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From Queer Necropolitics to Queer Eschatology

Reza Abdoh's Unsettling Historiography

I always say that to people when they talk about the Millennium.
It is like my culture has been forgotten
Reza Abdoh¹

Brown indexes a certain vulnerability to the violence of property,
finance and capital's overarching mechanisms of domination
José Esteban Muñoz²

I have often wondered why José Muñoz never wrote about Reza Abdoh. Now, both have passed too early, and that dialogue is left in the heads of those of us left

¹ Reza Abdoh and Gautam Dasgupta, "Theatre Beyond Space and Time," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 40, no. 3 (2018): 24, https://doi.org/10.1162/pajj_a.00430.

² José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, eds. Joshua Chambers-Letson and Tavia Nyong'o (Durham, nc: Duke University Press, 2020), 3.

behind. These two brown queers destroyed by different iterations of biomedical neglect, fast and slow death, haunt the present of queer theory and performance in the Americas. They are joined in my mind by a third brown queer, Victor Cazares, whose play *Ramses Contra Los Monstruos* I wrote about for the editor of this issue previously.³ Mentioning this is to acknowledge this essay as a return to thinking about time, space, and matter through the lens of queer eschatology. These two engagements are part of a rather unsettling idea (at least for me): that the most compelling articulation of liberation, of being other under Neoliberal necropolitical rule has been imagined—is being imagined—outside of secular, materialist temporalities and political processes. Thus, I underscore that this form of eschatology, queer eschatology, is not only a divestment of theater/performance historiography from so-called teleological straight time as theorized by Elizabeth Freeman, but also from orthodoxies of queer theory predicated either on a never arriving future (Muñoz) or the definitive lack of one (Bersani, Edelman).⁴

Taking up the challenge of unsettling historiography within theater and performance practices asks me to consider Reza Abdoh's *Father Was a Peculiar Man* with necropolitical theory emerging from the so called "global South" in combination with us based queer theory. Necropolitics, as conceptualized by Achille Mbembe, expands and critiques Michel Foucault's conception of biopower, which was largely imagined within the frame of European historical political conditions. Mbembe considers how the conditions within post-colonial Africa and Palestine ask that we confront "figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations."⁵ For Mbembe, the combination of mass war machinery, finance capital, and the extension of racism from the colonial period to the present create new modes of subjugating life to death or creating "death worlds" that confer upon persons or populations "the status of the living dead."⁶

Given that *Father* was an adaptation of a classic of European literature (Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*), which occurred at capitalist ground zero—New York City—and was largely enacted by white actors, my choice could be thought of as an act of bad faith. Yet, I insist that this theorization is apt for understanding Abdoh's critique outside of the limitations of us-centric frames of analysis because of his global understanding of the heteropatriarchal "death

³ Patricia Ybarra, "Latino/a Dramaturgy as Historiography," in *Theatre/Performance Historiography: Time, Space, Matter*, eds. Rosemarie K. Bank and Michal Kobialka (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 75–93.

⁴ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

⁵ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 68.

⁶ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 92.

worlds” created for gay and trans persons during the AIDS era, in which this play was created. My journey is a mode of thinking with Abdoh that resonates with Michal Kobialka’s previous essay on spatial dialectics.⁷ Although our theoretical assemblages are quite different, I share Kobialka’s methodological commitment to close reading a performance so as to unsettle reductive orthodoxies of thought—even those said or thought to be liberating—under necropolitical neoliberalism. My engagement with what might be an unsettling choice of object also interrogates a number of settled historiographical narratives about Abdoh’s place and time in theater history; about the genealogy and historiography of queer theory; about the negation or engagement of futurity in that theory; and about the failure of US-centric racial constructs to fully allow what Muñoz might call a sense of brown to emerge in relation to Abdoh’s work. At the same time, I move beyond what might be called a negative critique to positively embrace *Father’s* eschatological imagining as an affirmative political practice to combat the collusion between patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism: the end of gender differentiation entirely.

Father Was a Peculiar Man was a three-hour long adaptation of *The Brothers Karamazov* staged in New York City’s Meatpacking District on the West Side of Manhattan. Loosely based on a script written by Mira-Lani Oglesby, *Father* was a site-specific performance incorporating dance numbers, installation-like exhibitions of BDSM, and scripted scenes adapted from the novel.⁸ Abdoh’s aesthetics resonated with aspects of site-specific performances supported by his producer Anne Hamburger, aspects of gay theater that adapted or camped the classics and employed drag, and aspects of performance art such as the body art of his friend Ron Athey. Abdoh’s work was very different from the autobiographical solo shows and narrative dramas about largely white male gay subjects with AIDS that dominated New York theater the 1980s and early 1990s, however. It is perhaps for this reason that he does not appear in the annals of this period of gay performance, although his work is well documented as an important innovation in avant-garde theater. Nonetheless, even in this framework, less attention has been paid to *Father* than to Abdoh’s other original works, with the exception of theorizations by Elinor Fuchs and Bertie Ferdman.⁹

To begin my own inquiry, I return to the epigraph to this essay that comes from Abdoh’s 1994 interview with Gautam Dasgupta, which was not published

⁷ Michal Kobialka, “A Note on Spatial Dialectics,” *Performance Research* 21, no. 3 (2016): 54–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2016.1176738>.

