

2013

# The Politics of Identification in Waiting for Godot

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## Recommended Citation

Herren, Graley, "The Politics of Identification in Waiting for Godot" (2013). *Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 6.  
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## Chapter One

# The Politics of Identification in Waiting for Godot

Graley Herren

1956 Hungary, 1957 San Quentin, 1976 Johannesburg, 1980 Cape Town, 1984 Haifa, 1992 Quebec, 1993 Sarajevo, 2007 New Orleans. Coming soon to a locked-down, bombed-out, banned, segregated, or flooded theater near you: *Waiting for Godot*. But why *Godot*? A play that begins with the line, “Nothing to be done” (11) and concludes both of its acts in abject paralysis [“*They do not move*” (52, 88)], hardly recommends itself as a lightning rod for political activism. Nevertheless, throughout the production history of the play it has frequently been revived at times of social upheaval before suffering audiences who long for deliverance, and who see their suffering and longing reflected back at them by *Waiting for Godot*.

For a play that goes nowhere, it has remained constantly on the move. *Godot* recently had its passport stamped and its political credentials renewed in a highly acclaimed 2007 New Orleans production, produced environmentally in neighborhoods still ravaged by Hurricane Katrina. Artist and activist Paul Chan, who conceived the project, recalls his original inspiration for this site-specific production.

Friends said the city now looks like the backdrop for a bleak science fiction movie. Waiting for a ride to pick me up after visiting with some Common Ground volunteers who were gutting houses in the Lower Ninth, I realized it didn't look like a movie set, but the stage for a play I have seen many times. It was unmistakable. The empty road. The bare tree leaning precariously to one side with just enough leaves to make it respectable. The silence. [. . .] It was uncanny. Standing there at the intersection of North Prieur and Reynes, I suddenly found myself in the middle of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

(2)

Chan teamed up with two New York-based arts groups—Creative Time productions (best known for the “Towers of Light” memorial at Ground Zero) and the Classical Theatre of Harlem (who had just mounted a production of *Godot* in 2006) to stage two weekends’ worth of free public shows in November 2007, first at a crossroads in the Lower Ninth Ward, and then at a destroyed house in Gentilly.<sup>1</sup> The project might easily have been dismissed as a carpetbagger enterprise, especially since these New York artists eventually left town with a book contract and a documentary film deal already secured. However, Chan was scrupulous from the start to involve local residents, artists, and activists, and to establish a “shadow fund” through which every dollar spent on the production was matched by donations earmarked specifically for relief efforts in the Lower Ninth and Gentilly. It seems that the production team scored a rare trifecta: embraced by the locals, lauded by the popular press, and ignored by the Beckett estate<sup>2</sup> and other orthodox Beckettian purists, who normally do not miss a chance to excommunicate heretical productions like this stageless, cross-racial *Godot*.

I certainly would not count myself among the purists,<sup>3</sup> and I have no vested interest in either endorsing or denouncing Chan & Company. My interest lies in trying to understand the counterintuitive yet persistent political allure of *Waiting for Godot*. What is it about this play that so frequently attracts producers to stage it in volatile political environments? In what ways does the play support political appropriation, and in what ways does it resist, frustrate or undermine such designs? Jon Erickson grapples with some of these fundamental questions in a recent article for *Modern Drama*, “Is Nothing To Be Done?” There he provides a useful working definition of the term “political”: “The political is a means toward an end, and the end for those in democratic societies is an ethical one, related to the amelioration or ending of suffering and the flourishing of the good” (259). Does *Waiting for Godot*, as written or performed, in fact work as a means toward the ends of ameliorating suffering and encouraging “the good” to flourish? Can a production of the play be employed effectively in pursuit of such ends, regardless of what Beckett may or may not have intended? The present essay turns for answers not only to Beckett’s primary text and to scholarly exegesis, but also to two remarkably different but equally engaged *Godot* productions: the aforementioned 2007 New Orleans production, and the 1993 Sarajevo production conceived and directed by the late Susan Sontag.

## 1. WAITING FOR CLINTON: GODOT FOR AND ABOUT SARAJEVO

In the summer of 1993, amid constant Serbian bombardments, American art critic, novelist and intellectual iconoclast Susan Sontag made a highly publi-

cized trip to Sarajevo to direct *Waiting for Godot*. She had visited the war-torn city before, but this time she was resolved to make a more meaningful contribution: "I couldn't again be just a witness: that is, meet and visit, tremble with fear, feel brave, feel depressed, have heartbreaking conversations, grow ever more indignant, lose weight. If I went back, it would be to pitch in and do something" (299). Interestingly, her description of what constitutes an inappropriate response to crisis sounds precisely like the behavior modeled by Vladimir and Estragon in *Godot*. Nonetheless, Sontag chose not to waste her time in idle discourse but instead to act upon her ethical impulse to ameliorate the suffering of Sarajevans. She humbly conceded, "I was not under the illusion that going to Sarajevo to direct a play would make me useful in the way I could be if I were a doctor or a water systems engineer. It would be a small contribution. But it was the only one of the three things I do—write, make films, and direct in the theatre—which yields something that would exist only in Sarajevo, that would be made and consumed there" (300). Of course, Sontag's larger agenda was considerably more ambitious than "a small contribution" for the theatrical consumers of the beleaguered city. In acting locally, she was clearly thinking globally, seeking to attract increased international attention to the Bosnian plight and using her moment in the spotlight to lobby for military intervention against the intensifying genocide. During rehearsals, Sontag recalled, "The cast and I tried to avoid jokes about 'waiting for Clinton,' but that was very much what we were doing in late July [. . .]. Although people were afraid to hope, for fear of being disappointed, at the same time no one could believe that Clinton would again speak of intervention and do nothing" (314-315).

