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Now I See You, Now I Know You: How Constructions of Space and the Self Navigate the Tension Between Reenchantment of the World and Intimate Communion in Autobiographical Performance

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Now I See You, Now I Know You
How Constructions of Space and the Self Navigate the Tension Between
Reenchantment of the World and Intimate Communion in Autobiographical
Performance

by

Huong (Jess) Nguyen

Class of 2024

Under the advisement of Randy Reyes

A critical essay submitted to the faculty of Macalester College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in Theater and Dance

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Abstract

The transformative power of live performances lies in their reenchantment of the world: how they allow us to see special qualities of everyday objects and phenomena. Autobiographical theatre, rather than trying to find new ways of seeing, aims to transform the audience to “[make] the stranger less strange”. How do these qualities co-exist in autobiographical performance, and how does such a style of performance navigate them? By centralizing a comparative analysis of stagecraft in Aya Ogawa’s *The Nosebleed* and my honors project, *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*, I demonstrate how constructions of space and the self help collapse the boundary between reenchantment of the world and intimate communion of the self.

Honors Project in the Theater and Dance Department

Advisor: Randy Reyes

Theater and Dance Department

Introduction

In 1974, playwright Aya Ogawa was born. Their father, Akira Ogawa died in 2007 (Ogawa 2023 81, 79). The year Ogawa was born saw some of the final moments of what Vietnamese people know as the American War and what Americans know as the Vietnam War. The year Ogawa's father died, the first iPhone revolutionized human interactions with screens (Elgan). Two planes crashed into the Twin Towers in New York in 2001, the year of my birth, and had since then fueled Americans to take cautionary actions against foreigners. One of such actions included the Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002 that begins the monitoring of foreign students, such as myself, in the interest of tightening security. In 2018, Ogawa presented their play, *The Nosebleed* as a work-in-progress at Brooklyn Art Exchange (Ogawa). This play was conceived as an autobiographical piece when Ogawa began exploring their sense of failure arising from the death of their father in 2007. In the same year of 2018, I applied to Macalester College in Saint Paul, Minnesota. These events have nothing in common with one another aside from the year in which they took place. However, their occurrence became the series of events that converged in the following moment: in January of 2024, I began the staging of my honors performance, *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*. Just a month after that, I saw Ogawa's *The Nosebleed* at the Walker Art Center and briefly shared a stage with them.

I watched *The Nosebleed* at a point in my creative process when, in my mind, it encapsulated everything *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* had purported to be. Both pieces are autobiographical performances from the perspective of queer Asians in America. In fact, the original iteration of the latter's script divided the "self" into three distinct characters who would function similarly to the four actors that embodied Ogawa in *The Nosebleed*. Yet, I did not want to create *The Nosebleed*. Rather, *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* felt like myself. Ogawa and their

ensemble devised and developed *The Nosebleed* for a few years, from the 2016 presidential election to 2022 (Ogawa; *The Nosebleed* program). I collaged the text for *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* throughout four months from September to December 2023; the script continued transforming throughout rehearsals until its performance in March of 2024. Where *The Nosebleed* represents Ogawa's "self" as multiplicity—four Aya's who interact with one another—*Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* stages my "self" as duality—a solitary performer on stage who acts with and reacts to the director's recorded voice and projection footage. *The Nosebleed* speaks from the perspective of an established adult Japanese-American professional. *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* espouses the point of view of a soon-to-be college graduate who is Vietnamese in America. The most crucial difference between the two shows is *The Nosebleed* tells a story of one of Ogawa's greatest failures, while *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* splices together vignettes that dwelled on rhizomatic connections similar to the ones that converged in my brief encounter with Ogawa.

As two distinct pieces of theatre, created by different people, *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* and *The Nosebleed* have qualitative differences. Yet, as two pieces of autobiographical theatre, the two performances seek to accomplish the same goal, in roughly the same format. I had never met Aya Ogawa. Neither had I known their life, the intimate details of their relationship with their father, or the particularities of the Japanese immigrant experience. Yet, in those seventy-five minutes of attending *The Nosebleed*, Ogawa and I viscerally participated in the same "autopoietic feedback loop" (41), a term that performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte uses to describe the oscillation of the subject-object relationship between the performer and audience. In those minutes, I bore witness to one of their life's greatest failures and, briefly, shared their stage during the funeral ritual. Similarly, I did not know many audience members

who attended *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*. *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* took shape as an autobiographical performance since I wanted to share the pieces of cultures, history, politics, and personal struggles that led to the present moment, in which the audience, the performer, Gwen Rockler-Gladen, and I congregated in the theatre to experience the show together. After the opening performance, one audience member—at the time, he had been an acquaintance of mine—commented that he felt like he knew me better. Perhaps I had succeeded.

In her book, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Fischer-Lichte identifies the “ubiquitous performative turn” (18) in the 1960s, which resulted in a shift in scholarly views of the concept of “performance.” Instead of a static text to be read, the performance became a dynamic event to be experienced (162). The event and its aesthetic consists in the participants’ partaking in an autopoietic feedback loop, an erasure of binary oppositions—for instance, that between the performer and audience, and “situations of liminality that transform the participants of the performance” (163). As the performance transforms its participants, it also re-enchants the world. Re-enchantment allows us to rediscover the qualities of quotidian objects and participate in activities that make them extraordinary. For Jenn Stephenson, in autobiographical theatre “the performer attempts to communicate an intimate sense of what it means to be a particular self to a second-person assemblage of curious witnesses” (217). Autobiographical theatre transforms the subject’s inner psyche into an event to be experienced by external spectators. This process of communication situates a “stranger”, the subject being performed, into the witnesses’ social reality, “making the stranger less strange” (217). As an event, the autobiographical performance generates an interesting paradox. On the one hand, the quotidian notion of “self” becomes extraordinary. On the other, the performance’s primary goal must be to provide the audience with

an enhanced sense of intimacy with the subject of the performance. How does *The Nosebleed* navigate this tension? How does *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*?

The performative turn calls for a new aesthetic theory that, rather than utilizing the rhetoric of textual analysis, derives its vernacular from the performance's nature as an event. Fischer-Lichte suggests, "the notion of event is complemented by *mise en scène* and aesthetic experience" (182). *Mise en scène* constitutes the assembly of spatial and material elements of staging, including scenic, lighting, sound elements as well as the arrangement of performers on stage. Unlike in the context of the film as a textual medium, Fischer-Lichte considers the performative *mise en scène* to be flux and emergent, corresponsive to the aestheticity of performance and the "bodily co-presence" (32) of the performance's participants. The aesthetic experience comprises that precise moment of encounter mentioned above between "I" and "You"—between audience and performer—that occurs through the shared experience of the performance. Autobiographical theatre enhances this encounter through its complex interactions with the embodiment of a non-fictionalized subject. Though Fischer-Lichte ultimately denies that the success of these elements "cannot be planned" but are rather "emergent phenomenon", the *mise en scène* and the aesthetic experience are still useful ways to discuss directorial intention and the intended impact on the audience of a performance (189). Thus, through the lens of Fischer-Lichte's aesthetic theory of performance, this paper centralizes a comparative analysis between my experience as an audience member for Ogawa's *The Nosebleed* and the process of creating my honors performance, *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* to analyze how each show utilizes *mise en scène* to navigate the tension between reenchantment of the world and intimate communion. As I navigate this tension, I argue that *mise en scène*'s arrangement of space and the

presentation of the self through the aesthetic experience in both pieces of autobiographical performance collapse this dualism.

The Nosebleed

The Nosebleed's pre-show music introduces the audience to a repertoire of *enka* music, a genre of Japanese popular music popular among older Japanese generations (Okada). The stage features a white floor, sectioned into four equal horizontal parts, and a small white wall where hangs a frame. It seems bare. Bare does not mean devoid of meaning, but it does help in lowering the audience's guard. We do not have much to look at aside from a few prop tables and a set of office desk and chair that face away from the house. Even the visual focal point: a red jacket that hung on the back of the office chair, fades into our periphery after a while. I remember only very briefly discussing with my partner what would happen on that stage, before our conversation drifted to different territories. While we are caught up in our pre-show conversations and pleasantries, Aya Ogawa slithers onto the stage, seemingly undetected, greeting us with a simple "Hello everyone!" Their presence silences the room. Dressed in a casual pair of grey trousers and a white shirt with black stripes, Ogawa takes off their KN-95, and introduces themselves, then their play to the audience.