⁸ All observations about the play will come from the video of the performance, shot in June 1990 and provided by Anthony Torn, which is very different from the script by Mira-Lani Oglesby, *Father Was a Peculiar Man*, dir. Reza Abdoh, recorded video, produced by Anne Hamburger and En Garde Arts, 1990.

⁹ Bertie Ferdman, *Off Sites: Contemporary Performance Beyond Site-Specific* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 2018), 120–124; Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1996): 134–136.

until 2018. The exchange, which takes on the issue of catharsis and purgation in Abdoh's work, bears quotation in full:

[RA:]. . . I don't like to be tranquil. This is not the time to be tranquil. I think of purging in the sense of propelling one to action. . . .

[GD:] I think that the time is right once again, as we enter the close of the second millennium, the Christian millennium . . .

[RA:] Exactly. I always say that to people when they talk about the millennium. It's, like, my culture has been forgotten.

[GD:] Now, more and more, as we're entering another *fin-de-siècle* period, which last time around gave birth to all new artistic movements, starting with Symbolism, and to works of art that dealt with eschatology, I suspect that will make a comeback again, given all of the millennial angst. I wonder what you feel about it. Is it something that concerns you?

[RA:] I think, as you put it, this eschatological engagement is something that's very real right now. You know, we're trying to grasp a sense of apocalypse, or a sense beyond that. It's something that really is a very important part of understanding our culture right now, and by our culture, I mean the global culture. I don't mean just the Western culture. Certainly, in my own work, that's something that I'm engaged with continuously. . . .¹⁰

This exchange exemplifies the way Abdoh frames his global consciousness as a critique of the limitation of viewing his plays solely within the frame of the European avant-garde and US millenarianism. The latter was a common trope in framing US gay theater, given the popularity of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1991). His reference to the "forgetting of his culture" while typically enigmatic and seemingly vague, is quite specific. Given his commentary on Manicheism, which preceded this moment in the interview, I argue that Abdoh is talking not about his ethnicity, his national origin, or even theater practices such as Ta'ziyeh, as suggested by John Bell and Daniel Mufson.¹¹ Rather, Abdoh is referring to a cosmological disposition within a monotheistic religion that imagines an end of the world/transformation in which evil is eradicated that is embedded in Zoroastrianism *and* Western religion—i.e., "the sense of apocalypse or something beyond that in 'our global' culture."¹² A close consideration of *Father Was a Peculiar*

¹⁰ Abdoh and Dasgupta, 24–25.

¹¹ John Bell, "ΑΙΘΡΑ and Avant-Garde Classicism: Reza Abdoh's *Quotations from a Ruined City*," *The Drama Review* 39, no. 4 (1994): 21–47; Reza Abdoh and John Bell, "To Reach Divinity Through the Act of Performance: An Interview with Reza Abdoh," *The Drama Review* 39, no. 4 (1994): 48–71. In an interview with Salar Abdoh, Reza's brother, he states that this influence is overstated.

¹² For those unfamiliar, Zoroastrianism is a religion with pre-Christian roots in Iran. Zoroastrianism is a monotheistic belief system that imagines a time when Lord Mazda is at hand, spurring an idea of "end times," which includes an ordeal by fire during which those who serve Mazda will be separated from those who do not. This bifurcation of good and evil subjects involves all walking over the bridge of the separator, which offers narrower or wider paths to the other side. See George

Man, makes it clear that it was Abdoh's disidentification (in Muñoz's sense) with Dostoyevsky's Christian eschatology (and the patriarchal aspects of Zoroastrian cosmology such as the emergence of the Mazda) that allowed him to imagine the end of evil by destroying (white) patriarchy through parricide.¹³ In his own era, Dostoyevsky resurrected the possibility of human goodness at a moment of great turmoil at the end of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoyevsky scholar Joseph Frank refers to this as Dostoyevsky's "eschatological imagination" which Timothy Jacobs suggests is a mode of calling into question the idealization of individualization in an age of pessimism about human goodness.¹⁴ Abdoh stands apart from Dostoyevsky's belief in human goodness as a universal value. But he does believe in the construction of a community created through the experience of evil: women, queer folks, sex workers, and brown folks who suffer under homophobia and the vagaries of neoliberal capitalism have experienced that evil. Abdoh disidentifies with Christian abjection of sexual pleasure (remember the Karamazovs are also called the sensualists) and Dostoyevsky's romance with asceticism but recognizes the wisdom of Alyosha's lack of judgement. Abdoh avers from the anxious reification of gender roles, and (at least somewhat) the ancillary misogyny contemporary to his own era and Dostoyevsky's. And Abdoh is quite ambivalent about the valorization of children so crucial to Dostoyevsky's conceptualization of innocence. Yet, Abdoh quite literally drags Dostoyevsky into the Meatpacking District as a way to think through the possibilities of another world—a world imagined by queer biblical scholars and contemporary theologians such as Sarah Coakley and Michael Nausner in which the eschaton offers a new gender future, free of gender entirely in its most radical imagination, in the present as much as a distant future.¹⁵ In *Father*, this beautiful transformation necessitates the violent murder of the patriarch, Fyodor, before his transformation into a woman and, later, a non-binarized marcher in the cobblestone streets amongst a multitude of actors and audience members.