Sontag's political agenda could presumably have been served by any number of plays. Yet, from the beginning, her idea was not to produce just any spectacle for the suffering Sarajevans, but specifically to enlist Beckett's classic to aid the cause. Why *Godot*? "Beckett's play," explained Sontag, "seems written for, and about, Sarajevo" (300). To her credit, Sontag appears to have been cognizant of the fact that Beckett offers no panacea of political solution in the play, nor did she wish to force-feed her audience bromides of false hope: "Culture, serious culture, is an expression of human dignity—which is what people in Sarajevo feel they have lost, even when they know themselves to be brave, or stoical, or angry. For they also know themselves to be terminally weak: waiting, hoping, not wanting to hope, knowing that they aren't going to be saved" (304). Despair—over the futility of hope, the inevitability of suffering and the impossibility of salvation—casts a pall over *Waiting for Godot* from start to finish. As Jon Erickson bleakly observes of the play, "Suffering, whether of the New Testament poor or of the contemporary proletariat, is not redeemed here, certainly not by any human effort (and, in light of what one assumes to be Beckett's belief, not by anything else either)" (261). Estragon has resigned any faith he may once have had that

things will ever get better: "Nothing to be done," he complains on two occasions (11, 22), as well as conceding, "Don't let's do anything. It's safer" (19), "No use struggling" (22), and "Nothing we can do about it" (24)—all within the first fifteen minutes of the play. Vladimir, on the other hand, still behaves as if help might be forthcoming, though his ragged hope now seems more a habit than a genuine gesture of faith: "I'm beginning to come round to that opinion," he responds to Estragon's opening resignation. "All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything. And I resumed the struggle" (11). He is the impetus behind continuing to wait for Godot, continuing to wait for meaning behind or redemption from their suffering. But a half century of unrewarded hope is enough to shake anyone's faith. "I can't go on!" cries Vladimir late in the play, even though he reaffirms his intention to do just that in the play's closing exchange.

From the beginning, Didi and Gogo have already reached the abject impasse of the "terminally weak" that Sontag ascribes to Sarajevans by the summer of 1993, and nothing happens (twice) by the play's termination to substantially reverse that condition. One might well ask what possible ethical good could come from showing a desolate play to a population already thoroughly desolated before the show goes on. Sontag countered that in times of desperation, audiences do not necessarily hunger for escapist pap to help them easily digest their plight: "It's not true that what everyone wants is entertainment that offers them an escape from their own reality. In Sarajevo, as anywhere else, there are more than a few people who feel strengthened and consoled by having their sense of reality affirmed and transfigured by art" (301-302).

In sum, then, Sontag professed that *Waiting for Godot* was worth performing at this time and in this place because the people of Sarajevo needed to witness an "expression of human dignity" that "strengthened and consoled" them as it "affirmed and transfigured" their "terminally weak" sense of real hopelessness. But how can a group's collective sense of reality be at once "affirmed" and "transfigured"? If it is affirmed, then what need is there for transfiguration? If transfigured, then doesn't the resulting new sense of reality displace rather than affirm the original? This apparent contradiction is no mere semantic quibble; for no sooner did Sontag select *Godot* for its affirmative relevance—"Beckett's play [. . .] seems written for, and about, Sarajevo" (300)—than she set about radically transfiguring the performance into something very different than the play Beckett wrote. Given the extremely difficult and dangerous conditions in which she and her cast were working, and conceding that her guiding motives were more political than aesthetic, it would be prudish in the first instance and profoundly beside the point in the second instance to hold Sontag's production to punctilious standards of fidelity. That being said, it is difficult to reconcile Sontag's cham-

pionship of *Waiting for Godot* as the ideal mirror for the Sarajevan crisis on the one hand, with her cavalier overhaul of Beckett's dialogue, characters, directions and iconography on the other.

To be fair, some of her departures from Beckett's instructions were relatively benign. For instance, she cast a woman in the role of Pozzo and a man in the role of Boy. Granted, such meddling with the dramatis personae had infamously attracted the ire of the Beckett estate on previous occasions, even to the point of shutting down certain high-profile productions that did not follow the letter of the Beckettian law.<sup>4</sup> However, surely most reasonable observers can agree that occasional casting departures by a director from the race, sex or age of a character as originally conceived by the playwright can be both a practical necessity and a portal of discovery for new interpretive possibilities. Had Sontag confined her revisions to provocative new approaches to casting, then her aesthetic interventions would have fallen well within the reasonable bounds of creative license.

Sontag reconfigured the play far more radically, however, when she chose to triple the central couple. The Sarajevo production featured three separate Vladimirs and Estragons on stage simultaneously—a central male couple, flanked by two women on one side and an elderly man and woman on the other. By way of explanation, Sontag merely noted, "there was no reason not to use what Beckett envisaged, two men, at the center; but they would be flanked on the left side of the stage by two women and on the right by a woman and a man—three variations on the theme of the couple" (306). Her initial concession sounds almost as if she were doing the playwright a favor by actually retaining some semblance of the play he wrote, even as she invented entirely new characters and scenarios for a production still billing itself as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. By tripling Vladimir and Estragon, Sontag takes an audacious liberty that works against the fundamental premise of the play. The couple's isolation is essential to their condition. It explains why they have become so codependent upon one another, and it accounts for their bewilderment when confronted with the novelty of Pozzo and Lucky. Furthermore, the sustained analogy between Didi and Gogo and the two thieves crucified beside Christ is sacrificed with the tripling of the couples. Had Sontag elected simply to cast two women in the two primary roles, or an older man and woman, then either of these casting decisions might have been interesting and would have been at least as justifiable as the female Pozzo and the adult Boy. But to splice together the actions and dialogue of three Vladimirs and three Estragons seems less like an aesthetic experiment guided by a coherent directorial vision and more like a cloning experiment gone terribly wrong.