The Nosebleed, they say, initially only explored "failure." Of course, many audience members would already have known this from Ogawa's director's note, printed in the program: "Then it turned into an autobiographical play that focused specifically on what I consider one of the greatest failures of my life." Ogawa does not dwell further on the particularities of this failure—they do not need to, since the audience would soon be seeing this story. Instead, Ogawa introduces their first collaborator, Ashil Lee, who rushes down to the stage from his seat among

the audience.¹ Lee, too, introduces himself. Laughter arises among the audience as Lee delivers a stand-up comedy-style recount of their personal failure. At the end, she lets the audience know she will be “playing Aya, starting now.” As “Aya,” Lee introduces the audience to Kaili Y. Turner, the next actor and another Aya. The cycle continues until an ensemble of four Ayas: Lee (Aya 1), Turner (Aya 2), Saori Tsukada (as Aya 3), and Drae Campbell (Aya 4) has greeted and had a chance to share with the audience a small piece of their personal failures. The focus turns to the audience then: “Is there anyone in the audience who’d like to share a brief failure story?” Ogawa asks. I stick to my seat. One particularly brave audience member volunteers to share their story. I do not remember how this story went as much as the fact that the audience member had share it on their own accord. I wondered if it had felt cathartic for them.

Ogawa introduces themselves as a performer, then. In *The Nosebleed*, they play their son Kenya and their father Akira. Just like that, *The Nosebleed* begins. This seamless transition between the “pre-show” period and “the play itself” captures a piece of the world beyond *The Nosebleed* and brings it into the play. As the audience streamed into the theatre that evening, we each received a piece of notebook paper and a small golf pencil. Eventually, we would be using those items to write down the questions that “Aya” would ask their father the next time they talked to him. At one point audience members could volunteer to be on-stage and participate in a Japanese funeral ritual. In this ritual, audience volunteers work in pairs to pick up pieces of shredded paper using chopsticks. I volunteered for this moment and, briefly, shared the same stage with Ogawa and their ensemble. I will recollect this moment of connection in a later passage. “To fully engage with ‘The Nosebleed’ is to wrestle with the messy truths of losing a parent, and the questions they leave forever unanswered,” writes Thomas Floyd from *The*

¹ Ashil Lee uses “they/he/she” pronouns, and I, therefore, will be mirroring this flexibility and alternating among these pronouns to refer to them.

Washington Post. Ogawa's autobiography connects with the audience on a visceral level. Throughout *The Nosebleed*, elements of audience participation allowed for Ogawa's autobiography to not only "report on past memories" but also "bring into being new selves and imagine new futures" (Stephenson 218). Ogawa's self-story, thus, became a site for theirs, the performers', and the audience's transformation.

"Who here has watched the reality shows *The Bachelor* or *The Bachelorette*?": The Transformative Power of a Bare Set

The Nosebleed takes place in what Rhoda Feng of *BOMB Magazine* calls a "spartan white stage." The lighting rarely changes throughout the play. Rather, it remains a consistent white color, shining down from overhead until one pivotal moment. The office desk facing away from the audience provides a consistent anchor point, looming behind even the more whimsical scenes. Cobbled together from four prop desks and the items on them, set pieces come together easily and get broken down at the same speed, as though to represent "vignettes" of memories. In the white void of the stage, Ogawa and their ensemble realizes the distinct spatial environments associated with each vignette of Ogawa's life.

In scene one, aptly titled "*THE BACHELORETTE*", Lee and Campbell re-enact a scene from the reality TV show *The Bachelorette*. Thus far, in *The Nosebleed*'s narrative, Ogawa has been catching up on the show while they stayed in Japan to facilitate their children's schooling. Acting as storyteller proxies for Ogawa themselves, the four Ayas take turns introducing the premise of *The Bachelorette* to the audience. *The Bachelorette* is an American reality television show in which the titular bachelorette must find her true love by going on dates with twenty-five eligible bachelors. This introduction, prefaced by a self-aware admittance of shame about

watching *The Bachelorette* builds up the audience's expectation of this re-enactment: "addictive and horrible" entertainment where one "[watches] white people try to find true love on TV" (Ogawa 74). Thus, when Turner plays the background music to the re-enactment on a cassette player, I, as part of the audience, also begin participating in a process of creation. The music, localized on the stage by the small size of the cassette player, separates the space of the performers from the space of us, the audience. Lee and Campbell, re-enacting the scene, deliver direct addresses to the audience, mimicking the cuts to confessionals, a "defining characteristic" of reality television (Staples) that consists in reality the narration or commentary of reality shows' participants on the events that have unfolded. As the two embrace, the scene, which previously takes place in a barren, white-floored space, transforms in my mind into a reality television show set. As Lee and Campbell transition into a scene of a picnic date, Turner lays down a simple checkered picnic blanket downstage center. This has been enough to recreate the awkward *Bachelorette* date in Aspen, Colorado.

Lee and Campbell's embodiment of two reality television participants allow me to picture a different space. Fischer-Lichte quotes Johann Jakob Engel in saying that "the audience's illusion is destroyed whenever the actor's body ceases to represent the dramatic character but is perceived as the real body of the particular actor" (60). Throughout this reenactment of *The Bachelorette*, it appears that Ogawa wishes to separate the audience from what is occurring "on screen." The actors who play Aya cease to be themselves and instead morph into the dramatic characters that populate the world of *The Bachelorette*. In the script of *The Nosebleed*, Lee's dialogue is written as follows:

AYA 1 as DEAN What's up, Rach? (*To camera/ audience*) I'm very excited to see Rachel today. (*To RACHEL*) What's up? (*DEAN and RACHEL run toward each other to*

lift/embrace. Dean turns to camera/audience.) But I'm a little bit nervous. I'm scared of the uncertainty and everything. (Ogawa 2023, 75)

The stage direction for Lee instructs them to treat the audience also as a “camera.” Lee and Campbell’s corny and theatrical delivery of their lines in this scene contrasted directly with the conversational way they had been speaking to the audience before adopting their respective Dean and Rachel personas. The rapid changes between the performers’ asides to the “*camera/audience*” (emphasis in original) and their dialogue with one another simulate the whiplash editing style of reality television. In this style of editing, the audience watches a “cut” to a brief confessional to gain an insight into the show participant’s headspace during the event that transpired before the cut (Staples). As an audience member, I did not have as strong of a reaction to this scene as some others, as I was not familiar with the content of *The Bachelorette*.² Yet, by mimicking and parodying conventions of the reality television genre in staging this scene, Ogawa and their ensemble transformed the stage and its distance from the audience’s seats into the other side of a screen and turned my own experience of the theatre space into an encounter with a screen.

Fischer-Lichte charts out an apparent dichotomy between live performance and “mediatized” ones (67). In our contemporary digitized age, “as soon as electric amplification is used, one might say that an event is mediatized” (Auslander 24). A performance becomes mediatized when, rather than experiencing it “live”, one encounters a digital reproduction of it. Because of its oppositional relationship to liveness, mediatized performances do not count on the simultaneous presence of performer and audience bodies in live performing spaces and invalidate the autopoietic feedback loop generated through the exchange of energy in that space. In the case

² It is worth noting that this scene used text taken directly from episode 8 in season 13 of *The Bachelorette*.

of reality television, such as *The Bachelorette*, audiences see “reality” as modulated through extensive production processes of filming and editing. By invoking the screen through the reality television set-up, Lee and Campbell’s re-enactment of *The Bachelorette* transforms the audience’s experience of this moment. The premise that Lee and Campbell are both playing “Aya” mediates this reproduction of a television scene, turning it from “watching Rachel and Dean” to “experiencing how Ogawa watches Rachel and Dean”.

In a moment of departure, Rachel asks Dean a non-sequitur question: “Why haven’t you talked to your dad in two years?” (Ogawa 2023, 76) This question provokes Dean to leave Rachel on the picnic blanket and walk away. I had not been able to confirm whether the dialogue following this question also took place in the actual *Bachelorette* episode. However, the question that seemed to come out of nowhere pulled me into Ogawa’s headspace the moment they encountered this *Bachelorette* scene. No real cameras were involved in this re-enactment. Instead, Ogawa’s experience of *The Bachelorette* becomes the “camera” that “films” and the producers and editors who “edit” this scene. As we watched Lee stumble through answering these questions, we, the audience, felt how Ogawa interacted with the television, how they projected themselves onto the mediatized bodies of Rachel and Dean on the screen. Both Rachel and Dean were “Aya.” In his stumbled-out answers, Lee betrays a reluctance of his rendition of “Aya” to be vulnerable and confront the questions about familial relations that watching *The Bachelorette* has raised. Playing on the mediatization of “reality,” the scene mediates the audience’s perception of this *Bachelorette* moment through Ogawa’s autobiography. As Lee and Campbell begin engaging in a self-aware dialogue about a strained relationship with a father figure, the scene becomes less *The Bachelorette* and more Ogawa’s internal monologue, bridging my transition out of the world of “*The Batch*” (Ogawa 74). As Ogawa, playing their son Kenya,

directed my and the Ayas' attention to the next scene, I escaped the recreated picnic date in Aspen, Colorado and returned to the space of the Walker Arts Center.

