

Revolution at the Crossroads: Street Theater and the Politics of Radical Democracy in  
India and in Algeria

by

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To my parents,  
Arun and Malvi Doshi

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## Chapter I

### Introduction: Street Theater and Local Performance as Revolution in the Vernacular

If we accept the idea of an identity that is no longer fixed to the past, we can arrive at a more accurate conception, that of an identity in the process of becoming. This is to say an identity that is an inheritance of traces, of words, of traditions transforming with the time that is given to us to live with one-another. A man who lives but only in relation to his shining past is like a petrified corpse, a corpse who has never, in a sense, ever lived.  
-Abdelkadir Khatibi, Penser le Maghreb<sup>1</sup>

#### A Funeral and Collective Body

In her memoir Le blanc de l'Algérie, Assia Djebar describes the Algerian writer and playwright Kateb Yacine's funeral procession. The artist had died in exile in France, and his body had been returned to Algeria for burial. The train of mourners, Djebar notes, decide to transform the wake into a party, a disorderly happening. As the coffin is prepared for internment, over the dim chatter of the attendees—in Berber, popular Arabic, and French—a rendition of the *Internationale* rings out.<sup>2</sup> The song is interrupted by another group, who begin to sing patriotic tunes. Against this cacophony, the Imam [priest] begins to deliver his funeral sermon in Classical Arabic. But, as Djebar tells us, in the same way that the songs had dueled in the background, the priest's oration is partially

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<sup>1</sup> All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

<sup>2</sup> The term Berber refers to the indigenous tribes of North Africa. Berbers are often referred to as *Imazighen* (singular *Amazigh*), meaning "free men." The Kabyle people number among the prominent Berber ethnic groups in Algeria.

drowned out by Berber chants by attendees protesting presence of the Imam.<sup>3</sup> Finally, amidst rising tensions, the poet is buried. As she ends her reminiscences, Djébar reflects on how Kateb continues to divide communities, and the author wryly notes Kateb is likely “laughing from the other side.”<sup>4</sup>

Likened in Djébar’s text to a “happening,” and “festival” in Djébar’s text, Kateb’s funeral procession captures in microcosm the conflicts and rifts between minority groups in post-independence Algeria. Much of Kateb’s work centers on these dilemmas of the Algerian nation, and indeed, his production in theater, prose, poetry, and popular performance may be understood as representing the artist’s own, ongoing search, for a collective, cultural idiom. Kateb vociferously opposed the post-independence politics of Algerian President Boumedienne, who had sought to stem the tide of Arabo-Muslim revolutionary ideologies in Algeria by incorporating Islam as a constituent element of Algerian nationality, thereby alienating Algeria’s own non-Arabic speaking, non-Islamic ethnic and linguistic minorities.<sup>5</sup>

It is significant then, that at his death, so many different groups should have claimed Kateb as one of their own. For Kateb, national identity lay not in homogeneity, but rather in the celebration of difference that would pay testament to an Algerian history founded on recognition of its heterogeneity and contingency rather than on a narrative of origin. It is a perspective shared by contemporary progressive Maghrebite writers such as

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<sup>3</sup> Following independence, the Algerian nation-state embarked on a program of nation-state building that both enforced the teaching of classical Arabic as the national language and recast national history in terms of Islam. Kateb himself had railed against Arabicization policies in Algeria, and the presence of the Imam would have been objectionable to Algerian-Berbers and other non-Islamic (and linguistic) minorities attending the funeral.

<sup>4</sup> French colonial, administrative documents listed Kateb’s surname as his first name. In an ironic gesture, the author elected to publish under the incorrect version of his name. Following the precedent set by critics of Algerian literature, my usage corresponds to the author’s actual surname, “Kateb.”

<sup>5</sup> In The Battlefield Algeria, Hugh Roberts addresses in detail the oft overlooked political history of the Boumedienne regime.

Abdelkadir Khatibi—quoted in the epigraph to this chapter—who have sought like Kateb, to recuperate a national voice that is sustained by a recognition of cultural and linguistic diversity.

The notion of identity that is perpetually “becoming”—as so powerfully invoked by Khatibi—is reflected in Kateb’s work. Indeed, as Kateb himself asserted: “I think, in effect, that I am the producer of a single book. At the beginning, it was a poem which then transformed into novels and then theater, but it is always the same work that I will leave just as I began it, that is to say, as a ruin and as a construction site, exactly as is Algeria...” (“Les intellectuels...” 28). Despite such statements as this, however, critics have persisted in privileging Kateb’s early published works over his later popular theater. Naturally, one must acknowledge that his renowned novel Nedjma (1956)—recognized for its stylistic innovations and original critique of nationalism—built for him an international reputation. At the same time, however, the notion of a single work that Kateb himself describes obliges us to consider Nedjma as but one iteration, or instance, of a larger artistic endeavor predicated on a continuity and flux that stress process over product, evoking the language of performance.

Kateb’s statement above about his work was issued in 1967, before he devoted himself to public, political theater. What if one were to replace the word “novel” in his assertion, with the word “play”? In other words, in the fluid continuity he ascribes to his oeuvre, what if one were to think of the process of writing successively, poetry, proscenium stage plays, novels etc. as a performance determined by its context? Such a conception would prominently foreground his street theater production, to which I now turn.

## Popular Theater and the Exile of Language

After an extended stay in France and voyages abroad to Indochina and the Middle East, Kateb Yacine returned to his Algerian homeland in 1970. Kateb had been deeply affected by the Vietnamese revolution and its success against the French colonizer. During his visit, he enjoyed the opportunity to learn about local Chèo theater, a popular performance form combining theater, music, and dance, also notable for its frequent presentation of historical narrative (Pears 110). The experience was formative for Kateb, who, sensing that the ideals of the Algerian national project had been compromised (which he described in terms of “the ascension of the bourgeoisie in the FLN [*Front de Libération Nationale* or National Liberation Front]”), sought a medium to address the Algerian people themselves (Poète 34). Sensitive to the high illiteracy rates in the country, Kateb elected to stop publishing and to refocus his efforts to producing popular theater in Arabic dialect and the Berber language, *Tamazight*.

After initially collaborating with the group *Le Théâtre de la Mer* [Theater of the Sea], producing proscenium-stage theater in local dialects, Kateb founded his own troupe in 1971 and began experimenting with popular, mobile theater. Traversing Algeria and performing in local dialects, Kateb’s group, named *Action Culturelle des Travailleurs* [*Workers’ Cultural Action* or ACT], practiced a theater that employed minimal props and spare settings for performances in public spaces, workplaces, and rural areas, in front of audiences with little or no access to modern drama. ACT’s ironic, parodic performance drew widely from both mainstream “elite” and popular cultural forms to deliver a trenchant critique of the political forces contributing to the social ills of the Algerian people.

Various factors figured into Kateb's aesthetic choices: in his eyes, the impoverished Algerian population had been betrayed by the newly-installed national elite who had failed to foster the growth of a democratic, civil society. Moreover, state modernization plans and the institution of Classical Arabic as the national language (where a majority of the illiterate population employed dialectical Arabic) had alienated the people from their national institutions.<sup>6</sup> Producing a mobile theater that could be easily shifted from the stage to public areas, Kateb sought to develop an edifying, pedagogically effective cultural form that would educate his audiences, inspire forms of political and social community, and preserve traditions waning under the so-called developmental policies of the post-independence state.

### **Theaters of Liberation**

In terms of literary histories and theater movements, Kateb's original, collective production parallels similar efforts by artists *across* the postcolonial world to produce popular theater in vernacular languages. Perhaps the most notable example is the work of the Kenyan artist Ngugi wa Thiong'o who in 1977 ceased publishing in English to then concentrate on writing and producing popular theater in Swahili and Gikuyu. Other notable artists and groups—the collective work of which has been referred to as the “Theater of Liberation Movement”—include the Phillipines Educational Theater Association (PETA) and the Brazilian theater group Grupo Galpão.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Regarding this idea of “betrayal,” Kateb maintained that “[i]t is important to understand that the Algerian people walk with a knife in their backs, that they have been betrayed by their leaders.... The true martyrs are perhaps not the dead but among the survivors” (Poète 35).

<sup>7</sup> In The Playful Revolution, Eugène Van Erven offers a useful overview of the movement in Asia.

Multiple sources fed into this movement. Prominent, of course, was the legacy of anti-colonial nationalist movements that had drawn on popular movements to further their causes. In terms of theater practice, the work of Bertolt Brecht maintained an enduring influence. Whether artists embraced or rejected his techniques, Brecht, in the history of theater, singularly effected through his writing and practice a radical revision that unpacked the realist conventions of “bourgeois theater” to question the relationships between stage and audience.<sup>8</sup> Brecht’s recasting of the audience as an agent of production offered artists the theoretical tools to explore popular theater as a collective endeavor that extended beyond the performance area. Cultural linguistic factors also significantly motivated the theater of liberation. A difficult problem involving language arose for many postcolonial artists educated in the tongue of the erstwhile colonizer. In the post-independence era, these artists found themselves alienated from their fellow countrymen who spoke local languages and not that of the colonial center. Kateb Yacine is a prime example of this, and it was his own sense of urgency to address his people in their language that led him to produce theater.

### **Theater on the Post-Colonial Periphery**

This dissertation compares Kateb Yacine’s popular theater production post-1971, with the work of the North Indian theater troupe the *Jana Natya Manch* (*People’s Theater Group* or JANAM]. Grouping the Kateb Yacine’s and JANAM’s respective productions under the term street theater, this project will intervene in discussions about

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<sup>8</sup> As Bill Worthen has explained it, “Brecht calls for the theater to dramatize its own rhetoricity as a social practice, to show how staging theatrical experience *for* the spectator necessitates the staging *of* a spectator or spectators, the reproduction of material individuals as an interpreting, interpretable, ideologically packed ‘audience’” (*Modern Drama* 148).

state, subjectivity, and community to suggest the ways which street theater practice models forms of national community that are inclusive and performative. Here, the notion of performativity refers to a recursive critical process which, as it asserts identity or community, makes manifest and subject to further critique its own process of signification.

This project draws on first-hand research gathered as an observer and participant of JANAM performances and rehearsals, and then, as a student in the numerous acting workshops offered by the collective. My work on Kateb's theater work draws from Kateb's own substantial writing on theater, and importantly, on the writing by the critics Jacqueline Arnaud and Ahmed Cheniki, both of whom have carefully documented ACT's live performance. In what follows, I will offer brief history of JANAM following which, I will address theater technique, and language, in both Kateb's and JANAM's work. I will then outline the problems in postcolonial studies that I wish to address and offer a discussion of where this study will intervene in the field. I will conclude with a brief chapter outline.

### ***The Jana Natya Manch***

Led by the young theater activist Safdar Hashmi, JANAM formed in 1971, as an extension of the New Delhi branch of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), which was a national cultural association that had been founded in the 1940's to revitalize the Indian performing arts. As the New Delhi IPTA grew increasingly centrist in its political outlook, the group broke away and, under Hashmi's leadership, reformed as JANAM. At this early point, the group continued to perform stage plays for large

audiences. By the late 1970's in the wake of ex-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's repressive regime, the trade unions and leftist organizations with whom JANAM worked found themselves considerably weakened. Recognizing the need for an inexpensive, mobile theater that could be politically relevant, JANAM subsequently refocused its efforts on the production of political street theater and allied itself closely with the Marxist Communist Party of India [CPI-M]. Hashmi resisted opposing street theater to proscenium theater, choosing rather to focus his critique on "bourgeois theater" forms that privilege individual aesthetic experience over the collectivity (The Right to Perform 29). As Hashmi repeated in his writings, street theater denies the rarefied experience of a bourgeois aesthetic in order to both promote a collective experience and serve as a catalyst for the redressing of mass, social injustice.

In 1989, JANAM moved into the national spotlight when, during a performance of the play Halla Bol [Raise the Slogan], the group was attacked by a gang hired by a local politician affiliated with the ruling, Congress political party. In the area where the attack took place, JANAM had been performing plays that had shifted public sentiment to leftist political parties, thereby clearly threatening the incumbency of the official accused of hiring the gang. The attackers disrupted the performance and assaulted the group, killing Hashmi. The day immediately after the attack, the group, now led by Mala Hashmi, Safdar Hashmi's widow, returned to the spot to complete the performance that had been interrupted the day before. Safdar Hashmi's murder attested to the efficacy of a small-scale, mobile theater to mobilize its audiences. Prior to the events of 1989, the group had tended to perform unannounced. Following the attack, however, the group to tightened its alliance with the CPI-M and began to rely on local activists to pre-select



public areas deemed “safe” for performance. Just as it suggested that truly public space is non-existent, the attack attested to the efficacy that a small-scale, public theater could have in mobilizing audiences.

### **Street Theater Genres as Vernacularization**

Street theater genres describe open air performances that take place in public areas (i.e. street corners, marketplaces, city plazas). The theater uses few props, making for a spectacle that is easily transported, and it is not uncommon for the groups like the *Jana Natya Manch* to perform four or more times in one day. Generally, spectators surround the small circular area that is the site of performance; audience members therefore face each other and the actors. The arrangement of the public creates a performance circle where spectators frequently become agents in a performance. This blurring of the fictional space of performance and the real space of the audience, I will argue, is an important component of the power and efficacy of street theater.

Stylistically, the theater places heavy emphasis on bodily movement, gesture, and voice. Plays are frequently parodic and the register of humor ranges from slapstick to irony. The structure of the plays themselves leaves much room for improvisation, allowing actors freedom to respond to the reaction of an audience or even conditions in the area that impact the performance. Although scripts of almost all of the JANAM plays are available, the transcriptions that the group publishes are distributed with purely reading audiences in mind; the actors themselves rarely work from complete texts. Changes in a single play between different performances occur either through advance consensus of the performers, or more often, in tandem with the many variables that shape

a performance, including feedback from the public. In the case of ACT, Kateb refrained from publishing any scripts whatsoever, and extant texts have been edited from fragments of scripts used for rehearsals, first-hand accounts, and audio recordings.

The similarities between street theater forms practiced by JANAM and ACT attest to a global discourse of political theater that parallels predominant conceptions of “world literature.” Yet where the notion of world literature remains for the most-part and amorphous concept discussed variously in terms of “globalization” or “multiculturalism,” the discourse of political theater, considered particularly in terms of its Brechtian formulation, insistently questions the capacity of production to represent a community.<sup>9</sup> Where various conceptions of “World Literature” take for granted ideas of national literature (either as participating in a global multiculturalism or as a concept to be transcended in a globalized world) that transparently link community and text, political theater interrogates the ways in which representations are produced and consumed. Political theater, then, radically deconstructs the relationship between aesthetic production, artist, and community (conceived in the space of theater as the audience). One of my main arguments will be that the inclusion of the spectator as an agent of performance in political street theater hinges on a recognition of the contingency of the dynamics between spectacle and audience, and the ultimate strategic significance of collective performance.

As with the similarities between JANAM’s and Kateb’s productions, I similarly recognize the key differences and local traditions that shape many of the practices of either group. In the case of JANAM, for instance, the group frequently draws upon the

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<sup>9</sup> For discussions of the concept of “World Literature,” see Damrosch, What is World Literature? and Coppan, “Ghosts in the Disciplinary Machine...”

cadence and music of popular North Indian song as form for character monologues. Such loose borrowing from local forms illustrates the ways in which the group has tended to eschew any conception of “traditional form” (regarded as a fixed object of research) to instead privilege notions of culture and tradition that are lived, and therefore constantly remade.<sup>10</sup>

Kateb also drew upon local performance practice, focusing on a storytelling modes like *Halqa*, a form widespread in the Arab world, but with particular, local variants. The form typically involves one or more storyteller/performers who occupy a space at the center of an audience. Through frequent call-and-response, audiences are invited to participate in the performance.<sup>11</sup> Yet just as he drew upon and recast such “traditional” forms, Kateb also explored the theater forms of Western antiquity. The Byzantine Empire had brought with it to North Africa outdoor theater traditions that Kateb frequently cited as inspiration. As he wrote in an article published in the Tunisian daily Action: ““In Sicily as in Tunisia, and in all of North Africa, there are great, abandoned spaces that were people’s theaters, and which are accusations to today’s young generations who do not yet know how to read in their land the message of ancestors” (qtd. in Chergui 42). Kateb’s repertoire therefore incorporated a multiplicity of forms that represented, for him, the diverse history of the region.

To frame the comparison offered in this project, I use the term “vernacularization” to describe on the one hand the relationships between Kateb’s and JANAM’s production to global discourses of political theater defining a horizon of comparison, and on the other hand the particular and important differences between

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<sup>10</sup> For a clear articulation of the idea, see “Paramparik Rupon Aur Devices Ke Saval” [“Questions of Traditional Forms and Devices”] in Hashmi, Safdar.

<sup>11</sup> See Amine, “Al-Halqa...”

either street theater form. Such a conception of the “vernacular” permits consideration of the common concern of both street theater forms for politics, representation, and community, as it foregrounds the local practices and contexts that distinguish either.

### **Collectivity and Radical Democratic Practice**

The collective nature and improvisational practices of both JANAM and Kateb’s ACT sustain an open theater, subject to constant change and re-signification. As was also the norm in Kateb’s group, JANAM members, during the conception of a play, are invited to contribute ideas for performance, to write songs, and to shape the political critique of a play by offer opinion or personal research to refine or change an idea. The liberties granted to the actors are formalized only to the degree that individual members are invited, during either the conception of a play or a single rehearsal session, to assume the responsibility for assessing choreography and the development of those parts of plays that are scripted.

Such open hierarchies and concerns about egalitarianism in the group extend into the theater through the configuration of the audience as agents within a performance—through the invitation issued to join in theater or, alternatively, in the opportunities offered following a performance for audience members to express opinions, offer feedback, and potentially, shape future performances.

Such fluidity in the conception and enactment of performances lends itself to a theater that is always in flux and that, as it invites the audience to participate in performance, renders the spectator acutely conscious of the artifice of the theater and the roles that are being played. In this way, the theater manifests the contingency of the

meanings it creates at the moment that it offers a representation. In a meticulous commentary on ACT's theater, Ahmed Cheniki writes:

The "bare" stage is filled with accessories that change function and attribute, requiring the spectator to deconstruct and reconstruct the events that are presented. All the employed techniques establish a distance between the actor, the character, and the public.... The actors were therefore required to master several techniques of interpretation in order to well present situations and events tied to particular historical and political realities. (2)

Though focused on Kateb's production, this analysis can easily be transposed to JANAM's work, which suggests a common motivation to explore the political significance of representation and to model egalitarian forms of interaction through a radically inclusive theater practice.

### **Deconstructing Language**

The comparison between JANAM's and Kateb's theater raises important questions about language and the ideologies of nationhood that shape understandings of community and communication in a postcolonial context. Both JANAM's and Kateb's theater practices betray a profound consciousness of the multi-lingualism of both their audiences and the nation as a whole. In both India and Algeria, the question of a national language has become a major political issue to the extent that Hindi in India and Classical Arabic in Algeria have come to represent, in a relationship of metonymy, the Hindu and Islamic majority populations in their respective countries.<sup>12</sup> For JANAM and Kateb any

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<sup>12</sup> To this extent, the rallying cry "Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan" adopted by Indian nationalists corresponds to the slogan "Islam is my religion, Arabic is my language, Algeria is my fatherland" used by the Association

advocacy of minority rights, then, must necessarily address questions of language. Beyond issues of comprehension, then, the choice of language in street theater performance is a highly charged and politically significant issue.

JANAM performs its plays in the Hindi-Urdu widely spoken in North India. The group largely relies on the heterogeneous experiences of the actors as a filter for language. In other words, during rehearsals—where dialogues are often improvised and refined in terms of the register needed for the scene—discussions that occur about the language and the common input of the group ensure a level of communicability. Made up of a rotating group of students, working professionals, writers, and artists, JANAM relies on the negotiations undertaken by the collective to produce plays accessible to a larger community.

The linguistic make-up of Algeria posed a different set of problems for Kateb. By choosing to focus his work on popular theater, Kateb sought to address a vast, non-French-speaking Algerian public who had very limited access to his published work in both material and linguistic terms. Whereas the elite in Algeria would have been educated in French and perhaps classical Arabic, the masses of underprivileged rural and urban citizens largely spoke the Berber language Tamazight or any one of the variants of popular Arabic.

Kateb's transition to popular Arabic, however, was far from seamless, for as Kateb himself explains, “[e]ven now, I conceive scenes in French, in my mind. But in which French? It is only French in its writing, a graphic, formal French. The content remains Arabic, because I see the public whom I address” (*Poète* 80). Ultimately, as we

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of the Ulema in 1930s Algeria. For a history of national language in India, see King, *One Language*; for a history of Arabicization in Algeria, see Roberts, *Battlefield Algeria*, and Stora, *Algeria, 1830-2000*.

know from his own writings, Kateb relied on his theater group to collectively translate the initial creation—the outlines of a scene in French—into the local language. The gap between French as a sort of signifier, “a graphic French,” and the signified Arabic content (figured as the intended or imagined audience), is bridged then, through a translation into popular Arabic: Kateb’s thought traces a curious path that begins with the image of the collective, and that becomes Arabic once it is mediated through French.

The writing process as Kateb describes it represents a reversal of the particular temporality active in conventional understandings of national ideologies. Indeed, the politics of anti-colonial nationalism predicated itself on the assertion of a fully self-realized, unitary subject—the “people”—which is inscribed and called forth before its own manifestation. What Kateb describes in terms of his conception of plays mirrors his group’s practice of theater itself, the production of which constantly adapts according to an image of a heterogeneous, multifarious public.

Such a conception of language explains, then, why it is that few of Kateb’s Arabic plays have been printed and circulated in published form (in French or in English). This absence of text is partly a deliberate choice, as Kateb remarks:

Political theater implies incessant change. One cannot know when and how it will work.... As we study a situation, our vision refines itself, and we incessantly feel the urge to change the words. If a text is written, it takes on definitive value, it freezes. (Poète 81)

Here, Kateb figures language as an emblem of both temporality and an identity that is in flux. This character is in fact reflected in the French scripts that are now available. Edited posthumously, each of the published plays has had to be extensively annotated, and the

one major collection now available—only in French—contains within it a lengthy appendix with fragments of scenes that were omitted over time or that represent alternative versions of that included in the main body of a play. Focused on the present and manifesting the polyglot nature of the people, Kateb's theater challenges the notion of a uniform national language as it critically responds to the efforts of the post-independence regime to impose classical Arabic as the national language.

### **The Pitfalls of Postcolonial Community**

The title for this section is inspired by the essay "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness," in which Frantz Fanon describes the tensions between universal nationalism and provincial, local, identities, each of which ultimately threatens the coming into being of nation. Fanon describes how, by failing to pay attention to the particular needs of the nation and relying upon the models and direct support of the former colonizer, the national middle class alienates the people. Such rifts ineluctably lead, he suggests, to a type of retrogressive thinking that replaces the national community with tribal or even racial conceptions of community. In such cases, Fanon writes,

[n]ational consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the people, will be in any case, only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been. (148)

Fanon was startlingly prescient, and his interrogation of the ways in which national institutions fail to address the needs of the people anticipates the major questions raised



today by postcolonial theorists about nation, culture, and identity in the heterogeneous post-independence nation.<sup>13</sup>

I wish to situate this study of street theater at the center of this discussion, with specific reference to the question about community and the institutions of nation. As the discussions of the particular issues raised by plays make clear, the political motivation of street theater is to reclaim national identity and to articulate a call for alternative, transparent governmental practice (and institutions) that address the people. Almost every street play—either JANAM’s or Kateb’s—is motivated by a concern about particular issues: the rights of laborers or minorities, for example. Yet one can trace in these plays an articulation of the particular problem being addressed in terms of universal rights within the nation. In other words, what is at stake for Kateb’s group and JANAM is *equally* the reparation of a specific wrong and an articulation of a universal right of all citizens that has been breached.

The mediation that street theater facilitates between the particular claims of a community and the universal rights of the nation parallels the shifts that the theater effects in agency from actor/theater group to spectator. Together, the articulation of rights and the incorporation of audience members into political performance model practices of community building. Theater performances, then, define public spaces for participation and political activism. The street theater of both Kateb and JANAM enacts the ways in which, as the artist and critic Ngugi wa Thiong’o has suggested, the postcolonial nation is a space of contested performance, or “enactments of power,” in which the stakes of contestation are the symbols of the nation to be built (38).

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<sup>13</sup> I am thinking, for example, of Partha Chatterjee’s *The Nation and Its Fragments*, a text in which Chatterjee suggests that the contemporary postcolonial nation is mired in a situation wherein forms of governmentality fail to address the diverse practices and beliefs of the populace.

This dissertation project analyses street theater to further qualify the conflict over national symbols that Ngugi describes as a postcolonial condition. Where Ngugi focuses on the arts in general, I privilege street theater as a genre that dramatizes the encounter between enactments of state hegemonic discourses and the struggle posed by minority populations in the nation to assert claims for political rights. Performances assert their transformational capacity, I argue, through a rehearsal of the very conflict over national symbols themselves. In other words, street theater is an oppositional genre that consciously appropriates discourses, languages, and genres from the public sphere in order to redress the divisions of power and the “products” of the political system itself.

In chapter two, I discuss JANAM’s play Shambukh Vadh and Kateb’s text Le polygone étoilé as productions that subvert foundational narratives of origin that sustain nationalist political claims. To frame my discussion, I describe the relationship between national texts and lived, national culture as analogous to that between a dramatic script and its performance. I argue that JANAM’s and Kateb’s works radically revise conventional notions of text/performance that privilege either, to defined the relationship as one that is mutually constitutive and moreover, constantly re-performed. Such a conception opens spaces for the relationship between both national culture and nationalist discourse to be rearticulated if not reinvented.