If "there was no reason not to use what Beckett envisaged" (306), then was there any preferable reason, aesthetically or politically, to use instead what Sontag envisaged? Quite frankly, no, judging by her rationalization: "It

was troubling that there were more good actors available than parts, since I knew how much it meant to the actors I auditioned to be in the play” (305). Viewed purely in terms of employment opportunities, three Vladimirs are inarguably better than one (likewise three Hamlets, or three Hedda Gablers—why not four?). Perhaps one should not fault Sontag too harshly for her humanitarian impulse to provide meaningful work for actors whose talents were not only chronically under-utilized during the city’s bombardment but who were quite literally willing to risk their lives in order to participate in her production. And on some level it is understandable that she might have felt a greater sense of obligation to collaborate with the men and women working alongside her than to keep scrupulous faith with the late Beckett’s text.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, generosity and solidarity notwithstanding, to reduce *Waiting for Godot* to the function of employment agency—radically revising the play not in an attempt to enhance its expression of human dignity or to interrogate its terminal weakness so much as to avoid making difficult casting cuts among actors who needed a job—is to make a travesty of this or any other play. The honor of enlisting *Waiting for Godot* in the service of suffering Sarajevans, only to fundamentally misrepresent the play to the very audiences it was designed to affirm, is dubious at best. Beckett scholar Lois Oppenheim was not alone in suspecting that “her decision to bring *Godot* to the former Yugoslavia was not so much about Sarajevo as about Sontag” and that “the Sarajevo production was not what Sontag claimed it to be, ‘a way of [pitching] in and [doing] something,’ but motivated, rather, by narcissism masquerading as martyrdom, or at the very least, altruism” (41).

Unfortunately, Sontag’s altruistic interventions included not only multiplication of the cast but also subtraction of the text. Over the course of the grueling rehearsals, she discovered that her mutated version of *Godot* was running considerably longer than traditional productions. With her addition of four cloned characters, the first act alone was clocking in at ninety minutes. Even with a “paired down” second act (in which she deigned to include only one Didi and one Gogo), the performance was approaching three hours’ duration. This realization finally began to trouble Sontag’s scruples—over her audience’s discomfort: “They would be hot, since it was high summer, and they would be squeezed together; I knew that many more people would be lining up outside the stage door for each performance than could be seated (tickets are free). How could I ask the audience, which would have no lobby, bathroom, or water, to sit so uncomfortably, without moving, for two and a half hours?” (312) To her mind, these unacceptable conditions necessitated a drastic solution: “I concluded that I could not do all of *Waiting for Godot*. But the very choices I had made about the staging which made Act I as long as it was also meant that the staging could represent the whole of *Waiting for Godot*, while using only the words of Act I” (312). Therefore, motivated by her altruistic desire to extend employment to as many actors as possible,

Sontag radically distorted the play; then, once she realized that this distortion yielded an excessively long first act, rather than abandoning her first mistake, she compounded it with a second, jettisoning the entire second act of the play. "This is awful!" (59), as Vladimir protests in act II—or would have done, had Sontag allowed her audience to hear these words, rather than erasing half of the play "written for, and about, Sarajevo."

To her grave discredit, Sontag admitted that there were deeper concerns than heat and duration behind her decision to excise the second act: "Perhaps I felt that the despair of act I was enough for the Sarajevo audience, and I wanted to spare them a second time when Godot does not arrive. Maybe I wanted to propose, subliminally, that act II might be different" (313). The contradiction at the heart of Sontag's project is laid bare in this damning admission, where she confesses to knowingly and willingly violating the spirit of the play. She purportedly selected *Godot* for its unflinching stoicism, its refusal to opt for easy escapism, its affirmation of Sarajevans' "terminally weak" sense of reality: "waiting, hoping, not wanting to hope, knowing that they aren't going to be saved" (304). And yet, in what must be regarded at best as an act of bad faith and at worst as deliberate censorship, she withheld Beckett's reiteration of despair in act II, ostensibly "sparing" her spectators, but in fact sparing herself, while selling both her audience and the play short. Jon Erickson argues that one of the key accomplishments of *Waiting for Godot* is Beckett's achievement of a compatible form to accommodate meaninglessness:

[ . . . ] in pointing to the meaninglessness of existence, Beckett couldn't give us a formless play, in which the dialogue goes nowhere and is completely arbitrary, and expect us to understand the suffering that meaninglessness entails for humans who want answers. Instead, we are given form, form with a vengeance—a form that promises meaning but denies it also in its very form. Instead of a hermeneutic circle, we are given a vicious one. Instead of the promise of progress, the threat of infinite regress. The symmetry of the two-act *Waiting for Godot*—necessary to depict time's passing, a third act superfluous—is both an aesthetic pleasure and its ultimate frustration. (267)

Erickson goes on to characterize the second act beautifully as a reiterated moment of suspension, "the moment of hope's exquisite suffering in trying not to hope" (267). By robbing the play of its symmetry and hedging its hopelessness, Sontag cheapened the play and her audience's theatrical experience.

Then again, "trying not to hope" is precisely what political activists attempt not to do. Despite her righteous anger and palpable frustration over "the absence of any political will to end this suffering" (321), Sontag obviously believed that it was better to "pitch in and do something" rather than continuing to wait passively like Didi and Gogo. To the extent that she saw

their passivity reflected in the despair of Sarajevans or in the paralysis of world leaders, she sought to shatter that mirror. Remember that Sontag claimed, "In Sarajevo, as anywhere else, there are more than a few people who feel strengthened and consoled by having their sense of reality affirmed and transfigured by art" (302). Yet wherever the play threatened to acquiesce in or affirm acceptance of suffering, she intervened through directorial transfiguration, "flipping the script" and subverting its message. As we have seen, she tripled the primary couple, thus replacing the isolation of act I with a community of shared suffering; and rather than allow the play to complete a vicious circle of despair, she eliminated act II altogether. Though she claimed to have chosen *Waiting for Godot* for its unique relevance to Sarajevo, her production tells a different story, a story about a play that wasn't relevant enough and needed political correction through artistic transfiguration. It is as if she wanted to stage an aesthetic intervention that modeled the military intervention she hoped for from NATO. If Susan Sontag could save *Waiting for Godot* from Samuel Beckett's despair, then perhaps there was still hope that Clinton and comrades could save Sarajevo from Bosnian genocide.