Abdoh knowingly chooses a work which Freud used to theorize parricide psychoanalytically, screws around with it and makes a palimpsest of the Karamazov family, the Kennedy family, and his own to make his point about the

Foot Moore, "Zoroastrianism," *Harvard Theological Review* 5, no. 2 (1912): 180–226, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1507426>; Hans Schwartz, *Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdsman's Publishing Company, 2000), 37.

¹³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

¹⁴ Frank, quoted in Timothy Jacobs, "The Brothers Incandenza: Translating Ideology in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 49, no. 3 (2007): 290, n. 4.

¹⁵ See Sarah Coakley, "The Eschatological Body: Gender, Transformation, and God," *Modern Theology* 16, no. 1 (2000): 61–73, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0025.00115>; Michael Nausner, "Toward Community Beyond Gender Binaries: Gregory of Nyssa's Transgendering as Part of His Transformative Eschatology," *Theology and Sexuality* 8, no. 16 (2002): 55–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/135583580200801606>.

evils of abusive, if charismatic, patriarchs within our social world.¹⁶ The novel's philosophical meditations, it should be noted, are embedded within a plot of detection in which we question which son really killed his father. Abdoh and his collaborator/script writer Mira-Lani Oglesby set aside the mystery by staging in Fyodor's murder in plain sight: Ivan holds the knife as Smerdyakov repeatedly stabs his father. Oglesby and Abdoh skip Dmitri's trial almost entirely. They offer Dmitri's execution and Smerdyakov's suicide in the place of the trial. The last third of *Father* contains a section labelled "Ivan's nightmare," which transposed Ivan's conversation with his double/devil into an s&m exhibition within an old meat locker, and a "coda" that combined a resurrection scene with Ilusha, a child martyr's, funeral.¹⁷ Staging Dmitri's execution and Smerdyakov's suicide before Ivan's nightmare (which is a sequence different from the novel) while extending the "Speech at the Stone" section from the novel's epilogue allows Abdoh to instantiate his eschatological vision in the place of earthly tragedy and judgment.

The staging of Ivan's nightmare is crucial to this vision. In the novel, this conversation happens when Ivan is in a fevered state replicated in the present by the symptoms suffered by AIDS victims in response to the virus and the medicine that cures it. Ivan's nightmare quite literally becomes the state of suffering caused by a disease that heteropatriarchy allowed to fester for years. The externalization of Ivan's bodily and psychic state takes the form of a meat locker decorated with fake snow in the middle of summer. Within this meat locker we find Ivan naked and hung upside down like a side of meat being beaten by his father; campy Romans and Christians; JFK, his wife, and his lover having a spat; Miss Arizona confessing the violent dynamics of her home to a therapist who wields a saw blade; various scenes of copulation; and Dmitri's emotional breakdown.¹⁸ These moments blend true sadism, BDSM play, and psychological torture in a site where cows become beef, gesturing to the reduction of people to flesh that Erika Munk describes in her review.¹⁹ We might think of *Father* less as a "meaty metaphor" than a confusingly mixed one that combines father/son sadism with daddy/boy violence exemplifying gay male sexuality in relation to the death drive articulated in the anti-relational theses of Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani.²⁰ However, in combina-

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Dostoyevsky and Parricide," in *The Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21: 1927–1931, trans. James Stratchey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), 173–196.

¹⁷ I am borrowing the term "coda" from Tony Torn, an actor in the show who labelled this last episode a "coda" in the production video.

¹⁸ Hanging Ivan as a side of beef allusively references the idea of being hung by a hook in hell that Fyodor Karamazov mentions in Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Modern Library, 1963), 20–21.

¹⁹ Erika Munk, "Meaty Metaphors," review of *Father Was a Peculiar Man*, *Village Voice*, July 24, 1990, 102.

²⁰ Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

tion with the production's numerous resurrections, Ivan's nightmare is less a hell or even a meeting with a devil than as a conflagratory purgatory after which the coming together of humanity happens. It is striking that this is the only scene in *Father* staged indoors. In the novel, this event happens in Ivan's home. Here it is inside of a beef processing plant. While meat lockers could not be mistaken for a cozy domestic interior, Abdoh's choice not to stage this scene on the street suggests that the violent conflagration happens beyond closed doors as well as in the mind. Combined with the burning house earlier in the play, Abdoh stages the street as the site of liberation in contrast to the tortures within the heteronormative domestic interior.

Three actions happen during Ivan's nightmare that exemplify the eschatological aspects of these staged tortures. One: Tom Pearl, who acted as Jesus/a Christ figure throughout *Father*, is painted green like Osiris by Dmitri. This reference to pre-Christian modes of eschatology and to the god of fertility and regeneration shifts Tom's subsequent resurrection from being a staging of the crucifixion of Christ to being a ritual of his dispersion to the many as a form of afterlife.²¹ One might even say he becomes vegetal. (Other gestures to Osiris are found throughout the play, including one actor wearing his famously shaped hat.) It is important that by painting Tom Pearl green, Dmitri transforms his own role in the novel as an unjustly persecuted character into a person who gives succor to a religious figure. Two: it is also in this scene that Tom Fitzpatrick, who plays Fyodor Karamazov for most of the play, puts on a floral dress and a wig and undoes his role as a patriarch in the process. Abdoh, by having Fyodor undergender himself as the patriarch during a scene that the novel uses to articulate Ivan's humanist cosmology, suggests that the possibility of eschatological hope for a future comes in this form of gender transformation not in the killing of God. And three: by juxtaposing Tom Fitzpatrick's gender transformation with the sermons about obeying and worshipping the father (Jesus/God), Abdoh ironizes the patriarchal aspects of religion to clear the way for a new path forward without patriarchy.