In chapter three, I focus on Kateb’s Mohamed prends ta valise and JANAM’s Honda ka Gunda, to explore the relationship between performance and public space. I argue that, by making visible in the performance space, histories and subjects that have been written out of national narratives, street performance disrupts the reproduction of

universal ideologies of national belonging, to open spaces for the memory of alternative national histories, critical reflection, and group solidarity.

In chapter four, I examine Kateb's Boucherie de l'espérance and JANAM's Halla Bol to discuss the ways street theater genres incorporate their audiences into performances. The construal of the audience as collective agent in a performance models, I suggest, inclusive forms of political participation in which solidarities are grounded in theatrical relationships.

## Chapter II

### The Author on Stage:

#### Kateb Yacine's Le polygone étoilé and JANAM's Shambukh Vadh

The performance studies project makes its most radical intervention, I believe, by embracing both written scholarship and creative work, papers and performances. We challenge the hegemony of the text best by reconfiguring texts and performances in horizontal, metonymic tension, not by replacing one hierarchy with another, the romance of performance for the authority of the text. Performance studies bring...rare hybridity into the academy, a commingling of analytical and artistic ways of knowing that unsettles the institutional organization of knowledge and disciplines.

-Dwight Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research

#### Reclaimed "Authenticities" and the Crisis of Community.

On December 6, 1992, a mob of approximately 75,000 Hindu militants stormed the Babri Masjid mosque in the northern Indian town of Ayodhya. Using hammers and their bare hands, they demolished the structure and reclaimed the site as the original location of the Hindu temple (called the *Ram Janmbhoomi*) marking the birthplace of the god Ram.<sup>14</sup> The instigator of the violence was the Sangh Parivar (Family of Organizations), a collective of Hindu nationalist political parties that had roused supporters by leveraging spurious historical documentation establishing the area as Hindu holy land. By claiming that the area had been wrested from Hindu control in the 16<sup>th</sup> century—in the early period of the Mughal empire—the Sangh Parivar defended the demolition of the mosque as being both act of retributive justice and a symbolic gesture

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<sup>14</sup> For a detailed history of the Babri Masjid/Ayodhya affair, see Udayakumar.

linking the present-day nationalist aspirations of the Hindu right to religious, mythological narratives of Hindu community. The attack on the mosque sparked riots across India that resulted in the deaths of 2,000 citizens.

The demolition of the mosque at Ayodhya was a watershed moment in a longer series of events that had witnessed the rise to prominence of Sangh Parivar member the *Bharatiya Jana Party* [*Indian People's Party* or BJP].<sup>15</sup> The growing BJP of the 1980s and '90s claimed that it had assumed the national role abdicated by the Congress party after independence. Specifically, the party platform decried the national government for courting the minority vote (primarily Muslims and heterogeneous caste-groups<sup>16</sup>) rather than securing national interests, seen as coterminous with the project of building a homeland founded on a Hindu, spiritual world-view.<sup>17</sup> Amidst raging debates about minorities and national identity, the Babri Masjid and Ayodhya emerged as potent

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<sup>15</sup> The *Sangh Parivar* refers to a group of political organizations organized around the ideologies of the militant Hindu *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (National Volunteer's Organization or "RSS"). The primary goal of the RSS is to advocate for the revival of Hindu tradition, which it sees as being threatened by secular politics of the Indian left. In the last two decades, the presence of the RSS in mainstream Indian political culture has been sustained by the rise to prominence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party or BJP), which led the government of India between the years 1998-2004. For a useful account of the BJP's rise to power, see Biswas. For both a lucid account of Ayodhya's *continuing* relevance to contemporary Indian politics and a discussion of the politics of secularism in India, see Ganguly, Ludden,, and Basu.

<sup>16</sup> The idea of "caste" (or "varna") refers to a metahistorical social category that establishes hierarchies in Hindu society. While sociologists such as Louis Dumont have interpreted caste as being intrinsic to Hindu-Indian civilization, contemporary scholars such as Nicholas Dirks have argued for a reevaluation of caste as a modern concept that is the product of both British colonial governmentality and the efforts of Hindu social movements.

<sup>17</sup> In their assessment of the rise of the BJP, political historians largely point to two key historical events that the BJP successfully leveraged to its own gain: 1) The *Shah-Bano* ruling and 2) the Mandal plan also known as the Indian "affirmative action" for lower-caste groups. In 1986, Rajiv Gandhi, the Congress-party Prime Minister, in a blatant effort to secure the Muslim electorate, overturned a Supreme Court ruling that obliged Muslim men to make alimony payments to their divorcees in cases of financial hardship. By deferring to Muslim personal law in matters of marriage and divorce (and effectively granting Muslims separate dispensation), Prime Minister Gandhi unsettled many Hindus who felt that the government too easily pandered to minority sentiment. Second, in 1989, the left of center National Front party, which had succeeded the Congress party, implemented the finding of the famous Mandal Commission, a parliamentary body that had recommended the institution of seat reservations and quotas (for jobs and places in schools) to redress caste discrimination. To the followers of the BJP, such "affirmative action" was perceived as a threat to high-class interests, and more broadly, the social structure of Hindu society.

symbols for a BJP intent on consolidating its power and asserting its Hindu nationalist project. The events at Ayodhya marked the continuation of long-standing Hindu-Muslim tensions in India, but the *repercussions* of the violence—for instance the 2002 attack by Islamic Militants on Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya, and the subsequent incrimination of BJP-officials who had used the attack to further their own agenda—indicated the degree to which the communal (or religious) question was also a *national* crisis.<sup>18</sup> The Ayodhya event in India publicized the BJP project and swelled the ranks of the party, which won national elections—and control of the parliamentary house—in 1996. Though the party was subsequently voted out in 1998, it regained its majority in parliament between the years 1999-2004. The continued presence of the BJP as a significant agent in national politics attests to an ongoing, important debate about the nature of Indian statehood and government.

The significance of Ayodhya to modern Indian political history—the details about both which are greatly truncated here—finds a source in the South Asian narrative Ramayana, which Indian nationalist parties have drawn upon for their symbols. Most practicing Hindus will be familiar with the overall story, which describes the travels and the heroic exploits of the hero Ram (an incarnation of the god Vishnu), who assumes the throne of the Kingdom of Ayodhya. There are literally hundreds of versions of the epic in both poetic and dramatic forms, and both Hinduism and Buddhism lay claim to Ramayana traditions.<sup>19</sup> The BJP, however, only recognizes the poetic/textual version ascribed to the sage *Valmiki*, established by colonial philology as the oldest and therefore

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<sup>18</sup> See Ambrani.

<sup>19</sup> In the introduction to the edited volume, Many Ramayanas, Paula Richman provides a useful overview of the heterogeneity in the Ramayana tradition.

most authoritative version of the text.<sup>20</sup> Engaging in what Sheldon Pollock has called “canonizing purification,” the BJP has leveraged its own ideological reading to link the fabled city of the Valmiki’s text to both the present-day site of Ayodhya and to a defense of its own conservative platform (289). To use a theatrical metaphor, Ayodhya became, therefore, the stage for a violent performance of the Ramayana as scripted by the Hindu right.<sup>21</sup>

The response of mainstream critics in India to the rise of the Hindu right was to deplore the demise of Indian secularism. To many, the ascendancy of the BJP heralded the end of the Nehruvian state-building project. (see Ganguly) However, a minority of historians on the political left added another voice to the debate. As critics like Sumit Sarkar have argued, Hindutva ideology, in its aspirations to found an Indian state exemplifying the values of an “authentic past,” replicates the binary historical vision of secular-nationalism that embraces Western governmental institutions while nonetheless maintaining a notion of an original Indian community untainted by colonial presence.<sup>22</sup> In Sarkar’s assessment, then, the fault of *both* secular-nationalist historiography and right-wing ideologies is that they maintain a stage-ist vision of history based on an idea of an essential and original Indian nation. Sarkar’s critique raises important questions of the apparent disjuncture between the fundamental concept of community and the state. Must

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<sup>20</sup> The Valmiki text dates from 500-100B.C.E.; modern scholarship has disputed earlier judgments establishing this text as the oldest.

<sup>21</sup> As a further example of this theatrical nexus of epic narrative and political ideology, one might consider the events that precipitated the violence at Ayodhya, namely the procession that BJP leader L.K. Advani led from the city of Somnath (in Gujarat) to the site of Ayodhya itself in 1990. Travelling in a Toyota truck that had been decorated as a divine chariot of epic lore, Advani proclaimed that he had embarked on a *rath yatra*, referring to the regal procession of soldiers that are a leitmotif in Hindu mythology.

<sup>22</sup> Responding to assessments of Indian history that describe the “stages” of Indian history (thereby allowing neat compartmentalization of ancient and modern India), Sarkar suggests that: “A helpful metaphor for history, then, may not be a single track with neat ‘stages’, or even a ‘stream’, but multiple ‘threads’ that can intertwine as also move apart, with the criteria for evaluating them not one, but many” (69).

we always talk about “Indian” community as being distinct from the nation-state, and its concomitant cultures of citizenship? This chapter seeks to intervene in this debate by situating the question more broadly in terms of post-colonial theory as a whole, and examining the particular ways in which the cultural work of Kateb Yacine in Algeria and the *Jana Natya Manch* in India have broached the vexing question.

### **Re-imagining Post-Colonial Community**

Kateb’s and JANAM’s works are framed, in the contemporary histories of their respective countries, by moments in which political actors/parties or state-governments have engaged in nation-building projects founded on an appeal to the past. Through its aforementioned recuperation of the Ramayana narrative as an epic text, the BJP articulated a call for a national culture privileging the “Hindu” origins of the nation. In Algeria, the post-independence government made similar appeals to a spiritual and national past seen as Islamo-Arabic.<sup>23</sup> The assertion of such singular national histories, if they did not lead to violence, alienated and minoritized the heterogeneous social groups seen as being inassimilable to the dominant narrative of nation.

In this context, both JANAM’s and Kateb Yacine’s works pose alternative narratives of nationhood. While avowing their own fictional status, they both explore the various meanings of the past and their relation to the present. Further, by refashioning the narratives of nationalist ideology, both appeal to broader national communities and recuperate the ideal of an inclusive community. JANAM’s Shambukh Vadh is a stage-

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<sup>23</sup> In Enlightenment in the Colony, Aamir Mufti describes this convergence of religion and politics a marker of post-colonial modernity. As Mufti states it, “[u]nique to modern society is our contemporary political experience of religion as a political identity, in which identification within a “world” community, the will to cultural uniformity, and political interest are fused together as if in a seamless whole, and the emergence of this experience converges with the rise of a modern middle class” (29).



production that adapts a scene from the Ramayana to counter the upper-caste Hindu ideology promulgated in the BJP fashioning of the epic. Kateb's text Polygone étoilé counters the state-level adoption of Arabo-Islamic history as Algerian-national heritage with a hybrid narrative that foregrounds its own intertextuality to question the status of any text or literary project claiming to represent the totality of the Algerian nation.

The questions that both works address here ask about the nature of artistic and political collectivities represent particular cases of what is, more generally, an enduring subject of inquiry *across* the post-colonial world of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup> In an early articulation of the key problem of commensurability between national institutions and a hybrid, unevenly developed, post-colonial community, Frantz Fanon forcefully articulates a role for the founders of the postcolonial nation in The Wretched of the Earth. As Fanon suggests, the task at hand for the native intellectual is to explore the past, to move beyond the “shells” and “corpses of the past,” to “go on until he has found the seething pot out of which the learning of the future will emerge” (225). Key for Fanon is the subsequent squaring of this body of cultural knowledge with the present, real aspirations of a people that is constantly coming into being. It is through this critique of *both* past and present that both national cultures and the state-institutions that spring from them are shaped. Fanon's call to the Third World, “[l]et us not pay tribute to Europe by creating states, institutions, and societies which draw their inspiration from her,” attests to his vision of a postcolonial nation-state that has shed the formalism of European

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<sup>24</sup> In the post-colonial context, critics like Partha Chatterjee, Homi Bhabha, Sumit Sarkar, and Mahmood Mamdani have all addressed the question of statehood in post-colonial societies, interrogating concepts of community, citizenship, and governmentality and exploring the numerous contradictions that have arisen in postcolonial nations, between local communities and practices on the one hand, and state-institutions averring themselves as universal on the other.

bourgeois-nationalism to invent its own institutions corresponding to the needs of the present day (315).

Qualifying the dialectical thinking that sustains Fanon's urgent call to reconceptualize national culture, both Kateb's text and JANAM's play challenge the truth claims posed by their respective national histories. By asserting—as in a metacritical move—artistic production as an assemblage of intertextual sources, both works refute the claim of any representation to originality. Further, the theater and the text in question trace the contours of an entirely different conception of nation and community: in contrast to ideologies of nationhood motivated by an epic, monologic desire for unity, the literature and theater addressed here suggest that the nation and its forms of community can only be known through their practice, and that any access to nationhood is necessarily mediated through the practice of “doing”—its constant enactment.<sup>25</sup>

Such a perspective on nationalism and nationalist histories importantly refines extant models for thinking about the nation-state and its heterogeneous communities. The dominant paradigm that currently frames discussion draws from a line of criticism that includes the important work of scholars like Partha Chatterjee and Homi K. Bhabha. In the essay “DissemiNation,” notably, Bhabha describes agency of a national people as operating in a disjunctive temporality, split between the *pedagogical* (totalizing, universalist idea of citizenship) and the *performative* (the ambivalent and emergent forms of lived reality). Bhabha's critique offers a useful framework for thinking through the practices of citizenship, but it reifies (i.e. construes as concrete what is in fact an abstraction) the pedagogy of the nation state. What the works discussed in this chapter

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<sup>25</sup> This idea draws significantly from the work of William Worthen, whose work explores the relationships between texts and performances through discussions of the lines of influence and authority between dramatic texts and staged enactments.

alert us to, then, is the fact that performativity subtends the institution of the nation-state itself. In other words, these works suggest that as much as nationalism requires a political aesthetics that determines its manner of self-representation, it also requires an aesthetic politics to ground both its representative claims and the histories that it mobilizes and in some cases, invents.

### **The “Author” as Stage-Actor: Redefining the Narrative Authority**

Kateb’s and JANAM’s productions both challenge the foundational thought of nationalist myth-making and expand the ways which artistic/literary genres have been discussed in conjunction with nationalist political projects. Where textual genres—either as epics or novels—have conventionally been privileged as aesthetic forms lending themselves to the foundation of national traditions, Shambukh and Polygone challenge the primacy of literary forms in the ideologies of nationhood. By metacritically exploring the work of artistic production, these works assert a vision of artistic production as being intrinsically inter-generic and intertextual. Such recognition of cultural heterogeneity calls attention to the collective oral cultural production and minor narrative forms marginalized by totalizing and statist national narrative modes that saturate the field of culture and that shape both social relations and subject formation.

Of course, there are important distinctions, aside from genre, between JANAM’s play and Kateb’s text. The former challenges Hindu orthodoxies and caste practices that selectively impose rights based on social status in a Hindu world-view. Participating in a leftist political movement organized by the CPI-M (Marxist Communist Party of India), the Hindi-play Shambukh Vadh circulated in primarily lower-class, lower-caste venues,

where the performance was intended to inspire debate about the Hindu right, and to incite spectators into forms of political activism. Kateb's Polygone, much differently, is a hybrid, complex, highly challenging French text that melds autobiography, history, theater, and poetry in order to write—to paraphrase Jaqueline Arnaud—the destructured world of an Algeria ravaged by colonization and war and a people cut off from their identity and buffeted by repercussions of violence (Arnaud, 833). It is a text which, in the face of a monolithic, nationalist Arabicization project in Algeria, attempts to “re-write” a heterogeneous collectivity and to subvert from within a textual perspective of culture.

Though these differences imply different audiences, modes of circulation, and norms of reception, both works nonetheless repudiate immutable national traditions to insist on national identity as contingent, as the ongoing negotiation within a collectivity that includes state-actors and citizens. Such a perspective represents a shift away from Bhabha's highly influential articulation of national identity, which reinscribes a core-periphery analysis (i.e. one that opposes the discursive authority of a state-center, and the performative excess of a population under state-rule) through its emphasis on the “incommensurability” of minority narratives and state-pedagogy. In Bhabha's schema, the lived experience of nationhood exceeds the narrative authority of the state, and it is through the ambivalent identification with nation that groups are minoritized (see Bhabha 167). Much current critical work on national communities (I am thinking particularly of Partha Chatterjee's recent publications) replicates the premises of Bhabha's text. Such analyses leave little space to ask a fundamental question—one that echoes Fanon's strident call—about how one might reimagine national spaces and national communities.

Offering an alternative to the binaries posited by critical theory, Polygone and Shambukh reconceptualize the national community in a manner that resonates with the ways performance studies has addressed the relationships between dramatic texts and staged (or embodied) performance. This question of text/textuality and performance is one that importantly shapes the discipline of theater/performance studies, and importantly for postcolonial studies sensitive to the politics of literacy, it is a field of inquiry that interrogates links between textuality and non-literary (oral or embodied) modes of communication.

In “Disciplines of the Text/Sites of Performance,” William Worthen describes the two predominant perspectives on the fraught ties between texts and play: whereas the “literary” perspective on the subject grounds meaning in the text with the result that the performance can only be the embodiment of the authorial intention of the work, the “performative” perspective universalizes the meanings of performance, such that meaning is created ever only on stage, regardless of how a text is read (16). The rift between the textual and performative perspectives here interestingly mirrors the ways much postcolonial criticism has spurned the universalist aspect of nation (what would correspond to the literary or textual perspective in performance studies) to focus on the heterogeneous temporalities, cultures and modes (the performative perspective) that define lived experience and which exceed the boundaries of nationalist ideology.

Worthen suggests that what is at stake is not an antagonism between text and performance, but rather a slippage in understanding that moves from the recognition of text as a field of multiple significations to a conception of text as a repository of the “work” of the author and therefore as authoritative. By reversing the terms of thinking

and considering meanings in texts as being productions—which thereby ascribe to the text the function of performance—Worthen calls attention to the instability of both texts and performances as registers of signification (23). Crucially, if the “performative aspect” of dramatic studies abandons the text, Worthen’s intervention is to *recuperate* a performativity/performance that addresses both texts and enactments as mutually constitutive.

The deconstructive move that performance studies enables in terms of text and performance is analagous to the performative dimension of both Kateb’s text and JANAM’s theater—both works which, by insisting on the processes through which national subjects are created rather than the meanings that national subjectivity signifies, opens spaces for an ongoing resignification of national space. Read through the epigraph of this chapter, Kateb’s and JANAM’s productions alert us to the performative aspect of community and state formation, thereby reminding us that nationalist ideologies establish meanings through the power effects of institutions and disciplinary sites. To make visible the functioning of power in this context is to destabilize the mechanisms—and the genre-conventions—that define the ways nationalism presents itself.

As much as the works discussed here are invested in reformulating the concept of national belonging, they are not anti-national. What is at stake is, ultimately, the conception of an inclusive community that does not elide the particular differences of its constituents through a universal claim. In what follows, I will offer detailed analysis of both Shambukh Vadh and Polygone to explore further how a conception of both nationhood and community as performative—where I understand performance as the

practice that focuses on processes of meaning making/enactment rather than signification—can incite novel thinking of the nation and its communities.

### **Performing Shambukh Vadh: Between Text, Theater, and Street Performance**

In the Indian general elections of 2004, the ruling BJP party suffered a surprise defeat that brought the Congress party (the party of Nehru and subsequently, Sonia Gandhi) back into power. The BJP had ascended to power on a dual platform promoting economic growth and traditional values. Though the party presided over a relatively prosperous economy fueled in no small part by foreign direct investment into India, the distribution of wealth remained fairly concentrated, and analysts read the 2004 defeat as a backlash on behalf of the vast electorate who had not reaped the rewards of global growth. While the party had perhaps failed to fulfill its promises of prosperity for the country, it had fared relatively better on the score of its cultural platform. At the national level, the party ruled from the center-right. The party's local practices, however, were multifarious. In certain areas, local state authorities engaged in discriminatory practices against lower-caste groups (called Dalits) and non-Hindu minorities. In other areas, however, the BJP funneled funds into local charities to buy the support of impoverished Dalits and to gain local, popular support.<sup>26</sup> Responding firstly to this enduring local influence of the BJP and Hindu-right in India and, secondly, to a widening perception that the Congress party had insufficiently addressed the issue, Communist party of India (CPI-M) launched in 2004 an anti-caste campaign intended to weaken the grip of local BJP actors.

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<sup>26</sup> In the essay "Problems of Social Power and Discourses of the Hindu Right," Tanika Sarkar traces the multiple affiliations that the BJP maintained during this period.

JANAM produced Shambukh Vadh to coincide with a series of Communist party political rallies held in New Delhi. JANAM's play draws loosely from a section of the last book (called the "Uttarakanda") of the Hindu narrative the Ramayana. In the narrative, a Brahmin man presents himself at King Ram of Ayodhya's court, carrying his dead son. The man complains to King Ram (who is recognized for his divine powers) that his son has died needlessly—for no apparent reason—and the grieving father then inculcates Ram himself: "Never before have I witnessed or heard of such a dreadful thing," the man cries, "as, in Rama's reign, for people to die prematurely. Rama must have committed a serious fault since in his kingdom, children succumb" (579). At that moment, the sage Narada informs Ram that there is indeed a fault in the kingdom—he reveals that a *Shudra* (a low-caste individual) has begun to practice a form of asceticism (called *tapasya*) that is forbidden to all but the higher members of the Hindu social order.

Seeking out the perpetrator of what amounts to a crime, Ram visits his kingdom and finds Shambukh. Responding to Ram's questioning, Shambukh replies, "O Rama, I was born of a Shudra alliance and I am performing this rigorous penance in order to acquire the status of a God in this body. I am not telling a lie, O Rama, I wish to attain the Celestial region" (583). Notably, Shambukh admits his fault, which is to aspire to enlightenment through religious practice. As punishment for his crime, Ram subsequently beheads the low-caste ascetic and, at the moment of the killing, the Brahmin boy comes back to life. One life is therefore exchanged for another. By killing Shambukh, Ram fulfills his *dharma* (his divine duty), this justifying the greatness of his rule.

The short section of the work devoted to *Shambukh* is notable, as it has served as a rich source of inspiration for adaptations of the Ramayana that have attacked Hindu



orthodoxies or lobbied against the caste system, and in choosing to produce their own adaptation of the Shambukh story, JANAM tapped into a long history of enactments that have reclaimed the Ramayana as polyvalent, as a text that incites debate rather than as an epic that speaks of a distant, fixed past.<sup>27</sup>

### **Unsettling the Authority of the Ramayana**

JANAM's reworking of the story focuses on the priest Shambukh, transforming the character into anti-caste activist, who establishes a school in his ashram to teach other Untouchables how to read, recite, and write the various scriptural languages. The play weaves into this central narrative strand characters drawn from the Hindu epic Mahabarata, the Hindu Upanishad scriptures, as well as an adaptation of a short story by the contemporary Dalit (low-caste) writer, Ramnihor Vimal.

A striking element of the staged performance is the manner in which it manifests its own intertextuality by presenting the Shambukh story as a play enacted within the theater. Such staging at the beginning of Act One establishes the performance as a fiction and it creates spaces for the characters to comment on the performance. The play begins with a conversation at center-stage, between a group of low-caste washerwomen and a *pandit* (Hindu priest), a risible but kindly figure who flirts with the young women. The washerwomen explain to the priest that they are in search of entertainment and that, having read Valmiki's text, they have decided to stage their own version of the *Shambukh*

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<sup>27</sup> In "The Politics of Telegu Ramayanas: Colonialism, Print Culture, and Literary Movements," (in Richman, Questioning Ramayanas) Velcheru Narana Rao offers a useful survey of some of the ways in which the Shambukh narrative has been adapted in Southern India enactments of the Ramayana. In the context of modern anti-caste activism, B. R. Ambedkar, the Indian nationalist and prominent anti-caste activist, used the Shambukh story repeatedly to pose an argument about the untenability of caste-hierarchies.

story. The audience is immediately conditioned for the performance to follow, as the ensuing conversation between the characters focuses on the justification for and manner of the performance.

The *pandit* is astonished that the washerwomen would adapt a play out of such a short section of the Ramayana. His first reaction expresses dismay—“Lekin Ramkatha to darshak dekthe hi rehthe hain. Unhein kuch aur dikhao” [“But audiences see the the *Ramkatha* (i.e. Ram narrative) all the time. Show them something else”], he suggests. He follows, then, with the question: “Bas, ye soch raha hoon ki is zara se prasang se poora natak kaise banega?” [“Well, I am thinking about how you will make an entire play out of such a small scene?”]. A retort by one of the washerwomen—“Aap is chota sa prasant kehthe hain?” [“Do you actually think this is a small scene?”]—continues the conversation. As the *pandit* and the washerwomen then summarize the various details of Valmiki’s text, various characters involved in the play—Shambukh, the priest Satyakam<sup>28</sup>—appear and announce themselves downstage. Without transition, the proper subject of the play begins. The washerwomen and the *pandit* remain in their same roles, but as actors in the story of Shambukh. The play itself is comprised of several intertwined subplots—involving for example Brahmin (upper-caste) priests who feel threatened and scheme against Shambukh, or an illicitly married Brahmin girl and low-caste boy who seek refuge in Shambukh’s ashram, which all connect in the dénouement of the performance (i.e. Shambukh’s death).