## 2. MIRRORS OF POLITICAL IDENTITY

Sontag's 1993 Sarajevo production appeared at an anxious turning point in "the Beckett Circle"—that cantankerous cadre of friends, performers, fellow writers, devoted collaborators, theater critics, academics, and defenders (most self-appointed) of Beckett's best interests. In the years immediately following Beckett's death in 1989, people passionately interested in his work were scrambling to orient themselves to the new post-Beckett realities. Not surprisingly, given Beckett's own proprietary concerns over productions of his work during his life, performances staged after his death provided a contentious battleground on which Beckett's posthumous authority was tested. Without Himself around to direct his own plays, or to instruct others in doing so, or to bestow or withhold his imprimatur on a given production, we Beckettians spent a good deal of energy and spilled massive quantities of ink fretting over "What Would Beckett Do?" Entering the fray at this particular juncture, Sontag served as a convenient target for scorn, given the extravagant excesses of her heresies against Beckett's most sacred text. Consider for instance Lois Oppenheim, who craftily couched her objections to Sontag in the form of a question that answers itself in the asking: "Can the interpretation of art, such as the director's interpretation of a play [. . .] make sufficient difference to justify a misrepresentation of the artist's or playwright's primary intentions, or is such misrepresentation merely reckless and falsifying and hence without real justification?" (40) Either way, it would seem, Sontag is guilty of misrepresentation. But why single out Oppenheim, when

my own disapproval is scarcely concealed in the preceding assessment of the production. Sontag's deviations are so brazen that it is tempting for commentary to devolve into a duel to hoist her upon the pithiest petard. Meanwhile, the legitimate political stakes raised by *Waiting for Godot* can easily get obscured amid the bluster. In truth, I suspect that many Beckett critics would have been equally uneasy with a perfectly faithful rendition of the play, on the grounds that performing *Godot* in 1993 Sarajevo (or for that matter in 2007 New Orleans) necessarily distorts the play insofar as it involves conscripting Beckett as spokesperson for one side against another in a local political imbroglio. In other words, the tired arguments over authorial intention and textual infidelity may serve as smokescreens for deeper concerns over political appropriation and identification.

Elin Diamond locates the source of this tension in the play itself when she characterizes *Waiting for Godot* as a "parable on the problematic of identification" (38). According to Diamond, identification—the phenomenon most influentially described by Jacques Lacan in the "mirror stage" of ego formation<sup>6</sup>—is the cracked looking-glass in which all political relations are falsely reflected. "With their basis in false images, identificatory fantasies elide the reality of the other's difference, turn the other into a semblance of (my)self" (39). When extended to the political arena, this false equation of self and other invites one of two strategies, both considered dangerously distorted by Diamond: "An imaginary nonrational psychic process, identification produces, in the political realm, a crude, potentially violent division between those who are like me and those who are 'other'; those who are 'healthy' and those who sicken the body politic and must be destroyed" (39-40). In other words, politics at its most benign invites solidarity—Let's all just get along, fostering unity by ignoring difference—while politics at its most malignant threatens extermination—If you are not with Us you are against Us and must either be converted or eliminated. Either way, the "identificatory fantasy" is false, premised upon an "imaginary nonrational psychic process." Considered in these terms, *Waiting for Godot* does indeed offer trenchant political commentary, argues Diamond, but not the kind that producers typically bargain for when they enlist the play to serve their specific causes. "What is political in *Godot*," she asserts, "is not the real suffering it mirrors but the oppressive effects of identification's mirror relations and the impossibility of a politics that necessarily derives from them. For Beckett politics is not unaesthetic; it's impossible." Politics is impossible because it "operates not in spite of but through the imaginary" (40), and any understanding of imaginary identification as inherently irrational must necessarily reject such a misguided effort out of hand as foredoomed.

Diamond does detect a viable alternative to identification offered in *Godot*, albeit on the more modest interpersonal level. She argues that Vladimir and Estragon's "duologues are more than the time-passing antics of existen-

tial clowns; they are exercises in negotiating power relations without coercive identifications" (41). She notes that, for all their apparent similarities, "their pronounced sameness makes room for difference" so that "the couple do not mirror one another; no one is trapped in the other's identificatory fantasy" (41). For Diamond, Didi and Gogo's inability to play at being Pozzo and Lucky represents not a theatrical defeat but an ideological victory: "Their failure to achieve the norm of meaning constitutes a resistance to that norm" (41). If politics writ large is impossible, interpersonal communication that resists identification and respects difference may still be viable. Diamond's conclusions about politics of/as failure are consonant with Jon Erickson's thesis, advanced tentatively in the form of a question: "Could we say [. . .] that *Waiting for Godot* is reflective of *the limits or even failure* of politics in human affairs?" (259)

This deep distrust of politics—as impossible, doomed to failure, based upon false premises of identification between self and other—is a signature of much postmodern thought, particularly in the field of ethics. Like Elin Diamond, Terry Eagleton turns to Lacan's "The Mirror Stage" as the paradigmatic statement of the problem. In *Trouble with Strangers: A Study of Ethics*, Eagleton explains,

The importance of Lacan's lecture lay in its illustration of the imaginary—that strange realm of the human psyche in which subjects and objects [. . .] appear constantly to exchange places and live each other's lives. [. . .] It is as though you can put yourself in the very place from which you are being observed, or see yourself at the same time from the inside and the outside. (2)

The self's imaginary identification with the other is regarded with deep suspicion by the cultural left, asserts Eagleton, because the imaginary affirms "unity, stasis, resemblance, correspondence, autonomy, mimesis, representation, harmony, plenitude and totality; and no terms could have been less *à la mode* for an avant-garde whose buzz words were lack, absence, difference, conflict, fissure, dispersal, fragmentation and heterogeneity" (5).

A prime example of this tension can be found in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, whom Eagleton labels "one of the earliest postmodern thinkers." As with many of the ethicists Eagleton studies, Levinas' distrust of the political is rooted in twentieth-century atrocities: "His extreme wariness of identity and generality has its roots in a history of fascist and Stalinist barbarism. For him, as for some of his postmodern progeny, there is a discernible path from the generic to the Gulag" (233). When Diamond derides "the oppressive effects of identification's mirror relations and the impossibility of a politics that necessarily derives from them" (40), she reveals her membership in the Levinas camp that perpetually sees reflections of Hitler and Stalin whenever gazing into the political mirror.