At the end of scene eight, the audience has the opportunity to write down the questions they did not get to ask their fathers with the pencil and papers they were given. Throughout the performance, Ogawa transforms from embodying their son Kenya to embodying their father Akira Ogawa. They wear the red jacket that was previously hanging on the back of the office chair and sat there with their back turned to the rest of the Ayas and the audience. As this image persists throughout *The Nosebleed*, Ogawa's silent presence as their father emphasizes the continuity of Akira Ogawa's *absence* in Ogawa's life. After all Ayas have finished writing their questions, the Ayas collect the audience's questions. Turner's "Aya" decides that this next moment is "our chance to ask [these questions]" (Ogawa 89) as all Ayas push Tsukada toward the study, where Ogawa-as-their father still sat, impassive yet looming. The stage direction in this moment reads, "*Suddenly we are in theatrical lighting*" (89).

Throughout the performance, I had grown accustomed to the overhead white lighting of the Walker. In this moment of transition between scene eight and scene nine, the sudden change in lighting immediately transported me to a different space. The room went dark. The only light throughout this scene shone in a narrow strip that encompassed Ogawa and Tsukada, resembling the view of a cracked-open door looking into a dark room. Once again, I participated in the act of collective creation alongside the cast of *The Nosebleed* and other audience members. Suddenly, I shared not only Ogawa's space but also their memory of this moment: "one of the last times [they] talked to [their] dad" (89). In scene nine, Tsukada's Aya is alone with their father. The moment of vulnerability heightens the coldness associated with the memory of Akira Ogawa's office space. By maintaining the consistent bright lighting throughout its duration, *The*

Nosebleed placed me not only into the space of Akira Ogawa's office, but also engaged me with the anxiety that this moment must have caused Ogawa. Tsukada stood center stage right while Ogawa and the desk sat upstage center. Like a child, she called out, “父 父 父 (Pause) 父父父 / [Dad...Dad.]” (89) In truth, the distance between their bodies in that moment had not been that great. Yet, the singular strip of light that illuminated them generated a seemingly irreconcilable distance. The feeling of distance in that moment allowed my mind to fill in the gaps left by the lack of physical set pieces. There had only been one chair aside from the one Ogawa was using, but I was still immersed in my mind's recreation of a room cluttered with chairs, described in scene four.

In scene ten, “The Funeral,” audience volunteers were invited onto the stage to participate in a funeral ritual. Lee and Campbell take turns explaining the ritual as follows:

AYA 1 (*intimately, to the audience*) In the Japanese Buddhist tradition, most people are cremated, and when their remains are pulled out of the oven, everyone gathers around and looks at the bones and dust.

AYA 4 Perhaps you can still make out the form of the human body.

AYA 1 Some parts of the larger bones might remain. And the friends and relatives of the deceased use chopsticks and work in pairs to pick up the larger pieces of bone together and place them in the urn. (Ogawa 2023, 91-92)

The specific invocation of a ritual directly links the scene to liminal transformation, the moment of rupture that disrupts dominant, pre-established structures, such as the boundaries between performer and audience. At the beginning of the show, the boundary between the audience and performance spaces had already been broken throughout the Ayas' entrance from the audience's seating. However, in this moment audience members are invited to transgress this boundary. As I

volunteered to participate, I directly embedded myself into the diegetic spatial landscape of *The Nosebleed*. During this ritual, Turner instructed me on where I should stand and when I should begin my turn in the ritual. As I observed others performing the funeral ritual, I also began to crave for my turn. Yet, the closer it got to that moment, the more I began to fear: what if I tripped? What if I, somehow, could not hold my chopsticks properly?

I had been wearing a pair of platform heels that clacked with every step. This noise broke the silent ritual, amplifying my presence in the room as an unnamed audience member who would be partaking in the event on stage. No other audience volunteer had worn such noisy shoes—I wondered if Ogawa or the ensemble noticed this detail as much as I did. The “bones” we would pick up were shredded paper from the audience’s questions toward their fathers. I received a pair of chopsticks from Campbell and, alongside another audience member, picked up the “bones” and moved them into an urn. The actual moment in which I participated in the funeral ritual came and went quickly. Akira Ogawa, still embodied by his child, watched as we picked his “bones”. As I faced Ogawa, I came to treat the shredded paper with as much respect as if they had been real bones. In her discussion of the *mise en scène*, Fischer-Lichte considers that “[it] can therefore be defined and described as a process that aims at the reenchantment of the world and the metamorphosis of the performance’s participants” (189). By participating in the funeral ritual, an element of *mise en scène*, I came to see a pile of shredded paper assembled to resemble a human shape as an object I should regard with reverence.

「ハ °ハ °、なかなかいて °。た °いし °ようふ °。ハ °ハ °。」: A Tale of Four Ayas

In the script and in the show’s program, Ogawa refers to themselves as “AYA 0/KENYA/DAD” (Ogawa 2023, 73; *The Nosebleed* program). In fact, their embodiment of themselves ends at the end of the scene entitled “Introduction:”

AYA 0 [...] So before we get to my failure, I have to tell you that I will also be performing in this play, but unlike my collaborators, I won't be playing Aya—instead I'll play a couple of other people. And the first person I'll be playing is my younger son, Kenya, at the age of five, having the titular nosebleed.

AYA 0 takes a vial of fake blood and squeezes a big dollop of blood into their nose.

Blood comes pouring out, covering their face, neck, and hands. aya 0, as kenya, sees the blood on his hands and starts screaming and crying. (Ogawa 2023, 74)

In a play about their life, Ogawa chose to embody their son and their father. Ogawa's "self" in *The Nosebleed* spread out evenly into the four performers: Lee (Aya 1), Turner (Aya 2), Tsukada (Aya 3), and Campbell (Aya 4). The four Ayas, most distinct from one another in their ethnicities, appeared to represent multiple aspects of Ogawa. Diep Tran, writing for *Joy Sauce*, speculates that Tsukada, who had the most ties to a Japanese ethnic identity, represented Ogawa's more "Japanese" side. Although Ogawa, themselves, had gender non-conforming identities, this aspect of themselves laid dormant and unexplored in this work. Instead, the job of representing these identities rested on Campbell, a transmasculine lesbian and Lee, a trans nonbinary person. Perhaps it had been no coincidence, then, that the "most Japanese" out of four Ayas would handle the most emotionally resonant scenes, and that the pinnacle of the central story of failure would be presented in Japanese.

Scene nine presents a conversation between Ogawa and their father. Tsukada was the only "Aya" who could speak fluent Japanese. Thus, she speaks as Ogawa while Campbell stands away from the scene, paraphrasing the conversation ever so often to the audience. These dialogues are only translated in the script. However, even with the translation it is difficult to discern the nuances of the language utilized without native proficiency of the Japanese language.

Thus, as an outside observer throughout the performance of *The Nosebleed*, I could only discern what each actor had been saying through Campbell's English translation of this exchange. The exclusivity of this scene's language eventually becomes usurped as Tsukada's Aya grew frustrated with Akira Ogawa and flees the scene. Lee steps in to replace Tsukada, while Campbell goes off to embody Ogawa's mother, and Turner steps in to replace Campbell as the translator. From here, the language grows recognizably more simplistic, as though Lee's Aya has morphed into a child consoling their dying father. The final words exchanged between parent and child in this scene are Lee's consolation of Akira Ogawa, telling him to not cry.

The separation of Ogawa's "self" into four distinct bodies affords *The Nosebleed* this variation in portraying Ogawa's reaction to each episode in their life. Doing so, Ogawa theatricalizes their interactions with the world. The aesthetic experience of *The Nosebleed* intrinsically consists in the audience's encounter with these four "selves." Ogawa's four "selves" are not in conflict—in fact, the most they do is squabble among themselves to figure out which side should be the first to face a difficult situation (Ogawa 2023, 89). Ultimately, Ogawa's selves navigate the world as a unified group despite representing different facets of Ogawa. Helen Shaw writes of scene ten's funeral ritual, "[suddenly], the reason for the many selves becomes clear — they can conduct the loving funeral the original Ogawa never could. Even the audience is called in to help: Many hands make light the load." Thus, it is Ogawa's four selves, rather than Ogawa themselves, who interacted with audiences in *The Nosebleed* and with whom the audience became acquainted. Yet I felt a sense of emotional catharsis by the end of *The Nosebleed* as Tsukada, playing Princess Diana, took Akira Ogawa's hand and led him to the afterlife. Certainly, I had not been the only audience member who felt this way. Jill C. Shomer of *Columbia College Today* recalls "sobbing hard enough that [she] left with the hiccups."

The Nosebleed's mise en scène invited its audience into the shared act of creation alongside the show's cast, thus empowering them to perceive the world as imbued with extraordinary qualities. Meanwhile, the show's division of Ogawa's self into four allowed each actor to equally embody themselves and Ogawa. It did not take much to notice, for instance, that all the Aya's did not look like Ogawa or that Lee's Aya spoke Japanese with a Korean accent. In an interview with Shomer, quoted above, Ogawa says, "I thought that if [...] I wrote autobiographically and took responsibility by presenting the story myself with my body and my voice as part of the mechanism of this, that it would eradicate that question of truthfulness". By removing the concern for "truth" in the audience and representing themselves as a multitude, Ogawa brought themselves and their exploration of failure to the audience. The combination of *The Nosebleed's mise en scène* and its aesthetic experience of Ogawa's "self" collapses the boundaries between reenchantment of the world and intimate communion.