The spatial move from confinement of the lockers to the freedom of the open street is as crucial to Abdoh's eschatological vision as the transformation of gender of the murdered patriarch. This openness exemplifies the wide road offered to those saved within the Zoroastrian transformation in which evil is eradicated. The outdoor crucifixion stands aside and stands in for the death and funeral of the innocent boy Ilusha, the Christ-like figure in Dostoyevsky's novel. Dostoyevsky's juxtaposition of this funeral and Dmitri's rantings in his jail cell calls attention to the Dmitri's delusions about himself as a martyr in the face of an actual sacrificial lamb (Ilusha). Abdoh, in contrast, combines the crucifixion of Christ/Osiris, the death of the young boy (represented by a young white twink

²¹ See "Osiris," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed May 15, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Osiris-Egyptian-god>.

being rolled around in a coffin) and Alyosha's comment that there is nothing to forgive. In doing so, Abdoh brings about a version of Patrick Cheng's vision of queer eschatology that he imagines in the face of mortality caused by the AIDS epidemic. Cheng writes, that,

[a]ccording to the Doctrine of Apokatastasis all things will be restored because of the ultimate triumph of God over evil and death. As we have seen the boundaries between male and female, life and death, punishment and reward will be subject to eschatological erasure at the end of time. Indeed, even the boundaries between different world religions will be erased.²²

Subsequent to Alyosha's allocution, we see Abdoh's final transition from mourning a dead child to a joyous parade. Literalizing the coming together of all people, the cast marches forward together to *Dream a Little Dream of Me*, riffing on Alyosha's advice to the boys at the funeral to never forget each other. In the transformation we return to seeing a phalanx of bra-clad male actors enjoying a ludic walk together, a collectivity who march forward together in an explosion of gender expressions and joy. This collectivity includes Dmitri and Fyodor; the latter has put on his black coat and hat, but still retains the wig, the makeup, and the dress of his femme persona. Dmitri is all jazz hands and fey gestures. The coalescence between the two Karamazovs stands in contrast to their combative roles earlier in the play, inherently rejecting the limitations that masculinity imposed on them. It is striking that early in the play, Abdoh has both Dmitri and Fyodor decrying the fact that they "were not allowed to be a little girl" in an earlier scene. These utterances transpose the assignation of femininity/feminine gender from their use in the novel to ridicule Alyosha and Smerdyakov to being used in the play to articulate the desire to escape the limitations of their patriarchal embodiments.²³

Abdoh's cosmology, then, replaces the return of god with the dissolution of patriarchy and the emergence of a horizontal collectivity without a traditional masculinity. Looking back at Dostoyevsky, the re-centering of Alyosha in this last section of *Father* and the expanded importance of the epilogue asks us to reconsider the youngest Karamazov's call for mercy and kindness in the community where he asks the boys to be kind, honest, and most importantly not to forget each other. If we imagine that these young cisgender boys are replaced by young adult genderqueers, some of which are living with HIV/AIDS, Alyosha's simultaneous preaching and abdication of his own authority is a model of a different relationality

²² Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 136.

²³ In the novel, Alyosha is teased for "being a girl" for not being able to hear stories about women that would be counter to his excessive chastity, Dostoyevsky [and Garnett], *Brothers Karamazov*, 17. In David McDuff's translation, Smerdyakov is referred to as she when Fyodor is making fun of him for his foolishness. See Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. David McDuff (New York: Penguin Books), 177.

that undoes the hierarchical and abusive personal, religious, and state forms of patriarchy that oppress all of the characters in the play. His repetition of the masses yelling “Hurrah” for Karamazov at the end of the play, moves this cheer from referring to the valorization of the patriarchal Kennedy and Karamazov families to cheering for new kind of commonality. This transformation is a revision of the eschatological vision Ivan’s visitor outlines during his nightmare. He states:

I maintain that nothing need be destroyed, that we only need destroy the idea of God in man, that’s what we have to set to work. It’s that that we must begin with. . . . And I believe that period, analogous with geological periods, will come to pass—the old conception of the universe will fall of itself without cannibalism, and what’s more, the old morality, and everything will begin anew. . . . His pride will teach him that it is useless to repine at life’s being a moment, and he will love his brother without need of reward. Love will be sufficient only for a moment of life, but the very consciousness of its momentariness will intensify its fire, which now is dissipated in dreams of eternal love beyond the grave and so on and so on in the same style.²⁴

Abdoh counters Dostoyevsky by eliminating the *idea of man in god* and replacing the momentariness of love with one that might last forever. Yet, unlike Alyosha he does not ask his audience of “boys” to find their happiness in a memory of childhood—all memories of childhood in *Father* are nightmarish—but in an attenuation of the reality of the present as a form of collective futurity.

