Introduction: Mediations of Authorship in American Postdramatic Mediaturgies

For a good understanding, the Spring 2018 American Theatre and Drama Society issue of the *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* is best considered as an initiative that follows up the BELSPO sponsored international research project, "Literature and Media Innovation: The Question of Genre Transformations." Running from 2012-2017, it brought together six research teams, four of which hailed from Belgian institutions—two Flemish (KULeuven & VUB) and two Walloon ones (Louvain-la-Neuve and Liège)—besides one from Canada (UQAM) and one from the US (OSU).[1] Among the many genres analyzed and fields explored in light of the increasing mediatization of the arts and society at large, theatre and performance fell to the Center for Literary and Intermedial Crossings (CLIC) at the Free University of Brussels. On March 17, 2016, this Center organized a conference already devoted to the theme of the present journal issue, even if the ATDS contributions zoom-in on specifically American inflections of the topic. Still, in a globalized world, the mobility and mixed roots of artists, besides the constant need to find sponsors, renders the characterization of projects in national terms perhaps questionable and their mediaturgical interests seldom exclusive. As Jacob Gallagher-Ross, one of the speakers at the Belgian conference, in the meantime has argued, it is somewhat ironical that the first installment of Nature Theater of Oklahoma's media-enabled *Life and Times* project, "singing the sorrows and pleasures of a very American childhood, was featured in Berlin's Theatertreffen festival as one of the ten best *German* productions of the year."[2]

Aside from the ironies of international funding, and scholarship, we may add, I here want to mention, as a preliminary, some of the more general issues that the March 2016 VUB conference tackled.[3] Thus, Matthew Cornish (Ohio U) dealt with the reliance on diagrammatic scripts by the English-German theatre collective Gob Squad to support their improvised encounters with people on the streets, synchronously relayed into heavily mediatized stage productions. Bernadette Cochrane (U of Queensland) discussed the destabilization of the spatio-temporal locators of productions and audiences in global but not necessarily democratizing "livecasts," whether from New York's Metropolitan Opera or London's National Theatre. Dries Vandorpe (UGent) returned to mediaturgical theatre's related deconstruction of the vexed ontological distinction between live and techno-mediated performance on the grounds of diverse arguments (spatiotemporal co-presence and spectatorial agency, affective impact and authenticity, contingency and risk, unicity and variability...)—arguments all flawed because of logically defective classification systems. With the aid of some intermedial choreographic work by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, I myself queried the reciprocity between technology's invitation to appropriation and adaptations' increasing hybridization because of that very technology, a process challenging the logical discreteness, self-presence or self-sufficiency, as well as hierarchical character of generic, media, and gender identities, both, much like traditional authorship, making for an empowering yet disenfranchising

exclusiveness.[4]

The themes of the Brussels conference and present ATDS issue also adhere closely to the remit of the doctoral project conducted by CLIC member Claire Swyzen, here represented by an essay on the Hungarian-American Edit Kaldor and New Yorker Annie Dorsen. Kaldor's *Or Press Escape* (2002) and *Web of Trust* (2016) are shown to open up the theatre stage to the social media, converting it into a more apparently than actually co-authored media-activist site, joining physically present and tele-present audience members. As a result, the authorship here already signaled towards Michel Foucault's more discursive author function. Dorsen's *Hello Hi There* (2010) in fact consisted of a staged conversation between two chatbots mouthing text bits partly culled by computer algorithms from an interview between Foucault and Noam Chomsky on whether language creates consciousness or vice versa.[5] As indicated by Dorsen's post-human talk show, whose textual database was expanded with material from the Western humanist tradition, the scope of Swyzen's research and of postdramatic mediaturgies obviously exceeds the American context, reaching out to the very processes of cognition. The term and concept of the "postdramatic" were nevertheless popularized by German scholars like Gerda Poschmann and Hans-Thies Lehmann who theorized the notion with the aid of the varied theatre practice in Germany and surrounding countries during the late 20th century.[6] As recently as 2015, Marvin Carlson still argued the relative absence of postdramatic theatre from the North American mainstream, despite important contributions from experimentalists like the Wooster Group, Richard Foreman, and Robert Wilson.[7] On both sides of the Atlantic, however, there have been misconceptions regarding the precise nature of the postdramatic, leading to confusions with collective, interdisciplinary, and devised theatre productions.[8] After all, these just as easily allow for the contribution of independently active playwrights with a lingering dramatic bent as for the more broadly defined writing integral to postdramatic mediaturgies.

