Introduction

Imagine a woman able to partake in a social political cultural conversation. . .

—Rhodessa Jones, program notes, Slouching Towards Armageddon

I begin with an image of a theatrical eruption that occurred in Slouching Towards Armageddon: A Captive’s Conversation/Observation on Race, the fifth full-length public performance of the Medea Project. The audience is seated, waiting for the performance to begin, the stage is dark, and all of a sudden, hip-hop music booms out, the doors in the back of the theater are flung open, the audience twists and turns around to look, and what they see coming down the aisles of the theater is a long line of stamping, kicking, dancing women moving through the theater and up onto the stage. The women’s boisterous entrance—not from the wings, where we might expect actors to enter, but from outside the theater—heralds the key act of the Medea Project: to make visible what has been repressed and oppressed. That which has been sequestered, kept out of sight, bursts out among us, so loudly and with such exuberant, menacing, energy that it is impossible to ignore. The women interrupt the normal boundaries of the theater, and they even manage to interrupt our view of each other as they parade among us. They have been let out and are now in our midst, invading the space usually reserved for the audience. What are we to make of them? Who are they? What will they say? What do they stand for? Are these women supposed to be mythical furies, or are they simply furious? Are they the elemental allegorical figures we see listed in the program, or are they the people with names like Darcell and Chelsea also found there? How will this theatrical event explain the interruption before us, and make us not only understand what we are seeing but what our connection may be to what is in front of our eyes? What have they to do with us?

Rhodessa Jones consciously directs these women to be “in their face,” to “take it to the audience.” She wants them to interrupt the comfortable passivity of an audience sitting in their seats, awaiting their entertainment. She wants the music loud; she wants the women to look scary. And she
insists on making a connection between us and them. In her pre-performance speech to audiences, she argues that these women from jail have everything to do with us:

In the days of antiquity, theater included us all. It was a religious experience. I hope this project resounds back to that theater. This is not psycho-drama. Word came out that one critic has said, "We've seen The Medea Project. Why see it again?" Well, the reason is, this is the voice of the people here, of women, and women are mad as hell. It's lawless out there. We ask the question why more and more women are going to jail; what's happening to our children. . . . This is theater for the twenty-first century. The evening news doesn't get it; it talks about African American men. But we want to take a global look, at all of it. If your life is so normal, give your seat to somebody else. Attempt to imagine the life of another; this is theater for American culture; it is rehabilitation, planting the seeds. If you think jail doesn't have anything to do with you, someday, just wait, a ten-year-old will be pointing an Uzi in your face. Just as we've seen AIDS touch us all, so will this violence. ¹

Her central claim is that theater is a religious experience, a place of communion, which includes everyone. Her use of Greek, African, and Asian myths and of folk stories is one way she insists on making her theater inclusive. Her theater also depends on bringing together people who normally wouldn't find themselves in one place at any one time thinking about what they have in common. She means her work to be a kind of education for the women who take part in the ensemble or chorus. Those women, like the young men in training in classical Athens, are meant to see how they can defend themselves and their children and their community from violence and to be able to distinguish between true friends and enemies within and without. Jones's theater, like the classical Greek, wants to make the audience the judge, reacting in horror to the violations of civilization and in sympathy with a critique of it.

When she convinced the San Francisco Sheriff's Department to release the women to perform in a legitimate theater space in the city, she changed more than just the location. The incarcerated are, for the evening, no longer hidden or silent. And for those few evenings, the work is no longer drama as therapy or arts as correction; it is no longer theater only for incarcerated women. It becomes theater about why some women end up incarcerated and some do not; it is about what should connect communities and what does not connect them at present. It calls into question the boundaries of what is public and free and what isn't, and it exposes the violence that connects us all. Short of promising personal salvation, Jones has said she means her art to build bridges, in order to make even the most protected and privileged of spectators feel their connections with those who are not. Part of the drama is to make the audience ask questions: why these women, why are more women going to jail, and how does the incarceration of women affect society at large? Finally, Jones wants her theater to be a call to community, to thinking about what a proper community should look like and what sorts of social action would have to take place to bring that community into being.

It makes sense to begin with a description of the most visible part of the Medea Project, the public theatrical production, because the conversation can begin only when we can hear what hasn't been heard, see what hasn't been seen. But everyone who sees a live Medea production feels the tension between what they can see and what remains invisible. We know there are other women we will not hear from, because we are told at the end of the performance who they are. We also know there are numerous organizations that played a part in controlling the movement of these women back and forth and in and out, but they are not on stage. In the last Medea Production of the twentieth century, Slouching Towards Armageddon: A Captive's Conversation/Observation on Race, the theater workshops that led up to the public performance existed in and around many institu-
tions: hospitals, jails, halfway houses. Jones coordinated an impressive list of organizations of political and social power that promised to help the incarcerated women after the public performance is over. But we know watching the evening’s performance that we can’t know who will and who won’t profit.

Walking to the theater in which Slouching Towards Armageddon was performed, up Powell Street in downtown San Francisco, I wind my way through panhandlers, street people, drug addicts. I mostly don’t look at them; I even hope they stay mostly invisible. And the irony grows, because I know I’m going to see performances by the very types I am now trying to avoid seeing. Slouching opened on 21 January 1999 at the Lorraine Hansberry Theater, a theater that produces African American plays and is located inside the gymnasium of the old YWCA, now the Sheehan Hotel. Seating 300 people, the theater was sold out every night of the two weekend runs.

The audience was racially diverse; there were African Americans, Asians, Chicanos, whites. A San Franciscan mixture of progressives and bohemians, old hippies and the young hip, gay and straight filled the theater. Various representatives from the jails came to the performances; the sheriff was there on the first Saturday night. Angela Davis came one evening. There were funders from local foundations; social workers and residents from the halfway houses some of the women live in; students, families, and friends of the women in the troupe; people from the theater community in San Francisco; and the simply curious. Since 1992, when the Medea Project first went public, Jones has worked to expand the network of people who make the evening possible. The shows have been advertised, reviewed, and celebrated in local papers as great entertainment and as a socially worthy cause, so that now, when an audience gathers, it feels like a reunion. Many in the audience are known to each other; they are colleagues in the work place, or neighbors, friends, or friends of friends. They are ready to be entertained, but they also participate—cheering, stomping, hissing, and rising to their feet to applaud at the end of each evening.