Anti-Cartesian Variety Show

When I talk about *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*, I describe it in a myriad of ways: an attempt to detangle a philosophical concept, a multimedia performance art piece, a documentary. However, at its core, *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* encapsulates a piece of autobiographical theatre collaged from texts that I encountered. The play features only one white performer, Gwen Rockler-Gladen, who plays me and many other "characters." The performance occurs in a minimalist domestic space in a black box theatre. In one moment, the actor morphs from one character into another in quick succession. In another, the actor traverses throughout the playing space with a slow, deliberate walk, "existing" rather than "acting." Events play out in bursts, as a collection of vignettes that jumps erratically through time and space. For instance, in scene six,

the audience watches a commercial for Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. As the commercial ends, the audience sees the performer traverse the space slowly as she moves set pieces to their next position in the scene.³ The next moment is a re-enactment of sports spectatorship accompanied by a projection of a nonimmigrant visa application that transitions into a monologue taken from Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*. Finally, the scene arrives at a marionette-like recitation of a passage that defines the philosophical concept "rhizome" quoted from Deleuze and Guattari's aforementioned book. Imbuing myself into the performance using projection and sound, I extinguish the possibility of interpreting the events on stage as anyone else's life but my own. Yet, with an aspiration to put to practice nebulous concepts like "presence", "rhizome", and "intimacy", I attempted to use my self-story as a jumping off point. According to one audience member, the performance "feels like scrolling on [the short-form video social media] TikTok".

"LIVE WITH A STUDIO AUDIENCE!": Malleability in the Performance Space

I wanted the performance space to be flexible so that it could accommodate the wide variety of scenes in the show. Thus, set designer Jessica Chen and I collaborated to best understand our set needs. Scenes four and seven of the play reenacts the pivotal argument scene from the film *Marriage Story* (Baumbach), in which two divorced parents, Nicole and Charlie (portrayed in the film by Scarlett Johansson and Adam Driver) engage in a futile argument about the person at fault for their separation. I added this scene initially as a call-back to a previous performance I had directed, where I juxtaposed the two characters' argument with projection footage of their monologues about what they once loved about one another. For a show that

³ Rockler-Gladen uses she/they pronouns and I will switch between these two pronouns in reference to them to reflect this.

encapsulates the journey of how I arrived at the present moment, I thought that including a text I had directed prior would be appropriate. Throughout the process of *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*'s artistic development, I transformed the argument into a situational comedy (sitcom) segment that also serves as an exploration of the disconnect between the way I mediate the world in Vietnamese and in English.

Though these two scenes could take place anywhere, I opted to set them in a domestic living room environment. The setting of a living room denoted a private space, further enhanced by the physical presence of only one actor. This decision influenced the set pieces for the rest of the show. The environment of a domestic living room setting was accomplished through an arrangement of two armchairs that would sandwich a whiteboard, which would serve as our projection surface, and a small cubby that would serve as our prop storage. Throughout the show, only one armchair would be moved to new locations in order to define new environments. For instance, in scene four, the chair sits facing the audience upstage left, simulating an open living room. In scene five, the chair has moved to the center left of the stage, facing the whiteboard with its back against the audience. These two moments constructed two distinct "living room spaces", denoting a graduation among private spaces.

I collaborated with lighting designer Scout Holding Eagle-Bushaw and sound designer Asher Younger to create two distinct lighting looks and soundscapes for scenes four and seven. To create the *mise en scène* for scene four, I asked Holding Eagle-Bushaw to recreate a flat, shadowless lighting scheme of a three-point camera sitcom set. As part of the sitcom soundscape, I asked Younger to create sound cues for laugh tracks that would be played throughout the scene. Initially, Rockler-Gladen would have acted alongside a filmed footage of me for both *Marriage Story* scenes. Growing up alongside the advancements of mobile screen technology, I have

experienced life equally on- and offline. Thus, I had been drawn to the idea of juxtaposing Rockler-Gladen's live performance with my own mediatized one. However, due to time constraints, these filmed footage eventually were replaced by a different form of mediatization: individually-cued recorded dialogues. These pieces of dialogues turn the domestic sitcom setting of scene four into an outward-facing headspace. As such, throughout both scenes four and seven, Rockler-Gladen re-enacts the *Marriage Story* argument scene with the text spoken in a recording. These recorded voices eventually become prominent elements of the *mise en scène*. In creating the soundscape for each scene, Younger and I experimented with the directions from which each line of dialogue came. In scene four, the dialogues only come from two speakers placed upstage on opposite sides. However, in scene seven, where the mood of the scene becomes serious, the dialogue moves across both the performance and audience's spaces.

At the climax of the scene, the line “Tao không thể tin cả đời này tao sẽ phải dính với mày! [I can't believe I have to know you forever!]" (Nguyen 10; see Appendix A) causes the character to collapse onto the floor. In this moment, I envisioned that this line would come out of all four speakers. During technical rehearsals, Younger experimented with programming the line so that it would move from one speaker to another among the four speakers placed in four corners of the theater. In scene four, I wanted for there to be a clear distinction between the performance space and the audience space to generate the spatiality of a sitcom set. Because of my intention for the scene, I wanted all recorded dialogues to originate from the two speakers placed on stage. However, in scene seven, I aimed to collapse the boundaries between the performance space and audience space. Younger's experiment with routing the line of dialogue through all four speakers created a much more dynamic way to delineate the collapsed

boundaries between the performer and audience. Thus, I kept this moment of sound design in the final performance.

“[emerging] among the audience”: Bodily Co-presence Among Audience Members

One of my first intentions going into staging *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* was to make the audience feel like they have just watched a documentary, and to explore the concept of intimacy. Thus, I conceptualized the audience space of *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* to resemble an outdoor movie screening set-up. Some of my early inspiration photos show cozy scenes, decorated by fairy lights, where pillows and blankets are utilized as seating. Scenic designer Jessica Chen stayed faithful to this vision as I worked together with her on the set elements. In an ideal world, the audience’s seating would consist in pillows, blankets, as well as comfortable couches spread out on the ground of the theater. I had envisioned this seating even before going into staging. I wrote these aspirational directions down in the text of the play. In scene two, the character “*emerges among the audience*” (Nguyen 1). In scene six, she would walk among the audience during a recording of an extended land acknowledgement to hand out red pockets with chocolate coins. At the end of the performance, Rockler-Gladen would return to her previous seat in the audience. I had Fischer-Lichte in mind as I conceptualized Rockler-Gladen walking among the audience. To define the *mise en scène*, Fischer-Lichte writes, “staging proceeds from the insight that the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators is required to generate the performance” (187). Rockler-Gladen’s movements among the audience, thus, intended to highlight the particular liveness of this performance.

Due to logistical constraints, we had not been able to configure the audience seating without a set of seat risers. Chen and I proceeded with the vision of a film screening and opted for a hybrid between the folding theater seats that were already installed in the space and floor

seating using the blankets and pillows. In our communication, Chen discussed taking out some chairs and replacing them with cushions and throw pillows for a more relaxed and intimate feeling. We decided to spread the pillows out among each level of seating and used the ground level almost exclusively for floor seats (fig. 1; see Appendix B). This set-up brought forth new challenges. Chen came up with the idea to position Rockler-Gladen on a floor seat as a means to signal to the audience that they could sit there. However, in our first and second performances we still had difficulty in inviting the audience to occupy these seats on the floor level. As I watched the audiences fill in their seats, I found that many would head straight to the theater seats rather than the ones on the floors. Throughout the first and second performances, I noticed that many audience members had been faculty members of the college that I had invited. Many in this demographic talked about not being able to use the floor seats due to the lack of comfort that they would offer. However, comfort was evidently not the only barrier to the floor seats since students who also attended performances had been reluctant to take the floor seats despite having been informed by the team of ushers that floor seating was encouraged.

It was only in the third and final performance, for which the show had a full house, that the seats on the floor level were fully occupied. The audience of mostly students squeezed together in the floor seating space all theater seats had been occupied. As the show's director in the space, the atmosphere felt different with the full occupation of these floor seats. I remember seeing a group of students filing in right before the show began in this third performance, frantically looking for seats and ending up sitting close together on the house left side of the floor until the very end of the show. In a note from the same production meeting mentioned in the previous section, I described the experience of *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* as one "where you're watching a movie with your friends and [...] your attention turns sporadically between the

“film” you’re watching and the actual experience of being there, making connections with the people around you”. Compared to the first two performances, the feeling of the audience space generated in the third performance felt the most similar to how I had intended. Perhaps the difference between the third show and the previous two had been the lack of theater seat options, although I hesitate to consider it the definitive reason to the audience’s reluctance to occupy the floor.