But why Hitler and not de Gaulle? As Eagleton pointedly observes, "When Levinas thinks of solidarity he thinks of fascism, not of the resistance movements which fought to overcome it" (233). Of course, Beckett personally participated in that movement, a political coalition that ultimately prevailed against the very forces that Levinas et al. oppose. By invoking the French Resistance as a positive example of political solidarity, Eagleton airs his own counter-suspicion against the anti-political thrust of postmodern ethics, namely that such indiscriminate vilification of the political amounts to throwing the democratic baby out with the fascist bathwater. He finds a dangerous degree of social abnegation in the ethics of Levinas and his postmodern progeny: "his ethical thought is among other things symptomatic of an era in which the whole concept of human communality has been damaged almost beyond repair, both by its advocates and its antagonists. At its most negative, it is the sign of the gradual atrophy of the sense of society. Politics is now the problem, not the solution" (233). Eagleton rejects this anti-political platform in no uncertain terms: "What one might loosely call poststructuralist or postmodern ethics reflects among other things a massive failure of political nerve on the part of a European intelligentsia confronted not only with the formidable power of global corporate capitalism, but still languishing guiltily in the long shadow of the Gulag and the gas chambers" (233). Eagleton is not blind to the real abuses that can and have resulted from the politics of identification or from global corporate capitalism for that matter. Nonetheless, he challenges the notion that the only acceptable antidote to the disease of fascism is to erect a quarantine wall of alterity between the self and the other, isolating against cross-contamination. Instead, Eagleton counters simply but persuasively, "Human interaction involves identity as well as difference. The notion of communication is the ruin of both absolute identity and absolute alterity" (237).

How then might one scale the walls of alterity to communicate with the other in ways that are at once practically effective and yet respectful of difference? On what common ground can the self and the other stand separately but together? Eagleton's response resonates strongly with *Waiting for Godot*. Rather than positing grandiose humanist platitudes as the basis for political solidarity, he charts a much humbler pathway through the looking-glass of identification: mutual abjection.

But what if ethics and ontology were not so opposed? What if an immeasurable abjection were what we had in common? If the Other relates to me (as abjected, traumatised, held hostage and the like) just as I relate to him, then the non-relation between us, so to speak, becomes symmetrical. [. . .] It is on the ground of our shared trauma [. . .] that a free, equal and fulfilling encounter between us becomes possible. (238)

Opponents of the imaginary assume at least two things about the identificatory encounter between the self and the other: 1) when the self (any self) gazes at the other (any other) and sees reflections of himself, he is mistaken; and 2) not only is the self wrong in imagining similarity where there is really only difference, but he is willfully wrong—imagining similarity only to serve some nefarious end, breaching the walls of alterity in a Trojan horse of identification only to spring out and ultimately destroy the duped other. Eagleton rejects both of these assumptions. He suggests that legitimate identification is possible, and that it need not necessarily be based upon deception, manipulation or abuse of power. In fact, the shared experience of having been abused by those in power can serve as the common ground on which the self and the other stand side by side in solidarity.

*Waiting for Godot* endorses no specific political program for its spectators to follow, nor does it encourage faith that solutions are forthcoming from any sort of savior, political or otherwise. However, the play does affirm that empathy and communication are still possible on the very “ground of our shared trauma” mapped out by Eagleton. Estragon repeatedly asks Vladimir if they are tied to Godot. Insofar as the Pozzo/Lucky relationship mirrors the relationship of Godot to the tramps, the play implies that Didi and Gogo are indeed slaves bound to their master, even if that master may be no more than an imaginary figment of their own creation, and even if they have the power to sever those bonds if only they would acknowledge as much. However, they are also tied with less oppressive bonds—to one another, to Pozzo and Lucky, and by extension to all fellow sufferers watching the play or suffering outside the theater—through their shared abjection.

All efforts at political action in the first act prove pathetic and futile. Vladimir and Estragon repeatedly state their commitment to doing nothing. With the appearance of Pozzo and Lucky, Vladimir is temporarily moved by an ethical impulse to protest injustice. Outraged by Lucky’s cruel mistreatment, he musters up the courage to object: “It’s a scandal!” (28) However, his righteous indignation quickly subsides once he learns that Pozzo plans to get rid of Lucky by selling him at the market. This revelation would seem to invite further political outrage at Pozzo’s blatant engagement in the slave trade. But instead, probably intuiting the analogy between Pozzo and Lucky and his own relationship with Godot, Vladimir shifts his concern to the master’s abandonment of his faithful servant. Eventually, Didi goes so far as to turn the tables on Lucky, blaming him for mistreating Pozzo: “How dare you! It’s abominable! Such a good master!” (34) With Estragon, the case is even worse. First he deprives Lucky of his meager sustenance by eating the scraps from Pozzo’s chicken bones. Lucky responds soon thereafter with a sharp kick to his shin, and Estragon retaliates in the second act with an even more brutal beating of the fallen Lucky. At this point, there would seem to be little hope for solidarity among the disenfranchised, all of whom seem more

intent upon serving their own self-interests than in uniting to ease each other's suffering.

However, act II does at least offer new opportunities for political engagement. The mighty and the meek have both fallen, literally, since the now-blind Pozzo and the now-mute Lucky no sooner return than they fall to the ground and can't get up. Vladimir sees the opportunity for altruism and delivers what sounds like a political manifesto:

Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! [*Pause. Vehemently.*] Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. [. . .] To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! (74)

The earnestness of the oration is undercut, however, by the action on stage. For, while Vladimir is speechifying about the need to assist the downtrodden, he is in fact delaying to do so, as Pozzo and Lucky continue to wriggle helplessly on the ground. When Didi and then Gogo finally do attempt to lend a hand, their efforts fail spectacularly, resulting in their own downfall and their resentment toward those whom they sought to help. Again, the play would seem to testify against the viability of even the most humble attempts at political activism.