There is no mistaking Jones’s presence as the master interpreter, the person who focuses the audience’s attention, first in the program notes and then in her opening speech. Her program notes for Slouching begin: “On the eve of the millennium at the end of this century we are wading thru the ‘politics of personal destruction’; the very air is right, soiled and murky. We are inundated with voices complaining, shouting, argu-
ing, threatening, patronizing, lying, yes, even crying. In the cities we are living in virtual lockdown! Rage reigns outside—the poor get poorer, our children choose exile, disappearing even as they dance, anesthetized with rhythm, rhyme, enshrouded in oversized fashion, gulping sugar, smoke and powder. We are all seduced into virtual reality. Armageddon beckons."

Then Jones appears in front of the audience to give her customary curtain speech, a mixture of rage and celebration. The Rockefeller Foundation gave her money to develop this performance with women in the jail around the subject of race and racism. Race, Jones remarks ruefully, is, for the moment, a sexy subject. But it was a real challenge to have a conversation about race in jail, she says, "since, as a general public, we haven't had that conversation yet." She goes on, saying it was like opening up Pandora's box—all sorts of evil things began to creep out. Jones tells the audience that she started the workshop by asking the women two questions: what was their first memory of race; and, if they could take a pill and change their race, their gender, their entire being, what would they choose to become.

As the lights dim, Jones takes her seat directly in front of the first row of spectators, puts on headphones and begins to "direct" the show from this spot. Periodically throughout the evening she calls to the actors, "Speak out!" "Move it!"—snapping her fingers and generally acting as the protective mother/director. She never takes her eyes off the performers; that is her most visible connection to them. The stage set is simple. A big painted banner erected across the stage reads, "We the Other People of the United States." There is a piano on one side of the stage, on the other is a bank of six or seven televisions at various angles. Throughout the show, clips from different television shows appear—news, Michael Jordan, sitcoms, as well as rehearsals from the Medea Project.

As a spotlight comes on, a rather short but solid black woman comes on stage. She is wearing a loose white shirt, baggy dark blue pants, her hair in dreads. Holding a big book, she introduces herself as the Mother of God. There are titters from the audience. One evening, she pauses, looks out, and says, "Surprised, aren't you? (Pause) Most people are. My grandson, Jesus Christ, he wasn't blonde either. He's short and brown like me." The audience laughs after each line, and she continues, "If you're praying to some blonde guy . . . that's why it's not working." Now the audience is guffawing. The woman speaking is Sean Reynolds, social worker, Rhodessa Jones's oldest partner in the Medea Project. As the Mother of God, she introduces the gangster motifs that permeate Slouching Towards Armageddon. Many of the women in this Medea production are young; some are still teenagers. They are different from the habitual cons that the Medea Project used to see in the mid- to late 1980s. Some of these young girls, aged eighteen and nineteen, are in jail for more violent crimes—attempted murder, bank robbery. Reynolds reads some text, pauses, and ad libs in reaction to the audience; at the same time, she is interacting with the cast, who are making their entrance from the back of the theater down the two aisles on either side of the audience. Dressed in street clothes that mimic the slouching look of the multicultural, hip-hop gangster, the women move forward in fits and starts, until they are all on stage, black, white, one Filippina, threatening, posturing, surrounding the Mother of God. Reynolds says, "You don't scare me. I'm the Mother of God." Jones's warning about all sorts of evil being released from Pandora's box is before our eyes. They move offstage, swaggering, with attitude.

Reynolds follows them off, and the lights come up now on Paulette Jones, a formerly incarcerated woman (no relation to Rhodessa Jones), who sits at the piano. Like Sean Reynolds, Jones is black and grew up in the 1960s. She has a magnificent full-bodied singing (and speaking) voice and, like Reynolds, is able to play with and off the audience through-

"Curtain Call," from Buried Fire. Photograph by Lorraine Capparel, 1996
out the evening. In many ways, *Slouching Towards Armageddon* is Paulette Jones's showcase, though she has sung and performed in two other Medea productions. Here, she sits at the piano throughout, anchors the troupe through rap songs and cabaret tunes, and sings two of her own songs. The first, which she sings after the Mother of God leaves the stage, is a slow, sweet ballad she has called “Dancing the Dream.” Gina Dawson, the choreographer for *Slouching Towards Armageddon*, dances lyrically to the music, with a silver veil over her face and a long white dress. People in the audience who do not know Dawson may not know how to read her racially. Her veiled self coupled with Jones's refrain, which says the dream is not about color but about love, seems to undercut any simple notion of identity politics. It’s a wistful tune, a wishful song, that hopes to disentangle race from identity. It asks whether we can see beyond the color of someone’s skin, see a “real me.” Here, in this opening song, a more essential “me” is posited, beyond race, in the lyrics and the visualization of an indeterminable racial subject. The dream of peace—a song about peace—fades away as Dawson dances off. And abruptly, with a huge crash, a topselling rap song pours into the theater, and the troupe of “gangsters,” now dressed in various costumes of white, stomp onto the stage. As the song fades, they begin to fight each other, until they are pushed backstage by a black woman, Gail Burton, who comes forward to tell us Pandora's story. Burton, who grew up in East Harlem and went to Radcliffe, is a playwright herself. She wrote two versions of Pandora's myth to open and close the show. The Mother of God and Paulette Jones (or the Auntie of God) make jokes with her (“Zeus, Prometheus, Pandora . . . and they say black people have funny names”), as she gives us the standard version of the myth in black street language, with a saucy, coy presence. Zeus uses Pandora to revenge himself against Prometheus, who is not paying him proper respect. Zeus gives Pandora a box filled with evils (and one good thing—hope) to give to Prometheus, but he also gives Pandora an inquisitive nature, so he knows she will open the box and let the evils out. She finishes her speech:

**BURTON:** So Pandora said, “Sure, you’re right, Zeus. *I’m not* going to open your box. Your box is safe with me. Just let me have it.” But Pandora had already been given that nosy nature, so y’all know she opened up that box. And when she opened up that box, all hell broke loose. The only thing left in the box was hope.

