

Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Pearlman, Lazlo and McLaughlin, Deirdre (2020) If you want to kiss her, kiss her! Gender and Queer Time in modern Meisner training. *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, 11 (3). pp. 310-323. ISSN 1944-3927

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2020.1789723>
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2020.1789723>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/42949/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)



**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE



UniversityLibrary

If you want to kiss her, kiss her! Gender and Queer Time in modern Meisner training

Dr Lazlo Pearlman and Dr Deirdre McLaughlin

Drama Department, Northumbria University, Newcastle, United Kingdom;

The Royal Central School of Speech & Drama, London, United Kingdom

Lazlo.pearlman@northumbria.ac.uk; Deirdre.mclaughlin@cssd.ac.uk

Provide short biographical notes on all contributors here if the journal requires them.

If you want to kiss her, kiss her! Gender and Queer Time in modern Meisner training

Responses to creating trainings for LGBTQ+ and other marginalized student groups tend either toward rejecting acting “methods” as unfit for purpose, or to simply changing pronouns in these trainings and carrying on as before. This paper works through an encounter with heteronormative gender ideology in the Meisner technique. It looks at the way the training and the trainer supported the normative and shut down the ability for students to act on the Meisner instruction to ‘bring the actor back to his emotional impulses and to acting firmly rooted in the instinctive’ (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 37). It considers how a repositioning of the Meisner repetition exercise as an example and experience of Jack Halberstam (2005) and E.L. McCullam and Mikko Tuhkanen’s (2001) formulations of “Queer Time” in order to problematize the role of the trainer as “guru” or “charismatic teacher” and normative “time keeper” and thereby to create training in which students are free not to follow hegemonic cultural behaviour patterns. We posit that this “queer Meisner time” might be used in order to foster atmospheres in which students who do not conform to gender and sexual norms might not encounter these restrictive hegemonies.

Keywords: Meisner technique; repetition; Queer Time; heteronormativity; chrononormativity; gender; LGBTQIA; guru

In this paper, we reflect together upon our experiences as queer Meisner trainers and students, drawing upon the specific context of Lazlo's attendance and experience of an intensive Meisner training in the UK¹, a training setting which was warm, welcoming and, unlike Sanford Meisner and many of his disciples, where the instructor used nurture as a primary teaching tool and made a clear effort to create an atmosphere of inclusion in the room.² And yet, not long after the classic repetition exercises began, the trainer's instruction to a male student to kiss a female student "if he wanted to" bought normative notions of masculine and feminine, behaviour and heteronormative gender and sexuality to bear in the name of "following your instincts." The problem with this instruction was clear: neither student had been given the tools or opportunity to follow any but the culturally trained "instinct" to kiss (male) and be kissed (female). This

¹ This paper is looking at the role of the Meisner trainer in activating or deactivating the potential for Queer Time inherent within the Meisner technique. Accordingly, we will be reflecting on observations developed from our collective experiences both as actor trainers and as training performers, formerly as students in the conservatory/drama school setting, and currently as part of our ongoing professional development as trainers.

² While slight in build and often featured in documentation of his teaching sitting in a small chair behind a large desk, Meisner's presence remains as looming as the impact of his technique. While Meisner's technique calls for a free exploration of impulse and emotion that he claims is available to all students regardless of "talent" (Meisner Estate 2006), his communication style often belied that sentiment.

paper works through that classroom encounter as a framework for reflecting upon heteronormative gender ideology in the delivery of the Meisner technique. We aim to identify some of the ways the Meisner trainer might tend to support the normative and shut down the ability for students to act on the Meisner instruction to ‘respon[d] truthfully to the other person’(Meisner 1987: 42). We consider how a re-assemblage/refocusing of the Meisner repetition exercise as an example and experience of Queer Time (McCallum and Tuhkanen 2011, Halberstam 2005) might create training in which students are free not to follow hegemonic cultural behaviour patterns and further posit that this “queered Meisner time” might be used in order to foster atmospheres in which students of the Meisner technique who do not conform to gender and sexual norms might not encounter these hegemonies. We conclude that the Meisner repetition exercise, when freed of its cis-heteronormative baggage - with assistance from Judith Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005) - may itself be trained as and in Queer Time, and further propose that when freed of such baggage other neo-classical acting “methods” may be reassembled and experienced in/as Queer Time. We then suggest, while recognizing the artificial dominance and multiple blind spots of the white western acting canon, that engaging in the Queer Timing of the? said canon may be useful in the quest for de-gendering, decolonizing and de-normativizing these techniques for LGBTQIA+ students and any student participating in acting training.