Similarly, Abdoh’s casting and costuming practices push into new notions of the queer by undoing notions not only of patriarchy but also of race and gender. Smerdyakov, a male character, is played by a queer actress assigned female at birth Jan Leslie Harding. Dmitri and the temptress Grushenka are played by Iranian actors who defy certain norms of masc/femme behavior. And Reza Abdoh both acts in the play and surrogates himself with a white actor wearing white makeup (Tony Torn). Combined with the casting a white actor—Tom Fitzpatrick—as Fyodor, Abdoh not only advocates for the murder of white patriarchy but also asserts patriarchy to be “white.”²⁵ This casting configuration makes the avenger against the patriarch (Fyodor) a genderqueer person (Smerdyakov) aided by Ivan, who was played by an HIV positive actor. Importantly, it is Smerdyakov, not Dmitri, who asks “Why is such a man alive?” in Abdoh’s adaptation. Casting Assurbanipal Babilla as Dmitri queers the novel further. Dmitri is usually seen as the most cis-normative of the Fyodor’s sons. He is a brawler, a hetero lothario, and

²⁴ Dostoyevsky [and Garnett], *Brothers Karamazov*, 688.

²⁵ Tom Fitzpatrick played Creon, Perón, and many other roles subsequently. Curiously, however, the first play Abdoh directed after this one genders Tom differently. In *Hip Hop Waltz of Eurydice*, Tom Fitzpatrick plays Eurydice/Dora Lee to Juliana Francis’s Orpheus/Tommy. See *Hip Hop Waltz of Eurydice*, dir. Reza Abdoh, Los Angeles Theater Center, 1990 (video by Adam Soch, 2009).

the most like his father in disposition. In Abdoh's work he stands out because of his Iranian-ness and his affect. Openly gay, Babilla whirls like a dervish, combines "fey" movements with almost comical fights with his father, and defies the norm for the character embodied by Yul Brynner in the 1958 film of the novel.²⁶ This riff on Brynner is conscious. Babilla is dressed as a drag Yul Brynner—in relation to both masculinity and race. Brynner, who participated in a series of yellowface acts over the course of his career, including in the *King and I*, cut a very butch figure. Brynner is dragged by a fey Iranian playing Russian (Brynner was born in Russia). Here Abdoh is considering Iranian identity in relation to whiteness, queerness, and nascent version of what Muñoz would call brownness. Abdoh's prismatic fracturing of his own subjectivity through his casting of the four sons with a white HIV+ actor playing Ivan, a fellow gay Iranian playing Dmitri, a gender-queer woman playing Smerdyakov, and a non-masc white dancer playing Alyosha reveals an exploration of identity ignored by orthodox racial politics. On the eve of the emergence of queer theory and the period of incubation of queer of color critique, Abdoh theorizes queerness as a truly expansive category. It is tempting to retroactively attribute a certain visionary anticipation to Abdoh, but perhaps it is better to understand him as being of his time—seeping in the reality of summer 1990 in New York, which stood at the threshold of a number of transitions in capitalist structures and articulations of gay/queer identity.

It is in this spirit that I read the complex relationship of the performers to the sex workers whose streets they invaded in the Meatpacking District. Many of the sex workers were transgender and/or people of color who had worked in the area for years. On the one hand, the juxtaposition showed the very different ways the performers and the sex workers were sometimes treated, revealing the injustice of this inequity. It is not an accident that theorists of trans necropolitics often study the systematic policing and murder of transfeminine sex workers of color and it would be in bad faith to erase the difference between these actors and the sex workers in the area.²⁷ Yet many of the performers spent enough time in the area to reach out to those who worked the streets, trying to stay out of the way of interrupting their commerce when they could, with the exception of a conscious interruption of an assault of one of the workers one night by a group of performers who forestalled the violence. Rather than implying a white savior narrative, I underscore the existence of a shared awareness of the systemic violence of the area and the policing in the play represents and the one that was to come in the Giuliani era (1994–2001). Certainly, this performance, like the area of itself, was on

²⁶ *The Brothers Karamazov*, dir. Richard Brooks, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, 1958.

²⁷ See C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence Death and Trans of Color Afterlife," *The Trans Studies Reader*, eds. Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 66–76; Peter N. McLellan, "Queer Necropolitics in the Decapolis: Here and There, Now and Then," *Biblical Interpretation* 28, no. 4 (2020): 428–450, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-2804A003>.

the edge of a gentrification, if not a gentrification of the mind, in Sarah Schulman's sense.²⁸ We must remember, however, that Smerdyakov, the genderqueer avenger, commits suicide by hanging himself on the train track that would become the high line after a complaint about an arrest for smoking marijuana. This monologue gestures to a shared dissatisfaction with the capitalist re-packaging of the area that would attempt to displace all of the queer commerce with a high-end retail mall for the wealthy. Abdoh's own past as a sex worker perhaps alerted him to the complex politics of the area. It is in the aforementioned contradictions that Abdoh's emergent critique of necropolitical capitalism comes into being—one that in many ways anticipated queer of color critique. As Snorton and Haritaworn have suggested, queers of color and particular trans people of color are often also let to die—in part as a way to distinguish them from queer subjects that are allowed to live—and Abdoh is aware of this, even when his critique is less than perfectly exemplified by the largely white twink actors in his company.²⁹