**MOTHER OF GOD:** Keep hope alive!

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The troupe now spills over the platform in character, each as a particular personification of Evil: Naughty, Vanity, Confusion, Desire for Power, Money, Pride, Misfortune, Jealousy, Slander, Revenge, Fear, Lust, Desire, Sorrow. They swarm and dance and mug until they form a lineup. Revenge steps out, and points at the audience: “Don’t let me catch you sleeping.” Jealousy shakes her finger: “Don’t hate me because you can’t be me.” Misfortune stares: “Anyone feeling lucky? (Pause) I didn’t think so.” The audience laughs.

The incongruity of ancient story and contemporary talk create the joke and reinforce the questions about identity that the play raises from the opening moments. Are these allegories or signs of personal traits? Are they examples of our own internal evils that we know we each harbor, or external ones that we fear will attack us? Do these figures appear before us as objects of pity and fear, providing us with a cathartic letting out and letting go, or are they instruments of punishment, punishing themselves and also warning us that we are next victims? It is in part the indeterminacy of these boundaries, the mixture of personal and allegorical identities, the permeable boundaries between the evils we see on stage and those we know are within us that sharpens our sense of connection.

This opening of *Slouching Towards Armageddon* choreographs and sings the essential structure of the Medea Project: individual monologues, songs, and group dancing are juxtaposed; old-time wisdom, myths, and spiritual histories are brought into relation with contemporary women, who sometimes stand alone to tell their individual stories and sometimes sing and dance together en masse. The women learn discipline and coordination from the goddesses, and the goddesses are also changed, as their ancient rituals are modified, updated, and their classic stories are performed anew. There is a constant state of fluidity between the collective movements and individual stories; sometimes someone dances alone, and sometimes stories get passed around. Always there is the conscious use of space to signal who has been let out, or broken out, which serves to remind us that more women remain locked away, unseen. With no interference, Jones knows how to vary the emotional tone and control the dramatic shape of the evening. It’s the pacing of the show, the juxtaposition of inset plays, of music and dance, humor and horror, the mixture of classical references, children’s folktales, and contemporary street stories that work to keep the audience riveted. The energy of the performers doesn’t flag and neither do the audience’s responses.
The audience's laughter at the wisecass jokes that the Mother of God cracks with the Auntie of God stops while they listen to one of the most powerful and ominous stories told during Slouching Towards Armageddon. Darcell Bernard (Revenge), an older black woman, steps on to a darkened stage. The chorus of women stand behind her with masks on, punching their fists in a slow rhythm, dropping to the floor behind her as Bernard slowly tells this story, each sentence distinctly spoken, with long pauses between each phrase:

It was hot as fuck outside. It was a beautiful day. I was walking up Haight Street and lo and behold, the devil . . . disguised. He had brown curly hair, he was light skinned, big green eyes. He was a good looking fella.
He said, “What’s happening.”
I said, “Hey.”
He asked where was I going.
“T’ the park.”
We started walking, stopped at the store. I bought a pack of Kools and a pint of Wild Irish Rose. We were kickin it. Then somehow money came up.
I said, “I got some food stamps.”
He said, “You do? Give ‘em here.”
So I gave him a $50.00 book.
He said, “I’ll be right back.”
He came back quick with $40.00 cash.
I said “Wow” and gave him $10.00.
He said, “I’m going to go get some crack.”
And I said, “Cool, but it ain’t my thing.”
He comes back and started smoking his crack while I’m drinking my wine.
Getting a little hungry, I said, “Let’s go to the new Burger King on Fillmore.”
He said, “Cool.”
We walk over to the Burger King, order, sit down and I see a friend of mine.
I say, “Hey, Nel. Wha’s up?”
He said, “Hey, baby.”
I said, “I’ll see you in a minute.” I finished eating and looked over at the devil.
And I said, “I’ll see you later.”
The devil said, “Can I talk to you outside for a minute?”
We goes outside and he sticks a gun in my ribs.

And he says, “Walk, bitch! You better not say a mother fucking word.”
And I’m walking scared as fuck. He takes me up to the roof near the Kabuki theater. We get up on the roof.
I said, “What you want? Some head, some pussy? Anything. Just don’t hurt me.”
But he wanted me to fight him. And I did. And I got my ass kicked. He snatched my backpack. He cut my straps and tied me up. He made me suck his dick. He fucked me and then he cut my throat. (Hands up to throat, head tilts, scar visible.) He was smiling the whole mother fucking time. I can hear him going down the stairs. I jumped up and tried to untie myself. I could hear him coming back. I lay back in the puddle of blood.
And I said, “Oh god, please let this man think I’m dead. Don’t let him kill me.”
I could feel him staring at me and I’m scared and he walked up to me. And he pulls out his dick and then he pissed in my face. Then he turned around, he pulled down his pants and then he shit in my face. I could hear him walking away. I jump up. I went to the top of the stairs and untied myself. I looked down and he was gone. I see a whole lot of church people in the parking lot. I must have fainted. When I came to there was a black woman tying her scarf around my neck to stop the bleeding.
That day I walked with the devil.

There is silence, murmurs, someone is crying in front of me, and then the audience claps, somberly.
Another young black woman with a wristband on to alert us to her incarcerated status, Chenique Garret (Misfortune), eighteen years old, stands up and addresses her missing father. She has written him a letter that begins:

Dear Dad: I want to let you know how I feel. I’ve been carrying your sorry ass name for eighteen years and you’re not even around. Daddy, I miss you, but how can I miss somebody I don’t even know? You know how fucked up my life has been because I never had a father figure? Did you know that at the age of twelve I started getting high, fucking older men, being abused and shit? Well, as you can see, I grew up pretty fast. I grew up without you. Just with mom, and half the time, I felt like she didn’t want me either.
You know, I envy some girls when they talk about their dad this and their
With her hands on her hips, striking a bold stance, she leads the troupe into the Medean "Kicking Dance." The women all move forward and thrust their legs up and out: boom, boom, boom. They fight back, then recede back into formation.