The Meisner Technique

Sanford Meisner, American actor and actor trainer popular for developing the Meisner technique, has become a staple within western drama school training, professional development courses and masterclasses. Popular among actors who profess they want to be “in the moment” and reject techniques which are “too

intellectual”³, Meisner’s ‘reality of doing’ (Meisner & Longwood 1987:16) and the technique’s popular repetition exercise privilege excellent listening skills - because, as Meisner states, ‘You’re not pretending that you’re listening; you’re listening. You’re really listening.’ (Meisner in Meisner & Longwell 1987: 16) and a commitment to executing action within imaginary circumstances. The following? story, interpolated through the next sections, is a recounting of one classroom event that Lazlo experienced that echoes many we have encountered personally and in our research. This story presents an engagement with the teaching of foundational exercises from the Meisner technique focussing specifically on directions given to the student-participants by the Meisner trainer and their subsequent impact on impulse, identity and time.

It was on the first day of a two-day intensive intro to Meisner workshop that I decided to take as a refresher to my previous training, and to reacquaint myself with the experience and positionality of being a student. There were six of us of different ages, trainings and backgrounds and the teacher knew nothing about us. We introduced ourselves minimally, stating our acting background and our primary reason for attending the workshop. The teacher, who I will call Janet, was warm and funny and attempted to make a space in which there was both structure (strict time keeping, breaks, and assurances that when we needed the loo or anything else we should take care of ourselves) and “freedom”, espousing the Meisner mantra of ‘fuck polite’ (Meisner, 33) and positioning the working room as a place where all we had to do was to listen to our partner and respond from impulse. All impulses were possible, and no responses were off limits. Mark, do we want these referenced in some way?

As American actors and actor trainers living and working in the UK, we have shared a collective interest in the fact that our Meisner training and experiences are called upon far more frequently in the classroom setting as trainers in the UK than it has

³ Meisner popularly stated ‘I’m a very non-intellectual teacher of acting’ (Meisner & Longwood 1987: 37) and encouraged his students to avoid ‘intellectual nonsense’ (36) in the pursuit of ‘get[ting] [them] out of [their] head[s]’(47). This is a sentiment which has subsequently been adopted by other trainers of the technique.

in other international contexts. Furthermore, as queer-identifying individuals, we have observed both in our experience as students in the classroom and as trainers some of the limitations which can occur when applications of Meisner technique encounter students who do not conform to gender or sexual norms.

We began the foundational Meisner exercise of repetition, in which two actors sit across from each other and repeat the first thing they see: "blue shirt, blue shirt, blue shirt", then developing into a call and response that takes in the emotional changes in the partner "You have a blue shirt, I have a blue shirt, you smiled, I smiled, you smiled", meant to release the actor from intellectual processes and allow them respond to what they observe and feel from the other. In this exercise the teacher often facilitates the observation and response, stepping in and offering "what do you see, what are you feeling, say it", in an attempt to open a space to let go of the student/actor worry of not getting it "right", of the attempt to make "interesting" choices or create a specific narrative rather than following the Meisner dictate to "live truthfully under a given set of/imaginary circumstances". Our group of beginning Meisner students dutifully dived into the exercise, each one of us trying to follow the rules – rules that were asking us not to follow rules but impulses. The repetition exercise in Meisner is a training that can feel antithetical to how students think of "acting" and each of us came to the moment in the chairs attempting to let go of any preconceived sense of what we were meant to do. Ref?