It is here that we see the ways in which Abdoh literally fucks with the genealogy of queer theory in the US. Abdoh's representations reveal that a clean line between gay and queer and even the emergence of queer of color critique may not be sequential.³⁰ *Father Was a Peculiar Man* was staged the very same year that queer emerged as a term within popular and academic discourse.³¹ This shift from gay/homo to queer was sometimes embraced and sometime rejected by leaders of the gay community. For some, leaning into the abjection of gay male sex was a preferred resistant practice to heteronormativity.³² For others, many of whom were not gay upper-class white men, the change might have been a blessing. Although Abdoh is not present in the theoretical archive of this debate, his eschatological vision is crucial to the emergence of the queer from gay life. Abdoh's ambivalence about a central trope of gay masculine iconography, the torture of Saint Sebastian. In his conversation with Dasgupta, he states:

The martyrdom syndrome, the Sebastian syndrome, I think it's something that is very real for a queer consciousness, because traditionally there has been this construct, which has basically created a boundary for the body of the homosexual, and for the psyche of the homosexual, and for the culture of the homosexual. That boundary has

²⁸ Sarah Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

²⁹ Snorton and Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics," 66–76.

³⁰ See Roderick Ferguson, "Queer of Color Critique," *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, March 28, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.33>.

³¹ The genealogy of the word queer as an affirmative self-signifier is complex. *The Sage Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Studies* underscores that while Gloria Anzaldúa used the term queer throughout the 1980s, the emergence of queer theory comes in about 1990 with Theresa de Laurentis's queer theory conference. See also Jeffrey Escoffier, *American Homo: Community and Perversity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 173–185.

³² Bersani, *Homos*, 1–10, 77–88.

at once provided the safety net for it, because it has managed to find its own niche, to find its own home. But, at the same time, it has threatened it into practical nonexistence in certain ages. It has threatened it underground, and now within the past thirty years, I would say, there has been a kind of a resurgence of an understanding of that consciousness, which doesn't really have to do with self-inflicted martyrdom, but has to do with understanding that context, and understanding that history, and not shying away from it. Embracing it and trying to come out of the victimized role into the role of a player, to the role of a model-maker, a paradigm shifter, whatever you want to call it.³³

Abdoh's comments make clear that he is working through the emergence of a new form of queer agency. Abdoh calls up the image of Sebastian in *Father* at least twice. In one case, an actress wears a flesh suit with needles protruding from her torso replicating Sebastian's wounds; Alyosha's BDSM torture on the bed with clothespins calls up the image equally. As noted earlier, this image is literally undone when Tom Fitzpatrick removes the clothespins from Ken Roht/Alyosha. Combined with Alyosha's shouts of "I am not a martyr," Abdoh pushes against the Saint Sebastian myth as a limitation of possibilities and toward what he calls "trying to come out of the victimized role into the role of the player, the model maker, the paradigm shifter, whatever you want to call it." In one sense, he is simply pushing against the conceptualizing of himself and all those with AIDS as martyrs; in another, he is looking to a future in the present that neither ends with the rectum as a grave or a utopia of cruising predicted on fully rejecting "a toxic present."³⁴ Abdoh rejects the adherence to the death drive in the gay theory incubated in this period and soon after as well by Bersani, Edelman, and others. It is also a place where he grapples but does not fully agree with Muñoz's idea of a cruising utopia, although as Noel Salzman points out, his later works are a fruitful place to think about debates in queer theory in relation to the anti-relational thesis.³⁵ I am of course also fucking with time here myself because I refuse to call Abdoh a visionary or fall prey to the idea of a straight time that would place Abdoh before queer theory. Instead, Abdoh simply imagined how the biomedical homophobic violence of the AIDS crisis and the necropolitical violence of capitalism, even its newly fascist iteration, were linked through a global notion of heteropatriarchy present at the time.

Abdoh's theorizations of queerness and neoliberalism belong not only within debates within contemporary US queer and performance theory, but also live within the assemblage of theory from the so-called global south and post-crisis Spain. In their engagement with Mbembe's theorization of necropolitics, Sayak Valencia and Paul B. Preciado extend Abdoh's social critique by emphasizing the role of

³³ Abdoh and Dasgupta, "Theatre Beyond Space and Time," 25.

³⁴ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 27.

³⁵ Noel Salzman, "It's Movement I'm After: Abdoh, Queer Temporality, and Death" (unpublished paper, 2010).

heteropatriarchy in the creation of death worlds.³⁶ Valencia's mentor Preciado critiques the biomedical industry of gender identity in relation to patriarchy and state violence.³⁷ Following Preciado, who suggests that "within techno-patriarchal and hetero centric societies . . . masculine sovereignty is defined by the legitimate use of techniques of violence against women, against children, against non-white men and women, against animals, against the planet as a whole," Valencia points the finger at heteropatriarchy as an essential part of neoliberal capitalism.³⁸ Like Preciado, Valencia imagines transfeminism, and particularly the disarticulation of masculinity from male gendered individuals, as part of the solution to ending gendered violence under neoliberalism within the Americas (which she labels "gore capitalism"). She, however, links this maneuver to woman of color feminism ultimately advocating that,