A white prisoner, Angela Wilson (Confusion), delivers a piece that speaks about her frustration at landing in jail. On stage, the troupe of women stand in a line with their hands interlocked. Wilson begins to speak from behind them, describing her rage at finding herself in jail as a kind of second jail, her "own personal lock up." Continuing to speak, she breaks through the line of women, recognizing herself at the end of her monologue as responsible for herself: "A killer I've allowed myself to be—of me. Here, all locked up in this place. Heart, mind, body, and soul, all agree, we can't wait, to be set free, of this prejudice against—me." Wilson's story about her "own personal lock up" contains images of her self that are contradictory. She shows herself to be a victim of prejudice but also a participant, a killer of herself as well. She is responsible for her lock up and not entirely responsible. She longs to be free, but it isn't clear from what: freed from the self that landed her in jail, or from prejudice (of what sort?) that locked her up? Remembering the sentiment of Paulette Jones's earlier song, which asks whether anyone can look beyond the color of a person's skin and see the real "me" beneath it, I find Angela Wilson's "me" inchoate, and I can't tell whether it's because I need to know more biographically or because she is, in some fundamental sense, still personally locked up.

Other women sing about being free. Chelsea Parnell (Slander), a very young black girl, sings a capella gospel songs in which she gives herself up to God and testifies: "Though in this life I've made mistakes / Only God can judge me now / Because he controls my fate." Wilson and Garret perform "Hair Rap," in which curling irons or perms hold out the promise of changing, at least, hair fate:

With women she speaks son's sort?) also graphically locked young of can dad know, you that I wish you could be in my life. But, you know, that's your decision. But if only you knew what you were missing.

If I were to see you, hell, I wouldn't know what to do. But I tell you what, that might be the happiest day of my life. And that might be the worst day of yours. I just have one last question: How do you like me now?

Our hair, their hair, your hair
If you're black and your hair is nappy, get a perm to straighten it really snappy.
If you're white and your hair is straight and stringy
Get a perm to curl to make it snappy.
Our hair, their hair, your hair
From stringy and straight to springy and great
Check it out.

The juxtapositions seem critical, but I'm not sure what other people would think, and here's where I'd be glad to partake in a conversation. Are these modes of control, God and a hair perm, equally powerful, depending only on what someone happens to believe or not to believe? Can we choose to look a certain way, and so be a certain way, or are we in God's hands? The production offers different ways of thinking about identity, and Jones refuses, as director, to rank them for us. Instead we are given different versions of the same story.

Toward the end of the show, Gail Burton appears again to tell Pandora's story, only this time from the goddess's sisters' point of view. And when the point of view shifts, everything changes. What was purely evil is now seen as good and bad. Out of the box, now described as a jar, come gifts for the world, not just terrors:

BURTON: Well, the last story I told y'all, Zeus's brother's, uncle's cousin's people told me ... But now Pandora's people told me this.

Number one, Zeus didn't make Pandora, because Pandora was a god herself. And at one time she was more powerful than Zeus. She was older than Zeus.

MOTHER OF GOD: I could have told you that.

BURTON: When Zeus and his crew took over the world, they made up that story—they were just trying to perpetrate that story on Pandora, they were trying to make everybody believe that nothing existed before them. Now y'all know better than that. Number two: Pandora was down with the Earth Mothers. Y'all know who they are: Gaia, Mother Nature.

AUNTIE OF GOD: Don't fool with Mother Nature.

BURTON: She put me in mind of Osun. You know that girl.

AUNTIE OF GOD: We used to play together. Big booty Osun.

BURTON: Zeus told me she had a box. But these sisters said she had a jar.
And from that jar she poured all these gifts into the world for human kind. What gifts? Well, stuff like a pomegranate that became a lemon and then a pear. And then there were flowering trees with fruit and gnarled trees with olives. And y'all know what else she made? She made the grapevine.

**AUNTY OF GOD AND MOTHER OF GOD (singing):** I'm about to lose my mind. Heard it on the grapevine.

**BURTON:** She put her hand inside the jar and pulled out seeds and scattered them across the hillside, for illness and hunger and for weeping. There were minerals and ores and clays of all kinds. She rolled the jar down the hillside until everything was covered in her flowing aura. Chile, everybody bathed in the changing colors of her aura. She brings wonder and curiosity and wisdom, she brings healing and communal bonds, she brings justice and mercy, and loving kindness for all human beings. You know, it seems like Zeus made up Pandora. You know how it is when someone tries to bring down a powerful woman.

My mama used to tell me, "Look at the good side. Think positive." You know, if you stay positive and you think about Pandora you might consider her Mother Abundance. You got to take the good with the bad.

In this revisionary myth, Pandora is responsible for all that is good in the world, not just the bad. Good and evil seem to be a package deal. What kind of charge evil has depends upon who is doing the charging. We think we know what evil is, but maybe we don't see to the bottom of it, its roots, its connection to that which is good.

Sean Reynolds now addresses the audience and remembers the women who started rehearsing but did not make it to the end. Sally, who rehearsed up to the very last day, but then was told she couldn't perform in the theater because her crime, attempted manslaughter, was too serious; some who were released but didn't stay with the group; and the rest who dropped out while still in jail. Finally, each performer speaks an affirmation, "If I live and do not die, I hope I . . ." As Bernard says, "have a career in fashion advertising," someone in the audience cries out, "You will!" The audience cheers and claps, perhaps hoping that vocal acclamation can translate hope to a reality. At the end of the evening, Jones has brought us back to wondering about the reality of these women's lives, and the distance between what they (and we) can hope for and what will come true. What was most powerful for me, after seeing my second live Medea production, was not the swelling sounds of applause, which had so moved me while watching *Buried Fire*. Having seen more of the rehearsals of *Sloshing Towards Armageddon*, I was moved by all that the audience could not know because they hadn't been there: the long road it had taken to get these women to this point. I was more aware than ever before of how little I really knew of each person in the cast, how imperfectly I could predict their futures.