Adapting the Valmiki Ramayana, the JANAM performance reclaims a diverse history of the narrative recognizing the different uses to which it has been put. The point

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<sup>28</sup> *Satyakam* refers to a character in the *Upanishads*. The bastard child of an unknown father (presumed to be high-caste) and a low-caste woman, *Satyakam* transcends his low caste status and is awarded the sacred thread (the mark of a Brahmin) as a reward for his devotion.

is made by the historian Romila Thapar, who has noted that the Valmiki Ramayana itself represents an amalgam of narratives cast as an epic which, in its earliest form was not received as either history or spiritual guide, but as poetic composition (142). The staging that the JANAM play performs therefore counters the many ways in which the Ramayana as epic has been absorbed into the fabric of Hindu culture. Indeed, one important counterpoint would be the televised serial produced by Ramanand Sagar and presented in 1987 on *Doordarshan*, the Indian state-owned television station. The broadcast of the televised serial represented a break in convention for the station—which had not previously permitted such religious programming. Indeed, many critics at the time suggested that the permission to broadcast was a political ploy on behalf of the national government to retrieve the orthodox Hindu vote. The program was a massive success, with a weekly viewership estimated at a conservative 60 million. Reports abounded of families turning their televisions into center-pieces of a shrine for the Sunday morning broadcast (Lutgendorf 136). For many critics, the televised Ramayana dovetailed with the BJP reading of Valmiki's text: as authoritative tellings, both propounded normative ideologies through an assertion of a truth-claim seen to be inherent in the epic tale (Richman, Questioning Ramayanas 11).

The strategy that the JANAM play enacts through its adaptation, then, involves a reframing of Valmiki's work (i.e. an epic connoting an absolute past) as a narrative open to multiple signification. By making evident the terms of its own presentation of the narrative however, the performance also forecloses the authority of its own retelling. The deconstructive move is reflected in the performance of the play itself—its stage-craft and choreography.

## **Playing with Genres: Between the Street and the Stage**

Unlike the street theater performance that constitutes the bulk of JANAM's activity, Shambukh Vadh is a stage play that the group toured with, performing both in established theater houses and outdoors, in free, public venues. The opportunity to perform stage theater, which JANAM produces on average once a year, offers the collective the opportunity to produce longer plays than the normal 30-minute street play. The performance of Shambukh Vadh that I draw on here took place on April 24, 2005, in Sahibabad, a suburb in the outskirts of New Delhi, where much of the region's manufacturing plants are located. The area is inhabited by a largely a low-class worker population, the majority of which is employed in local factories. The caste make-up of the group would have been diverse, since the area—with its proximity to manufacturing and industrial centers—is known to attract a diverse mix of poor, recent arrivals to the city.

In terms of both setting and structure, the performance incorporates elements from both street and proscenium theater, such that the performance is hybrid: though a stage-play confined behind the “fourth wall” marking the edge between performance area and audience, it nonetheless features the free-flowing, improvisational quality of street theater. The setting for the one-hour and twenty minute long play was undeveloped lot open to the street in the front, bordered by a crumbling concrete wall on the left and right, and overlooked by the rear windowless back of a building on the far side. A large wooden stage approximately 50 feet long and 25 feet deep had been erected for the occasion. The stage itself consisted of large wooden planks covered with rough carpet, at a level of approximately 4 feet high. Lights strung lengthwise on the stage illuminated the

area. Microphones leading to speaker system had also been set up across the stage, in order to amplify sound against the background din of traffic from the street.

Given the fact that the group would not perform in the same area twice—in other words that the performances would move nightly to different areas—stage elements were kept to a minimum, with few costume accessories and no stage fixtures. Rows of chairs offered seating, but audience members scattered loosely in front of the performance area, and many of those unable to find seating near the stage chose to take places at the side of the stage or more frequently, to scale and sit atop the walls on either side of the lot. No tickets were needed to watch the performance and audience members were free to move at will.

It is not surprising, of course, that a street theater group would bend the conventions of proscenium production when performing on stage. Yet I would add that the structure of the play similarly tests the boundaries of a proscenium stage. The incorporation of street theater technique into proscenium acting works to interrogate the representative claims of proscenium theater and—in terms of the conventions of the bourgeois drama—its realist conventions that presume stage production as re-production of a script text. Consider, for instance, the fluid movement of actors on and off-stage and the lack of indication of division of act or scenes. At the outset of the play, as Shambukh and Satyakam appear downstage, the action fluidly shifts contexts from a discussion between the washerwomen and the pandit about the impending performance to the performance itself—resulting in a blurring between “reality” and theater that is a leitmotif of the street play. The structure of the performance is in fact arranged around such juxtapositions such that the spectator, while aware of the various intrigues leading to the

denouement of the play (i.e. Shambukh's demise), is not always sure whether the pandit or washerwomen occupy the frame within or without the performance staged by the washerwomen.

Such collapsing of frames in the play (i.e. the frame of reference in which the performance of a Ram story is discussed and that when it is performed) challenges the audience and disrupts the representation of the Ram narrative. The audience is similarly confronted with questions of representation through the use of a chorus. At various moments in the play the actors interrupt the ongoing scenes to congregate on stage and sing. At the outset of the play, the songs are devotional. Praising Ram and the goodness of his rule, the songs are consistent with the conventions of Sanskrit drama, which would begin with a devotional song or prayer to remove obstacles to likely to arise in the course of a performance. As the performance draws on, however, the intermittent songs transform into commentaries about the play and—as in the end of the play—into a call for action and struggle against the caste system. The shift in register of the songs plays ironically on the assumptions of the audience, who would expect from the outset, all music to follow the conventions of the genre. The ironic use of the songs, then, parallels the ways that the play itself adapts the Ramayana in ways unauthorized by the conventions of the genre, to counter the authority of the work.

### **The Political Imperative of Performance**

The challenge to the authority of the Ramayana (as read by the Hindu right) that Shambukh Vadh poses is articulated in the name of lower-caste rights. At the same time as the play contests the caste-based politics through opposition to the foundational terms

that the BJP uses to justify its actions, the play also models for the spectator forms of political action founded on a vision of novel, and inclusive forms of community. The framework for this political activism in fact parallels the appropriation that the play effects of the Ramayana narrative and its re-enactment as oppositional to the particular authority granted to it by the BJP.

The idea is illustrated in the scenes of the play focusing on the priest Shambukh's ashram. Having announced his plan to found a school where untouchables can learn manual skills and language, Shambukh charges Sundari, a Brahmin woman, to teach other untouchables how to read the scriptures. Sundari fulfills her duty by directing a play in which different characters are asked to assume the roles of a Brahmin priest, a landowner, and a Dalit laborer.

A lengthy scene is devoted to the construction of the play, and the rehearsal that the ashram-dwellers practice, in which Sundari instructs the different actors about how to play their respective roles. Pundarik, the disciple of Shambukh who has been assigned to play the role of the Brahmin priest, has a particularly difficult time mimicking the speech of a Brahmin and reading the holy verse. Growing increasingly frustrated, he threatens to abandon his role. "Sanskrit to panditon aur rajaon ki bhasha hai. Is bhasha se to hum gharib shudron jo dabaya gaya hai. Phir hum kyon Sanskrit sikhain? ["Sanskrit is the language of pandits and of kings. This language is also that of the oppression of the poor and lower-castes like us. Why should we learn it?"] he asks. Sundari's response defines the political import of language. She explains that it is not because of the Sanskrit language that the lower castes are oppressed. Rather, she asserts, "Ek taraf Sanskrit mein aisi smritiyon ki rachna hui hai, jisme Shudron ke shoshan ko Shastron ke anusar sahi

tehraya hai. Lekin gyan vigyan ke naye granthon ki bhi isi bhasha mein rachna hui hai. Is bhasha ka bahishkar kar hum apnaa hi aahith karenge” [“On the one hand it is true that there is a body of knowledge in Sanskrit that justifies our oppression. However, there are other scriptures that have been written and another body of knowledge that tells us that by not learning the language, we are doing ourselves harm”]. The statement is important as it distinguishes between language as an open field of signification and the ideologies through which language may be mediated. Sundari’s statement works then, to unhinge the any argument about Sanskrit as a sacred language, to be selectively made accessible. Equally important, her statement indirectly justifies any adaptation of the Ramayana itself, for if one is able to relativize the truth claim of a body of knowledge that claims language as being sacred and fixed, it is a then only a matter of small shift to then to similarly counter the learning that would similarly limit access to study—and interpretation—of the Ramayana narrative itself.

In brief, the play within-the-play, in other words the play staged by Sundari and her students, narrates the story of a poor, Dalit woman who seeks a donation of grain from her landlord, so that—following the conventions of hospitality—she can feed the relatives who visit her. The landlord has promised to grant his laborer a small amount of grain, but on the day that the laborer is to collect what has been promised to her, the local Brahmin priest visits the landlord and, out of his own prejudice, attempts to dissuade the landlord from making his donation. The Brahmin convinces the landlord that he has nothing to gain by donating the grain, and together, the two hatch a plot to humiliate the untouchable and to deny her what she has been promised. At the appointed hour, the Dalit woman arrives, and in a moment that verges on slapstick, the Brahmin tells the



untouchable woman that a miracle has occurred, and that a deity has spoken through the grain, delivering a message in poorly-rhymed verse in a rural Hindi dialect, instructing that it should not be eaten by a person of lower caste. The landlord therefore refuses to deliver the food

Unable to protest, the incredulous untouchable returns home. But, the woman turns the tables on the two men who have humiliated her. For, on the day that she is to begin to till the landlords field, she proceeds to claim that another miracle has occurred, and that a divine voice has this time spoken through the bull. In the same way that the grain was forbidden to be consumed by the Dalit, the bull now refuses to be led by an untouchable. When the landlord told the woman that a divine voice had spoken through the grain, he quoted a bit of doggerel that he attributed to the grain itself. On her part, the untouchable woman retaliates with her own comic poetry that she ascribes to the bull. The scenes I am describing are highly comic, the effect of which is heightened by the fact that the untouchable woman has used the tools of brahmin and landlord against them—in short, she has co-opted and used oppositionally the language of her oppressors.

The *mise-en-abîme* I have described, that is, the play staged within the play allegorizes, I suggest, a particular vision of Dalit politics. What is ultimately at stake in the scene is, of course, language which grants access to the law. By claiming the right to learn language, the untouchables in Shambukh's ashram reclaim the power of speech as a conduit to equality. Language therefore allows for an oppositionality that reconfigures the question of rights seen as being inherent (as intrinsic to caste) to an assertion of common right based on access to the same modes of signification. This equality rests on a fundamental supposition that language is a common good of the community.

For the audience member watching the play, the concrete manifestation of such reclamation of rights through modes of signification is illustrated at the end of the play. In the final scenes of the play, Shambukh learns that the upper-caste Brahmins in the kingdom have congregated at the court of King Ram in to lobby for his intervention and also, that the same Brahmins have been inciting violence against the lower-caste communities seeking to develop literacy. In one clash between Brahmins and Dalits, Shambukh is informed that a Brahmin boy has died, and that the boy's father has taken the dead body to Ram's palace. Shambukh sends an emissary to King Ram to represent the low-castes, but upon arriving at the court, Shambukh's devotee discovers that the Brahmins have conspired with the guards at the palace (who are of higher caste than the Dalits) to prevent anyone but high-caste priests from presenting themselves.

Shambukh knows that Ram will avenge the death of the Brahmin, and in his closing monologue, takes his place center-stage. As he awaits his fate he announces, "Tho Ram aa raha hein.... Vo Ram jo saikdon shudron ka khuun beah jaane par bhi vichalit nahi huua, ek brahmin putr ki maut bardaasht nahi kar sake aur aa rahe hein" ["So Ram is coming.... The Ram who, upon the shedding of hundreds of Shudras' blood, is not moved, but who cannot tolerate the death of one Brahmin boy"]. He adds:

Mein Shambukh yahan bait tap kartha huun, kartha huun vedon ki thrichaon ke paat, kartha huun intazar ki aayain Ram aur chinn-bhinn kar dain mera mastak. Kyon ki isse hi shuruuath hogi vedon ki satta ke anth ki, isse hi shuruuath hogi hamare aandolan ki, isse hi shuruuath hoti Ram ke iishvarathv ke anth ki. Mein Shambukh nakaarta huun Ram ke iishvarathv ko....

[I Shambukh sit here and worship. I read the scriptures as I wait for Ram to come, and I will lower my head that he might cut it off with his sword. Because from here on the age of the Vedas (scriptures) will end, from here our movement will take root, and from here the divinity of Ram will end. I Shambukh disobey his divine rule.]

Given that the average audience member would be generally familiar with the stories of the Ramayana, mediated through an authoritative telling (whether BJP's, the televised serial, or other), Shambukh's final assertions would be very controversial and would pose a contradiction. The orthodox Hindu perspective would hold Ram's divinity as inviolable, given that it is predicated on a sense of justice. Yet Shambukh's crime is to engage in worship and to appropriate a scriptural language the religious signification of which, in the terms articulated by the performance, has been uncoupled from caste hierarchy. JANAM's play articulates, then, a conception of community based on flux and a constant articulation of rights through common modes of signification.

### **Kateb Yacine's Le polygone étoilé and the Inscription of a Collective Voice**

Published in 1966, the experimental text Le polygone étoilé [The Starred Polygon] is one of the last major works by Kateb Yacine. Three years after its release Kateb returned to his homeland of Algeria and, refocusing his efforts on producing popular, political theater, ceased publishing altogether. Citing the need to bring his work closer to a largely illiterate Algerian public, he formed the theater group *Le Théâtre de la*

*Mer* [*The Theater of the Sea*], and traversed the country presenting trenchantly comic, political theater that lobbied for the rights of minorities and the underprivileged.<sup>29</sup>

Polygone is conventionally read as the work that precedes a radical break in the trajectory of Kateb's oeuvre. It is an enigmatic work—comprised of 71 short pieces of poetry, prose, and theater—that finds its only unity in its published, bound form. Texts incorporated into the work include, among others, historical passages about the French occupation of Algeria, autobiographical passages, theatrical fragments about the French colonial rule, comic passages featuring characters adapted from popular Algerian storytelling traditions, and oneiric, lyric prose passages. Many of these texts revisit motifs explicated in Kateb's earlier literary career, yet the generic variation and the lack of a consistent narrative foil any attempt to read Polygone in a linear fashion.

Critics have tended to read this break in Kateb's career—between on the one hand his published work in French and on the other, his popular theater in Arab dialect—in terms of an ideological shift.<sup>30</sup> Texts such as Polygone, written in highly crafted French, have been received as the expression of Kateb's melancholic lament over an Algerian nationalist project gone awry. In contrast, his later theater in Arab dialect—while no less politically significant—is seen as celebratory and irreverently parodic. Undeniably, there is a significant shift between publishing and writing in French, and producing highly improvised popular theater. Despite these differences, however, I maintain that there is a consistency between the two, consideration of which illuminates both the role of Kateb's

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<sup>29</sup> In Recherches, Jacqueline Arnaud offers an exhaustive catalogue of the texts in Kateb's work.

<sup>30</sup> Kateb's popular theater was never scripted prior to their performance: plays evolved through the collective improvisation of the group. Available, published versions of his theater are transcriptions drawing from the limited, available recordings of the theater as well as Kateb's personal journals. Also of note, Kateb himself did not speak Arab dialect. He largely relied on his theater troupe to translate a specific play for performance into the regional tongue. Given the many local variations in language, his popular theater was therefore a collective work in constant translation.

theater in terms of his entire production and, more importantly, the relationships between literary canons, text, and performance in post-independence Algeria.

In this chapter, I read Polygone alongside Kateb's own writing about theater and the critical evaluation of his work to underscore the parallels between Kateb's published texts and his popular theater. Beyond the fact that both Polygone and Kateb's later theater express a relentless critique the post-independence Algerian regime, I argue that Polygone (like his later theater) highlights what I will call the "performative" aspect of his work. In other words, just as Kateb's later theater relies on interaction with the audience to create theatrical meaning, Kateb's text throws into relief the role of the reader in constructing meaning out of the text. In both the theatrical and textual case, then, political and cultural signification evolves out of an interaction between the spectator/reader and artwork that underscores artistic creation as a collective process rather than as the product of a single author. Such a perspective holds the meaning of art as contingent or dependent upon the manner of interpretation rather than being intrinsic to the work itself.

Reading Polygone in this way enables an interpretation that recognizes the consistent ways in which Kateb's work evolves in reaction to the cultural and political discourses of colonial and postcolonial Algeria. Both the colonial *francisation*, and the post-colonial *arabisation* of Algeria privileged textual-notions of culture (predicated on literary canons) as the cultural foundation of political identity.<sup>31</sup> By experimenting with

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<sup>31</sup> Though colonial-French and postcolonial-Algerian state language policies were fraught with contradictions, both exhibit a fundamental structural similarity in that language pedagogy (accompanied by cultural policy) was seen as a means of moral, civic education. Under French colonial rule, the teaching of the French language constituted the focal point of an educational system that aimed, through proper instruction, to create a colonial subject assimilable into French culture. Supplemented by readings from canonical literary French texts, language pedagogy aimed at the civic instruction of the colonial subject in the essentials of an institutionally defined French identity (see Gosnell 41-68). Following independence, in

artistic form in ways that I describe as “performative,” I maintain that Kateb’s Polygone expresses a critique of the authority granted to the print text and concomitant forms of textual literacy. An analysis of Polygone that focuses on the performative aspects of the work therefore enables a reading that highlights the textual biases and notions of authority that inflect the cultural politics of the post-independence era of Algeria.

After situating Polygone in terms of both Kateb’s larger production and the critical reception of the work, I will discuss specific passages in the text that underscore the political and cultural significance of Kateb’s narrative, and the element of reader participation that I define as being “performative.” My discussion about Kateb will culminate with a discussion of the cultural politics of post-independence Algeria and the particular ways in which both Kateb’s experimental narrative and popular theater work to challenge the cultural canons of both colonial Algeria and the post-independence nation state.

### **Contexts for Reading Polygone: The Critical Reception of Kateb’s Work**

How does one read a text that offers few chronotopic indicators that allow one to place a narrative within a set time and space? Critics have tended to focus on historical contexts as an entry into the text. Commenting on the fragmentary aspect of the work, numerous scholars such as Jacqueline Arnaud have observed that the “chaotic” aspect of the Kateb’s Polygone “corresponds to the fractured Algerian milieu in disarray since

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the state-building efforts of the regime under Algerian President Ahmed Ben-Bella, education in classical Arabic was mandated as a way of linking the Algerian present to its Islamic roots and thereby breaking the tradition inherited from the French presence. This education was largely carried out in state run schools (the *medersa*) focusing on qur’anic studies as a medium for language pedagogy. As with French colonial policy, Arabization privileged textual cultural forms as foundation for the cultural education of a new citizenry.

1830, and even more specifically, to a country ravaged by war, whose inhabitants were physically and morally mutilated, cut off from their identity, and living in a world of contradictions even in 1965-66, as the turbulence continued” (Recherches 831-832). Such evaluations of Kateb’s work associate the destruction of traditional narrative forms and genres in Kateb’s work with the author’s own desire to find a form adequately representative of the upheaval in post-colonial Algerian society.<sup>32</sup> Though it is important to recognize the ways such upheavals in Algeria shaped Kateb’s oeuvre, such a perspective ignores the ways in which Kateb’s text *both* critiques an existing state of events *and* recuperates possibilities for a liberated, political future.

Through a historically specific critique, scholars interested in Kateb’s work have offered invaluable insight into the contexts of Polygone. Though such appraisals have highlighted the important ways upheaval in Algeria shapes Kateb’s text they fail to address the particular consistencies between his published work and popular theater and the radical critique that Polygone offers of the aesthetic-cultural system that subtended dominant discourses about post-independence Algerian identity. Through a reading of the work that is attentive to the ways in which the ambiguities in Polygone implicate the reader in the construction of meaning, I maintain that the fragments of texts in Kateb’s

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<sup>32</sup> Polygone was published in 1966, four years after Algerian independence, which itself was the culmination of both a protracted, bloody war with the French and domestically, ongoing conflict between local factions, among which radical Islamist groups figured prominently. Contrary to popular expectation, the regime of Ahmed Ben Bella, Algeria’s first president, witnessed a worsening of an already catastrophic social and economic situation. In 1965, the Algerian army led by Colonel Houari Boumédiène overthrew the Ben Bella government, seized power, outlawed rival parties, and undertook a vast project of state-building. In the social domain, this entailed rewriting a “sanitized” Algerian history that cast the present-day state as the avatar of a mythical, precolonial Arabo-Islamic regime (see Stora, Algeria 1830-2000 172-174).

text work performatively—that is, that they create multiple significations that open up spaces for novelty and political signification within oppressive, hegemonic systems.<sup>33</sup>

### **Meaningful Ambiguities and Resistance to Narratives of Origin**

Given the lack of any topoi that situate the texts comprising Polygone with respect to one another, it is easy to read any reference to ambiguity that the text makes as self-referential in terms of the work as a whole. Consider for example the first stanzas of one of the many poems interspersed in the text:

Observez un chat  
Poursuivi entre quatre murs  
Par le chien du propriétaire  
Et dites-moi  
S'il existe pour le chat  
La moindre ligne droite (86-87)  
[In the world of a cat  
There is no straight line  
Watch a cat  
Chased between four walls  
By the dog of the owner  
And tell me  
If there exists for the cat

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<sup>33</sup> Arnaud alludes to the type of performativity that I wish to signal. As she remarks, there can be no entry for the reader of Le Polygone étoilé, "...who does not want to become him/herself also a creator or who does not want to explore this impression of strangeness: one must enter into a Maghrebi mythological world" ("Corde" 32). Unfortunately, Arnaud leaves this idea of the interaction of reader with text undeveloped.



Any straight line at all]

If we take this playful poem seriously for a moment, and interpret it allegorically in terms of Kateb's work, then it is clear that what is at stake is the impossibility of following a "straight line" in a system marked by power inequities. The poem offers an initial justification for the fragmented work. But then who is the pursuer and who is pursued? How might we further interpret this allegory?

I argue that what is at stake is not so much the one-to-one correspondence of the allegory, but rather the fact of the power itself that positions predator and prey with respect to each other. In the allegorical interpretation, what matters is not so much the one to one correspondence of the metaphorical elements, but the formal relationship of the elements to one another, where there is no one implied correspondence between the elements of the allegory. The idea is illustrated in the opening of the text.

Polygone begins with lengthy, lyrical prose passage that depicts a scene in which a group of captives are bound and imprisoned: "Ils étaient tombés dans un grand cri, les yeux fermés. Ils se sentirent aussitôt prisonniers. Puis ce fut la lumière, et des êtres rigides, de haute taille, s'emparaient d'eux régulièrement, d'un geste bienfaiteur et surnois" ["They fell with a cry, and eyes closed. They immediately became prisoners. Then there was light, and large, stiff-backed men would grab them in a gesture of devious care"] (7). The text offers no spatial or temporal indicators that situate the passage, which largely focuses on the pain and torments of the prisoners.

As Charles Bonn has observed there is a systematic play on ambiguity in Kateb's work to produce a political signification that is multiplied through the indeterminacy of the text. Describing the numerous descriptions of captives that appear in the text, Bonn

remarks that Le polygone étoilé “plays on temporal ambiguity, particularly in the prison/camp sequences. Few diegetic indicators permit a temporal localization of these narratives, analysis of which reveals that their narrative structure is situated both before and after Independence” (Bonn 193). Delimiting his interpretation to the history of Algerian politics, Bonn reads the text as a critique of both the pre and post-independence regimes that highlights the continuity between colonial practice and the Algerian state. Yet such a reading relies on interpretation; the paucity of concrete indices in the text neither confirms nor denies this conclusion as right or wrong, leaving the work open to further interpretation.

### **Revolution and Collective Memory in Polygone Étoilé**

The temporal ambiguity Bonn discusses and his specific political reading of Polygone presumes that one approaches Kateb’s text with adequate background to interpret the text. Indeed, the function of Polygone seems to be that it requires the reader to carry out a sort of interpretation that throws into relief the intertextual elements in the work upon which we base our interpretations. Yet to the degree that any interpretation is left provisional, I suggest that Polygone calls attention to—and questions—the ways in which texts work within cultural systems to assert meanings. The idea is significant in the context of Algeria, for at that moment of Polygone’s publication, state regime had begun to actively revive a nationalist mythology that spoke of a pre-colonial, Islamic heritage.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Such claims to an Arabo-Islamic heritage have always been, of course, detrimental to the Berber tribes and numerous ethnic minorities in the Maghreb (North Africa) that lay claim to a longer history in region than Islam. Kateb’s own “revolt” against the Islamicisation should be read precisely in terms of these other minority discourses, the existence of which was threatened the post-independence nation-building project.

Such ideas are expressed, for example, in the numerous passages in the text that speak of characters named alternatively “les ancêtres” [the ancestors] or “les fondateurs” [the founders]. Following the opening scene of the text in a highly lyric prose, the text describes the avatars of tradition who appear as “les ancêtres”:

Mais les Ancêtres eux-mêmes seraient condamnés à renaître, en rangs par quatre, inexorablement tentés de parcourir la route d’exil, mais le décor aurait changé: ils entendraient leurs descendants mugir, et le retour au ciel serait interdit par un vent de révolte.... [Q]uatre par quatre, leurs descendants défileraient devant eux, les retiendraient à leur tour prisonniers.... (10)

[But the Ancestors would themselves be condemned to rebirth in rows of four, inexorably drawn to wander in exile, but the scene would have changed: they would hear their descendants roar, and their (the Ancestors’) return to the heavens would be forbidden by the wind of revolution...their descendents would pass before them, and in turn keep them prisoners.]

In this passage, the four captives from the opening scene find their mirror image in the Ancestors reborn in “rows of four.” The suggestion that the ancestors are reborn and effectively imprisoned recasts myth and the narratives of origins represented by the Ancestors as relationship of oppression. In the context of a political interpretation of the work, such a description alludes precisely to the myth-making project undertaken by the post-independence state.