[t]ransfeminist subjects can be understood as queer multitudes who through the performative materialization of their bodies are able to develop different forms of g-local agency. These queer multitudes continue developing categories that result in non-standard agencies, not as an absolute truth nor as infallible actions, which can be applied in a variety of contexts in a deterritorialized way.³⁹

Valencia's conceptualization of gore capitalism and Preciado's larger argument about the biomedicalization of gender identity deal with conditions that emerged subsequent to Abdoh's death. Nonetheless, Preciado's intervention in gender embodiment (and Valencia's performativity) is found in *Father Was a Peculiar Man*. Abdoh's representations of gender are ludic and often prosthetic and/or sartorial. Femme identification is marked by the wearing of bras, dresses, and wigs, masculine identification is gestured to by the wearing of pants, wigs, and beards. Signifiers are mixed in a 1990s kind of way—shaved heads meshed with slip dresses and unfeminine walks. Mustached visages were mixed with campy jazz handed dances. These gestures are decidedly out of step with new modes of trans and non-binary identity that value authenticity and gender confirmation. And while it is easy to judge the ludic genderfuck gestures of the past as inauthentic, it is perhaps the very question of gender authenticity as imagined by the state which needs to be questioned. Preciado, while quite engaged with the history of queer

³⁶ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, chap. 1; Sayak Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, trans. John Pluecker (New York: Semiotexte, 2018), chap. 1 and 4.

³⁷ Paul B. Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of the Crossing*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020); *Countersexual Manifesto*, trans. Kevin Gerry Dunn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: Feminist Press, 2013).

³⁸ Preciado, *Uranus*, 260.

³⁹ Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*, 263, 265.

theory, draws his inspiration from Gayle Rubin rather than Judith Butler.⁴⁰ His own gender embodiment was done, at least initially, outside of the confines of the medical establishment, his playful “countersexual manifesto” made (il)liberal use of dildos and other industrial plastics, in addition to within s&m and anal pleasures in ways that challenge Foucault and Bersani. At first glance, Preciado seems an odd inspiration for a feminist critic of the drug war in Mexico. Nonetheless, this synchrony is not surprising if one reads Preciado’s critique as taking on the patriarchal roots of necropolitical capital and its relationship to fascisms. It is only recently that Preciado has so openly discussed Spanish nationalism and fascism in relation to his gender transition / critique of patriarchal masculinity.⁴¹ In an essay called “My People are the People of the Ill-Born,” he states in relation to Spain, “I am insensitive to the emotions aroused by Fatherland. Fatherland, father Patriarchy. I have abdicated from these things,” and later, “Since the medical powers diagnosed me as gender dysphoric on the pretext that I did not identify with the gender assigned to me at birth, I claim today to be nation-dysphoric.”⁴² Preciado imagines queerness as a critique of masculinity vis-à-vis non-binary embodiment of masculinity not invested in confirmation or authenticity in a traditional sense. This is a form of transfeminism like no other. The connection between political regime and masculinity under capitalism is worth noting, because as Tony Torn suggests, Abdoh’s own father was a beneficiary of a certain kind of Iranian neoliberalism, which meshed perfectly with his own homophobic and toxic patriarchal behavior/disposition in ways that we are only starting to grapple with openly.⁴³ In the end, Preciado suggests an expansion of his *Countersexual Manifesto* as the basis for a political transformation. He writes:

The failure of the Left lies in its inability to redefine sovereignty in terms other than in relation to the Western, white bio-male patriarchal body. The only way to a global mutation today is to construct a planetary somatic communism, a communism of all living bodies with and together with the earth. With the distinction between production and reproduction (naturalized as male and female, respectively) at the core of the division of labor within the modern colonial heterosexual capitalism, the new political organization of labor cannot be achieved without a new political organization of sex and sexuality. That implies that the sexual organs as we know them, related to reproductive functions and normative heterosexual choreographies (penetrator, penetrated) have to be fully overcome.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Preciado, *Manifesto*, 78–79.

⁴¹ See “The Son,” “My People are The People of the Ill-born,” “Homage to an Unknown Nanny,” and “Necropolitics: French Style,” in Preciado, *Uranus*.

⁴² Preciado, *Uranus*, 241.

⁴³ Tony Torn, *Who Will Be a Witness?* (Master’s thesis, Goddard College, 2019).

⁴⁴ Preciado, *Manifesto*, 13.

Although not a bioidentical representation, Preciado's political imagining looks a lot like Abdoh's march through the meat-packing district. The place where Abdoh diverges from these scholars, including Mbembe, is his interest in eschatology. Mbembe is skeptical of paradigms that can be associated with messianism, which he defines only as negative;⁴⁵ Preciado and Valencia's queer futurities are also clearly secular. Muñoz's utopianism is more Marxist than spiritual. Abdoh joins strange bedfellows—queer, largely anglophone biblical scholars—in imagining a queer future based in a perversion of the Christian tradition. Mixing Zoroastrian and Christian imaginings of the end, Abdoh imagines a post-conflagration gender-queer future. And, as I argue, Abdoh's thinking questions the suppositions of queer historiography itself. His work does not fit into a timeline that moves from gay identity to white queer (cis) nationhood to queer of color critique. *Father* remixes these modes of imagining liberation that suggest that this genealogy is too neat and tidy, excluding non-Euromerican understanding of cosmology and capitalism. Not only does Abdoh question and engage with Muñoz and Edelman's questions a decade earlier than their ideas were published, he throws their assumptions into question—with a most unlikely intertext: Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. A close look at Abdoh's work also underscores the ways in which performance as a mode of thinking is essential to Preciado and Valencia's thinking about the larger dissidence from the sex/gender system under necropolitical capitalism.

But the theme of this issue is about historiography. And it is here that what might be called a reading/interpretation of Abdoh's play engages with the editor's concerns. Eschatology itself is in some sense a form of historiography, which in its most radical imaginings asks that we replace a teleological understanding of divine time with an imagining of the eschaton as a present presence rather than a future event after an apocalypse. Although the events in Abdoh's play at least sometimes engage the sequence of events in Dostoyevsky's novel, the performance posits a different form of temporality in which the recursive and regenerative possibilities of a different world are present. This present is not the replication of the no-future death drive, nor is it the stultifying now Muñoz seems to want to escape. Instead, Abdoh's imagining is an eschatological one that rejects the doomed teleology of capitalist domination through imagining a different world in the present within performance. The model for political, economic, and spiritual liberation then comes from a performance that emerged in the thick of necropolitical development and continues to perform in the present day as a fully instantiated eschatological transformation. Realizing this asks us to move away from thinking of *Father* as a past theatrical production that merely tell us about a complex moment in history (although it also does that!), or a glorification of queer identity, but rather asks that we see this performance, and

⁴⁵ Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 104–107.

performance itself, as an “object” that exceeds, better yet, unsettles its own time, space, and material conditions through the instantiation of eschatology, here Abdoh’s queer eschatology, as historiography. And this may be Abdoh’s historiographic gesture bequeathed to us.



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Abstract

From Queer Necropolitics to Queer Eschatology: Reza Abdoh's Unsettling Historiography

The theatrical oeuvre of Reza Abdoh has been lauded for its reinvigoration of the avant-garde, its formal and political daring and its astute commentary about the violence of the HIV virus (Fordyce, Carlson, Mufson, Bell). More recently, Abdoh's work has been taken up as a commentary on neoliberalism—in part because of its politicization of bricolage and pastiche, recalling the more radical possibilities of theorizations of scholars such as Frederic Jameson (Zimmerman). Others have called out the modes by which Abdoh expanded the possibilities of queerness in the early 1990s. Yet no scholar has commented on Abdoh's engagement of eschatology as a mode of historiography. That is the purpose of this essay. It is under this rubric, rather than an idea of generic postmodern milieu, that I read the multiple and discordant temporalities in Abdoh's performances. While drawing on theories of the necropolitical (Mbembe) and gore capitalism (Valencia) in relation to conceptions of queer eschatology and capitalist violence, my inquiry emerges from consideration of the structural and theoretical aspects of the art works ("object's") themselves. I consider how *Father Was a Peculiar Man* (1990), performed in the Meatpacking District of Manhattan, exemplifies the historiographical possibilities of performance through its embodiment of an eschatological vision of the world in which the gender binary is performatively undone.

Keywords

necropolitics, queer necropolitics, Reza Abdoh, patriarchy, neoliberalism, transgender, historiography

Abstrakt

Od queerowej perspektywy nekropolitycznej do queerowej eschatologii: Niepokojąca historiografia Rezy Abdoha

Teatralną twórczość Rezy Abdoha chwalono za ożywienie awangardy, formalną i polityczną odwagę oraz celny komentarz na temat brutalności wirusa HIV (Fordyce, Carlson, Mufson, Bell). Ostatnio odczytano ją jako komentarz do neoliberalizmu – po części ze względu na metody upolitycznienia bricolage'u i pastiszu, przypominające radykalne sposoby teoretyzowania takich badaczy, jak Frederic Jameson (Zimmerman). Dostrzeżono także środki, za pomocą których już na początku lat dziewięćdziesiątych Abdoh poszerzył możliwości queerowania. Celem tego artykułu jest analiza sposobu, w jaki Abdoh wykorzystał eschatologię jako rodzaj historiografii. W tym niekomentowanym dotąd kontekście, bez odwołań do ogólnego postmodernistycznego klimatu, autorka interpretuje wielorakie i sprzeczne czasowości w jego spektaklach. Odnosząc teorie nekropolityki (Mbembe) i kapitalizmu

gore (Valencia) do koncepcji queerowej eschatologii i kapitalistycznej przemocy, opiera swoje dociekania na analizie strukturalnych i teoretycznych aspektów samych dzieł (“przedmiotu badań”). Zastanawia się, jak *Father Was a Peculiar Man* (1990), wystawiony w Meatpacking District na Manhattanie, ukazuje historiograficzne możliwości performansu poprzez ucieleśnienie eschatologicznej wizji świata, w której binarność płci zostaje performatywnie unieważniona.

Słowa kluczowe

nekropolityka, queerowa perspektywa nekropolityczna, Reza Abdoh, patriarchy, neoliberalizm, transpłciowość, historiografia

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