The drama of the Medea Project lies as much in what isn't scripted as it does in the choreographed evening performance itself. One evening, in the middle of her speech about the Devil raping her, Bernard moves too close to the edge of the stage, steps into the lights, and falls off the stage, crashing to the floor. Jones rushes up to her, asks, "Are you all right, Darcell?" And she answers, from the floor, flat on her back, in a drawl, "Yeah, I'm all right." "Can you go on?" "Yeah, I can." She is helped back up on stage, stands for a minute, says, "Now, where was I?" The audience roars. And then she just moves right on. It's amazing concentration for a thirty-seven-year-old woman who has been doing every conceivable drug (in her words) since she was in junior high school. One man in the audience that night said he thought the moment had been rehearsed, just part of the show. The second night before the end of the run, Bernard is released from jail. But at 4:00 in the afternoon she isn't where she's supposed to be to get a ride to the theater. Nobody is much surprised not to see her. And then an hour and a half before the curtain, she strolls into the Lorraine Hansberry, receiving cheers and applause and gets to work. She is there for the next performance as well. But she doesn't show up for the first Saturday meeting after the show closes. Even in the glow of the affirmations, "I hope" and "You will," surely everyone wonders what will happen after, whether the performance of the Medea Project will affect the performance of life. A month later Paulette Jones hears that Bernard is strung out on heroin.

The form of the Medea Project itself forces everyone to think beyond the performance, to wonder whether the performers are following a script, whether the story they tell is true, whether the telling of it will make a difference next time the same plot is encountered. We may wonder how much hasn't been told, and we may wonder where they are now. Darcell Bernard told me that on her way to the theater that first afternoon as a free woman, she walked through downtown, past all of her friends offering her all kinds of drugs to celebrate her freedom. She could very easily have decided to join them. That day she said no.
Rhodessa Jones thought Garret, of “Dear Dad,” had made the most progress of all the women in the group. Garret and Parnell, both under twenty, sucked their thumbs whenever there was a lull in the rehearsals. Garret, who was so sullen at the beginning of the process, toward the end seemed more often just sad, and at one last rehearsal, cried about her missing, fuck-up family. Three days before the production opened, she could barely speak her letter to her Dad. She had to read it; she couldn’t remember it. She had no attitude. Her affect was flat. I thought this was hopeless, that the performance would be a debacle. But Jones kept working with her; she made her stand with her hand on her hip for the last line: “How do you like me now?” When she was forced to move a certain way, her reading became more intense. By the opening, Garret did thrust her hips and remember her lines. She made the audience listen, commanding their attention. Whether her family (the ones there, the father not) were changed by what they heard, whether she herself was, once the public performance was over, I don’t know. But I did see an almost miraculous transformation from a girl who sucked her thumb to a young woman who stood in front of 300 people and spoke her mind.

The fierce questioning of what constitutes the “real” identity of these women, the core “me” that Paulette Jones and Angela Wilson allude to, occurs in each of the Medea Project’s works. What do race, class, family, gender, desire, and education have to do with it? Slouching Towards Armageddon was to focus on race, but race was just one subject used in exploring the reasons for an incarcerated self. Who is agent? Who has agency? Who is in control of their fate? Who speaks of freedom? Of being seen? Of being desired? Bernard tells me, and she told Jones, that she didn’t think her story about being raped by the Devil had anything to do with race. She thinks of herself as lucky and as a survivor. In fact, Jones thinks Bernard’s story does have to do with race, at least in part, and so do many others in the group, though that disagreement was never voiced in discussions. It was a hot day in August and there were lots of people on the street outside Burger King. No one saw her walking down the street with a gun held up to her back. No one cared, no one heard, no one looked. Outside on the streets, in a neighborhood used to violence, Bernard is not visible. She’s held hostage even before she gets to jail.

The artful presentation of these stories in Slouching Towards Armageddon seems to offer a promise of personal salvation for the actors and a demand for social change to the audience. When Bernard tells her story, she becomes visible, and we cannot bear the thought that she will be silenced again. But, of course, she may be, and we may remain silent too if we see her, or don’t see her, on the streets outside the theater. Jones is funded now not only for the workshops she conducts in jail, but because she intends to bring the women center stage, to make the private rehearsal go public in a professional manner. And then, once it goes public, in spite of its label—“Theater for Incarcerated Women”—it isn’t only a theater for the incarcerated. It becomes theater for people who want to see the incarcerated visible, safely available. The project continues to garner funding in part because Jones is able to pull off, over and over again, a polished, rousing public production in spite of the obstacles.

She does not overpromise. Although some participants may harbor illusions about salvation, Jones entertains no such fantasies. She often tells the women, “This ain’t no Dreamgirls. . . . I don’t delude myself that I’m making a hell of a lot of difference with this. . . . I don’t expect these women to get out of jail and go right out and find jobs and stop smoking dope and suddenly become successes. But what this has done is light a few lights. And light is always better than darkness, you know what I’m saying?” Jones always distinguishes between fantasies and reality: “There’s a lot of lost children, women who have no idea where they really are in the world, just the ideas they get from TV. . . . We play with fantasies in our workshops. But when somebody goes, ‘After I get out I’m gonna be a hairdresser in Beverly Hills,’ I say, ‘Wait a minute. Let’s get real. How are you going to pay for a ticket there? How are you going to get some training? They can’t wait around for miracles.’” The Medea Project is interested in an investigation of the plots that lead to imprisonment—the causes for addiction, rage, recidivism—in hopes that by asking certain questions, the women might not count on miracles but instead plot a different course. But Jones knows that the traditional plot won’t change for most of the women unless more people participate in its redesign. The Medea Project, in its most far-reaching conception of itself, means to make us not only recognize that we share common plots but to find ways for all of us to change them by becoming more socially active citizens.