Central features of postdramatic theatre are the reconfiguration, if not abandonment, of Aristotelian dramatic concepts and traditional theatrical notions such as character, action and plot, proscenium stage and set, normative temporality and spatiality, etc. As a corollary, conventional drama's underlying mimetic premise is challenged, too, though illusionistic effects, whether aestheticizing, activist, or media-critical, remain common, as Swyzen demonstrates with regard to Kaldor's *Web of Trust*. These illusionistic effects are also hard to resist, as when critics interpreted the fragmentation of Spalding Gray's recollections in *India and After (America)* (1979) as reflections of his cultural alienation and psychological breakdown, as argued by Ira S. Murfin in his contribution to the present ATDS issue. Mimesis possibly survives the postdramatic mediaturgical turn in the guise of reenactments which problematize any arguable paradigm shift, insofar as the "post-dramatic" signals both continuities and discontinuities. Reenactments therefore could be said to limit dramatic theatre's creation of a "fictive cosmos"[9] to the overt recreation of a "reality," whether artistic or not, often with the help of advanced technology, as in the scrupulously reproduced everyday speech, at times verging on uncanny nonsense, in the productions of Nature Theater of Oklahoma. This invites comparison with what Dorsen calls the occasional "near-sense" of the chatbots' dialogue foregrounding the thingness and materiality of language, undermining dramatic theater's logocentrism as well as infusing postdramatic theatre like Dorsen's with an unexpected lyricism. As Gallagher-Ross argued at the Brussels conference and in his subsequently published study on *Theaters of the Everyday: Aesthetic Democracy on the American Stage* (2018), the technology-based practice of Nature Theater of Oklahoma, besides documenting an extant reality, touches on the very processes of perception and thought, struggling to achieve verbal expression prior to any artificially imposed aesthetic or (post)dramatic form, given that in the different installments of their epic *Life and Times* they also experiment with extant genres and media forms.

Reenactments do not, for that matter, automatically reclaim realist art's function as illusionistic slice of life. To the extent that this function indeed depends on maintaining the fourth wall, it actually staves off everyday reality to the benefit of some Platonist ideal controlled by the dramatist. Gallagher-Ross traces the roots of America's theaters of the everyday, like that of Nature Theater of Oklahoma, to American Transcendentalism but this democratic homebred tradition represented by Emerson and Thoreau, revalorizes the aesthetic value of daily life as personally experienced. Quite surprisingly, a similar impulse may be at work in Kaldor's work, insofar as it seems to share characteristics with the Slow Media movement, as argued by Swyzen. This reflective, contemplative impulse should be distinguished from European idealist aesthetics permeating the continental dramatic tradition via Hegel's abstract moralism up to the late 19th century and beyond, which is not to say, as Gallagher-Ross argues, that there is no ethical-critical dimension to an enhanced awareness of our everyday experiences, be they technological or not.[10] In *Swimming to Cambodia* (1985), one of Spalding Gray's "talk performances" discussed in the present *JADT* issue by Murfin, the manner in which Gray incessantly and obstinately pursues an idealized yet heavily mediatized "Perfect Moment" makes him oblivious to the everyday beauty Emerson advocated. On Karon Beach in the Gulf of Siam Gray apparently found his "Shangri-La," evocative both of perfect Kodachrome color spreads for luxury resorts and of Robert Wilson's mediaturgical theatre of images.[11] Emerson is explicitly referenced by Gray when he mentions his own studies at Emerson College and in his moment of "Cosmic Consciousness" echoes the philosopher's famous "transparent eye-ball"-passage from his essay on "Nature." The eventual shift to a non-contigent idealism making timeless abstraction of the evanescent everyday could be seen as evidence of Murfin's claim that Gray's early talk performances solidified in later productions under the influence of the very technologies he initially played off to preserve his monologues' freshness. Put differently, Gray's talk performances, as here argued, moved away from a more postdramatic authorship deflected by "intermedial contingency," to a more self-authored dramatic literary model.