Equally important are recurring scenes in Kateb’s work that depict the scene of a “chantier” or construction site. The repeated scene in the text lyrically describes vast edifices to be constructed, where the phrase “Chaque fois, les plans sont bouleversés”

[“Each time, the project was overturned”] appears as a refrain. This site of failed construction that appears as a leitmotif in the text refers of course dually to Kateb’s text itself and the assertion of Algerian identity. The link is made concrete near the conclusion of the text, after one such passage describing the “chantier,” where the narrator avers:

Notre statut de mémoire d’Algérien fut toujours provisoire, et chaque fois qu’on le définit il devient un peu plus vague.... Peut-être sommes-nous les premiers responsables de ce néant, d’où l’urgence de nous organiser enfin par nous-mêmes.... [I]l semble que nous ne serons jamais versés dans un camp bien déterminé, dans lequel nous pourrions prendre des habitudes, mais trimbalés d’un lieu à l’autre, en attendant quoi ? Une véritable révolution. (133-4)

[The condition of our Algerian collective memory was always provisional, and every time that one defined it, it became more vague... Perhaps we ourselves are responsible for this void, which is the source of this urgency for us to organize ourselves....[I]t appears that we will never fall into a clearly defined situation to which we could adapt, but rather that we will be shifted from one place to another, waiting for what? A true revolution.]

Here, the implication of the text is that a true revolution would determine the conditions for an assertion of an Algerian collective memory, but it is left to interpretation what a “true revolution” might be.

## Reading and Textuality: Interpretation as a Performative Act

The association between revolution and *chantier* would seem rather dissatisfying to a reader looking for ideological assertions. Indeed, rather than positing the grounds for an inclusive Algerian identity, Kateb's text focuses on the the *chantier*/construction site itself as the site of transformation. In short, the presentation of the *chantier* as revolutionary shifts focus away from the presentation of definite meaning to the process of meaning-making—exemplified in the image of an edifice that is constantly erected, destroyed, and rebuilt.

The ambiguities in Kateb's text work, as I have indicated, depict scenes that require metaphoric interpretation by the reader. Meanings therefore evolve out of what amounts to a performative relationship between reader and printed word. In the domain of theater, "performativity" designates the relationship between stage-practice and spectator that frames the context for novelty.<sup>35</sup> In the domain of print-text, the corollary of performativity is "textuality" which, in its broadest usage, defines the process of

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<sup>35</sup> Drawing from the work of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, the critic Janelle Reinelt has discussed "performance" as that aspect of "performativity" which "stages the subject in process, the making and fashioning of certain materials, especially the body, and the exploration of the limits of 'representation-ability'" (Reinelt 201). Performativity indicates the aspect of theater that focuses not on the meanings that characters signify, but rather on the processes that are used to create meaning. For Reinelt, it is in this process of meaning-making (a process that always necessarily involves a relationship between spectator and performance) that spaces for novelty evolve. Thought of in simple, concrete terms, any two performances of a single theatrical work will never be the same despite the intention of its agents/producers. The domain of performativity indicates that critical perspective which focuses on the differences between the two performances to identify spaces for the re-signification and transformation of the intended meaning. Therefore, where theater in Reinelt's critique, is a space of representation (and subjection to certain rules governing said representation), performance opens the possibility of signification that is unintended by the roles prescribed in theater. The theoretical framework Reinelt offers gestures towards an understanding of the dialogic relationship between "performance" and "theater" as an analogy for thinking about the "implication of the body in material regimes of power" and, very fundamentally, the foundation of subjectivity (213). Reinelt's exposition of performativity rests upon a vision of a subjectivity that is inherently unstable in that the theater produced by acting subjects is constantly supplemented (in a process that transforms both the theater and its agents) by the novelty in performance.

reading and interpreting a text. As Jerome McGann has asserted, “[t]extuality is a scene in which readers respond to the texts they encounter. If one locates the reader at the center of textuality, it is because the text is passive and silent, because it needs the reader’s activity to infuse it with meaning, to bring it back to life” (4). Eschewing conceptions that see texts as repositories of a truth that can be illuminated by proper interpretation, proponents of “textuality” alert us to the determining sociohistoric conditions (i.e. the ways in which texts are edited and published, and the condition of the reader who consumes the text) that establish the horizon within which texts are interpreted. McGann adds:

[T]exts are produced and reproduced under specific social and institutional conditions, and hence that every text, including those that may appear to be purely private, is a social text. This view entails a corollary understanding, that a “text” is not a “material thing” but a material event or set of events, a point in time (or a moment in space) where certain communicative interchanges are being practiced. (21)

Like performance, then, the “textual” perspective highlights the texts as emerging out of a dialogic relationship: the transaction between reader and text mirrors that between audience and spectator. In making this comparison, I do not wish to assert absolute equivalence. Of course, the comparison breaks down in the case of popular theater such as *Kateb’s*, where spaces open for direct audience participation in performances themselves. What I wish to stress in juxtaposing “performativity” to “textuality,” however, is the idea that texts, like performances, are social events. Second, very crucially, theories of textuality help us read texts as palimpsests: in other words, the

material publication of texts, their editing, and the presuppositions of the reader create layers of meaning, under which there is neither a single, original text nor one stable interpretation. The life of texts, to use McGann's words, is determined by their reproduction and our readings of them.

McGann's work presents a theory of reading that valorizes the interaction between reader and text, thereby challenging modes of interpretation that privilege texts themselves as sole repositories of meaning to be decoded by the reader. Whereas McGann intends his theory to apply to a general framework for reading, I use the idea of textuality here to signal the ways in which Kateb foregrounds the construction of his own work, casting not only Polygone but also in fact, his entire production as a "work" in progress. The reappearance in Polygone of themes and character drawn from Kateb's earlier works exemplify the idea of "rewriting" that I am indicating. Consider for instance the female character Nedjma (whose name means "star" in Arabic): in many of Kateb's works, Nedjma appears as the unattainable embodiment of the Algerian nation, and the sought-after beloved of Kateb's male protagonists. First appearing in the 1948 poem "Nedjma ou le poème ou le couteau" ["Nedjma or the Poem or the Knife"], the character subsequently reappears in almost all of Kateb's published works as the eponymous character of the novel Nedjma (1958) and in Polygone. My interest is not so much in documenting the reappearance of the character, as much as indicating the degree to which the repetition of themes and motifs throughout Kateb's oeuvre indicates his conception of his own work as being in constant evolution.

## **National Identity versus the Collective Voice**

The link that Kateb establishes between both text and nation as works in progress challenges the predominant notion national narrative (and correspondingly, the valorization of textual literacy) in post-independence Algerian cultural discourses. Following Algerian independence in 1962, under President Ahmed Ben Bella and then Houari Boumedienne in 1965, the Algerian state undertook a massive state-building project that involved the mass nationalization of industries and an increasingly centralized state-power. In the cultural domain, the state equally sought to establish institutions that would support its reform programs and equally, educate a population that had been deprived of access to its “authentic” cultural forms during the long 130 years of French colonization. In this context, the early 1960’s were marked by fervent energy—literary institutions and authors’ collectives subsidized by the state flourished. Kateb Yacine himself joined the “Unions des Écrivains Algériens” [Union of Algerian Writers], which counted among its members other noted authors such as Jean Sénac and Rachid Boudjedra. Yet as literary critics and historians have noted, such cultural projects were fraught with contradiction to the degree that authors like Kateb were staunchly against Arabicization. Ultimately these cultural projects foundered against both the increasing conservatism of the state, and the limitations of a mass, illiterate population who had little or no access to the types of cultural forms subsidized by the state.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> As Sofiane Hadjadj has remarked, “[c]ultural activism will permanently suffer from these ideological tensions, from political flux, from distrust and lack of confidence; it (the cultural project) will be torn between indifference and a will to instrumentalize. What is ultimately privileged are grand cultural festivals that are publicized in the international media. No serious cultural reflection is undertaken and the Algerian intellectuals, the renowned writers, yesterday united and committed, now disperse, renounce their interest, go into exile...” (2).



In the voluminous historical criticism about nationalism, it is axiomatic to state about nationalist movements in the twentieth century, that assertions of national identity rested on the idea of a unified, national polity. In nationalist movements, moreover, the ideological role granted to artistic production—plastic arts, literature, theater and poetry—was to narrate the coming into being of the citizen or new, national subject.<sup>37</sup> Under the post-independence socialist-regime in Algeria, writers were summoned to comply with the official ideology embodied by the FLN party and to sustain nationalist fervor.<sup>38</sup> In sum, writers were asked to embrace the aesthetics of socialist realism and in some cases, to write in classical Arabic.

While Arabicisation was adopted as official policy, numerous contradictions still prevailed. A significant segment of the elite in Algeria continued to speak in French, and Arabicization hardened the split between a francophone and arabophone elite (a distinction that the educational system continued to produce to the degree that instruction for medical and technological degrees continued to be offered in French) (Algeria 1830-2000 170). Arabicization projects had their greatest success among the rural poor—the groups that had few educational options beyond what was offered to them by the state. Yet the major issue persisted in that the most desirable careers continued to require complete fluency in French. Educated rural dwellers therefore found themselves largely unqualified for positions that would have granted them upward social mobility.

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<sup>37</sup> In Enlightenment in the Colony, the critic Aamir Mufti offers a lucid analysis of the intersection between national, state-building projects and fiction-writing. As Mufti explains it, “...telling the truth of society in fiction amounted to narrating the emergence of the secular citizen subject as the highest form of consciousness in a colonial society” (125).

<sup>38</sup> The *FLN* refers to the *Front de Libération National* political party that had led the Algerian nationalist cause.

Educated largely in French, and only semi-literate in Arabic, Kateb was a keen observer of these various contradictions in his country. In the closing text of Polygone, in fact, he describes—in the only such autobiographical sequence in the work—his own formation in Arabic/Arabic dialect and French. In the short sequence, he figures classical Arabic as the language of his father, and the popular forms as the language of his mother. In terms of the latter particularly, he writes, “[E]lle était surtout douée pour le théâtre. Que dis-je? A elle seule, elle était un théâtre” (179) [“(S)he was above all gifted for theater. But what I am I saying? She herself was a theater, I was her only and enraptured audience...”]. Kateb later qualified this description of his mother in an interview reprinted in Le poète comme un boxeur, where he asserts, “When I think about the theater, I see first of all my mother.... As soon as my father would leave, she took revenge in imitating his manly voice, en dressing like him, and imitating him in the smallest details. She could then imitate my child’s voice, to become a mirror...” (135). Interestingly, the description that Kateb offers here echoes verbatim an unpublished, typed text found among his letters, titled “Theater and Poetry Are My Mother and My Father,” in which he further describes theater as the symbol of le tribu/the tribe (in other words, the collective identity that predates the nation-state, that is fractured through the experience of modernity).

Yet a moment of alienation occurs when Kateb begins to study French, the language that offers freedom yet imposes isolation. Describing his subsequent success in French, Kateb writes:

Jamais je n’ai cessé, même aux jours de succès près de l’institutrice, de ressentir au fond de moi cette seconde rupture du lien ombilical, cet exil intérieur qui ne rapprochait plus l’écolier de sa mère que pour les

arracher.... Ainsi avais-je perdu tout à la fois ma mère et son langage, les seuls trésors inaliénables—et pourtant aliénés! (181-2)

[Never did I cease...to feel within this second cut from the umbilical cord, this interior exile that would only bring the schoolboy close to his mother to then tear them apart.... In this way I lost at once my mother and her language, those inalienable treasures—now however alienated!]

To the degree that Kateb figures this relationship to Arabic/the “mother-tongue” in terms of orality—as he puts it, his study of French imposes a “camisole du silence” [“straightjacket of silence”] over his mother (181)—the study of French texts and language represents therefore a profound loss of culture that is primarily oral and collective.

For Kateb then, the turn to popular theater represented both a *return* to oral culture and a means for establishing a modern national identity that would be as cohesive as the mythical and irretrievable tribal affiliation. The popular theater Kateb produced with his group represents a genre that evolved over time in function of its collective audiences, while at the same time reflecting back to the public an image of itself. Its political thrust evolves as much out of advocacy of a specific issue as its constant emphasis on intersubjective relations and the construction of a vibrant national identity out of which a ravaged postcolonial society could spring anew.

Yet if one considers the performative dimension of Polygone, the efforts in the text to capture multiple voices and stories, to write and then rewrite (as in the image of the scaffold), then it is clear that a similar impulse to trace the contours of a collectivity here guides the work. I would argue that Polygone—particularly since it is in some ways

a compendium of texts and fragments that have appeared in Kateb's previously published work—is the writer's attempt to deconstruct the notion of authorship and to make manifest the intertextual, and even collective nature of the written work.

### **Rethinking National Genres**

The juxtaposition here of the print text Polygone and the play Shambukh Vadh attest to a similar set of aesthetic, cultural, and political questions in modern India and Algeria. Both works make prominent an ongoing project to define the contours of a community that would recuperate the universalist project of nationhood, but in ways that somehow attend to the particularisms of local community. Reading across genres, this chapter has largely focused on the notion of performance. Though the theoretical terms employed—performativity, performance—derive from Western critical paradigms, the critical focus of these terms on heterogeneity, self-reflexivity, and processes of meaning-making rather than on signification render them broad enough to sustain the types of comparison posed here.

The discussion of national genres has continued to privilege text forms as the primary for thinking about the nexus of nation, community, and culture. No doubt, this is in part due to the enduring influence of a line of nationalist thought that begins with Benedict Anderson, in his preliminary articulation of “Imagined Communities,” which he then revised into a statement about “Bound” and “Unbound” identities. Within this body of thought, the primary artistic genre of nation continues to be the novel. Yet if, as Tim Brennan has suggested, the novel plays a “national role, as it were, only in an international arena,” then I would argue, through my analysis of both Polygone and

Shambukh Vadh, that a fuller picture of national genre might be understood through a deconstructive move that recognizes a national genre not as the novel alone, but rather as a dialectic of text and performance.

### Chapter III

#### Performing the People: Street Theater and the Politics of Publicity in Kateb Yacine's Mohamed prends ta valise and JANAM's Honda ke Gunda

“If he wants to start a revolution, the writer must not express himself, but rather help others to express themselves...a writer must pass his time in helping others speak...if the people begin to speak, they do so in torrents. One must listen carefully and deliberate the novel experiences one hears about, as they offer us important alternatives; in this way the myth of the writer will decline. The writer will be a historian.... (Kateb, cited in Arnaud “Théâtre politique” 133)

#### Staging Hidden Bodies and Silenced Voices

In a scene near the outset of the street theater production Mohamed prends ta valise [Mohamed Pack Your Bag] produced by Kateb Yacine and ACT, the risibly named French Général Decoq presides over the forced inscription of young Algerian men into the French army. The men will provide reinforcements, the General indicates, at Verdun—the site of one of the bloodiest battles of WWI.<sup>39</sup> Representations of the forced recruitment of young men combine with scenic elements that explicitly refer to African slave trade, such as the binding of the conscripts by ropes. As he watches the bound captives being led away, the General proclaims:

Vous vous êtes engagés en foule,

Vous avez quitté

Sans hésitation votre terre natale,

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<sup>39</sup> During World War I, the French government forcibly employed 17,000 Algerian workers in arms factories and obliged 173,000 Algerian men (of which 25,000 died) to fight in the war (Stora,  Ils venaient 14).

A laquelle vous êtes si attachés.  
Vous, tirailleurs, pour donner votre sang,  
Vous, ouvriers, pour donner vos bras.  
Mes enfants, mes amis,  
Vous êtes les défenseurs  
Du droit et de la liberté! (Boucherie 233)  
[You have committed yourselves in droves,  
You have left  
Without hesitation your homeland,  
To which you are so attached.  
You, infantry, to give your blood,  
You, workers, to give your arms.  
My children, my friends,  
You are the protectors  
Of the law and of liberty!]

Stage notes included with the published version of the script of Mohamed indicate that the General's discourse is delivered in French, and that an interpreter who accompanies him translates the address into Arabic.<sup>40</sup>

The content of the General's hypocritical proclamation, the brutal context in which it is issued, and its simultaneous translation all combine to create a complex network of meanings. Clearly, the general's discourse—particularly his invocation of

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<sup>40</sup> The fact is significant as language had become a highly politicized issue by the middle and late 1960's. Under President Boumediène, the Algerian state had begun to promote Classical Arabic, spoken by only a minority of the population, as the national language. For Kateb and his collaborators, this "Arabicization" policy represented one of many ways the dispossession of the larger, underprivileged Algerian citizenry continued as it had under the colonial regime.

“liberty” —is patently absurd, given procession of bound bodies that passes before him. Given the linguistic demographics of Algeria at the time, however, it is conceivable that the captives would only have spoken popular Arabic and that they therefore might not have completely understood the translator. The general’s qualification of the captured conscripts as “children” conveys an attitude of colonial paternalism, and his appeal, finally, in the last lines to “law” and “liberty” echo the values of liberal democracy—yet the fact that he does not mention “equality” raises the possibility that he is at least partially conscious of the power dynamic of the scene. Whose liberty and law, then, are the forced conscripts protecting?

The numerous contradictions in the scene resonate historically on multiple levels. In one sense, the procession rehearses the exploitative practice of colonialism that finds its own justification for the appropriation of both bodies and capital in service of empire. And in another vein, it was precisely through moments such as this, when Algerian men were forcibly recruited into the army or to work in factories that, through their travel and interactions with others abroad, they comprehended fully the vast inequalities between Europe and its colonies. As Benjamn Stora suggests, the experience was surely a “...shock of discovery of a different society: having come from his *douar*, [the conscript] discovers large cities, industry, and he learns of labor unions and political organization, not to mention the possibility of political resistance” ( Ils venaient  15).

Mohamed prends ta valise was the first play that Kateb produced in collaboration with his theater group *Action Culturelle des Travailleurs*. After its premier in Algiers in 1971, the play toured in France, where it was staged in factories, dormitories, and schools. By the end of its second tour in France in 1975, an estimated 350,000 people had



seen the performance. The play focuses largely on the mass emigration of Algerian workers to France, and hardships that they faced abroad.

Emigration from Algeria accelerated after 1962, when the booming French economy and rapid industrial expansion called for substantial additional labor power (Stora, Ils venaient 413). As had been the case since the early twentieth century, the French nation opened its doors to North African laborers, and masses of work-seeking men, frequently along with their families, left unemployment and political uncertainty at home to build a new life in the former colonial center.<sup>41</sup> Due to bureaucratic incompetence of the immigration authorities in France, domestic companies began to recruit—often illegally—workers from Algeria.<sup>42</sup> Algerian immigrant laborers (and particularly illegals) in France frequently found themselves in deplorable, exploitative living and work conditions.<sup>43</sup>

The play situates the history of emigration to France within the global history of colonialism, nationalism, and the building of the Algerian state—captured in a series of approximately 30 scenes. In the vision that the play presents, the flux of Algerians into the erstwhile colonial center inscribes itself into a long history of the continued dispossession of the Algerian people perpetrated successively by the former colonizer and the post-independence, Algerian state regime. As Rosalyn Baffet has suggested, the global analysis that the play offers of emigration “...allows for immediate and pragmatic

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<sup>41</sup> For an overview of the history of Algerian immigration to France see Stora, Ils venaient: Simon.

<sup>42</sup> Official statistics suggest that between 1968 and 1975, the Algerian population in France grew approximately 50% to reach 710,000 (Simon 38). Given the number of illegals also entering the country, the actual number is likely higher.

<sup>43</sup> In Deconstructing the Nation: Immigration, Racism and Citizenship in Modern France, Maxim Silverman offers a clear description of the typical *milieu* of the Algerian immigrant worker: where single men were frequently housed in worker’s foyers in tight, shared quarters, families were frequently offered housing in *bidonvilles*, or worker settlement colonies almost always situated in suburban areas, removed from city centers. In terms of employment, laborers frequently filled positions in mining and manufacturing industries—in frequently hazardous if not completely unsafe working conditions.

social action. Emigration is not an independent form of exploitation from others, they all share the same principle. To learn its causes and effects in a global manner allows for collective action and solidarity, which is important in the revolutionary plan” (137).

As Kateb repeatedly stated, the emigration of Algerians to France represented a tremendous loss to the nation: “We are not only losing young workers, but our youth is moving abroad. Those who should build the Algeria of tomorrow are coming to France to sweep the sidewalks” (Poète 70). For a young Algerian worker watching the play during one of its tours on mainland France, or for young man attending a performance in Algeria, the impact of the scene described above must have been felt as akin to an alienation effect inspiring critical reflection about the scenario.

Whereas the Kateb of Polygone worked to write a text that manifested the collective experience subtending individual artistic expression, the Kateb of Mohamed—as the epigraph to this chapter implies—had moved further along a continuum in his exploration of the notion of collectivity. Kateb’s project now was not to locate an Algerian collectivity finding its own expression through the personal experience and writing of the politically committed intellectual, but rather, to incite that collectivity to speak for itself, to make noisy debate, to clamor for rights and a cohesive Algerian community. As opposed to the silent, restricted, and chained convicts in the scene described above, Kateb wanted his audiences to express themselves.

The collective represented for Kateb the popular voice in Algeria that had been suppressed and silenced by the government. As he expressed it in a 1968 speech delivered at the Local Worker’s Union in Algiers:

Since the birth of the FLN, we see a certain mistrust of the worker, of the intellectual, of the woman, and of youth. The criminals and the bourgeois who have taken power have derailed the liberation movement. They have deceived the people. In showing us, since independence, their sordid squabbles, they have betrayed the revolution before it even truly began. (1)

In such a situation, where the government had stemmed progressive reform in the state, and where a large populace remained alienated and impoverished, Kateb saw the place of the artist as being among the people, engaging them in discussion and debate, developing consciousness, and potentially forming solidarities.

### **Reclaiming the Heterogeneous, Contested, Public Sphere in the Nation**

Kateb's numerous statements about the heterogeneity of the Algerian people—and about the need for collective discussion—parallels recent critical work that has redefined the bourgeois public sphere.<sup>44</sup> In the essay “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” Nancy Fraser suggests that “the bourgeois public was never *the* public. On the contrary, virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public there arose a host of competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics, and working class publics” (116). Importantly, Fraser adds that the relationships between the bourgeois sphere and other publics were always conflictual, and that the

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<sup>44</sup> As Fraser suggests, in its classical formulation, the public sphere was to constitute a space where participants would speak to each other as if they were social and economic peers. The key phrase here, as Fraser observes, is “as if,” which suggests that differences between interlocutors were eliminated, but simply bracketed off. “But were they really bracketed?” Fraser asks, “Rather, discursive interaction within the bourgeois public sphere was governed by protocols of style and decorum that were themselves correlates and markers of status inequality. These functioned informally to marginalize women and members of the plebian classes and to prevent them from participating as peers” (119).

counterpublics that contested bourgeois norms posed their opposition by alternative styles of public behavior and norms of public speech. Fraser's formulation offers a useful framework for thinking about heterogeneity in the nation-state, and her definition of the public sphere as a net of conflicting counterpublics provides a helpful terminology for describing antagonistic relations between social groups in Algeria. Indeed, it is through the concept of the public sphere that one can understand Kateb's assessment of a "multi-national" national community: "There is not a Berber Algeria, there is not an Arab Algeria, there is not a French Algeria: there is *an* Algeria. This Algeria must not be divided. Algeria is 'multinational'..." (Poète 52). For Kateb, clearly, there was unity in division.

### **Postcolonial Street Theater and the Formation of Political Solidarities**

In its project to establish political solidarities across differences, street theater such as that produced by Kateb and as I will argue, JANAM, relies upon developing both a historical and "spatial" perspective of the public sphere. Further, if the place of theater is, as Kateb stated, among the people, in lived space, then its processes and its modes of engaging its audiences transforms (and in fact broadens) our idea of what a range of normative behaviors in the public sphere might include.

To clarify, then, I consider the notion of "historical" public space as the making visible of counterpublics not acknowledged or overlooked by historical account, and by "spatial" public space, I refer to the ways street theater traces spaces of deliberation; in other words, if the public sphere refers to *institutionalized sphere* of discursivity, I suggest that street theater practices map out spaces of interaction. In theoretical

formulations, the public sphere does not correspond to the nation (though it is a space where the nation can be critical of the state)—but in what follows, I will suggest that the particular mappings of public deliberation that street theater traces (through its movement and iterations of performance) pose a critique of national space.

To elaborate the argument, I will juxtapose a discussion of Mohamed prends ta valise with an analysis of JANAM's Hindi street production, titled Honda ke Gunda (Honda's Thug). First performed in August 2005, JANAM's play responds to the brutal police suppression of a workers strike staged at a Honda automobile factory in the industrial/commercial city of Gurgaon, just south of New Delhi. The title of the play refers to the Chief Minister of the district of Haryana, Bhupinder Singh Hooda who is seen by many political leftists as having subsumed questions of labor rights to local economic interests in maintaining Gurgaon as an attractive and profitable site for foreign direct investment.

Beyond the immediate similarity of the two plays—namely that they address workers' issues, and the role of both international and national-level labor and trade agreements regulating labor politics—I include the two plays here because of what they tell us about the relationships between history, space, and visibility. As suggested in the scene introduced at the outset of the play, one of the ways Kateb used street theater was to broaden historical perspective. In presenting the procession of forced conscripts departing their Algerian homeland at the behest of the colonizer, Kateb recuperates a history written out of the national narrative of the French nation and its colonies. Indeed, it is largely only well into the postcolonial period that sustained critical attention has turned to such forgotten episodes of exploitation.

In scenes to be elaborated upon below, the JANAM play similarly recuperates historical perspective as an incitement to thought and action: following the riots, the Gurgaon regional authorities attempted to fault the rioting workers for public disturbance, thereby justifying the police attack. However, an independent investigation led by members of the Communist party (CPI-M) uncovered a long history of abuse in the factory, the narratives of which JANAM adapted into a play that bears testimony to labor abuse sanctioned by a government eager to reap foreign investment income.