Yet Vladimir's most poignant speech near the end of the play does succeed in offering a politically efficacious statement of principle. After Pozzo and Lucky exit and before the Boy enters to announce that no salvation will be forthcoming from Godot again today, Didi wonders, "Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now?" If one is attentive, he notes, it becomes clear that "The air is full of our cries. [*He listens.*] But habit is a great deadener" (84). At this moment in the play Estragon is physically asleep, but Vladimir acknowledges that they have both been lulled into an ethical torpor from which it is difficult to awake. No irony lightens this heart-rending dark night of the soul in which Vladimir recognizes his role in a cautionary tale, an example of how not to live, waiting in vain for salvation, sleep-walking through life, doing nothing. His most enigmatic line here is "habit is a great deadener." The sentiment is familiar to Beckett, first expressed in his early monograph on *Proust*.<sup>7</sup> What is unclear in this case is the antecedent. Which habit does Didi have in mind? The habit of living? The habit of waiting? Within the context of this speech, it seems more likely that he means the habit of ignoring the cries of others. The primary shortcoming for which Didi faults himself is a failure of empathy, a failure to hear in the self's cry of abjection the echoing cries of millions of other fellow sufferers. This is as close to a political credo as the play comes. Life is suffering, but one need not necessarily suffer alone. "To each man his little cross," muses

Vladimir (58), but Christ was not crucified alone; he had the two thieves for company. Immeasurable abjection and shared trauma provide common ground, if for no better function than to plant ones cross alongside ones fellows. Beckett does not go so far as to profess any great faith that concerted political action will succeed in ameliorating misery—though neither does the recipient of the *Croix de Guerre* and the *Médaille de Résistance* exclude that possibility. He offers no more or less than the hope that some useful good might come from hearing the cries of others and recognizing an affinity with ones own suffering. This modest proposal does not presume to cure the world's ills, but it is the necessary first step in that direction. Furthermore, this basic political principle ascribes some redemptive function to identification other than as an irrational, oppressive process leading inexorably to the Gulag or the gas chamber.

### 3. WAITING FOR FEMA: ENLISTING AND RESISTING THE POLITICAL MIRROR IN NEW ORLEANS

The 2007 New Orleans production contributes instructively to this ongoing debate over the politics of identification. As related in the introduction, Paul Chan's original inspiration to mount *Waiting for Godot* came from the striking similarities he noticed between the devastated Lower Ninth Ward and the set of Beckett's play. He did not see these correspondences as only working in one direction, however; he believed that New Orleans might have as much to teach *Godot* as *Godot* had to teach New Orleans: "In New Orleans in 2007, *Godot* is legion and it is not difficult to recognize the city through the play. Here, the burden of the new is to realize the play through the city" (3). With so many ready-made affinities at hand, Chan chose not to select a local theater in which to stage the play, but rather to take the play directly to the people most affected by Hurricane Katrina, performing it on site amid the unreconstructed rubble. The play was also cast to accentuate affinities with its audience. Vladimir was played by prominent African-American actor Wendell Pierce, best known for his role on HBO's *The Wire*, "whose parents once lived in the neighborhood, not far from where the play was staged" (Brown). Lucky was played by Mark McLaughlin, the only white actor among the principles and a "local theater veteran" (Giselson). Chan claimed that his goal in all of these creative decisions was "to enter and engage the myriad dimensions of life lived in the midst of ruin, without succumbing to the easy graces of reducing it to either knowledge or illustration of that life" (3). Caveats notwithstanding, the belief that *Waiting for Godot* and post-Katrina New Orleans had an intimate mirror-relation with one another was a core conviction of the project from its genesis, a conviction shared by the dozens of collaborators and generally reaffirmed by the play's reception.

Upon closer examination, however, it seems that not everyone saw the same reflection when *Godot* held up its mirror to decimated nature in New Orleans.

The production's riskiest move was to unmoor the play from the stage, performing the first weekend's shows at a crossroads in the Lower Ninth Ward and the second weekend's shows at a storm-ruined house in Gentilly.<sup>8</sup> Yet by all accounts this creative gamble paid off, yielding sublime new significance from several moments in the play. The British journalist Ethan Brown noted the chilling relevance of a line like Vladimir's "Where are all these corpses from?" (60), in a neighborhood where human remains were still being discovered among the rubble. The flood-ravaged landscape also added sharp poignancy to Didi and Gogo's exchange early in the second act:

VLADIMIR: Do you not recognize the place?

ESTRAGON: [*Suddenly furious.*] Recognize! What is there to recognize? All my lousy life I've crawled about in the mud! And you talk to me about scenery! [*Looking wildly about him.*] Look at this muckheap! I've never stirred from it! (57)

Not only the impotent fury but also the precise descriptive details of Gogo's diatribe rang all too true for local audience members. The director, Christopher McElroen of the Classical Theatre of Harlem, similarly exploited the ready-made *mise-en-scène* of the environmental setting to full advantage. David Cuthbert of the *Times-Picayune* complimented the production for making "great use of the broad canvas at hand, in spatial relations, stumbling forays into the weeds and the dramatic entrance and exit that two trees in the distance on North Prieur Street provide" (Cuthbert). He added that the chance creative interventions of the environment itself occasionally worked to serendipitous effect: "as a bonus, tugboats from the Industrial Canal provide haunting echoes" (Cuthbert). The city effectively served as both set designer and sound technician for the production. Covering the event for the online magazine NOLAFugees.com, Anne Giselson reported, "The soundscape was just as integral: distant police sirens, tugboat and train horns [and] some sharply wailing birds, all pulsing quietly in the background, muted by the once treacherous canal and surrounding empty lots of former homes." Occasionally the script was altered slightly to account for the site-specific realities of this unique setting; indeed, any director would have been derelict in his duties to have bypassed such exquisite opportunities. For instance, when the tramps first attempt to orient themselves to their surroundings, Didi alludes to a bog as reference point:

VLADIMIR: [*Looking around.*] You recognize the place?

ESTRAGON: I didn't say that.

VLADIMIR: Well?

ESTRAGON: That makes no difference.

VLADIMIR: All the same . . . that tree . . . [*Turning towards the auditorium*] . . . that bog. (16)

In the New Orleans production, "that bog" was revised to "that levee." More importantly, the physical orientation of the reference was reversed. Instead of making comical metatheatrical reference to the audience as a bog, Wendell Pierce's Vladimir turned ominously backward toward the levee, whose breach had so recently unleashed the deadly flood in that very neighborhood. As Giselson observed, "This tiny change shifts attention away from the audience to the levee, our ubiquitous symbol of failure." Giselson testifies to the profound cumulative effect of these seemingly minor alterations: "The set never lets you forget either—whenever Estragon sat exhaustedly at the base of that north leaning pole, that stuck storm compass, my heart nearly broke."

For all the searing emotional power unanimously attributed to the production, reactions were mixed when it came to the cultural and political value of this *Godot*. Chan's emphasis upon collaboration with the locals—residents, community organizers, theater practitioners, journalists, and educators—seems to have been earnest from the start. His establishment of a "shadow fund" for relief efforts further proved his commitment to "pitch in and do something" with a lasting and tangible positive impact in the region. This spirit of solidarity proved contagious in certain quarters, rejuvenating many spectators with a surge of civic pride, as if attendance itself constituted an ennobling political act of community rebuilding. In David Cuthbert's glowing review, for instance, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between his praise of the play and his praise of the courageous New Orleans audience seated transfixed before its mirror: "This is Beckett's merciless, tragic-comic view of mankind, playing at life to avoid the specter of death, awaiting an enlightenment that stubbornly refuses to appear. But man, being what he is, will pin his hopes to something as ephemeral as two leaves sprouting from an otherwise barren tree. If that's not us, I don't know what is." To borrow Sontag's formulation, it would seem that *Waiting for Godot* is written for and about New Orleans. Cuthbert all but says as much when he concludes, "This is stimulating, adventurous theater of the first order in which we see ourselves in the mirror of a great play." Viewed from the vantage point of identification, the play is most deserving of praise precisely when it most resembles the lives of its audience, and vice versa.

Not every spectator was as enamored as Cuthbert with the images reflected by the New Orleans spectacle. Rather than finding a model for political solidarity, Anne Giselson found social inequality still evident in the limited accessibility to this “free” performance:

What felt most “Nawlins” to me was that while hundreds of us stood around in line for a ticket, some for over an hour, joking around, grumbling, spraying ourselves with the free mosquito repellent, VIPs with lanyards sailed past us, as did some neighborhood residents who tried to argue that they’d lived there their whole lives and they shouldn’t have to wait.

Embedded within the withering sarcasm of this complaint is actually a very serious corrective. As its postmodern detractors rightly recognize, identification harbors a dangerous tendency for overgeneralization, blanching out the heterogeneity of a group and replacing it with a homogenous façade of pseudo-unity. “The danger is in the neatness of identifications,” cautioned the young Samuel Beckett in “Dante ... Bruno . Vico .. Joyce” (19). Giselson’s behind-the-scene’s reportage provides a timely reminder of the real tensions that continued to divide certain members of her audience from one another, a disparity that applies to almost any given audience viewing any given play. The “we” of Cuthbert’s “we see ourselves in the mirror of a great play” sounds a bit too neat and aspirational in light of Giselson’s grumblings—especially when one factors in Ethan Brown’s report that 400 attendees without passes were turned away from the opening night’s overcrowded performance. In other words, the only “we” reflected by *Godot* on that particular night were those fortunate enough to obtain an exclusive seat before its mirror. The overwhelming popularity of the production was a great affirmation of Chan’s project, yet the existing tensions exacerbated before the show indicated the real obstacles to achieving any kind of “Big Easy” solidarity after the show. Clearly the image Cuthbert saw reflected “in the mirror of a great play” conflicted sharply with the parallax view Giselson saw reflected in the glare of the VIP lanyards.

Despite their markedly different interpretations of the spectacle surrounding *Godot*, these divergent “Nawlins” reporters both found sustaining political inspiration from the play itself. Cuthbert observed, “There is no great entity riding to our rescue to ‘fix’ what has been broken. We must do it ourselves, as we have, with the help of compassionate strangers and our own crazy courage.” Giselson was even more outspoken about the message of self-determination:

There’s already been a whole lot written about the connection of the play to the city’s current state of affairs, emphasizing the idea of New Orleanians “waiting.” Waiting for FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency], waiting for Road Home money, waiting for neighbors, waiting for a master

plan, etc. This, I imagine unintentionally, emphasizes a certain passivity to the reconstruction that mischaracterizes the enormous, historic, exhausting amount of civic activity down here. I've never seen the town so goddamned busy, so many sunken eyes and jittery nerves and bleeping blackberries and calloused hands. In fact, many, many people did not wait and are not waiting, paralyzed, for government help, but rather are moving forward and doing.

Giselson may resist the “we” classification which would conflate her with the VIPs in the front row, but she proudly embraces civic identification with her neighbors on the back bench when it comes to sharing abjection and working together to ameliorate it. Those who would read *Waiting for Godot* as a protest letter to the despot *du jour* or as a conscription letter for the next messiah misidentify the target audience. The play was never addressed to those in power or to any would-be savior, but rather to the disempowered who, through the empathy sometimes demonstrated by Didi and Gogo, and through the solidarity of action conspicuously declined by them, might actually help one another affect change for the better.