Though I cannot speak for other audience members, the seating on the floor afforded me a more intimate connection with members of the audience I already knew. In the first performance, I positioned myself on a floor seat beside my cousin and partner. Throughout the performance, I felt empowered to rest my head on my companions’ shoulders or fully lean on them. I did not feel this encouraged ability to touch in the third performance, when I seated myself next to my partner in the theater seats on the highest level of the seat risers. This transformation in my own comfort through the *mise en scène* of the audience space could have resulted in what Fischer-Lichte considers the “liminal, transformative experience” (54). My claim, of course, brings up the important question of the threshold of “transformation:” how much transformation should there be for a moment to be “transformative.” Could the micro-scale moment in which two audience members inch closer together be considered a transformative experience? Due to the scope of this project, I leave this question to further studies.

“These lines always tie back to one another”: A Philosophical Detour

I base the structure of *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* upon the concept of the rhizome. Thus, I intend for it to reflect the transnational, rhizomatic flow of cultures, capital, and people. Thus, I constructed my “self” in *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* from vignettes that demonstrate a

wide range of historical, cultural, personal, and political context that led to my appearance on the stage at the very end of the show. For this reason, I would now like to take a philosophical detour to demonstrate these interconnections. I will first explain the curious presence of a text from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in the play. This will follow a discussion of the phrase “*Anti-Cartesian*” in the show’s title as well as how the rhizome can help one conceive of a Self.

As Rockler-Gladen emerges from their seat among the audience in scene two, they recite a quote taken from *A Thousand Plateaus*, written by Deleuze and Guattari:

Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees. [...] These lines always tie back to one another. That is why one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad. [...] The] book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an aparallel evolution of the book and the world; the book assures the deterritorialization of the world, but the world effects a reterritorialization of the book, which in turn deterritorializes itself in the world. [...] Mimicry is a very bad concept, since it relies on binary logic to describe phenomena of an entirely different nature.

(9-11)

In the initial production meeting, I mentioned wanting to explore the concept of the “rhizome” and use it as a way to structure the whole of the performance. Brent Adkins describes this chapter in *A Thousand Plateaus* as “a sort of user’s guide” (22), an introduction into how one might read and understand how connections are made in the book. The rhizome consists in a horizontal structure with no center that sprawls out in a multitude of unpredictable directions. “Rhizomes do not propagate by way of clearly delineated hierarchies but by underground stems

in which any part may send additional shoots upward, downward, or laterally” (23). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome forms and propagates a network of non-hierarchical connections among visual and performance art, science, language, music, mathematics, and further. The book attempts to make connections with manners of expression beyond the realm of the written word and spread beyond its form, to “form a rhizome with the world” rather than merely representing or describing it.

Yet, despite these connections, the lines of segmentarity of a rhizome “always tie back to one another”. It is crucial here that I illuminate the origin of the phrase “Anti-Cartesian” in the show’s title. Deleuze and Guattari clearly reflect a deep influence from the Enlightenment philosopher Baruch Spinoza (Adkins 31). Throughout the staging of *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*, I had been taking a class on Spinoza. This continual influx of knowledge throughout my process of creation undergirds my artistic exploration throughout the show. In Spinoza’s philosophical system, everything is an expression of the same immanent Substance. He refutes the dominant Enlightenment view that originated with René Descartes. In the Cartesian system, the immaterial mind and material body constitute two distinct Substances of thought and extension. Spinoza begins from this point of view in his work, the *Ethics*, and demonstrates through geometric reasoning that thought and extension, in fact, express the same Substance. If Descartes’ two substances consist in a dualistic system, then Spinoza’s one substance is monistic. This Substance continually exists and, by virtue of its existence, causes the existence of everything else.⁴

⁴ Many would refute the creative potential of Spinoza’s system. Like Hegel, one may say “that if monism is true, then nothing new can arise, because everything is already contained in a complete and static ‘One’” (Adkins 31). Yet, Spinoza’s monism, as claimed by Adkins, does not concern ontology—how things come into existence, but, rather, metaphysics—the nature of things that already exist. This particular response to Spinoza, thus, does not hold true, as Spinoza’s system already is not concerned with how new things can arise.

Thus, using the framework of monistic Substance, I view the “self” through the rhizome. If, according to Spinoza, Substance expresses itself infinitely through everything that exists and if this Substance has a tendency to express itself rhizomatically, as Deleuze and Guattari would say, then “I”, as an expression of Substance, form rhizomatic connections with the world and the world, in turns forms rhizomatic connections with me. Adkins further comments, “[Deleuze and Guattari] want to write a rhizome that connects to the outside, and that transforms their book and the outside. They want not so much readers as fellow creators” (32). Thus, *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* demonstrates my attempt to create alongside Deleuze and Guattari. Coming into the show, I had anticipated that few would understand a philosophical argument I had been attempting to make. For this reason, *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* is a performance, not a lecture. In creating the show, I understand my “self” as a rhizome. Each vignette of *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* investigates how my “self” is constructed through its interactions and interconnections with world events, cultural elements, and, of course, others.

“There is a camera on stage”: Collapsing Boundaries Between Live and Mediatized Selves

I had Fischer-Lichte specifically in mind as I staged this performance since I wanted to foreground, but not explicitly mention, ideas in her text that profoundly impacted my thinking on the theatre. Thus, I began with such high-brow questions as “how does an encounter with the body on screen and an encounter with a body on stage play out at the same time in the age of mobile screen technology?” This question led me to Fischer-Lichte’s remarks on “mediatized performances” (68) that the screen invalidates co-presence and the autopoietic feedback loop. Fischer-Lichte discusses Frank Castorf’s staging of Dotoyevsky’s *The Idiot* in 2002 to emphasize this point. In it, the audience experiences a theatrical performance that was simultaneously

filmed. In the first half of the performance, the audience could see the actors' bodies on stage, alongside their faces on the screen. However, in the second half, the actors completely disappeared from the stage. The audience watched a live performance during which the stage was empty and their experiences were, instead, mediated through the camera. Fischer-Lichte writes:

Usually, the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators is taken for granted in theatre performances. Likewise, it is not missed in a movie theatre or in front of the television. In this case, however, the bodily presence of the actors constantly threatened to disappear as the result of its own mediatization. These recorded sequences at least seemed to interrupt the feedback loop. The spectators watched the video images but could not influence them. (73)

These notions hold up on the reenactment of *The Bachelorette* in *The Nosebleed*. Laura Mulvey's influential, psychoanalytical theory of the gaze posits that the film viewer adopts the point of view of a domineering, masculine figure. The mere act of watching the screen subjects the spectator to adopting the perspective of the phallic apparatus that is the camera. Thus, sitting behind a screen, film audiences project their desires onto the filmic images and representations instead of participating in the shared ritual of live performance. Understanding *The Bachelorette*'s reproduction to be a reenactment of a television show, the audience assumed the perspective of Ogawa mindlessly watching this entertainment. Lee and Campbell's embodiment of Rachel and Dean reflects Ogawa's projection of their guilt over their relationship with their father onto the mediatized figures on screen. Here, the understanding of the screen is congruent with dominant theories of the screen, such as Mulvey's gaze theory, in which the spectators are relegated to this singular act of watching. This passive "watching" also seems to confirm

Fischer-Lichte's observation above, that, when watched, the bodies of the performers "disappear" and are subjected to the spectator's perspective.

However, more contemporary screen theories reject this notion of the singular gaze. Lee Grieveson calls for a new theory of the screen that takes into account the role of the screen as a regulator of conduct and a means of cultural governance. For Grieveson, the screen interacts with the contemporary person as a technology of subjectification. In this lens, we interact with the contemporary screen not as a mere spectator, but a participant in the process of subjectification that constantly occurs through the flow of power among filmic performances and our performances of everyday life. Grieveson must have foreseen the rising popularity of touchscreen devices at the time of writing. We have moved beyond a time when the only action toward screens is "spectatorship". In our contemporary lives, we conduct haptic interactions with the screens through the action of touching, swiping, or typing. The post-COVID, portable screen mediates human interactions. I have once caressed my partner's face on the phone because I had not been able to reach him due to our geographical distances. Thus, "mediatization" no longer consists in the same process that negates bodily co-presence and the autopoietic feedback loop. As part of the generation that grew up alongside the proliferation of smart, touchscreen phones and an increasingly interactive, horizontal internet, I challenge such a clear-cut dichotomy between mediatized performance and live performance. In *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*, I intervene in this dichotomy through the use of live projections.