In terms of the spatial dimension of history mentioned above, the two plays discussed here compliment each other by illustrating the ways—in a globalized context—street theater can make visible flows of power as it constellates spaces for discussion and solidarity. In JANAM's play, the performances trace through the content of the play and in the mapping for performances in space (i.e. literally, the places of performance) the flux of global capital into India. In Kateb's play, conversely, the play captures a history of outflows from Algeria to France—through the exportation of labor. What makes the comparison compelling, then, is precisely the fact that the plays discussed suggest the need to think of the public sphere spatially as a way of both bringing to light oppressive structures of power and tactically engaging in a critique of the nation.

### **Street Theater and Intersubjectivity**

Both Kateb's and JANAM's play, in terms of the relationships that they establish with their audiences, expand understandings of the normative codes within the heterogenous public sphere. As Fraser suggests in her essay counterpublic spheres that contest the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public sphere are characterized by their

own alternative norms of behavior and speech. There is an implicit assumption in Fraser's account that the counterpublics that constellate—a religious minority for instance—do so around a set of normative codes and assertion of identity. Through a discussion of both Mohamed and Honda, I argue that these plays expand our notion of the counterpublic, by demonstrating the ways in which solidarities across spaces, class, gender, and ethnic identities can work. In other words, I assert that these plays suggest to us ways in which counterpublics can work strategically in ways that are intersubjective and dialogical, and therefore not founded on the assertion of a particular identity but rather, on that of a solidarity.

**Internationalism in the Name of Nation: Kateb's Mohamed prends ta valise.**

Through a series of approximately 30 successive scenes arranged in a loose, chronological order, Kateb Yacine's play Mohamed prends ta valise situates the history of emigration to France in the history of colonialism, nationalism and the building of the Algerian state. The play intersperses scenes depicting a character Mohamed and episodes featuring a host of historically significant characters.<sup>45</sup> In Kateb's play, then, the specific economic and social problems encountered by emigrants in France are interspersed with scenes depicting the array of global, historical events that mirror the exploitative, oppressive structures at the root of injustice experienced by Algerians in France. In addition to scenes featuring Mohamed, the subjects of scenes addressed include the colonization of Algeria, the forced recruitment of soldiers during both World Wars and in the French-Indochina War, and the historic rebellion of 1945 in Sétif (Algeria). These

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<sup>45</sup> Apart from certain scenes, it is unclear that Mohamed is the same throughout the play. This ambiguity is significant, given both the commonality of the name Mohamed in Algeria and the fact that the proper name was adapted into French to refer derogatorily to Algerian immigrants in general.

events are linked through juxtaposition of scenes, to the creation of the Israeli nation-state, the October 1917 Soviet revolution, and the Congress of Versailles.

As Kateb had therefore keenly realized—a fact that was much later analyzed by historians—emigration to France was as linked to the dispossession of local populations in Algeria as it was to enduring French economic influence.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, particularly in the immediate post-independence years in Algeria, emigration was considered a necessary evil that eased pressure on the domestic labor market and improved the balance of payments (through currency sent back to Algeria by emigrants). As it is presented in Kateb’s play, the historicization of Algerian immigration in France therefore raises crucial questions about both the development policies of the Algerian state and the enduring French economic influence in the Maghreb following Algerian independence.

The scenes in Kateb’s play follow one after the other, with little transition or context, and they challenge the spectator to assemble a meaning—that is, the fluid presentation of the performance challenges the viewer to reflect on the present in conjunction with the scenes offered, and thereby, to take an active role in the theater. Consider for instance, a scene towards the beginning of the play, a dialogue between characters named Ernest, Moché, and two characters who share the name Mohamed. Through the dialogue—and the ways that the characters introduce themselves, we understand that Ernest is French, Moché (as his name indicates) is Jewish, and that

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<sup>46</sup> As the historian Benjamin Stora has acknowledged, “...the process of migration was directly linked to land dispossession in Algeria: the history of emigration is indistinguishable from the history of rural society and its dismantling” (*Algeria: 1830-2000* 14). As Stora rightly observes, the French seizure of land under the colonial regime and, much later, the Algerian government’s own land nationalization policies—the so-called “agrarian revolution”—both involved the appropriation of rural, arable land, and the displacement of jobless Algerians to the cities, from whence many migrated abroad.



between the two characters named Mohamed, one is Algerian and the other Israeli. (For instance, Moché introduces himself with “Shalom!” Mohamed II with “Salam”).

In a comic scene, each of the characters begins to claim that the space they occupy—the space that they stand on—is their home:

Mohamed I: Je suis chez moi!

Mohamed II: C’est mon douar.

Moché: Non, tu es chez moi!

Mohamed I: Allons, tu divagues?

[...]

Ernest: Comment s’appelle ton douar?

Mohamed II: Allons, tu es fou!

Comment s’appelle ton douar?

Mohamed I: Algérie, et toi ?

Ernest: France

...

[(Boucherie 213-4)]

[Mohamed I: I am at home!

Mohamed II: This is my *douar*. [village]

Moché: No, you are in my home

Mohamed I: Go on! Are you talking nonsense?

...

Ernest: What is the name of your village?

Mohamed II: Go on, you are crazy!

What is the name of your village!

Mohamed I: Algérie

Ernest: France]

The juxtapositions obviously reference different spaces and times, but the doubling of *Mohamed* into the Algerian and Palestinian alert the spectator to an underlying similarity between the French colonization of Algeria (defined by the comic interactions throughout between Ernest and Mohamed I) and the Israeli occupation of Palestine (defined by the interaction of Mohamed II and Moché). Such frameworks establish for the spectator, contexts for an a historical perspective that challenges any singular understanding of colonization or oppression that does not take into account global connections and the ties between the local and the global.

Such scenes function doubly: firstly, they prepare the audience to think about emigration to Algeria within a broader context, one that considers the culpability of both the French state and the Algerian government, and secondly, the types of connections that they model across time and space—in this particular case, one between Algeria and Palestine—encourage the spectator to perhaps make similar comparisons in terms of the the rapid succession of scenes that comprise the theater itself. Indeed, as Claire Finburgh has asserted “Kateb seeks to make heard in his theater not the voice of a nation or an individual, but that of a heterogeneous and international collectivity of the oppressed” (92).

The connections that the play poses, I would argue further, work also negatively—that is, to create irony out of placing the spectator in positions where s/he knows more than the character. For instance, the scene depicting the Congress of

Versailles—the meeting that marked the end of WWI and the partition of European territories—as it makes connections with colonization, also reflects on the alienation of the worker. At the outset of one episode, N’Guyen Ai Quoc (later known as Ho Chi Minh) appears in the performance area to speak to three workers, only one of whom is identified by name, as “Marius” suggesting that he is French:

N’Guyen Ai Quoc: Camarades, au congrès de Versailles

Les grandes puissances impérialistes

Préparent un nouveau partage des colonies.

Nous devons troubler ce banquet funèbre!

...

N’Guyen Ai Quoc: Franchement, camarades

Si vous ne soutenez pas

La lutte des peuples opprimés,

Quelle est donc la révolution

Que vous prétendez faire?

First Worker: Il a raison

Second Worker: Et moi, je dis qu’il exagère!

First Worker: Tu n’es qu’un chauvin!

Second Worker: Et toi un fanatique!

(Stage notes indicate that the two fight, and accidentally knock Marius to the ground)

Marius: Ils veulent unir le monde entier

Et nous, on n’arrive même pas

A se mettre d'accord

(Boucherie 237-8)

[N'Guyen Ai Quoc: Comrades, at the Congress of Versailles

The great imperial powers

Prepare a new partition of the colonies

We must disrupt this funeral banquet!

...

N'Guyen Ai Quoc: Frankly comrades,

If you don't support

The fight of the oppressed

What then is this revolution

That you hope to enact?

First Worker: He has a point

Second Worker: I think he's exaggerating

First Worker: You're biased!

Second Worker: You're a fanatic!

(Stage notes indicate that the two fight, and accidentally knock Marius to

the ground)

Marius: They want to unite the entire world

And we can't even begin

To reach any agreement between ourselves ]

The scene illustrates clearly the comedy that infuses the play, as it poses a critique that will situate the scenes depicting the Algerian workers in France that follow, into a

broader global history that associates conflicts within Europe to colonization and situates international labor squarely in the anti-colonial movement. Given that Mohamed was performed widely in French factories, for Algerian emigrants, this scene works to alienate the spectator from the actors in the play, raising questions about workers solidarity by depicting the conflict of characters.

### **The Dialectic of Immigrant Labor and Unemployment: Critiquing Neo-Colonial Influence**

The scenes discussed above, as they promote a global consciousness of histories of oppression, prepare the spectator for a broad critique in the play of the relationship between post-independence Algeria and France. Most notably, the play triangulates the role of the French-state (as representing the forces of capitalism), the Algerian post-independence regime, and religious forces as agents of labor exploitation. The notion is carried in the leitmotif of the play, scenes that depict a slave trader gathering captives. The opening scene of the play, for instance, depicts four chained slaves being led away. The group is guided by a slave trader and accompanied by both a missionary and a mufti (Islamic religious leader); while the religious men utter their hypocrite prayers, the trader goads the slaves on with his whip:

Esclaves/Choeur: Voilà l'oeuvre du colonialisme!

Mufti et missionnaire

Aux côtés des soldats

Au nom du Paradis,

Te mènent en enfer..

Voilà l'oeuvre du colonialisme!  
Esclave/Coryphée : Des siècles ont passés  
Et l'Afrique est toujours esclave  
Du Maroc jusqu'à Bagdad,  
On nous vend comme du bétail  
Missionnaire: Au nom du Christ!  
Mufti: Au nom du jihad!  
Esclaves/Choeur: Afrique corps sans tête!  
Le roumi monte la garde.  
Missionnaire et mufti  
T'envoie en pays étranger.  
Afrique corps sans tête!  
(Boucherie 208)  
[Slaves: Here is the product of colonialism!  
Mufti and missionary  
At the side of the soldiers  
In the name of Paradise,  
Lead you into hell.  
Here is the work of colonialism!  
Slave/Chorus leader: Centuries have passed  
And Africa is as always slave  
From Morocco to Bagdad  
We are sold as beasts.

Missionary: In the name of Christ!

Mufti: In the name of jihad!

Slaves: Africa, a body without a head!

The European watches over.

Missionary and mufti

Send you to a foreign country.

Africa, a body without a head!]

The scene alludes doubly to the complicity of religion in the dispossession of Africa, as it does to the official government cultural policy in post-independence Algeria that sought to recast the history of the nation in terms of Islam. , The scene subverts the official government policies at the time seeking to recast Algerian history as Islamic. As an exponent of an Algerian cultural identity sensitive to the diversity of both Arab and tribal affiliations in Algeria, Kateb therefore envisioned the nationalist portrayals of an Arab past as perpetuating the cultural alienation experienced under the colonial regime.<sup>47</sup>

The exclamation that the chorus makes (“Afrique corps sans tête!”) is also significant. Towards the end of the French-Algerian war, the Algerian revolution had assumed significance beyond the scope of the Algerian nation, as the battle that would herald the end of French empire as a whole.<sup>48</sup> Following independence, the ruling FLN party under Ben Bella pursued this anti-colonial stance by taking the lead in the Non-

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<sup>47</sup> In the introduction to La question berbère dans le mouvement national algérien 1926-1980, Amar Ouerdane provides a useful overview of French colonial policy regarding Arabic and Berber populations in Algeria. As Ouerdane explains, French colonial policy privileged an Islamo-arab history of Algeria in order to suppress resistant Berber/Kabyle tribes.

<sup>48</sup> As an example, one need but consider a writing by Frantz Fanon published in El Moudjahid, the newspaper recognized as the “voice of the FLN.” In an article entitled “Decolonization and Independence,” Fanon maintained, “To say that the localized collapse of colonialism increases its disintegration as a system is no longer the explanation of an abstract principle which is perceptible only to intellectuals.... The Algerian people is quite aware of the fact that every blow struck against French oppression in Algeria dismantles colonial power” (Fanon, Toward the Liberation 105).

Aligned movement of nations (NAM) that resisted alliance with global superpowers as they voiced their support of global, anti-colonial resistance. The pronouncement of the chorus suggests the capitulation of Africa (and the notion of pan-African resistance) to colonial power and indicates, I suggest, Kateb's keen awareness of the contradictions between Algeria's international aspirations to lead NAM and its domestic policies that tended towards oppressive Arabicization.

### **Making History: The JANAM Intervention in the Honda Labor Strike**

Accounts of the actual events surrounding the Honda worker's strike that inspired the play are conflicting, but consistencies in numerous reports suggest a basic order of events. On July 25, 2005, 3000 striking workers began a peaceful protest march in Gurgaon. Following a melee that broke out with the police, several strikers set fire to a parked police jeep, at which point the police reacted with inordinate violence, firing rubber bullets into the crowd and attacking the strikers with clubs. Twelve workers were killed and somewhere between 2-300 workers were injured and required subsequent hospitalization.

The immediate reports in the media tended to focus on the strikers, portraying them as having incited the authorities. But as more information spread as to the cause of the strikes, it became clear that what was at stake was a long history of the abuse of workers rights in the Honda factory. In a broader context, the event became a touchstone for India's ability to provide foreign investors a "conducive climate" for investment. Japan's ambassador to India was quick to observe that the incident was "a disadvantage for India's image as a FDI (foreign direct investment) destination". The ministry of external affairs was equally prompt in retorting that such an "isolated incident involving a



labor dispute should not become a benchmark for judging the investment climate in India". Under pressure, the Haryana chief minister Hooda predictably ordered a judicial inquiry. By the end of the week, the immediate dispute had been settled and an agreement signed by the management and the workers. Though several police officers were ultimately dismissed, the fundamental questions about the relationship between Chief Minister Hooda's administration and companies like Honda went unanswered.

Immediately after the events, several leftist groups including two factions of the Communist party of India began to uncover the local causes that had led to the strike. As these groups reported it, the Honda factory was a site for widespread labor abuse and interviewed workers expressed a litany of violations and broken promises by Honda company management, all of which were later verified by a representative from the International Labor Rights Fund. It turned out, additionally, that the Honda factory workers had been trying to unionize for months. Yet the labor arm of the district government led by Chief Minister Hooda had remained a silent spectator as the Honda Corporation repeatedly refused to recognize the incipient union, thereby thwarting the workers' attempts to organize.

Within days of the events, JANAM produced a short play that they began to perform daily in the outskirts of Delhi. The play itself presents a series of unconnected scenes that each raise questions about the events surrounding July 25. I will focus on the last section of the play, where scenes depicting a staged conversation between Chief Minister Singh-Hooda and the Yukihiro Aoshima, President & CEO of Honda in India alternate with workers' descriptions of factory conditions. The dialogues featuring Hooda and the Honda CEO are comic insofar as Hooda is depicted as a fatuous official,

willing to make any compromise to secure the Honda investment in India. The comedy in the scene is inspired by both the cultural misunderstandings between the two and the imbalance of power between the leader of industry and a groveling administrator. For instance, at one moment, Hooda promises that as the district that contributed to the agrarian Green and White Revolutions in India, Haryana (in other words the area in which Gurgaon is located) can be the site of great transformation for Honda. Not understanding the references that Hooda has made, the Honda CEO balks, and insists that he would prefer not to hear of any revolutions at all. Hooda then suggests that in fact, what he meant was that the revolution will be red, like the carpet laid out at Honda's feet. Here of course, the suggestion of a red revolution is an anathema to the Honda representative who prepares to pull out of India all together. To patch things up, Hooda promises instead a khakhi revolution, referring to the uniforms of the Indian police who will enforce the company's will.

Such comic scenes alternate in the play, with depictions of factory workers, who assume positions in the center of the theater area and mime the repetitive actions of their work. One by one, each of the workers stops, circles the stage, addresses the audience with a description of the labor abuses that took place in the factory, and then resumes the position assumed at the outset of the scene. Each worker articulates, in the context of personal experience, the findings reported by the activists who interviewed workers following the strike. For example, a female worker describes how the Honda management removed the doors to all of the restrooms in order to ensure that workers would not waste time. This act led further to further abuse and sexual harassment perpetrated by the male middle management. In another case, a male worker describes

how a full 20% of workers salaries were deducted to pay for health insurance that was never delivered.

Although the play responds to a local event, the particular framing of the scenes suggest that a national space needing reclamation and transformation is being invoked. At the beginning of each performance, one of the JANAM actors would deliver a long address describing similar conditions across India: the exploitation of tea plantation workers in Bengal; the plight of tribals living near a Coca cola plant in Kerala; and farmer agitations for the reformation of water resource allocation policies in Ganganagar, Rajasthan. The framing of the play expands the local issue to include a cross section of an Indian society seen as suffering under the influence of economic globalization brought about largely by the presence of foreign investment in India. Here, the particular demands of the workers are subsumed into a general claim and the call for the guarantee of the rights of citizens in general.

One of the important aspects of this play, as with all street theater in general, is the way in which performances change over time. It is notable, that earlier performances of “Honda ka Goonda” didn’t incorporate as many of the details about worker abuse in the factory. Scenes featuring the factory workers reports about labor conditions were added over time. In addition, following feedback from audience members as well as a request from the Marxist communist party who had helped sponsor some of the first performances, the history of the Honda workers’ attempts to unionize was stressed in later plays. In bringing up these details, I wish to highlight the ways in which the idea of a collectivity and community is central to the JANAM performances. As much as street theater is collective work improvised and produced by different members, the plays

themselves continually transform according to the demands of the moment. If the early nationalists had stressed a popular social totality to be captured and refashioned in the name of progressive ideology, JANAM plays emphasize the mutability of the totality itself. This method of the theater brings us much closer to the project of Bertolt Brecht, who had argued against the type of social realism promulgated by the anti-fascist Popular Front in France through the critic George Lukacs. As Brecht maintained, “[t]here is not only such a thing as being popular, there is also the process of becoming popular. If we wish to have a living and combative literature, which is fully engaged with reality and fully grasps reality, a truly popular literature, we must keep step with the rapid development of reality.”

Such a conception of the popular does not represent a complete break from the earlier writings of the Progressives. Indeed, in his early writings on the nature of literature, Premchand had already signaled the importance of content over form. Nonetheless, the shift I am indicating—one that ultimately focuses on performance—raises important questions about politics and genre that are the central focus of my dissertation.

In closing, I would like to suggest that the articulation of an idea of a people in the IPTA manifesto, and the further association of labor rights as the rights of citizens in the JANAM play reflects the evolution of a populist political practice. Drawing heavily from the work of Eugene Laclau, I describe populism as the process by which a particular claim that antagonizes a ruling social order is taken up, through a chain of associations as a popular demand in the name of a universal order such as the idea of a people. The idea

of the people therefore functions synecdochally, that is, it represents particular claims and demands that are assume universal value in the name of the popular.

In the same way that the Progressive writers envisioned the nation as a contested space to be won over and transformed, the JANAM play that I have presented here expresses an idea of a national right to be secured through the solidarity between organized workers and oppressed classes. This articulation of solidarity is largely consistent with the ways in which the Indian left has increasingly called for increased state intervention in the redistribution of income and wealth as the larger liberalization process if carried forth. Given the efficacy of popular genres to address to address local populations, I therefore situate street theatre centrally in the process whereby local demands are translated into the popular claims that are at the foundation of both solidarity movements and populist politics.

## Chapter IV:

### Performance and Political Tactics: Street Theater and the Politics of Oppositionality

#### Tactical Internationalism and the Battle for National Right

Kateb's plays are notable for the ways in which they humorously juxtapose historical characters from different epochs and nations to create microcosmic views of the global networks of power shaping local events. His early play Boucherie de l'espérance (Slaughterhouse of Hope), for example, features a host of character-allegories of the American, French, British, and radical Islamic powers to incriminate the global superpowers as the instigators of religious conflict. By describing the interconnections between local situations and international politics, Kateb's play challenges visions of modernization that describe as atavistic, the religious, social, and cultural conflicts raging in the Middle East. As attested by the success of Kateb's productions, such depictions resonated with an Algerian population caught between pernicious, radical Islam and an oppressive state that justified its actions in the name of modernization.

By explicitly referring to the global influence of Western powers, Boucherie alludes to persistent structures of neo-colonialism and the continued exploitation of the developing world in the late twentieth century. As the play's protagonists suggest however, this shared experience of oppression creates possibilities for international solidarity: employing the discourses of both pan-Africanism and the "Third World" movement, Kateb's heroes propose potentials for political resistance through

international affiliation.<sup>49</sup> Such invocation of internationalist discourses in Kateb's play is curious, particularly since the playwright's explicit intention—as he repeatedly expressed it in his interviews and non-fiction writing—was to develop a performance art that would inspire a rethinking of a specifically Algerian national identity.<sup>50</sup> For Kateb, the cultural expression of an inclusive, equitable Algerian community would lay the groundwork for a future *real* Algerian revolution marking the *true* birth of the nation. Cultural production and most of all theater, Kateb maintained, would lay the necessary foundation for this revolutionary project. The concurrence of internationalist discourses, popular idioms and nationalist ideology in Kateb's work indicates a vision of culture and identity encompassing multiple perspectives including those of both local ideologies and global networks power. As such, this complex juxtaposition of elements from diverse histories and genres shapes a theater that, as I argue, renegotiates national ideologies of citizenship and community.

I discuss Kateb's work here to introduce a comparative reading that examines, through both Algerian-French and Indian-Hindi/Urdu street theater, the expression of popular politics in the post colonial world. In the last 30 years, genres of street or mobile theater that distinguish themselves by their political content and their self-conscious modernity have evolved in both India and in Algeria. An overwhelming majority of the groups practicing such forms express a political desire to access largely illiterate audiences who have no access to print culture. Street theater performance therefore traces

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<sup>49</sup> Readers should here be alerted to the multivalency of "Third World." As I use it here, the term refers not only to the current notions of "third world" as developing nations, but also, in the spirit of the original use of the category, to the group of nations that had constellated after World War II in their refusal to ally with the US/USSR superpowers and in their condemnation of neocolonial practices.

<sup>50</sup> As Peter Waterman and Jill Timms define it, "internationalism" is a leftist, democratic project for creating international solidarities between social classes, popular interests, and progressive identities, independently of, or in opposition to, the state or capital. Internationalism predated and was independent of both unions and labor movements (179).

the divide between a small, ruling literate elite inhabiting a narrow and discrete civil society, and a large, diverse population, largely seen as having been denied the benefits of civic rights.

In this chapter, I will analyze Kateb's Boucherie and the Hindi-Urdu street play ĀkhiriJulūs (The Last Strike) While remaining sensitive to the determining historical circumstances that distinguish each theatrical form, my comparison will attest to what I will maintain are emerging modalities in post-colonial thought—exemplified in street theater—that seek to assert inclusive forms of community and political solidarities within the complex matrix of nationalism, homogenizing globalization, and local/particular identities.

Like Kateb's Boucherie, JANAM's ĀkhiriJulūs significantly foregrounds internationalist discourses.<sup>51</sup> But where Kateb's play draws from the history of the League of Non-Aligned Nations (also referred to as the “Bandung Movement” or “Third World Movement”), JANAM's production recuperates Indian discourses of labor internationalism.<sup>52</sup> In the plays examined here, internationalist discourses subtend the assertion of notions of common good and human rights, thereby justifying the particular

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<sup>51</sup> To clarify my use of the term, I wish to here distinguish the term “internationalism” from “transnationalism,” with which it is frequently confused. Drawing upon the work of Perry Anderson, I define “transnationalism” as a specific character of capital in the last decades of the twentieth century. I therefore delimit “transnationalism” as a term which, though its close associations to contemporary forms of economic globalization, describes first, institutional bonds that link zones of capital into a single compact and second, the globalized financial speculations that escape classic state boundaries. Through its association with social, nationalist, and even reactionary, anti-nationalist movements, internationalism therefore has a much longer and more varied history than transnationalism (see Anderson, “Internationalism”).

<sup>52</sup> The Non-Aligned Nations movement (of which Algeria was a leader in the 1960s) reflected growing sentiments in newly independent nations that the superpowers continued to extend undue influence over the formerly colonized world. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, support for coalitions such as the Non-Aligned Movement had faded as various member nations fell under the influence of either pole of the USA/USSR axis.



claims the plays enunciate as being universal.<sup>53</sup> To borrow the terms used by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, such internationalist discourses serve as a “discursive exterior” that justifies the transformation of relationships of subordination (in this case, the subordination brought about by inegalitarian economic and social structures) into relationships marked by antagonism. In other words, by recalling the language and imagery of internationalist movements, both Kateb’s and JANAM’s performances refigure particular relationships of subordination represented in the plays as being oppressive and therefore to be subverted.<sup>54</sup>

Beyond their questioning of national hierarchies, I further argue that by making a spectacle of “theatricality,” in other words by representing theater within the frame of the spectacle as *mise-en-abyme*, and then “playing” with the various frames of performance (between the audience and street play, and between the street performance and the *mise-en-abyme* of theater/the “play within a play”), both street plays offer models of performance itself as an oppositional political practice. As types of what Michel de Certeau has called “tactics,” oppositional practices involve recombining existing rules and cultural forms in a way that is influenced by, but never wholly determined by the rules and forms themselves (37). My use of the idea of oppositional practice therefore refers to the ways in which both plays that I discuss appropriate political discourses and theatrical modes to construe radical, *international* solidarity movements as types of

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<sup>53</sup> Internationalist ideologies found their main exponents in India and Algeria in the labor movements affiliated to the Communist parties. The anti-colonial internationalist thrust of these groups then finds a later articulation, in the post-independence period, in the Non-Aligned movement, in which India (under Prime Minister Nehru) and Algeria (under President Ben Bella and then President Boumedienne) were major actors. For a history of the international labor movement in India, see Krüger. For a useful introduction to the Non-Aligned movement, see Mackie.

<sup>54</sup> As Laclau and Mouffe maintain: “Serf, slave, and so on, do not designate in themselves antagonistic positions; it is only in terms of a different discursive formation such as ‘the rights inherent to every human being,’ that the differential positivity of these categories can be subverted and the subordination constructed as oppression” (154).

“open” performances which, through their self-referentiality, construe collective political movements as performances used to secure rights in the nation.

Such tactical use of solidarity movements represents a political practice that I associate with what contemporary theorists have called “post-Marxism.” Referring to theoretical positions that critique political movements grounded in the assertion of the primacy of a single subjectivity or group identity (such as the worker’s movement) as the agent for change, post-Marxism bases political practice in the building of social relations between groups recognized as being heterogeneous. As I argue in this chapter, the recasting of internationalist discourses as performance—in both JANAM’s and Kateb’s plays—opens the field of political subjectivity to allow for the participation of heterogeneous groups.

### **JANAM’S ĀkhiriJulūs: Labor Politics in India and Current JANAM Production**

In the analysis presented in this chapter, almost 35 years separate Kateb’s first production of Boucherie in 1969 and ĀkhiriJulūs (The Last Strike), the present-day JANAM play addressed here. While remaining sensitive to the manifold cultural and historical differences between the two, my comparison is inspired by the similar ways in which both street plays self-consciously foreground theater through mise-en-abime and assert political solidarity through the representation of internationalist discourses. The prominent place of such themes in both street plays suggests, beyond a common concern over performance, an underlying motivation to define the contours of agency—with its emphasis on actors acting upon the world—in terms of both national and global politics.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Numerous anthologies address the rise of radical street performance internationally. Though these texts provide an invaluable introduction to the extant theater movements in various locales, few of these

The *Jana Natya Manch* street play Akhri Julus (The Last Strike) was first performed in early 2004, in conjunction with the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) political campaign to defend the right to organized labor protest in India.<sup>56</sup> Reacting to 2003 Supreme Court of India rulings outlawing government workers from striking, the CPI-M asserted that the ban on collective work stoppage constituted a breach of fundamental labor rights. Echoing this sentiment, JANAM accepted a CPI-M invitation to participate in a grassroots movement launched to recruit India's unorganized labor (non-unionized workers) into the CPI-M managed Central Indian Trade Unions (CITU), thereby increasing the lobbying power of the political party.<sup>57</sup> JANAM was given a free role in creating the performance, a street play that strikingly invokes both the internationalist discourses of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century labor movement and the anti-colonial struggle in its representation of labor protest as a fundamental right.

In a broad, political context, Indian leftists have read the August 2003 decision in terms of their own perception of an anti-labor trend in Indian economic liberalization policies.<sup>58</sup> As Prakash Karat, General Secretary of the CPI-M has argued, the disciplining

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publications if any, offer close readings of single plays. Important texts include Erven; Cohen-Cruz; and Plastow and Boon.

<sup>56</sup> In the landmark case T.K. Rangarajan vs. Government of Tamil Nadu and Others in August 2003, the Supreme Court of India both ordered striking government workers to end their work stoppage and issued a ruling that denied government workers the right to engage in future, organized, labor protest. The decision was the culmination of a tumultuous summer in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu that had witnessed mass government employee protests and the dismissals of striking, government functionaries. In ruling as they did, the Supreme Court upheld the Tamil Nadu Essential Maintenance Services Act (TESMA 2002) that forbade workers and functionaries in specific industries from any work-stoppage that would suspend the delivery of civil services. In the eyes of Indian pro-labor factions, the application of TESMA represented a breach of the International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions that guarantee workers' rights to protest and set a worrying precedent for the application of the national, Essential Services Maintenance Act (1981) in the suppression of organized labor.

<sup>57</sup> Readers will be alerted to here that the discussion of the "Indian left" here focuses on the CPI-M to the exclusion of the centrist CPI (Communist Party of India) and the more militant CPI-ML (Marxist Leninist) and CPI-Maoist parties. In terms of sheer political visibility and presence in parliament, the CPI-M is by far the major "player" in the landscape of the Indian political left.

<sup>58</sup>See Viswanathan.

of organized labor is consonant with the ways in which the Indian state has supported national economic policies courting foreign direct investment (FDI) at the expense of both the working class and rural, agricultural labor. As Karat stated, “[t]here is an offensive of capital against labour.... The leading forces against the policies of liberalisation are the trade unions and that is why they are targeted.... You don't see the judiciary intervening in the privatisation process where several laws are violated.” In Karat’s assessment, as in the discourse of the left more broadly, what is ultimately at stake is the failure of the state to assume a sufficiently active role in protecting labor rights and fostering conditions of economic equity.<sup>59</sup>

In its response to the court decision, the Indian left has moved between on the one hand a strident defense of the right or freedom to strike that takes precedence over state jurisdiction, and on the other, a vociferous call for an activist state that regulates the equitable distribution of property/wealth. As indicated by critics such as Etienne Balibar, such questions of *freedom* (seen as substantive rights which must be protected from the intrusion of the state) and *equality* (a collective goal enforced by the redistributive state) are conjoined in modern democratic politics (40-59). The conflation of these two contradictory terms, into what Balibar calls “equaliberty,” poses an “ideal” universality in that equaliberty justifies the universal extension of political (civic) rights by explaining that equality and freedom are inseparable. Yet the ideal is fraught with contradiction in that its denotation of universality of principles (against a horizon of humanity) can only apply in the context of the autonomy of a popular sovereignty (where so-called “universal” values only apply to a particular citizenry). Within democracy, therefore the

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<sup>59</sup> For a clear statement of the contemporary, economic agenda from the political left in India, see Chandrasekhar Ghosh.

concept of equaliberty signals the ways in which the political signification of “rights” leaves it to practice and social conflict to determine the content, or political articulation of the rights of man.

Consideration of this tension between freedom and equality subtends my readings of JANAM’s play. As I demonstrate, the turn to transnational discourses in terms of a political performance working within a national frame can be read as an expression of the contradiction in equaliberty, namely that it posits an ideal universality and a an expression of “human rights” in the frame of national politics.<sup>60</sup> As I analyze it, to the degree that its political content asserts universal significations within national frames, the play epitomizes the contradictions in democratic political systems. Through the metatheatrical commentary that can be apprehended in its representations of *mise-en-abime*, furthermore, I assert that the play reveals the centrality of theories of performativity to the actual formations and mobilizations of mass political movements.

For the following analysis, a problem of an “original” script to draw from as a primary “text” presents itself. The nature of street theater is such that improvisation plays an important role in the performance, and JANAM actors themselves rarely work from scripts. Plays constantly evolve, based on both the audience feedback during performances and the current events that may pertain to a subject treated in a play. Performances are further subject to change based upon environmental variables (for instance, a rainstorm that restricts the play to a covered area), the availability/absence of cast members for a performance and on occasion, restrictions imposed by local authorities. JANAM did in fact publish an early script of Akhri Julus, but the text was

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<sup>60</sup> The idea here of a “politics of the rights of man” here being understood as contradiction to the extent that the rights of man are classically understood as *natural* and not political (Balibar 50).

intended for reading audiences and was not itself used for any performance; moreover, later revised versions of the actual performance significantly differed from the early text. Given both the natural evolution of street performance over time and the contingencies of performance, there is no one “original” script available for the play under discussion.

I will draw upon a version of Akhri Julius witnessed first hand on February 22, 2005 in the Delhi suburb of *Dabri*, a neighborhood primarily but not exclusively inhabited by workers from the nearby factories. The performance took place in the late afternoon, on a narrow street temporarily blocked off for short speeches and a performance that in total lasted approximately 45 minutes. On this day, the audience consisted of crowds of people who congregated around the performance area, in the windows of buildings overlooking the street, and on the rooftops in the area.

As with all JANAM street plays performed under the sponsorship of the CPI-M, the performance discussed here was introduced by a series of speeches by local Communist party members, who addressed the frequent labor violations committed by local employers, the lack of sufficient labor law oversight, and the history of the Tamil Nadu case, notably focusing on the roles of international business and state power in colluding to suspend worker’s rights. The speakers concluded by urging enrollment into the CPI-M and CITU, which had made the defense of labor rights central in its joint-political agenda. Moloyashree Hashmi, one of the JANAM organizers, followed these speeches with a short introduction to the play. Describing the JANAM collective, Hashmi was careful to emphasize the fact that none of the actors are professional artists, but rather that they are students, professionals and blue-collar employees who work during the day and then devote their free time to theater. Further, she added, the play to be

performed was not “a product of the imagination” (“vo hamne apne man se nahibanaya he”) but inspired by historical events and the lives of the common man. Her speech established an important link between the actors and spectators that suggested identification between actors and audience.

The play focuses on two characters: an unnamed Supreme Court judge and his driver/servant, Ramdin, who find their car trapped in a traffic jam caused by a workers’ strike. Other characters include the chorus, who appear in the performance as the group of strikers causing the disruption, and the *sutradhar*, or chorus leader, who steps out of role in the transitions between scenes in the play to narrate events and to provide background information.<sup>61</sup> The play alternates between scenes depicting dialogue between the judge and Ramdin and scenes involving the strikers, the latter of which are particularly notable since, rather than depicting a conventional workers’ strike, they feature short plays enacted by the strikers that are part of the strike itself. As Ramdin and the judge watch the scenes unfold—that is, as they watch the strikers stage their theater—both feel compelled to participate and act along with the chorus/strikers. In this way, by presenting a play that takes place within a play, Akhri Julus prominently figures theater as a *mise-en-abime*.

Framed by dialogues between the judge and Ramdin, each of the three scenes staged by the chorus draws from labor history to depict precedent for worker protest. The first and second scenes each draw from Indian labor history to depict in turn, the arrest and trial of a worker during the 1974 Indian Railways strikes in Bombay and the 1908 trial of the of the Indian nationalist leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Notably, both scenes end

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<sup>61</sup> In the Sanskrit tradition, the *sutradhar* (*sutra*: thread; *dhar*: one who holds), is the leader of the chorus. The *sutradhar* is a narrator of events, a commentator on characters and one who holds the plot together.

with depictions of the workers strikes: in the first scene, the wives of arrested workers are shown organizing as they join the mass movement—an historically significant event that marking the entry of women’s groups into labor politics. In the second scene, workers stage a strike in protest of Tilak’s sentencing in a moment that marked the coincidence of the nascent labor movement in India and anti-colonial nationalism.<sup>62</sup> In either case, therefore, the central role of the labor movement as a channel for political protest is underscored. The third reenactment staged by the chorus is unique in that it draws from American labor history to portray the trial and sentencing of four of the leaders of the 1886 Haymarket labor riots in Chicago, Illinois.

Despite differences in subject matter, the three scenes staged by the strikers are connected to each other—and indeed to the Supreme Court Tamil Nadu decision—through their depiction of trial/courtroom episodes. The fact that each of the strikers’ reenactments focus on the necessity of protest to defend labor rights, furthermore, offers justification for the continued struggle to preserve worker’s rights in the present-day. The experience of participating in the scenes in the rally hardens the judge, but Ramdin emerges transformed and at the conclusion of the play, he himself goes on strike—he defiance renders invalid the judge’s own order (issued at the beginning of the play) prohibiting he strike.

The invocation, in the strikers’ theater, of the socialist labor movement (as in the Tilak trial protest scene and the Haymarket trial) alludes to historical moments when classical Marxist thought remained the driving ideology of leftist parties in India and

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<sup>62</sup> Sukomal Sen offers important information about both events, the depictions of which in the play accord with historical account. The participation of worker’s wives in the Indian Railways Strikes marked the significant entry of organized women’s groups in the labor movement. In terms of the Tilak trial, Sen observes that the widespread labor protest that ensued in reaction to Tilak’s sentencing numbers among one of the first political strikes by Indian workers (95-98).



abroad. As numerous political scientists and social historians have observed, however, the myriad political and economic transformations of the late twentieth century have reconstituted the social field such that the unity of the (leftist) political agent can no longer constitute itself in terms of the working class. With the collapse of Marxism as a global, cultural and political force, the “social” sphere comes to be seen—as the multiplicity of political movements attests—as irremediably heterogeneous.<sup>63</sup> It is my argument that the JANAM play reflects this shift through the distinction that the performance articulates global solidarity movements as performances rather than as manifestations of a singular, collective subject (worker’s movement).

The reading of Akhri Julus that follows will describe the ways in which, through self conscious foregrounding of theater, street performance asserts an idea of political agency rooted in performance. In other words, through the representation of a specific worker’s identity in the theatrical mise-en-abime, the street play links to notions of labor rights the expression of an international worker’s identity that is represented as being performative and “tactical.” Further, by depicting spectator participation in theater through Ramdin and the judge’s performances, the play models the ways in which solidarities can be performed. Beginning with a discussion of the opening song of the play, I will define the types of oppositionality that characterize street theater and suggest a framework describing the ways in which discourses are appropriated into such political

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<sup>63</sup> Such an idea of a heterogeneous social sphere, is borne out by recent discussions focusing on the emergence of post-independence social movements in India. As historians and sociologists such as Raka Ray and Mary Katzenstein have observed, Indian social movements in the immediate post-independence era remained accountable to a political “master frame” in which state, party and movement functioned symbiotically. The post Nehruvian era (following the Prime Minister Nehru’s death in 1964) witnessed the end of this synergy between the state and social movements, as the market and religious nationalist institutions became the basis for a newly organized Indian state. The proliferation of social movements in the name of gender, class, religious and caste interests therefore attests to the latent social heterogeneity (what I would call a “popular” heterogeneity) that both the Nehruvian, social-democracy and the earlier politics of Indian nationalism had sought to unite in the name of socialism (see Ray).

performances. I will then offer a closer analysis of the embedded plays staged by the strikers, upon which I will expost a theoretical discussion linking performativity and political tactics.

### **Appropriative Irony and Popular Song:**

Akhri Julus is punctuated by songs which open the performance and signal transitions between scenes. In popular Hindi theater, as in modern day cinema, songs function as metanarratives that tie the narrative together and that offer the spectator cues to reflect upon the larger meanings in the work. The opening song of the play is particularly important in this regard, for the way in which it frames the play and contextualizes the labor demands articulated by the Indian political left. The song is additionally notable for the ways in which it combines popular rhythms with a political message; as such, it clearly illustrates the ways in which the performance transforms cultural discourses as part of its political project. I will focus on the opening song here, for the important ways in which it frames key themes of the play and illuminates the ways the theater self-consciously appropriates discourses and cultural genres. As will be noted in the Hindi transcription provided below, the song is composed of a series of quartets of mixed meter which are rhymed and separated by a twice-repeated refrain. The *sutradhar* opens the song and the individual chorus members sing each successive line, with the refrain (which asks the question “Bolo kya karem ham?”/ “Tell me, what are we to do?”) being the only part sung in unison. The below translation captures neither the cadence nor rhyme of the original:

Mahamgi hogi dal roti

Sasta hogi jivan

Naukri pe friz lag gi

Band hogi pemshan

**Bolo kya karem ham** (repeated 2x)

Sasti hogi kar videshi

Bas ka barh gaya bhara

Amiron ki fil gud hai

Apna hua kabada

**Bolo kya karem ham** (repeated 2x)

Amrikan darbar main

Ghutne rahe hai tek

Apne to rotike lale

Vo khate haim kek

**Bolo kya karem ham** (repeated 2x)

[Dal and Roti are expensive

Life is cheap

Work is frozen [i.e. hiring has ceased]

Pensions are eliminated

*Tell me, what are we to do?*

Foreign labor is cheap

The power of the hired [foreign] mercenaries has grown

The life of the rich is sweet

Ours is ruined

*Tell me, what are we to do?*

Support for the American kingdom

Grows ever more strong

We yearn for bread

And they eat cake

*Tell me, what are we to do?]*

Echoing the identification between audience and performance suggested by Mala Hashmi in her introduction—where she had stressed the commonality between the artists and actors—the “we” of the refrain interpellates both spectators and performers as the subjects of the song, namely as a population dispossessed by the politics of globalization. With the last line, as though in response to the question, the actors scatter into the performance space, imitating the various sounds that one associates with a strike—the sound of horns bleating from cars halted in traffic, the chants of strikers, a striker explaining a labor issue to a disgruntled passerby. In the din that the actors create, only fragments of sentences or proclamations can be understood, and the overall effect is one of discord easily recognized as the effect of a mass, public strike. Whereas the refrain sung by the chorus poses the question of action in terms of language (“*Tell me, what are we to do?*”), the answer is characterized by noise and movement. I signal this here to first indicate the important ways in which street theater is characterized by its focus on language and physicality. Few props were employed in Akhri Julus and key events, like the stalling of the judge and Ramdin’s car in the strike, are conveyed purely through mime. Second, the dispersion of the actors in the performance area signals the “loose” organization of the stage. No one part of the performance area assumes “center stage,”

and given the fact that the audiences at the very least face the area from two different sides (most often they surround the audience), the actors must constantly circulate to face audience members on different sides of the area.

With its rhyme and refrain, the song itself resembles common genres of popular song which are pervasive in Hindi speaking India and, as the linguist Yamuna Kachru has indicated, have been assimilated by mainstream advertising and Bollywood music (226). Yet where the Hindi popular song Kachru speaks of is marked by a rhyme that lends itself to humor, the song performed by JANAM foregrounds political situations contributing to social ills. The song moves from a description of quotidian hardship (the lack of food and employment) to describe the influence of foreign investment in India, such that the basis for the strike at the end is notably economic inequity brought about by economic globalization and not, in the narrower sense, specific labor action.<sup>64</sup> The chain of relationships, linking local poverty, national politics and globalization, is sustained by the rhyme: in the first quartet, for instance the rhymed pair *jivan* [life]/ *pemshan* [pension] links in an implied causal relationship, the lack of income security systems in India to daily misery and poverty. The song qualifies the strike action—the immediate response of the actors after the song—and broadens the debate around both the Supreme

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<sup>64</sup> I do not suggest that either JANAM or the CPI-M are opposed to globalization. Rather, the CPI-M agenda, which JANAM has largely followed, has articulated (particularly in the last five years) a sustained call for a more regulated foreign direct investment. Specifically in terms of New Delhi, over the past 20 years, the outlying industrial areas of Gurgaon and Noida have witnessed the closure of small manufacturing firms which have been replaced by multinationals such as Honda, Coca-Cola, and Moser Baer. Many of these multinationals have been offered incentives (including exceptions to local environmental law and even immunity from labor regulation) that have exacerbated extant social and civil infrastructural problems. Attacking the notion that globalization is equitably profitable, the CPI-M has called for increased state intervention in the private sector and the tightening of national and international laws governing industry practices.

Court decision and the right to strike by alluding to wider questions about the presence of transnational corporations in India and the economic policies that sustain them.<sup>65</sup>

The decision to employ a popular form for the song, on one level, serves to draw a large audience. As one of the JANAM directors Sudhanva Deshpande has indicated, such popular forms are commonplace and any Hindi speaker from the Haryana/UP area would naturally identify the song's distinctive cadence and the rhyme. The opening song would therefore serve as an effective way of attracting interest while conveying the relevant message. In terms of deeper, cultural significance, the appropriation of popular genres also reflects a set of political conceptions. From the early manifestos by Safdar Hashmi to the more recent articles published by Sudhanva Deshpande, JANAM members have consistently articulated a critique of the ways in which systems of domination work through popular forms. The song in the JANAM play therefore represents an ironic and oppositional appropriation of mainstream media that blurs the distinction between popular genres and political discourses.

Drawing upon the ways in which Ross Chambers has discussed irony, I argue that by introducing a division between how the song is delivered (as a popular form) and what it signifies (the political critique), the opening music enacts an "ideological split." As Chambers brilliantly describes it, such splitting is characteristic of ideology itself, to the degree that ideology is a discursive proposition that positions subjects differently, in relations of power ("Irony" 19). Irony is exemplary insofar as it oppositionally enacts this split by demonstrating the workings and implications of ideology as an uneven system mediated by shared understandings. Notably, the discussion here is not about what irony

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<sup>65</sup> The idea is underscored by the mention of the United States which, in this play as in many expressions of anti-globalization of the political left, has come to represent, as *synecdoche*, the negative aspects of globalization.

is, as much as what it does: to use Chambers' words, the "practice here is more ironical than ironic." Where the meter, rhyme and delivery of the song mark it as popular and allude to a set of expectations about the genre, the content introduces a political message into the performance and, through the commentary that it issues about popular culture, redefines what it means to be a consumer of the genre.

Rather than situating itself outside of popular culture, the JANAM play exploits existing structures of power (in this case the commercialized, popular form) for purposes of its own. Understood in this way, the song analyzed here is an example of what Ross Chambers has defined as an appropriative irony that is oppositional in its use of the authority belonging to existing power to the end of changing its other—the reader of a text or in this case, the viewer of a play (see Maneuver 1-9). Following this logic, the performance can be understood as one that works within a complex network of relationally defined systems of power to both render explicit the operation of power and to assert possibilities for political action.

If appropriative irony illuminates the discursive relationships at work in the opening song of Akhri Julus, it also calls attention to the communicative relationships that form between subjects. Put in the most simple terms, irony fundamentally relies upon the successful accord between two interlocutors about the meaning of a message. The "success" of irony itself depends upon the capacity of a destinary of a message to perceive intended irony, and the use of irony entails a risk that the audience will perceive irony where there is none or that they will not recognize it at all. In the specific critique of the interaction between performance and audience, recent thinking about irony once

again proves useful for the ways in which it foregrounds communication and the exchange that take place between audience and performer.

In her work Irony's Edge, for example, the critic Linda Hutcheon proposes an intersubjective understanding of irony that overturns interpretations privileging irony as a type of language to be decoded—a form of communication available to a select few who are able to decipher the hidden, unsaid meaning of an ironic message (91). As Hutcheon maintains, existing communities play a crucial, foundational role in allowing irony to happen: irony does not so much create communities of understanding as much as the shared knowledge, beliefs and communicative strategies within existing, discursive communities enable irony to come into being.<sup>66</sup> Reading Akhri Julus *through* irony highlights the mutual dependence between the audience and performance and allows for a spectrum of meanings to be generated out of the performance—ranging from a response that conceives of the play as pure entertainment to one that attends to the political message. This array of responses is an index of both the active role of the audience and the irony at work in the play.

The focus on the role of the audience here emphasizes the interactive aspect of street theater, and the processes of meaning-making that take place during the performance. Indeed, the “success” of street theater is measured by the capacity of plays to engage in transformative communication with audiences. In Akhri Julus, the impact of the performance was predicated on the successful identification of the audience with the

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<sup>66</sup> Here it should be noted that Hutcheon distinguishes between her notion of “discursive communities” and established notions of “discourse communities.” As Hutcheon explains it, discursive communities acknowledge “...those strangely enabling constraints of discursive contexts and foregrounds the particularities not only of space and time but of class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual choice—not to mention nationality, religion, age, profession, and all the other micropolitical groupings in which we place ourselves or are placed by our society” (92).



play, and the reframing of labor rights issues as general rights, in the context of national and global politics. Such broadening of conceptions of particular demands as universal exemplify the contradiction that Etienne Balibar locates in modern democratic politics, wherein supposedly universal ideals rely upon their own particular repetition for justification.

### **Towards a Performative Politics of Internationalism:**

I have used Balibar's important text to present an analysis of JANAM's play that focuses on the ways in which the theater group engages in (to use Balibar's terms) a "politics of the rights of man" that involves the repetition and constant negotiation of human rights claims (46). The notion of repetition and evolution that is at the center of such politics implies a political subjectivity (as agent) that is constantly evolving in terms of particular contexts, in ways that might be described as being "performative." The idea can be explicated through the definition of "performativity" itself. Drawing from the work of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, the critic Janelle Reinelt has discussed "performance" as that aspect of "performativity" which "stages the subject in process, the making and fashioning of certain materials, especially the body, and the exploration of the limits of 'representation-ability'" (201). For Reinelt, "performance" describes a model for the emergence of novelty in a theatrical space that is determined by the spectator. Whereas theater, in this scholar's critique, is a space of representation (and subjection to certain rules governing said representation), performance opens the possibility of signification that is unintended by the roles prescribed in theater. The theoretical framework Reinelt offers gestures towards an understanding of the dialogic

relationship between “performance” and “theater” as an analogy for thinking about the “implication of the body in material regimes of power” and, very fundamentally, the foundation of subjectivity (213).

The theory of performativity that Reinelt summarizes suggests a vision of a subjectivity that is inherently unstable in that that the theater that produced by acting subjects is constantly supplemented (in a process that transforms both the theater and its agents) by the novel significations of performance. It is my argument that Akhri Julus engages in a radical politics that asserts a political agency rooted in performance: The play refigures agency as a supplement to subjectivity, or equally the product of a body acting and using the non-identity of its own subjectivity (the fact that a performing subject always exceeds the significations captured by the discourses of power shaping subjectivity itself) to transform extant systems of power.<sup>67</sup> In short, JANAM performative practice eschews any presumption of a fully formed, autonomous subject as the *a priori* of political action. As I will demonstrate through my discussion of the play, such notions of a performative subjectivity are conveyed through the tactical appropriation of extant discursive formations and their resignification through performance. Beginning with an analysis of the interactions between the judge and Ramdin, my discussion will focus on both the third play staged by the strikers and the conclusion of the performance.