While the Meisner technique could be explored through multiple tools employed within the training, we have chosen to direct our attention to a moment within an experience of the repetition exercise to highlight the importance of the relationship between the student and the trainer in this exchange. Arguably the most popular tool within the Meisner technique and an exercise which lays the foundation for many of the other tools within the technique, the repetition exercise is partner-based activity which is undertaken in three stages. As described in the anecdote above, in stage one, the first partner will face the second partner and make an observation such as, "You have a green sweater." In the next stage, the second partner will repeat this phrase exactly how they have heard it. Later, this repetition will progress from an exact (1) objective

repetition without changes to (2) objective repetition with observations and subsequent changes, and a final stage of progression (3) where subjective repetition evolves from a ping pong game to a deeper ‘connection’ and ‘emotional dialogue’ between the participants (Meisner & Longwell 1987: 22). The repetition exercise as the foundation of Meisner technique is the crux of popular phrases such as “acting is reacting” and supports Meisner’s specific aim ‘to teach actors to respond spontaneously to outside stimuli, to act on impulse’ (Malague 2012: 112).

At one point a young woman I will call Clara and a young man I will call Matt sat in the chairs across from each other and began the exercise. They started far apart, began the repetition trying to respond to what was happening across from themselves, and having little access at this point to doing so. Matt seemed especially to be struggling with letting go of any previous idea he had of “improvising a scene” but was making a valiant effort to connect with Clara, leaning in, staring into her eyes, hands tightly clasped in his lap, giving all sorts of signals that she was not picking up on and not responding to the ones she was giving. He moved closer and closer until finally Janet vocally stepped in:

“What do you want, Matt?” she asked urgently.

He hesitated, “I... want to be closer”.

“No, what do you want?! Do you want to kiss her? Then kiss her! Then she can do what she wants!”. Ref?

In that moment of the Butlerian performative, Matt was given his mission – to be the heteronormative guy to kiss the girl - and Clara became the girl to be kissed. Watching the rest of this exercise, it became clear that instead of freeing either of them to follow an impulse, this moment foreclosed any other possibility than fulfilling the directive of the kiss. This directive fed into the social expectation of Matt’s sexual and gender identity, or perhaps one he might want to project, framing him as the heteronormative man. Watching Matt move closer to Clara, we observe her locked in a visible struggle as to whether or not she wanted him to kiss her or had to let him. In this

moment, we are left with the impression that Matt no longer had any choice but to head in for the kiss, and Clara had no real agency to stop him. The exercise ended in an awkward near miss, a brushed off attempt that became the partial peck on the nose that ended the exercise.

Chrononormativity and Meisner Repetition

Janet's urgent statement pushed Clara and Matt into a performative reification of heteronormative gender roles. Gender performativity as described by Judith Butler (2006) is the iterative process that creates, inscribes and reinforces societal norms of gender, and in doing so forms subjects as either inside or outside these norms. Because this performativity happens over and in time, time is also implicated in the expression of the gender (hetero)normative.

Looking now at the moment Janet prompted Matt to kiss Clara, several alarm bells sound as teachers, acting students and as individuals whose identities and work are largely concerned with the refusal/rejection and challenging of heteronormativity and hegemonic identity constructions. Given Janet's instruction, how might either actor resist being repetitively constructed through that Butlerian performative? During a moment of confusion when each student was trying to follow the primary rules of this Repetition exercise to take in the partner and heed their impulses, the instructor, and seemingly the Meisner technique, offered up a reified, non-impulsive reiteration of heteronormativity – Matt and Clara had no time to resist it.

Heteronormative time, here onwards framed by Elizabeth Freeman's conception of 'chrononormativity[:]' 'the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward

maximum productivity' (Freeman, 2011, 23), can be thought of as time lived out via 'Kronos,' a 'linear time' whose name 'mythically signs lineage (in the ancient Greek myth, Kronos is father to Zeus)' (McCallum 2011, 8). Chronology is the western world's linear arrangement of time from "beginning" to "end": From birth to adolescence, to adulthood; marriage, children, and career; retirement, old age and death. The chrononormative describes and conditions how much and in what ways time is to be spent in each of these phases. In contradistinction, for instance, to the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples' "everywhen" of The Dreaming, or Dreamtime, and the Theravadan Buddhist "Kalachakra" or circular wheel of time, western chrononormativity regulates not only the speed at which things are- and life is - supposed to happen, it also proscribes their start-to-finish order. Lives lived outside of the chrononormative are not considered maximally productive "successful" lives in this dominant western paradigm. People who embrace youth for "too long" are censured; those who do not conform to the types and timeframes of normative life and family are "black sheep" and those who do not climb a normative career ladder (or die without climbing far enough) are deemed failures. Chrononormativity helps to shape the roles and expectations of gender, sexuality and the parameters of legible subjecthood. The dictates of maximum productivity privilege normative notions of gender and sexually "productive" behaviours and timelines and therefore genders and sexualities that seem to neatly fit these timelines. '[C]hrononormativity', as Stephen Farrier notes, 'is a construction that, like all cultural constructions, functions as a site of power that favors certain modes of being over others.' (Farrier, 2015, 1400)

As acting students as well as trainers we have both experienced and witnessed the chrononormative foreclosure in multiple western canon actor training environments, Meisner and others. While prescriptive and limiting for all acting students, this closing down has the potential to be particularly impactful for LGBTQIA+ and gender nonconforming students.

In my own (Lazlo's) example of that day as a transgender acting student, when Janet gave her instruction to Matt and Clara the potential for me to act on "impulse" and be "in the moment" was greatly diminished. I felt instantly ejected from the exercise: I apprehended and felt in my body that I did not have the correct, cisheteronormative, trained "impulse" to "kiss the girl" so what would I do when I was in their place? At that moment I became acutely aware of my Trans and Queer self, the cis-possibly-hetero-male appearing person who does not have the cis-hetero-male enculturation or experience. In my seat my access to listening and responding via impulse were already and instantly foreclosed and set: I knew that no matter who I was sat across from when it was my turn to work or what emotional play might happen between us I would never lean in for a kiss. In a training for which being open to emotional impulse is paramount, this knowledge left me solidly and irrevocably outside that possibility. Ref?

What would it take for Matt to have resisted Janet's chrononormative instruction to kiss Clara if it was not his actual impulse, or to take on and feel the instruction not as a favoured "mode of being" instituted and reiterated from a past predating his birth, but to remain in the present, aware of Clara's actual responses, her indecision, her discomfort; to be alive and responsive to a moment, to allow all of those complex emotions to mediate and change any real desire to kiss her that Matt might have had? And what would it have taken for Clara to have unfettered access to her own feelings and responses on whether she wanted to be kissed, or to be able to respond to what was actually going on across from her – kiss or not? What would have had to happen in the

room before we got to this moment that could have allowed for all possibilities rather than reducing them down to this precluded one? Taking cues from our own embodied experience of failing the requirements of the chrononormative, we look now to the potential of Queer Time and the Meisner Technique to address these questions.

Queer Time

Jack Halberstam (2005) writes, ‘Queer Time is a term for those specific models of temporality that emerge within post-modernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance’ (6), and E.L McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (2011) note the ‘untimeliness’ of queer subjectivities: an untimeliness that ‘dislodges’ us from ‘socially shared, normative periodicities’ (8). Queer subjects cannot easily live with/in the chrononormative. Farrier notes:

[T]he work on Queer Time has explored the sense that time is organized in a way that it structures normativity, so to be out of temporal alignment in some sense is to be illegible by the terms of the normative’ This thought sees the human as bound to time in order to properly be[.] (Farrier, 2015, 1401).

Even when the processes and milestones in an LGBTQIA+ life-time look similar (LGBTQIA+ marriage and child rearing, seemingly normative career paths, etc), navigating the routes to and through these paths takes concerted effort and most often requires making conscious and specific choices (e.g. advocating for same sex marriage and adoption rights and/or finding alternative ways to pregnancy; navigating family members’ responses to these, modulating ones’ level of outness to the career path chosen). The reveal of the apparatus of heteronormative temporality puts normative successes, failures and life-timings in stark relief as the constructions that they are. However, LGBTQIA+ subjects respond to these apparatus, the chrononormative is

failed, or rejected, or subverted and reshaped. Without the heteronormative imperative of marriage, children and particular kinds of “career success”, Queer temporalities are stretchy: chrononormative timeframes do not have to apply, and in some cases cannot apply. ‘On the other hand [Queer Time] is manifest as lived experiments with ways of life, forms of identity, cultural activities, and modes of existence that upset the smooth flow of reproductive straight time.’ (Farrier, 2015, 1401). Not being bound by the ‘reproductive straight time’ of normative futures leaves life trajectories perhaps ‘closer to the time of kairos, the moment of opportunity’ (McCallum, 8-9). This kairos moment can be seen as by definition the (Meisnerian) present moment.

Queer Time in/and Meisner Repetition/Meisner Repetition and/as Queer Time

If Queer Time is a ‘perverse turn away from the narrative coherence’ (Halberstam in Dinshaw, 182), experienced as and with a “turn away” from the chrononormative, we posit that Meisner repetition has the potential to function as a microcosm of Queer Time. To begin, as in Queer Time, inside a Meisner exercise time also does not have a normative shape. There are strict if simple rules and patterns to the exercise: students must repeat back and forth what the other is saying, and they are tutored in what kinds of things to say (often referred to as ‘calls’) that will help them break away from normative dialogue: What they say should always be something they get from the partner/other, they should not say or do anything unless what the partner is doing or saying compels them to verbally (or physically) change the “call”. However, despite and at the same time because of these parameters, inside the repetition exercise normative logics of time and conversational dialogue disappear. Time stretches and shrinks and “narrative coherence” stretches and shrinks with it. One call (“you are

pushing me away”, for instance) can be repeated dozens of times before the partner is compelled to make a new call (perhaps “you want to leave”, or anything else they might have gotten from the behaviour of the other). In what is meant to be a free play and constant emotional shifting carried by these “calls”, normative rules of time or logics of conversation are dismantled, are perhaps ‘queered’. One of the hardest things for new Meisner students is to relax into this letting go of the normative notions of narrative and speech and/in improvisation. Queered time in Meisner can give rise to queered relationships between these partners. Power dynamics can shift and change in any and all directions. Attractions and repulsions, anger, lusts, frustration, boredom, emotional connection and dissolution, laughter, tears, etc, all can happen in a freewheeling Meisner session, where students are able to “live truthfully” (and potentially “queerly”) under a myriad of “imaginary circumstances” in a 10-30 minute exercise.

While Matt and Clara were struggling to find their way through the repetition, they had the potential to be ‘dislodged’ (McCallum 2011) from the chrononormative and to experience the queer Kairos: an impulsive and responsive moment with no need for a destination. Inside the exercise the pair were not able to use a normative logic to get through their scene since the Meisner repetition parameters thwart those logics. In the moment before Janet stepped in they were in a tension that had no way to resolve into something recognisable. When Janet told Matt to kiss Clara she called the pair of them and those of us watching out of Queer Time and into chrononormative time. Her intention was to help them move through what seemed to be a moment of impasse (an intention itself arguably not Meisnerian). Her instruction gave them a way forward but foreclosed the stretchy, messy, incoherence of Queer Time in favour of a chrononormative “love scene”.

If Queer Time works away from the narrative coherence of ‘adolescence– early adulthood –marriage – reproduction – child rearing– retirement–death.’ (Halberstam in Dinshaw, 182) then the Meisner repetition exercise can function as that microcosm of Queer Time. It is only when the hetero-chrono-normative is imposed on it in order to return it to normative “intelligibility”- in this case of socio-cultural understanding of male and female gender roles - that the expansive properties of this technique become problematic. Queer time in Meisner, perhaps “Queer Timing” Meisner, is to engage not with the reifying repetition of the Butlerian gender performative, but with a ‘*subversive* repetition’ that ‘might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself’ (Butler, 32 emphasis added). Working with “Kairos” time as the moment of opportunity, Queer Time in Meisner means repetition can be moved away from a performative reification of the past toward the unending opportunity of present moments. Meisner repetition has the potential to avoid the performative by remaining, if uncomfortably, in the present moment in the act of *doing* rather than representing. By being impulsive, by attempting to refuse the historical Chronos, Meisner’s repetition retains the potential to enact Queer Time. It is only when the teacher or trainer calls gender performativity into the exercise that this potential is foreclosed.

The Legacy and Influence of the “Charismatic Acting Teacher”

Chrononormativity in the context of actor training not only privileges certain kinds of performative and foreclosed “impulses”, it also privileges productivity over process. The actor is set to view her training as something she buys to produce her as a “good” actor rather than allowing her to focus on acting as an ongoing learning,

developing and training process, in which students over time become more sensitive and able to respond to the behavioural in others and themselves, as Meisner's technique is said to offer. When training is restricted to a chrononormative experience of behaviour and/in time the students desire to "get it right", to learn and master a technique becomes a means to an end. In the same way that chrononormativity in actor training shapes the roles and expectations of the student, it similarly reframes the trainer as the arbiter and sometimes "master" of productivity and "productive" behaviours.

An acknowledged trope in actor training, the "guru" or master teacher has enormous power in the training room. They are seen as the keeper and transmitter of the method and lineage of training, and they hold in their hands the power over the student's acting career – often not simply because the student believes the trainer has the key to what makes a "good" actor, but that they also frequently hold a set of keys to what could make the student a successful actor: the names and the ears of casting agents, directors, producers. In some cases, they may run a company that can cast the student in straight out of class if the student receives the transmission of technique to "the guru's" satisfaction. Feminist scholar Susan Ogden-Malouf provides this warning: "'Method' acting, as it's traditionally taught, asks the performer to align with a part, to search for those self-revelations appropriate to a role. The acting coach or director frequently serves as an all-knowing guru for whom the performer must be absolutely vulnerable (opening the way to both psychological and sexual exploitation)' (in Malague 2012:1-2). We see an instance of this vulnerability occur for both Matt and Clara at Janet's direction.

The term “guru”, however, is highly problematic in its appropriation of the spiritual traditions that have been corrupted in the claiming of this title for the “all-knowing master” at the head of an acting classroom. We will alternatively be utilizing Richard Hornby’s descriptive phrase ‘the charismatic acting teacher’ (Hornby 2007), a distinction Hornby placed on ‘star teachers who conceived it as their function to prepare their pupils to be star actors’ in order to meet the expectations of their future careers (67). Hornby identified Meisner directly as being among the ranks of a legacy of “charismatic acting teachers” in the United States alongside Uta Hagen, Sanford Meisner, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Herbert Bergdorf, all preeminent American trainers who popularized and adapted elements of the Stanislavski system.⁴ While these trainers, ‘revered, envied, loved, hated, argued over, and in ‘some cases well paid?’ became synonymous with their bold opinions and strong student followings, Hornby argues that ‘now, all are dead, and the phenomenon has died with them’ (ibid). However, while Hornby distinguishes this ‘personality cult of the teacher’(68) as existing specifically within the USA during the heyday of American Method training, we, like Rosemary Malague would argue that his identification of the charismatic teacher as one whose emphasis is on directing the actor’s self-expression rather than facilitating it, ‘continues to flourish’ (Malague 2012:21), and while contemporary charismatic teachers in the Meisner classroom may appear to be ‘broader and less dogmatic’(Hornby 2007: 69), they now extend beyond Hornby’s original geographical

⁴ Hornby’s article compares American “charismatic trainers” of the 1950s with a British actor training model which views the school (RADA, Central, etc) as the source of “charisma” rather than the trainer. However, arguably, in both models, the “authority” or the “expert” rather than the student is framed? as the source of charisma who then becomes responsible for identifying it and training it within the student.

distinction of the USA . In today's western commodity culture, the charismatic teacher is in the business of selling "maximally productive" actors and careers within the chrononormative paradigm,

The "charismatic teacher" has historical and cultural purchase: most acting students study techniques known fundamentally by their master's names, as all charismatic trainers wrote books or had books written about them and their approach to acting: The Stanislavsky System, Strasberg's Method, and Uta Hagen's approach to acting, The Meisner, Grotowski and Chekhov Techniques all have been made famous by their creator-teachers, and though none of these "charismatic teachers" are still alive, actors still often search out these techniques by their master's names, taught by another master, often someone who for legitimacy and marketing purposes will trace their lineage back as close to the original as possible.

As the 'charismatic teacher' in Lazlo's encounter, Janet held the keys to the training: what she said created the culture of the room and controlled the parameters of the exercise. The Meisner dictate to "fuck polite" conceptually means that an unending set of responsive possibilities open up for the actor, however the contours of these will always be set by the teacher based on their own apprehension of what is "possible;" presumably taking into account what stage of a process they find the students in, individually and as a group. Setting parameters in a workspace is not inherently a problem: it becomes problematic when what trainers offer as "possible" is confined to the hegemonic normative - and not solely around genders and sexualities. To subvert this normativisation in the first instance the trainer has to recognise and respond when chrononormative behaviours arise in themselves and/or their students – Meisner was not

consciously aware that he was conditioning the room to collapse rather than expand certain possibilities throughout his teaching career, and neither was Janet in 2018. Meisner's '*fuck polite*' mantra (Meisner & Longfellow 1987:33) functionally meant "fuck polite society," it did not mean to "fuck" (confront, refuse, dismantle, destroy, etc) socially conditioned cis-heteronormativity, classism, racism, ableism, sizeism in actors and their training. To begin to comprehensively "fuck polite" trainers must first work to dismantle the chrononormative in the room and in themselves.

In the Meisner repetition technique as Meisner himself created it - though as evidenced in his masterclass recordings the way he taught it was often ethically compromised in the above mentioned ways - students are asked to understand that the most important person in the room is not themselves but the other, that they become 'fully available to [the] partner, authentically responsive in each moment' (Silverberg in Hodge, 159). Meisner was looking to provoke 'interplay', 'communion', and 'chemistry' (ibid)- relationship - between the actors. For Queer Timing Meisner away from the chrononormative and toward an ethically remodelled actor training we return to Judith Butler for her theorising of relational identity and ethics in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005).

In this work Butler develops the idea of subjecthood as always relational and refutes the chrononormative notion of a singular and fully accountable "self". She writes that the moment one attempts to narrate a fixed/finished identity (to 'account' for oneself) this account is immediately bound up in the other, since the accounting one gives is 'already implicated in a social temporality that exceeds its own capacities for narration' (8). '[T]he "I" has no story of its own that is not also the story of a relation -

or set of relations – to a set of norms’ (ibid). These norms are in part held and reflected by the one who witnesses the accounting: in our framing, the repetition partner who by their presence in the moment and the culture is also always already giving an account of themselves. Butler tells us that, since our capacities for accounting are always exceeded, accounting will fail, and marks the normative requirement to attempt to give a successful (i.e. ”complete”) account as an act of ‘ethical violence, which demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same’ (2005, 42). She tell us that this violence

insists itself into the present as an anachronism. The ethos refuses to become past, and violence is the way in which it imposes itself upon the present. Indeed, it not only imposes itself upon the present, but also seeks to eclipse the present—and this is precisely one of its violent effects’ (5)

When Sanford Meisner or Janet, or any other “charismatic teacher” gives an instruction to a student that seeks, however inadvertently, to force them into a that teacher’s chrononormative notion of the student’s self and direction of that self’s travel (“If you want to kiss her, just kiss her!”) they enact that anachronistic ethical violence on everyone participating, ‘eclipsing’ the actual present moment of the relational repetition and ‘vehemently suppressing the potential of the individual’ (Hodapp, 2013, 115) to spill out of the structure of accounting it emerges from: to not become “the guy to kiss the girl” nor “the girl to be kissed”. In Butler relationality to/with the other is the basis of our ethical responsibility, not the violent imposition of an anachronistic set of ethics that dictate what kinds of self can be properly (ac)counted. Butler writes that the fact that the self will always ‘exceed its own capacity for narration creates a

disorientation of the subject resulting in a failure to achieve self-identity’ ‘However, she maintains that a new ethical sense can emerge from this failure.’ (Hodapp, 2013, 115).

This failure can

constitute a disposition of humility and generosity alike: I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot have fully known, and I will be under a similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others, who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves. (Butler, 2005, 42).

In the quest for QueerTiming Meisner, we take the sense of an ethically remodelled disoriented “accounting” from Butler to an anachronistic Meisnerian world that could only “fuck polite” in its constricted heteronormative conditions. We identify that Meisner’s repetition technique theoretically does not invoke the chrononormative, that as written it can enact a relational accounting between the participants that can resist and refuse this violence, and allow the ‘humility and generosity’ of reciprocal ‘failure’ between students (and trainers) looking for the relational moment. Perhaps Meisner’s own homosexuality unconsciously helped him to create a technique that has the potential we identify (and perhaps not) but he was a product of his time and his technique was developed and gained favour in a time, place and profession filled with the requirements of heteronormativity, even though many of its participants had genders and sexualities they were required to hide in the performing arts industries in which they worked and trained. The current and past Meisner trainer acts “violently” when they allow an anachronistic version of the normative to clamp down on the participant. When the Meisner trainer calls cis-heteronormativity into the space, students fall into a “narrative coherence” of heteronormative relationships, or must spend their time refusing, unpicking and reframing them. However, if the trainer can invoke Queer Time

in a Meisner training session the potential arises for participants to find responsiveness not limited to normative social conditioning. In the first moment of each Meisner repetition, each partner's 'I', being called toward a process of recognition with the other, is already changed, as it is in each subsequent moment. If students and trainers allow for this disorienting process the possibility of ongoing relational change that brings about the behavioural aliveness that Meisner is looking for becomes available. Repetition, when freed of the violence of trying to maintain a collective and fixed understanding of identity, allows for the 'ecstatic': literally the self-transcendent.

Conclusion

The Meisner technique is one of the three canonical American offshoots of the Russian Stanislavski system. Where Lee Strasberg focussed on the internal psychological aspects of the system and Stella Adler on the societal-sociological, Sanford Meisner looked to the behavioural: focussing not on the actor's "self" but the actor's response to the "other". In Meisner technique the acting student works to respond both to the other and with the other. This potential for relationality can allow an actor to be open to discoveries and responses beyond the normative, if relationality and responsiveness is not conditioned as to what is and is not inside 'coherent' parameters of behaviour. As queer and transgender acting trainers and students we know Meisner and other canonical acting techniques to be historically rife with cis-heteronormative tendencies, and yet we are convinced that Meisner still has the possibility to offer something powerful to many students of acting and performance. We conclude that while there is much conditioning to be challenged and unpicked, there is the potential for Meisner repetition to be reimagined and reassembled by, in and as Queer Time.

Using the Butlerian understanding of “giving an account of oneself” to bring Meisner into Queer Time we identify a way to think about how we become ethical trainers; how we confront our own conditioning and begin to dismantle it; and how we offer this to students. Queer Time does not support the chrononormative past-tense idea of fixed and singular subject making, rather it keeps us together in the Kairos of the present moment. This relationality has the potential to become fully available in a reassembled Meisner where we can tell this moment’s “truth” without needing to violently fix it in place.

In queered Meisner we look to find the “we”, the places where we are accountable to and with each other. As a queer and trans artist working and writing with a queer, crip, cis artist, we know this must be a fully relational, intersectional “we”. With Butler: Our self-knowledge is limited because it is opaque, but this “humble and generous” relational failing-to-know - as actors, performers, as people - can offer connections to an ethical life in and out of classrooms, on and off stages.

References

Butler, J. (2005). *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Butler, J. (2006). *Gender trouble*. New York, London: Routledge.

Dinshaw, C. (2007). THEORIZING QUEER TEMPORALITIES: A Roundtable Discussion. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13(2-3), pp.177-195.

Farrier, S. (2015) *Playing With Time: Gay Intergenerational Performance*

Work and the Productive Possibilities of Queer Temporalities, *Journal of Homosexuality*, 62:10, 1398-1418, DOI: 10.1080/00918369.2015.1061361

Freeman, E. (2011). *Time binds*. North Carolina: Duke University Press, p.23.

Frace, J. (n.d.). *The Acting Guru Essay*. [online] Ontheboards.tv. Available at: http://www.ontheboards.tv/sites/default/files/The_Acting_Guru_Essay_byJeffreyFrace.pdf [Accessed 9 Nov. 2019].

Halberstam, J. (2005). *In a Queer Time and place*. New York: New York University Press.

Hodapp, C. (2013). [Review of the book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, by Judith Butler]. *The Pluralist* 8(1), 115-118. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/503707>.

Hodge, A. (2009)???. *Twentieth century actor training*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Malague, R. (2012). *An Actress Prepares: Women and "the Method"*. New York. Routledge.

Meisner, S., Longwell, D. and Pollack, S. (1987). *Sanford Meisner on acting*. New York: Vintage Books.

McCallum, E. and Tuhkanen, M. (2011). *Queer times, queer becomings*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

The Sanford Meisner Masterclass. (2006). [video] New York: The Sanford Meisner Estate.

???? Sperber, D. *Rev.Phil.Psych.* (2010) 1: 583. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-010-0025-0>