Lehmann in this regard speaks of realist drama's and the dramatic form's "catharsis" of the real,[12] supplementing tragedy's much debated abreaction of pity and fear (or the negative features of these emotions) in the course of a dramatic action thereby completed and closed off. Postdramatic theatre, by contrast, tends to reduce the dramatist's control, it opens up the stage to the everyday, and redistributes authorial power. This happened partly under the influence of technology, partly by promoting the performer-audience relation or so-called theatron axis,[13] thus releasing a social activist potential in the joint "creation" of text and performance. What is eventually lost in terms of illusionistic representation, aesthetic pleasure and entertainment value may be gained in terms of political awareness, as the physical embodiment and exposure of, and to the mediation returns a sense of agency in a mediascape obfuscating its operations, material and immaterial, for whatever reasons (sheer complexity, profit, ideology...).

The media's prominence in contemporary dramaturgies has led Bonnie Marranca to coin the term "mediaturgy" for those productions where the technology is integral to the composition of the theatrical performance rather than a surface phenomenon.[14] Cases in point she provided at the time were *Super Vision* (2005-2006) by The Builders Association and *Firefall* (2007-2009) by John Jesurun. This is one of the reasons why the Brussels conference on postdramatic mediaturgies featured Shannon Jackson (UC Berkeley) as keynote speaker, with a talk on "The Relational Construction of Form and Authorship in Cross-Arts Collaboration." In that talk, she explored a variety of institutional settings—museums, theaters, festivals, installations—and considered how conceptions of form and authorial signature change accordingly. Depending, in part, upon the curatorial conventions of the venue, a performer may be a collaborator, a subordinate, or a form of material. Similarly, moving work across institutional venues may

shift the stance taken towards artistic contributions, whether by the artists-creators or spectators-consumers. Work discussed included that of The Builders Association, on which Jackson and Marianne Weems published the first lavishly illustrated monograph, and which Marranca deemed exemplary of postdramatic mediaturgies.[15]

That Weems, the director of The Builders Association, together with several company members, should have co-authored this critical-genetic study which is partly archive, partly (auto)biography, marks the extent of her creative practice and possibly the postdramatic remediation of a retrograde seeming, paper-based platform, all too easily lending itself to linear single-authored stories.[16] The meticulous crediting of each and every one involved in each of the Builders Association productions is further evidence of the dispersion of traditional authorship, which may well have been the default of theatrical creation. To quote from the book's intro: "Early pieces such as *Master Builder*, *Imperial Motel (Faust)*, and *JUMP CUT (Faust)* restaged and rearranged classic tales across unorthodox architectural assemblies of screens and bodies, a practice of postdramatic retelling to which The Builders returned in their recent restaging of *House/Divided*."[17] The epilogue, too, in a conversation between Weems and Eleanor Bishop, extensively dwells on the mediaturgical aspect of The Builders Association's work at large, more in particular the prominence of computer-aided media design as dramaturgy and the medial creation of meaning and implementation of media-related ideas, like the networked constitution of self by such a mediascape.[18] Thus the media become material and metaphor. This reciprocity gets reflected in Jackson's critical vocabulary when she speaks of the company's "theatrical operating systems" and "storyboard" phases—terms derived from computer science and cinema to designate the mediaturgical postdramatic (re)assembly process, "that may or may not be post-narrative as well."[19] The resulting "smart" productions are directly addressed to a "smart" audience perhaps too much at ease with "smart" technologies[20] to fully fathom or question their implications. Hence these technologies have become the means and object of theatricalization, as in *Super Vision*, dealing with the economics and politics of "dataveillance," or *Continuous City* (2007-2010), exploring global social networking technologies and their impact on how we inhabit local geographies.

John Jesurun, that other exemplar of postdramatic mediaturgies Marranca singled out, has been at the center of the scholarship which Christophe Collard generated in the context of the inter-university research project on genre transformations and the new media. Like the predoctoral work of Swyzen, some of his wide-ranging postdoctoral work is here sampled, albeit with a more programmatic contribution in which Jesurun's "ecological," i.e. organic and holistic interrelational interpretation of the mediaturgical concept allows for a brief survey of his creative output. In the course of his playwriting career, Jesurun has collaborated with Weems's Builders Association, as well as with Ron Vawter, founding member of the Wooster Group, on scripts that were subsequently produced by other companies, too.[21] But Jesurun is also reputed to reduce his live performers to language-machines, as here argued by Collard. This again attests to the lingering tension between the loosening and tightening of authorial control, equally evident in Dorsen's algorithmic theater, where the options for the chatbots' conversation in *Hello Hi There* have been preprogrammed and are thus contained by Dorsen and her collaborator, the chatbot designer Robby Garner. Even in Kaldor's *Web of Trust*, the seemingly co-authored protocol in retrospect was prescribed, as Swyzen discovered.

Whereas Kaldor herself may have obfuscated the "rehearsal" of the protocol for her *Web of Trust* prior to its live performance, Gray's critics were the ones who tended to miss or neglect the reliance on media of reproduction in his low-tech monologues.[22] At first sight, his early "talk performances" seem

diametrically opposed to Dorsen's chatbot and Kaldor's computer desktop performances. Yet Murfin in his discussion of Gray's monologues demonstrates their postdramatic mediaturgical stance by foregrounding his deliberate extemporaneous use of language as material and process rather than narrative content, in reaction to medial fixity and dramatic linearity. This resonates with the aleatory artistic tradition in which Dorsen also inscribes her work partly because of the manner in which freedom is generated by constraints, just as for Jesurun language provides an enabling limit for his performers and technology, even if he opposes his actors' improvisation. Contrary to his later reputation as unassisted "solo" performer, Gray's monologues were heavily determined by media objects. During the creation and performance of his early work these were used as found or documentary material triggering improvisation rather than as support of a fixed script, whether the taped interviews with family members, slides, and vinyl recording of *The Cocktail Party* in *Rumstick Road* (1977), a dictionary in *India and After (America)* (1979), or his journal entries on a West Coast tour, framed by contemporaneous newspaper, magazine and book excerpts in *The Great Crossing* (1980). However, Gray's reliance on the same media (writing, print, audio and video recordings) for the development and circulation of his monologues, in a sort of feedback loop fixed them, whereas the human recall and extemporization earlier on made for fragmentation and discontinuity, at the expense of an authoritative voice and story. What may have accelerated this process, Murfin argues, is the artist's need for a commodifiable format or comedy act. By doing without the diary entries in *Nobody Wanted to Sit Behind a Desk* (1980) Gray very much resolved the dilemma in favor of the dramatic lineage and replication, but at the expense of intermedial contingency.

Gray's autobiographical talk performances, dependent on predominantly analogue media, form a radical contrast with the collective identity performance of in-groups by means of social media and the web, dealt with by Ellen Gillooly-Kress. This hybridized live and digital identity construction through visual signposts, insiders' language and performative gestures, rather than solidify in the course of time, as argued by Murfin for Gray, keeps changing, as the markers of identity are appropriated by opposite parties, like anti-fascists and white supremacists. The hazards of the social media are indeed such that any meme can be co-opted and abused in ideological conflicts. This recalls Roland Barthes's claim that the only way to outwit myths is to remythify them in turn, the more since myths in his definition exchange a physical reality with a pseudo-reality, much like the internet may be said to do. The partly arbitrary choice of a meme as vehicle for a new ideological content also fits Barthes's myths, though in both kinds of appropriation, the original content is still needed as support of the new signification.[23] The initiative for these appropriated identity memes and their ideological reinscription may have been taken by individuals or be limited to the policy-makers of the ingroup. Yet, the memes' viral spread on the social media and imageboard websites like 4chan and Reddit collectivizes authorship, short of exploding it altogether. Through its antagonistic rhetoric, making for a war-like scenario, the digital and discursive performance, when picked up by the traditional media, also risks spilling over from the internet back into the physical world and actual violence. This was the case with #HEWILLNOTDIVIDEUS, an unmoderated live stream participatory performance, set up by Nastja Säde Rönkkö, Luke Turner, and Shia LaBeouf on the occasion of Trump's inauguration on January 20, 2017. Apart from traveling from New York to Albuquerque, Liverpool and Nantes, this installation and its reception provide a more disconcerting, inflammable hybridized "theater of the everyday" unlike those with which I started this introduction, in a space where physical and digital identity formations merge to end up forming what Gillooly-Kress calls a "hypermediated haunted stage" with all too dangerous consequences.

By way of conclusion, I want to thank Cheryl Black and Dorothy Chansky, the former and current ATDS Presidents, for offering another forum next to the 2016 VUB conference platform; the ATDS members

who submitted their work to this Spring issue of the *JADT*; and last but not least, the ATDS members who acted as anonymous peer-reviewers. All generously contributed to the scholarship here presented, offering what I hope is an exciting and thought-provoking sample of American postdramatic mediaturgies in which authorship is variously modulated along different spectra, operating between the human and the non-human, the analogue and the digital, the individual and the collective, the distributed and the delegated.

[1] For a brief presentation of the overall project see Jan Baetens, Johan Callens, Michel Delville, Heidi Peeters, Myriam Watthee-Delmotte, Robyn Warhol, and Bertrand Gervais, "Literature and Media Innovation: A Brief Research Update on a Genre/Medium Project," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 64, no. 4 (2014): 485-492.

[2] Jacob Gallagher-Ross, *Theaters of the Everyday: Aesthetic Democracy on the American Stage* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018), 152, original emphasis.

[3] The VUB theatre conference program can be found online at http://www.vub.ac.be/en/events/2016/mediations-of-authorship-in-postdramatic-mediaturgies-conference. The March 17 event was matched the following day by a second series of talks, presented at Leuven University (UCL) under the title, "Intermediality, or, the Delicate Art of World-Layering" dealing with non-dramatic genres. See http://research.vub.ac.be/sites/default/files/uploads/clic-cri_confer_flyer_final.pdf.

[4] Johan Callens,"Rosas: Reappropriation as Afterlife," in *Routledge Companion to Adaptation Studies*, eds. Dennis Cutchins, Katja Krebs, and Eckart Voigts (London: Routledge, 2018), 117-127.

[5] The Chomsky-Foucault debate was moderated by Fons Elders and broadcast in 1971 by Dutch television as part of a series. Elders first included the transcript in a collection of three interviews he edited, *Reflexive Water: The Basic Concerns of Mankind* (London: Souvenir Press, 1974). He reprinted it separately as *Human Nature: Justice vs Power. The Chomsky-Foucault Debate* (London: Souvenir Press, 2011), though by then A.I. Davidson had already released the text in *Foucault and His Interlocutors* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1997), 107-145. Elders's 2011 edition consists of an introduction, followed by the two-part transcript. The first part tackles the question of human nature, knowledge, and science, the second deals more with politics.

[6]See Gerda Poschmann, *Der nicht mehr dramatische Theatertext. Aktuelle Bühnenstücke und ihre dramaturgische Analyse* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1997) and Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. and introd. Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006).

[7]Marvin Carlson, "Postdramatic Theatre and Postdramatic Performance," *Brazilian Review of Presence Studies / Revista Brasileira de Etudos da Prescença* 5, No. 3 (Sept.- Dec. 2015), 579.

[8]Carlson, "Postdramatic Theatre and Postdramatic Performance," 582.

[9]Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theater*, 22.

[10]The gap between European idealism and Emerson's Transcendentalism is somewhat diminished in his theory of visuality, holding that sight, like language, is a way of inhabiting a visual field and integrating its objects, at the cost of distorting both by the idealizing operations of language and perspective, the visual distortions of the one and the other's fixations by figures of speech and generic conventions, and we might add medium specificities. See Branka Arsi?, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 55, 68, as discussed by Gallagher-Ross, *Theaters of the Everyday*, 50-51, 68.

[11]See Johan Callens, "Auto/Biography in American Performance," in *Auto/Biography and Mediation*, ed. Alfred Hornung (Heidelberg: Winter Universitätsverlag, 2010), 287-303.

[12]Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 2006: 43; rptd by Gallagher-Ross, *Theaters of the Everyday*, 18.

[13]Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 128.

[14]Bonnie Marranca, "Performance as Design: The Mediaturgy of John Jesurun's *Firefall*," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 96 (2010), 16.

[15]See also chapter 5, "Tech Support: Labor in the Global Theatres of The Builders Association and Rimini Protokoll," of Jackson's *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (London: Routledge, 2011), 144-181.

[16]In fact, Weems has always combined creative with critical work, whether as a founding member of the V-Girls and Builders Association or as dramaturg for the Wooster Group, also co-directing Art Matters and lecturing at different universities.

[17]Shannon Jackson and Marianne Weems, *The Builders Association: Performance and Media in Contemporary Theater* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 2015), 3.

[18]Jackson and Weems, *The Builders Association*, xiii, 384-385.

[19]Jackson and Weems, *The Builders Association*, 17.

[20]Jackson and Weems, *The Builders Association*, 8, 393.

[21]*Faust/How I Rose*, which The Builders Association used for *Imperial Motel (Faust)* (1996) and *JUMP CUT (Faust)* (1997-1998), received major runs at the National Theater of Mexico, while his *Philoktetes*, after featuring in *Philoktetes Variations*, as directed by Jan Ritsema in 1994, was revived in October 2007 by Jesurun himself at the SoHo Rep with a cast featuring Will Badgett (Odysseus), Louis Cancelmi (Philoktetes), and Jason Lew (Neoptolemus). See Johan Callens, "The Builders Association: S/he Do the Police in Different Voices," in *The Wooster Group and Its Traditions*, ed. and introd. Johan Callens, *Dramaturgies Series: Texts, Cultures, and Performances* vol. 13 (Brussels & Bern: Presses Interuniversitaires Européennes-Peter Lang, 2004), 247-261; Johan Callens, "The Volatile Value of Suffering: Jan Ritsema's PhiloktetesVariations," in *The Trojan Wars and the Making of the Modern World*, ed. and introd. Adam J. Goldwyn, *Studia Graeca Upsaliensia* vol. 22 (Uppsala: Uppsala University Press, 2015), 223-244. 2015; and Christophe Collard, "Processual Passing: Ron Vawter

Performs Philoktetes," *Somatechnics* 3, No.1 (2013), 119-132.

[22]See also Claire Swyzen, "'The world as a list of items': Database Dramaturgy in Low-Tech Theatre by Tim Etchells and De Tijd, Using Textual Data by Etchells, Handke and Shakespeare." *etum: E-Journal for Theatre and Media* 2, No. 2 (2015), 59–84, accessed May 15, 2018, https://cris.vub.be/en/searchall.html?searchall=swyzen, for an interpretation of one British and two Flemish low-tech postdramatic mediaturgical productions: *Broadcast/Looping Pieces* (2014), *Peter Handke en de wolf* (2005) and *Elk wat wils. Iets van Shakespeare* (2007).

[23]Roland Barthes, "Le mythe, aujourd'hui,"Mythologies (Paris: Seuil, 1957), 191-247; "Myth Today," *Mythologies*, ed. and trans. Annette Lavers, Noonday Press (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 109-164.

"Mediations of Authorship in American Postdramatic Mediaturgies." by Johan Callens

Jordan Schildcrout
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Maurya Wickstrom
Stacy Wolf

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