Jon Erickson argues that *Godot* guides its audiences to distinguish between cosmic misfortune and social injustice: “What is at issue is a matter of separating questions of social justice—what we can change—from feelings about cosmic justice—what we cannot. If we do not do this, if we do not accept that there is ‘nothing to be done’ in relation to cosmic justice, then the ‘what is to be done’ of social justice will never be realized” (271). To apply this litmus test to New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina must qualify as a cosmic misfortune, something that neither the residents of New Orleans nor their government could avoid. People devastated by the storm might instinctively consider this disaster to be unfair. However, such a response confuses misfortune with injustice, premised as it is upon the misguided assumption that the universe operates according to principles of fairness. Nevertheless, the charge of injustice may indeed accurately pertain to the inept governmental response to the disaster, in which case there is “something to be done” other than passively accept the situation. When Estragon opens *Godot* with the observation that there is “Nothing to be done” (11), one might well accept this assessment as a cosmic concession to the inevitability of suffering in every human life. On the other hand, it is much more difficult to accept his passive resignation when he and Vladimir inspect Lucky’s wounds. Observing the “running sore” on the servant’s neck, they reason,

ESTRAGON: It’s the rope.

VLADIMIR: It’s the rubbing.

ESTRAGON: It’s inevitable. (26)

Well, perhaps a sore is the inevitable outcome of incessant rubbing from a rope, but placing a rope around a man's neck and tightening it like a noose and leading him around like an abused beast of burden is by no means inevitable. It is injustice, committed by the powerful (Pozzo) against the powerless (the most unlucky Lucky), a crime that demands a political act of rectification (emancipation). Not surprisingly, this lesson is lost entirely upon the perpetrator Pozzo, who waxes, "The tears of the world are a constant quantity" (33)—which is merely a more lyrical way of saying "Nothing to be done." Those in power inflict suffering upon the disenfranchised, through sheer incompetence as often as through premeditated malice, and they have and will always rationalize these injustices as unavoidable misfortune.

*But:* Didi and Gogo should know better. From a political standpoint, *Waiting for Godot* is less an indictment of the Pozzos and George W. Bushes of the world for their bungling abuses, or of the Godots and Bill Clintons of the world for failing to arrive and save the day, than it is an exposé of political failure at the grass roots. Didi and Gogo know firsthand what it feels like to be beaten, to go hungry, to suffer inexorably at the hands of cosmic forces beyond ones control, but also to suffer unnecessarily at the hands of social forces that could be resisted. The disempowered in this play outnumber the powerful three to one, and had they exercised the wherewithal to work in solidarity, they might have gained strength from these numbers to ameliorate some of their suffering. After all, volunteers in the French Resistance determined that something could be done, or at least ought to be attempted, and, impossibly, they did it. Yet the slaves in *Godot* bicker at one another instead of uniting to turn their righteous protest against the forces that oppress them, some of which (though not all) might be resisted. When Didi confesses late in the play to becoming deadened to the cries of others, he essentially convicts himself of the same "massive failure of political nerve" with which Eagleton charges the postmodern intelligentsia (233).

While the play presents political failure, it is not inevitable that its audiences will mirror that failure. Just because Didi and Gogo famously do not move at the end of the play, this does not condemn audiences to replicate their immobility. Those producers who look to *Waiting for Godot* for a program in how to solve the perennial problem of human suffering are apt to be disappointed. Likewise, those who seek to appropriate the play as a political protest against local tyrants or epic fools, or as a public plea for the intervention of a political savior, are sure to find that their appointed puppet resists the voice of the ventriloquist. *Waiting for Godot* is a play about tramps addressed to tramps. To the extent that it mirrors the condition of those tramps on the other side of the footlights (or Sarajevan candle lights, or New Orleanian street lights) it reflects not a model for political resistance but a model for political failure. Nevertheless, in exposing that failure as such, *Waiting for Godot* may invite the spectator to grimace at the image of herself

she sees reflected in the play. If so, then this quintessential play about failure, apathy, paralysis, and abjection might be effectively enlisted as a cautionary tale inspiring political mobilization quite different than the inaction mirrored by the play.

## NOTES

1. See [www.creativetime.org](http://www.creativetime.org) for production photos as well as detailed descriptions of the mission, performances, participants, off-shoot projects, and support services associated with the New Orleans *Waiting for Godot*.

2. The reprieve would not prove permanent. In January 2011, the Beckett estate abruptly withdrew its permission for the post-Katrina *Godot*, shutting down a scheduled production at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and thus forcing director Christopher McElroen to cancel a tour of the production. See Mark Shanahan and Meredith Goldstein, "No More 'Waiting,'" *Boston Globe* (25 January 2011), online at [www.boston.com/ac/celebrity/articles/2011/01/25/no\\_more\\_waiting/](http://www.boston.com/ac/celebrity/articles/2011/01/25/no_more_waiting/) For information about several highly acclaimed performances of the McElroen production before the Beckett estate's sudden reversal, see [www.christophermcelroen.com/waiting-for-godot-tour](http://www.christophermcelroen.com/waiting-for-godot-tour).

3. For a fuller discussion of my reservations about purist protection of Beckett's work, see the final chapter of Graley Herren, *Samuel Beckett's Plays on Film and Television* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

4. The most notorious example is JoAnne Akalaitis' American Repertory Theater production of *Endgame*. For illuminating discussions of this controversy, see Akalaitis' interviews in Jonathan Kalb, *Beckett in Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989 (165-172); and Lois Oppenheim (ed.), *Directing Beckett*, Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994 (135-140).

5. It is worth noting that Bosnians remain highly appreciative of Sontag's political efforts on their behalf, regardless of the debatable artistic merits of her production. In April 2009, Bosnian officials announced that a city square in the center of Sarajevo would be renamed Theatre Place-Susan Sontag in honor of the late activist.

6. See Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function, as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink, New York: W.W. Norton, 2002 (3-9).

7. Beckett praises Proust's artistic exploitation of involuntary memory, as opposed to voluntary memory which he dismisses as lifeless habit and thus anathema to art: "The man with a good memory does not remember anything because he does not forget anything. His memory is uniform, a creature of routine, at once a condition and function of his impeccable habit, an instrument of reference instead of an instrument of discovery" (17).

8. The Lower Ninth productions took place on November 2-4, 2007, at the intersection of Reynes and North Prieur Streets. Because the crowds vastly exceeded the 600-seat amphitheatre, the original Friday-Saturday run was extended to a third show on Sunday. The Gentilly productions took place on November 9-10, 2007, at 6205 Warrington Drive.

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