There are, obviously, many ways to tell the story of the Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women. One could organize a book about the Medea Project around the (to date) five theatrical productions, creating an expanded production history, of the sort begun above, but I don’t believe it is possible to duplicate, even approximately, the experience of a performance. As Peggy Phelan has argued, “Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation
of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance.” Thus, in the rest of this book, rather than try to recapture the experience of the public performances, I focus instead on how the plots or myths or driving metaphors that differentiate each production link specific social concerns with artistic expression. Though the public productions are aesthetically interesting in and of themselves, to restrict this account to a discussion of the public performances would not fully encompass the project’s long-range trajectory, its pedagogical aims and political aspirations, that is, on all that comes before and after the public performances.

It would be relatively simple too, as these things go, to explain the making of the Medea Project heroically, to write a biography of its founder and artistic director, Rhodessa Jones, making her the hero, describing her singular beliefs and her experiences. There is no question that the making of the Medea Project could not have happened without her. It would be difficult, everyone concedes, to find someone with her combination of talents so as to duplicate the project somewhere else. Her African American heritage, her background as a performance artist, her feminism, her blues, energy, sweetness, wisdom, and rants have made her one of the most charismatic divas of the postmodern performance art world, a performer and director who dismantles the traditional borders between performance, theater, therapy, high and low art, in order to rethink the meaning of community in a multicultural nation. There is no sense in downplaying the importance of individuals—Jones, in particular. But to make her the hero leaves everyone else playing the role of acolyte or follower, with fewer lines, weaker parts, diminished voices. That is decidedly not the sort of theater Jones makes.

Rhodessa Jones is the connector who links incarcerated women with artists, the guards from the San Francisco jails with ushers in theaters, directors of private foundations with the elected sheriff of San Francisco, and then translates their ways of talking and beliefs, negotiates among institutions and rules, to create theater in public that aims to do more than entertain. She is an artist who speaks with a sense of a mission, not as religious leader or heroic savior or patriarchal (or even matriarchal) master/mistress, but rather, I think, in the language of Kobena Mercer, “as a connector located at the hyphenated intersection of disparate discourses.” Jones is an artist, a social scientist, a political activist, and a public intellectual, who performs each role for different audiences. She is adept at crossing over—in the 1960s, as a black woman in a white femi-

nist dance troupe; since then, as a performance artist who also teaches children and adults. She has long worked with difference—different disciplinary structures, people from different cultural backgrounds—and her performances incorporate many different artistic traditions. Her voice is unmistakably powerful, her rants loud and clear. But her voice does not overpower others. Instead she makes it possible to hear those who in some other show would have been only part of a chorus at best, or not heard at all. In the intersection that is the space of the Medea Project, people try on other parts, become articulate in ways they may never have been before, think about and act out what it would be like to take off down a different street, work out a different ending. To write a single biographical history would not be faithful to the many biographies Jones means us to hear.

As a scholar and teacher of American studies, I was intrigued by the sounds of the Medea Project. Different voices reflected different communities and different discourses: of rehabilitation, punishment and discipline, social work, aesthetics and salvation, commercial viability and tourism. It was these sounds that I wanted to capture. The Medea Project depends upon the collaboration of many organizations: the jail, public and private foundations, halfway houses, theaters. In the Medea Project all sorts of people stand in close proximity who might never have otherwise, and all get a chance to sound off, to make their mark: San Francisco sheriff Michael Hennessey and assistant sheriff Michael Marcum; social worker Sean Reynolds, MSW; executive director of Cultural Odyssey, Idris Ackamoor; director of Artists-in-Residence in San Francisco County Jails, Ruth Morgan; and, over the years, the women who make up the performing Medea Project troupe. All of these people are skilled at speaking for their own institutions, but they also see the great benefit of collaborating with strangers. The Medea Project inspired me to continue to believe that the arts can serve social concerns and that the academy can also encourage, even facilitate, social activism as an intellectual and moral imperative.

In the theoretical language of the early twenty-first-century’s cultural criticism, the Medea Project is a quintessential “crossover” project—interdisciplinary, multicultural, and hybridized. It occupies an interstitial space, between social work and art work, among individuals and institutions and disciplines and discourse that allow for certain kinds of actions and constrain others. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the jails themselves, where the disciplines of violence and punishment hold
sway. From jail, society's most restrictive site, the Medea Project creates space to move physically, emotionally, and theatrically—to reconfigure the discipline and particular habits of survival of the streets to the customs and surprises of the theater. Its strengths and its limitations come from the very different groups who participate—artists, social workers, guards, prisoners—and who have, sometimes, very different measures for judging the project's effectiveness.

In fact, what I think people find is that the usual standards they rely on for judging do not accurately reflect the effects of this project. For example, if theater critics evaluate only the quality of the singing, the dance, the formal integration of myths and contemporary stories, the lighting design, and costumes, they recognize that they are not getting at what is unique about the performance, its back story, its intensity. Critics ask whether what an audience sees is art, or is good art, or whether this is some form of victim art and thus beyond criticism. Guards ask whether the prisoners are more dissatisfied or more confident. Funders want to know how many lives have been saved or the percentage who return to jail. None of these questions yields a description of this project that accounts for the interaction and intermingling of art and social work. It is precisely the way in which the project collapses such distinctions that marks its vitality and seems worth paying attention to.

In order to chart the effective communicative power of this particular community project, which owes everything to its hybrid cultural formation, to the multiple communities it brings together, I feel it is important to describe the various kinds of participation it demands. Rather than represent this still-in-process project in terms of either a straightforward theater history or a biography or a series of biographies, I have situated the Medea Project in three sometimes overlapping fields of practice that frame the sorts of participation that occur. If, as Gillian Rose has argued, the basic act of participation in community arts projects is seen as a transparent good, that the basic process is to produce more process and more participation, I hope that by scrutinizing particular practices of participation I will be able to evaluate and analyze at least some parts of participation's efficacy.