Following the opening song, the judge and Ramdin enter onto the scene. As the dialogue indicates, the audience is led to believe that they are in a car that has been stopped by a strike procession that has halted all traffic. The discussion between the two

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<sup>67</sup> As I use it, agency refers to the capacity of the autonomous subject to be self-reflexive and engage in intentional choice.

and the judge's expressions of exasperation over the fact that the strike is blocking his progress are notably interspersed with references to current debates about labor in India. For instance, the judge asserts: "Ahe ye mazdur! Jab dekho tab hartal! Inhe to tek par hi rakhna chahiye, hayar and fayar!" [These workers! Whenever you see them, they are on strike! There should be a contract established: hire and fire!]. The borrowed English words "hire and fire," represent the commonly used phrase designating labor practices wherein Indian employers freely terminate workers, without heeding labor laws protecting employees from job termination. Ramdin corrects the judge however, indicating the heterogeneity of the crowd by listing the range of professions of people in the imagined crowd of striking workers ("teachers, doctors, lawyers, nurses..."). The sweeping gesture that he makes with his arm as he speaks encompasses the chorus and the audience, maintaining the association between the striking workers of the play and the spectator that is introduced in the opening song.

The initial interaction between the judge and Ramdin is important for the ways in which it responds to the Indian Supreme Court ban by consistently revealing the gap between lived situation and the narrow portrayal of labor protest suggested by the language of the decision itself. In effect, Ramdin's statement broadens the perspective expressed in the Supreme Court writ, which portrayed the strikers as lower-tier functionaries who were neglecting their work.<sup>68</sup> As CPI-M leaders such as W. R. Vadarajan pointed out, the court's bias against lower tier clerks and office workers presented itself in the judgment as "...a very narrow interpretation of civil liberties,

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<sup>68</sup> The relevant passage in the Supreme Court judgment reads: "Government employees cannot claim that they can take the society at ransom by going on strike.... For redressing their grievances, instead of going on strike, if employees do some more work honestly, diligently and efficiently, such gesture would not only be appreciated by the authority but also by people at large."

ruling out the avenue even for a minority to protest against majoritarian and state authoritarianism.”

The repeated references of the Supreme Court—that is, the repeated *performance* of the decision—reveal the biases and contradictions in the judgment and undermine the authority of the judge. In his initial dialogue with Ramdin, for example, the judge decides that he will outlaw the strike. To much comic effect, however, he is reminded by Ramdin that his proclamation can only take effect after some time—since they are not in an actual court, the judge’s ruling has no immediate result. Ramdin’s simple, matter-of-fact perspective contrasts visibly with the exaggerated anguish of the judge, whose ranting and wild gestures underscore his incapacity to assume complete control over the situation. The dialogue is interrupted by the strikers (played by the chorus) who begin to stage their first skit. Ramdin convinces the judge to watch the scenes that are taking place in the procession, for if strikes are truly outlawed, this will be a historic, last strike well worth watching. Realizing that the strikers are about to stage a trial scene, the judge insists that, following his rightful role, he will play the legislator in the embedded play. Frantic to join the scene, he orders Ramdin to bring him his cap, gown and his hammer. By focusing on the objects and attire symbolizing the power of the judge, the play underscores the judge’s authority as a performance. In other words, the play depicts the judge’s role as constructed rather than intrinsic. If performativity works here to undermine the judge’s authority, it also works significantly to found positive assertions of solidarity movements that are figured as performances. I explore the idea by focusing on the third embedded play staged by the strikers.

The scenes that the chorus enacts are overall similar in structure, though the third offers important variation. At the outset of each of the three scenes, the *sutradhar* provides a brief historical sketch of the situation, as the chorus holds aloft placards printed with phrases describing the events in question (relevant date and figures citing the number of strikers involved in the specific event). Further, all three scenes feature a trial in which the judge, playing his own role as a legislator, hands down a guilty verdict. Where the two first scenes then end with reenactments of historic strike scenes and a discussion between the judge and *sutradhar* about the legality of strikes, the third scene ends with Ramdin's declaration that he himself is going on strike and joining the procession that has trapped the judge's car. Ramdin's strike therefore closes the third scene and street play itself, and as such, it marks a breakdown of the frames of performance that separate the street play from the performances staged by the chorus.

The third scene is also distinguished by its content. Where the first two scenes draw upon Indian labor history, the final reenactment staged by the chorus is inspired by the Chicago Haymarket riot trials of 1886.<sup>69</sup> The scene opens with the *sutradhar's* short description of the events leading to the riots and then immediately transitions to the trial of August Spies, George Engel, Adolph Fischer and Albert Parsons, four of the labor organizers/anarcho-syndicalists who were brought to trial for having instigated the May 4

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<sup>69</sup> The Chicago Haymarket Riot of May 4, 1886 is the origin of the internationally observed May Day. A short history of the event begins on May 1, 1886, when labor unions in and around Chicago engaged in a strike calling for the institution of an eight hour working day. Led by the anarcho-syndicalist Albert Parsons, the Chicago strikers were joined over the next days by over 350,000 workers nationwide. On May 3, Chicago police killed two people as they intervened in a dispute that had broken out between strikers and strike-breakers at the McCormick Harvesting Plant outside the city. Local organizers including the labor leader August Spies subsequently called for a protest rally to be held on May 4, on the Haymarket square in Chicago. The rally itself began peacefully, but as the police who had gathered to monitor the event began to disperse, a bomb exploded in the police line, killing one officer. The authorities retaliated by firing into the crowd of strikers, killing 10. In the ensuing months, eight labor organizers were tried for instigating the attack on the police. All were sentenced to death with one of the convicted later being spared on appeal. (For a detailed history of the event, see Green, [Haymarket](#).)

events. The reenactment focuses on the testimony of the convicts, who each deliver a short monologue describing the inhuman work conditions they endured that led them to strike. The defense delivered by each is loosely based on available trial reports and transcripts, but on the whole the speeches are fictionalized and focus on the defiance of the defendants to the judge. Where Ramdin had earlier played relatively minor roles in the staged plays, he notably here plays the role of Albert Parsons, delivering an impassioned speech defending labor protest. The scene concludes with the sentencing of the convicts.

In the history of working class internationalism, the Haymarket events, through their association with May Day as the International Worker's day, have become what James Green has called a "potent ritual event" commemorated yearly by rank-and-file workers globally, seeking to assert their presence in the world ("Globalization" 16). In Green's account, Haymarket and May Day therefore represent enduring symbols of the heyday of the international labor movement, the commemoration of which presumes a concrete notion of an internationalist, proletarian identity. The invocation of the international labor movement introduces into the play a discourse that justifies as universally applicable, the particular claims for Indian labor rights enunciated by both the play and the political campaign in which it participates. By appealing to higher universal norms to renegotiate the terms of national discourses, such internationalist discourses highlight the unevenness within a national ideology that avers itself as uniform and indeed, universal within the jurisdiction of the nation.

In my reading of JANAM's play, I argue that, through the ways in which it is acted out, as theater embedded in performance, the Haymarket scene represents labor

solidarity itself as being performative. Performance, as a tactical and politically effective maneuver, therefore plays a central role in renegotiating exclusions within the nation by opening a site for the articulation of specific demands. I will elaborate the idea in a reading of the closing of the play, where Ramdin rebels against the judge.

After staging their final performance, the chorus disperses to side of the stage. Observing that the strike has ended, the judge orders Ramdin to move the car, yet Ramdin now claims that he too has gone on strike. In the same way that the judge's repeated performances in the embedded plays associate him with a history of state antagonism to labor, Ramdin's own participation in the plays transform him such that he phrases his resistance as an act of solidarity with the strikers. He addresses the judge with a rhymed speech that is punctuated by a refrain uttered in unison with the chorus:

Ramdin: Solah, solah ghante ghate phir be mile na roti

Salvadaron ne chusi badan ki boti boti

Polis gunda neta jab khich tan kikal

Chorus & Ramdin: Kese rahe mazdūr chup, kyon na kare hartal!?

Judge: Isse to mūlk ka sara pesa barbad ho jaega.

Ramdin: Mūlk ka sara mal kazana, jab le jaye videshi

Unke karobar phale, aur chaupat ho swadeshi

Desh ke hakim hi jab desh kare kangal

Chorus & Ramdin: Kese rahe mazdūr chup, kyon na kare hartal!?

Judge: Is fesle ke khilaf hartal pe jana ghair kanunihai!

...

Judge: Magr jaoge kahan? Hindustan ki akhri julus

ja chukiho!

Ramdin: Yor honar, Hindustan ki akhri julus kabhi nahi khatam honewalla. Mujhe se hazaron mazdur is julus par shamil hone apne ghar se nikal chuke hain. Ab ap yahan se nahin nikal payenge.

Chorus:

Har zor zulm kitakkr main, hartal hamara nara hai!

[Ramdin: 16 hours spent working, and to not even get bread

Those in control (lit: those who pull the strings)

have sucked the life (lit: flesh) out of our bodies

When the police, thugs and leaders

Harass us (lit: pull the skin from our bodies)

Chorus & Ramdin: How can the workers stay quiet, and why wouldn't they strike!?

Judge: You waste the money of the government.

Ramdin: The nation's treasures taken by foreigners

Benefits their industry (lit: makes them grow fruit), while it lays waste to ours

As the doctors(lit: hakim) of the country make this country wretched

Chorus & Ramdin:

How can the workers stay quiet, and why wouldn't they strike?

Judge: The decision to strike contradicts the order, and is illegal!

...

Judge: But where will you go? India's final strike is over!



Ramdin: Your honor, India's last strike will never end. Thousands of workers have come out to strike as I have and now you will not be able to leave.

Chorus: Against every injustice, "strike!" is our slogan. (Repeated as the actors leave the theater area, and disperse into the audience.)]

Given Ramdin's descriptions earlier in the play of the diverse professions (and by extension class-interests) represented by the strikers, the statements he makes in the closing dialogue are surprising. Particularly, his articulation of a "workers" resisting a coercive state, itself described as a coalition of "Polis gunda neta" [police, thugs, government leaders], would seem to amount to a declaration of working class counter-hegemony against the state. If the earlier statement about diversity worked to widen the relevance of the political campaign in question to different social groups, Ramdin's closing statements would seem to narrow them once again to a single social strata.

To explore the ramifications of Ramdin's assertions, I focus on the theatrical context of the closing scene. As the sequences of events in the play, and the constant foregrounding of performance remind us, Ramdin's transformation takes place through theater and his participation in the embedded plays. The link between these performances and his ultimate transformation is maintained by the ways in which his final statement about a never-ending strike echoes the defiant speech that he delivers playing the role of Albert Parsons, where he declares that his death will not stem future labor protest. Yet this identification between Ramdin and labor protesters is complex in that the strikers (who Ramdin joins) are consistently marked themselves as playing a role. Furthermore, in the episodes where Ramdin participates in the embedded plays—which are the only

scenes in which he interacts with the chorus/strikers—all the participants are actors. The worker's identity about which Ramdin speaks exists only in performance.

Such figuration of the Ramdin and the chorus as actors, in fact, serves the purpose of reducing the judge to the level of spectator. Indeed, at the moment when Ramdin suggests that the judge will in fact be trapped in a perpetual strike, his reference is not to a literal demonstration as such as it is to a situation in which the judge will always find himself placed in a situations as in the embedded plays, where the convictions that the judge issues fail to stem labor protest. Interpreted through the ways in which it confines the judge to the role of spectator, Ramdin's declaration of a worker's identity therefore has the effect of validating political action in terms of theater.

Through the *mise-en-abime* of theater within the street play and particularly, through Ramdin's framing of political solidarity as a sort of performance, I argue that the street play models for the public the political efficacy of performed identities. This pedagogical effect of the theater hinges the breaking down of the various frames of theater and on the identification between the audience and performers. During the dialogue scenes between Ramdin and the judge, the chorus disperses around the edge of the performance area, to sit at the edge of the audience. Transitions between scenes are therefore marked by the movement of the chorus on and off the perimeter of the stage, with the physical placement of the actors at the edge of the performance area working to emphasize proximity with the audience. Such identification is highlighted at the end of the play, as the chorus and Ramdin leave the performance area while chanting the last line of the play. The movement of the actors into the audience, I suggest, reverses the direction of the gaze in the performance area. Whereas the street play is characterized by

an exchange between the audience and actors in which the performance area remains the center of the audience gaze, the movement of the chorus and Ramdin into the crowd at the end of play expands the space of theater beyond the frame of the street play, incorporating the audience itself.

The oppositionality that I have been describing involves a tactical use of theater to secure political ends. It is through a use of a worker's discourse that ultimately serves to counter the oppressive law rather than the concretization of the worker as agent. To this end, what is tactical is in fact discursive. The idea is expressed in the final lines of the play. In describing the complexities of Akhri Julius here, I wish to signal the ways in which the street play constantly foregrounds its own performance. Ramdin's statement about the worker as political agent cannot be seen as being anything other than a performance in a context where the strikers portrayed in the play are themselves marked as actors. Yet this performance is nonetheless valorized through its effect at the end of the play. As Ramdin states the final words of the play, both the chorus and audience disperse into the audience as the *sutradhar* raises a chant "Har zor zulm ki tukkr me, hartal hamara nara he" (Against every injustice, "strike" is our slogan.) Given the symmetrical construction of the play, I read the chant here as a response to the question posed in the opening song of the play ("What are we to do?"). Here, the phrasing of "*hartal*" ("strike") as *nara* or "slogan" refigures resistance on the level of language rather than a subject-centered action. In other words, the statement enacts a split between the actor (and speaker of the phrase) and labor protest, which becomes a question of language rather than the material presence of a protester.

In Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe critique central position of class in the Marxist conception of political change. Adapting Antonio Gramsci's distinction between the state as a coercive power and civil society as the space of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe propose a model of democratic society that rests on the power of social movements rather than political parties to transform civil society (which in the Gramscian conception, founds the power of the state). As they describe it, the social field is constructed within civil society, through the various discursive formations contending for hegemony.<sup>70</sup> In this view, the plurality of the social sphere and proliferation of points of antagonism permits a multiplicity of rights oriented struggles.

The analysis that Laclau and Mouffe present is extremely useful for the ways in which its focus on plurality acknowledges the inadequacy of classical Marxist conception of the worker as an agent for political change. In Akhri Julus, the "tactical" invocation of a worker's struggle suggests the ways in which performance plays an important role in counter-hegemonic solidarity struggles. Indeed, if Laclau and Mouffe's analysis is a symptom of the larger ways in which theories of the political field have posited agency in linguistic terms, I suggest that street theater both indicates the importance of performative discourses to political solidarity movements in the post-Marxist epoch.

The closing line play and the invocation of "strike" is inflected with the history of labor action as depicted in the three embedded scenes, each of which, as mentioned, centers on labor protest. But the figuration of the term through language as "slogan," indicates equally a distance between the articulation of the term and the actual event. Put

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<sup>70</sup> Here, I understand hegemony not as the overcoming of difference, but as an ongoing and conflict-ridden process of mediation through which antagonistic struggles articulate common social objectives and political strategies. Commonality or alliances therefore arise out of an interplay of diverse political struggles in which no one group or actor can claim to represent the totality.

in another way, the closing chant, understood as a discursive figuration of political action, indicates the ways in which the performance to take place within the theatrical space established by the street theater will always exceed the models established in the embedded plays. Interpreting the closing in this way, I am heavily influenced by the theories of performativity as articulated by Judith Butler in both Bodies that Matter and Excitable Speech. For Butler, the subject is fully constituted through the discursive structures that hail it into being, and though it is compelled by those structures to repeat social norms, its reiteration of those norms may fail to approximate the norms themselves. Agency belongs to the subject in the unfolding of time, and is a product of the processes through which structures of power reproduce themselves.

### **Oppositional Anti-Theatricality and Kateb Yacine's Boucherie de l'espérance**

Produced in 1971, Kateb Yacine's Boucherie de l'espérance is notable for the ways in which, like JANAM's production of Akhri Julus, it prominently features theater as a mise-en-abîme and appropriates both internationalist and popular discourses. These similarities indicate a common political investment to reimagine political subjectivities as always being incomplete, in formation, and therefore capable of producing multiple significations. Such a perspective radically questions nationalist ideologies founded on the conception of a unitary citizenry and modeled after notions of autonomous subjectivity. As with Akhri Julus, internationalist discourses in Kateb's street performance play an important role in this process of resignification: functioning as a "discursive exterior" that displaces and deterritorializes national ideologies, the

invocation of the Third World movement opens the foundations of Algerian national subjectivity to critique as it creates possibilities for future liberation.

The Algeria that Kateb returned to in 1970 was in the midst of important economic and political transformations that had exacerbated the divide between the wealthy, educated elite and masses of illiterate, rural and urban poor. By the time Kateb finished Boucherie in 1969, Algeria had been subject to an unconstitutional government for four years: after overthrowing President Ben Bella in a 1965 coup d'état, Houari Boumedienne had abrogated the national assembly and annulled the 1963 constitution. Proceeding in this way, the authoritarian state attempted to neutralize opposition and to begin the process of constructing state institutions unencumbered by a priori doctrines and constitutional constraints.<sup>71</sup> The Boumedienne regime subsequently sought to propagandize the three and four-year economic development plans that it implemented as a continuation or extension of the nationalist project. The reformist policies worked with

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<sup>71</sup> The sweeping reforms instituted by the Boumedienne regime encompassed almost every facet of economic and social life in Algeria, and they merit detailed mention here for the ways in which they form the backdrop of Kateb's complex articulations—through performance—of the relationships between local popular conditions and global politics. In the economic arena, the Algerian government sought to seek self-sufficiency for the nation through rapid industrialization and the diversification of foreign trade. The country subsequently entered into a host of binding aid, technology and trade agreements with France, Germany, England and the USA. These ties to the west and to former colonial powers complicated the government's position and the state was obliged to make numerous sacrifices to foreign capital in its push to industrialize. Domestically, the government exercised an iron hand: as the regime consolidated power it incorporated and redirected the political left, represented by institutions like the UGTA (*Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens*) into its own party.

In the cultural domain, the state implemented a massive Arabisation, the aim of which was to institute modern literary Arabic as the national language of Algeria. The immediate effect of the policy was that it alienated Tamazight population in the Kabyle region of the nation, from where Kateb himself came. Medium and long term, the policies served the purpose of a growing radical Islam movement. However, the Arabisation of the public administration and the state sector didn't keep pace with secondary and higher education. Furthermore, large state corporations were reluctant to employ arabisants, preferring candidates fluent in a European language, who were better able to handle transactions with Western business customers and providers. The policies resulted in a situation wherein, by the mid-1970's large numbers of educated Arabic speakers found themselves unemployed. For a detailed description of Boumedienne policies in the 1960s and '70s see Karen Farsoun and Roberts.

only limited success, however, alienating vast portions of the population and laying the foundations for the growth a reactionary, radical Islamist movement.<sup>72</sup>

The formation of the Algerian state under the Boumedienne regime and the reactivation of a nationalist discourse were largely predicated on the assertion of an Arabo-Muslim conception of the Algerian state over and against the actual diversity of the Algerian nation. As the historian Hugh Roberts asserts,

[T]he conception of the nation which has informed the action of the state works out as a very *un-national*—indeed *anti-national*—nationalism.... And the simplification of the Algerian society, by eliminating or subverting traditional centres of authority and bases of collective social action at the local level, has reduced the bases of popular resistance to the social project of the Islamists as well as to that of the government. (28)

This “anti-national nationalism” of the Boumedienne regime amounted to a vast project of social-engineering that sought to impose a singular vision of Algerian nationhood onto the territory. The widespread disaffection resulting from the eradication of local centers of authority and social organization, as Roberts indicates, played into the hands of a reactionary Islamic movement. In the context of such oppression, Kateb envisioned the Algerian revolution as an incomplete project to defend a vision of Algerian culture that recognized pluralism and a polyglot society.

Produced during a lengthy visit to Vietnam and the Middle East, Boucherie de l'espérance (Slaughterhouse of Hope) was first performed in French and then later

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<sup>72</sup> I use the term “radical Islamism” to refer to what is more commonly known as “fundamentalist Islam.” My choice of terms concurs with Hugh Roberts’ statement that to apply the term ‘fundamentalist’ to radical Islamism incorrectly associates it with the anti-scientific eccentricity associated with fundamentalist Christianity. Radical Islam is absolutely orthodox, and should therefore be distinguished from fundamentalism (4).

collectively translated by Kateb's group into colloquial Arabic and Tamazight.

Following the conventions of the genre that dictate the constant evolution of plays to reflect specific contexts, the street play was constantly revised and was never formally transcribed.<sup>73</sup> What remains for scholars today is an edited version of the play that Kateb authorized in 1988, comprised of scripts pieced together from both Kateb's journals and rare recordings. Given the lack of visual material available for the analysis of this play, I will focus on the published script, drawing extensively on Kateb's voluminous writings on theater practice to found my analysis.

Boucherie epitomizes the concerns about history and internationalism that mark Kateb's theater. Specifically, the play explores the complex relations between the local and the global by representing the Israel-Palestine crisis as a conflict serving interests of radical religious factions in collusion with British, French and American superpowers. In a 1978 interview, Kateb articulated the reasoning that had led him to "internationalise," through plays such as Boucherie, the local problems he identified in Algerian society:

(...)Palestine... appears far away; in reality, it's proximate and it concerns us. The situations have in common a language issue, the theme of liberation and homeland, a theme of a people who liberate themselves; a battle for the popular liberation underway in Palestine or Vietnam takes place at a distance of perhaps 20,000 kilometers, but it's the same problem (Poète 89).

Kateb's statement alludes to an intricate link that he envisioned between the specific, post-colonial moment in which he worked, the concurrence of liberation movements

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<sup>73</sup> As Kateb explained it, "[w]e create theater that presents problems in a new way. ...Political theater involves change. One cannot predict: every day, the history of these problems evolves.... A text takes on definitive value and freezes, if it is written" (Poète 81).



internationally, and broader themes of popular liberation and homeland. The relationship between these themes is never articulated as a fixed formula in Kateb's work and that the connections between global politics, local situations and the Algerian nation are constantly worked out through performance.

### **Performativity under the Sign of Irony**

Boucherie de l'espérance takes as its setting Jerusalem and features as its central character, a poor unemployed Palestinian named Mohamed. Through a series of highly comic events, Mohamed is named against his own will as the prophet of Islam. The play follows the protagonist through a series of comic adventures that frequently involve his neighbor, a Jewish man named Moïse (or Moses) who has also unwittingly been named religious leader. A host of other significant characters also appear in the play, including the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire; the risibly named generals—the French “Générale de Cock,” the British “Générale Cock,” the American “Super Cock”; and a donkey. Though a brutish and dumb beast, the donkey, notably, is at the center of the ruses that both Mohamed and Moïse play in order to triumph over their adversaries; together, either one of the heroes and the animal lead a symbiotic existence that I would argue allegorizes the relationship between a revolutionary leader and a larger, mass population.

Like Akhri Julius, Kateb's play expresses political agency in terms of performance that extends beyond the space of the stage. However, where the JANAM play affirms theater (in terms of both its theatrical and performative aspects) as a model for agency, Boucherie posits political action as the subversion of an identity figured as already having been theatricalized. Specifically, Kateb's play figures the Middle East as a

“theater” for a power struggle between Western European powers and radical religious interests, where agency rests in the capacity of the play’s protagonists to subvert the roles that are assigned to them. Such representations in Kateb’s play correspond to a vision of the nation that recognizes the matrix of competing interests including Western European powers, Islamic radicals and state powers in areas like the Maghreb and the Middle East.<sup>74</sup> The idea is illustrated in two important scenes in Kateb’s play, wherein both Moïse and Mohamed are coerced to fight each other in a “ring,” where they are observed by aforementioned England, French and American generals. In the first scene, the British General Cock captures Mohamed and Moïse, and prepares to stage a fight between them. Having been excluded from any role participating in the organization of the staged combat, the French Générale Decoq forcibly objects. He attacks the British general, but the antagonists are forcibly separated by the American General Supercock, who explains:

Allons, chers amis,  
Laissez là vos petites querelles  
On peut toujours se battre,  
Mais par personnes interposées.  
[Come dear friends  
Leave your little quarrels  
You can always fight between yourselves

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<sup>74</sup> The Boumedienne regime’s efforts to undercut the base of a growing radical Islam movement resulted in a host of contradictions. In 1966, for instance, the government banned the Islamist *Al Qiyam* (The Values) movement that had taken root in the country while at the same time adopting into official policy the very programs (such as the stigmatization of western values and conservatism regarding the position of women) that *Al Qiyam* had upheld. While the move served to assert the government monopoly of the religious sphere in the short term, the policy worked long term to galvanize a radical Islamic movement that critiqued the Algerian regime’s superficial adoption of Islamic principles as it called for a government based on *Shari’a* (Islamic law) (Roberts 28).

But through intermediaries]

He then adds, addressing the public:

Il n'y a plus de coqs

Mais il y aura du sport,

Le Club des Grands Puissances

Organise un combat de boxe !

Moïse contre Mohamed.

[There are no more roosters

But there will be sport,

The League of Great Powers

Organizes a boxing match!

Moses against Mohammed.]

In a ring resembling a cock-fighting arena, surrounded by chorus of the play—which is divided between supporters of Islam and Zionists—Moïse and Mohamed are readied for battle. As the two prepare to spar, the English “Cock” and French “Decoq” interrupt the proceedings: the former places lead weights into the gloves of Moïse, and the latter inserts cotton into the gloves of Mohamed. As the partisan chorus belonging to each side encourage the battle, Moïse and Mohamed each offer an aside, directed at the audience of the play, describing the seemingly intractable positions in which they have each been placed:

Moïse, *a part*: Moi, l'éternelle victime,

Je deviens le bourreau,

Et je fais le jeu

Des antisémites.  
Mais si je quitte le ring,  
Je redeviens sale juif,  
En route pour le four  
Ou le déportation  
Mohamed, *même jeu* : Quelle force, et quelle faiblesse!  
Cent millions d'Arabes,  
Trois cent millions de musulmans,  
Et nous sommes tous colonisés !  
[Moses, *aside*: I, the eternal victim,  
I become the executioner,  
And I play the game  
Of the antisemites.  
But if I leave the ring,  
I become once again the dirty jew,  
On the road to the ovens  
Or deportation  
Mohamed, *same game*: What strength, and what weakness!  
One hundred million Arabs  
Three hundred million Muslims,  
And we are all colonised!]

Realizing that the battle is a lost cause, Mohamed dives to the ground, admitting his defeat and rejecting the role that had been chosen for him, and the chagrined American

general promises a rematch. The play offers clear allegorical allusions to a perspective of the Middle East conflict that emphasizes the controlling, manipulative role of the global superpowers and the consequent contradictions that arose within the competing Islamic and Jewish camps.

I read in Mohamed's decision to abandon the fight an expression of resistance arising out of the character's acute consciousness of the untenability of his position—a sentiment that is even more forcefully expressed at the end of the play. Though a series of adventures, both Mohamed and Moïse once again find themselves pitted against one another. Fighting furiously, they tumble out of the ring. Exhausted from their struggle the two take pause in their fight:

Moïse: Dis moi-Mohamed,

N'es-tu pas prophète?

Mohamed: Qui ? Moi?

Quelle idée!

Moïse: On m'a beaucoup parlé

D'un Mohamed prophète.

Mohamed: Et on ne parle pas

Du Mohamed chômeur ?

C'est moi, je me présente.

*Ils se serrent la main. Moïse prend son balai et se met au travail.*

Mohamed: Comment, toi, Moïse,

Tu n'es qu'un balayeur ?

Je te croyais plus riche.

Moïse, *balayant*: Je ne possède que ce désert.

Mohamed: Allons, bon, tu recommences !

Ce désert est à moi.

*Le combat reprend. Lumière sur les casques bleus.*

Supercock: Revenez sur le ring !

Moïse: Non.

Mohamed: Et non.

[Moses: Tell me Mohamed,

Aren't you a prophet?

Mohamed: Who? Me?

What an idea?

Moses: I have heard much about

Mohamed the Prophet

Mohamed: And nothing of

Mohamed the Unemployed?

That's me, here I am.

*They shake hands. Moses takes his*

*broom and begins to sweep.*

Mohamed: How is it, Moses.

That you are only a sweeper?

I believed you to be far more wealthy

Moses, *sweeping*: I have nothing but this desert.

Mohamed: So you start again!

This desert is mine.

*The fight recommences. Light shines on the blue hats.*

Supercock: Return to the ring!

Moses: No.

Mohamed: No.]

This decision to reject the “ring” represents a disavowal of the “stage” on which both characters have been assigned a role and are subject to the audience demand to represent a religious conflict. The play represents the gap between the interests of the various powers staging the play and those of the protagonists, yet it presents no outlet from the situation or utopian reconciliation.

Through its depictions of theatrical and political themes, the scene captures the relationship—central to street theater practice—between performativity and radical politics committed to renegotiating subject positions sanctioned within the nation. As political theorists such as Ernesto Laclau have defined it, radical political practices recognize the heterogeneity and multiplicity of social movements that always exceed the singular, group identity asserted by any single movement or party. Such conceptions of group identities draws upon the poststructural critique of the autonomous subject that has focused on the incommensurability of lived experience to the signifier naming the subject. According to this perspective, the reality of the individual always exceeds (through a logic of supplementarity) any designation of subjectivity itself.

Linking performativity to radical political practice, Judith Butler has critiqued theories of political agency that assume the autonomy of a subject to act on a political field. As Butler has asserted, such classical notions of subjectivity overlook the crucial

role of the political field itself in shaping, in the first instance, the supposedly autonomous subject. Dismissing any notion of the outright “death of the subject,” Butler forcefully argues—in terms of feminism—for a conception of subjectivity that valorizes self-reflexive critique:

To deconstruct the subject of feminism is not, then, to censure its usage, but, on the contrary, to release the term into a future of multiple significations, to emancipate it from the maternal or racialist ontologies to which it has been restricted, and to give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear. (Excitable 45)

What is at stake for Butler is not a rejection of identitarian conceptions of womanhood, but rather the splitting of the sign of “woman” from its referent and the “safeguarding” of the latter as a site of resignification. As Butler argues, the subject is constituted in and by a signifier (such as “woman”), where “‘to be constituted’ means ‘to be compelled to cite or repeat or mime’ the signifier itself” (Bodies, 220). As a performative moment, the “miming” has the potential for subversion.

Returning to Kateb’s play, I would like to suggest that the scene in question captures the “double bind” of subjectivity as explicated by theorists such as Butler. Both Moïse and Mohamed are coerced into assuming positions as leaders in ways such that their combat allegorizes the entire religious conflict. Through their incorporation into regimes of power, both Mohammed and Moïse are unable to refuse the role assigned to them by the French, American and British generals. Yet it is through playing their roles to the fullest extreme – fighting to the point that they tumble out of the ring, and by extension, out the realm of control of their captors that the characters are in effect, able to



transform the regulating power—though without ever fully escaping it or subverting it. Through this process in which the gaze between spectator and performer is disrupted, the artifice of the ring becomes inescapably apparent.

Both irony and the types of performative structures discussed here, through their appropriation and transformation of existing forms (either discursive or theatrical forms) exploit the contingent foundation of those forms themselves. Yet at the same time, performativity—like irony—remains embedded in the discourses that it implicates, to the degree that it remains open to being reperformed (or ironized) and itself further transformed. In dialogue that the two hold after exiting the ring, Mohammed and Moïse subsequently aver to each other their “true” identities, yet in the same moment, they find themselves once again reenacting (but on slightly different terms) the very role—as combatants—assigned to them by their erstwhile captors. In this regard, it is notable that the play posits at various moments, the conflict over homeland as being itself a contrived situation involving the machinations of western powers—but that the theater offers no false idea of an exterior position, or alternative subjectivity that would be independent of systems of power.

The critique of subjectivity that I describe in both JANAM’s play and Boucherie parallels the ways in which both plays destabilize the axis of theatricality that divides spectator and performer. Such opening up of spaces, and the rejection of a privileged space for the actor represents a rejection of the primacy of the law that determines theatrical spaces. The fact is particularly significant in Kateb’s play to the degree that theatrical space, figured as the “ring” in which both Moïse and Mohamed spar, circumscribes the domain of oppressive political power. In the latter scene that I describe

above, the rejection of the “ring” occurs as it were, by accident, with both Moïse and Mohammed falling out of the space as they fight. Yet this ironic practice of playing appropriating and manipulating theatrical roles to subvert power structures from *within* equally serves as a tactic that both Mohammed and Moïse exercise in order to prevail over their oppressors. Repeatedly, both characters manipulate situations into which they have been placed—for instance, by feigning naiveté until the crucial moment when they can overcome their adversaries.

Kateb’s inspiration for Moïse and Mohammed draws heavily from a set of Arabo-Berber tales featuring the folk-hero *Djoh’a*.<sup>75</sup> In the Algerian folktales as in Kateb’s plays, *Djoh’a* appears as the exemplary social outsider, the deceptively conniving figure who prevails over adverse situations through ruse and cunning. As the critic Jean Déjeux observes: “*Djoh’a* therefore plays the role of idiot because he is obliged to act in that way and because he is wise enough to pass as such. Underneath his simple exterior, he is wily: ‘he plays the donkey to have his hay,’ as the saying goes. He kisses the hand that he cannot cut” (26). Playing the role of the fool, *Djoh’a* in effect manipulates situations to his own gain.

Through their role-playing, Kateb’s characters offer multiple significations that exceed the roles they have been assigned. This notion of excess—of signification that exceeds the signifiers—is at the heart of Terry Eagleton’s discussion of radical politics. As Eagleton suggests, radical politics can signal and overturn oppressive structures, but “it cannot prescribe the content of what must then be lived, for the content, as Marx says,

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<sup>75</sup> This source material, furthermore, belongs to a much larger body of folktales which may be heard throughout the Mediterranean basin and south into Africa that all feature more or less the same stories and same protagonist, albeit under different names. While most likely Arabic in origin, the tales bear, in each region where they are found, a clear local imprint that attests to pre-Arab cultures and rich histories of cultural mixing.

goes beyond the phrase. All radical politics are thus in a profound sense formalistic” (29). Central to Eagleton’s statement is a critique of politics and indeed, political agency that is predicated on the existence of a stable subjectivity. The idea is mirrored in the diverse ways in which both Moïse and Mohamed reject the fixed, theatrical roles assigned to them by the Western generals figured in the play.

The idea of role-playing central to Dejeux’s analysis of Djoh’a highlights the theatrical aspect of Djoh’a’s ruses. By allegorizing Djoh’a and reanimating the figure in global contexts, Kateb in effect recasts the role-playing the character employs to humorous effect in the stories, as politically effective tactics. In Kateb’s adaptation of the Djoh’a cycle of stories, moreover, Moïse’s and Mohammed’s ruses and play-acting work lay bare the power hierarchies in which they are implicated: the reversals that both characters effect therefore ironize theatrical situations (and the positioning of actors and spectators) through theater itself. As an example, I consider a humorous scene in Kateb’s play depicting Mohammed’s interaction with a merchant. Fleeing from a group of Zionists who attack him, Mohammed spies a merchant who has concealed a sizable amount of money in his turban. By calling up to the merchant, Mohammed convinces him to lean out of his window, causing the turban—with its hidden gold coins—to fall to the street. Mohammed gathers the money, save one gold piece, which the chorus leader picks up.

The merchant inevitably accosts Mohamed, who refuses to return the money by claiming that it was a gift from God. Mohamed agrees to accompany the merchant to the Islamic authority, but suggests that he cannot appear in court dressed as he is:

Mohamed: Je ne puis aller chez le cadî avec mes haillons.

Toi, ton caftan brodé te remplit d'assurance.

Mais moi, ma vieille tunique sale

Me donnera tous les torts.

Mohamed: I cannot go to the cadì in these rags.

You, your embroidered vest fills you with confidence

But me, my old shirt

Will give me every fault.

Mohamed is supported by the chorus, who exclaim in the background: "La justice n'est juste que pour des hommes égaux!" [Justice is only just for equal men!] In this way, Mohammed convinces the merchant to give him both suitable clothing as well as a horse to ride on. As both men deliver their cases to the sultan in court, Mohammed predictably turns the tables on his adversary. In front of the authorities, he asks the merchant:

Mohamed: ...Mais dis moi, marchand,

Crois-tu que le monde entier t'appartienne?

Au train où tu vas, tu peux prétendre aussi

Que mon caftan est à toi !

[Mohamed: Tell me, merchant

Do you believe that the entire world belongs to you?

To the extent that you might also pretend

That my vest belongs to you?]

The enraged merchant physically attacks Mohamed in court, effectively exchanging with Mohamed the role of accuser/accused, and sealing his defeat to his more wily adversary.

In prevailing over the merchant, Mohamed engages in an oppositional practice that uses the hidden truth of justice (spoken by the chorus) against itself. His act exemplifies what Jean-François Lyotard defines as the rhetorical weapon of the weak, involving a logical ruse that “consists simply in placing that which presents itself as the absolute, the last word, in *relationship with itself*, and consequently, conceiving of it as but one element in the totality of singular, relative objects” (6). If the prevailing justice, rather than considering all men equal, only serves men of certain wealth and property, Mohamed’s ruses enable him to appear as such. In the scene in question, the Sultan remarks that he knows who Mohamed and the merchant are—he suspects a trick but is obliged, given the impartiality obliged by the context within which both Mohamed and the merchant appear to be equal, to remain impartial. Mohamed subsequently prevails by introducing an inequality into the system, namely accusing the merchant of being crazy.

By acting in the way he does, Mohamed, effectively transgresses the boundaries of a system of justice that regulates those who are equal and are beneficiaries of certain forms of due process and those who are not. By keenly perceiving the relativity of a system that organizes subjects according to property, measured by material appearances, Mohamed maneuvers in order to prevail and in so doing, disrupts the integrity of the system itself. Mohamed’s tactics resonate with Lyotard’s assessment of the rhetoricians who are the subject of his essay:

But for them, this outside is not outside, because the last place, the last word, the reference to the ultimate and absolute—has no positional value. For them no outside because there is no inside., no, no *inside itself*: the

inside itself as presumed interiority falls immediately into exteriority.

There is no exteriority. Or better, there is only exteriority. (6)

As with the powerless and oppressed, but sage cynic philosophers that Lyotard describes, Kateb's protagonists inhabit a world of "exteriority" that defines their marginal status vis-à-vis centers of power.

In Kateb's play, this "exteriority" is the organizing principle for the vision of community presented in the play, an assertion of group identity significantly invokes the internationalist discourses of the Third World movement. In one of the numerous asides that punctuate the play, Mohamed addresses the audience with a short monologue:

Mohamed: L'homme est un animal politique.

En Afrique, en Asie, ou en Amérique,

On peut déterminer la ligne de conduite

Des affaires de l'État,

En étudiant la bête la plus proche de l'homme,

Autrement dit: la plus stupide.

Cet animal, après le singe

En voie de développement,

C'est l'âne sous-développé,

Humble, mais ambitieux,

Capable de s'unir aux juments de l'Europe,

Et de donner le jour à un mullet,

Le plus humains de tous les ânes.

C'est un fait historique

Après le singe, on trouve l'âne  
Un peu partout dans le tiers-monde.  
L'Union des Écrivains Absents  
Désigne cette region immense de l'univers  
Du nom d'Anafrasia  
C'est le pays des ânes, et des analphabets....  
[Mohamed: Man is a political animal  
In Africa, in Asia or in America  
One can discern the progression  
Of the affairs of state,  
By studying the beast most closely related to man,  
In other words, the most dumb.  
This animal, after the monkey  
In its evolutionary development,  
Is the underdeveloped donkey,  
Humble but ambitious,  
Capable of mating with the ponies of Europe,  
And giving birth one day to a mule,  
The most human of all the donkeys.  
It's an historical fact,  
After the monkey, one finds the donkey  
Almost everywhere in the third world.  
The Union of Missing Writers

Designates this immense region of the world

With the name “Anafrasié”

It is the country of donkeys and illiterates....]

Mohamed’s comparison of the human to the animal (*l’âne*) on the one hand refers to the animal that is the constant sidekick of both the play’s protagonists and Djoh’a. At the same time, the evocation of the beast is reminiscent of racist colonialist discourses that figure subject populations as animals in comparison to the civilized (white) European colonizer. Here, however, Mohamed’s ironic speech shifts the focus away from race and on to developmental notions of language and literacy as categories of irreducible difference distinguishing the ruler and the subjugated. The “âne sous-développé” [underdeveloped donkey] is almost but not quite human, and the association of this “animal stupide” [stupid animal] with illiteracy is underscored in the play by words centering on the assonance between *âne* and *analphabète*. Where the tyranny of colonial power—and the motivation for national resistance—had been based on a binary logic that pitted the colonized against the colonizer, Mohamed’s short address reveals the nation-state as being divided along the lines of class and development, one measure of which is illiteracy. As represented in this short address then, rifts within the national community itself confound the binary oppositions (of colonizer/colonized or even citizen/foreigner) that are the foundations of nationalist thought.

A community founded on the commonality of underdevelopment is captured in the reference that Mohamed makes to “Anafrasié,” a neologism that is a combination of the syllable [an]—extending the associations with *âne* and *analphabète*—and the words *Afrique* (Africa) and *Asie* (Asia). Described in the play as “le pays des ânes, et des



analphabets,” the term here refigures as a country (le pays) a vast region of the “third world” where the major symptom of its underdevelopment is (as is suggested in Kateb’s play) prevalent illiteracy. As we learn from Mohamed in the last lines of his monologue, the term *Anafrasié* is a term coined by the “Union des Écrivains Absents,” (Union of Absent Writers). The ironic reference is to the “Union des Écrivains Algériens” [Union of Algerian Writers], a cultural organization founded after independence that promoted the idea of a national, Algerian literature. Cultural activists like Kateb heavily criticized the Union for its singular focus on writing in French and in Classical Arabic, and its complete dismissal of oral traditions and local, Arabic dialects to the project of building a “national” culture.

In Boucherie, *Anafrasié* therefore designates that population excluded from participating in the economic and cultural formation of the new nation state by both language/illiteracy and class. Throughout the play, as in the above monologue, Mohamed’s various assertions describe the idea of *Anafrasié* as a territory delineating space founded on the shared experience of oppression rather than on the expression of a national identity. The assertion therefore posits possible communities across territories, beyond linguistic, regional minority and national identifications. Given the historical context of the Boucherie and the geography delineated in Mohamed’s speech, it is clear that the inspiration for *Anafrasié* is the Third World movement. For the non-aligned nations that constellated following the Bandung conference in 1955, political independence from the former colonizers was a means rather than an end to complete economic and political liberation. Beyond the particular differences of nations, the

overall spirit of the movement maintained that the structures of empire in fact persisted well after independence.

The non-aligned movement was, of course, an international movement in which Algeria played a leading role—an ironic fact given Kateb's critique of the internal politics of the nation. Moreover, Kateb was exceedingly skeptical that a true pan-African, or union of post-colonial nations could ever effectively organize (a skepticism that was borne out by the ultimate demise of the movement itself, which had already begun by the time that Kateb wrote his play). As in the JANAM play, the allusion to internationalist discourses here works as a performance that places the particular inequities in the Algerian context into a longer history of colonialism and then empire.

Such an idea of performance is sustained by the manner or context in which the scene in the play is delivered. The many asides that both Moïse and Mohamed deliver in the play—moments when action ceases and the characters directly address the audience—attest to the influence of folk-tale, and structures of popular narrative on Kateb's work. Addressing the audience, Mohamed steps out of the frame of the play to assume the role of storyteller or narrator. His address introduces a didactic register into the play that reinforces the notion of performance as tactic that is consistently foregrounded in the action of Mohamed and Moïse.

## **Conclusion**

Both JANAM's Akhri Julus and Kateb's Boucherie invoke universalist discourses to renegotiate the nation as a community. By construing national subjectivities as relative and contingent, such discourses undermine the bases on which *exceptions* to human rights and universal citizenship in the nation are normalized and maintained. Such a

perspective broadens the discussion of *exceptionality* as imperial practice that Partha Chatterjee has convincingly described in terms of international political relations:

The imperial prerogative, I suggest, is the power to declare the colonial exception. Everyone agrees that nuclear proliferation is dangerous and should be stopped. But who decides that India may be allowed to have nuclear weapons, and also Israel, and maybe even Pakistan, but not North Korea or Iran? We all know that there are many sources of international terrorism, but who decides that it is not Saudi Arabia or Pakistan but the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq that must be overthrown by force? Those who claim to decide on the exception are indeed arrogating to themselves the imperial prerogative (124).

As I have been describing them, both plays indicate the persistence of the “imperial prerogative” in the nation-state. To this extent, the concept of “empire” defines the context of both street plays and indeed, general street theater practice in both India and Algeria.

## Chapter V

### Conclusion: The Temporalities of National Tradition

In a published interview dated 1967, Kateb Yacine describes Algeria as being at once “a ruin and a scaffolding,” a country in the “throes of death as it is being born.” In a register typically humorous and symbolic, Kateb continues:

Algeria has not yet finished coming into the world. [...] Algeria is an excellent, molten material, and one can make of it what one likes, this is exultant but at the same time difficult. One cannot know a people as an individual, it is like the ocean, and one loses oneself in it, but one must nonetheless delve in and continue to immerse oneself within, even if the only pearl that one finds is an old shoe. Such shoes are worth their weight in gold. One must immerse oneself with the people and find its old shoes, because that is all that there is to find, these are nothing and yet they are priceless. Since one can read the future in the sand, one can also read the past in a cast-off shoe! (“Intellectuels” 28)

The context of Kateb’s statements refers, as strongly implied, to the work of the artist, and indeed, to Kateb’s own total production, which he repeatedly described as an *oeuvre* “en gestation.”

Kateb's statement raises a host of questions about the role of the public, and importantly, about the past, present, and future of the nation. If the Algerian people is as radically heterogeneous as Kateb suggests, then what of the minority identities in the nation? What role do gender identities, ethnic groups (the *Tamazight* tribes for instance), and linguistic communities play in a collective seen in flux? Moreover, what of the history of the nation? What type of consciousness of the past evolves out of the process of exploration that Kateb describes?

The idea that Kateb poses has been echoed by the writings that JANAM members have themselves disseminated about their work. In an early article in Hindi titled "The Question of Traditional Forms and Devices," Safdar Hashmi rails against the "Theatre of Roots" movement in vogue in the 1980's, which had led theater workers to seek to recuperate traditional forms of theater: "Tradition is to be found in our lived atmosphere, over living environment; such tradition naturally infuses our work and our experiments" (Safdar 57). As Hashmi argued, the types of research promoted by the Theater of Roots school only alienated traditional modes from the lived and meaningful contexts that gave them their energy. What mattered, then, was lived experience.

In response to the rejection of history affected by contemporary critical performance practice, the writer Rustom Bharucha, in a wide critique of postmodern performance, has suggested:

But if one considers the predicament of underprivileged communities, such as the dalits (low castes) in India, for instance, whose ethnicities have been stamped on, demeaned and inferiorized for centuries, surely the task of upholding a dalit identity is part of a long and hard-earned struggle,

which has involved a disidentification from earlier, hallowed, patronizing descriptions of untouchables as harijans [“children of God”]. (55)

Clearly, the minority status of the Dalits and a history of *ongoing* oppression would seem to discourage the collective national perspective advocated by theater. The concern that Bharucha raises, one that juxtaposes the collective perspective of theater and the particular experience of minority, strikes at the heart of any consideration of the nation and its communities.

On the one hand, it is clear that street theater works *tactically*: in a plays like Mohamed prends ta valise or Honda ke Gunda, the particular rights of laborers find themselves cast as universal rights within the nation. Yet this perspective alone does not allow for the revolutionary aspect of street theater, namely that beyond its activist role, what is at stake is a fundamental interrogation of the institutions that determine what the national collectivity is. In what follows, I will argue that the question of collectivity and minority is one that hinges on the recognition of universalism and particularity as being mutually constitutive. As a project that would aim to consider further the role of performance in community, I will suggest a further line of inquiry that considers the particular “inscriptions” of the nation that street theater allows.

### **People’s Theater Stars the People**

The title for this section heading refers to the slogan printed widely—in the manifestos and disseminated materials of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (or IPTA), which constituted the performance-focused arm of the nationalist Progressive Writer’s Association of early post-independence India. In order to address a wide public,

and particularly the vast illiterate population of India at the time, IPTA formed local theater groups throughout India, each charged with producing theater in local forms to educate the people about the nationalist movement.

The street theater forms practiced by Kateb and JANAM sets a more radical precedent than IPTA productions.<sup>76</sup> Whereas the goal of IPTA had concentrated on the politicization of local idioms of theater, JANAM and Kateb radically involve the spectator in the theater as either agents of performance or critical observers. Street theater performances only evolve, then, out of an effort that joins street theater group and audience as a collectivity, materialized (however ephemerally) as something that exceeds our knowledge. This moment of performance, then, refigures (through the novelty that it introduces) the boundaries of community as being malleable and contested.

Yet this statement would seem to lead back to the same predicament and the tension between the universal and the particular. On the one hand, the political power of street performance is that, through its refusal of the conventions of role-playing and its active rejection of the authority of representation, reveals the universal content of nationalism as empty and always subject to re-signification. Such oppositionality hinges on the artists' knowledge and consciousness of the present. Contemporary theory would describe such consciousness in materialist terms, as a perspective that—to use Walter Benjamin's terms—abandons the “eternal image” of the past to privilege a unique experience of the present (262). Such focus on the present offers critical perspective on national histories, without inscribing an alternative, dominant history.

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<sup>76</sup> In Acts of Authority, Nandi Bhatia offers a useful overview of the few extant IPTA scripts.

## **The Universal within the Minor**

Kateb himself articulates the project in terms of the Berber minorities in Algeria.

In a statement about the *Tamazight* language, he suggested that:

It exists, it lives but is in the process of dying, but it is also the base of our historic existence. It is only through it that we can find ourselves. The work of the writer becomes, at its limit, almost oral: it is necessary to be present, to speak to the people, to skirt this trap that is laid before us and that would make us Arabo-Islamic or French-Algerian. Those are the two ghettos that I would wish to avoid.

(Poète 33)

Key in this assertion is the figuration of both the Arabo-Islamic and French-Algerian identity (both of which constituted, at different points, dominant national narratives) as “ghettos.” Kateb’s statement in effect minoritizes national narratives, privileging not any particular content of Berber identity as much as its orality, and its forms of expression that resist incorporation into an economy of representation that would infuse certain practices as being normative.

If the “trap” of the Arabo-Islamic narrative is to be caught up in historicism privileging a lost origin, the pitfall of the French-Algerian identity is to immerse national culture in a history of postcolonial victimhood. For Kateb, the solution to this is not research into lost traditions, but a constant deployment of lived cultural practices of the minority to destabilize the hegemonic national narrative.



## **Towards a Theory of Performative Political Practice**

The discussion of political performance and opposition above suggests several future lines of comparative inquiry that would potentially put pressure on both extant performance theory and discussion of political community. If part of the work of street theater practice is—in the deployment of a repertoire of lived practices of minority—to challenge dominant narratives, then questions naturally arise as to the ultimate re-performance of those practices after the performance. In the case of JANAM, for instance, what elements of street theater practice condition an audience member's subsequent involvement with the political party sponsoring a campaign in which JANAM participates? In Algeria, where continuing violence between an authoritarian state-government and radical Islam has long-stifled street theater forms, contemporary groups continue to re-perform Kateb's plays. How have they adapted his work? What minor forms do they employ?

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