At the top of the show, we project a live feed footage of the stage onto the whiteboard. As the stage also contains the whiteboard, the effect generated allows the audience to see the stage reflected infinitely into itself. As one of the first things the audience would encounter as they walked into the space, I wanted the images projected on the whiteboard to reflect how the

mediatization of bodies and spaces also participate in the autopoietic feedback loop. In fact, throughout all three performances, I attempted to invite the audience to interact with the live camera as well as the whiteboard. During the pre-show moments of the third performance, a trio of audience members finally did. They sat right below the camera, on one of the seats on the floor level. Upon raising their arms, the three audience members discovered that the movements of their hands would be projected onto the whiteboard. This realization enabled them to begin playing with their hands, turning them into puppets that interacted with one another. Similarly, audience members who stepped up to the whiteboard to interact with it seemed to suddenly become aware of their bodies. Like the trio of audiences before, they also began to move and influence the way their bodies would move in the projection. The same process also occurred in me as I examined my own image in the projection. In the case of Castorf's performance, the audience experienced a live performance simultaneously with a mediatized one. As they began to lose the bodily co-presence with the performers to the screen, they began to crave seeing these real bodies. Live projections in *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*, thus, mediated the dichotomy between "live" and "mediatized" performances. The audience encountered their own bodies reflected back to them and immediately began to attempt to affect this reflection. The audience's encounter with the mediatized performance of their own selves seemed to heighten their awareness of their own bodies in space and encourage them to "perform" themselves.

The screen's relationship with the self plays a major role in other instances in *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*. In scene eight, Rockler-Gladen delivered eight monologues in succession, accompanied by a projected screen recording of the anonymous online counter-mapping platform, *Queering the Map*. The platform aims to "digitally archive LGBTQ2IA+ experience in relation to physical space" (LaRochelle n.d.) and, thus, contains a

sprawling multiplicity of anonymous queer experiences. On this platform, one could place a pin on any location on a world map and input their own text, which would be archived anonymously alongside the pin's location. In *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*'s script, I put together the text accompanying seven of these pins, which offer vignettes into a largely invisible queer life from my home: Hanoi, Vietnam. In response to them, I added to *Queering the Map* a "confession" of my own, detailing my current experience with my gender identity in Vietnamese. I intended for this moment to equally generate a sense of solitude and a sense of connectedness of a young queer person while they browse and contribute to *Queering the Map* from their own laptop. As such, the screen recording also contained the "clicking" sound of a computer mouse and the sound of typing on one's keyboards. As the mouse clicked on each "pin," Rockler-Gladen would read them aloud, attempting to embody the pins' authors while mediating these texts through her own experience of queerness.

This scene underwent multiple revisions in rehearsals. In the final version of the scene, Rockler-Gladen stands next to the whiteboard, where the screen recording is projected and simply delivers the text of each pin to the audience. In the rehearsal room, we explored the possibilities of using a real laptop as a prop as well as a lighting device. However, I found that the scene emotionally impacted me the most when Rockler-Gladen simply delivered the text of the pins toward the audience. When Rockler-Gladen simply delivered the lines, she generated in me the coexisting feelings of isolation and solace in an online encounter with these anonymous others. Mediated through Rockler-Gladen's live performance and through my own experience of queerness, the voices of faceless, nameless, mediatized strangers became embodied. For me, this encounter with anonymous queer "others" could only be generated with the inclusion of media precisely due to these strangers' location in Hanoi, Vietnam. This encounter represented a

moment of rupture, in which my “self” forms a rhizome with these mediatized “others” through our common experience of queerness and, even more simply, our common experience of being on the *Queering the Map* platform.

“I don’t know you, but I truly, deeply want to”: Emotional Catharsis for Whom?

I always cry at the ending of *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*; always at the part of it where I thank the network of people that inspired, suffered, and assisted me so I could reach that ending. Leading up to this moment, Rockler-Gladen invites me—the director—on stage for a final round of the card game “We’re not really strangers”. In this game, players get to know one another through questions that span three levels of intimacy: Perception, Connection, and Reflection; players take turns drawing question cards and all players must answer the questions. We had been playing the game throughout our rehearsals and planned to finish it on stage. For the duration of *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*, the audience experiences glimpses of the director through the incorporation of projection and sound. My appearance throughout the end of the show, thus, aims to bolster a connection among the bodies on stage, the subject of the play, and the audience. The ending recontextualizes the stage events that had occurred so far and serves as a point in which my rhizomatic exploration spreads out to directly include the audience.

Rockler-Gladen had slowly moved the set pieces throughout the performance so that in the final scene I would be sitting in an armchair placed downstage center, facing the audience, next to a whiteboard that would serve as a live feed projection surface (fig. 2; see Appendix B). As I sat down on an armchair placed downstage center, next to a live feed projection of this very moment, Rockler-Gladen asked the audience to draw cards from the third level of “We’re not really strangers.” In staging this moment of audience interaction, I intended to generate an

explicit encounter between the self in the autobiography and the audience. In my direction, the moment would serve as a “ritual” that the audience and I would participate in together. I considered Fischer-Lichte’s conception of the staging of liminal moments that would transform all participants in the performance. As a director, I intended to break the interaction between the audience and Rockler-Gladen as an actor. Though I wanted to show glimpses of Rockler-Gladen as a purely existing self through slow walks, acknowledging her self beyond the character she plays, the moment of the card game indicates a point of rupture, where Rockler-Gladen ceases encountering the audience as an “actor” altogether.

Rockler-Gladen asks the audience to draw the question cards for us to answer. Fischer-Lichte considers this interaction with the audience to be a moment of “role-reversal” between the audience and performers, “an interplay of disempowerment and empowerment which applies to both artists and spectators. The artists relinquish their powerful positions as the performance’s sole creators; they agree to share – to varying degrees, of course – their authorship and authority with the audience” (50). Importantly, in order for the role reversal to be effective, Fischer-Lichte posits that it must follow moments where the audience did not have as much power over the outcome of the performance. Throughout all three performances of *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*, the moment in which Rockler-Gladen exited their “acting” self to invite me on the stage and introduce the card game consistently served as a turning point for the audience. In that moment, the audience seemed to be released. The audience always met my movement onto the stage with some sort of reaction: laughter or applause, which had largely been absent throughout the show.

During a meeting about this performance, my advisor Randy Reyes stressed the importance of vulnerability throughout the card game. Implementing this feedback, the moment

of connection with the audience at the end of *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* allowed them to see my “self” in a way that had previously not been available through previous scenes.

Conclusion

The interventions made by *The Nosebleed* and *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* to the dichotomy in autobiographical performance between the reenchantment of the world and intimate communion heavily draw from the lives of their respective autobiographical subjects. Ogawa’s representation of *The Bachelorette* and their interactions with those on-screen events indicates an entirely different relationship to the screen from my direct incorporation of live projections and screen recordings to represent the virtual world. Similarly, Ogawa’s identity as a Japanese-American informs the way they split themselves into four. The four Ayas underscore the complex interplay between self, racialization, and queerness in American society. Compared to this self-portrayal, the mediatized and live selves I sought to portray reflect an interplay between a global, Anglicized identification with queer strangers on the internet and a cultural and historical identification with a Vietnamese identity.

As a young director, I know that comparing my own honors performance to Ogawa’s Obie Award-winning show is a tall order. As I wrote about *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*, I dwelled on my intentions with the piece rather than the intended effects. This is because while my intentions with *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show* are evident to me, many did not translate to the audience. In a debrief meeting, I received the feedback that my preoccupation with forms and high-brow concepts became a shortcoming of my performance. Indeed, a few audience members I spoke to after the show could not connect to the subject of the performance—myself, until the card game, as the direct inclusion of the concept of the rhizome had been confusing and

inaccessible. The project of writing and performing a rhizome demands that Rockler-Gladen's self must also be acknowledged. However, *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*'s original conception as a show performed by me had led me to neglect exploring how Rockler-Gladen shows up as themselves in the final piece. The breadth of the concepts I purported to implement also limited the final show, as it did not leave room for any of these big ideas to play out in a satisfying manner. This comparative analysis had been an illuminating project, as it allowed me to see the ways in which a more experienced artist crafted space and staged the "self", while translating the more theoretical aspects of the play into empirical experiences that would become grounds for human connections.

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Appendix A: *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*'s script

ANTI-CARTESIAN VARIETY SHOW

A collage

Collaged created by Huong (Jess) Nguyen

Length: 40-60 minutes (hopefully on the lower end)

#1: on stage

#2: in person and on film (unison)

#3: on film

These three are all the same person. Not the same actor.

1. Preshow:

There is a camera on stage. An intimate setting. As the audience enters, the camera films the house.

PROJECTION: footage of house. During this pre-show period, audiences may explore the playing space, but may not touch the camera.

2. A lecture:

*#1 emerges among the audience. As they speak, PROJECTION shows a recording of #3 repeating the same text. #3 is reading this text in a conference room while highlighting it from its book-source: *A Thousand Plateaus* by Deleuze and Guattari.*

#1

Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees. [...] These lines always tie back to one another. That is why one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad. [...] The] book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world,

#3

Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc.,

#1

there is an aparallel evolution of the book and the world; the book assures the deterritorialization of the world, but the world effects a reterritorialization of the book,

#3

as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees.

#1

which in turn deterritorializes itself in the world.

#3

These lines always tie back to one another.

#1

Mimicry is a very bad concept, since it relies on binary logic to describe phenomena of an entirely different nature.

#3

That is why one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad.

#2

[... The] book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an aparallel evolution of the book and the world; the book assures the deterritorialization of the world, but the world effects a reterritorialization of the book which in turn deterritorializes itself in the world [...]. Mimicry is a very bad concept, since it relies on binary logic to describe phenomena of an entirely different nature.

3. *The point of departure:*

SOUND (overlying the following projection): Mãi Không Trở Về. The song carries on throughout the video montage and fades out at the instrumental break, in time for #1's monologue.

PROJECTION: Medium shot of #3 continuing to read the book-source of the previous quotation. Video montage of things I see everyday.

#1 (like a politician to the public)

“Vietnam is ready to develop cooperative relations with the US in many aspects, especially in the economic, trade, and scientific and technological fields, in accordance with interests of the peoples of the two countries as well as in harmony with peace cooperation and development in Southeast Asia”. Vietnam’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1997.

4. **The TV Show, part 1:**

#2 (like a TV host)

AND NOW, WE RETURN TO MARRIAGE STORY: LIVE WITH A STUDIO AUDIENCE!

[Transition music with applause]

Light and sound a la studio lighting. Three-point camera set-up, or something that simulates it. That argument scene from *Marriage Story* (dir. Noah Baumbach) between Nicole (#3) and Charlie (#1). **#1 is speaking to #3, who is on the projection.** Otherwise, this is a sit-com scene, complete with canned laughter and applause...

#3

Hey

#1

Where's Henry?

#3

Laser tag.

#1

You want something to drink?

#1

I have unfiltered tap water, beer, and some juice boxes.

#3

I'll have a juice box.

How do you give a juice box to a projection?

#3

Henry's teacher wants to meet with us

#1

You mean his LA teacher—

#3

Can you respond to the email so we can set a time?

#1

Yeah, I've been distracted.

#3

I understand. They just want to rule out everything, you know, with his reading.

#1

I think he's just over-anxious. I think he wants it so much.

#3

I know, he quits too easily if things aren't easy for him. You know, he's like us, he's stubborn.

#1

They said he's off the charts in math.

#3

He's still a lousy Monopoly player because he tries to save all his money.

Amusement on both ends.

#3

It's just that... up until now we've been able to keep Henry at least somewhat removed. And this will change that.

#1

Uh huh.

#3

And we have to protect him

There's a long silence.

#1

I don't know how to start...

#3

Do you understand why I want to stay in LA?

#1

No.

#3

Well... that's not a useful way for us to start--

#1

I don't understand it.

#3

You don't remember promising that we could do time out here?

#1

We discussed things. We were married, we said things. We talked about moving to Europe, about getting a sideboard or what do you call it, a credenza, to fill that empty space behind the couch. We never did any of it.

#3

And you turned down that residency at the Geffen that would have brought us here and--

#1

It wasn't something I wanted. We had a great theater company and a great life where we were.

#3

You call that a great life.

#1

You know what I mean.

#3

Well, that's the problem isn't it? I was your spouse, you should have considered my happiness too.

#1

Come on! You WERE happy. You've just decided you weren't now--

#3

So, OK, let's... I work here now. My family is here.

#1

And I agreed to put Henry in school here KNOWING that when you were done shooting, he would come back to New York...

#3

Honey, we never said that. I thought...that if Henry was happy out here and my show continued, that we might do LA for a while.

#1

I was not privy to that thought process.

#3

The only reason we didn't live here was because you can't imagine desires other than your own unless they're forced on you.

#1

OK, you wish you hadn't married me, you wish you'd had a different life. But this is what happened.

#3

So what do we do?

#1

I don't know.

#3

You put me through hell DURING the marriage!

#1

Is that what that was? Hell?

#3

And now you're going to put Henry through this horrible thing so you can yet again get what you want.

#1

It's not what I want...I mean, it's what I want, but it's what was...WAS...what's best for him.

#3

I was wondering when you'd get around to Henry and what HE actually wants.

#1

Oh, fuck off-

#3

No, YOU fuck off. You're fighting for something you don't even WANT. You're being so much like your father.

#1

Do not compare me to my father.

LAUGH TRACK.

#2 (like a TV host)

WE'LL RETURN AFTER A QUICK COMMERCIAL BREAK

5. The commercial break:

#3 (a commercial, promoting Deleuze's book)

[... The] book is not an image of the world. It forms a rhizome with the world, there is an aparallel evolution of the book and the world; the book assures the deterritorialization of the world, but the world effects a reterritorialization of the book which in turn deterritorializes itself in the world [...].

Mimicry is a very bad concept, since it relies on binary logic to describe phenomena of an entirely different nature.

TV static? Something to indicate a TV channel switching. PROJECTION: Footage of #3 reviewing a U.S. visa application (DS-160), particularly the security screening questions.

#1 watches the footage, commenting on this like the screening of a sports game. In the background; soundtrack of people cheering as well.

SECURITY SCREENING QUESTION: Do you have a communicable disease of public health significance? Communicable diseases of public health significance include: chancroid, gonorrhea, granuloma inguinale, infectious leprosy, lymphogranuloma venereum, infectious stage syphilis, active tuberculosis, and other diseases as determined by the Department of Health and Human Services?

#3

No.

#1

GO! GO! GO! YEAHHHH!!!

SECURITY SCREENING QUESTION: Have you ever violated, or engaged in a conspiracy to violate, any law relating to controlled substances?

#3

No.

#1

GO GO GOGOGOGOGO!! SCOOOOORE!!

SECURITY SCREENING QUESTION: Do you seek to engage in terrorist activities while in the United States or have you ever engaged in terrorist activities?

#3

No.

#1

YES! YOU GO! WOOOO!! FUCK THEM UP! U.S.A! U.S.A! U.S.A!

Again, we hear: TV static or something to indicate a TV channel switching.

PROJECTION: #3 performs a solo chèo act. In the background of this projection we see the same act performed by a real chèo performer. The rhythm of the following monologue takes from the rhythm of the chèo performer in the projection. The monologue's text is taken from Sarah Kane's 4.48 Psychosis. As #1 recites the monologue, they very slowly strike poses from the projection.

#1

to achieve
to overcome and attain
to increase self-regard
to overcome opposition
to have control and influence
to defend myself
to vindicate
to be seen and heard
to excite, amaze, fascinate, shock, intrigue, amuse, entertain, or entice others
to be free
to resist
to be independent and act
to desire
to defy
to avoid pain
to avoid shame
to obliterate to maintain self-respect
to repress fear
to overcome weakness
to belong
to be accepted
to draw close and reciprocate with another
to converse
to communicate,
to laugh and make jokes to win affection
to adhere and remain loyal
to enjoy sensuous experiences
to feed, help, protect, comfort, console, support, nurse or heal
to be fed, helped, protected, comforted, consoled, supported, nursed or healed

to form relationship with Other, with an equal
to be forgiven
to be loved
[...]

Every rhizome contains lines of segmentarity according to which it is stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, etc., as well as lines of deterritorialization down which it constantly flees. [...] These lines always tie back to one another. That is why one can never posit a dualism or a dichotomy, even in the rudimentary form of the good and the bad.

6. The real:

PROJECTION: #3 reading the book-source of the previous quotation. After a while, they reach toward the camera, operating it to shoot some videos. Same video montage; the videos now play with their actual recorded sounds.

#1

I would like to take this moment to invite everyone who's comfortable doing so to close their eyes.
You can use this time for any mindfulness practice of your choosing, or you can also just be.

Land acknowledgement:

Macalester is situated on the ancestral homeland of the Dakota people, particularly the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands, who were forcibly exiled from the land because of aggressive and persistent settler colonialism. We make this acknowledgement to honor the Dakota people, ancestors and descendants, as well as the land itself.

#1 walks among the audience and gives out red envelopes with chocolate coins for Lunar New Year while saying "Happy New Year" in Vietnamese ("Chúc mừng năm mới").

#3

Please open your eyes.

I am not only taking space in this physical place. This performance would not have been possible without various digital interventions like Google's cloud-based storage service, Google Drive. We often think of these digital activities as taking place in ephemeral, immaterial spaces. However, data generated through and stored on these platforms occupy material space in what we call data centers.

These data centers, too, are located on colonized land. These lands and locations often go unrecognized in land acknowledgements. Yet, time and time again, throughout history, many technological innovations have been created and deployed alongside colonial and imperial projects. Therefore, I would like to acknowledge and recognize the history, cultures, and lives lost, erased, and undermined on the lands where our data now occupies.

These images have a digital location. Throughout the process of editing this video, its footage, as well as its previous iterations, resided, and is still currently residing, on Google Drive. Google's data centers are located worldwide and are too numerous to be listed in an exhaustive manner. However,

I would like to acknowledge the people and communities indigenous to the land where now occupies Google's largest data centers: The Dalles, Oregon: the land of the Wasco and Wishram, Yakama, Confederated Tribes of Warm Spring, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, and Confederated Tribes of Siletz (sai-letz) Indians; Douglas County, Georgia: which is Muscogee (mus-ko-gyi) land; Loudoun County, Virginia: Piscataway and Manahoac land; Lenoir, North Carolina: Kayauwee (ke-yau-wee), Moneton, Yesan, Mánu, and Yuchi land; and Berkeley County, South Carolina: Santee and Sewee land.

#1

In speaking of lost and erased histories and narratives, too, it would be a great disservice if I do not bring up the institution currently facilitating this performance, Macalester College, an institution that prides itself on a progressive reputation, yet only very recently, in the Spring of 2020, approved the decision to remove the name of prominent settler-colonialist Edward Duffield Neill from one of its buildings which stands on the very land he colonized. As of this moment, Macalester College, as an institution, has yet to take further steps in paying reparations to descendants of this stolen land.

#2 (while #3 stands in front of the Spoonbridge and Cherry sculpture)

I recognize that I benefit from the exploitation of Turtle Island: the occupation of this land, the erasure of its Indigenous peoples and cultures. *I honor the people indigenous to this land—ancestors and descendants—as well as the land itself.*

7. **The TV show, part 2:**

#2 (like a TV host)

AND NOW, WE RETURN TO MARRIAGE STORY: LIVE WITH A STUDIO AUDIENCE!

The end of the previous *Marriage Story* scene. Canned laughter has disappeared. The light has suddenly turned more naturalistic. #1 and #3 look seconds away from getting into a physical fight or sobbing, or some other strong physical-emotional reaction of the sort. They cannot touch each other. It gets ugly and personal.

#3

Tôi có so sánh cô với bố cô đâu. Tôi nói là cô đang hành động rất giống bố cô. Cô động vào người tôi thôi là tôi đã thấy ghê người.

#1

You're a slob. I made all the beds, closed all the cabinets, picked up after you like an infant—

#3

Cứ nghĩ đến việc nằm với cô thôi là tôi đã muốn lột da mình rồi.

#1

You'll never be happy. In LA or anywhere.

#3

Cái người đã đồng ý cưới cô là người lạ đối với tôi.

#1

You and I both know you CHOSE this life. You wanted it until you didn't. You used me so you could get out of LA.

#3

Tôi có dùng cô đâu mà—

#1

You did and then you blamed me for it. You always made me aware of what I was doing wrong, how I was falling short. Life with you was JOYLESS!

#3

Rồi, cảm ơn cô rất nhiều.

#1

You're welcome.

#3

Tao không thể tin cả đời này tao sẽ phải dính với mày!

#1

You're fucking insane! And you're fucking winning.

#3

Mày đùa hả? Tao muốn bảo vệ cuộc hôn nhân này. Từ đầu, tao đã thua rồi. Mày có yêu tao như tao yêu mày đâu.

#1

What does that have to do with LA?

#3

Mày ích kỉ đến mức đấy hả? Ích kỉ đến nỗi mày không còn nhận ra là mình ích kỉ nữa. ĐỊT MẸ
MÀY CON ĐẤU BUỒI!

#1

Everyday I wake up and hope you're dead-- Dead like-- If I could guarantee Henry would be OK. I'd hope you get an illness and then get hit by a car and DIE.

Silence. Projection shuts off.

#3
I know.

#1
I'm sorry.

#2
Me too.

Another moment of silence.

8. The reflection:

PROJECTION: Segment from the film "Em Bé Hà Nội". This scene shows the devastating effects of the U.S. bombings of Hanoi during the War of American Aggression.

#1

"Vietnam is ready to develop cooperative relations with the US in many aspects, especially in the economic, trade, and scientific and technological fields, in accordance with interests of the peoples of the two countries as well as in harmony with peace cooperation and development in Southeast Asia". Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1997.

(Perhaps the following bit, until the next projection, can be performed almost completely in the dark; the projection screen being the only light source?)

PROJECTION: A screen recording of #3 entering the queeringthemap.com interface. They find Vietnam on the world map and zoom into Hanoi. They open the notes left on some pins. After a while, they leave their own note in Vietnamese at the location of their home. Queering the Map's font does not facilitate Vietnamese script. As #3 leaves their note, we see that some text cannot be shown.

As #3 opens the notes, #1 reads them out loud. #1 translates the note #3 leaves at their home into English.

#1

I held her hand through the busy streets. I kissed her and held her close. (giua kim ma va thuy khue)

Dear, I got to be shallow to be with you, since feeling things deeply will destroy us. Or maybe, It would be better if we are apart and I know that you [are] doing good somewhere. Darling, be good, be safe and take care of yourself, please? D. (dich vong hau)

She led me through the doom day, turned me into another person. She didn't know that, we were not a thing but she was special. (phu thuong)

Just a small town girl, crushing on pretty girls on the school's dance team, dreaming of coming out one day (me tri gan pham hung)

I'm about to say goodbye to my soul friend. We promised to die together since we both suffer the same fate. But now they're leaving me alone in this forsaken country. They're leaving for another country and God knows if they'll end themselves out there or they'll live a happier life without me. Or they'll come back for me. I love you with my whole broken messed up being. Goodbye. (*cau vinh tuy, duong co linh*)

too many embarrassing stories here (*cat linh gan ho giang vo*)

My first pride was with a group of strangers who made me feel safer than any friends ever did, we joked and laughed about the absurdity of bananas and got scolded for cussing out loud. I never had such a beautiful night. Even though the face paint I got for myself got scrubbed off right before I got home and the pride flags I bought that day went into the closet, it was one of the most important day in my life. I can't wait to return. (*bo ho gan hang trong*)

I've been thinking a lot about how I conceive of myself in Vietnamese. I think that any non-binary person will encounter these difficulties. I read somewhere that some Vietnamese non-binary folks use the pronouns “cam” or “chanh”, like smashing together the pronouns for girls and guys into one, combining two things that seem to be so opposite! To me, these pronouns don't fit. I think the English pronouns “they/them” fit me much better. I don't understand myself. In middle school, my homeroom teacher said that I love foreign things. I've understood myself in another's language, yet when I'm thinking of “me” in my mother tongue, I feel confused. Suddenly I realize that in my homeroom teacher's sarcasm, there's something so fucking correct.

PROJECTION: Footage of our rehearsals.

For the final monologue and throughout the music, it'd be nice if #1 could have a handheld microphone of sorts, but not completely necessary.

#1 (a stand-up bit)

“It is myself I have never met, whose face is pasted on the underside of my mind”. I found this line at the end of Sarah Kane's play, *4.48 Psychosis*: an expression of her thoughts, sense of self, mental illness, instability. Is it a symptom of mental illness to have never seen your self? As paranoid capitalists, you can only see yourself through what you're not. This dichotomous positionality only exists through imagination. You are not me. I am “me”. “I think therefore I am”. But how would Descartes account for my body? Can “doing” do for “being” what “being” does for “thinking”? I think therefore I am therefore I do? But I also thought, was, did; will think, will be, will do. Which one of these is me? You change a sentence. Suddenly, your subjectivity exists in the past or future or present or past continuous or future continuous... I used to be this tall; now I'm no longer! Which one of these is me?

In Vietnamese there are no tenses. Simply “đang”: is actively doing, “đã”: did, and “sẽ”: will be doing. Linguists call this aspect. Modifying sentences with an exact indication of time negates the need for these aspects. I always *am*, but what I do depends on the time of day. This is not a comparison, only a linguistics lesson.

I don't know you, but I truly, deeply want to. We contain lines of segmentarity according to which we are stratified, territorialized, organized, signified, attributed, as well as lines of deterritorialization down which we constantly flee. [...] These lines always tie back to one another.

...

I would now like to perform the song "Mãi Không Trở Về".

#I gears up to perform *Mãi Không Trở Về*. The background is a karaoke video of that song. It's a very particular type of video and the nostalgia it evokes will not make sense to anyone other than Vietnamese people from Vietnam. Or perhaps people from mainland Asia.

As the music kicks in, #I instead turns to the director, who sits in the audience. #I invites the director to the stage and asks them several questions chosen at random from a deck of “We're not really strangers” cards. Spotlight on the director's seat.

#I adlibs to explain the game and asks audience volunteers to choose the cards. They then ask the questions and take turns answering them with the director.

When the questions run out, #I adlibs, thanking the audience for being part of the experience.

9. The end:

The director hands #I a notebook containing the ending speech. #I reads the ending speech out loud and follows all stage directions as written in the notebook.

PROJECTION: Live footage of the house from behind the seats as the audience watches the projection screen.

Black out.

Appendix B: Figures



Figure 1. The audience space of *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*. Photo by author.



Figure 2. *Anti-Cartesian Variety Show*'s staging for the card game. Screenshot from recording of performance.