Autobiography

The first form that participation takes, and which is perhaps most central to the project, is the expression of autobiography, the telling of one's own story. Many of the theatrical techniques Jones developed for the Medea Project are aimed at enabling and showcasing autobiography. That the incarcerated women’s experiences have to be acknowledged, understood, related, and heard is a key principle of this feminist theatrical project. That everyone has a story to tell, that everyone’s story is worth telling and is more amazing than anything heard on Oprah, is a constant refrain. However, though the Medea Project begins with honoring experience, it would be limited if that were all it did. Instead, Jones finds theatrical ways to interrogate the personal, surrounding the contemporary with the mythical, providing more texts, and thus context, for these women, so that each individual’s story is not isolated but always seen in relation to others. Practically, the project knows what theorists have argued, that autobiography alone neither guarantees new insights nor changes behavior. As Joan Scott has argued, experience is not transparent but is “at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted.” The Medea Project wants women's stories to be told, but it also recognizes the importance of interpreting those stories, of making connections from the personal to the social. If inner feelings are discussed separately from their relationship to power, rules, discipline, money, and means, then “discussion of... 'inner' self and feelings replaces rather than leads to a discussion of links to the ‘exterior’ and ways to transform it.” A move from personal autobiography to the contextualization of the self in history or mythology is apparent in the title of the project itself. Jones insists on using art and world culture as points of comparison and contrast to the personal.

Critical Thinking

Secondly, like other forms of liberation theater, or theater for development, the Medea Project loosely uses Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed in the course of its workshops, though not explicitly in the productions themselves. Freire’s “conscientization,” critical thinking through dialogue, is a key practice for the Medea Project. As Freire argues,
which does not separate itself from action, but constantly immerses itself in temporality without fear of the risks involved. . . . For the critic, the important thing is the continuing transformation of reality, in behalf of the continuing humanization of men. 16

It is not only that people must develop an intellectual awareness of their place in history, but they must find ways to act out that consciousness. This is, of course, a tall order, for anyone. Liberation theater workers have been pretty hard-nosed when they evaluate the success of their own theater work to perform this sort of critical thinking. Honor Ford-Smith, director of the Jamaican feminist theater group Sistren, has argued that although her group’s work validated popular culture and developed in the women a sense of self-worth and although “the process of the drama improvisations taught the language of the theater while, at the same time, allowing people to reveal and reflect on their own experience,” it “did not teach people how to theorize about their experience, nor did it teach them how to teach.” 17

Talking, even critical talking, is not a sufficient pedagogical goal for Freire or for liberation theaters like the Medea Project. Talking is only a means to an end, which is to liberate the oppressed. Reflection doesn’t necessarily lead to the sort of critical thinking that would allow people to take social action, to reproduce the act of teaching, or to reproduce some part of the project elsewhere. As Ngugi wa Mirii has said, “In terms of the whole concept of Theatre for Development, where the emphasis is dialogue, you have to be very careful because it can also be a means of mystification of the problem—that once you have discussed it you have actually solved the problem.” 18 The Medea Project insists on dialogue and attempts to develop critical thinking. But no one on the project is naive enough to think that talking will have solved anyone’s problem. They are all too aware of the necessity of changing social conditions, aware too of the limited power of the theater to directly affect the “transformation of reality.”

Reimagining Community

The third important practice of participation is the Medea Project’s attempt to redraw the boundaries of community. In workshops and productions, the Medea Project interrogates what community means, the boundaries we can cross over and those we cannot—as women, men, of a particular class and race, nationally and locally. It establishes connections between groups that otherwise might not come into contact and, by imagining communities different from those we have at present, presents itself as a radical or alternative geography, what Homi Bhabha calls “a third space.” 19 Critics have become suspicious about the use of the concept of “community” for radical politics, since, as Doreen Massey writes, the concept depends upon distinguishing between members and nonmembers, inside and outside, “another way of constructing a counterposition between ‘us’ and ‘them.’” She goes on to argue for a new conception of place:

[one that] can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent. . . . If places can be conceptualized in terms of the social interactions which they tie together, then it is also the case that these interactions themselves are not motionless things, frozen in time. They are processes. One of the great one-liners in Marxist exchanges has for long been, “Ah, but capital is not a thing, it’s a process?” Perhaps this should be said also about places; that places are processes, too. 20

Insofar as the Medea Project inhabits a place on the map, it is in this sense of being a meeting place of social interactions, not static and not homogenous, seeking other connections in its mission to transform the boundaries that now exist between the imprisoned and the free, to chart a course from jail, through the theater, to a center for women on the outside that could be an alternative home and school.

All of these practices—the autobiographical, the critical thinking, and the reimagining of communities—impinge upon each other. All are filtered through a theatrical medium, and all can be evaluated as effective tools in the service of this practical and utopian project. Jones mostly refuses overtly political goals:

I would refrain from saying what the politics are, because then it becomes a school of thought, and it isn’t that. I didn’t come with any politics other than theater saved my life. You can be in my dream if I can be in your dream. This is what I know, sister. This is how you make bread, this is how you make community, this is how we can take care of our children, this is how we can
live in the world as women. It's very homespun, it's very much mother wit. I'm not the intellectual, academic one. That was Sean. I don't think Sean set herself up to be lofty. But Sean set herself up to be the didactic teacher. She was also guerrilla warfare for both of us. I don't think I would dare talk about the politics of it. It would become dated in a way. You can't trust politics. Politics implies a certain kind of order. And basically, at heart, I'm a sort of anarchist. I do think there's a way we can live together, there's a humanistic, very simple way to live together, if we can remember that we are all part of a human family. It's about women saving their own lives through the creative process. I guess for me that's the bottom line.21

Sistren director Ford-Smith concurs:

Often theater, poetry or dance will be expected in a highly simplistic way to carry responsibility for articulating and enacting political positions. In spite of the fact that it cannot do this, cultural work strives nevertheless to be connected to the political and to violate the parameters of the term political. It aims at change or consolidation through the revelation and understanding of forms of oppression and exploitation, forms of affirmation and celebration. It combines an experience of pleasure with personal spiritual, political and economic experience. It can confront areas of experience hitherto hidden, and in so doing it will disturb rather than effect change, create insight rather than measurable action.22

The Medea Project does disturb, and people will testify that it creates insight. Ford-Smith is right when she suggests there are limits to what art can do, but what the Medea Project causes us to imagine is the way artists, connected to other institutions, could effect change and take measurable action. I believe that the success of cultural projects in the United States will depend increasingly on the ability of performers like Jones to translate back and forth for others, to be able to make common cause across disciplines and institutions, to integrate the techniques of the imagination with the practicalities of finding the money for a new address and safer homes.

