

Medea/Media: a glitchy counterfactual

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James Ijames, the winner of a 2022 Pulitzer prize for *Fat Ham*, loosely based on *Hamlet*, has just presented a new realization of *Medea*, *Media/Medea*, which had its world premiere at Bryn Mawr College and the Community College of Philadelphia in April 2023. This article provides a reading of it, addressing the themes of irony, queer ‘authenticity’, acting, and mothering through the framing of the ‘glitchy counterfactual’ — a conceit we borrow from Legacy Russell’s manifesto for a new Black cyberfeminism to approach the most blatant innovation in Ijames’s version, the unfulfilled infanticide. This astonishing change in the script, which tightly connects Medea with her onomastic negativity and queer unbecoming, urges us to reflect upon survival and survivance in an anti-Black world; it might yield a reckoning in line with Kevin Quashie’s notion of ‘subjunctivity’, Black ‘aliveness’.

Who is Medea? We all think we know. Medea is the foreigner who leaves everything behind her to follow a lover who then betrays her. She is the mother who decides that the best revenge for that betrayal is to kill her own children. And the gods do not punish her, they reward and rescue her.

In April 2023, Bryn Mawr College and the Community College of Philadelphia jointly presented a new realization of Euripides’ *Medea*.¹ It was written by James Ijames, the winner of a 2022 Pulitzer prize for *Fat Ham*, which was loosely based on *Hamlet*: the new play was entitled *Media/Medea*. This inventive reimagining both plays with and challenges what we think we know about Medea’s story. It challenges, indeed, the very idea of the ‘we’ who ‘know’. The play is articulated around expectations of what it means to know who Medea is. It explores modes of defiance from within and from outside the familiar narrative. And it suggests that each of us could become Medea — and that we need not do so.²

¹ *Media/Medea* was commissioned and presented through the ‘Greek Drama/Black Lives’ project on which Catherine Conybeare was PI. It was funded by an ACLS Sustaining Public Engagement Grant as part of a program made possible by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)’s Sustaining the Humanities through the American Rescue Plan (SHARP) initiative. The play had its world premiere at Bryn Mawr College and the Community College of Philadelphia in April 2023. As part of the original commission, Ijames generously agreed to make the script available through open access: it can be read at <https://digbmc.github.io/media-medea/play> (click ‘View Script’), and is available for further performances. All citations below reference this version of the script by page number.

² As the Chorus comments to the children: ‘She is absolutely capable of killing both of you. Quickly’. Precisely because it is part of a discussion concerning evaluation of character — what one can or cannot do, what one can be expected (or not) to do or think — the referentiality of this statement can be interpretively extended far beyond Medea herself, who, in the play, is immersed in a domestic, contemporary scenario, (too) ‘familiar’ to everyone, one that tests the general sense of what (any)one is ‘capable’ of doing in extreme circumstances.

Ijames locates the story of Medea in a Black family of privilege in the present-day USA. Medea is an actor, Jason a director, their children spoiled and utterly recognizable adolescents; they are all perpetually on display through channels of social media, their superficiality thematized by the glass house in which they live. The Chorus consists of the children's classmates, constantly watching, posting, commenting. 'You can see us. And we can see you' is the initial description of the atmosphere on stage. In a media-saturated environment — a digital panopticon, a counterpart of the 'prison-courtroom' where Alice Diop's Medea sits in the film *Saint Omer* (2022)³ — that statement is both a promise and a threat. The banal patterns of mediated response blur the boundaries of the 'authentic'. Irony is the dominant mode — as showcased by the character of Glauce, 'a regular Eve Harrington', whose speaking part replaces that of Creon's daughter in Euripides' play; and Circe, Medea's aunt, reduced to a nanny-like character who replaces the Nurse, expanding and dispersing motherhood. In a tense dialogue that destabilizes tone and genre with a blend of melodrama and camp, Medea teasingly, cuttingly asks Glauce what she learnt in acting school, setting up this exchange:

GLAUCE

To breathe, to relax, to believe. To act.

MEDEA

That is the first primary thing. To act, to do, to choose to become. (46)

Always aware of their audiences, always aware of what an artful self-presentation can bestow, these women see acting as the way to 'choose to become'. The play thematizes the illusion of choice — or rather, the illusion that choice is ever free, that it can ever be a claiming of control, and that it will not bring with it unforeseeable consequences. It also raises the question of where ironization begins and ends. When does irony fold back on itself, perhaps resulting in forms of what has been called 'queer seriousness'?⁴ At the end of the play — when the Chorus of voyeurs is about to exit, leaving those of 'us' who are seated in the theatre hall or are reading as the only witnesses, spectators, and voyeurs, revealing the positional convergence that has made us complicit all along — we, as a hybrid, shifting, fickle audience, reflect and finally replace the Chorus, and their voyeurism and banality becomes ours. 'We' respond to the actors; 'we' also turn on them. The Chorus says of Medea, 'She's always acting—even when she's not' (3). That line could be savage; it could be critical; it could be simply dispassionate description. It matters that the role of Medea is written for a Black woman. Acting is her profession. Is it also a strategy of survival?

In what follows we propose a preliminary reading of this play, reflecting on the themes of irony, queer 'authenticity', acting, and mothering through the framing of the 'glitchy counterfactual'. We adopt this concept to approach the most striking innovation in Ijames's version, the unfulfilled infanticide, which we also connect with the spectral persistence of Medea's brother, Absyrtus. This absent infanticide is the plot element that, in enacting the negativity intrinsic to Medea's name, accomplishes an Absyrtean conflation of queer disidentification, the rejection of identity's boundedness,⁵ and Black deindividuation, the project, in Fred Moten's words, of 'detach[ing] difference from individuation', intended as 'a regulative concept'.⁶

³ See Telò (2023b). The phrase 'prison-courtroom' is borrowed from Castañeda (2023).

⁴ Young (2014).

⁵ See Muñoz (1999), on disidentification as 'a mode of recycling or re-forming an object that has already been invested with powerful energy' or 'a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously'.

⁶ Thus Moten (2018), who calls individuation 'a concept of law enforcement, that is meant to control and create a certain kind of separability that then becomes associated with difference'.

In James Ijames's reimagining of Euripides' play, Medea is a star of social media — both its subject and its object. With a trace of the star quality of Norma Desmond or Margo Channing, Medea is not just a performer objectified by social media, but also a clever manipulator of the commodifying system that voraciously absorbs feelings, relations, and situations into an all-encompassing hackneyed narrative with a reassuring yet terrifying sense of déjà vu impenetrable to the disruptive logic of the event. The collective voice of the young Chorus — 'always ready to tweet, record, snap or insta the proceedings' — takes the shape of an insistent background, the infinite echo chamber of clicking, posting, liking. We hear that 'the sound of a notification springs them into terrific action', but the apparently evental, an-economic force of this sound is immediately transmuted into — or already partakes of — the economy of the familiar, the already-known, that which can be grasped, mastered, archived. Medea's infanticide, in this perspective, is not the unheard-of, unspeakable act that shocks the conscience, but the entirely expected outcome, contained and possessed by a digital memory eager to be nourished by another iteration. 'She's gonna kill those kids.... It's so obvious! Do you not see what's happening what's unfolding.... I think she might be about to commit murder. I like the way that sounds Muuuuurder.... We all thought it wasn't very motherly as well but...you know your mom', says the Chorus, eager to capture and post (and thus voyeuristically 'bear witness to') the impending tragedy.⁷ The Chorus and Glauce are compulsive social media users — both posters and scrollers. Asked by Jason, 'Who do you all belong to?', the Chorus responds with 'the Internet', a digital Name of the Father. After taking a selfie with Medea, Glauce — the disingenuously star-struck Eve Harrington figure, who has tried to imitate, to 'follow' or repeat Medea 'in every move' — says, 'I would like to post this. Are you alright with that?' In the production of Raelle Myrick-Hodges at Bryn Mawr College and the Community College of Philadelphia,⁸ the *skênê* building morphs into a closet, or a safe room, with a glass window that puts Medea's grief, her frantic exhumation of Absyrtus, and the slaughter of Glauce on display, pairing them as interchangeable commodified targets of the *media*, of the Chorus's digital voyeurism. It is as though, in this transition from *Medea* to *media*, the offstage's aura of mystery, its safeguarding of the unseen and unrepresentable, were torn apart by the morbid curiosity of the social media user. Instead of an offstage whose events are narrated according to the conventions of Greek tragedy, we are given a window that allows us to spy on the secrets of the inside, which are simultaneously broadcast on an adjacent wall through an overload of photographs and postings. Not only does the Chorus expect Medea's children, Shel and Devan — whom the script leaves ungendered — to be killed; the children, too, seem, if only for a moment, to perceive their own death as imminent. Deceptively — or unwittingly — suggesting that she will go with the script, that the event will be nothing but repetition, Medea shows them a dug-up memory, the ashes of her brother, a boyish body dismembered and burned, which makes them recoil in horror, as though the tragedy of their uncle is about to become their own. Individual cognition is subsumed within the insatiable maw of algorithmic memory, within the automated affective machine of the digital archive or artificial intelligence.

Ijames ingeniously breaks the apparently unbreakable bond between Medea and the infanticide, a Euripidean innovation that has indelibly marked her imaginative survival in antiquity and modernity and has turned into a 'code', liable to be used and replicated ad infinitum.⁹ Reversing Seneca's famous *Medeaaffiam*, i.e., 'I shall become Medea' (171) — which climactically shifts to the eternal present of her filicidal revenge, *Medea nunc sum*,

⁷ *Media/Medea*, 57 and 62.

⁸ In the course of our discussion, we will privilege this production, as our approach to the script has been inevitably coloured by it; we are, of course, aware that other productions in the future will bring out other potentialities of the text.

⁹ On the play with the negative $\mu\eta$ in Medea's name in Euripides' prologue, see Konstan (2007).

'I am now Medea' (910)¹⁰ — Ijames's Medea becomes Medea by *not* being Medea (or the scripted Medea), by not killing her children, by enacting the negativity, the 'not' (*mê*) in her name (*Mêdeia*). This negativity — making Jason believe she has killed her children by reddening her hands with wine¹¹ — is her ultimate experiment in acting, not simply the *meta*-acting that has become a topos of Senecan criticism,¹² showing ironical awareness of the role she is scripted to perform, but the overacting of a studied inaction, an *in-acting*. This *in-acting* also encompasses a kind of *internalized*, *introjected* acting — that is, a tendency to act even when one is not.¹³ As Ijames demonstrates the need for a completely different approach to becoming Medea, Seneca's *Medea nunc sum* amounts to a misdirection: 'I am putting on the gorgon, the harpy, the crone, the vixen, the devourer goddess... *I am now Medea*' (91). This moment of apparently becoming Medea,¹⁴ by asking, 'Is the world watching?' — like Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* telling Mr. DeMille she is ready for her close-up — leads to the denial of the act that allegedly makes her who she is. In the excess of her plural singularity, her multiple identities ('the gorgon, the harpy, the crone, the vixen, the devourer goddess') are deterritorialized, unmaking her rather than making her. Or rather, she becomes an embodiment of never-being, unbecoming, an opacity that she shrewdly projects onto Jason ('I thought you were opaque.... It means you can hide things. And I didn't like that' [75]). Unbecoming is an ongoing refusal more radical than a becoming that is decentered, deterritorialized, multiplied.¹⁵ Rather than a future, the announcement of what is expected to happen, *fiam* in Seneca's *Medea fiam* amounts, almost programmatically, to a subjunctive mood, 'the animating of being through the expressiveness of might-be', to use the formulation of Kevin Quashie, who locates 'a poetic of subjunctivity that beholds blackness as a capacity of wandering and wondering'.¹⁶

To stage her unbecoming, Medea needs the motherly protection of her aunt, Circe, the magician, who is good at playing tricks, an image central to one of the most innovative scenes of the play. The two gold coins that Shel is able to make disappear and then appear again patently foreshadow survival through disappearance for herself and their sibling, Medea's withholding of infanticide, her imagination of a counterfactual. The coins allude to the Greek burial practice of supplying a corpse with an obol to pay for the crossing of the river of the Underworld. Here, perhaps, the duality of the coins points to the filial 'couple', which, in the canonical tragic plot, is destined to disappear, that is, to be killed

¹⁰ See Schiesaro (2003: 213), who connects *Medea nunc sum* with Medea's defiant question to Jason: *conuagem agnoscis tuam?* ('Do you recognize your wife?', 1021). Recognition — 'predicated on the immobility of fundamental characteristics which define [Medea] as what [she is]', on the present as a repetition of the past — is behind the pleasure of iterability and predictability afforded by social media. Noting the appearance of versions of *Medea nunc sum* throughout modern reception (from Corneille to Wesley Enoch), Boyle (2014: ad loc.) observes that 'this statement of personal and theatrical identity' underscores 'the centrality of infanticide to the definition of Medea'. The process of 'becoming' Medea is already dramatized in Euripides' play through the Nurse's search for comparanda (the sea, a rock, etc.) discussed by Boedeker (1997).

¹¹ In the first production of the play, Jason is left with the misleading proof of a teddy bear stained with blood.

¹² See esp. Schiesaro (2003).

¹³ This is exactly the tendency pinpointed by the Chorus earlier in the play and quoted above: 'She's always acting — even when she's not'.

¹⁴ In Seneca's finale, where aesthetic suspension is entangled with uncertainties in the manuscript tradition, the killing of the first child is separate from that of the second one, (provisionally) leaving the audience at a loss, as Walsh (2018) observes, 'They might assume that Medea cannot "become Medea" unless both children have died, in which case the glaring question is: Can she "become Medea" without the second murder?' Continuing her analysis of the affective phenomenology of viewing, Walsh observes that 'if the tragedy were to end here...perhaps the audience would have felt it an unbearably inconclusive juncture'; they might have wondered 'whether Medea's process of "becoming Medea" is...complete'.

¹⁵ By 'unbecoming' Kim (2018: 236) defines 'the process of shedding the categories and the identities that we've been coerced into becoming'. See also Moten and Harney (2013). Halberstam (2010) labels Marina Abramović 'the artist of unbecoming', who contests feminism's well-established idea of 'becoming woman'. On queer and trans* unbecoming, see Halberstam (2018).

¹⁶ Quashie (2021: 59, 61, 82).

by their mother. The coins held tight or ingested, only to be ejected again, point to Shel's and Devan's invisible rebirth, their hidden survival. (The coins turn out to be chocolate: the haunted symbol is playfully robbed of its power.) Going against the script, imagining an alternative queer future — one that, as we will see, disrupts the heteronormative shape of the familial 'bond' — or even indulging in some form of mnemonic destruction is the only possibility of living on for (this) Medea. As she puts it, 'I had to cut some things out of my memory so I could be okay. So I could...survive' (32). This mnemonic selection is another form of the introjected acting that is indispensable to motherhood, to the normative set of social protocols, roles, duties that make up heteropatriarchal motherhood (as opposed to the non-hierarchical, plural, queer *mothering*).¹⁷ The programmatic line 'She is always acting—even when she's not' is a comment on the oppressive expectations of motherhood or maternal labour set by reproductive futurism, but also on the ongoing, 'theatrical' interaction with 'props' that maternity necessitates, a plurality of (in)animate co-performers.¹⁸ 'Of course we all pretend for children', said IJames in conversation. 'What about Santa Claus?' IJames's Medea, actor though she is, shows the cracks and fragility engendered by the endless pressure of the script of motherhood. 'My loves!' she exclaims more than once — an apparently overblown interjection. The stage directions make clear that this is not (just) a return of irony ('She loves her children. She's a good mom on her best days and a distant mom on her worst' [32]). However, the fact that this piece of information is contained within a stage direction ironizes while reinforcing the performative pressure of motherhood, the unmarked imperative to inhabit fully, internalize, and possess a role whose dispossessive capacity is disavowed.¹⁹ At the same time, the ironizing spreads a glitchy force.

The title of IJames's play is a complex punning glitch, which does not simply link Medea with the digital contemporary but underscores the subversive negativity accomplished by the final act. *Media* is almost a misspelling of *Medea*, a bit of bad coding (graphic or phonetic), a 'glitch'. In her manifesto for a new Black cyberfeminism, Legacy Russell celebrates the digital glitch 'as a vehicle of refusal, a strategy of nonperformance', 'a fissure within which new possibilities of being and becoming manifest', or a 'calculated failure' that 'prompts the violent socio-cultural machine' of capitalism — emblemized precisely by social media — 'to hiccup, sigh, shudder, buffer' (2020: 8, 11). We can say that, in contesting the technological fantasy of self-identical repetition and endless iterability allied with the capitalistic aspiration to flawless efficiency, Medea's denial of the infanticide — the misdeed longingly demanded by the Internet's panoptic eye — works as a 'a tear in the fabric of the digital' (Russell 2020: 13), as a *glitchy* malfunction. When Erik Gunderson (2017), following John Henderson's take on the 'explosive energy' of the Senecan Medea (1983), says that 'the multiple layers of repetition...amplify one another and yield a sort of feedback that over-loads the simple circuit of identical return where input is the same as output', he seems to characterize Seneca's repetitious excess as a digital loop on the verge of breaking down through some sort of glitch. The glitchiness of *Media* manifests itself as a mode of dramatic expressivity, of saying the unsayable — as when Medea erupts into *Uggggggghhhhhhhhhhh aaaaaaaabhhhhhhhhhh* (a sound that a stage direction compares to the cry of Demeter as she searches for Persephone [15]). In the tense dialogue with Glauce, she lets her resentment emerge through the intimation of a *brotherly* syllable: 'The home I was given as a prize for setting fire to my past, my family, my...*br*...' Importing a minuscule piece of Absyrtus's dismembered body into the verbal flow, *br* is the glitching of language that shiveringly affords a murdered child a possibility not of survival, but of survivance — that is, an overload that lingers, a kind of sensory surplus, not continuous but

¹⁷ On *mothering* as an open, non-biological alternative to maternity and motherhood, see Gumbs, Martens, and Williams (2016) and Lewis (2021 and 2022).

¹⁸ On prop-oriented maternity (encapsulated by the formula 'mother-plus-baby-plus-buggy-plus-stuff') and maternal labour, see Baraitser (2016).

¹⁹ On motherhood and dispossession, see esp. Bragg (2020).

surreptitious.²⁰ In a late-antique African version of the Medea story, the cento by Hosidius Geta, Absyrtus appears as a ghost,²¹ spreading a hauntological aesthetics of revenge very much in line with the workings of the glitch. Yet in Ijames's play Absyrtus instigates a revengeful non-revenge — just as in *Fat Ham* Ijames contests revenge and ultimately refuses it.²² (Un)becoming the protagonist of *Media*, Medea delivers her *Medea nunc sum* not by proudly 'recognizing' her impending infanticide in the fatal dismemberment of her brother, but, rather, in repudiating it and retroactively resurrecting him by denying her former self, or the very notion of any self.²³ The idea of the character's individuation falls apart in the moment that the most distinctive, 'non-negotiable' trait of Medea's mythic persona in the collective imagination — the infanticide — is overturned, not simply undone but dismissed as a lie fabricated at the expense of the white notion of the sovereign self, as a cognitive loop disorienting racialized heteropatriarchy.²⁴ Recalling Moten's theoretical framework, Medea is thus reinventing the very notion of difference (sexual and racial) as a radical deindividuation,²⁵ interpretable as a kind of (metaphorical) defacement,²⁶ which can be interpretively linked with the dismemberment of her brother.

The glitch that jars Medea into Media, performed infanticide into a non-performance, a failure to kill, is a mimetic tribute to Absyrtus's body, to a corporeal 'defect', a 'malfunction', or even a disability. As Medea says: 'He had a chipped tooth. So when he smiled it was a bit crooked' (45). The glitch, Russell says, 'challenges us to consider how we can penetrate...rupture...the material of the institution and, by extension, the institution of the body' (2021: 25). In one of the most striking moments of the play, Medea, in a fury, apparently forgetting to 'act', hurls the box of Absyrtus's ashes at Glauce so that it 'explode[s] open', covering Glauce's wedding dress and angrily scattering the remnants of a child past over the children of the future. We may think of the ashes — a form of "nonhuman" agitation²⁷ — as penetrating the fabric of the self-contained, ostensibly impermeable *muthos*, generating a counterfactual that is glitchy, like Absyrtus's crooked smile or a chipped tooth that bites without cutting. This is something altogether different from what happens in Seneca's play, where 'the crime' — the murder of the first child — 'occurs with Medea as

²⁰ Telò (2023a: 175). We are referring to the Derridean concept that has been used, for example, in Native American Studies to suggest the repudiation of survival understood as the endlessly recolonizing practice of memorialization, the so-called recognition politics. See Derrida (2011: 119, 147): 'If from *life* we appeal to *light*, from *vie* to *vision*, we can speak here of *sur-vie*, of living on in a life-after-life or a life-after-death, as *sur-vision*, "seeing on" in a vision-beyond-vision'. As Saghafi (2020: 102) explains, 'living "beyond" one's death, *sur-vivre* is not life *after* death (a state of life or a continuation of life) but rather *sur-viving*, *more* life still'.

²¹ See Malamud (2012).

²² See, e.g., Lenker (2023).

²³ On the abolition of the self, 'a repository for the defense against...things marked as opposed to a normative self, with its attending racialized, gendered, classed, and abled archive', see Bey (2022). In Seneca's *Medea*, *Medea nunc sum* is followed by an explicit reference to the murder of Absyrtus: *iuvat, iuvat rapuisse fratrum caput, / artus iuvat secuisse*.

²⁴ Another recent version of *Medea*, by Rachel Cusk (2015), chooses an ambiguous position on the question of the infanticide. The play ends with the news that the children 'ate a bottle of painkillers...like fucking Smarties'. Did Medea have any direct responsibility in (the orchestration of) this accident? Will the children eventually survive? In an interview, Cusk observed: 'I find that I do not believe in the child-killing as a literal event. But the director cannot conceive of a "Medea" in which the children are not killed. Around this impasse we have arranged ourselves'. Cusk adds that 'the killing no longer means what it once might have. Actual violence is rudimentary and mute; psychological violence is complex and articulate' (Edwards 2015). In Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), a Medea-like character also refrains from committing the filicide: see Stevens (2018). What makes Ijames's *Media/Medea* stand out is the deception that frames the failed infanticide: Medea succeeds in making Jason believe that the expected act has in fact been carried out.

²⁵ See esp. Moten (2003: 214–16) on deindividuation, a concept central to the 'sociopoetic activity' of 'the black radical tradition' as an 'improvisational, anarchically principled (dis)organization' (2017: 17, 36).

²⁶ What we call 'defacement' corresponds to Deleuze and Guattari's 'politics without a face' (1987: 171). It is nothing but the conceptual removal of the ethical space of the face from the domain of semantic, representational commensurability. See Butler (2004: 132–4).

²⁷ We owe this conceptualization of 'ashes' to Chen (2024: 10).

some kind of puppet-figure, guided by her brother's movement' (Walsh 2018). The identification of Medea with Absyrtus could not be more powerful in IJames's adaptation. While she is digging up the box with his ashes from inside the glass case that functions as a semi-open *skênê* building, we hear Circe saying that she 'tears herself to pieces from the inside out' (6). Her brother's ashes are also the fragments of her broken self, which this new performance (this novel experiment in becoming or unbecoming Medea) demands that she collect, gather into a precariously unified persona and then disseminate, disperse all over again, shattering the normative fantasy of individuation. This dispersion is also reflected in the perceptive fragmentation and disauthentication caused by the sensory overload of social media, which inflict a split, fractured, unwittingly glitchy cognition, visualized in the original performance by the juxtaposition of theatrical action with a simultaneous, disorienting proliferation of pictures and postings on the wall adjacent to the stage building.²⁸

The glitch is also linked, in the play's aesthetic worldview, with the materiality of soil and dust.²⁹ After breaking the pot that holds the ashes, Medea asks Circe to bring 'a dust buster', clean up, and bury the remains (ashes and the container's debris) in the garden so that the game of an-archivic exhumation and the melancholic homage to Absyrtus can always be renewed.³⁰ We can say that the non-identity of unbecoming and deindividuation continues as ongoing subjunctivity and not mere repetition, as glitchy possibility rather than endless iteration. The garden space that, in the original production, we can see into, even when Glauce is dying, turning into melted organic matter that joins Absyrtus's ashes, is an almost 'matrixial' space of concealment and disclosure, one that simultaneously connects this highly mediated action to a natural environment and yet profoundly problematizes such a connection.³¹ The cycle of violence and revenge is perversely blended with the natural imaginary of a biological cycle of violence/revenge, which seems to throw the 'sun' down, to drag Medea's highbrow, paternal Apollinean cosmological ancestor, explicitly evoked by one of her children — 'she talks to the sun like family' — into the present/past zone of unbound, amorphous matter, *chôra*, the 'endles[s] furling and unfurling' of 'a mass of dancing particles of dust'.³² The dust persists, spills over, queering the cyclical and the biological through the indistinction of life and non-life.³³ At the same time that the stage is cleaned up and the debris is removed through mechanical erasure, the dust returns in the evanescent image of gray matter cascading onto the bodies of Jason and Medea's once unified family in the picture on the screen, beside the stage building. Dust is the contaminant that symbolizes the rupture of familial harmony, but it is also the materialization of a glitchy persistence, of an unruly survivance enabling uncanny and impossible encounters, such as that between Absyrtus and Glauce.

Reinterpreted as a glitch in Medea's name, a digital code gone awry, the word (and the concept) *media* participates in the ontology of error, the 'wild unknown' (Russell's phrase) of a counterfactual that is only partially legible.³⁴ Through Medea's Circean ruse, Jason is

²⁸ In the original performance, the separation between Medea and Jason on stage in one of the last scenes equally engenders a sense of split cognition. The spatial layering connects with the need to take sides. When Jason and Medea are widely dispersed on stage, one is asked to take sides with either, to decide on which to rest the gaze. This connects with the Chorus's hashtag 'Winner winner'.

²⁹ On dust and glitch aesthetics, see Kane (2019: 59).

³⁰ *Media/Medea*, 24. On the an-archivic Euripidean Medea, see Telò (2020: 90–113).

³¹ On the 'matrixial' as a 'feminine/prenatal' Real, 'an unconscious space of simultaneous emergence and fading of the I which is neither fused nor rejected', see Ettinger (1994).

³² For this definition of dust, see Deleuze (1993: 86); on the Platonic *chôra* as 'a disfiguration that emerges as the boundaries of the human both as its very condition and as the insistent threat of its deformation', see Butler (1993: 41).

³³ On dust and lifedead, see Marder (2016: xii and 11); see also Lyons (2020: ch. 2), on the continuity of life with decay materialized by soil.

³⁴ Gallagher (2018: 13) observes that 'the counterfactual mode makes [the] connection between imagining diverse possibilities and establishing character unusually clear by explicitly inventing lots that are incompatible with the individual's known destiny and allowing an accretion of contradictory stories'.

the user who is denied access. As Russell observes, ‘Encryption, as a process, indicates the encoding of a message, rendering it unreadable or inaccessible to those unauthorized to decipher it’ (2020: 84). Alive yet invisible, present in the world yet absent, removed from their father’s sight, the children are the encrypted code, the *cyphertext* that fissures Medea’s name, that turns her performed non-performance, her *in-acting* into counterfactual survival. An obvious rejection of Medea’s Athenian future, of the replication of the heteronormative status quo offered by Aegeus, this *in-acting* contours an experiment in queer bonding, or *k-incoherence*,³⁵ which is predicated on the ‘interplay between a centrifugal drive away from sociality’ — the departure towards an indefinite place — ‘and a centripetal pressure toward sociable belonging and linkage’.³⁶ This k-incoherence, a queer redefinition of the boundary between erotic and affective bonds, is symbolically located in the regathering of the extended family in an illocution that brings to mind Amber Musser’s idea of a diasporic queer feminine as ‘what is activated when we look to the mother as horizon, as elsewhere’ (2018: 176). Medea arrives on stage cradling the urn of Absyrtus’s ashes in her arms, as if it were perhaps an aborted child, and longs ‘to talk with him again’ (31). Motherhood seems to give way to the ‘strange intimacies’ of mothering, with its possibility of forging new forms of relationality, or even of ‘a radical remaking of time’.³⁷

Ijames replaces heteronormative parentality with an intrafamilial homosociality, Medea and Circe, niece and aunt — a female version of Eve Sedgwick’s avuncularity³⁸ — but also, in a sense, two sisters. Yet another dyad looms large — Demeter and Persephone — introducing kinship trouble in the relation between Medea and Circe, turning niece into mother and aunt into devoted daughter.³⁹ This trouble makes room for ‘an alternative way of envisioning governance in which enfamiliment is not the racializing means of (pre) qualifying for personhood and political subjectivity’.⁴⁰ Does this ‘trouble’, this reciprocal interchangeability, have the power to ‘strike against the tensions of generationality’ or ‘go beyond the possessive...conditionings induced by the norm of the couple’ (Robinou 2023: 17)?⁴¹ Is this kinship trouble precisely what establishes a sisterly bond between Medea and Circe, horizontally juxtaposed with the siblinghood of Shel and Devan? Will Medea even keep her promise to regather with Circe?

Although Medea saves her children, she still has the catastrophic potential of a digital glitch, always looming, always in menacing abeyance, always in the shadow. Instead of dragons (snakes?) instrumentalized to drive her chariot, to stage her triumph, we are left (as the script’s stage direction indicates) with ‘the shadow of a dragon’ that ‘envelops the space’, the ‘breathing of [a] massive creature’, ‘the steam from its exhalation’, which freezes Jason rather than killing him (100). This animal shadow brings us back to the only other time in the script that the word ‘shadow’ occurs — and, thus, to Medea herself, in the portrait of her traced by the Eve-ish Glauce, in which she unwittingly prophesies Jason’s death, somewhere beyond the end of the play: ‘You were sliced up on the screen with *shadow* and a veil that made you look like a widow...The razor’s edge between cruelty and tenderness’ (46). This is the razor’s edge that the glitchy Media/Medea defies.

The dragon that materializes as smoke and gigantic claws severed from an invisible body, as a viral threat spreading everywhere without ever being fully seen or captured, has a counterpart in the ghostly ontology of the children, in their appearance in disappearance. ‘I’m not even leaving a space of grief for you.... Go bury your dead’, Medea cannily says to Jason — while saying ‘Go bury your children’ would have ruined her brilliant misdirection,

³⁵ We borrow this term from Bradway and Freeman (2022).

³⁶ Weiner and Young (2011: 223).

³⁷ Nash (2021: 147). On the ‘strange intimacies’ of *mothering*, see Nash and Pinto (2020).

³⁸ See Sedgwick (1993: 52–72).

³⁹ Nash (2021: 146) observes that ‘Black mothering is actually *sistering*’.

⁴⁰ Rifkin (2022: 157).

⁴¹ On ‘kinship trouble’ in Butler’s theorization, see Telò (2024).

turning a sublime ambiguity into a banal lie.⁴² (Medea here seems to revert to a previous dialogue with Jason when, addressing the audience, from a pink spotlight momentarily illuminating a dark stage, she uttered ‘Got him’, figuratively showing her dragonsque claws, casting herself as untouchable, finally in command [84].) Condemning Jason to an impossible working through, which, differently from the quest for the Golden Fleece, will know no end, Medea forces him to experience her own death-driven condition, the condition of melancholic exile, her resetting and starting over again — her own unbecoming.⁴³

But that is not the end. The woman who is ‘always acting—even when she’s not’ moves to leave the stage. At that moment Jason breaks through her self-possession. When he says, ‘I never loved you’, Medea is undone. A play that has from the first words interrogated the notion of the private, a play in which performing as an actor is not just meta-theatrically thematized but generates in the audience the thick impression of impenetrable entanglements between the actor and the character level, between the actor/character’s consciousness and unconsciousness, their theatrical awareness and their interiority’s spontaneous histrionics, ends in a moment of queer authenticity. This queer *effet de réel* comes about as an ironization of irony itself, as the ironical self-undoing that internalized acting (‘acting even when one is not’) is subjected to.⁴⁴ One of the innovations in Ijames’s play — the construction of two filial figures who are fully realized as characters, with emotional context and credible sibling dynamics — can be read as resulting from the ironization of Euripides’ reduction of Medea’s children to extras, an anti-realistic or un-realistic choice, in itself a kind of irony. At the climactic moment, dominating Jason, protected by her dragon, after he has called her ‘A ghoul. A hag. A bitch. An enemy.... [A] gilded frame that’s insides have come loose with maggots and rot’ — almost an ironic replica of her version of *Medea nunc sum* (‘I am putting on the gorgon, the harpy, the crone, the vixen’) — Medea responds, ‘Such beautiful language. You once called me siren. Golden Lady. Beloved’ (99). Through the final word, the ironization of irony conjures Toni Morrison’s own *Medea*, her *Beloved*, inspired by the tragedy of Margaret Garner who killed her two-year-old daughter to save her from the death of slavery.⁴⁵ While we seem to see Medea no longer acting but racked by the pain of rejection, the impression of affective ‘authenticity’ is the effect of a second glitch — not the defiance of the endless cycle of violence and refusal of the death of the children, but the subversion of the digital command that we always act. Rather than being a form of self-control, acting, performance, emerges from the impossibility of any form of self-knowledge, from something close to Black improvisatory fugitivity, which Moten connects with deindividuation.⁴⁶ The collapse of the fantasy of epistemic certainty, which even Medea seems to fall into when she is sure that her ‘Got him’ closes off the game, is the affective substance of what, for lack of a better word, we can call authenticity. In this moment, it is not only acting, but the very notion of a self that collapses; the performance of inclusion and exclusion always presupposed by such a notion corresponds to the distinction between being *in* and *out of the know* that irony relies on yet unpredictably disrupts.⁴⁷ In the performance, this

⁴² *Media/Medea*, 99, 101.

⁴³ On Medea as a refugee, see Kasimis (2020); on Medea’s Lacanian death drive, as a constant resetting, see Telò (2020: 89–90).

⁴⁴ Young (2014) theorizes ‘queer seriousness’ elaborating on the idea of irony as a pervasively (self-)corrosive principle elaborated by De Man (1996).

⁴⁵ Toni Morrison famously said that Garner, the historical figure behind Sethe, ‘is not Medea who kills her children because she’s mad at some dude, and she’s going to get back at him. Here is something that is huge and very intimate’ (Smith 1987: 151). On Sethe as Medea, see Haley (1995), Walters (2007: 110), and Cullhed (2022: 90–2).

⁴⁶ See esp. Moten (2003).

⁴⁷ Arguing for ‘self-abolition’, Bey (2022: 34) observes that ‘the self is made possible by a fundamental exclusion, and that exclusion is a violation of not only other purported nonselves but also the very subject that is said to be a self, inasmuch as that subject has excluded, from the jump, other kinds of selves and nonselves it might have been were it not for the regime of the self as the only proper way to exist in the world’.

queer authenticity is encapsulated by Medea's illuminated expression, an obligatory focus of attention, which generates the effect of a close-up. In the cinematic close-up of a face, especially a woman's face, according to Mary Ann Doane, there is 'the attempt to capture an invisible depth' of 'a surface that in its refusal of any "beyond," any depth, connotes only a beautiful illegibility'.⁴⁸ The opacity of this 'beautiful illegibility', which a tripping tongue might render as 'LGBT', offers the perception of queer authenticity, the ironization of irony. Even though Jason might well be lying, still acting, 'I never loved you' closes off discourse, freezes the possibility of irony, yielding a tragic seriousness that knows no 'beyondness'. With the expectation of filicide defied, the pain is located elsewhere, in the all too recognizable affective jolt of being told (or suspecting) that one has never really been loved, which deindividuates the members of the audience, enveloping them in the smoke, the thick intensity, of a disavowed feeling.

James Ijames said that when he rewrote *Hamlet* as *Fat Ham*, he 'didn't want to end it with a heap of Black bodies'. *Fat Ham* ends instead with a scene of queer Black joy, which brings the audience to their feet.⁴⁹ In the case of *Media/Medea*, when asked about the reclamation of the myth, he says: 'I am not reclaiming anything. This is my story to tell too'. This play does not quite end with joy, even though it rescues Medea's children from infanticide and thus shields her from the condemnation that, in Diop's *Saint Omer*, we see literalized in a courtroom setting.

Media ends with a community of grief through the expansive force of Medea's emotional loss, but also with the political questions raised by the glitchy counterfactual, with the defiance of the narrative of filicide. Would the deaths scripted by the tradition have been subject to fleeting compassion, seamlessly followed by a return to complacency? Isn't the glitch what prevents Medea from conforming, fully belonging to the system of capitalistic consumption that is complicitous with the murder of Black lives? Through his observation on *Fat Ham*, Ijames invites us to ask what those deaths would have meant in their Black context. In the ironizing of irony, the queer authenticity of the ending, he creates a space of ethical and affective projection while silently asking what might be dismissed, what might perversely fail to generate a sense of identification. The thought of what does *not* happen in the play might yield a reckoning in line with Quashie's subjunctivity, Black 'aliveness'. Perhaps one condition of Blackness, a confrontation with having never been loved — with having been thrown into an anti-Black world, with having been cast as the impossible ontology, with having been forced to be (as) mere non-being⁵⁰ — is exposed by the play in all its raw realism. A collective 'we' of aesthetic and ethical identification that does not coincide with the liberal fantasy of a post-racial world remains complicated and uneasy. If one community of feeling, the fantasy of an all-encompassing 'colourless' coming together, can be elicited, can the other one, a more radical, deindividuated identification in difference, be imagined too?⁵¹

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⁴⁸ Doane (2021: 181).

⁴⁹ See S. Kim (2022: 546–7).

⁵⁰ In her commentary on W. E. B. Du Bois's 'The comet', a novella in which, with the extinction of (white) humanity, a Black man feels for the first time free, Saidiya Hartman observes: 'It is hard to forget all of those eager for him to die, awaiting his disappearance, obsessed with denying him the right to exist even in this lesser state' (2020). See Warren (2018: 5): 'Blacks...have function but not Being—the function of black(ness) is to give form to a terrifying formlessness (nothing)'. See also Moten (2013: 739): 'Blackness is the anoriginal displacement of ontology.... It is ontology's anti- and ante-foundation.... The irreparable disturbance of ontology's time and space'.

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