In the following chapters, I highlight certain cultural intersections: autobiographies and classical myths; scenes of dramatic instruction, refused and taken; prison statistics and singular ex-prisoner voices; institutional constraints and communal imaginative hopes. In Chapter 1, “A Counter Epic: Making the Medea Project,” I describe Jones's background and the beginnings of the project, when Jones transformed a jail workshop into the first public Medea production. Jones made a brilliant connection between the myth of Medea and the stories she heard from the women in jail, though the women initially denied any similarity between Medea's anger and revenge and their own lives. Jones explores the way certain plots still constrict, while showing how narratives, telling one's own story in relation to others, may release different endings.

The second chapter, “To Be Real: Rehearsing Techniques,” focuses on the pedagogy of the theater, the theatrical and antitheatrical techniques Jones uses to investigate, remember, claim, and reproduce women's private lives for the public. In workshops and in the public productions, Jones focuses some of the drama on women's bodies, and audiences have had a range of responses, from “The Medea Project is just into titillation” to “The Medea Project is all about men bashing.” I am interested in the way Jones combines humanist and postmodern techniques, the ways in which she and Reynolds share in the pedagogy of liberation, through the theater and through discussions of current events, making the politics and cultural work of art inextricably intertwined.

In Chapter 3, “Prison Discourse: Surveying Lives,” I briefly survey the history and current polemics surrounding prisons in the United States—seen by some as the problem, by others as the preferred solution. Most discourse about prison relies either on statistics or on representative anecdotes. I find both unsatisfactory as analytical tools. Instead, I turn to five once incarcerated women who performed in the Medea Project and speak about themselves “before and after.” As the core of the project, these women appear in the center of the book, a sort of ground zero. They speak for themselves. I don't attempt to interpret their experience but offer each woman as she described herself for me in an interview. I think that their strong self-presentation refuses any simplistic solution and yet also compels readers to think further.

The fourth chapter, “Community Work: Imagining Other Spaces,” explores the real communities that surround the project—local San Francisco history, foundation practices, the ideas of a progressive sheriff, and halfway houses that teach self-esteem—and ends with utopian visions of what the Medea Project could become: more than a theater, a project that in yoking together institutions, artists, and individuals from different communities transforms the nature of community itself.

Jones walks a fine line, and perhaps this is a line worth paying attention to as we watch arguments swirl around government funding for the arts.
today. She doesn’t claim that art can save all lives (though she says it saved hers); instead, she says she is teaching some people the skills to save their own lives. To give these women the means to control their lives differently is certainly one of the purposes of the Medea Project. The artistic service—the individual epiphanies for those on stage and those who watch in the audience—I take always to be a possibility, and I do not underestimate its power. Indeed, for me, the fierce ambition that underlies all the Medea Project’s contingent and contradictory relations is the belief that art transforms—not only individuals but communities as well.

But this ambition is the hardest to realize. If what people hope is that the theater can resolve racism or spring everyone from jail—the answer has to be no. No single cultural institution (or performance) can be expected to do that. It may even be a dangerous trajectory to argue that the social work that art does is more important than its aesthetic value, because people will expect some way of quantifying the production: how many lives have you saved? I will argue that the arts do provide social services, though to be most effective they must be woven into other equally important social services—ones that provide housing, education, jobs.

The Medea Project depends on many different institutions, any of which may cease to invest, and on particular individuals, who may shut down, burn out, move on. Practically, the Medea Project has worked extraordinarily well in certain arenas and less well in others. As a public theatrical event, the Medea Project has inspired local enthusiasm and appreciative audiences, but it has not managed to institutionalize itself within the jails, depending from year to year on different grants to be able to begin another workshop. In medias res, it is not clear that the project will be able to sustain the partnerships it has that make the public performances possible, or to create new partnerships that would support programs for formerly incarcerated women, or to institutionalize itself by training new directors, teachers, and staff who can continue the work or duplicate it in other jails or in community centers. However, by making visible what our society has not thought worth saving, producing a public event that is self-consciously always questioning what it means to be a public, the project moves beyond the theatrical to inspire the audience to think of more creative and useful intersections that will help protect and educate everyone who inhabits our worldly public sphere.

CHAPTER I

A Counter Epic

Making the Medea Project

I would be nothing more than a memory or a bitch with a bad attitude if I hadn’t found acting . . . . Yeah, theater is my religion.
I’ve been baptized in the applause and it saved my life. But if you’re blessed enough to climb up on the platform and say “Over here! Everybody look at me!” then you damn well better have something to say.
—Rhodessa Jones, quoted in Snider, “Just Say Rh!”

In Rhodessa Jones, the creator and director of the Medea Project, the women in the project have a life story they can use as a counter against the traditional, predictable, plots usually attached to women of her class and her race. In certain ways, Rhodessa Jones’s life conforms to the lives of many of the women she has met in jail: African American, born into a poor family, an unwed mother at an early age, with no college education. And yet she is always aware that she has escaped their fate. Jones was born in Florida in 1948 to a large African American family of migrant laborers. She is the eighth of twelve brothers and sisters. She remembers living in migrant camps, the sounds of Saturday night dances and music, watching performances that seemed like vaudeville. One of her brothers was a great dancer, other family members sang, she was a comic. In the 1950s, the family settled on a farm near Rochester, New York, where the schools were good. Rhodessa and some of her siblings started a singing group; another brother, Bill T. Jones, kept dancing.1 Someone was always reading: her father, Zane Grey; a brother, D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller. Both her father and her mother were strong presences in the family. She describes the lack of tolerance for loafing and whining: if she was sitting around, her mother would hand her a broom; if she did something her father thought was wrong, there wouldn’t be time for an explanation. She recognizes her parents’ influence in the way she directs: