Camp, the Canon, and a Performative Burlesque: Paula Vogel's Plays as Literary and Cultural Revision

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines the ways in which Paula Vogel's plays respond to and rewrite canonical texts, while simultaneously addressing contemporary concerns, such as domestic violence, pornography, pedophilia, and AIDS. Vogel's dialectical writing strategy encourages the audience to look at these cultural issues from a defamiliarized, historical perspective, so that they are seen less as sensationalized "issues" and more as historical questions that have accumulated meanings over time. In addition, since many of her plays rewrite texts by such canonical giants as Shakespeare, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, and David Mamet, to engage with Vogel is to engage with the canon of theatre and literary studies, as it is restaged in a different historical context and recast with women at the center of the action. Responding to a predominantly male canon, Vogel shifts the focus away from an often universalized, truth-seeking male protagonist, placing women center stage, not as valorized heroines, but as conflicted characters who both enact and resist the discourses that constitute their bodies and identities. Thus, the overarching goal of this study is to examine the ways in which the dialectical structure and dramaturgical strategies of Vogel's plays offer another way of looking at the literary canon, social history, and contemporary American culture.

Since Vogel's plays rewrite canonical texts, position women center stage, present polymorphous sexualities, and mobilize humor to approach uncomfortable topics, her plays

employ a dramaturgical strategy that I am calling a “performative burlesque.” While camp is the broader aesthetic within which Vogel works, burlesque foregrounds an eroticized female spectacle. A performative burlesque, as it operates in Vogel’s plays, describes: a writing strategy that strips bodies and texts of their accumulated cultural connotations; a comedic blending of high and low forms; a mode of performance describing the ways in which her characters expose themselves, psychically, emotionally, and physically; an extension of a historical theatre practice that continues to inform the cultural meanings around women in performance, both on and off stage.

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Introduction

"Bold," "daring," "defiant," "seductive," "sensitive," "disturbing," "witty," "brutally honest," and "clever" are some of the words used to describe the plays of Paula Vogel. Raising major cultural questions in innovative ways, Vogel's theatre is both politically challenging and wildly imaginative. In the following pages, I will examine the ways in which Vogel's plays respond to and rewrite canonical texts, while simultaneously addressing contemporary concerns, such as domestic violence, pornography, pedophilia, and AIDS. Vogel's dialectical writing strategy encourages the audience to look at these cultural issues from a defamiliarized, historical perspective, so that they are seen less as sensationalized "issues" and more as historical questions that have accumulated meanings over time. Vogel's theatre is the space in which to unravel these accumulated meanings, so that they can be recognized and examined. In addition, since many of her plays rewrite texts by such canonical giants as Shakespeare, Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, and David Mamet, to engage with Vogel is to engage with the canon of theatre and literary studies, as it is restaged in a different historical context and recast with women at the center of the action. Responding to a predominantly male canon, Vogel shifts the focus away from an often universalized, truth-seeking male protagonist, placing women center stage, not as valorized heroines, but as conflicted characters who both enact and resist the discourses that constitute their bodies and identities. Thus, the overarching goal of this study is to examine the ways in which the dialectical structure and dramaturgical strategies of Vogel's plays offer another way of looking at the literary canon, social history, and contemporary American culture.

A Brief History of Paula Vogel

Vogel's working-class roots inform her approach to the canon, and her feminist position. Born in Washington D.C. in 1951 into a working class family with a Jewish father and a Catholic mother, Vogel attended prestigious Bryn Mawr College before transferring to Catholic University, where she finished her B.A. in theatre in 1974. After being rejected from the Yale School of Drama, Vogel applied to and was accepted by Cornell University, completing all of the requirements for her doctorate in Theatre Studies, except the dissertation.[1] After over twenty years teaching playwriting at Brown University, and training some of the most exciting new playwrights in the country, Vogel has come full circle, accepting a position in July 2008 as the chair of the playwriting department at Yale School of Drama. Vogel says that, despite her professional successes, she still views herself as working class (Vogel, Personal Interview).

Although this biographical information is important for a developed sense of Vogel's work, it will not provide the basis of my readings of her plays. Biographical readings may provide a fruitful starting point, but I do not believe they yield very generative or far-reaching interpretations of an artist's work. In fact, I would suggest that, ultimately, these readings reinforce the individuality of the artist as sole creator, rather than looking at both the artist and her work as part of a larger social and historical network. While Vogel admits to the autobiographical elements in her work, she also emphasizes the inevitable "displacement in the theatrical process. There's no such thing as a 'you' or 'he' or 'she.' They're character recipes, not real people" (Interview with Savran 279). Working from Kenneth Burke's dramatistic notion of character recipes, Vogel displaces the individualism of the character (which is a novelistic way of reading drama), and instead

[1] This biographical information is taken from *Current Biography Yearbook* (1998).

emphasizes the relationship among the characters and between the characters and the play-world. Not only does the notion of character recipe suggest that there is no identity that exists in isolation, but it also refuses any attempts to fix a character's gender or sexuality, since these too will shift in relation to the changing dynamics of the play-world.

Vogel's artistic perspectives are informed equally by Russian Formalism, Kenneth Burke, canonical playwrights such as Brecht, Artaud, and Strindberg, as well as "all the songs of Judy Garland; every Broadway musical; and a gay brother, who, when I was seventeen, took me to see John Waters" (Interview with Greene 430). Referring to Strindberg as "an extremely powerful ally for me as a woman dramatist because in him there is a fear and a power of women not approached by any other dramatist" (Holmberg), Vogel reveals her unique strategy as a playwright. As David Savran argues, "Paula's own playwriting represents a revision and repossession of a highly masculinized textual practice" (*Queer* 191). She sees Strindberg's sexism as an opportunity to examine the sexism that persists in contemporary culture. That she takes on a dramatic canon of predominately white, male playwrights suggests something of Vogel's bold engagement with the very institutions that marginalize her as a writer, feminist, and lesbian. Indeed, as Pierre Bourdieu asserts, "the strategy *par excellence* is the 'return to sources,' which is the basis of all heretical subversion and all aesthetic revolution, because it enables the insurgents to turn against the establishment the arms which they use to justify their domination" (84).

Canonization is a deliberate process of selecting texts deemed valuable, and preserving and disseminating of these texts for the purposes of maintaining cultural

traditions. It is also a practice of legitimization that perpetuates social stratification and structures of domination. Canonical texts are deliberately selected remnants of history that create certain relations of power, establish criteria and codes of aesthetic judgment, and legitimize cultural authority. In the field of theatre and literature, the process of canonization contains traces of its origins in Christian theology, with canonized literary texts implying those that somehow transcend the messy matters of the material world and obtain a universal and timeless quality. Tracing the emergence of "legitimate" literary theatre in 1920s America, Savran describes the process of canonization:

> During the nineteenth century, [canonization] became more and more closely linked to the cultural as an autonomous field unconstrained by political or economic forces and the concurrent rise of the purportedly autonomous, visionary artist. Yet as has often been pointed out, canonization is not a mystical but a historical process. It represents an itinerary of cultural legitimization that privileges and excludes certain kinds of texts as well as their makers and consumers; it constructs hierarchies; it tries to sublimate and etherealize the commercial character of art; and it establishes aesthetic, ideological, and moral values and standards that masquerade as disinterested and universal.
> (*Highbrow/Lowdown* 223)

Pervading Vogel's plays is her response to this cultural process of canonization. Talking back to the canon as a feminist, Vogel finds herself both inspired by the tradition she has inherited and outraged by her historical exclusion from it.

Alisa Solomon offers a valuable elaboration of a possible feminist approach to reading the dramatic canon: "[T]hough as a feminist, I certainly recognize the misogyny within the Western dramatic tradition and resent women's frequent exclusion from that tradition, I am not ready to join some of my colleagues in ditching canonical plays as irrelevant or hostile to feminist concerns. I'd rather widen the openings that theatre's denaturalizing effects provide to expose and exploit Western drama's revelation of gender's artificiality" (9). Vogel is of the same mind, "expos[ing] and exploit[ing]" Western drama's revelation

of gender's artificiality, its historicity and thus its changeability. In *Unmaking Mimesis*, Elin Diamond suggests the ways in which Brechtian strategies may be appropriated by feminist theatre. Diamond develops "a theatre-specific feminist criticism" that she terms "'gestic' feminist criticism" which brings together "key topoi of feminist theory—gender critique and sexual difference; questions of authority in women's writing and women's history; spectatorship and the body—with key topoi in Brechtian theory—*Verfremdungseffekt*, the "not…but," historicization, and *Gestus*" (44). This gestic criticism informs many of my reading of Vogel's plays. And as I am suggesting, Vogel's Alienation effect takes the form of a performative burlesque. Vogel's female characters mockingly and sometimes mournfully "act" femininity as a set of social practices that they both identify with and resist. Diamond writes, "Brechtian historicization insists that [the] body is not a fixed essence but a site of struggle and change," while his theories give "us a way to put that history in view" (52). Vogel restages literary history through the lens of contemporary culture, rummaging through the dramatic canon to find and mobilize theatrical techniques that she can use to produce new ways of seeing familiar issues.

During her doctoral work at Cornell, Vogel began to realize the importance of form, experimenting with the *way* that theatre can show its audience rather than *what* it shows them. In particular, Victor Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarization, the method by which an artist renders the familiar strange, thereby inciting a renewed way of seeing, is found throughout Vogel's work, as she continually makes the habitual, the forgotten, and the taken-for-granted and makes it appear in strange and unexpected ways. Shklovsky's notion of defamiliarization was adapted by Brecht, and named *Verfrumsdungeffekt*, or

what is usually translated as the Alienation effect. Throughout this study, I will refer to Vogel's method of theatrical distancing using the term defamiliarization, since she cites Shklovsky as her source for this strategy (Interview with Linden 255). Shklovsky describes the way that habituation stifles sensual life: "Habituation devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war" (12). Thus, he writes:

> art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult. . . . *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.* (12)

Vogel does not write about AIDS, pedophilia, and domestic abuse; rather, she defamiliarizes the way we habitually see them as social pathologies. Vogel mobilizes form to offer different ways of understanding and experiencing history, culture, and our bodies. In particular, Vogel consistently defamiliarizes family and sexuality, unraveling the many layers of significations that constitute our understanding of them.

Experiments with form infuse all of Vogel's plays with an inventive theatricality. As Kenneth Burke states, "Form in literature is an arousing and fulfillment of desires. A work has a form in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, and to be gratified by the sequence" (124). Put another way, "form would be the psychology of the audience" (31), and since "there are no forms of art which are not forms of experience outside of art" (143), the manipulation of form is the manipulation of the way an audience experiences both the work of art and the ideologies that inform it. As Vogel says in an interview with Ann Linden:

> I am a formalist. . . . I think that one gets to the postmodern by deconstructing the modern. And that's what formalism does. If you follow someone like Kenneth Burke or if you follow the Russian formalists all the way to the letter, they're very much active in deconstruction. I sort of see a play traveling through time as

> unraveling its own devices. I mean, when I think about Bertolt Brecht and the separation of elements, I literally see the elements separating in terms of the textual elements. The plot and the character aren't doing the same thing. (256)

Vogel mobilizes a variety of forms—repetitive, circular, and conventional—while reorienting the audience toward an awareness of how these forms structure certain expectations and habituated ways of seeing. Taking Shklovsky and Burke together, Vogel defamiliarizes form, thereby representing a seemingly mundane or disturbing subject in such a way that it may be examined from a different angle and understood as a product of history, and not as natural or self-evident.

A Brief History of Feminist Theatre Criticism

Interpreting Shklovsky and Burke in an era of Derridean deconstruction and second-wave feminism, Vogel imbues their theories with a feminist and deconstructivist edge. In her seminal text, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988), Jill Dolan articulates the founding principle of feminist criticism as the dismantling of the ideal spectator, who "in North American culture . . . is assumed to be white, middle-class, heterosexual, and male" (1). Dolan writes, "That theatre creates an ideal spectator carved in the likeness of the dominant culture whose ideology he represents is the motivating assumption behind the discourse of feminist performance criticism" (1). Thus, from its beginnings, feminist theatre criticism has been a theory of reception, focusing on the ways in which theatre constructs its audience, as well as how that audience might be constructed differently. Much of the early dialogue among feminist theatre critics, such as Sue-Ellen Case, Jill Dolan, and Kate Davy, revolved almost exclusively around the performances of Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver and the work done at WOW (Women's One World) café in New York City. While this dialogue was crucial in developing a vocabulary and a repertoire of

lesbian performances, it eventually became a limited body of criticism. Unlike much of the feminist theatre theory of the 1980s and 1990s, Vogel was not interested in developing a feminist or lesbian aesthetic, nor was she concerned with valorizing women on stage.[2] She was interested in reading the canon with a deconstructive eye, while resisting its address to an ideal spectator. In this sense, she was doubly alienated as a playwright: As a woman and lesbian, she was marginal to the dramatic canon, and as a feminist playwright who presents negative images of women, she was marginal to a feminist theatre that championed positive female characterizations. In an interview with Ann Linden, Vogel states, "I guess I've sort of fallen between the different models of what feminist theatre is…or queer theatre" (257; ellipsis in original).[3] Since, with the exception of *And Baby Makes Seven*, Vogel does not focus on lesbian or gay characters nor does she celebrate women's bodies and experiences, Vogel's plays were left out of prevailing discussions of feminist and queer theatre. In 1991, Lynda Hart described a "Feminist theory of dramatic representation [that] simultaneously addresses the absence of women from conventional theatre while it struggles to construct alternative ways of

[2] Similar to the interest in *l'écriture feminine* in literary studies, some feminists working in theatre during the 1970s and 80s, often labeled cultural feminists, sought to find an authentically female mode of performance, one rooted in the body and its rhythms. For example, in her essay "Re/cognition, Re/presentation, and Re/creation in Woman-Conscious Drama," Rosemary K. Curb made call for "a theatrical language capable of communicating female perceptions which have been erased by the fathers and thus appear non-existent to the dominant culture" (304). Similarly, in her 1984 essay, "Locating the Language of Gender Experience," Linda Walsh called for an "authentically female" style of performance, which will be "based on a biogrammar," "replete with female signs," and emerging from "experiences the body has known on the basis of gender" (6-8). In contrast, materialist feminists emphasized the social and historical constitution of gender inequality. For example, in *Theatre and Feminism,* Sue-Ellen Case "underscores the role of class and history in creating the oppression of women," and refutes claims "that the experiences of women are induced by gender oppression from men or that liberation can be brought about by virtue of women's unique gender strengths" (82). Questions of feminist aesthetics continued to be an important topic in feminist theatre criticism, with the 1995 publication of *Theatre and Feminist Aesthetics* (Karen Louise Laughlin and Catherine Schuler, eds) and its fifteen wide-ranging essays examining the effects of feminism on theatre.

[3] Vogel admits, "I haven't been embraced by seventies or eighties theater. And that, particularly when I was younger, was very painful" (Interview with Linden 255). *And Baby Makes Seven* was criticized by lesbian feminists when it first premiered, for its use of male children (*Contemporary,* Bigsby 306); *Desdemona* was criticized for its negative depiction of the female characters (Interview with Linden 255).

seeing" (3), a theory that Vogel's plays put into practice, even though the "alternative ways of seeing" that she presents are not always easy or comfortable. Not surprisingly, Hart posited this theory at the beginning of the decade in which Vogel's plays began to receive major productions. Vogel's plays found more receptive audiences amidst the identity politics of the 1990s, as critical and popular attention was focused on breaking up homogenous groups and reformulating questions of equality and justice based on understandings of difference rather than sameness. Vogel's plays, that is, participate in the process of deconstructing monolithic categories of gender, class, sexuality, and race. Vogel's plays are feminist in the way they ask questions about constructions of gender and sexuality, and queer in their deployment of form and treatment of contentious subjects. Articulated more as a practice than an identity, Vogel's feminism is a mode of inquiry, a way of asking a question.

While some feminist critics suggested rejecting the canon entirely, others went about creating a separate canon(s) of women-authored plays.[4] Both responses, however, mean that many past plays and playwrights are left unchallenged by feminism, and thus remain ensconced in the aura of canonicity. In her pioneering text *Feminism and Theatre* (1988), Sue-Ellen Case did the invaluable work of recuperating forgotten female playwrights, such as Aphra Behn and Hrosvitha von Gandersheim. And yet, after highlighting the canon's almost uniform exclusion of women, feminist theatre criticism did not go on to theorize ways of deconstructing the canonical texts themselves. Rather, they were

[4] In *Feminism and Theatre*, Sue-Ellen Case contended, "feminist practitioners and scholars may decide that [ancient Greek] plays do not belong in the canon—and that they are not central to the study and practice of theatre" (19). Examples of collections and anthologies aimed either at creating a female canon include: *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*. Ed. Lynda Hart (1991); *Modern American Drama: The Female Canon*. Ed. June Schleuter (1996); *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color: An Anthology.* Eds. Kathy A. Perkins and Roberta Uno (1996); *Women on the Verge: Seven Avant-Garde Plays*. Ed. Rosette C. Lamont (2000); *Front Lines: Political Plays by American Women.* Eds. Alexis Greene and Shirley Lauro (2009).

assumed to be fully polluted by patriarchal codes, and the forms themselves inherently masculinist. In 1985, Case insisted, "women do not have the cultural mechanisms of meaning to construct themselves as the subject rather than the object of performance" (*Feminism* 185). Yet Vogel found ways of constructing women as subjects of the performance, by pillaging the canon to see what might be usefully reworked. Moreover, Case neglected the ways in which women have historically found a ways of constructing themselves as subjects on the popular stages of burlesque, vaudeville, and musicals.[5] Implicitly, Case was attacking a specific form of representation: realism.

Realism was at the center of one of the most involved debates in feminist performance criticism. Lynda Hart describes, "the hegemony of realism in drama which effectively masks the *re-creational* power of mimesis" (4). In its reliance on mimesis and narrative closure, feminist critics argued that its effects, from Hedda Gabler to Jessie Cates in Marsha Norman's *'night Mother*, have been downright fatal for women. In *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988), Jill Dolan writes, "Realism is prescriptive in that it reifies the dominant culture's inscription of traditional power relations between genders and classes. Its form masks the ideology of the author, whose position is mystified by the seemingly transparent text" (84). Sue-Ellen Case warned, "Cast the realism aside—its consequences for women are deadly" ("Butch-Femme" 297).[6] Robert Vorlicky points to the enormous canon of male-cast and male-authored realist plays, which number in the thousands (4), arguing that these plays "do not merely illustrate and display (men's cultural) power; by repeatedly staging it, this drama transforms it into an active crucial component of

[5] I will return to this point in the section on A Brief History of Burlesque, which follows.
[6] Case and other feminist critics were, in part, responding to two successful realist plays authored by women, Marsha Norman's '*night Mother* (1983) and Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* (1984), both of which featured female characters killing themselves. Some critics drew the connection between the content of these plays and their form of representation.

American cultural politics" (1). In the 1996 collection *Feminist Theatre and Theory* (Helene Keyssar, ed), the debate surrounding the role of realism in feminist theatre remained central. However, to a large degree, the arguments rely on a definition of realism that remains static and unchanging. This focused attack on realism, while necessary and fruitful, deflected energy away from positing new forms of representation or tweaking existing forms for different purposes. It is the repeated and continual canonization and mystification of a specific style of realism that perpetuates uneven structures of power and ensures that the worlds they represent continue to seem natural and self-evident. Helene Keyssar's defined feminist theatre criticism of the 1970s and 80s as being about "identification, recognition, definition, and contextualization" (2), which might be interpreted as meaning that it was concerned with finding ways for women readers and writers to define a place for themselves within the historical narrative that the canon conveys, preserves, and passes down.

Elin Diamond writes that, in retrospect, the feminism of the 1980s "was also a kind of realism" (*Unmaking* xiii), since it treated its object of attack as if it was a fixed and stable form, rather than a social and historical one. Diamond historicizes realism, by tracing the changing definitions of mimesis. From the Platonic truth-model to the therapeutic model of Freudian psychoanalysis, and through to the radical challenges to these models by feminist theatre, Diamond shows how realism, and the mimesis on which it relies, has taken on different cultural meanings throughout its history. This reformulation enables a creative agency in the ways in which women playwrights use form. Diamond, along with Alisa Solomon and the later work of Jill Dolan, has forged a new avenue of feminist theatre criticism, one that salvages parts of theatre history for feminist purposes in the

present and celebrates the utopian possibilities of performance and the provisional communities is creates.

Throughout its roughly four decade history, feminist theatre criticism has fragmented most fundamentally along divisions of class, sexuality, and ethnicity, as well as along theoretical lines. As materialist feminists argued that women's bodies and identities were socially and historically constructed, and cultural feminists who sought to recover a unified, authentic female subjectivity, believing that there was an intrinsic meaning and value in women's bodies, their ways of knowing, and their ways of writing. Case contends, "there appears to be a crucial stall in feminist theory in the late 1980s between the materialist poststructuralist (sometimes called postmodernist) critique and others that have been considered essentialist" (Introduction 7). Hart suggests that the "loci" of feminist theatre in the 1990s is that of "language, space, and the body" (13), which leaves room for both materialist and essentialist possibilities. Falling into the broad category of materialist feminism, Vogel refuses to represent unequivocally empowered or valorized female characters, showing instead the ways in which women were and are both products *and* producers of patriarchy. Her female characters are always represented as living agents within a particular structure of feeling, shaping and being shaped by their social environment, class, and history.

Suggesting something of her rather unique style and perspective as a feminist playwright, Vogel reveals, "When people ask who [my] prototype is . . . as a feminist playwright, I say Chekhov, Williams, and Guare." Vogel praises these playwrights for giving their female characters a "complicated desire" and a "psychological complexity equal to the male characters" ("Conversation between Vogel and Guare"). Singling him

out, Vogel emphatically states, “John Guare is the greatest living American playwright. Period.” In his passionate use of language, his relentless reinvention, and his “love of women,” Vogel finds in his theatre an expansive and inclusive imagination that inspires her own (“Conversation between Vogel and Guare”). Thus, Vogel’s theatre is related less to the theatre of Jane Chambers, Terrence McNally, and Wendy Wasserstein, and more to the formally experimental and less easily categorized theatre of John Guare, María-Irene Fornés, and Cherríe Moraga.

A Brief Discussion of Theory and Method

As an overarching goal for this study, I will examine the ways in which Vogel’s plays explore gender, sexuality, and the family as historically constituted, volatile social categories, enacted by characters who have internalized the discourses of sexism and homophobia and, as such, both enact and resist them. Never romanticized or idealized, Vogel’s female characters enact the conflicts and inequalities that constitute their bodies and identities. Indeed, Vogel’s female characters are often at odds with their own bodies, inscribed as they are by both personal and cultural histories that continually degrade and/or hyper-sexualize them. Vogel creates complex female characters who take center stage to say, “yes, but...” in response to the traditional theatrical and historical narratives that have defined them.

As a feminist and a lesbian, Vogel is committed to representing gender and sexuality not as reified categories of identity, but as shifting and relational positions. My readings of Vogel’s plays are informed by Judith Butler’s influential writings on gender and sexual performativity, especially her recent work in *Undoing Gender* (2004). The performance of gender and sexual identities in Vogel’s plays continually challenges the

conventions through which these categories establish their authority. The theatricality of her plays highlights the performativity of gender as, to use Butler's oft-quoted phrase, "a stylized repetition of acts" (*Gender Trouble* 192). These acts gain their force through their repetition, or more specifically, through their citation of legitimized acts. There is, therefore, no ontology of gender, no original gender act; rather, the "reality" of gender is "an effect" of the repeated acts, "which congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance" (43-44). The citational nature of normative gender acts works in much the same as the citation of past texts—both work to legitimize the meanings conveyed by the act or text through the invocation of authority. Alternatively, these citations might "misquote" authority, through for example, a burlesque revision of a past text or a theatricalization of gender acts. As Butler argues:

> The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous production. (192)

Crucially, however, the "arbitrary relation" between repeated gender acts is, in Vogel's theatre, placed within specific social and historical contexts. Vogel explores the fissures between performative acts and effects in her revision of past texts, juxtaposing these acts as they are constructed in different historical texts and contexts. As such, Vogel's representations of gender examine it as an embodied "signifying practice" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 198), by juxtaposing representations within historically divergent sign systems. In that way, Vogel's theatre historicizes gender performativity.

Vogel's theatre emphasizes gender as a learned, internalized set of social dispositions, which attain an effect of naturalness and reality "through sustained social performances." Within this system, masculinity and femininity are "part of the strategy that conceals

gender's performative character" (192). Vogel exploits this strategy by representing masculinity and femininity, not as fixed essences associated with a particular gender, but as positions taken, strategies of survival enacted in specific social situations. Focusing on how femininity comes to be learned and embodied in American culture, Vogel creates female characters that are themselves impersonating femininity. That is, her female characters are female impersonators.

In many ways, Vogel's theatrical style resembles Esther Newton's descriptions of camp in her 1972 anthropological text, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, a text that Butler draws on for her theorization of gender performativity and a text that Vogel was greatly influenced by in the 1970s (Savran, *Queer* 194). Newton's study describes camp and drag practices within homosexual communities in the late 1960s, bringing this social practice into academic visibility. She was surprised to learn that "impersonators believed the major and most fundamental division of the social world [was] male/female" (Newton xvi-xvii). Indeed, this central structuring division informs every aspect of psychic and social development, both for those who fall into normative categories as well as for those who do not. Impersonators exploit and perform the incongruities of the sex-gender system, in which male-masculinity and female-femininity are naturalized as one and the same, and yet can also be taken apart. Newton describes camp in terms of three main traits: incongruity, theatricality and humor. She writes, "Incongruity is the subject matter of camp, theatricality its style, and humor its strategy" (106). This could stand as an apt description of Vogel's plays. Newton emphasizes that camp is not as a thing, but rather a mode of perception, a relationship *between* things, and

a "'a strategy for a situation'" (105).[7] Moreover, in her "Note to the Reader," Newton clarifies her choice of the word "mother" for the title: "camp humor ultimately grows out of the incongruities and absurdities of the patriarchal nuclear family; for example, the incongruity between the sacred, idealized Mother, and the profane, obscene Woman." This is the realm of Vogel's theatre; the mother, the prostitute, the teenage girl, the sex worker are all represented to underscore the many contradictions and incongruities involved in constructions of femininity and heterosexuality in late twentieth-century America.

To develop a sense of Vogel's playwriting style, then, I will turn to discourses on camp, particularly those of Esther Newton, Susan Sontag, David Román, Andrew Ross, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Sue-Ellen Case, and Pamela Robertson. Since Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp" appeared in 1964, camp has generated a plethora of dialogue regarding its political and performance possibilities. Much initial reaction came in response to her rather off-handed statement, "It goes without saying that the camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical" (277). Yet, the main trait of camp that Sontag sought to trace is "a seriousness that fails" (283). As Pamela Robertson points out, Sontag can be credited for publicizing camp among heterosexuals, while also making it a possible topic for academic discussion (120). Since Sontag, camp has been redefined and challenged, both as a practice and as a critical concept. For example, some feminists express concerns of its potential misogyny, seeing camp and drag as mocking femininity and perpetuating sexist stereotypes. Caryl Flinn writes, "Camp's exaggeration of the female form—whether worn by men or women—reproduces the familiar connection with

[7] Interestingly, this phrase, Newton notes, is borrowed from Kenneth Burke, who uses it in relation to poetry.

abject excess it had in countless more traditional discourses" (448). While this certainly may be true in certain types of camp and drag performances, misogyny does not inhere in the practice of camp. There are as many varieties of camp as there are producers (and consumers) of it.

Moreover, as both a style and a critical concept, camp must be understood as an historical term. Sontag's elaboration of camp, for example, has to be read in its connection with pop culture of the sixties. During this period, there was a convergence between camp, a "minority elite" form of representation, and the everyday products of pop culture, which together brought camp into broader public awareness (Robertson 120). During this period, the popularity of camp was part of the larger cultural shift that fueled the social liberation movements (gay liberation, feminism, and the civil right movement), Andy Warhol's fame, and anti-war movements.[8] Like these movements, camp signified cultural shift from status quo stability to a widespread anti-establishment ethos. Camp has since become a highly commodified and heterosexualized form of representation, which Paul Rudnick and Kurt Anderson label "Camp-Lite" (94). Since its first American appearance in Redding J. Ware's 1909 book *Passing English of the Victorian Era,* through the pop culture of the1960s and into the twenty-first century, camp's subcultural voice has become a highly commercialized and consumable aesthetic style. Indeed, some even refer to today's reality television world as post-camp, which is not surprising given the penchant for attaching the prefix "post" to some of the most politically charged terms of the past several decades, such as race, feminism, nationalism.

[8] Andrew Ross cites a 1975 interview with Sontag, in which she contends that camp aided and fueled the feminism of the 1970s ("Uses of Camp" 323).

Vogel's plays are camp in their oblique positioning of the spectator in relation to vexed subjects, in their theatricality, in their combination of humor and pathos, and in their purposeful confusion of normative codes and conventions of gender and sexuality. Lesbian critics have, in the past, appropriated camp for feminist purposes. In her essay "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," Sue-Ellen Case discusses the work of Shaw and Weaver, using camp as a lesbian performative mode, thus showing how this butch-femme couple assert a new "feminist subject position," one that generates, "with the aid of camp, an irony that allows her perception to be constructed from outside ideology, with a gender role that makes her appear as if she is inside of it" ("Butch-Femme" 292). In her essay "Fe/male Impersonation," Kate Davy, supports Case's project, in general, although she criticizes Case's use of camp as a discourse, rather than as a practice. Davy writes, "Because [Case] invokes camp as a 'discourse,' instead merely using its salient elements, the baggage of camp discourse is imbricated in her argument" (367). By assuming the effects of Shaw and Weaver's performances would be inevitably and automatically subversive, Case mistook camp as a style without a history and, unfortunately, found that the feminist subject cannot simply perform her way outside of the dominant ideology. Davy also criticizes gay male camp performance as a form that "tends to reinscribe rather than undermine, the dominant culture paradigms it appropriates for its farce and means to parody" (362). Making an important distinction between gay male camp and lesbian camp, she writes, "In the context of gay male camp and its venues camp is indeed a means of signaling through the flames, while in lesbian performance it tends to fuel and fan the fire" (369). So, while "the wink of [male] camp reassures its audience of the ultimate harmlessness of its play . . . [w]hen the butch-femme subject winks, phallocratic

culture is not reassured" (369). The uses to which camp is put, then, are never neutral or seamlessly transmissible from one body or sexuality to another. Each performance unleashes its own set of significations, depending on the subjects performing, the context of the performance, the people viewing the performance, and the conditions under which the performance takes place.

In addition to lesbian camp, feminist camp is an under-theorized area that works to forge links, historically and stylistically, between gay male and feminist (both lesbian and straight) camp performances. Pamela Robertson's provocative discussion of feminist camp in the performances of Mae West, Joan Crawford, and Madonna (among others) offers a fascinating perspective on the growing body of discourse around camp. Curiously, she "straightens" camp by attributing it to a predominantly heterosexual female spectator who derives (guilty) pleasure from watching and enjoying the female stereotypes performed by feminist camp icons such as Mae West.[9] In this way, Robertson hopes to forge a way of discussing "the many points of intersection, as well as real differences, between feminist and gay theory" (9). She argues that the "tradition of feminist camp, which runs along side—but is not identical to—gay camp, represents oppositional modes of performance and reception," and through her analysis of feminist camp, Robertson hopes to "reclaim a female form of aestheticism, related to female masquerade and rooted in burlesque, that articulates and subverts the image- and culture-making processes to which women have traditionally been given access" (9). I would like to mobilize Robertson's insights, while also developing the "rooted in burlesque" aspect of her theorization of feminist camp. In her primary example, Mae West, Robertson sees

[9] Robertson does, however, say that she hesitates to call feminist camp straight, and opts instead to refer to this viewing position as "queer" (9).

the performative possibilities of feminist camp: "West activated the spirit, if not the letter, of burlesque not simply by becoming a female grotesque but by merging burlesque with the styles of female impersonation and camp" (29). She goes on to argue that West was able to "address her position as a sexual subject and object in much the same way that burlesque does" (35). I believe that feminist camp has as much in common with burlesque as it does with camp, and I think it is worth exploring this particular history of women in performance.

Robert Allen's *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* provides both an invaluable history of burlesque on the American stage and a productive way of thinking about Vogel's dramaturgical strategies and her consistent interweaving of sexuality, humor, politics, and social history. Allen points to the historical implications of burlesque:

> the refiguring of woman that occurred on the burlesque stage represents the establishment of a model that will prove to be extremely powerful, influential, and, as regards sexual politics, problematic. Lydia Thompson is the figurative mother of Sophie Tucker and Mae West and the grandmother of Bette Midler. At the same time, burlesque also present a model for the sexual objectification of women in popular entertainment. Thus, it can also be seen as the progenitor of modern pornography. (27)

It is precisely this contradiction—or, rather, this dialectic—that animates Vogel's plays; her characters are products of this complex history of women in performance. In a play like *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, we see the last vestiges of historical (not neo or retro) burlesque, in the form of pornography and strip clubs, while the earlier form of burlesque as satirical revision can be glimpsed in a play like *Desdemona.* Moreover, Vogel's humor and theatricalization of various forms of femininity resembles that of Mae West and Bette Midler, with its mixture of verbal wit and sexual "awarishness."

I would like, then, to develop burlesque as a way of talking about Vogel's theatre. While camp is the broader aesthetic within which Vogel is working, burlesque is her mode of performance. And while burlesque and camp are related in terms of emphasis on incongruity, theatricality, and humor, there are several difficulties in bringing these two terms together. Firstly, camp and burlesque have very different histories, and thus carry with them different connotations. Secondly, they are associated with different audiences and different performing subjects. Thirdly, camp is an aesthetic, while burlesque is a popular form. Fourthly, camp and burlesque are used differently as parts of speech (camp can be both a verb, noun, and an adjective, while burlesque is used either as a noun or a verb). The primary difficulty—and productive richness—of bringing these two terms together is that camp is associated with gay male performers and spectators, while burlesque is associated with heterosexual female performers and heterosexual male spectators. Yet, both the majority of gay male drag and classic burlesque, I would argue, work to resignify femininity as performance of agency, cultural power, and authority. However, whereas camp and drag tend to de-eroticize the female spectacle, burlesque foregrounds an eroticized female spectacle. Thus, for a feminist project such as Vogel's, burlesque offers a mode of performance that underscores, even as it critiques, the sexualization of the female body.

A last distinction I would like to make between camp and burlesque is their divergent yet related cultural positions. Burlesque has historically been situated culturally as a low, feminized form, while camp, with its "pseudoaristocratic patrilineage" (Ross 316), flourished as a discourse and a practice in the age of mass culture as a way to salvage the privilege of "taste-making intellectuals to patrol the higher canons of taste" (315). Thus,

camp and burlesque are distinguished along cultural boundaries of high and low taste, as well as along boundaries of gender and sexuality. And yet, both camp and burlesque negotiate their respective positions from the margins of dominant culture. Taken together, the contradictions and convergences between camp and burlesque capture the range of Vogel's theatre. Continually bringing together high and low culture, she uses an aesthetic associated with male homosexuality, imbuing it with a feminist angle and positioning women center stage, impersonating themselves as both speaking subjects and erotic objects of history.

In her revisions of male-authored texts, her representations of polymorphous sexualities, and her emphasis on the centrality of a female performing subject, Vogel's theatre in many ways parallels the history of burlesque in America. Furthermore, Vogel refers to *Mineola Twins* as "the burlesque version" ("Women in Theatre") of *How I Learned to Drive*, thus suggesting that her strategy as a playwright is to turn issues and identities inside out. Vogel's burlesque is a writing strategy that strips bodies and texts of their accumulated cultural connotations, without positing an alternative, outside, or essence beyond these connotations. Burlesque is also a mode of performance, describing the ways in which her characters expose themselves, psychically, emotionally, and physically in Vogel's plays. Finally, as a popular form, burlesque offers a historically informed way of examining what meanings accompany female performers on the American stage. Reaching back into history, Vogel fuses the techniques of female performers (with an emphasis on the body) and the strategies of male authors (with an emphasis on language). The product is a theater that is at once seductive, provocative, and deconstructive. Vogel continually foregrounds what it means to be a woman on

stage, as both a sexual subject and object. As a way of discussing both Vogel's revision of past texts and her staging of contemporary questions, I will call her dramaturgical strategy a performative burlesque.

The classic definition of burlesque as a parody of a high culture literary or dramatic work emerged in the 17th century as a literary and performance genre, and was defined as, "That species of literary composition, or of dramatic representation, which aims at exciting laughter by caricature of the manner or spirit of serious works, or by ludicrous treatment of their subjects" (OED). This applies to Vogel's revisions of canonical plays, in that she often humorously turns them on their heads (*Desdemona* and *And Baby Makes Seven*), blends highbrow culture with low (*Hot 'n' Throbbing*), and employs a variety of styles, genres, and intertextual references (most of her plays). The more modern version of burlesque is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "A variety show, frequently featuring strip-tease. Also *attrib.* orig. and chiefly *U.S.*" This American variation of burlesque is related to other popular forms, such as vaudeville and variety shows. This version includes music, humor, witty dialogue, parody, and an emphasis on female spectacle, all of which are characteristics of Vogel's plays. My use of the word "performative" in conjunction with burlesque aims to emphasize burlesque as performance practice that "cites" the codes and acts of gender and sexuality. In a formulation that productively connects theories of performativity and the practice of burlesque, Butler writes, "sexuality . . . emerges precisely as an improvisational possibility within a field of constraints" (15). Further, my use of the word "performative" in relation to burlesque is a move toward bringing the history of theatre and performance into discussions of performativity. Marvin Carlson describes performativity as the

"theoretical partner" (Preface) of performance discourse, and thus a "performative burlesque" is also a way of bringing together theory and practice. And as Elin Diamond insists in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, "Performativity . . . must be rooted in the materiality and historical density of performance" (5).

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reminds us, "'Performative' at the present moment, carries the authority of two very different discourses, that of theater on the one hand, and of speech act theory and deconstruction on the other" (*Touching Feeling* 7). Suggesting the dialectic at work in Vogel's plays, Sedgwick states, "in its deconstructive sense performativity signals absorption; in the vicinity of the stage, however, the performative is theatrical" (7). Mobilizing both connotations of the performative, Vogel absorbs, or assimilates, canonical texts, while taking vexed cultural subjects surrounding sexuality and theatricalizing them. In this sense, she undermines notions of an original or singular authorship of either a text or act, while emphasizing the multiple social and historical factors that go into producing sexuality as a culturally intelligible, visible performance. As Butler points out, "gender is always coming from a source that is elsewhere and directed toward something that is beyond me, constituted in a sociality that I do not fully author" (16), and thus to enact one's gender or sexuality "entails a certain dispossession," an "undoing" (16). Performative burlesque suggests the ways in which gendered and sexual performances are historically constituted, and enacted in forms that are both discursive and theatrical, unconscious and conscious. As Diamond writes, "When performativity materializes as performance in that risky and dangerous negotiation between a doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretations), between someone's body and the conventions of embodiment,

we have access to cultural meanings and critique" (*Performance* 5). This describes both the work of Vogel's theatre and the cultural significance of burlesque as a performance practice. Performative burlesque describes Vogel's placement of women at center stage, as active and complex social actors, who are inevitably coded as sexualized body even as they articulate political voice. And as an historical theatrical form, burlesque was an arena in which in which women could be sexual *and* funny, spectacular *and* socially aware.

A Brief History of Burlesque

From minstrel shows and burlesque to vaudeville and slapstick comedy, theatrical humor has consistently been mobilized in America as a way to express national anxieties regarding race, class, sexuality, and gender relations. In 1869, Britain's Lydia Thomson and her troupe of bawdy performers brought burlesque to America in the form of humorous revisions of classic texts, in which the women played both male and female parts. Also in 1869, Richard Grant White remarked on the popularity of burlesque:

> It means something, this outbreak of burlesque acting around the world. No mere accident has made so monstrous a kind of entertainment equally acceptable to three publics so different as those of Paris, London, and New York. And by monstrous I do not mean wicked, disgusting, or hateful, but monstrously incongruous and unnatural. (White 256)

What burlesque meant, in part, was an increasing cultural fascination and eroticisation of the female performer and increasing distinctions between high and lowbrow cultural forms. During its first year, burlesque was thought by some to be *the* new form of American theatre. Richard Grant White predicted (inaccurately, it turns out):

> [D]rama as an intellectual diversion of the mind from one channel of thought to another, has passed away, I think forever. The public, even the cultivated public, . . . seeks only to be amused. Of this mood, burlesque, or "spectacular extravaganza" is the natural and inevitable product. We . . . have probably seen the

> last of our legitimate drama. (266)

Of course, legitimate theatre was established in America, while burlesque became increasingly marginalized, eventually being reduced to striptease.

Lawrence Levine traces the emergence of the cultural hierarchies in late nineteenth-early twentieth century America, describing this as the period during which "American culture was going undergoing a process of fragmentation" (207). Levine argues that the organization of "standards of taste" and the cultural hierarchies of highbrow and lowbrow was a method of training and containing the "masses." Culture would "ennoble, elevate, purify" while providing a sense of order amidst "turmoil" and "alienation" (206). Levine writes of the "tension in this relationship" between the "arbiters of culture" and the masses:

> It is important to recognize the tension in this relationship, which led the arbiters of culture on the one hand to insulate themselves from the masses in order to promote and preserve pure culture, and on the other to reach out to the masses and sow the seeds of culture in order to ensure civilized order. (206)

Indeed, it was precisely this tension that burlesque highlighted, since it threatened to invert this hierarchy, and create from the masses a middle-class theatre audience based not on hierarchies of taste, but on degrees and forms of pleasure.

Along with its bold humor and gender reversals, burlesque broke down distinctions between high and low culture. In 1869, William Dean Howells thought burlesque might serve as a test-case for evaluating the current state of American taste, writing, "an inquiry into the present taste in theatricals concerns the fact rather than the effect of taste" (636). However, Howells ultimately decried burlesque not because of its disruption of gender norms, but because of its "foreign character" (643). That is, "The new taste . . . is not our taste. It came to us like any other mode from aboard, but, unlike the fashions in dress, it

received no modification or impression from our life" (643).[10] Burlesque's transgression of gender norms seemed almost secondary, for Howells at least, to the threat it posed to American identity and taste. Howells main concern in his essay was that "the new taste in theatricals" expresses a "comedy [that] is, like the opera, alien" (644). Unlike White who predicted that burlesque and other types of comedic theatre would become *the* American theatre, Howells offered his hopeful prediction that "we shall not see the burlesque again next winter," since by then it will be seen as "an old-fashioned folly" (644). Neither prediction of these early American arbiters of taste was correct. Although it changed dramatically over the course of its history in American popular culture, burlesque became a theatrical form that irrevocably shaped how women in performance were perceived, both in the audience and onstage. Burlesque participated in the construction of class-based female sexuality in American culture, with white, middle-class femininity clearly demarcated from the sexualized, working-class femininity of the burlesque performer.

While burlesque began as popular entertainment in the late nineteenth century, it quickly became reorganized as marginal form of entertainment meant for a heterosexual male audience. As Shteir writes, "In the nineteenth century, burlesque was composed of three parts, had both satirized the upper class and displayed women's bodies for a working class audience. By the turn of the century, though, burlesque had already begun its downward spiral into a venue focusing on raucous skirts and the solo female performer" (54). This shift exemplifies the process of incorporation, in which dominant

[10] This debate continues in American theatre today, with many American critics and playwrights railing against the importation of British theatre, instead of producing American work. Vogel herself is very vocal about this. Moderating a panel discussion on September 10, 2008 at the 92nd Street Y in New York City, entitled, "New Faces of Drama", Vogel said adamantly, "America has been importing its politics for quite some time. We import Stoppard, rather than listening to the Stoppards here. They are here." A similar statement found its way into Christopher Durang's recent political farce, *Why Torture is Wrong, and the People Who Love Them*, produced during the 2008/2009 season at the Public Theater.

culture remakes the cultural forms of a subordinate group.[11] As Howells pointed out in 1869, "the stage is not an Institution" in America, and "yet it affords recreation to a very large and increasing number of persons" (636). This mass appeal of burlesque inevitably made it an influential social practice and a cultural battleground. With its brash displays of women parading their sexuality while satirizing high culture, burlesque was eventually exiled from the legitimate stage. As Allen points out, "Ironically, it was the presence of respectable, middle-class women and men in the audience that made burlesque so problematic" (77), since it placed female sexuality and class distinctions center stage, just when those things were being purged from the audience to make way for (and help produce) a more homogeneously middle-class audience. As Allen writes, "Just when sexuality in the audience had been stifled, the third tier evacuated, and the concert saloon closed, the 'leg business' put the issue of female sexuality center stage" (78). Torn between the profits that burlesque brought in and the challenges it posed to public morality, the arbiter's of taste would work to establish a legitimate theatre that was in dialectical opposition to its low, economically insatiable other. By the 1920s, "The theater," Savran argues, "was becoming increasingly bifurcated into the so-called legitimate stage—deeply suspicious of jazz, cinema, and other popular forms—and everything else" (*Highbrow/Lowdown* 42). Thus, over the course of the first three decades of the twentieth century, the middle-class theatre audience of the legitimate theatre and the audience and performers of striptease took up their respective positions in the cultural hierarchy, organized along the lines of gender, sexuality, and class.

[11] Incorporation is the obverse side of excorporation, which is part of a social theory of popular culture developed by John Fiske in his book, *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989). Fiske describes excorporation as "the process by which the subordinate make their culture out of the resources and commodities of the dominant group" (14).

In 1927, J. Brooks Atkinson wrote wistfully,

> burlesque has lost its traditional character. When first introduced in this country sixty years ago it appears to have been a combination of rough-and-ready caricature and "leg-show." After considerable success in London, Lydia Thompson made her American debut on Sept. 28, 1868, with a burlesque troupe scandalous in its impudence and wanton display of bifurcated beauty. ("Nothing Serious" X1)

The combination of the women's physical beauty, their comic voice, and their performance of male drag made them a veritable sensation. And it is this bifurcated beauty—a femininity that was simultaneously witty and erotic, political and sexual—that was such a thrill and such a threat. It wasn't long before this bifurcated beauty was culturally divided into two distinct types of female performers—the stripper and the comic. While both found a stage on which to perform, they were very different kinds of stages, with different kinds of audiences. In Vogel's theatre, this bifurcated femininity resurfaces. One of my central aims is to read Vogel's theatre alongside this other history of women in American theatre. I want to juxtapose and overlay them, place them side by side, bring together the high and the low to glimpse a broader picture of women in American theatre. Susan A. Glenn maps the interlocking history of theatre and first wave feminism in America, arguing that, by the 1920s, "the stage was a battleground of ideas and images," (8), with the tension between the performing female subject and the objectified female performer perpetually engaged in a struggle for representational power. Glenn argues, "It is in the interplay between active and passive female spectacle that we see most vividly how theatre became a progenitor of two very different, but nevertheless equally modern, concepts of femininity" (3). The brash self-spectacles of women like Eva Tanguay and Sophie Tucker were inevitably in tension with the

standardized and commodified spectacles of femininity produced by Florenz Ziegfeld Jr.[12]

White reflected thoughtfully on the cultural reception of female burlesque performers, which continues, I believe, to inform the ambivalent reception of women performing publicly:

> They excite the envy, and not infrequently provoke the jealousy of other women, who resent and wonder at the admiration they receive from 'all the men'… But the reason of this interest is merely that they are devoted to giving pleasure. It is their daily occupation to enliven, to stimulate, to delight. They do this in the eyes of the world. (262)

To be a woman on stage is to be always already sexualized. A pertinent question posed by Angela J. Lantham acts as a guiding principle for this study, and for the juxtaposition of burlesque and Vogel's plays. Lantham asks: "How, in fact, have we come to the point where the female form is such an instantaneously recognizable emblem for sex?" (457). Burlesque, I believe, offers some possible answers, as do Vogel's plays.

Since burlesque "was the most thoroughly feminized form of entertainment in the history of the American stage" (Robertson 28), it is an invaluable part of understanding what it means to be a woman on an American stage. "Without a question," writes Allen, "burlesque's principle legacy as a cultural form was its establishment of patterns of gender representation that forever changed the role of women on the American stage and later influenced her image on screen" (259). Moreover, the history of burlesque reveals the ways in which female sexuality has been constructed through class and race, which played out in burlesque through a gradual shift from brash and bawdy comedian, to the

[12] This is not to say that these two forms were mutually exclusive. Zeigfeld invited burlesque performers such as Gypsy Rose Lee, Fanny Brice, and Josephine Baker to perform striptease numbers in the *Follies.* Indeed, Zeigfeld's first wife, Anna Held, was the first to undress on Broadway in an 1898 show called *The Turtle*, bringing striptease to the legitimate stage (Shteir 49).

female minstrel, to showgirl, and finally, to the "low" female other—the stripper.[13] This shift can be traced from the perspective of female spectatorship, as working class women and prostitutes were gradually banned from the third tier of bourgeois theatres, and moved onto the stages of the male-dominated strip clubs, so that middle-class women could safely take their place in the newly forming middle-class theatre audience. As Allen writes, "Burlesque is emblematic of the way that popular entertainment becomes an arena for 'acting out' cultural contradictions" (27), such as the contradictions embedded in representations of female sexuality—the idealized, pure white middle class woman and the hypersexualized, commodified working class woman. The relegation of the sexualized woman into a male-dominated sphere was a crucial tactic in keeping these two forms of femininity separate, since it enabled the consolidation of an American middle-class theatre audience.

The most significant development in burlesque occurred in the splitting off of female spectacle into two distinct types: the sexualized female body and the witty narrative female voice. This division continues to inform women as both performers and writers in American theatre. Allen writes:

> The silencing of the sexually expressive woman in burlesque in the 1890s, then, had double significance. The burlesque performer had become objectified both in the sense of becoming an object of male scopic pleasure and in the sense of being removed from the stage as a speaking, ordinating subject. . . . As the burlesque performer's mouth became the only part of her body that did *not* move in the cooch dance, shimmy, and the striptease, she literally and figuratively lost her voice. To

[13] Susan A. Glenn refers to the years between 1890 and 1920 as "the mimetic moment in American culture" (74), which coincided with the "mimetic moment in American social thought" (75). She writes that on vaudeville stages and musical revues, "every conceivable kind of comic imitation was in full flower; blackface minstrelsy, gender impersonation, burlesque, parody, and ethnic caricature" (74-5). In the 1870s, burlesque and minstrel shows began to overlap, and as Glenn argues, this was threatening to some: "In the Progressive Era, when an assertive generation of New Women and New Negroes were knocking at the doors of white male power, a hilarious Salome cloaked in the mask of minstrelsy, or more precisely made ridiculous through it, registered the fascination and fear that surfaced when women and blacks threatened to act out new social roles" (111).

> be sure, she still had her body to enthrall and captivate. . . . But without a voice it was all the more difficult for that body to reclaim its subjectivity. (240)

Ambivalent responses to women on stage ranged from boredom to abhorrence to exultation. As Latham contends, "Mixed reactions toward the commercialized display of women's bodies were inevitable within a culture that simultaneously valorized capitalism, patriotism, female virtue, and physical beauty" (464). Indeed, the sexualized female body on stage challenged her traditional role in American culture, and yet supported her function as a sellable product.

Yet, as Rachel Shteir points out, by the 1930s, performers such as Gypsy Rose Lee, Ann Corio, and Sally Rand developed ways of finding a narrative voice even while taking their clothes off. They performed stripteases, while telling simultaneously telling stories of their rise from working class to stage stardom. They demonstrated their newly acquired cultural status by quoting literary passages and singing in verse. This relates to Robertson's assertion that the two film figures central to feminist camp—the gold digger and the prostitute—"create feminist camp effects that speak to a working-class woman's sensibility" (84). I would suggest that this trend in burlesque was an attempt to fuse the signs of high culture onto the increasingly debased signs of striptease, thus providing a gloss of legitimacy over the more seamy side of undressing. Literary striptease tells a story of women obtaining economic agency by selling their image as both "good," upwardly mobile, educated woman and a woman who offers her sexuality for consumption. However, this form lasted only two decades, as film and "the form of celebrity glamour created by Hollywood made achieving legitimacy difficult for many strippers" (195). Significantly, it was the economic boom of the 1950s that consolidated the divide between striptease and show business: "The worlds of legitimate show

business and striptease, having flirted at a time when it was economically necessary, became divided after World war II in an era of prosperity" (195). Film, rather than theatre, became part of mass culture, while film stars replaced burlesque queens. During this period, burlesque began to seem vulgar and unglamorous compared to the glamour of film celebrities (195-197). Thus, burlesque was pushed down the ranks of cultural forms, and its economic success depended more and more on explicit sexual display, devoid of humor or social commentary.

Burlesque was banned in New York City from 1934 to 1956, by then-major Fiorello Laguardia. Exiled from the stage, burlesque thrived in the form of the underground burlesque ("burly") film. Eric Schaefer argues that the burly film offered "transgressive potential . . . in its nonnormative representation of sex/gender roles in the performances of the strippers as well as the comics in their routines" (53). While I agree with Schaefer's argument that, together, the body of the female stripper and the voice of the comic in burlesque films offered messages that were often in tension with dominant codes of gender and sexuality, my main concern is with the fact that the comedic voice of burlesque was given over to the invariably male comic, while the female performer was rendered silent. While Schaefer points out the ways that, "the mode of production and style of burlesque films were mobilized to turn the representation of women—strippers—into spectacle" (50), he recuperates this spectacle as transgressive by arguing that between the first appearance of burlesque in the 1890s to the emergence of the burly film in the 1950s, "popular culture had shifted from a largely verbal system to one based on images" (62). That our culture is image-based is undeniable. However, images do not

offer the same symbolic or political agency that verbal power holds. As a body, you will be named; as a voice, you will have the potential to do the naming.

After a twenty-five year ban in New York City, burlesque was brought back in 1956, but with male comic performing in place of the "bumps and grinds of old-time burlesque" (Zolotow, "City will Permit Burlesque" 31), which was an attempt to return burlesque to a form of social comedy and high culture send-up. However, this return to a "cleaner" form of burlesque failed; "forbidden to use bumps and grinds," the new show closed after seven performances (Zolotow, "Out in the Cold" 9).

By the 1960s, burlesque began to seem old-fashioned and somewhat redundant since, as Shteir points out, in the 1960s and 70s, "with the Sexual Revolution in full swing . . . sex had gone public" (331). Indeed, sexual display was no longer illicit entertainment, but rather a hip, political statement. And so entertainers such as Ann Corio, Tempest Storm, and Gypsy Rose Lee became downright quaint, while strippers were driven into the lowest of cultural forms, silent vestiges of their performing foremothers. With the popular success of Kenneth Tynan's *Oh! Calcutta!* in 1969, nudity had even made it to the legitimate theatre stage. *Calcutta!* was a revue comprised of erotic skits written by writers including Sam Shepard and Samuel Beckett. Tynan's stated aim in putting together the show was to provide "intelligent" erotic entertainment for adults, a kind of "refined pornography." In a mock interview (written by Tynan) in the *New York Times*, Tynan explains his motivation for putting this work together: "It seemed to me a pity that eroticism in the theatre was confined to burlesque houses and the sleazier sort of night club…. All I hope is that the results will be a few cuts above burlesque in intelligence and sophistication" (Tynan D1). The hierarchy of taste that Tynan outlines, in which nudity

on the legitimate theatre stage and scripted by male writers is "refined" porn, while that which occurs in "burlesque houses and sleazy night clubs" is vulgar reveals the ways in which sexuality—both male and female—is shaped by class, specifically, class as defined through aesthetic taste. The producers, writers, performers, and audiences of *Oh! Calcutta!* carried a certain amount of cultural capital through their involvement with creating work already consecrated as art. However, what goes on in the other venues—burlesque houses and night clubs—is merely artless sexual display that is unabashedly about the body and economic capital, and not the "pure gaze" of the aesthetic critic or the symbolic capital of the legitimate theater. As Bourdieu writes, "The work of art considered as a symbolic good (and not as an economic asset, which it may also be) only exists as such for a person who has the means to appropriate it, or in other words, to decipher it" (*Field of Cultural Production* 220). While Tynan de-legitimizes burlesque and its sleazy venues, he simultaneously positions himself as an arbiter of taste. A patron of a burlesque house, however, might see Tynan's "refined pornography" merely as overpriced and humorless striptease.

By the mid-1970s, striptease had become the theatrical equivalent of prostitution. With the "tease" of striptease gone, money took priority over seduction. Becki L. Ross notes that, with the success of hard-core pornographic films, such as *Deep Throat* (1972) and *Behind the Green Door* (1973), as well as the launch of *Hustler* in 1974 and *Penthouse* in 1977, "the commercial sex industry, which included strip clubs, elevated the expectation of male consumers" for explicit displays of the female body on stage (179). The cultural relevancy of burlesque was diminished by the more ubiquitous images of sexuality offered by popular culture. As former Montreal erotic dancer Lindalee

Tracey writes, by the early 1980s, "television had swallowed imaginations, the corporate agenda has flattened dancers' individuality, and hard-core porn had leaked its numbing poison" (210). At that point, "striptease became business-driven and mechanical and the genius of strippers disappeared under the tyranny of explicitness" (210). Tracey argues that identifying one's self as a stripper is "as harsh a class distinction one can make." Relating reactions to her stripping career, Tracey states, "People reacted with suspicion, pity, or sometimes prurient fascination. They leaped into their assumptions, imagining me a whore, an idiot, a victim. I winced, not from my shame, because there really wasn't any, but from the shame people wanted to impose" (209). What was once popular entertainment was, in the 1980s, the theatrical version of prostitution. As feminists were gaining their voice in the public sphere, women on the strip club stages were reduced to their bodies, and femininity and masculinity were obsessively reified in the body of the stripper and the money of the male spectator.

In the past decade, there has been a resurgence of burlesque across the United States and Canada, ranging stylistically from a kind of "high class," gentlemen's club striptease to a somewhat nostalgic retro-burlesque to audaciously provocative performances that utilize the tools of burlesque to make a political statement. In an age that, as Susie Orbach has recently stated, "The body is turning from being the means of production to the production itself" (8), burlesque displays bodies meant, mainly, to produce pleasure. Neoburlesque's increasing popularity emerges from a culture that is both inundated with erotic spectacles and fascinated with all things retro. The historic resonance of burlesque promises a performance of sexuality that is a revision of older performances, tweaked to appeal to a contemporary audience that is savvy in its consumption of erotic displays.

New forms of burlesque offer an opportunity, for both performers and audience members, in which women, as well as gay men, lesbians, and transgendered people, can express themselves theatrically, politically, and sexually in ways that are not as predetermined and limiting as they would be in more dominant cultural forms, such as film, commercial theatre, or strip clubs. Shteir argues that the resurgence of burlesque expresses nostalgia for a simpler time: "Neoburlesque's popularity tends to yearn for the fifties—for a time when fewer choices existed" (338). While some neoburlesque forms do seem to evoke a more traditional gender division, many burlesque performers are overtly political in their humor and include a variety of performance styles and identities into their shows.

Many burlesque shows incorporate a diverse array of sexualities and genders, which suggests that burlesque in the twenty-first century, like solo performance of the 1980s and 1990s, offers a way of reclaiming formerly degraded and marginalized sexualities and genders. Burlesque offers a mode of performance in which these identities can be restaged as a humorous, political, and sometimes dissonant display of body and voice. Significantly, neoburlesque, in its humorous and often political undertone, is camp. New York City burlesque performer, Lady Rizo, borrows from cabaret, burlesque, and camp, thus producing a show that is diverse in both its style and in the sexualities it stages and addresses. Distinguishing between striptease and strip, Lady Rizo reveals the economic differences between neoburlesque (striptease) and strip: "Striptease performers make only enough to pay for their costume; strippers make enough to pay for four years of college" (Personal Interview). Much of neoburlesque's popularity emerges from its appeals to a diverse audience—gay, straight, and transgendered are all represented, both on and off the stage. Moreover, it offers an opportunity for cross-identifications, and for a

cross-examination of various forms of gender and sexuality. Burlesque and camp mutually inform and animate each other as performative modes that enable unconventional and previously oppressed identities put their bodies on display, thereby foregrounding the material flesh that has historically been both degraded and fetishized.

Burlesque derives its most powerful performative effects through the relationship between sexuality and humor and the dialectical tension between the performer as both a speaking subject and a visual object. As a recent review in *Theatre Journal* describes it, burlesque can be "Cheeky, rowdy, bawdy, endlessly self-referential, and, at its best, shockingly clever" (Dougherty 631). These adjectives sound very similar to the ones describing Vogel's work at the beginning of this introduction. As both a historical form and a dramaturgical strategy, burlesque offers a way to think about women's relationship to popular culture and performance, and the images constructed therein. As Allen suggests, "In burlesque's irreducible complexity, we can glimpse something of the larger complexities of the ways in which we construct meaning and pleasure from our engagements with cultural forms and, in the process, are constructed by them" (289).

Writing in the last three decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, Vogel has maintained a critical focus on the ways in which women are both constructing subjects and constructed objects of the history of sexuality, performance, and spectatorship. By placing female characters center stage, Vogel lets them tell their version of the story, their experiences in the last half of the twentieth century in America. She continually holds in tension the sexual saturation of the female body on stage and her status as a speaking subject and a subject through which history speaks. Thus, Vogel's

theatre is a feminist practice of seeing dialectically, a way of examining the female performer as both subject and object at once:

> For me being a feminist does not mean showing a positive image of women. For me being a feminist means looking at the things that disturb me, looking at things that hurt me as a woman. We live in a misogynist world and I want to see why. And I want to look and see why not just men are the enemy but how I as a woman participate in the system. (Interview with Holmberg)

Indeed, in Vogel's theatre, we are all complicit in structures of domination. Compare Vogel's approach to feminism to former stripper Seph Weene's description of her approach to striptease:

> According to their rules, my sexuality was a product. It was a harsh realization, but liberating. I knew the mind of my enemy. And I knew that, since this dehuman-izing view of women was so central to our culture, that it had been in my mind, too. I became conscious of that part of me that saw myself as less than human, and began to resist the self-hatred that has crippled women for so long. (36)

Vogel's playwriting, like Weene's striptease, is a reflexive strategy that holds in tension the central dialectic constituting women's bodies—that they are both a perceiving subject and an object to be looked at. And while the word "enemy" in both quotations might suggest a kind of militaristic mentality, it is, in both cases, a reference to the internalization of a sexist consciousness in both men and women. Both Vogel and Weene use the word "enemy" to articulate a psychic antagonism within their understandings of themselves as women. That is, both women remain conscious of the many contradictory significations that accompany a woman performing on stage, and they seek to understand how those significations structure their performances. Their performative strategy is one in which the performing of gender and sexuality develops a reflexive awareness of the effects of this performance. One of the first lessons females learn is to see themselves as both a subject and an object, and this "double vision" informs much of Vogel's theatre.

Burlesque—in all of its historical variations, from parodic canonical revision and gender impersonation to the voiceless stripper—captures the range of Vogel's foregrounding of sexuality, American social history, and literary history. Reading the canon as a feminist, Vogel interrogates how certain images of femininity and sexuality have persisted in these texts and, subsequently, in contemporary culture. Vogel's plays engage in an examination of the relationship between literary history and contemporary culture, asking why certain topics have such power to disturb, why we are so resistant to changing systems of gender and sexuality, and why we favor forgetting, rather than remembering and reimagining, our relationship to the past.

Vogel's work has received a considerable amount of critical attention, but there is not yet a full-length study of her plays. The two plays that have garnered the most attention are *How I Learned to Drive*, which won the 1998 Pulitzer Prize for drama, and *Desdemona*, which is linked to the most canonized of literary figures. *The Baltimore Waltz*, her breakthrough play, has also received critical attention, in part due to its unique, humorous, and sensitive treatment of AIDS. Several doctoral and master's theses have incorporated Vogel's plays, but again only in relation to the above three plays (with the exception of Carrie Ellen Ameling, who includes a chapter on *Hot 'n' Throbbing*). Much of the critical work on Vogel situates her in relation to the nebulous category of "women's theatre." The most extensive and provocative work on Vogel is Christopher Bigsby's chapter on Vogel in Contemporary *American Playwrights*, Ann Pellegrini's essay "Repercussions and Remainders in the Plays of Paula Vogel: An Essay in Five Moments," which is included in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, and David Savran's chapter on Vogel in *A Queer Sort of Materialism*. The work of these

three critics has informed and enriched my own readings of Vogel's work tremendously. The other invaluable sources for work on Vogel are interviews, in particular her interviews with Ann Linden, Arthur Holmberg, and David Savran. My own conversation with Vogel in New Haven, CT, in November 2008 was also immensely productive. Finally, the Billy Rose theatre collection at Lincoln Center has all of the New York productions of Vogel's plays, as well as the Washington D.C. production of *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, which has provided an opportunity for viewing productions of all of Vogel's plays, with the exception of *Meg*.

In writing this study, I hope to bring together and build on the critical work already done on Vogel, while including chapters on the rest of her published plays. Thus, I have three interrelated aims: the first aim is to write a full-length study of Vogel's *oeuvre*, paying attention to both the dramaturgical aspects and the social context of her plays; the second is to read these plays intertextually with the canonical play to which they are responding; and the third aim is to read Vogel's plays using theories of camp and histories of burlesque. Burlesque, I am hoping, will provide both a theoretical tool and a broad historical context, positioning Vogel's work within the richly varied field of American theatre, with special attention to women's changing places within that field.

A Brief Chapter Outline

The structure of this study will involve breaking Vogel's body of work into four chapters. The first chapter, "Taking on the Canon, Taking Center Stage," will include her three earliest plays, *Meg* (1977), *Desdemona* (1993),[14] and *The Oldest Profession* (1981), all of which rewrite literary history, while positioning women center stage. In these three plays, I will trace Vogel's response to the canon, as it moves from historical revision to

[14] Vogel wrote the first draft of *Desdemona* in the late 1970s, but it did not receive a production until 1993.

literary burlesque. Vogel's early play, *Meg*, presents an alternative reading of history as well as a revision of Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* (1960), a play that recounts the life of Sir Thomas More. Here, Vogel challenges conventional accounts of history that selectively choose *who* is remembered, and *how* they are remembered. The story of More is, in Vogel's text, marginal to that of his famously erudite and devoted daughter, Margaret/Meg. Vogel offers an alternative version of a Meg who is willful and curious. Most importantly, Vogel demythologizes both characters, while suggesting the tendency of traditional historical narratives to make heroes of "great men," in part by having women serve as mirrors of their greatness. What becomes immediately clear in this early work is that, for Vogel, history is embodied, not to mention rather lusty. *Meg* provides a valuable introduction to Vogel's work, particularly in terms of the way she situates women, not as the lost objects of history, but as the subjects of both history and their own lives.

In *Desdemona*, Vogel burlesques the most burlesqued of playwrights. Shakespeare's most idealized heroine becomes, in Vogel's play, exactly the whore Othello imagines her to be. Vogel's Desdemona is a brash and bawdy member of the upper class, who spends time working at a brothel in order to alleviate the tedium of her aristocratic lifestyle. The relationships between Desdemona, Bianca, and Emilia suggest that the sexual and social competition among women perpetuates divisive relations. Each woman is a member of a specific class—Desdemona is an aristocrat, Emilia working class, and Bianca an upwardly mobile prostitute. Vogel makes visible the ways in which female sexuality is defined and produced in relation to class position. Yet, in Vogel's text, the aristocratic Desdemona embodies the lasciviousness typically associated with the working class, and it is Emilia who is the emblem of piety and fidelity. And while Desdemona romanticizes Bianca's

profession as exemplifying her liberation from the bonds of marriage, Bianca secretly harbors middle-class aspirations. The male characters never appear on stage, although Shakespeare's play, it is understood, continues to unfold backstage, and thus influence, Vogel's play as well as the conflicted relationship among the three female characters. The ending of Vogel's play is similar to that of Shakespeare's, suggesting an unsettling inevitability to Desdemona's fate. Whether or not she is in fact a whore, her sexuality remains circumscribed by the male fears and fantasies that define it.

In *The Oldest Profession*, female sexuality is defamiliarized in a refreshing revision of David Mamet's *The Duck Variations.* In Mamet's play, two men sit on a park bench, philosophizing about death and life, without any reference to where (or who) they are. In Vogel's play, the characters are vibrantly drawn, as is the historical context in which they live. The group of women in Vogel's play consists of elderly prostitutes, who are feeling the economic impact of Reaganomics. The women become increasingly at odds with one another, as they differ in their views of how to run their business and, thus, how to manage their bodies. The play unfolds as a kind of emotional striptease. Each scene begins with one less woman on the stage, infusing a note of crisis and vulnerability into the play. Mamet's ahistorical play is given a historical context in Vogel's revision, and metaphysics is replaced by a historical context. In the 2004 Signature Theater production of this play, burlesque is performed by each of the women, as they make their final exits. Returning "home" to a mythic brothel in Storeyville, a place where their bodies and labor are one, the women perform their closing number, signaling the end of an era that perhaps existed only in the stories they shared with one another.

The second chapter, **"**Family, Fantasy, and the Feminist Camp**"** will include *And Baby Makes Seven* (1986) and *Hot 'n' Throbbing* (1992). Here, burlesque intersects with a feminist camp aesthetic, as Vogel offers a radical take on the relationship between sexuality and family structures. *And Baby Makes Seven* is a rewriting of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Here, fantasy and theatricality combine to create an entertaining take on newly emerging family structures. A lesbian couple, who are about to have a baby with their gay male friend, have cultivated a vibrant fantasy life from which they derive much of their sexual and domestic pleasure. Their fantasies revolve around the invention of three young boy characters that the women imaginatively enact. However, the arrival of the "real" child results in the necessary "death" of the fantasy children. Yet, since the boys have the last word in the play, fantasy emerges not as opposed to reality, but as a necessary and vibrant dimension of it. Moreover, Vogel suggests the possibilities for changing generational patterns. The play offers ways of imagining how we might change the roles we play within family structures, rather than unconsciously repeating the same story.

Hot 'n' Throbbing is an unsettling look at the connection between violence and sexuality. Here, fantasy becomes more harmful than playfully productive, particularly in the ways in which it informs sexual power relations. Implicitly, this play responds to a long tradition of male playwrights whose work, as David Savran states, "romanticizes violence against women" (*Queer* 191). Here, I will juxtapose Vogel's text with Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), a play that evades depictions of domestic violence in favor of invoking a masculine mythology of ritual violence. In Vogel's text, the protagonist, Charlene, writes erotic screenplays for a feminist film company; she also has an abusive ex-husband who brings the play to a fatal end. While Charlene wants to create women who are the center of

their own dramas, she is also inextricably enmeshed in a history of discourses that have defined female sexuality, discourses ventriloquized in the play through the figure of The Voice. Charlene's struggle to find a position within these discourses suggests the possibility of agency. However, the tension between fictional representations of sexuality and violence and the actualities of domestic violence is left unresolved in the play, leaving the audience with more questions than answers. What does remain clear is that any legislation of "obscenity" in the public sphere cannot be separated from discussions of violence in the private sphere.

The third chapter, "A Burlesque of American Social History" will be devoted to *The Mineola Twins* (1996) and *How I Learned to Drive* (1998), published together as *The Mammary Plays* (1998). Both plays span four decades of American history (1960s-1990s), with women inciting the action, and enacting the conflicts involved in national politics, family, and sexual development. In these companion plays, camp and a performative burlesque converge in an examination of American history and the constitution of women's identities.

Mineola Twins is an over-the-top farce, spanning the period of American history from Eisenhower to Reagan/Bush. David Savran points out *Twins's* relationship to Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan* and *Seven Deadly Sins* in that all three plays reveal "the schizophrenia that capitalism inevitably produces" (*Queer*, 190). I would like to place *Twins* alongside Sam Shepard's *True West* (1981), in order to juxtapose the long tradition of male rivalry and duplicity in literature with the dearth of female duos. Moreover, I hope to draw out the ways in which Shepard's male heroes remain in an enclosed, self-perpetuating world of endless violence, while Vogel's twins are historically situated,

politically animated, and socially active. Importantly, the play suggests that the extremes of Left and Right in the past decades are positions that depend on each other for their coherence. Vogel is telling this history through the experiences of women, as they come of age—and come apart—in a nation with increasingly polarized politics. Frantic and volatile, the twins enact a burlesque of American history.

Vogel's Pulitzer Prize-winning *How I Learned to Drive* (1997) employs a *Lolita*-esque pattern of seduction that unfolds from the point of view of the female. The temporal structure of this play exemplifies how form shapes the meanings of Vogel's plays. Emerging as fragments of memory, L'il Bit narrates the history of her relationship with her Uncle Peck. The play begins with the scenes in which Peck seduces a seventeen-year old L'il Bit, while the scenes in which she is thirteen are left until later in the play, after the audience has developed sympathy for (and perhaps even an identification with) Uncle Peck. As with all of her plays, Vogel challenges any easy distinction between victim and victimizer, suggesting instead how these positions can shift. *Drive* discovers some of the gifts that can be found in suffering. Significantly, both *Drive* and *Twins* (as with many of Vogel's plays) are pervaded by popular songs of the period, providing a kind of soundtrack to history, as well as reminding the audience that while "pedophilia" is the pathological label we give to an inappropriate sexualization of young children, popular culture incessantly sexualizes youth in similarly damaging ways. The difference is that we have become accustomed to vilifying the former and glorifying the latter.

The fourth chapter of this study, "Plays of Commemoration," will examine *The Baltimore Waltz* (1992) and *The Long Christmas Ride Home* (2004). The two plays in this chapter commemorate—through celebration, mourning, and memory—a personal and

collective past. Both plays bring this past into the theatrical present tense, stretching out a single moment of grief and pain in order to understand and incorporate the loss experienced within it. *The Baltimore Waltz* commemorates her brother Carl, who died of AIDS in 1987. This was Vogel's first nationally recognized work, winning the Obie award for best off-Broadway play. Vogel wrote this play as both a commemoration and a fantasy fulfillment of a trip to Europe that she and her brother never had a chance to take together. *Waltz* defamiliarizes AIDS, making it a heterosexual disease, transmitted from school children to their teachers. Here, Vogel implicitly responds to those who see the disease as exclusive to homosexuals, as well as to the rhetoric of AIDS activism of the 1980s and 1990s that insisted on the "innocence" of AIDS victims. The play's most salient intertext is *The Third Man*, which imbues *Waltz* with a playful *noir* mood that suggests a kind of secret, subcultural world, a world to which the audience is never allowed access. Fantasy and a circular structure imbue *Waltz* with a dream-like quality, a dream that is both politically potent and personally poignant.

The last play that this study will discuss is *The Long Christmas Ride Home* (2003), which is a family drama that is at turns poetic, poignant, and disturbing.[15] With echoes of Thornton Wilder, *Long Christmas Ride* is almost ritualistic in form, tone, and language. Subtitled *A Puppet Play with Actors,* this play incorporates Japanese Bunraku-inspired puppets, which act as the child versions of the adult actors. Two narrators relate the story, while at the same time providing some emotional distance from the events on stage. Like *The Baltimore Waltz, Long Ride* is a celebration of theatre's capacity to bring the dead back to life, and to bring body and soul back together. Significantly, both plays use a circular

[15] Vogel's last play to date, *A Civil War Christmas*, had its world premiere in New Haven, CT, on November 26, 2008.

form, involving a journey that ends with a return to the scene of loss. Here, Vogel uses the magic of theatre to create a dynamic space of renewal and remembrance. In all of her plays, Vogel mobilizes a feminist camp/burlesque technique to unravel some central questions that have persisted in American culture, history, and the dramatic canon.

I. Chapter One: Taking on the Canon, Taking Center Stage: *Meg*, *Desdemona*, and *The Oldest Profession*

> The pressing issue for feminists becomes how to inscribe a representational space for women that will point out the gender enculturation promoted through the representation frame and that will belie the oppressions of the dominant ideology it perpetuates.
>
> Jill Dolan, *Feminist Spectator as Critic*

> How can femininity be appropriated so as to signal both women's identification with it and refusal of it, given its constitution in patriarchy? What theories and practices will enable feminists to articulate different desires and interests, which are neither the same as men's or women's as they have been defined in patriarchy?
>
> Carol-Anne Tyler, *Female Impersonation*

> But burlesque casts down all the gods from their pedestals.
>
> Richard Grant White, "The Age of Burlesque"

Paula Vogel's most consistent dramaturgical strategies are: her rigorous engagement with the dramatic canon that, as a playwright, she has inherited; her experiments with form; and her positioning of women at the center of her play-worlds. The plays in this chapter exemplify all three of these impulses. All three plays can be read as direct dialogues both with a canonical text and with the culture from which Vogel writes. Revising Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* (1960) and Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603), respectively, *Meg* and *Desdemona* were both written in the 1970s (although *Desdemona* had to wait fourteen years for a full production), and they register some of the concerns and tensions surrounding second-wave feminism. *The Oldest Profession*, first produced in 1981, is in part Vogel's response to David Mamet's *The Duck Variations* (Bigsby, *Contemporary* 301). Rewritten extensively over a period of more than twenty years, *Profession* began as a response to a dramatic canon that positions male characters as the universal center of social life. In its last revisions, it became a history play, commenting on the effects of the Reagan era on the lives and bodies of five elderly prostitutes.

In all three plays, Vogel poses social questions to her audience through her experiments with form. The direct address to the audience in *Meg* asks: Who gets to tell us the histories we remember and pass on? The cinematic "takes" of *Desdemona* disrupt the linear cause-effect plot of traditional male-centered plays, asking: Are women's fates inevitably dependent on the male fears and fantasies that define these play-worlds? The repetitive structure of *Oldest Profession* replays the same theme, each time with a difference, so that by the end of the play, we are confronted with the question: Who is responsible for the well-being of that last, lone woman on the stage? All of these formal strategies act as defamiliarization techniques, techniques that restructure spectatorship from passive consumption to active involvement in the questions posed. Using a strategy that parallels the literary striptease of Gypsy Rose Lee, who read passages from Plato while taking her clothes off, performing what Rachel Shteir describes as "a working-class girl emulating the aristocracy" (179), Vogel's female characters take center stage to retell the canonized stories of literary history, while revealing the myriad ways in which they have been sexualized, domesticated, and idealized within this tradition. In all three plays, it is women telling their side of the stories, which are also the stories of the culture of which they are a part. Vogel's female characters are, like Mae West, both mimicking the tradition that they enact, taking apart femininity as it is defined in literary and social history, and broadening the boundaries of the field by mobilizing the conventions of theatre to articulate a different set of convictions.

Vogel positions women as the central subjects of her play-worlds, the protagonists that propel the stage action and participate in the production of culture and history. And yet, her female characters consistently refuse full identification in the traditional sense,

always encouraging a critical distance from the spectator, thus exemplifying Diamond's notion of gestic feminist theatre. Drawing on Brechtian theatre techniques, Diamond writes, "A feminist practice that seeks to expose or mock the strictures of gender, to reveal gender-as-appearance, as the effect, not the precondition, of regulatory practices, usually uses some version of the Brechtian A-effect" (46). Vogel's female characters mockingly and sometimes mournfully "act" femininity as a set of social practices that they both identify with and resist. As Carol-Anne Tyler argues, "the female mimic denaturalizes ideology by calling attention to the conventions that encode her as a woman; she repeats femininity with a playful difference that is a critical difference, producing knowledge about it: that it is a role and not nature" (38). However, the contemporary fascination with performance and role-playing has confused any theoretical distinctions between mimicry (as ironic performance) and masquerade (as imitation). Thus Tyler argues, "Perhaps the only way to appear to mimic rather than masquerade as the feminine," she suggests, "is to impersonate a man impersonating a woman" (60). That is, the most effective way of showing the performative acts of femininity is to foreground the fact that these acts are defined by and reproduced within a patriarchal symbolic. Since traditional femininity is defined in opposition to (and as a derivative of) traditional masculinity, women performatively enact femininity by citing gestures and codes that have been legitimized by male authority and internalized by woman. Thus, a woman impersonating a man impersonating a woman would reveal the social processes through which women come to learn and perform their gender. The signs of femininity, then, become visible when, for example, male-authored and male-centered texts are rewritten and recast with women as the protagonists. This is precisely what burlesque, as a form of

camp, does. And this is precisely what Vogel, in her revisions of canonical texts, does. David Savran provocatively argues that Vogel has "predicated her own feminist practice on a kind of male impersonation" through which "she imitates—with a difference—the strategies that male playwrights have long used" (*Queer* 191). Taking this description of Vogel's dramaturgical strategy one step further, one might say that Vogel is a woman imitating a man imitating a woman. The product is a theatre that takes for granted women's active roles in shaping culture, while highlighting the ways that femininity is constructed across history, against masculinity, between social classes, and through the repeated production of canonical texts and forms.

The first question Vogel asks when beginning as new play is: "what is the best structure to tell this?" (Interview with Linden 255). Believing that "form *is* content" (255), Vogel's plays appropriate and reinvent dramatic forms as a way of representing politics, history, and desires differently. Following Kenneth Burke, who points out that, "there are no forms of art which are not forms of experience outside art" (*Counter-Statement* 143), Vogel mobilizes form as a way of approaching a political topic in a different, unexpected way. Drawing from Burke's categories of dramatic forms, Vogel uses repetitive and conventional forms in order to trigger certain expectations in the audience, only to subvert those expectations and reveal a different perspective on a subject.[16] That is, Vogel invokes the familiarity of form to defamiliarize the content of past texts. Vogel most often uses conventional form, which Burke defines as "the appeal of form *as form*" (126). Examples that Burke cites include, "The invocation to the Muses; the theophany in a play of Euripedes; . . . the ensemble before the front drop at the close

[16] Burke outlines four dramatic forms, including qualitative progression and syllogistic progression, as well as repetitive and conventional forms.

of a burlesque show" (126). Burke differentiates between repetitive and conventional form, writing, "whereas the anticipation and gratifications of progressive and repetitive form arise *during the process of* reading, the expectations of conventional form may be *anterior* to the reading" (126-7). Vogel picks and chooses from the conventions of the dramatic canon, and mobilizes the expectations they carry to reveal the unexpected. That is, she uses the desires and expectations aroused by form as an opportunity to reveal conventions as the basis of social relationships. And just as conventions change, so too do the social relationships that they structure change.

Perhaps the most basic convention in modern theatre is the agreement between audience and performers to abide by certain rules of decorum. For example, the audience sits quietly while the actors perform, applauding at appropriate times, and, at the end of the play, the actors' bow toward the audience in response to the final applause. These and other rules—or conventions—govern the theatre as a social activity. Convention, as Raymond Williams points out, has three meanings: "assembly"; "tacit agreement"; "custom" (*Marxism* 173). Conventions are "by definition are historically variable" (173), changing in relation to the social and aesthetic forms they govern. Williams points to a social theory that examines "real grounds of the inclusions and exclusions, the styles and the ways of seeing, that specific conventions embody and ratify" (173). By deconstructing forms and conventions of theatre, it becomes possible to recognize the social codes embedded within them.

In *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, Williams offers a useful way of thinking about the relationship between form and convention, using his concept of "structure of feeling" to tie these notions together. Form becomes recognizable as form through the use of

accepted conventions, or techniques, which emerge from a particular structure of feeling, or social experience. Since "the idea of convention is basic to any understanding of drama as form" (Williams, *Drama* 12), the two concepts are inextricable. Williams outlines his theory: "What I am seeking to describe is the continuity of experience from a particular work, through its particular form, to its recognition as general form, and then this relation of general form to a period" (17). In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams defines structure of feeling as "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs" (132). Often experienced as a "personal feeling", a structure of feeling is, rather, a "*social* experience" (131), a "practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity" (132). Williams states, "Methodologically, then, a 'structure of feeling' is a cultural hypothesis, actually derived from attempts to understand such elements and their connections in a generation or period" (132-3). This definition relates directly to Vogel's revision of past texts, which brings them into historic relationship with the present culture and thus makes visible both the similarities and differences between the respective historic contexts from which the texts emerge.

Conventions operate within a particular structure of feeling, producing a work that is more than a combination of devices, but rather a social experience. The two main difficulties in analyzing structures of feeling are: the complexity of historical change and the coexistence of alternative structures (*Drama* 20). However, Williams contends, "it remains true that the discovery of contemporary structures of feeling (usually masked by their immediate and better recognized predecessors) is the most important kind of attention to the art and society of one's own time" (*Drama* 19). Thus, an analysis of

Vogel's plays that takes into consideration the social and historical fabric from which they emerge inevitably leads to a greater awareness of the complex organization of cultural categories and the contradictory negotiations between art and culture. In *Meg*, *Desdemona*, and *The Oldest Profession*, Vogel discovers—or uncovers—contemporary structures of feeling by reinventing traditional forms, disrupting accepted conventions, and historicizing contemporary experiences of gender, sexuality, class difference, and female homosocial relations.

Reformulating Conventions of Literary History in *A Man for All Seasons* and *Meg*

> I'm a believer in forms, Meg. I do not ask you or your husband to share my convictions; but do observe my conventions.
>
> Sir Thomas More, *Meg*

> The peculiar trait of burlesque is its defiance of both the natural and the conventional. Rather, it forces the conventional and the natural together just at the points where they are most remote, and the result is absurdity, monstrosity. It is a defiance of system. It is out of *all* keeping.
>
> Richard Grant White, "The Age of Burlesque"

If "conventional," in the above passages, may be interpreted as referring both to the conventions of theatre and the conventions of gender, then, together, these statements aptly describe Vogel's theatre, as it simultaneously turns the conventions of theatre and of gender on their heads. Vogel's plays force together "both the natural and the conventional" in order to reveal their dialectical dependence on one another. By taking on a canon of predominantly white, male playwrights, Vogel does indeed, "cast down all the gods from their pedestals." Since conventions work to naturalize what is defined as "the natural," the social codes embedded in theatrical and gender conventions may be productively unraveled in theatre, literally "a place for seeing." In her "defiance of system," Vogel theatricalizes and inverts conventional gender categories, thereby calling

into question their naturalization in history and in dominant culture. Similarly, the wrenching apart of the conventions of theatre, culture, and gender is the main business of burlesque. Moreover, "monstrously incongruous and unnatural" aptly describes burlesque as I am using it in relation to Vogel's plays, while also suggesting a certain resemblance to camp. Both burlesque and camp expose the absurd incongruities inherent in any systematic attempt to organize bodies and desires into binary gender categories, while challenging the institutionalization of realism and the well-made play as the dominant form of theatrical representation. In her first published play, *Meg*, Vogel inverts the hierarchical ordering of culture, gender, and history. Here, Vogel restages Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, placing Sir Thomas More's daughter, Margaret (Meg) in the position of narrator, thereby implicitly asking one of the central questions posed by feminist theatre: Who gets to speak?

Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* began with a successful run in London's West End in July 1960, moving to Broadway on November 23, 1961, where it garnered unanimous praise and many awards, including Tony awards for Best Play and Best Actor (Paul Scofield as More). Bolt's play seemed to come at a critical point in American theatre and culture. As Edward Albee was writing scathing critiques of American society and the 1960s social movements were beginning to form, Bolt offered a refined and edifying look back to a period when morality and truth were more stable concepts. American audiences and critics perhaps found the moral stability of a grand historical figure somewhat reassuring. Bolt characterizes his play as an examination of a "man with an adamantine sense of his own self" (xi). Describing More as "a hero of selfhood" (xiv), Bolt reflects, somewhat regretfully, "It may be that a clear sense of the self can *only*

crystallize round something transcendental" (xiv). And it was at this historical moment that notions of transcendence were about to be complicated by the emerging social movements and, in the academic field, by Derridean deconstruction of transcendental signifiers and Lacanian fragmentations of a unified subjectivity. *Man* was celebrated by critics and audiences once again when it was adapted in a film in 1966, also starring Paul Scofield and with a screenplay by Bolt. Doing away with the theatrical device of the Common Man, the film won a heap of Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Actor, and Best Director (Fred Zinnemann). In early 1960s America, Sir Thomas More perhaps emerged as an example of an increasingly rare sense of selfhood anchored in a Truth both individual and universal. In the reception of Bolt's play, More was revived as a modern martyr, who bolstered a belief in the autonomy and transcendence of the individual within a corrupt collective.

In *Man*, the religious canon and the literary canon converge, the symbolic capital of each reinforcing the other. The word "canon," of course, has its roots in the Church. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the history of this word, from the ninth century to the twentieth century, when it became associated with literary studies. The word carries with it the following related meanings: "1.a. A rule, law, or decree of the Church; . . . 2.c. A standard of judgment; a test, criterion, means of discrimination. . . . The collection or list of books of the Bible accepted by the Christian Church as genuine and inspired…. 16. A body of literary works traditionally regarded as the most important, significant, and worthy of study; the works of esp. Western literature considered to be established as being of the highest and most enduring value" (OED). More, along with Bolt's play

tracing his moral struggle with Henry VIII, is an interesting example of the connections between the Christian and the literary canons.

Sir Thomas More is a well know figure in both literary and social history, remembered for his steadfast religious convictions and his progressive views on women's education. Canonized by the Roman Catholic Church in 1935 and made the patron saint of politicians by John Paul II in 2000 (Moynahan 173), More is a historically glorified figure. And yet, his remembrance as a man of grace and strength comes only by evading the less heroic aspects of his life, such as his support of the burning of religious heretics. More was a staunch champion of seeking out and burning heretics. As Brian Moynahan argues, "More reveled in burnings" (341). Instead of this part of history, what is remembered is More's unshakeable conviction and his refusal to let others influence this conviction; we elevate More for his individual greatness, while obscuring the fact that his beliefs were the product of socio-religious conventions. More's unwavering faith involved a belief in the performative function of language, and specifically the Oath of Supremacy, which, as he says to William Roper, "is *made* of words" and so "may be possible to take it. Or to avoid it" (*Man* 125). As Bolt writes in his Preface to the play, More's belief in "an oath was something perfectly specific; it was an invitation to God, an invitation God would not refuse, to act as a witness, and to judge; the consequence of perjury was damnation, for More another perfectly specific concept" (xiii). Thus, his refusal of the oath may be interpreted, not as a heroic act of personal integrity, but as the fear of damnation. That is, his refusal of Henry VIII's request was a bid for eternal salvation. His legacy is glorified through the selective emphasis on his moral fortitude, and through his relationship to his daughter, Margaret. If "Meg brought out the

tenderness in this strange, tortured, and cruel man" (349), then Bolt's play elevated him to literary sainthood. Elin Diamond explains the implications of this process of canonization, stating, "Because bourgeois aesthetics enshrines the object (hero, event), it keeps us from seeing its social determinations" (145).

Bolt's play does not present an unequivocally heroic portrait of More, however. The Common Man complicates any uncritical glorification of More by acting as his dialectical counterpart, his class other, and a figure that history forgot. Bolt refers to the Common Man as "the most notorious of alienation devices, an actor who addresses the audience and comments on the action" (Preface xix). Described as a "pot-bellied" man of "base humor" (xxiii), the Common man begins the play with the following apostrophic apology: "It is perverse! To start a play made up a Kings and Cardinals in speaking costumes and embroidered mouths, with me" (Bolt, *Man* 3). By juxtaposing this "old Adam" with More's adamantine selfhood, Bolt underscores class as a determining factor in both the construction of historical narratives and in the composition of theatre audiences and tastes. He tells the audience, "The Sixteenth Century is the Century of the Common Man . . . Like all other centuries. And that is my proposition" (3-4). Offering an alternative historical account, from the perspective of the working-class man as both supporting cast and choric figure, the Common Man displaces More's timelessness and universality with the materiality of class difference.

Bolt explains how this figure was interpreted differently than he anticipated. He writes, "the word 'common' was intended primarily to indicate 'that which is common to us all.' But he was taken instead as a portrayal of that mythical beast, The Man in the Street." (xix). Bolt continues, "whatever he might have been, this Common Man is not in

the theatre . . . But I must modify that. He was not in the stalls . . . [b]ut in the laughter this character drew down from the gallery, that laughter which is the most heartening sound our Theatre knows." In that laughter, Bolt says, "I thought I heard once or twice a rueful note of recognition" (xx). Through the figure of the Common Man, Bolt addresses the "awarish" working class members of the audience, implicitly commenting on the class hierarchy in British culture, a hierarchy that can be seen, historically, in the configuration of classes in the theatre audience. In every role he assumes in the play, from More's steward to his jailer, the Common Man acts as a comic figure, which works to complement the stoicism of More. He also, importantly, establishes a sense of complicity with the audience, a complicity based on a type of self-preservation that contrasts with More's celebrated martyrdom. As he says to the audience at the close of Act One, as More enters his jail cell, "I'd let him out if I could but I can't. Not without taking up residence in there myself. And he's in there already, so what'd be the point? You know the adage? 'Better a live rat than a dead lion'" (127). This adage aptly captures the distinctions made between high and low culture, both in the play and the literary and theatrical history it gestures toward.

The class critique of Bolt's play was largely lost on American audiences. Different histories of class between Britain and America no doubt had something to do with the differing interpretations of The Common Man. Interestingly, while Bolt refers to the Common Man as an "alienation device," Howard Taubmann, in his 1961 *New York Times* review of the play, and later Ben Brantley, in his 2008 *New York Times* review, saw the Common Man as a Greek Choric figure (XI; "Martyr Me"). While both can be said to be accurate, since as soon as a convention is no longer conventional, it becomes a

distancing device, the use of different terms suggests a difference in conceptions of class. In Britain, the Common Man would have been instantly recognized as part of the working class, while in America, he perhaps signaled the everyman, the voice of the community. The Common Man, to American audiences, might represent a member of the middle class, an example of the backbone of the nation, with More embodying the possibility of achieving individual prominence. Both are important figures in American culture. But given Bolt's description of the Common Man as part of the gallery crowd, he would perhaps have been seen by a British audience as an ironic counterpart to and implicit critique of More's greatness.

Playing the part of More's steward, the Common Man introduces Meg to the audience in a tone described in the stage directions as "*Soapy*": "Lady Margaret, my Master's daughter; lovely, really lovely" (10). The irony of this introduction suggests Bolt's subtle parody of Meg's idealization, which underscores their respective class and gender positions. Meg operates in the play as the greatest challenge her father's spiritual resolve with reminders of his worldly obligations, both of which work to emphasize his greatness and underscore his warmth and humanness. Indeed, she is the greatest temptation to More's individual conviction. As Meg offers logical arguments as to why he should take the oath stating the King's Supremacy, More asks, "Well, has Eve run out of apples?" (141). The last "apple" Meg offers is a stark image of her and Alice at home in the cold darkness, left with nothing due to his unwavering conviction. Even this vivid description of their desolation does not move More enough to think beyond his own spiritual salvation.

The most complex characterization of Meg comes in her encounters with Norfolk and King Henry. After hearing that Meg has read the doctrines of Machiavelli, Norfolk asks, "You read it? Amazing girl, Thomas, but where are you going to find a husband for her?" Exchanging a glance with his daughter, More replies, "Where indeed?" (12-13). Bolt hints at Meg's complexity, and yet buries it in the modesty and obedience for which she is remembered and revered. When King Henry asks, "Why Margaret, they told me you were a scholar," it is More who prompts her, "Answer, Margaret." In her reply, "Among women I pass for one, Your Grace" (48), we get a sense not only of her self-effacing modesty, but also her isolation among women. As Merry E. Weisner points out, in early modern constructions of gender, "Men received greatest praise for their courage, wisdom, and power, and women . . . for piety, modesty, and obedience" (21). And although "The early modern period also saw numerous calls for the improvement of women's education," this learning was meant "for individual fulfillment or to make her a better Christian" and "was not linked to political or vocational aims" (144). Bolt's juxtaposition of Meg's erudition with the fact that she cannot dance (49) suggests his attention to her alienation from traditional gender roles. Meg's wealth of knowledge and the informed opinions that emerge from it produce an alienation from her role as an obedient and modest wife. Her education, then, may be a feather in her father's cap, but it also isolates Meg from men and from other women, something that Vogel brings out in her play.

Man concludes in a melodramatic tone, with the Common Man breaking this tone with his final address to the audience. As Meg pleads "Father! Father, Father, Father, Father" (161), More comforts her with his words of wisdom and devotion: "It is the law of nature and the will of God. . . . You have long known the secrets of my heart" (161).

Meg, here, plays the part of the Virgin Mary, weeping as Christ goes to his death. The Biblical resonance is unmistakable. The play ends with More accepting his death with dignity and greeting his executioner, played by the Common Man, with Christ-like forgiveness, "Friend, be not afraid of your office. You send me to God" (162). As the bang of the blade rings through the darkened theatre, the Common Man takes off his executioner's masks and comes to center stage to commiserate one last time with the audience: "I'm breathing…Are you breathing too? . . . It's nice isn't it? It isn't difficult to keep alive, friends—just don't make trouble . . . Well I don't need to tell you that. Good night. If we should bump into one another, recognize me" (162-3; first ellipsis in original). Concluding on a note of Hegelian recognition, Bolt's play suggests the reciprocal relationship between Great Men, such as More, and the Common Man, relating this historical dialectic to the constitution of the British theatre audience and the construction of cultural hierarchies in the broader culture.

The enthusiasm with which *Man* was embraced by American theatre audiences and critics in 1961 suggests the hunger in this period for "serious drama" and for a classic hero by which to revive a form of virile individualism. Howard Taubman's glowing review praised Scofield's More for his "steadfast strength," "wit," and "high intelligence," characteristics which highlighted the weakness of all other characters in the play—including, Taubman points out, "the daughter" (XI). What stands out in the play is More's singular greatness—his individuality and unwavering belief in his own convictions. Bolt's use of "the flexible form of the chronicle play and the difficult device of the chorus" resulted in, according to Taubman, "a work that cries out for theatre expression" (XI). Taubman wrote, hopefully, "*Man for All Seasons* recalls theatre to its

high function—to reveal and elevate as well as entertain" (XI). And yet, Bolt's description suggests that his play was perhaps meant to be an ironic critique, and not a moralistic representation in the tradition of theatrical realism. Through the figure of the Common Man, Bolt was highlighting social hierarchies, with his perverse introduction and base humor acting as a dialectical counterpart to More's intellect and wit. *Man* played for 637 performances, and was revived continually throughout the 1970s and 1980s.[17] An example of the power of production and reception, Bolt's play reinforces a sense of faith the individual, during a period in which deconstruction, feminism, the gay and lesbian movement, and civil rights activists were challenging the seemingly unshakeable foundations of universal subjectivity.

In 1966, Gladys Veidemanis emphasized the importance of Bolt's play—a "play for all seasons"—for English students, which suggests the ways that dramatic literature has often been used as a didactic tool, instilling a sense of morality and culture, in Matthew Arnold's sense of "the best that is thought and said." Veidemanis begins her essay by subtly denouncing the anti-realist vogue in theatre during this period. "Let me be candid and lowbrow" she writes, "I am getting weary of Albee, of sand-boxed grandmas with loathsome children and Jerry's who can't make contact with the landlady's dog. And I am unmoved by Pinter's derelicts, standing by endlessly and uneasily for the dumbwaiter to descend. It is also hard to continue waiting for Godot" (1006). Viedemanis argues that the play's lessons lay less in the greatness of More, than in the weakness of those who sought to shake him from his convictions, forcing him to "become inescapably snared, the necessary scapegoat" (1008). Meg, for example, is described as "like an Eve with a

[17] Charlton Heston played Sir Thomas in several productions in both New York and London. Heston also starred and directed the 1988 film adaptation of *Man for All Seasons.*

barrel of apples, . . . tempt[ing] him when he most vulnerable" (1007); the Common Man is the figure who "represents the compromiser, the individual who satisfies and preserves his own skin at all costs" (1007); and finally "Judas-Rich" betrays More for "a share of Wales" (1008). The Biblical parallels are telling, again suggesting something of the relationship between religious and literary canons.

The 2008 Roundabout Theatre revival of *Man* came off as a plodding passion play. The most notable change from the 1961 production was the omission of the Common Man, which left Sir Thomas More, played by Frank Langella, as the massive central focus of this production. Without the Common Man's comic commiserations with the audience, *Man* came off as heavy-handed realism. Langella's imposing physical presence on the stage was matched by the dark and imposing set design. Ben Brantley suggested a possible reason for a revival of this play, writing, "as the reign of George W. Bush comes to an end, it is certainly worth revisiting the play's considerations of the obligations of law and of government control of private beliefs" ("Martyr Me a Little"). And yet, the play's most indelible message is the belief in the radical antagonism between the individual man and society. The only remnant of the Common Man was his line opening Act Two, quoted ironically in the playbill: "For we are dealing with an age less fastidious than our own. Imprisonment without trail, and even examination under torture, were common practice" (*Playbill*; Bolt 81). Perhaps an attempt to explain their choice to revive the play by pointing to its contemporary relevance, the line transposes the voice of the Common Man to the voice of the play's producer. Brantley rightly describes Langella's More in the 2008 production, as "the fixed if towering center of a shrine" "(Martyr"), a relic of a time when fixed centers anchored our sense of truth and great men stood at the

center of a stable moral universe. In this production, the character of Meg (played by Hannah Cabell) was both physically and linguistically diminutive in comparison to Langella's More. Her submissive reticence made her role, at best, forgettable, and, at worst, painful to watch. Vogel's play offers a look at More from Meg's point of view, giving her a voice and a complexity that Bolt's play denies. Vogel's play is not any truer than Bolt's; rather, it underscores the different perspectives from which history can be told. What Bolt does with the device of the Common Man, a figure who emphasizes class distinctions in relating historical events, Vogel does with Meg, a figure who emphasizes the omission of women's voices in traditional historical accounts.

Written in 1976 while Vogel was a graduate student at Cornell, *Meg* won the Student Playwriting award at the Ninth Annual American College Theatre Festival in Washington D.C.. It is a play that, like Bolt's, uses the convention of the direct audience address, which in *Meg* is also a defamiliarizing device, since having a female character narrate and comment on the action of a play is not standard in any time period. Typically remembered for her obedience, modesty, erudition, and piety, Margaret More Roper is an example of history's tendency to flatten and reify figures in favor of a tidy, linear storyline. Vogel's Meg uses her position as narrator to deconstruct this idealization of her life and role in history. Beginning the play holding an impressive looking tome, she reads, "Margaret More Roper was born in 1508, the beloved daughter of the reverent Saint Thomas More, martyr of the true Church—and died the obedient wife of William Roper, Esquire. . . . She submitted her brilliance in all things to her father and husband, thereby increasing her luster; and remains an example among women—as befits the daughter of a saint—saintly in compassion, humility, and obedience" (6). Shutting the

book, Meg introduces her father, husband, and Thomas Cromwell, all of whom sit downstage. To the audience, she says,

> Perhaps as unwilling schoolchildren, captive in a sunny classroom, you have heard or read of these three men—father husband, and politician. Book after book are filled with words about their aspirations, their frustrations, their deaths. But all of that is another story—and not the story I tell you tonight. (7)

Here, we get a sense of Vogel's concern for the way that history is told, who gets to tell the stories, and who gets excluded in the telling. All of these concerns echo throughout her work, as each of her characters engage with the tradition they have inherited, while adding their version to the cultural definitions that this tradition constructs. Since "Tradition is in practice the most evident expression of the dominant and hegemonic pressures and limits" (Williams, *Marxism* 115), it offers an opportunity for revealing and expanding the contours of these limits. What *Meg* so effectively enacts is a demythologization of history. If, as Roland Barthes argues, "*myth is depoliticized speech*" with political being "understood in its deeper meaning, as describing the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in the power of making the world" (143), the mythologizing of history erases its material effects on present cultural formations. "Myth does not deny things," Barthes contends, but "on the contrary, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification" (*Mythologies* 143). Both More and Meg are "Innocent" figures that epitomize the tendency to transform history into "natural and eternal justification." Since myth naturalizes the political and historical, it conceals the power of the dominant group to define what will be remembered, and how it will be remembered. Vogel's play stages a way of experiencing history as relationship. Traditional History, as Walter Benjamin writes, "gives the 'eternal' image of the past," whereas "historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past" (262).

Suggestively using a sexual (and sexist) metaphor, Benjamin continues, "The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called 'Once upon a time' in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history" (262). "Man" enough to blast open this continuum, Vogel's *Meg* is "not a history play," but rather "a play about history" (Descriptive of the Play 3). That is, rather than offering a factual account of the life of Meg and her father, Vogel foregrounds the conventions that dictate the way history is recorded, retold, remembered.

The recurring idea in *Meg* is the political and historical importance of forms and conventions. Forms and conventions here apply equally to those governing the church, theatre, gender, and history. Thus, when More asks Meg to "observe my conventions" (14), he is asking her to act in accordance with his beliefs, and moreover, to act as though they are true for her in the same way as they are for him. This mimetic faith parallels the very belief system that animates both religion and theatre as well as the belief system set in play by dominant culture. More's request, however, points out the fact that this belief system is dependent on tactic consent, one of the definitions of "convention." Conventions, then, are the artificially constructed acts we perform to continually legitimize the status quo. However, if articulated within a variant form, these conventions can be defamiliarized and seen as socially structured, historical relationships and not eternal essences. *Meg* does just this. Positioning Meg as the central figure and narrator, Vogel mobilizes the convention of direct audience address, within the form of a realist play, thereby constructing a play about history as a form of storytelling.

As with all of her plays, Vogel constructs characters who embody the same complexities as the history and culture of which they are part. Indeed, there is something

of Vogel's strategy as a playwright captured in the words of Cromwell, who tells Meg, "A politician must always understand that people are composites—and play these composites against each other—and even against themselves" (64). Further suggesting the grand historical narrative that Vogel is revising, Cromwell goes on to say to Meg, "I only know that side of you revealed by Sir Thomas. The side of the devoted daughter" (64). Vogel creates characters that operate as dramatic counterparts to the contradictions of cultural struggle. In *Meg*, cultural contradictions and composite characterizations displace the myths constructed by traditional literary forms and conventions.

The first myth that *Meg* takes on is the modesty, chastity, and obedience of More's famously learned daughter. Meg is, from the beginning, full of saucy and spirited energy, engaging her father in debate at every turn and mobilizing every "strategy" (9) and "tactic" (16) she knows to persuade both her husband and her father. Meg's modesty is revised as a lusty and energetic passion for Will Roper, and her obedience rewritten in the vow she has Will repeat to her: "I, William Roper, . . . vow to be guided by my wife, Margaret More . . . in all matters civil religious, and domestic" (8). This playful scene is important in the way it invokes the notion of consent—in the form of vows, oaths, and conventions—in the constitution of social relationships. What Vogel is suggesting is that these conventions can be revised. She challenges More's tenacious insistence on the immutability of his beliefs, which he insists, "are the conventions by which I have lived," replying, "The only convention by which we live is fear –(*Angry.*) we live by the convention of groveling" (62). More believes in a "hierarchy which is ordained" (62), a hierarchy that usurps his role as father and husband, rendering him "but a tool" (62) of God.

The second myth that *Meg* deconstructs is the idealization of More as a Great Man who transcends the corruption of his culture, and becomes a martyr to it. In his dialogues and debates with Meg, More is humanized in a more conflicted way than in traditional accounts of his life, including Bolt's play. In Vogel's play, he is not an idealized hero, but a doting father and neglectful husband. One of the play's most revealing moments occurs when More confides in Meg his fear before he was to marry Jane Colt, his first wife and mother of Meg. He reveals his anxieties about becoming "familiar with this alien force, and liv[ing] from day to day never penetrating the distance between man and woman" (25). Recalling a history of male discourses surrounding female sexuality, More continues, "Men live out their lives never realizing that there are dark continents waiting to be discovered, whole new worlds of experience—a foot away from them, in the minds of their wives" (25). What is remarkable in this confession is that the mystery of women is described not in terms of their sexuality or their bodies, but in terms of their minds and intellects. What stories might have been told, More implicitly wonders, if men had inquired about the thoughts and ideas of the women in their lives?

The third myth that *Meg* addresses is women's position in relation to the function and authorship of history. This thread weaves together the entire play, and articulates its overarching purpose. Early in the play, More says to Meg, "I'd like you to take over writing the family history", to which Meg replies "(Delighted.) The family history! Could I?" (16). The incongruity between her child-like enthusiasm and the enormity of the task reinforces our traditional understanding of history as the monumental task left to legitimized (usually male) scholars. And yet, Meg takes on the task with earnest urgency, beginning facetiously with "The dominant force in the More household, around which the

household revolved, was Mistress Margaret More… a saucy snippet" (16). This parody of traditional accounts of More's life, many of which approach hagiography, takes on the added resonance of the feminist movement, which emphasized the recuperation of women's roles in history. More explains to Meg his desire to write down their family history, stating, "It all comes about as an extension of our discussion of words—words which in the attempt to capture truth inevitably become fabrications—and particularly offensive as history. So rather than have others fabricate our lives, we shall do it ourselves" (17). This poststructuralist description acknowledges history as composite of different stories, none of which are true or complete on their own.

The reconstruction of women's histories, which were often transmitted orally rather than through written texts, has been a rich and important project in feminist studies.[18] Theatre, with its visual and aural characteristics, is an especially apt form in which to represent oral histories. In Vogel's play, as in the feminist scholarship of the late 1970s, the oral history becomes a corrective counterpart to the more widely known and accepted history of Sir Thomas More. In a quiet yet revealing exchange, Alice reveals to Meg the story of her mother's "unlearned and rustic" (66) background. Growing up hearing of her mother Jane's "social refinements," which Meg astutely connects to the other "tales about women married to prominent men" (66), she now listens to Alice tell her that "the story of my mother's refinements is a myth" (67), and that Jane's refinement came entirely from father's tutoring. She left her own father's house and married More as "simple

[18] The height of interest in oral history for feminist theorists began with a special issue in 1977 of the journal *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies.* This issue explained the significance of transmitting, recording, and making public women's forgotten stories in a variety of disciplines, from sociology and ethnography to psychology and literary studies. There were three subsequent special issues focusing on the importance of oral history for women. The essays in these special issues are collected in *Women's Oral History: the Frontiers Reader (*2002). Together, they trace the trajectory of this strain of feminist scholarship, noting its movement from valorizing the personal aspects of these histories to a more reflexive engagement with the methods with which they are collected, recorded, and transmitted.

country girl" (66). Alice then reveals to Meg that More married Alice only a month after Jane's death, simply because "he needed someone"(68). As their former housekeeper, Alice took up the work of raising More's five children, even though she knew, "He was ashamed of me" (68). Telling Meg, "you have no idea of my love for your father" (68), Alice offers a glimpse into More's past, which alters forever how Meg sees him. She says to the audience: "There comes a time in life when father and daughter turn around and see each other as man and woman" (68).

This demythologization of Meg's father is a microcosm of the demythologization of the great heroes of grand narratives of history, a process that, according to French theorist Jean-François Lyotard, is part of the postmodern condition and its dismantling of totalizing and universalizing historical narratives.[19] Recalling an evening of her childhood, Meg relates to the audience, "As I gazed up at that limitless, eternal October blue, I can remember thinking: 'That is how much I love my father'" (69). Meg's reverie dissolves into a present address, and she states in a line recalling Bolt's play, "Now seasons and men can no longer move me, and I can barely remember my great child's love for Sir Thomas, as withered as the memory of a child's October" (69). Here, Meg narrates a history brought down to size as a narrative of fallible, vulnerable human weakness, as well as fallible human love.

And so in Vogel's play, Meg takes on the role of historian, and in the process develops a more intimate and genuine relationship with her stepmother, Alice. In a spontaneous conversation, Meg begins to question Alice about what she thinks about

[19] His most pertinent text on this subject is *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979). Here, Lyotard describes the critical dismantling of what he terms "metanarratives," or historical narratives and discourses that universalize and erase more marginal perspectives. Challenging metanarratives has been a crucial part of the feminist project, including Vogel's work.

while she knits, a skill that the book-taught Meg never learned and so has never valued. Alice states, “I remember my father, the house where I was born . . . Just patches really—nothing profound or scholarly. I guess I think of my mother most often” (44; ellipsis in original). When Meg asks, “What was she like?” (45), the two women engage in a form of history—as storytelling and oral transmission—that women and minorities have fought to reclaim over the past several decades. In her essay included in *Women’s Oral History* (2002), Sherna Berger Gluck writes,

> Women’s oral history is a feminist encounter, even if the interviewee is not herself a feminist. It is the creation of a new type of material on women; it is the validation of women’s experiences; it is the communication among women of different generations; it is the discovery of our own roots and the development of a continuity that has been denied to us in traditional historical accounts. (5)

This passage applies to both Meg’s conversation with Alice and Vogel’s revision of Bolt’s play. Meg concludes their conversation with the reflection that echoes feminist concerns of the period: “That’s really all women have to be remembered by—each stitch a mute word to testify that they existed in the first place” (46). Emphasizing the materiality of history, Meg is both the voice of her period and the voice of the period within which Vogel writes, a dialectical strategy that Elin Diamond describes as a form of “Brechtian historicization” that preserves “the ‘distinguishing marks’ of the past [while] acknowledging, even foregrounding, the audiences present perspective” (49). “Historicization,” Diamond writes, “*is a way of seeing* and the enemy of recuperation and appropriation” (49), since it refuses to be contained by the categories of universal or timeless. As Susan Dwyer Amussen and Adele Seeff point out, “naturalized stereotypes of femininity” in the early modern period were associated with activities deemed “sentimental, or trivial, such as flowers and still life” as opposed to activities associated

with “masculinity, for example historical subjects” (78). After her conversation with Alice, Meg turns to the audience to relate, without sentiment, that her first pregnancy has been a miscarriage, which she imagines as “my daughter [who] departed, wisely deciding to wait another century or so” (47).

Vogel also challenges the way we hold up Meg’s education as a sign of her liberation from traditional restrictions on women’s learning during this period. Meg is not liberated by knowledge, but rather socially isolated; her extensive learning alienates her from traditional roles of early modern femininity. And so, although Meg sent her sons away to school, she kept her daughters home, where they “grew up to be big healthy women, giggling in chapel, and gossiping at night. They knitted before the fire and dreamed of the inn-keeper’s son; and so passed gaily through their days in darkness” (72-73). Knowledge, Vogel suggests, is not always power, especially for those not invested with the cultural authority to create and transmit the discourses that make up the abstract category we call “knowledge.” In *Meg*, knowledge is even more alienating than ignorance, since it creates an acute awareness of the limitations circumscribing women’s production and practical use of their learning.

Vogel’s Meg, however, does use her awareness to revise the way we remember her. Here, Meg is not the daughter who embraces her father, kissing and clinging to him, weeping, as he is taken away to be beheaded. And yet, she does narrate this version, a version that William Roper wrote and that we, in turn, have inherited as history. In Vogel’s version, Meg refuses to go to her father’s beheading, saying to Will Roper, “You go, Will…. I will not make a public spectacle of myself—I cannot do it” (72). Refusing the theatricalization of her grief, Meg’s private mourning of her father is rewritten by

William Roper as the melodramatic wails at the end of "a study of a great man" (73). This "other story—the story of Sir Thomas More" acts as the mythic counterpart to Meg's story, "a story never recorded" (73). "For men are martyred in death", she tells the audience, "But women—women are martyred in life" (73). In a moving gesture, Meg ends the play by calling on her fellow women, dead and alive, "oh women of my age—could I have chosen, I would lie with you in your unmarked, communal grave—of silence" (73). This final line of the play refuses the attempt to romanticize Meg, a progressively educated woman during a period that most women lived their entire life illiterate. What Meg wanted for her children was a life without alienation, without unanswerable questions, and without the shadow of a Great Man obscuring their light.

Writing *Meg*, as well as *Desdemona,* during the height of the 1970s second-wave women's movement, Vogel found her plays were not well-received by feminists. She states,

> back then, when I was starting with things like *Desdemona*, even *Meg* or the *Oldest Profession*, it was seen as being very antifeminist because it was seen as presenting very negative images of women. Back then, interestingly enough, we weren't talking about class and gender or race and gender. It was very much that kind of new wave, National Organization of Women liberal feminism, and lesbianism was a dirty word. (Interview with Linden 256)

Vogel admits that she was not sure whether she was ostracized from the movement because she was "out as a lesbian" or because she didn't "see how one can separate gender from race, from economics" (256). Indeed, these factors complicated any politics positing a unified "we" of feminism. Vogel's characters do not represent "women" nor do they articulate a political perspective or argument. Rather, they perform and speak the cultural contradictions that position women against each other and against themselves.

Feminism, during this period, was also positioning itself against another type of female performance: strip shows. It was at the height of 1970s women's movement that burlesque was morphing into the strip show, a form harshly criticized by feminists as undermining the goals of social and political equality for women.[20] Becki L. Ross points out that strippers frequently "encountered hostility from many feminists active during the late 1960s and 1970s in the context of second-wave women's liberation" (193). During this period, there was an "assumption that femininity and feminism were mutually exclusive" and feminists often felt "dancers were falsely conscious, 'male-identified' reproducers of normative heterosexuality prevailed" (194). Ross states, "feminist activists snubbed exotic dancers as non-feminists" (194), treating them as "dupes of a debasing, misogynist plot" (223). And yet, many strippers "redefined and embraced feminism on their own terms" (223). This tension continues to inform relationships among women today, not only in relation to sex work, but also in relation to women's discomfort with other women's expressions of their sexuality. In calling into question the limits of how, why, and where women express their sexuality, striptease uncovers women's discomfort with seeing other women express their sexuality spectacularly. Put another way, an active and flaunted female sexuality remains a point of contention and conflict among women, and not merely between men and women. Both Vogel's plays and strip shows reveal the

[20] There was also a complex relationship between stage performers and suffragettes during the Progressive era, often borrowing strategies and techniques form one another. However, unlike the clear demarcation in the 1970s between the sexualized spectacle of the stripper and the political spectacle of the feminist, suffrage parades and female theatre performers both mobilized spectacle to produce a new set of images through which to represent women's public role during the Progressive era. As Susan A. Glenn points out, "the stage and the female performer became increasingly important symbols and resources for the conduct of women's politics, particularly in the early twentieth-century suffrage campaign" (130). Just as the stage became a new arena for displaying new behaviors of women, so too did the theatre become a place where those behaviors were regulated, as in the case of the chorus girl. In the 1970s, however, the burlesque stage disappeared as a space of satirical social critique and was replaced by the hyper-sexualized, hyper-feminized spectacle of the stripper, the archenemy of women's social equality and antithesis of women's political voice.

ways in which, within a male-dominated culture, degradation is always the dialectical counterpart to the glorified female spectacle.

Significantly, it was the economic independence of the female performers that led to burlesque's increasing social marginalization and its subsequent association with prostitution. As Allen points out, "because sites of working class commercial leisure . . . represented the intersection of feminine economic independence and social autonomy, they were singled out for particularly vehement attack as dens of prostitution" (76). It was the combination of public sexual display and economic autonomy that characterized the burlesque performer as a threat to middle-class constructions of normative femininity. As such, these two figures needed to be contained and kept distinct. In Vogel's plays, however, they almost never are. Most persistently, her plays unravel and challenge the mutually reinforcing dichotomy of the idealized, romanticized heroine and the degraded whore. Especially in her early plays, Vogel turns this dichotomy inside out, revealing the social and theatrical forms and conventions that structure this binary view of female sexuality. All of her plays underscore the proliferation of sexualized images of women and girls, which work to naturalize dominant culture's dualistic packaging of female sexuality as either threateningly wild or properly domesticated.

In her next play, *Desdemona*, Vogel deconstructs female sexual stereotypes as they are constituted along class lines. Here, we see Vogel's dramaturgy take on a classic tone of Thompsonian burlesque, while her emphasis becomes more keenly focused on literary and historical constructions of female sexuality. As Amy Green aptly puts it, "Vogel writes from a seriously satiric feminist perspective" (146), a description that captures the dissonant tone in many of her plays. As Green writes, "Her *Desdemona* . . . poses and

explores a fascinating proposition: what if Shakespeare's virtuous heroine were, in fact, a whore. How/would we reconsider her murder?" (146). The other pertinent question raised in *Desdemona* is: what kinds of relationships develop among women of different classes when they exist for themselves and each other only as objects of male desire and/or fear? To get at these questions, though not to offer any answers, Vogel burlesqued the most burlesqued of playwrights, trying to find a way into a dramatic tradition from which she felt excluded and into a feminist politics that she felt did not address issues of class.

"So I will turn her virtue into pitch": Burlesquing the Bard in *Desdemona*

> That we can call these delicate creatures ours,/ And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad/And live upon the vapor of a dungeon/Than keep a corner in the thing I love/For others' uses. Yet 'tis the plague of great ones;/ Prerogatived are they less than the base.
>
> Othello, *Othello*

> Oh piss and vinegar! Where is the crappy little snot rag!
>
> Desdemona, *Desdemona*

Vogel wrote the first draft of *Desdemona* in the late 1970s, and it received a staged reading at Cornell in October 1977. It also received second place in Actors Theatre's New Play Festival in 1979, the same year that Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* took first place (Craig 217).[21] However, it was not until 1993 that *Desdemona* received a full production at Circle Repertory in New York City. This time lag suggests that the play's bold presentation of female promiscuity and antagonism did not easily find an audience. Suggesting her impetus for writing the play, Vogel states,

> in the 1970s, when I had read *Othello*, I was struck by the fact that my main point of identification, of subjectivity, was a man who is supposedly cuckolded, that I was weeping for a man who is cuckolded rather than for Desdemona. And, of course, at that point in the seventies, in terms of women's studies, there was all the virgin/whore analysis coming out, and it wounded me a great deal that Desdemona is nothing but an abstraction and that I didn't find any way of

[21] Henley's play went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1981.

identifying with her. (qtd in Bigsby, *Contemporary* 299-300)

And so, Vogel wrote a play "trying to think of negative empathy in female characters" (300), a strategy that Vogel uses in many of her plays to encourage audiences to identity with characters that they would typically disavow. In *Desdemona*, we are encouraged to identify with a rather self-centered, conniving, and promiscuous aristocratic woman. Here, negative empathy works to highlight class conflicts among women, conflicts that were also taking place within 1970s feminism, while pointing to the symbiotic relationship between constructions of female sexuality and class mobility. Vogel irreverently takes Shakespeare's most historically moralized heroine and, together with a reinvented Bianca and Emilia, weaves together a series of scenes that present images of a competitive female homosocial environment, in which the male characters never appear, but from which also they are never totally absent. In "'Let it be Hid': The Pornographic Aesthetic of Shakespeare's *Othello*," Lynda E. Boose argues, "the dangerous cultural binary of virgin and whore . . . acts not only as an external inhibitor but, even more problematically, as a set of stringent rules that culture has trained all women, even those who represent such widely different social classes as do the three women of *Othello*, to internalize" (38). Vogel's *Desdemona* examines the tenacious virgin/whore dichotomy that underlies Shakespeare's play-world, by deploying a classic burlesque style and telling the story from the perspective of the female characters; in doing so, the play complicates the virgin/whore dichotomy, while maintaining a sharp focus on the ways in which female sexuality is constituted among women and across class lines.

Shakespeare is, arguably, the most imposing figure in both the literary and dramatic canons. The continued study, adaptation, and reinterpretation of his plays over a period of

over four hundred years suggest the immense social and symbolic power of both the author and his canon. However, Shakespeare's canonicity is not immutable or infallible, but a product of historical processes and the repeated affirmation of certain cultural values. Similarly, the morality and eternal truths that his texts are said to convey are not inherent in them; rather, they are constructed from them for specific cultural purposes in specific cultural contexts. As David Margolies argues, the timelessness and universality attributed to Shakespeare

> is neither a mark of excellence of the dramatist nor a neutral principle of interpretation; it is part of the ideological use of the plays. . . . Shakespeare is elevated above history; to challenge the timelessness of his plays is at once to call into question the whole ideology in which they are so deeply embedded. (51)

This is precisely what Vogel's revision of Shakespeare's play does. As Jill Dolan writes in her introduction to *Desdemona* in *Amazon All-Stars: Thirteen Lesbian Plays,* "Vogel neatly overturns Shakespeare's moral universe, building a more complicated, autonomous, and satisfying experience (if secretive and doomed) for *Othello*'s women" (438). Their experience is far from autonomous, however. Vogel's characters never find an outside to the ideologies governing Shakespeare's text. As Sharon Friedman argues, "The female world, though presented more subjectively, is still performing under a watchful, scrutinizing eye, awaiting judgment," and yet, "the spectator, perhaps for the first time, might stand outside it, recognize it, and resist its compelling vision" (140). It is in this sense that *Desdemona* is a feminist burlesque. For, as Alisa Solomon points out, "a play's feminist meaning is to be found not in what happens to a character, but in what happens to an audience" (14).

Significantly, the popularity of Shakespearean burlesques coincided with the popularity of both minstrelsy and burlesque, as all three theatricalized cultural attitudes and anxieties surrounding race, gender, and class. [22] Joyce Green MacDonald traces the history of *Othello* burlesques in nineteenth century, highlighting its intersection with both colonialism and minstrel shows. For example, in Maurice Dowling's 1834 production, entitled "*Othello, the Moor of Venice, formerly an Independent Nigger from the Republic of Haiti*, Othello spoke in "minstrel show dialect" and "is convinced of Desdemona's guilt by her loss not of a handkerchief with magical powers, but of a bath towel" (231). MacDonald makes the important point that any Shakespearean burlesque "poises itself to mock Shakespeare's burgeoning presence as a marker of high culture" (232). The comedic revision of a classic text is a form of cultural negotiation, a way for popular culture to stake a claim on the authority to consecrate cultural objects and the values they convey.

Shakespeare's plays have been an important part of the negotiation of cultural hierarchies in America. As Lawrence Levine argues, "Shakespeare and his drama had become by the nineteenth century an integral part of American culture" (15); Levine even cites an all-male performance of *Othello* performed by and for Civil War troops (37). Pointing to the interrelationship of minstrelsy and burlesque, he writes, "The minstrels loved to invoke Shakespeare as an authority" (15). "In one New York production starring first-rank Shakespearean actors," Levine describes, "a stuttering, lisping Othello danced

[22] Shakespearean drama and burlesque have a long and interconnected history. As Stanley Wells points out, "The practice of burlesquing Shakespeare began in his own day," although "the first substantial burlesques do not come until 1674" (49), with Thomas Duffet. Curiously, "no full burlesque version of a Shakespeare play in England is known between 1674 and 1810" (49); it was during this period, Wells suggests, that the texts of Shakespeare's plays were standardized. In any case, the reemergence of Shakespearean burlesques coincides with the rise of minstrelsy and burlesque, both popular forms that theatricalized cultural tensions surrounding race and gender.

while Desdemona played the banjo and Iago, complete with Irish brogue, ended their reveries with a fire hose" (14). The fragmented parodies and satirical revisions of Shakespeare's plays during this period prompted cultural "arbiters of taste" to declare that stage versions of his plays degraded their aesthetic value and should only be read rather than performed. Sullied by their exposure to the masses, American critic A.C, Wheeler argued, following Englishman Charles Lamb, "the theatre materializes Shakespeare, and in doing so vulgarizes him" (qtd in Levine 73). The unpredictability of embodied performance, and its reception by mass audience, was viewed as a corruption to the language of the text. Thus, Shakespeare's plays were defined first and foremost as literary texts, and only secondarily as theatrical performance. Removing his plays from the influence of the masses and into the realm of high culture, American tastemakers constructed a class hierarchy based on categories of taste, knowledge, and culture. From here, Desdemona's purity and Othello's honor can be preserved, along with the racial and sexual significations they embody.

In *Othello,* male control over female sexuality is associated with political power, and the loss of this control results in a divestment of power. Othello elaborates what the possession of Desdemona's sexuality means in political terms:

> I had been happy if the general camp,
> Pioneers and all, had tasted her sweet body,
> So I had nothing known. O, now forever,
> Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!
> Farewell the plumèd troop, and the big wars
> That make ambition virtue! O, farewell!
> . . . . . .
> Farwell! Othello's occupation's gone! (3.3. 345-357).

This is all that Desdemona's chastity encompasses and upholds for Othello, and all that her infidelity destroys. Her sexuality is, thus, as much a symbolic reality as a physical

one. As Peter Stallybrass argues in "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed," in Shakespeare's play, "a woman's body could be imagined as a passive terrain on which the inequalities of masculine power were fought out" (141). Desdemona's pure body, an imaginatively constructed body, becomes the ground on which the hierarchies of male power are negotiated. What threatens this purity is its dialectical opposite—the body of the whore. Specifically, it is the deceptive duplicity of female sexuality that poses the greatest threat to male power in *Othello*; the possibility that purity and virginity are only a performance and that, behind this performance, is a woman with an active sexual desire threatens to undo the social and semantic divisions preserved within the virgin/whore binary, particularly when both terms are located in a single woman, in this case Desdemona. As this binary becomes undone in *Othello*, Othello is no longer able to discern the truth of Desdemona's performance, thus deciding that she, "must die, else she'll betray more men" (5.2.6). The only way to keep distinct the sexual distinctions governing women's bodies is to eradicate anyone who threatens to obscure them. It is not only Othello's honor at stake in the preservation of Desdemona's performative purity, but also the honor and proper functioning of the male homosocial system from which his status and power is derived.

As Sherry B. Ortner has pointed out, there is virtually no cultural system that does not place symbolic and social importance on female chastity. She writes, "peasants and elites, agriculturalists and pastoral nomads, all seem to embrace some version of the female purity ethic with equal intensity and commitment" (43-44). While different interpretations can be evinced for pre-state societies, Ortner reveals that it is the development of state societies that gave rise to "the ideological linkage of female

virginity and chastity to the honor of the group, such chastity being secured by the exertion of direct control over women's mobility to the point of lifetime seclusion, and/or through severe socialization of fear and shame concerning sex" (47). Specifically, the discursive classifications in which female=nature and male=culture (48) and the formation of the patriarchal family structure (53) has resulted in a societal structure inextricably bound up with the control over definitions and expressions of female sexuality. Without possession of Desdemona's body and sexuality, his legal property in marriage, Othello is loses his social status and political power. And without Othello's faith in her fidelity, Desdemona loses her life. They are both locked in this deadly dialectic governing the world of *Othello*.

In an intimate scene between Desdemona and Emilia, act four, scene three of *Othello* is rich in subtext and profound in its implications for the women in this play-world. As Emilia unpins Desdemona's nightgown, the secrecy between these two women gives way to a more open dialogue, in which the women share memories and offer opinions. Recalling her mother's maid, Barbary, Desdemona establishes a female history based on class-based female homosocial relationships. She tells Emilia Barbary's story, in which "She was in love; and he she loved proved mad/And did forsake her. She had a song of 'Willow'; . . . and she died singing it. That song to night/will not go from my head" (4.3.26-31). This story suggests the kind of tradition that exists alongside and as an extension of the more dramatic male traditions of battles and victories. But when Desdemona asks Emilia if "there be women do abuse their husbands in such gross kind?" (4.3.62-3), and Emilia tells her, "There be some such, no question" (64), the construction of female sexuality in *Othello* becomes clearly defined across class lines. Describing this

scene using somewhat romanticized stereotypes of femininity, Eamon Grennan contends that it "composes a spectrum of female sexuality—including worldly innocence and experience, extravagant passion, all-forgiving love, faithful and unfaithful wives, and death from disappointed desire" (282). By naturalizing class positions, however, this scene also essentializes the forms of female sexuality it constructs.

The meanings generated within this pivotal exchange between Desdemona and Emilia are, I believe, what Vogel attempts to invert, unravel, and explore in her play. This scene begins with Desdemona questioning Emilia to find out her position on infidelity:

> **Desdemona:** Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the
> world?
> **Emilia:** The world's a huge thing; it's a great price for so small a vice.
> **Desdemona:** In troth, I think I wouldst not.
> **Emilia:** In troth, I think I should; and undo't when I had done it . . . who would not make her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch? I should venture purgatory for't.
> (4.3. 68-79)

Spoken in a private female space, both Desdemona's sexual innocence and Emilia's sexual knowledge is underscored, and inevitably linked to their respective class positions. While both women's sexual agency is tied to their husbands', it is Emilia who would use her sexuality to aid in her husband's social advancement, thereby constructing her servant class status as a form of prostitution. In her persuasive argument that men and women are sexual equals, however, Emilia describes sexuality in terms of a game in which both men and women play active parts:

> Let husbands know
> Their wives have sense like them. They see, and
> smell,
> And have palates both for sweet and sour,
> As husbands have. What is it that they do
> When they change us for others? Is it sport?
> I think it is. And doth affection breed it?

> I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?
> It is so too. And have we not affections,
> Desires for sport, and frailty as men have?
> Then let them use us well; else let them know,
> The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.
> (4.3.95-104)

In this fascinating passage, Emilia articulates an alternative view of female sexuality, one that does not depend on the virgin/whore paradigm, but rather one that involves a game-like struggle between sexual competitors. While the above passage gestures toward the deconstruction of this binary, it also makes explicit the ways in which the connotations of "whore" are, as Boose argues, "so threatening that all three of them circle warily around it, so desperate to extricate themselves from its condemnation that they willingly displace it onto other women as if such displacement would stand as proof of their own purity" ("'Let it Be Hid'" 38). Indeed, when Bianca later insists that she is "no strumpet, but of life as honest/As you that thus abuse me" (5.1.122-123), Emilia resists the comparison, thereby diminishing the effects of her more female-affirmative argument in the above scene. Moreover, the ambiguity of Bianca's comparison between her life as a prostitute and Emilia's loveless marriage is something that Vogel exploits in her version. Analyzing the above scene, Boose points out that as soon as the subject of infidelity is broached, "it is instantly retracted and quickly displaced onto some imagined other woman, the presumptive 'whore' whose existence must be theorized in order to carry the transferred guilt of the speaker's unacknowledgable fantasies" ("Let" 38). The cultural category of whore—or hussy—serves not only as a means of male control over female sexuality, then, but also as a means of women policing their own and one another's sexualities. Vogel's play turns this "imagined other woman" into Desdemona, who unabashedly expresses her "unacknowledgeable fantasies," thereby giving a body and a voice to the

"presumptive whore" that the men of *Othello* use to generate their violent fantasies and that the women disavow.

Iago is the voice of both racist and misogynist discourses in Shakespeare's play, and his words determine the actions and perceptions of the other characters, as well as those of the audience.[23] Fittingly, he is the character who also defines the obverse side of the whore he conjures in Othello's mind—the ideal woman. Iago describes this ideal woman to Emilia and Desdemona: "She that was ever fair, and never proud;/ Had tongue at will, and yet was never loud; Never lacked gold, and yet went never gay; . . . She that could think, and ne'er disclose her mind;/ See suitors following, and not look behind" (2.1.148-157). Iago champions modesty, humility, and reticence, which Carroll Camden argues match with conduct books from the Elizabethan period, and is therefore a "version of what was perhaps taken seriously by some men in search of wives" (Camden 65). Iago goes on to define female behavior: "You are pictures out of/ doors,/ Bells in your parlors, wildcats in your kitchens,/Saints in your injuries, Devils being offended,/Players in your housewifery, and housewives in/ your beds" (2.1.109-113). "Housewives" is an uncanny word that contains within its meanings both aspects of female sexuality—the dutiful wife and the whore.

The etymological history of the term "husswife" is important to an understanding of changing definitions women's social function and the reorganization of the categories used to define female sexuality. Mary Thomas Crane traces the fissure within the term "husswife," which could mean both a domestic wife and mother or a loose woman,

[23] In her essay "'Let it be Hid'," Boose argues that Iago is less a character than he is a strategy used to establish complicity with the audience, thereby confronting them with their own prurience. Boose writes, "Iago is a role, a strategy within the *Othello* text that shapes this play's construction," operating as "the pander who opens the door to the listener's pornographic imagination" (27).

during the mid-seventeenth century. Turning to poems by Ben Jonson and Emilia Lanyer, Crane elucidates

> a pattern of anxiety, first, over working class women's wage earning potential within the home (with fears of a concomitant sexual independence) and, later, anxiety over upper-class women's increasing idleness (with fears of concomitant sexual freedom as they were confined to a domestic sphere where servants did most of the work. (212)

It is precisely these anxieties that Vogel's *Desdemona* lays bare, revealing the indissoluble relationship between economic and sexual power, both in Elizabethan England and late twentieth-century America. The term "hussy" crystallized in 1650 as a distinct category of female sexuality as "an attempt to separate proper huswives from hussies" (217). Significantly, Crane also turns to anti-theatrical tracts of the period that "express repeated concerns about the presence of women at performances in public theatres" (216). The policing of female sexuality, it seems, is inextricably bound up with the policing of theatrical spectacle. Controlling the "swirl of uncertainties surrounding women's changing roles in society" led to an "attempt to separate housewives from hussies by confining women within the space of the home" (216). Distinctions between public and private spaces become crucial here; the association with promiscuity of women in public spaces is inextricably bound to the control and containment of their sexuality in the private space of the home. Thus, women's social roles were defined according to their sexual function—the idealized mother and the degraded whore, or, within a theatrical context, the middle-class female spectator in a legitimate theatre audience and the burlesque performer.

Whoredom is the threatening undercurrent in Desdemona's character, and by extension, the threatening undercurrent of heteronormative femininity, more generally.

For if she, “A maiden never bold;/Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion/Blushed at herself” (Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.3.94-6), possesses an uninhibited sexual drive, then does not every woman possess this same drive? Fittingly, it is her filial disobedience that hints toward her potential sexual promiscuity, which signals a defiance of paternal ordering of female sexuality. Indeed, Brabantio’s words to Othello early in the play works to characterize Desdemona as both virgin and whore, for Othello and the audience. He is the speaker in the above quotation describing Desdemona’s gentility, and also of the cautionary words spoken to Othello: “Look to her, Moor, if though hast eyes to see:/ She has deceived her father, and may thee” (1.3.293-4). Desdemona’s considerable act of agency in marrying Othello is undermined by how it is defined by the male characters whose values and fantasies govern this play-world. Kathleen McLuskie points out the many ways that Desdemona operates as an object of male power:

> She is the object of Roderigo’s lust, Iago describes her as the victim of miscegenous rape, Brabantio as a fantasy of filial obedience,… and Othello as the idealized audience for his construction of himself. These conflicting meanings of ‘Desdemona’ are played out before the figure who carries their theatrical meanings appears on stage. (178)

Past critics have treated Desdemona in similar ways, as an object and symbol. Whether exalted as a model of feminine virtue or denounced an example of feminine disobedience, some critics take Desdemona’s unblessed marriage to Othello as proof that she “is hardly the perfect maiden according to Elizabethan ideals of feminine and filial conduct, and similarly, she is not really the perfect wife according to the same code” (Ranald 128). Such comments suggest how, historically, Desdemona has been characterized as a symbol of femininity, to be used either as an ideal or a warning.

By the Victorian era, Desdemona was held up as the ideal woman and wife. For example, Mary Cowden Clark's describes the honesty and gentle nature of Desdemona, stating, "Very little short of an angel upon earth seemed his gracious lady to her faithful attendant" (348), while Victoria Anna Jameson wrote of "the exquisite refinement, the moral grace, the unblemished truth, and the soft submission of Desdemona" (181). After being elevated to these heights, there is nowhere to go but down—or burlesque. As Maria-Elena Buszek writes, "Fluctuating variously between the behavioral signifiers of prostitution (through their trade in physical exhibition, flaunting of self-aware sexuality, and public visibility), and 'true womanhood' (through their beauty desirability, and struggles for respectability), the burlesque performer effectively disrupted the binary which had named and controlled female sexuality in the Victorian era" (157-8). It is here that we find Vogel's Desdemona.

In *Desdemona*, Vogel transfers Emilia's assertive sexual disposition to Desdemona, thereby highlighting the role of economic class in constructions of female sexuality, the connections between marriage and prostitution, and the antagonisms among women that emerge from their economic and emotional dependence on men. Moreover, Vogel draws out the sexual tensions simmering in *Othello*, and circulates them among the female characters, so that there is a subtle eroticism between Emilia and Desdemona and between Desdemona and Bianca, which adds to the volatility of their relationships. In Vogel's play, it is Emilia who insists that she would remain unwaveringly faithful to her husband. When Desdemona asks Emilia, "have you ever cheated on your husband?" Emilia replies, "I'd never cheat—never—not for all the world I wouldn't" (Vogel, *Desdemona* 193). And it is Desdemona who takes up Emilia's position from *Othello*,

"The world's a huge thing for so small a vice" (193). Thus working class sexuality is, here, depicted as chaste and devout, while aristocratic sexuality is both insatiable and fickle. And prostitution is presented as an opportunity for both imaginary freedom and class mobility.

Vogel's play is subtitled *A Play About a Handkerchief*, which suggests that one of Vogel's aims in the play is to demystify the mysterious qualities of this pivotal prop, thereby expanding its symbolic function to include concrete effects. That the handkerchief—as both material and symbolic object—was sufficient "ocular proof" (Shakespeare 3.3.360) for Othello to kill Desdemona has been the subject of considerable critical attention.[24] Kenneth Burke suggests that the handkerchief is an emblem, and

> Since it stands for Desdemona's privacy, and since this privacy in turn had stood magically for his entire sense of worldly and cosmological order, we can readily see why, for Othello, its loss becomes the ultimate obscenity. (197)

In "Othello's Handkerchief: The Recognizance and Pledge of Love," Boose suggests the correspondence between the strawberry embroidery on the handkerchief and the virgin blood on wedding sheets. She writes,

> What Shakespeare was representing was a visually recognizable reduction of Othello and Desdemona's wedding-bed sheets, the visual proof of their consummated marriage, the emblem of the symbolical act of generation so important to our understanding of the measure of this tragedy. (363)

The strawberry embroidery concretely conveys the importance of Desdemona's virginity in the play, a virginity that Othello "gives" to Desdemona. Her loss of this symbolic

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[24] In "Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed," Peter Stallybrass argues that the handkerchief is connected to the purification of bodily orifices, and thus symbolizes Desdemona's purity in both public and private spheres. Other important scholarship on the handkerchief includes: Janelle Jenstad's "Paper, Linen, Sheets: Dinesen's 'The Blank Page' and Desdemona's Handkerchief"; Harry J. Berger's "Impertinent Trifling: Desdemona's Handkerchief"; James A. Hodgson's "Desdemona's Handkerchief as an Emblem of her Reputation"; Paul Yachnin's "Magical Properties: Vision, Possession, and Wonder in Othello"; Susan's Frye's "Staging Women's Relationship to Textiles in *Othello* and *Cymbeline*"; Peter L. Rudnytski's "The Purloined Handkerchief in *Othello*."

object and Emilia's theft of it suggests that it is an object to be circulated among women, who operate also as objects in the play.[25] Its red color also eerily foreshadows the play's conclusion. As Boose argues, the symbolism of the handkerchief "reaches into man's deepest cognitions about his sexuality, his myths, his religion, and his laws" ("Othello's Handkerchief" 374). That is, the handkerchief is, emphatically, a male possession, an object encoded with the significations constructed by and for a patriarchal symbolic.

The handkerchief, in Vogel's play, becomes a symbol not of male control over female sexuality, but of betrayal among women, a breach in solidarity among women that arises from competition for men's sexual attention. *Desdemona* is, in many ways, a classic burlesque of Shakespeare's *Othello*, a deconstruction of female sexuality, class relations, and the hostility, envy, and competitiveness within female homosocial relationships. In Vogel's play-world, the handkerchief is a "crappy little snot rag," an object that divides women who are themselves defined as objects.

The play begins with Desdemona frantically looking for the lost handkerchief, while Emilia, whom we have just witnessed stuffing this same handkerchief in her "ample bodice" (177), helps in the search. As Desdemona spews such exclamations as "Oh—skunk water!" and "Dog piddle!!" and "Goddamn horse urine" (178), it is quite clear that this Desdemona, a lady who gives hand jobs in church pews and works Tuesday-night shifts in Bianca's brothel, is not the Desdemona of Shakespeare's play. In *Desdemona*, female sexuality is defamiliarized through a reversal of sexualized stereotypes associated with class. Here, Desdemona has the insatiable sexual appetite, Emilia is devoutly chaste, and Bianca harbors hopes of trading her life in the brothel for a position in the middle-

[25] That his mother gave the handkerchief to Othello is significant, since it further establishes the handkerchief and the virginity it symbolizes as something that women inherit in a patriarchal culture.

class. Vogel burlesques constructions of female sexuality in *Othello* by creating a hypersexualized Desdemona, who contrasts sharply with a devoutly religious Emilia, a working-class woman who recites the Hail Mary while her mistress learns S & M techniques from Bianca. This reversal exploits the "what if" of Othello's worst imaginings. What if Desdemona had slept with the whole camp? What if the happenings backstage in *Othello* were exactly the sexual shenanigans of Vogel's *Desdemona*? Would, then, we think Othello justified in killing Desdemona? Or did we even think to question his justification in the first place?

In her Note to the Directors, Vogel writes, "*Desdemona* was written as a tribute (i.e. 'rip-off') to the infamous play, *Shakespeare the Sadist* by Wolfgang Bauer" (176). Bauer's 1977 play, like Vogel's, is irreverent in its invocation of the Bard. And yet, while Vogel inverts his play-world and the characters in it, Bauer includes the writer as a character, "Bill," who is "not totally bald. His crown of hair is reminiscent of that of William Shakespeare" (Bauer 99). Perhaps most audaciously, Bauer includes a series of short scenes that mimic an S & M film, with the character of Shakespeare tormenting the character named Sonia, "You don't like my poetry, you tramp, eh? Don't like it, you whore? *(Burns her, she winces)*" (105). Vogel takes the blatant misogyny in Bauer's play, which was written at the height of the women's movement, and places it within the inverted world of *Othello*. In this sense, Desdemona can be read as a play that burlesques the uses to which female sexuality has been put in dramatic literature, in general. While it began as a relatively realistic play, in later revisions of *Desdemona*, Vogel incorporated the form of Bauer's play, more than its content. Just as Bauer's play is "divided into 49 takes" with a "4-5 second black-out between each take" (99), Vogel structured her play in

"thirty cinematic 'takes'" (Note to Directors 176). Mimicking filmic techniques of shot, counter-shot, and jump cuts, both plays take on a disjointed, non-linear rhythm. Vogel encourages directors of *Desdemona* to "create different pictures to simulate the process of filming: Change invisible camera angles, do jump cuts and repetitions" (176), techniques employed again in *Hot 'n' Throbbing*. In *Desdemona*, Vogel creates an episodic structure that resists narrative flow. It is a dramaturgical strategy similar to that of burlesque and vaudeville, where theatricality and comic punch lines take the place of cause-effect plot development or characterization. Unlike Bauer, Vogel, recommends that "There should be no black-outs between scenes" (176), suggesting her attempt to reveal what goes on between scenes, as well as behind the scenes of dramatic literature and film.

The moments of violence in Vogel's text range from the serious to the parodic. Perhaps the most audaciously humorous scene, and the one most reminiscent of Bauer's play, is scene 22, entitled "*The beating scene*" (211). Here, Bianca teaches Desdemona the positions and gestures of "L and B" or what known in "th' Life as a lam an' brim … You know, first they beat you, an' then you beat them, and then you give 'em wotever" (210), reveals Bianca. Burlesquing S and M dynamics in both heterosexual and lesbian relationships, Vogel reconstructs these relations as a kind of sexual lesson among women, a lesson through which they teach each other how to embody and perform their sexuality. Re-circulating the sexual power dynamics of this practice among the varying sexual dispositions of women of different classes, the play attempts to imagine a sexual economy not defined and controlled by men. The high tragedy of *Othello* becomes, in *Desdemona*, a bawdy deconstruction of female desire, which, like classic burlesque, "provoked desire and at the same time disturbed the ground of that desire by confusing

the distinctions on which desire depended" (Allen 148). Bianca emphasizes the performative aspect of sexuality by insisting to Desdemona, "it's all fakement" (211), momentarily displacing the dire effects of imagined female sexual pleasure in *Othello* with a theatricalized comic release. As Desdemona "*perfects her synchronized moans, building into a crescendo, at which point she breaks into peals of laughter*," she tells Emilia, who is busy reciting the Hail Mary, "It's smashing! . . . you really must try it" (212). Sexuality is, here, neither the essence of one's identity nor a patriarchal possession, but a highly theatrical—and humorous—performance.

A more serious moment of violence come when Desdemona hears Othello call to her from off stage. When she rushes offstage (and onstage in *Othello*) to greet her husband, the stage directions read:

> *(And then, we hear the distinct sound of a very loud slap. A pause, and Desdemona returns, closes the door behind her, holding her cheek. She is on the brink of tears. She and Emilia look at each, and then Emilia looks away.)* (186)

These more serious moments in the play, when female solidarity falls away to fear and shame, are juxtaposed against humorous *double entrendres* and brief moments of female community. Comic inversions of *Othello* come also in the ironic references to Desdemona's fate in Shakespeare's text. Reassuring Emilia that Othello will not find out about her work at the brothel, Desdemona presciently insists, "nothing will happen to me. I'm the sort that will die in bed" (184). Later, she gestures ironically toward the deadly secrecy among women, when she says to Emilia, "My life rests on your absolute discretion" (195).

Desdemona offers an interesting, and often troubling, glimpse into a female homosocial environment, one that includes women of varying classes, religious faiths,

and ethnicities. In the character description, Desdemona is described as "Upperclass. Very," Emilia is described in terms of her accent, a "Broad Irish brogue," and Bianca's speech is described in both specifically theatrical and class-based terms as "Stage Cockney" (*Desdemona* 175). The descriptions of their spoken voices sets up a social hierarchy among these women, and this plays out in volatile ways in the play. Desdemona is, at turns, manipulative, indifferent, and taunting toward Emilia, while she idealizes Bianca as a "new woman" with sexual and social freedoms for which Desdemona longs. Although she mocks Emilia's working-class speech and manners, Emilia depends on Desdemona for her livelihood and social mobility. Emilia hopes to rise in class to become Desdemona's *fille de chambre*, a hope that Desdemona manipulates and that Emilia persistently mispronounces. And while, as Harry Berger Jr. argues in his discussion of *Othello*, "one of the motives [for taking the handkerchief] imaginable for Emilia is a socially coded pleasure in watching one's betters misbehave and suffer" (247), in Vogel's play, Emilia is the moral center. She chastises Desdemona for her lascivious adventures, and in the end, feels compassion for her probable fate. Emilia loathes Bianca, however, both on moral grounds and because she is jealous of Desdemona's temporary romance with her and her lifestyle. Bianca is perhaps the most even-tempered, and particularly as played by Cherrie Jones in the Circle Repertory production, she is the most likable character in the play.

Emilia's description of female relationships provides the most salient summation of this female homosocial world. To Bianca, she states,

> Don't be a fool hussy. There's no such creature, two-, three or four-legged, as a "friend" betwixt ladies of leisure and ladies of the night. And as long as there be men with one member but two minds, there's no such thin' as friends between women. An' that's that. (200)

This turns out to be quite accurate when Bianca finds out that the handkerchief Cassio gave to her was Desdemona's and their friendship ends in fisticuffs. Ortner offers an illuminating explanation for the reasons why women participate in their own sexual disciplining, while disciplining each other. She explains that "a girl's (or woman's) motivation for cooperation in her own subordination and control" stems from her attempts to negotiate her class position, "For if she is a good girl, she has the potential for personal status mobility" (57). Ortner continues,

> Here it becomes intelligible that it is often women themselves who actively reproduce patterns of female purity, socializing their daughters in fear of and shame about sex, telling them that it is for their own good (which in a way it is), and spying on and gossiping about one another's daughters as part of an overall deep internalization of a loyalty to the system. Again the point is the future orientation of the ideology, toward some often quite illusory but nonetheless remotely imaginable status mobility, which the girl herself internalizes as the 'someday my prince will come' theme. It is no wonder too that women later may resent their husbands as deeply as their husbands resent their wives. (57)

From this perspective, we can see that Bianca's dream of marrying her prince, Cassio, finds its counterpart in Emilia's resentment toward Iago, and his toward her. The idealizing and the degrading impulses equally revolve around the desire for status, money, and social power. As Vogel's Emilia says to Desdemona, "when a man and wife hate each other, what is left in a lifetime of marriage but to save and scrimp, plot and plan? The more I'd like to put some nasty rat-ridder in [Iago's] stew, the more I think of money—and he thinks the same" (Vogel, *Desdemona* 187). Money, it seems, has become a satisfactory substitute for love and affection.

Although absent from the stage, the men of *Othello* govern the women's relationships through their political and sexual ownership of them, whether as wives or prostitutes. Although Desdemona contemplates leaving Othello, with dreams of fleeing to Paris, this

dream depends on whether or not she can persuade Ludovico to "intercede with my father on my behalf" (195), and whisk her away to a less confining life. Marianne Novy argues, "Economics, ideologies, and lack of solidarity combine to confine women in this play; it is significant that women make economic gains here either by working as prostitutes, or, as Desdemona remembers from her youth, in taking expensive presents in exchange for sexual favors" (75). And yet, this economy of sexual exchange, Vogel suggests, is part of hegemonic constructions of female sexuality in western culture, with prostitution being but one point on the continuum of female sexuality and marriage another point.

In addition to the various sexual reversals and defamiliarizations, Vogel's play exposes the racist fantasies that historically have informed relations between black men and white women. In *Othello*, Desdemona states her blindness to Othello's race, insisting, "I saw Othello's visage in his mind" (1.3.253). She fell in love with his use of language, his capacity for weaving tales of his military exploits. In Vogel's play, however, Desdemona overtly fetishizes Othello's skin color and the symbolisms attached to his race. In her doctoral dissertation, Deanna Beth Shoemaker includes a chapter on *Desdemona*, which discusses a production that Shoemaker mounted and directed at the University of Austin in 2003. In this engaging discussion, Shoemaker outlines her use of Diamond's the feminist "not … but" in the production. Each of the three characters enacted a particular sneeze style and accompanying gesture, which both signaled their class and established their material relationship to the fateful handkerchief. Shoemaker states that Vogel "reimagines . . . Shakespeare's women," but she also argues that by representing "a murderous black man who brutally kills his white wife," Vogel's play participates in "the reproduction of this racist stereotype" (83). And yet, this can be said

of Shakespeare's text. Vogel did not devise Othello's murder of Desdemona. Vogel's play does, however, emphasize the sexual undertones of the stereotype of the violent black male, while suggesting women's complicity in this stereotype.

In Desdemona, there are numerous references made to Othello's skin color and penis size, which suggests that, far from passive innocents, these women are active authors of racist fantasies. In one of the more farcical moments, Desdemona wonders how Othello is "constantly tearing his crotch hole" (Vogel, *Desdemona* 205) in his underwear. The feigned innocence is juxtaposed with Desdemona's more active sexual curiosities. Making explicit the symbolic connotations of his race in Shakespeare's play, Emilia describes Othello as being "as jealous as he is black" (200). This reference perpetuates the stereotype of an inherently violent, irrational black masculinity, replacing the more poetic and historically obscure references to Othello's race in Shakespeare's text with a straightforward simile. Bianca further highlights the symbolic significance of Othello's race, reassuring Desdemona that even if Othello did come to the brothel while she was working a shift, he would not recognize Desdemona, since "the room's bleedin' black—blacker than he is" (209). Desdemona fetishizes Othello's race, telling Emilia,

> I remember the first time I saw my husband and I caught a glimpse of his skin, and, oh, how I thrilled. I thought—aha!—a man of a different color. From another world and planet. I thought, if I marry this strange dark man, I can leave this narrow little Venice with its whispering piazzas behind—I can escape and see other worlds. *(Pause)* But under that exotic façade was a porcelain white Venetian. (193-194)

Rather than positioning the white woman as the object of this racist sexual fantasy, Vogel's play positions her as the subject, constructing the eroticized, racist stereotypes and images that continue to shape understandings of both black masculinity and white femininity. Vogel's Desdemona echoes the sentiments of such critics as Margaret

Webster, who describes Othello as "more somber, profound, dangerous, primitive in simplicity, primitive also in violence, alien in blood. The gulf which divides him from Desdemona . . . is a gulf between two races, one old and soft in the ways of civilization, the other close to the jungle and the burning desert sands" (235). Drawing out the references to race and sexuality in *Othello*, Vogel positions the women in the play as participating in the construction of these stereotypes.

Vogel defines Desdemona's sexuality as an overwhelming yearning for knowledge. In this sense, Vogel suggests that female desire is a form of epistemology, a way of knowing that, within patriarchy, can only be gained through relationships with men. She tells Emilia of her bond with Bianca:

> She and I share something common in our blood—a desire to know the world. I lie in the blackness of the room at her establishment . . . on sheets that are stained and torn by countless nights—men of different sizes and smells and shapes, with smooth skin, with rough skin, with scarred skin. And they spill their seed into me, Emilia—seed from a thousand lands, passed down through generations of ancestors, with genealogies that cover the surface of the globe. And I simply lie there in the darkness, taking them all into too. I close my eyes and in the dark of my mind—oh, how I travel. (194)

Desdemona's vivid description of imagined freedom may be read as a description of erotics of reading, and the expansive imagination necessary as a woman reading a canon of male-authored literature. In the above quotation, sexuality is constructed both as a relationship between material bodies—dirty sheets, "smells," and "rough skin"—and a vibrant imagination. In this passage, there seems to be a parallel drawn among female sexuality, worldly knowledge, and the process of historical transmission. Like the canon, which is a product of history "passed down through generations of ancestors," the men with whom Desdemona has sex pass on their knowledge of the physical world. The vivid description of male seed spilling into Desdemona's body suggests the symbiotic

relationship between the physicality and the fantasy of sexuality. Desdemona's sexuality acts as a kind of metaphor of the way a feminist reader might derive knowledge and inspiration from the dramatic canon, and reimagine them as a form of female agency.

Desdemona seeks freedom and mobility through her sexuality, her body, and her imagination. What the upper class Desdemona and the working-class Emilia have in common is the fact that their economic status depends on their husbands' social positions. Suggesting the economics of sex, Desdemona says, "My dear mate is much to miserly to give me anything but his manhood" (189). Indeed, in the play, marriage is depicted as a form of prostitution as the women seek economic prosperity in exchange for their submission to their husbands. As Emilia tells Desdemona, "You see, Miss, . . . I'd like to rise a bit in the world, and women can only do that through their mates—no matter what class buggers they all are. I says to [Iago] each night, 'I long for the day you make me a lieutenant's widow!'" (187). Marriage is, like prostitution, a business of based on profit, market value, and terms of exchange, and women's roles within this business are as objects of exchange. However, marriage means differently across classes. For Desdemona, it is "purdah" (193), for Emilia it is a necessary evil, and for Bianca, it is a secret hope of a better life. Inverting the symbolic associations of both marriage and prostitution, Vogel asks the audience to consider the similarities between these institutions, rather than simply assuming their fundamental difference.

While Vogel makes a whore out of Desdemona, she normalizes Bianca's role as a prostitute, emphasizing the centrality of her work in the broader culture. As Bianca states:

> Aw have a place 'ere and Aw'm not ashamed t'own it. Aw'm nice to the wives in town, and the wives in town are rather nice to me. Aw'm doin' them favors by puttin' up wif their screwy owld men, and Aw like me job! The only ponk Aw has to clean up is me own. (201)

Bianca's work is represented here as central to a functional society. It not only qualifies as public service, it allows Bianca to maintain the kind independence that both Emilia and Desdemona seek. In relation to *Othello*, Grennan argues, "As a prostitute, Bianca… intensifies our sense of the predominantly sexual nature of this world. As a woman conventionally scorned, desired, used, and abused by men, she underlines the theme of female abuse at the heart of the play" (282). In Vogel's play, she becomes the inverse—an idealized, autonomous subject. Thus, Vogel reformulates the degraded prostitute as the New Woman.

Vogel's Desdemona idealizes Bianca as a "new woman," which invokes an historic link to this an early twentieth-century female figure. To Emilia, Desdemona describes Bianca as "free woman—a new woman—who can make her own living in the world, who scorns marriage for the lie that it is" (194). This idealized portrait of Bianca aggravates Emilia, a woman who is far from free. From the perspective of theatre history, Susan Glenn defines the "New Woman" as follows:

> The New Woman was a social reality and a cultural construct. Coined at the end of the nineteenth century, the term was used from the 1890s to the end of the 1920s to describe women who experimented with new forms of public behavior and new gender roles. . . . At the turn of the century, ambitious, educated middle-class women, many of whom eschewed marriage and dedicated their lives to the cause of social reform and political agitation (including women's rights) were labeled New Women. By the time of World War I, the term described a younger generation of independent women who demanded not only economic, political, and intellectual opportunity, but also sexual fulfillment. (6)

Not surprisingly, the era of the New Woman was also the height of classic burlesque's popular success. And, as Glenn points out, the stage was one of the primary arenas in which new types of femininity were enacted and contested. While female performers were challenging traditional feminine behaviors, producers such as Florenz Ziegfeld Jr.

and Ned Wayburn were manufacturing the standardized feminine product in the form of the chorus girl. As Glenn writes, “By the time of World War I, . . . competition between the spectacle of female self-assertion and theatrical spectacle that worked to obliterate the notion of female autonomy and personality turned the stage into a battleground of ideas” (8). And while Glenn singles out the vaudeville stage as the primary theatrical arena of the New Woman, she also points to the infusion of burlesque into vaudeville. She writes, “In the era of the New Woman, playfulness, parody, and burlesque constituted the core of an expressive culture that could be used to achieve a mocking distance, to criticize, to conserve—or simply to be enjoyed for its own sake” (120). Shteir adds that the New Woman “drew attention to herself” and “demanded freedom to express her sexuality” (87). These two words—freedom and sexuality—are often used together in feminist discourse, and yet are often more contradictory than complementary.

In *Desdemona*, it is Bianca who embodies the contradictoriness of sexual freedom. For, although she takes pride in her work at the brothel and her service to the community, Bianca also harbors domestic dreams of a stable middle-class life with Cassio. Bianca’s hopes of moving into the middle class suggest that sexual freedom is not a sought after goal for women, but a position from which they might escape. A woman practicing sexual freedom is, historically, tied to prostitution, while domesticity is its antithesis: sexual containment. And women are taught to seek the latter, rather than risk the stigma of the former. Bianca’s seemingly mundane aspiration also undermines Desdemona’s romanticized image of prostitution, leaving Desdemona bereft of a fantasy of freedom to alleviate her own feelings of boredom and entrapment. Bianca insists, “All women want t’get a smug, it’s wot we’re made for, ain’t it? We may pretend different, but inside ev’ry

born one o' us wants a smug an' babies, smugs wot are man enow t' keep us in our place" (214-215). This conventional articulation of male domination and female submission contradicts completely Desdemona's vision of Bianca as a New Woman. Although Desdemona's romanticization of prostitution as a form of female agency inverts normative constructions of this profession as immoral, it also obscures the fact that prostitutes experience a large measure of social antagonism, from criminal conviction to social marginalization. It becomes clear that Desdemona's fascination with both Bianca and prostitution are passing whims to relieve her from the boredom of a married life she describes as "purdah" (193). Agreeing to maintain their friendship, even though she can no longer risk taking a shift at the brothel, Desdemona says to Bianca, "What else have I got for amusement's sake?" (213). Women's relationships, in this play-world, consist in objectifying each other, creating an hostile class dynamic in which sleeping with each other's husbands is one of their only sources of power—and pleasure.

Significantly, the women do come together in a common cause: They work together to produce and perpetuate the illusion of Desdemona's chastity. Scene two has Emilia scrubbing bloodstained sheets, one of the many tedious domestic tasks that she performs thanklessly throughout the play. The blood is meant to be Desdemona's, which she is supposed to have shed on her wedding night, thereby proving her chastity. But, in fact, it is the blood of a hen that Bianca provided for them. Here, Boose's analogy of the handkerchief and the bloodstained sheet finds expression in *Desdemona*. However, in Vogel's play, the bloodstained sheets are reconfigured as a hyperbolic emblem of a phony female purity and an object around which is generated a kind of female collaboration, which contrasts with the handkerchief, which signifies female conflict and

male domination. The bloody sheets are a theatrically effective reminder of the violent effects of policing female purity, and a custom that Desdemona calls a "barbaric" (180). In the Circle Repertory production, the bloody sheets provided the backdrop of the set for the entire duration of the play, hanging on a clothes line as a dramatic reminder of the violence that connect both sexual stereotypes—virgin and whore. Although the women joke, "Nobody displays sheets on Cyprus" because "there aren't any virgins to be had on Cyprus" (180), the sheets act as a reminder, a more blatant and bloody one than the handkerchief, of the material effects of the symbolic associations attached to female sexuality. That the women work together to maintain the illusion of Desdemona's chastity underscores its fundamental importance, both to dramatic tension in Shakespeare's text and to Desdemona's survival in both plays. This female solidarity, however, suggests that they can only form bonds within a male-dominated world that constructs female sexuality as a possession of men. That is, their bonds are formed out of fear of retribution. Moreover, the women's failure to conjure the illusion of chastity suggests that, whether Desdemona was chaste or whether she was a whore is beside the point. What determines the outcome of the play is the imaginings circulated between Othello and Iago.

In contrast to the sheets and their fictitious representation of Desdemona's chastity, or the handkerchief, with its symbolic associations with her infidelity, the hoof-pick operates as its dialectical opposite, the phallic prop which signals Desdemona's robust sexual curiosities. Fondling the hoof-pick, Desdemona fantasizes, "Oh me, oh my—if I could find a man with just such a hoof-pick—he could pluck out my stone," then proceeds to ask Emilia, "does your husband Iago have a hoof-pick to match" (182). Not

amused, Emilia finally gives in to reveal Iago's diminutive size. Significantly, later in the play, Bianca uses this same hoof-pick as a weapon against Desdemona when she finds out that the handkerchief that Cassio gave her was originally Desdemona's (216). Bianca lunges at Desdemona with the hoof-pick in hand, which here becomes a weapon that women use against one another, crying, "Yer gonna snuff it, m'lady—so say yer prayers, yew goggle-eyed scrap o'a WHORE" (216). As she threatens Desdemona with the hoof-pick, Bianca burlesques several of Othello's lines, which he speaks before smothering Desdemona: "Put out the light, and then put out the light" (*Othello* 5.2. 7), "Have you prayed tonight, Desdemon?" (5.2.23), and "Down, strumpet!" (5.2.79). Bianca's revision of Othello's lines displaces the conflict of male authority over female sexuality so that it becomes a conflict among women. The hoof-pick, as a metonymic representation of the male-driven play-world in *Othello*, acts as a masculine counterpart to the handkerchief, and as the women of *Desdemona* take possession of it, they displace the obsessive focus on female chastity with the social antagonisms that exist among women of varying classes and varying sexual dispositions.

Ultimately, however, it is the male systems of discursive and political power that determine the female homosocial relationships in both Shakespeare's and Vogel's plays. As Vogel's Emilia insightfully suggests, "Women just don't figure in their heads—not the one who hangs the wash—not Bianca—and not even you, m'lady. That's the hard truth. Men only see each other in their eyes. Only each other" (220). While men operate in self-perpetuating field of autonomy and power, women can only define themselves in relation to the men who hold this power. They are functional parts of it, but not participants in it. And so women are at odds with one another as they defend their

tenuous positions as sexual property. Women's relationships, then, become the inverse of men's; they cannot see each other, but can only see the men for whom they are competing. As Elizabeth D. Gruber argues, "the ebb and flow of power between the women of Desdemona is oriented toward the possession of knowledge and the ability to keep or reveal secrets" (143). And yet, this ebb and flow of power is determined, ultimately, by the knowledge produced by the men in the play.

The power Bianca wields over Desdemona is sexual knowledge: She alone knows that, while working a Tuesday night shift at the brothel, Desdemona slept with Iago. The structuring principle of the women's relationships and their sole means of power and agency is their sexuality, which is simultaneously secretive and inescapable. When Emilia finds out about Desdemona and Iago, however, she does not rail against Desdemona, since any anger she might have felt is temper by her guilt about having stolen the handkerchief. Their respective betrayals cancel out one another. When Emilia finally confesses to taking the handkerchief because she was swayed by Iago's feigned affection, both women realize the extent to which their emotional and material dependence on men has come at the cost of their friendship and their lives. This moment of recognition is the crux of Vogel's play. Emilia and Desdemona end the play on a note of genuine female friendship, albeit a friendship based on a fear of male retribution. Even though the female relationships have achieved a kind of genuine camaraderie, they are still locked with the male-defined symbolic system. As they both realize the dire implications of Bianca's possession of the handkerchief, Emilia and Desdemona make last attempts to reassure themselves. Desdemona says, "Surely he'll not…harm a sleeping woman" (223; original ellipsis), while Emilia insists, "I'm sure your husband loves you!"

(222). Emilia tries to further reassure Desdemona by relating an occasion on which she watched Othello as he "gathered up the sheets from your bed, like a body and…and he held it to his face, like, like a bouquet, all breathin' it in" (223; original ellipsis). Realizing that he's "*been smelling the sheets for traces of a lover*," Desdemona says, "That isn't love. It isn't love" (223). In her most genuine line of the play, Desdemona seems to be responding directly to Othello's explanation of his actions in Shakespeare's play as those of "one that loved not wisely, but too well" (5.2.344). *Desdemona* ends with a series of short scenes, images really, of Emilia brushing Desdemona's hair, counting the brush-strokes, and counting down to the inevitable fate that they fear—and we know—awaits Desdemona.

In his review of Circle Repertory's 1993 production of *Desdemona*, Ben Brantley finds pleasure in the play as "an extended bit of intellectual vaudeville," and yet finds that this pleasure quickly "wears thin" ("Iago's Subterfuge" C20). In his review of this same production for *New York* magazine, John Simon reveals more about his literary and dramatic tastes, rather than the play itself. His review suggests two things: his belief in the originality and sanctity of canonical texts, and his belief that female promiscuity is deserving of punishment. He positions *Desdemona* as the genre of play "that parasitically lays its eggs in the host body of a classic" (78), which in this case, is "a play about the profoundest of human emotions" (78). Simon concludes his review by summarizing, "You might say this Desdemona is her own best Iago and deserves what she will get" (79). *The Globe and Mail*'s Kate Taylor is even more explicit in her suggestion that Vogel's play actually works to justify Othello's actions by making Desdemona thoroughly unlikable. Taylor describes the character of Desdemona in a 2002 Toronto

production of Vogel's play as "too self-absorbed to raise much interest in others. Indeed, she is so obnoxious, you'll be longing for that brute with a pillow" (R12). If these critics are looking for empathetic characters, then Vogel's play will indeed disappoint. But for those receptive to a deconstruction of the ideology underlying female sexuality, both in Shakespeare's play and within the broader history of western culture, then Vogel's play offers a series of sketches that enact this history. Clifford A. Ridley praised a Philadelphia production of *Desdemona*, calling the play, "a fine piece of work, both a consistently lively entertainment and a wickedly satiric rumination on the selectivity of storytelling" (D09). Indeed, in its humorous reversals, Vogel's play speaks volumes about the processes of selection, distribution, and assimilation that go into formulating traditional canonical and historical narratives.

In the relationship between Desdemona, Bianca, and Emilia, we see Vogel's burlesque dramaturgy as a form of feminist camp. As the signifiers of whoredom and prostitution circulate among the women, each establishes her position in relation to these male-defined terms of female sexuality. Pamela Robertson argues, "prostitution is the hidden threat behind feminist camp" (84). Perhaps another way of putting this is to say that prostitution is the wink of feminist camp, its knowing gesture. The prostitute signifies the explicit expression and commodification of female sexuality, while flaunting the secretive threat of promiscuity and its potential profits in all constructions of femininity. Linking the figure of the gold digger to both the prostitute and the showgirl, Robertson contends, "feminist camp is a sensibility that is particularly attuned to historically determined attitudes toward women and work and that the comic gold digger is to feminist camp what the dandy is to gay camp—its original personification, its defining

voice" (58). Just as the dandy signifies the possibility that femininity can be embodied and performed by men, the prostitute embodies the possibility that an active, opportunistic sexuality, which in western culture is coded as masculine, can be performed and embodied by a woman. As Robertson contends, "the tropes of prostitution and gold-digging . . . create feminist camp effects that speak to a working-class women's sensibility" (84). Indeed, it is this linkage, I would argue, between economic autonomy and an active female sexuality that feminist camp—and burlesque—articulates its most threatening critique.

If the prostitute is the "hidden threat" behind feminist camp, then her theatrical counterpart—the stripteaser—is the not-so hidden threat of burlesque. Explaining the social and semantic connections between striptease and prostitution, Becki Ross writes, "striptease was not prostitution, but near it; it was not pornography, but near it; it was not consummated sex, but near it. And therein lay its enduring genius for tapping collective anxieties about gender sexuality, class mobility, and racial difference" (223). It is in the sexualized spectacle of striptease that the aesthetics of feminist camp and the history of burlesque converge. Moreover, this gets at a fundamental distinction between gay camp and burlesque: the eroticisation of the female body. While camp emphasizes masquerade, parody, and theatricality, it evades the eroticism encoded in the female body that burlesque exploits. It is precisely this sexualization of the female body that Vogel's plays bring center stage, using a performative burlesque to position her as a speaking subject and unravel the connotations that her body carries with it onto the stage.

Taking the audience behind the scenes of Shakespeare's play, and by extension a dramatic canon that relegates female characters to subordinate roles, Vogel's *Desdemona*

lets the female characters tell their side of the story, a story that might make Meg blush, but that would make the women of *The Oldest Profession* nod in recognition. If *Desdemona* presents a divisive female homosocial defined through class and sexual competition, her next play, *The Oldest Profession*, offers a more congenial female homosocial that suggests the possibility of community, though not a community without conflict. If the play-world of *Desdemona* is defined by the patriarchal ideologies found in Shakespeare's play, then the play-world of *Oldest Profession* is defined by the political and economic climate of the Reagan era.

From Metaphysical Musings to Embodied Economics: *Duck Variations* and *The Oldest Profession*

> **Maudie**: You'd make thousands in my business.
>
> **Miss Jellyman:** Your business?! . . . I recognize that your business had been a great factor in the building of civilization. And of course it has protected our *good* women, and thereby preserved the sanctity of the home. And there were such women as Cleopatra. . . . But me, dearie, don't you think I'm just a little old?
>
> **Maudie**: Hey, what kind of business do you think I'm in? . . . Why, I got a chain of beauty parlors.
>
> Mae West and Alison Skipworth in *Night After Night* (1932)

> Ursula, you're a whore with the soul of a businesswoman. And I'm a businesswoman with the soul of a whore.
>
> Mae in *The Oldest Profession*

> When the secrets of the age were clear to him he took it like a man, which is to say as one who had no choice.
>
> David Mamet, "All Men are Whores: An Inquiry"

First performed in 1977, David Mamet's "All Men are Whores: An Inquiry" is written in seventeen short scenes, mini-monologues of the three characters, Kevin, Sam, and Patti, who each offer explicit and often esoteric social commentaries directly to the audience. The above quotation is Sam's take on the state of men in the late 1970s. Two

scenes later, he states, “I like a nice ass. I like a nice ass and legs. *(Pause).* The ass is the top of the legs” (188). In between these two short reflections from Sam, we hear Patti relate her partner’s fantasy of finding her beaten by an unknown man, a man that he then brutally kills in her defense. This is, she says, “Because he thought of me with great affection still” (187). These three vignettes trace a connection between philosophy and misogyny, both of which are traditionally male-constructed discourses. While the above quotations from Mae West’s *Night After Night* and Vogel’s *Oldest Profession* suggest the connections between whoredom and economics, *All Men are Whores* invokes the term to describe men who, after feminism complicated the organization of social and political power, have lost the privilege to act, do, and speak with unquestioned authority. Women who are whores are exercising their choice within a social and economic system that places monetary value on their bodies, while men who are whores have lost their capacity to choose how this system is organized. In “All Men are Whores” as well as in his earlier companion plays, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* and *The Duck Variations*, Mamet creates male characters who oscillate seamlessly between misogynistic and philosophical discourses, as they attempt discursively to revive a sense of agency and certainty in a social world changed by feminism, Stonewall, and the Civil Rights movement. Conversely, the female characters in Vogel’s *Oldest Profession* oscillate between nostalgic and economic discourses, both of which are attempts to regain a sense of community and security in a social world turned hostile by capitalist self-interest.

Mamet’s work in the 1970s and 80s vividly, provocatively, and often humorously articulates a heteronormative world gone awry. In *Some Freaks*, Mamet writes:

> For the true nature of the world, as between men and women, is sex, and any other relationship between us is either an elaboration, or an avoidance. And the true

> nature of the world, as between men, is, I think, community of effort directed towards the outside world, directed to subdue, to understand, or to wonder or to withstand together, the truth of the world. (90-91)

This definition of heterosexual and homosocial relations is remarkably rigid in its stark gender divisions and arrogant in its declaration that it is men who gather together to contemplate and "withstand . . . the true nature of the world." *In Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick restates her earlier definition of homosocial bonds as forming "a cultural system in which male-male desire became widely intelligible primarily by being routed through triangular relations involving women" (15). Sedgwick points out that far from becoming obsolete, "the inflictions of this system … have only become adapted and subtilized" (15). The gender relations that Mamet outlines above are produced from within a male-defined social world and symbolic order, which depends on the stability of these binary categories of gender and sexuality. However, Mamet's drama, and his nonfiction, speaks so resoundingly because he lays bare some of the most pervasive and habituated heterosexual gender traits with both a pithy accuracy and a deeply embedded sexism. Recalling the relationships in *Desdemona*, Mamet writes, "women do not, on the whole, get *along* with women", and when they socialize, they generally "indulge in the … intrafemale activities of invidious comparison, secrecy, and stealth" (*Some Freaks* 86). Mamet is unique in his willingness to engage openly with his conflicting feelings toward women, in general, and feminism, in particular. Mamet points to the women's liberation movement for "turning my head around a lot" (Fraser 7). Describing the effects of feminism on American culture, Mamet writes, "our society has fallen apart and *nobody* knows what he or she should be doing" (22).

The production and reception of his plays, I would suggest, participates in the subtilization of male homosocial power, as critics, excited by his theatrical depictions of male social and symbolic power struggles, are eager to embrace his relevance and yet not required to examine the system in which these relations are produced. Mamet is unique in his ability to both fit seamlessly into an established dramatic tradition and to forge into new territory, through his provocative depictions of gender and his contemporary use of language. By 1976, he had already positioned himself within a male dramatic tradition in a *New York Times* article, stating, "I'd like to write a really good play sometime: Like O'Neill, Odets, Chekhov, something the way it really is, capture the action of the way things go on" (Fraser 7). In a 1977 *New York Times* article discussing four new, exciting young playwrights, including Mamet, the authors signal to the immediate forefather of these four writers: "Mr. Shepard is already something of a model for these younger playwrights" (Gussow and Mitchell 9).[26] Mamet's play *American Buffalo* (1975) was about to hit Broadway, a play that moved him to national prominence.

But the 1980s was the decade that Mamet found fame in theatre and film as "the bard of modern immorality."[27] After his success with *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983), Mamet was positioned within a firmly established tradition. In 1985, Samuel G. Freedman classifies Mamet's drama in the following terms:

> Mamet employs Aristotle's rules of drama to write about petty thieves and sleazy salesmen. He composes free verse out of grunts, sighs, obscenities and sentence fragments. In both his stark writing style and his fascination with the male tribe . . . Mamet resembles Ernest Hemingway more, perhaps, than any writer of his generation. (SM 32)

[26] The other three playwrights are Michael Christofer, Christopher Durang, and Albert Innaurato.
[27] This description is from the title of Benedict Nightingale's *New York Times* article on Mamet, "Is Mamet the Bard of Modern Immorality?" April 1, 1984.

Freedman here places Mamet within a classic tradition that works to unquestioningly legitimize male authorial power, both for the writer and the critic praising him. Mamet argues, "I think the purpose of theatre, as Stanislavski said, is to bring to the stage the life of the soul. That may or may not make people more in touch with what's happening around them and may or may not make them better citizens" (Interview with Savran 136). Employing the quasi-religious concept of the soul and linking it to an optional and accidental social conscience, Mamet firmly positions himself as a rising star in the canon of American drama.

This consecration of Mamet, along with other "young angry men" playwrights of the 1970s and 80s is significant, since it was also a decade that saw an unprecedented number of women playwrights and, in the eighties, Pulitzer Prize-winning playwrights—Beth Henley for *Crimes of the Heart* in 1981, Marsha Norman for *'night Mother* in 1983, and Wendy Wasserstein for *The Heidi Chronicles* in 1989. Popular critics debated about the canonical merit of these plays, while feminist critics, notably Jill Dolan, Helene Keyssar, and Sue-Ellen Case, criticized them for using representational forms (namely, realism) that upheld patriarchal ideologies and, as such, were counter to feminist goals of forging a non-realist tradition of strong and empowered female voices in theatre. As Jill Dolan argues, the canonization of Marsha Norman's play was a deliberate process of ensuring that it abided by a set of predetermined rules, the first of which is that

> a play must conform to the rule of universality by transcending the historical moment and speaking to a generic spectator. . . . For *'night Mother* to be inserted in the canon, it should not substantially threaten the canon's economic imperatives in the context of late capitalism and twentieth-century Broadway play production, it also had to generate institutional recognition that would make it viable as a profitmaking product. (*Feminist Spectator* 20)

These remain the rules governing play production and canonization, defined for and by male critics and writers. And since women writers and performers do not signify as universal nor are they proven moneymakers, they are not often canonized.

Sexual Perversity in Chicago, first produced in 1974, and *The Duck Variations*, first produced in 1972, were performed together on a double bill at New York's St. Clement's Theatre in the fall of 1975, moving to the Cherry Lane Theatre in 1976. I want to suggest that these plays, written during the same period, produced together, and published together, are best understood as companion plays. Bigsby describes *Variations* as a play that "consists of an inconsequential dialogue between two old men. . . . They are conversation pieces. There is no movement, no plot except the unraveling of character" (*Modern* 211). Bigsby describes *Sexual Perversity* also as "a conversation piece" comprised of "a series of short, rapidly presented scenes" (211). Indeed, these two plays can be read as two phases of the life of the America male, two perspectives on male relationships, and two ways of telling stories. While *Variations* is a piece about perception, storytelling, and philosophical reflection, *Sexual Perversity* is a play about lurid looking, outrageous fantasies, and the social fallout of the 1970s women's movement. I want mainly to draw the perhaps not so obvious connection between the misogynist dialogue between the two young men in *Sexual Perversity* and the metaphysical musings of the two elderly men in *Duck Variations*, suggesting that these exchanges are two versions of the same story, one rooted in the history and language of philosophy, and the other rooted in the contemporary language of popular culture, with each working to legitimize the other.

Variations is a two-character play told in a series of often humorous exchanges between Emil Varěc and George S. Aronovitz, "Two gentlemen in their sixties" (Mamet, *Duck* 73). Each variation focuses on a specific theme, each rooted in reflections of the life cycles of ducks. If one were to compare the respective set descriptions of *Oldest Profession* and *Duck Variations*, the plays would seem to two versions of the same play. Just as Vogel's women sit and stay on a bench in an urban setting, so too do Emil and George take their place on a set described as consisting "of a park bench and perhaps a wire garbage can" in "A Park on the edge of a Big City on a Lake" (73). Although the Big City is easily decoded as Chicago, it is significant that Mamet's play assumes a kind of archetypal Time and Place, while Vogel consciously situates her characters within a specific time and place in American history. The men in Mamet's play enjoy the privilege of detachment from the world on which they reflect, as they pass the time mock-philosophizing about the relationship among ducks, between nature and culture, and among men.

The second variation of Mamet's play describes the relationship between the "hereditary Enemy of the Duck . . . the Blue Heron" (82). The scene is introduced by George's point that "You know, the duck's life is not all hearts and flowers. He's got worries too. He's got fleas and lice and diseases of the body. Delusions. Wing problems. Sexual difficulties. Many things" (82). Here, we get the sense that we are hearing an analogy for men's relationships with women, the Blue Herons of the bird world (the "her" of herons perhaps needs no emphasis). The antagonist relationship between these two species of birds remains a mystery to Emil and George, in much the same way as it does with Bernie and Danny. George ends the variation by concluding, "this much we *do*

know. As long as the duck exists, he will battle day and night, sick and well with the Heron, for so it is writ. And as long as the sky is made dark with the wing of the Monster Bird, the Heron will feast on duck" (83). This is both a universalization and naturalization of dysfunctional heterosexual relations, relations that are defined exclusively through the stories men tell one another.

Many of the exchanges between Emil and George are comic in their combination of high diction and colloquialisms, valid arguments and non sequiturs. Indeed, many of their exchanges seem straight out of a vaudeville sketch. For instance, in their reflections on companionship, Emil says, "No man is an Island to himself" to which George adds, "Or to anyone else" (Mamet, *Variations* 98). Or, in their discussion of the meanings of a duck's life, Emil tells George, "With your talk of nature and the duck and death. Morbid useless talk. You know, it is a good thing to be perceptive, but you shouldn't let it get in the way" to which George replies, "And that is the point I was trying to make" (96). While Bernie and Danny mimic the misogyny of strip club spectatorship, Emil and George perform the more middle-class role of vaudeville entertainers, mixed with a dash of classical debate techniques. The exchanges between Emil and George are part of a tradition of male-centered comic and philosophical dialogues, from the Marx Brothers and Samuel Beckett to, as Philip C. Kolin argues, Socratic dialogue. Within this tradition, Emil and George are able to distance themselves from the material world, while constructing the stories that history transforms into knowledge.

Mamet and his play fit easily within the dramatic and humanist tradition. Kolin describes *Variations* as "a slender masterpiece of American theatre" (21), noting that since he "has been powerfully influenced by intellectual texts, . . . [i]t is not surprising,

therefore, to find echoes of Greek philosophical thought embedded in Mamet's work" (22). Deborah R. Geis argues that the characters in *Variations* "evoke an image of the chorus figures in Greek dramas" ("David Mamet" 51). And Matthew C. Roudané suggests that the play's setting "capture[s] both Aristotelian unity and contemporary environments" (23). Further positioning both the play and Mamet within the canonical tradition, and indeed describing his plays in semi-divine terms, Dennis Caroll describes the play as one of Mamet's "Apollonian works" (70), and points out its similarity to *Waiting for Godot* in both tone and philosophical subtext (71). In a somewhat less exalting tone, Bigsby writes, "At the heart of all of Mamet's plays are story-tellers whose stories shape their world into something more than random experience, decay, and inconsequence" (*Modern* 210). Stories offer, Bigsby points out, "imaginative control over our experience" (210), and they also offer the opportunities to fabricate images of the past and future. As Walter Benjamin writes, "The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out" (*Illuminations* 87). In their frantic and fragmented dialogue, Mamet's characters seem to be attempting to resuscitate and reconstruct the pieces of a once more stable and clearly defined social world. Weaving stories that they hope will be taken for cultural truths, Mamet's characters situate themselves within a long tradition of male discourse. And as Danny says in *Sexual Perversity*, "So just let me tell my story, okay?" (53).

Sexual Perversity is a play that pits men and women at extreme odds, with each woefully misunderstanding the other amidst the changes effected by the feminist movement. Mamet describes the play as about "the myths that men go through" (Fraser 7). There are four characters: best friends Bernie and Danny and best friends Joan and

Deborah. Bernie, who is deluded by misogynist fantasies that he constructs and recreates in the stories he weaves for Danny, alternates between being turned on, enraged, and disgusted by the sexual permissiveness of "liberated" women. Danny, his best friend, is the more likable version of the man baffled by the changes that feminism brought about, who just admits to being confused and frustrated, not knowing what women really think or want. Deborah (likeably liberal) and Joan (more radical) are their female counterparts. While Danny and Deborah date, have sex, move in together, and then bitterly separate, Joan and Bernie watch with barely concealed delight.

Sexual Perversity evokes an era in which extreme polarization—of men and women, left and right—was beginning to take effect, only to be consolidated by the 1980s. Susan Faludi describes the backlash toward feminism that pervaded American culture in the 1980s, stating that it began "in the late 70s on the fringes, among the evangelical right. By the early 80s, the fundamentalist ideology had shouldered its way into the White House. By the mid-80s, as resistance to women's right's acquired political and social acceptability, it passed into popular culture" (xix). Later in her study, she singles out David Mamet's work in film, specifically *House of Games* (1987), as an example of this backlash (135-136). Indeed, Mamet's work registers the gender confusions and antagonisms of the 1970s and 80s perhaps more vividly than any other playwright.

Joan articulates Mamet's version of the conflicted voice of feminism in the early 1970s:

> Our efforts to come to grips with ourselves … in an attempt to become more human…. It has to do with an increased ability to recognize *clues* … and the control of energy in terms of *lust*…. and *desire*… But a finite puzzle. Whose true solution lies, perhaps, in transcending the rules themselves… (*Pause*.)… and pounding of the fucking pieces into places where they DO NOT FIT AT ALL. (37; ellipsis in original)

Joan expresses the confusions that feminism unleashed in women as well as men, when the choices made available to women perhaps seemed more daunting than liberating. What Joan is cryptically articulating is Mamet's sense that maybe women themselves did not feel comfortable with the changes feminism wrought. Compare to Bernie, the antifeminist:

> I mean what the fuck, a guy wants to get it on with some broad on a more or less stable basis, who is to say him no. (*Pause*.) A lot of these broads, you know, you just don't know. You know? … I mean young women in today's society… time she's twenty two-three. You don't know *where* the fuck she's been. (39)

And:

> Equal Rights Amendment? I'll give you fucking Equal Rights Amendment. … We got baby seals dying in Alaska and we're writing amendments for *broads*? (50)

And:

> With tits like that, who needs … anything. (69; all ellipses in original)

The above quotations exemplify Mamet's ability to rigidly construct gender distinctions in the language and diction of his characters. The lines between men and women are always clearly drawn. Indeed, the dialogue between Bernie and Danny is not unlike dialogue that one might hear in a strip club. As Pierre Bourdieu writes in *Masculine Domination*, men perform "manliness in front of and for other men and against femininity, in a kind of fear of the *female*" (53). This fear is negotiated by men in strip clubs, Bourdieu argues, through a kind of "frantic investment" in misogyny that defends and upholds their masculinity, thereby assuring their symbolic and political membership among "real men" (51-2).

The performance of masculinity in strip clubs comes out of the history of burlesque. By the turn of the twentieth century, as Allen points out, "burlesque had become a show

business industry whose success was based on catering to the audience that first the legitimate theatre and then vaudeville had excorporated: white working- and lower-middle-class males who continued to seek commercial entertainment apart from women and their families" (192). This "isolation of the burlesque form" produced a profitable yet marginal theatrical industry, far away from "the bourgeois mainstream of American theatre and culture" (193). This cultural marginalization produced a social space in which gender roles became increasingly rigid and polarized. Here, male spectators consumed a sexualized female spectacle, reifying this relationship as part of normative heterosexuality. The isolation of burlesque, moreover, ensured that the women on stage remain separate from the women at home. Fantasy and reality, here, work to distinguish the boundaries between a commodified femininity and a domesticated femininity, which thereby preserves their specific male-defined social functions.

Before telling Danny a horrifying tale involving a King of Egypt, which ends with him whacking a woman "on the forehead with a ball-peen hammer" (35) just as she is about to reach orgasm, Bernie invokes the Greek tradition to legitimize the story and the violently misogynistic fantasy it conveys. When Danny admits to not knowing of this kinky Egyptian King, Bernie tells him to "Read your history. The Ancient Greeks" (33). This exchange crystallizes the connections between the stories men tell one another, their cultural truth-value, and the history from which they derive their truth-value. Moreover, Bernie's reference to the Greeks points to the performative aspects of storytelling; his invocation and citation (or mis-citation) of the authority of ancient tradition legitimizes the story he tells. Thus, his delusional fantasy gets rewritten here as history of heteronormative relations.

As a final juxtaposition which suggests the dialectical relationship between these two plays, compare the final scene of *Sexual Perversity*, in which Danny and Bernie lie on a beach and watch women go by, to first variation of *Duck Variations.* On the beach, Bernie and Danny examine and dissect the bodies of the passing women, first gazing at a woman they find sexually attractive, and next seeing a woman whose overtly sexual display angers them:

> BERNIE: *Lookit* this.
> DANNY: Where?
> BERNIE: I see no reason to go on living.
> ……
> There can be no more to life.
> DANNY: Yes.
> BERNIE: In a way it's sad. To think I gaze upon the highest a man can wish for (62)

Moments later:

> BERNIE: Fuckin' *lookit* her.
> DANNY: I know it.
> BERNIE: Tell me she's not flaunting herself all over the beach.
> …….
> DANNY: Bern…Bernie…I think I can see her snatch.
> BERNIE: You're fulla shit.
> DANNY: On my honor, I can see her fucking snatch.
> ……
> BERNIE: Where does she get off with that noise?
> DANNY: I know.
> BERNIE: That fuckin' pisses me off.
> DANNY: I know.
> BERNIE: Piss.
> DANNY: Cockteaser.
> BERNIE: Prissy little cunt. (64-65; second ellipsis in original)

This blatant example of a pornographic male gaze that simultaneously exalts and degrades the female body is almost absurd in its hyperbole. As Joan Copjec points out in relation to film, the gaze "marks the subject's *culpability*. The gaze stands watch over the *inculpation*—the faulting, splitting—of the subject by the apparatus" (65). While theatre

differs from film crucially in that the theatrical apparatus does not control or direct the spectator's gaze in the same way that film does, the audience inevitably participates in Bernie and Danny's voyeurism, if only discursively, since the women they are splitting into idealized/degraded sexual objects do not appear on stage. Thus, the gaze becomes a function of language. The play ends with the men venturing a "Hi" and "Hello there" (69) to a passing woman, only to be ignored. Significantly, the final line of the play is Danny's response to their disregarded sexual advances: "Deaf *bitch*" (69). With their gaze rendered impotent, their only defense is to imagine that the object of their gaze is simply unable to comprehend its discursive power.

The pornographic gaze of Bernie and Danny is, I would suggest, translated in *The Duck Variations* as the everyday reflections of two older gentlemen. The latter play is, perhaps, meant to redeem, legitimize, or soften the former. The first variation has Emil and George staring out onto the lake, watching the boats:

> EMIL: Look at *her* will ya!
> GEORGE: That?
> EMIL: What else? Go, sister?
> GEORGE: That?
> EMIL: Sure as shootin'.
> GEORGE: That's the water pump.
> ……..
> EMIL: She's the water pump?
> GEORGE: Yes.
> EMIL: Look at her float.
> GEORGE: Yes.
> EMIL: … look at her float.
> GEORGE: Mmm.
> EMIL: Look at her…just sit there.
> (77-78; original ellipsis)

Juxtaposing these two exchanges, published and produced back-to-back, I would suggest that the trash talk of Bernie and Danny and the reflective philosophizing of Emil and

George are dialectical counterparts. Philosophy, here, obscures misogyny, while women operate as the decoy. Both trash talk and philosophical debate are recognized styles of storytelling within a western, masculine tradition, from Plato to Tarantino. The dialogue in *Variations* is an aged version of the raw dialogue in *Sexual Perversity*. The mock-philosophy of Emil and George acts as a quaint and comic counterpart to the misogyny of Danny and Bernie. And both modes of discourse involve the privilege and power of looking, an act that positions the observer as the subject who objectifies the observed.

Variations ends with Emil and George recalling the "Ancient Greeks" who "used to sit around all day looking at birds" (124). As they both identify themselves with and distance themselves from their ancestors, George comments, "A crumbling civilization and they're out in the Park looking at birds," while Emil replies, "These were Ancient Greeks. Old. Old men. Incapable of working. Of no use to their society. Just used to watch the birds all day . . . Greeks. Birds" (124). With a hint of nostalgia, tinged with bathos, Emil concludes the play:

> Watching each other.
> Each with something to contribute.
> That the world might turn another day.
> A fitting end.
> To some very noble creatures of the sky.
> And a lotta Greeks. (125)

As the only explicit historical and cultural reference, this final reflection falls just short of self-reflection and operates more as a parody of history and tradition. And yet, even in this parodic voice, the play affirms its place with the very tradition it mocks.

In his review of the two plays, Mel Gussow simultaneously praises the plays, and ushers in Mamet as "a talented new playwright" whose plays bring "a welcome gust of laughter from Chicago" (15). Gussow describes *Sexual Perversity* as a play "about male

and female bondings" and the "mating habits of young people today—which seem not so different from the mating habits of young people any day" (15). By making these sexist heterosexual relations timeless, Gussow also naturalizes them. The relationships are, in fact, vividly situated in an era of second wave feminism, and thus not universal "mating habit of young people nay day." He describes *Variations* a play that, while it "goes on a bit too long" is also full of comedic moments with "Second City flavor" (15). Gussow describes Emil and George as "Like two vaudeville clowns, they sway tall tales and trade pseudosagacities" (15). Carla McDonough situates Mamet's plays within the broader context of the social changes incited by feminism. She argues, "Mamet's drama addresses the confusion felt by men such as himself who no longer know where they stand in a patriarchy that is under revision" ("Every Fear" 196). Indeed, she argues, "Mamet's characters ultimately seem to be suffering under an identity crisis which they cannot name. They are supposed to be the empowered few in a system that oppresses others, yet they, too, find themselves oppressed" (205). This is an apt description of Mamet's depictions of masculine crisis, which have remained relevant from the 1970s and into the twenty-first century. It is a crisis that has taken many forms of expression, from the plays and films of Sam Shepard to films of David Fincher and Quentin Tarantino. Yet, at what point will women's experiences be considered as critical as those of men? In *The Oldest Profession*, Vogel depicts a distinct crisis in the lives of five elderly women, as they negotiate their way through a social and economic system that does not recognize their value, either as senior citizens (who are assumed to be both sexually and socially nonproductive) or as sex workers (who are productive sexually but degraded socially).

Profession is situated within a particular cultural moment in American culture and politics, which the "Time and Place" of the play states is "A Sunny day shortly after the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980" (Vogel, *Profession* 130). In his introduction to Vogel's plays, David Savran describes *Profession* as a play that "looks back to a time when there was a palpable connection between people and both the work they performed and the things they consumed" ("Loose Screws" xv). References to Reaganomics abound in *Profession,* and thus in retrospect, it is very much a history play, a play situated in the context of 1980s America. David Krasner points out, "the 1980s . . . saw the AIDS epidemic, the Reagan administration, and continuing obstacles to minority participation in the economy. The anarchy and liberation of the 1960s gave way to rampant individualism and acquisitiveness even within the most liberal segments of society" (101). And as James T. Patterson writes, "The legacy of the 1960s was the 'culture wars' of the 1980s, when the left and right fought over the legacies of the 60s social movements" (254). It was during the 1980s that the right and left polarized, and American theatre became cautiously conservative, not wanting to risk commercial profit for the sake of political controversy.

The 1980s were a divisive period in which the social values and economic structure of the nation were be contested, reorganized, and debated. James Patterson points out the doubling of divorce rates in the 1980s, which coincided with the reassertion of the values of family and home life on the political right. As conservatives invoked and reasserted the values of the 1950s, "Liberals shot back at what they considered the aggressiveness and intolerance of the Religious Right" (Patterson 260). This period also saw the socio-economic phenomenon referred to as "the feminization of poverty." Patterson explains,

"The 'feminization of poverty' was an abstract way of saying that families headed by women were three times as likely to be poor as those headed by married couples" (50). Conservatives in the 1980s "deplored America's high rates of out-of-wedlock pregnancy, divorce, and abortion" and nostalgically yearned for the more "decorous days of the 1950s" (260). Approaching the feminization of poverty from another angle, Vogel suggests the implications of conservative tactics on single, senior women.

Profession was first produced professionally by Theatre Network in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, in April 1988, then at 25th Street Theatre in Saskatoon, Canada. The play's next full production came in 1991, at Company One in Hartford, Connecticut. By the time of its 2004 Signature Theatre production in New York City, *Profession* had become a history play, set during the first four years of Reagan's reign and investigating its effects on the lives of five elderly prostitutes. Here, in Vogel's play, the Life is presented as a familiar aspect of American life, and as such vulnerable to economic and political changes. Vogel's play underscores the material affects of these changes on the bodies of women, women who until this era, had relied on their bodies for their livelihood.

Vogel reveals her three impetuses for *Profession*, as a desire "to do something with repetitive form," a tribute to her "grandmother [who] suffered a heart attack the fall before I wrote it," and a response to "Mamet's *Duck Variations*" (qtd in Bigsby, *Contemporary* 301). *Profession* historicizes Mamet's *Variations*, and offers the perspectives of five elderly women, who work as prostitutes on New York City's Upper West Side. Mamet's two elderly gentlemen, reflecting philosophically on the mating habits and life patterns of ducks, become in Vogel's play, five women's strategies for

survival in a society that does not recognize them or their work as valuable. Since they cannot take for granted that they are part of the metaphysical tradition, they must concern themselves with the physical, which means both suffering and sensual pleasure, conflict and community. In Vogel's play, death is not a philosophical topic, but rather a looming physical inevitability, and unseen event that takes place between almost every scene of the play. In this sense, the play's subtitle: *A Full-Length Play in Six Black-outs* suggests that form, here, is content. From Plato to Beckett to Mamet, *Profession* responds to the metaphysical dialogue and historical disinterestedness of male characters, characters who seem simultaneously detached from their social context and unquestioningly part of an historical tradition that defines them and that they define.

In *Profession*, Vogel works a kind of double defamiliarization: She defamiliarizes the sexuality of older women by making it perfectly ordinary, part of the everyday scene. Simultaneously, she defamiliarizes prostitution by making it homey, nurturing, and loving. In *Profession*, the women's increasing social invisibility produces a play that effects a kind of emotional burlesque, as the characters' vulnerability and their nostalgic recollections of the past work together to create a dialectical image of crisis in American social history. *Oldest Profession* performs a nostalgic burlesque, one that both evokes and mimics a past that is as real and familiar as the stories the women tell each other.

The repetitive form of *Profession* recalls the stasis and humor of the absurdists. However, what becomes immediately apparent is that these women are part of the chaotic flux of history. Moreover, while the aburdists typically take the male as representative of the universal subject-in-crisis who requires no individuation or explicit contextualization, Vogel's characters are vividly contextualized and characterized. Vera, the character

modeled after Vogel's grandmother, is "The youngest, 72. Loves the sun"; Edna, 74, is "A good time girl. Best Friend of Vera. Loves her work"; Ursula, 79, is "Germanic, bossy, set and determined Believes in rules, promotion, work ethic"; Mae, who was the Madam of Storeyville and now acts as the group's CEO, is described as "83. A self-made woman" (Vogel, *Profession* 130). As a fiscal conservative and quasi-Reaganite, Ursula is the most pragmatic of the bunch, arguing against Medicare and insisting, "Social Security has no place in a free market" (135). Lillian, however, believes the government owes her some support after "all my years of public service" (135). Vera comments on the rising cost of living in the city, and especially mourns the rising costs of her favorite foods at Mr. Zabar's. Mae is the most practical and the most nostalgic of the bunch. She seems the most out of place in this new economic climate. The women begin the play "sitting in the sun" on a "long bench on 72nd and Broadway, New York City" (131). The specificity of time and place contrasts with the deliberate vagueness of Mamet's *Duck Variations*. These women do not signify as universal subjects, and thus Vogel's strategy is to place them within a socially specific time and place, giving them distinctive characteristics that often conflict with the connotations of their grandmotherly bodies.

Throughout *Profession*, the Life is conveyed with feelings of nurturing and comfort, feelings that are undercut by the ruthless competition necessary for survival in an economic climate based on profit and self-interest. The play begins with Vera's description of her supper the night before, "a nice bit of lemon sole" (131), and these vivid evocations of the pleasures of eating punctuate the play as Vera remembers the foods her mother used to make. Not only does this create a homey, nostalgic feeling, but it also underscores that the memories of these women are rooted in sensual experience, in

their bodies. In their reminisces, we hear snippets of American social history, from the 1950s to the 1980s, such as their recollections of Mr. Jonathon, a former client who "was just so handsome in his gray flannel suit" and their complaints about the "Me Generation" and about cuts social services (134). In these opening scenes, we get a sense of character and context that is not yet reduced either to desexualized stereotypes of the grandmotherly old women or the nefarious subculture of prostitution. When we learn several minutes into the play that these women are prostitutes, we have already associated them with images of home cooking, past flames, social service cuts, and generational conflict. That is, they are vital and active parts of the larger political, economic, and social system. Vogel defamiliarizes their work and their age by withholding the particulars until these women are firmly situated within the larger social world of which we are all a part. It isn't until Mae takes out "a large, gleaming wicked hat pin" in order to defend their territory from the "Cheap amateur whores [who] don't know how to act like ladies" (138) that we realize that these five women are in the Life. This confrontation between the five older women, who spent their best days in a brothel in Storeyville, New Orleans, and the street prostitutes who threaten to take over their corner and their clientele suggests something of the larger effects of the history of industrialization on sex workers.

In his essay, "Central Park," Walter Benjamin writes:

> One of the *arcana* which has fallen to prostitution only with the development of the metropolis, is the masses. Prostitution opens up the possibility of a mythical communion with the masses. The rise of the masses is, however, simultaneous with that of mass-production. Prostitution at the same time appears to contain the possibility of surviving in a world (*Lebensraum*) in which the objects of our most intimate use have increasingly become mass-produced. In the prostitution of the metropolis the woman herself becomes an article that is mass-produced. (40)

Describing the destruction of the aura of the prostitute in mass-production, Benjamin suggests that the commodification of the prostitute "is indicated in the artificial disguise of the individual expression in favor of a professional one, such as is brought about by the application of make-up" (52-3), and in the commodified whore "the brothel never forms the background, as the street so often does" (53). Similarly, the women in *Profession* have been forced out of their brothel in Storeyville, which was closed down by the authorities, and onto the streets of an increasingly gentrified New York City. However, Benjamin suggests that the street prostitute holds the possibility of denaturalizing femininity, since the aura of a natural femininity will be destroyed by mass production. The obverse side of this mass production is the prostitute's alienation from her body and its labor. That is, unlike the work of art in the age of mass production, the work of prostitution involves a living person, the alienation of a living body.

The two generations of prostitutes that come face to face early in *Profession* bear interesting parallels to the "two different patterns of female impersonators" (7) that Esther Newton describes. The "stage" and "street" impersonators are differentiated by age, lifestyle, and "attitudes to basic life problems" (7). While "street" impersonators are generally younger, and do recorded acts, "stage" performers are older, and perform live. "Street performers are never offstage" and consider impersonation a lifestyle, while stage performers see their work "as a profession" (8). This ethnographic description of pre-Stonewall female impersonators in New York City draws an interesting parallel to Benjamin's commodified street prostitute versus the auratic brothel prostitute. Newton's description also connects in interesting ways with the younger generation of prostitutes in *Profession*, whom Mae describes as "Cheap amateur whores [who] don't know how to

act like ladies" (138). These "street" prostitutes offer a cultural counterpart to the "stage" prostitution that Mae and her gang perform. Indeed, in the interscene brothel-burlesque performances, the women bring back a by-gone era, an era that perhaps exists only in their memories and stories, an era in which their work was embraced as a "profession" and not disgraced as criminal. The interesting relationship between Newton's female impersonators, Benjamin's prostitutes in the age of mass production, and the women of *The Oldest Profession* is that they all underscore the ways in which economic and historical changes affect how female sexuality is performed, marketed, and consumed.

Mae, along with Vera, is the voice of nostalgia in the play, a nostalgia that registers the embodied effects of economic and social change. Nostalgia is evoked in the play as longing for a (mythic) time when prostitutes were part of the family life of the nation, and a (hoped for) time when senior citizens are not cast aside as unproductive and thus socially invisible members of society. Mae laments, "where's the pride in the name prostitute? It's all gone downhill since the government poked their nose in our business and booted out decent and self-respecting businesswomen out of Storeyville" (139). This outrage quickly becomes nostalgia, which here operates as a way of dealing with the pain of social alienation and displacement. Mae continues:

> Remember the house where we all first met? A spick-and-span establishment. The music from Professor Joe in the parlor; the men folk bathed, their hair combed back and dressed in their Sunday best, waiting downstairs happy and shy. We knew them all; knew their wives and kids too. . . . There was honor in the trade…My father went to Storeyville when I was a girl. Mother used to Miss Sophie in the street before Mass in the Quarter. (139; second ellipsis in original)

Here, prostitution is made familiar, a vital part of American culture and family life. The images and emotions evoked in this passage suggest importance and affective power of

memory, tradition, and community. Mae's memories of the brothel are full of the warmth and security associated with home.

From the Greek *nostos*, "return home," nostalgia is a personal and collective process through which memories are selected and reassembled to construct an experience and understanding of home. In his look back at the Reagan era, James E. Combs argues that the invocation of a nostalgic relationship to the past had a massively negative impact on the future of America. Combs states, "Reagan's covenant was with the past and not the future. Nostalgia expresses confidence in the past but not the future" (38). Arguing that "Ronald Reagan made nostalgia into a political art" (144) in his idealization of the 1950s, Combs adamantly states, "the ruling myth of the regime established by Reagan allowed no futuristic vision. Meanwhile, the process of history—the shift in global economics, the depletion of the environment, the atrophy of democracy and political participation at home—continued unabated since they were unrecognized" (145). By "exalting the model of the past, nostalgia makes it over into something that we may have lost. . . . Nostalgia politics is in that way a denial of history, and even more fundamentally, a denial of process" (145).

While there is much truth in what Combs is arguing, especially in the recognition of the political uses to which nostalgia can be put, there are other, more generative ways that nostalgia can be used, ways that do not necessarily obliterate the past, nor obscure any relationship to the future. Indeed, Combs's argument seems to rely on an understanding of history as linear, in which case his concern for a "denial of process" would be another way of saying that nostalgia is a denial of linear progress. Combs continues, "If popular narrative are fables of identity about paradise lost and regained, this American fable

suffers from the paradox of nostalgia. . . . The paradox of nostalgia is that is recreates an unstable past that serves only as a statement of faith and not of learning" (38). And yet, is the past ever stable? Is the past, when not tainted by nostalgia, always rooted in fact, and not faith? And can the past ever be remembered in its totality? Perhaps there are positive uses of nostalgia, particularly in the ways it can be used to revive a felt relationship to pieces of the past that have otherwise been omitted by the process of history.

In *The Future of Nostalgia,* Svetlana Boym offers a different perspective on nostalgia, one that assumes a dialectical relationship between past and present, individual and collective. She writes, "In my view, nostalgia remains an intermediary between collective and individual memory. Collective memory can be seen as a playground, not a graveyard of multiple individual recollections" (13). In this reversal of connotations attached to nostalgia, theatre becomes a forum for playing with memories, reassembling them to see what sorts of images of the past they might create. As "the work of memory" (xvi), nostalgia is productive force in the construction of national and individual identities. Boym describes nostalgia as a "longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but also a romance with one's own fantasy" (xiv). In this sense of displacement and loss, the theatre is an appropriate place to stage nostalgia. In an particularly apposite definition in relation to Vogel's theatre, Boym continues, "nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, of past and present, dream and everyday life" (xii). It is precisely this "double exposure" that Vogel's plays stage, and *Oldest Profession* does so through the dialectical oscillation between the women's memories of a friendlier, less disaffected past and their struggle to survive in an alienated political and economic

climate. As such, *Profession* revives storytelling as a cultural process of preservation, connection, and community. As Benjamin writes, "*Memory* is the chain of tradition which passes a happening down from generation to generation" (*Illuminations* 98).

Prostitution becomes, in Vogel's play, a metonym of different modes of production in American society, and the five women are the increasingly alienated labor force. Mae's method of handling the business reflects a socialist-minded sharing of income and expenses, which is countered by Ursula's capitalist belief in top-down organization, maximum profit, and increased productivity. Ursula suggests that, in order to remain competitive with the new breed of street prostitute, they should start advertising in the *Village Voice* to try to boost and diversify their clientele, a clientele that is quite literally dying out. She also insists on collecting payment—in cash—immediately after services are rendered; no more credit or exchange of goods ought to be allowed if the women expect to make a profit. Additionally, Ursula champions streamlining time spent with clients and increasing their price. She articulates her new business plan, stating, "We should up our fees. Change to a price list. . . . We have to increase the rate of turnover, and make the girls more time efficient. Lillian here stays in bed with Mr. Loman much too long" (Vogel, *Profession* 142). Echoing the national call to embrace fiscal conservativism, Ursula asserts, "Remember, President Reagan has called on all Americans to reduce the deficit, and to balance the budget. We can start here. . . . No more two hour lunches" (148). Mae argues that, rather than dehumanize their relationships with their clients and model their business on a rigid corporate structure, they should trim things like increases in their allowances. Mae even volunteers to go back to work, rather than making the others work longer hours. Becoming more and more

agitated with Mae's way of doing business, Ursula states, adamantly, "we're not going to stay in the Life, Mae, unless you stop living in the past! It's a New Age: We've got to get off our fannies and sell!" (141). Like the antagonistic female homosocial relationships in *Desdemona*, the women's relationships in *Profession* begin to fracture as they become increasingly alienated from the social and economic system in which they live and work.

Indeed, it is the women's very bodies and their labor that have become invisible and devalued in a 1980s free market economy, with its ethos of progress and its disdainful view of the past. When Ursula realizes that her "New Age" principles, a capitalist version of a spiritual self-help philosophy, are not espoused by the rest of the women, she remarks, "After all these years, to find out I've been working alongside communists," to which Vera responds, "We're not communist. We're…labor" (165; ellipsis in original). And yet, unfortunately, sex workers, including both prostitutes and strippers, are historically coded as abject bodies, rather than laboring bodies. As Ross states, "As long as striptease conjures up popular associations of worthless, diseased, lazy, drug-addicted, oversexed, and dangerous bodies, the erotic labour performed by dancers, past and present, will never be appreciated as labour" (Ross 246). Just as women, in general, have been historically reduced to matters of the body, prostitutes and strippers reinforce this reduction. As such, their labor, along with the labor of their counterparts, mothers and caregivers, is devalued, since it is naturalized as intrinsic to women's very ontology. Here, Vogel's intertextual reference to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is an important gesture toward including the oldest profession in the literary and social history of human labor.

One of Lillian's oldest clients is Mr. Loman, a gentleman who insists on paying in silk stockings and thinks America is still at war with Japan (145). While "*There is a respectful silence as the women realize that Mr. Loman has lost his marbles*" (145), Vogel gives a reverent nod to Arthur Miller's most well known tragic hero, suggesting the reality of literary history. Like *Desdemona*, *Profession* is, in relation to *Death of a Salesman*, a behind the scenes look at the story not told by these canonical texts. By staging these stories, Vogel begins to construct a literary history that includes the voices, memories, and stories of female characters. It is, of course, not insignificant that the women in *Profession* yearn for place called Storeyville, a place constructed through the stories they tell one another about the past. Like Vogel, looking for a place within the canonical tradition of male-centered narratives, Mae, Vera, Edna, Lillian, and Ursula long for a place where they are not alienated from their bodies and their labor.

Deborah R. Geis picks up on *Profession's* intertextual nod to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, writing, "Vogel's exploration of the politics of commodification draws explicit connections between Willy's failed career and the complex emotional trajectories of these women who have sold their bodies for a lifetime" ("In Willy Loman's Garden" 207). While Geis is right in drawing this connection, there is an implicit moralizing of prostitution in her suggestion that the women of *Profession* were forced into the Life and are therefore victims of a cruel capitalism. It is precisely this type of moralism that Vogel's play avoids. The women had many happy years selling their bodies; it is only in an era of deregulation and ruthless self-interest that they have become alienated from their clients, their work, and their own bodies. Indeed, this type of moralizing, as Mac Wellman points out, is a persistent aspect of American theatre, which confuses theatrical

emotion with "real feeling." He writes, "This confusion of emotionality and real feeling, encouraged by critics and academics and acting teachers especially, leads to (among other things) the true impossibility of an honestly pessimistic American play" (60). He goes on to suggest, "What is presentable on stage is defined by rules of decorum derived from our political denials: we do not have a race problem, the unemployed and poor are really deprived of opportunity, basically our society is a just and humane one" (61). This encourages a certain kind of moral attitude in the plays American theatre supports and produces. As Wellman puts it, "The American theatre wears a fixed smile suitable for all occasions, in all seasons" (61). And, so although Geis rightly states, "What is important here is that we get [*Death of a Salesman*] from the prostitute's point of view" (207), she insists that, "despite Mae's glowing account of the past, we can never get too far away from the notion that the prostitute's bodies are being bought and sold" (209). In this reading, moralism replaces a more far-reaching social and economic analysis of the systems that position these women—both because of their age and their profession—at the bottom of the social hierarchy, increasingly invisible and yet vulnerable and exposed.

Perhaps the most salient link between *Profession* and *Salesman* is the infusion of past into present. Bigsby points out that in Miller's play, "while past and present are causally connected (a narrative logic implying moral coherence) they are also consistent realities informing and deforming one another" (*Modern* 83). In Vogel's play, however, moral coherence is displaced by a ruthless economic system that does not recognize the value of human connection. The past is invoked in *Profession* nostalgically and, importantly, it is invoked as a history with women performing at the center of social life. While *Salesman* constructs a linear patrilineage, *Profession* constructs a matrilineage, with Vera's stories

operating as the embodied memory of a past filled with the simple pleasure of fresh raspberries and red beans and rice. During the course of the play, we watch these five women, sitting on a New York City bench, becoming increasingly alienated from society, from each other, and from a profession in which they have taken pride and pleasure.

In the 2004 Signature Theatre production (directed by David Esbjornson), after each blackout—and after the death of one of the women—the deceased member of the group performed a classic burlesque number as she took her place in that big brothel in the sky. In this highly effective theatrical juxtaposition, the inter-scene burlesque performances act as a transition between the blackouts that signal the death of one of the women and the everyday street scenes. Blurring lines between memory and history, theatre and everyday life, this production suggests the ways in which these orders of reality structure how culture is ordered and organized. As each woman takes her turn, removing her street clothes and revealing a sexy set of lingerie, she sings a classic number, such as Mae West's "I'm No Angel." Both Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* and David Rooney of *Daily Variety* commented on these burlesque interscene performances. Brantley describes the "bordello heaven of a red velvet piano parlor, where [the deceased women] sing lustily in the styles of Bessie Smith and Mae West" ("Portrait" E1), while Rooney describes the "bawdy, innuendo-laden" numbers "of the kind sung by Mae West or Sophie Tucker" (8). This juxtaposition of the historical trajectory of prostitution—from the bordello to the street—and the historical trajectory of burlesque—from popular stage to strip club—is an important part of the history female sexuality. Indeed, these liminal performances are as historically resonant as they are theatrically effective. One of the pivotal events in the history of burlesque was the Wales Padlock Bill of 1927, "which

would allow the [New York City] district attorney to padlock a theatre if it produced an 'indecent' production featuring 'sexual degeneracy' or 'sexual perversion'" (Shteir 106). While this bill initially "devastated burlesque" (107), striptease flourished on the cultural margins in the 1930s, a decade often referred to as the golden age of burlesque. It is this golden age—with its combination of nostalgia and social displacement—that the brothel interscenes, and the play as a whole, invoke. As each woman performs a striptease through which she transforms herself from an everyday prostitute to the classic burlesque performer, she enacts a nostalgic burlesque that is animated by the interposition of the everyday and fantasy, individual and collective memory, theatrical and historical representations of female sexuality. Joining Lillian in brothel heaven, singing, "Say, Mr. Fix-It Man," Mae says, "It's great to be back, Lillian. I am home." This line, which does not appear in the published text, affirms the longing for home in this play, a nostalgia intensified by the sense of crisis and urgency of the women's survival in 1980s America.

Although he describes Vogel as a "venturesome dramatist [who] provides a transforming theatrical wit, compassion and tolerance that keeps even queasy theatergoers hooked," Ben Brantley argues that, in Signature Theatre's production, "Form is uneasily dictating content" in this "draggy production" ("Portrait" E1). Reflecting on the sexualized seniors of *Profession*, Brantley seemed somewhat surprised that "even in panty-flashing bordello drag, none of these hookers comes across as mere jokes" but was disappointed that they were "given characters rather than constructs to play" (E1). And yet, realistic characterization is not Vogel's aim; the women in *Profession* are vibrantly drawn as commodified products of a culture within which they once acted as producers. David Rooney, however, stated, "the play doesn't add up to an

awful lot" (8). What does add up to a lot is that the play takes as a given that these five women are active and vital aspects of American culture, producers of the history and myths that animate the nation's economy and its identity, alongside the burlesque performers whose bodies have been similarly glorified, commodified, denigrated, and then largely forgotten.

By the 1980s, classic striptease, in the style of Tempest Storm, Ann Corio, and Gypsy Rose Lee, had died and, in its place, strippers performed totally nude on stage. Ann Corio and Tempest Storm decried the move toward explicit and unimaginatively performed nudity. In her nostalgic show, *This Was Burlesque*, which she took to New York City in 1970, Ann Corio refused her producers efforts to make her more comfortable with nudity, rejecting their suggestions to go see Kenneth Tynan's *Oh! Calcutta!* to see firsthand how ubiquitous it was in American culture. But she refused, and instead wore a sheer body stocking during her performances (Shteir 331). Tempest Storm also saw nude strippers as obscene, insisting, "I don't think pornography or obscenity serve anything. They certainly don't entertain" (qtd in Shtier 331). And yet, as Shteir writes, "By the end of the decade, though, she too was stripping nude" (331). In her study of striptease as a form of labor, Becki L Ross writes, "Members of the world's second oldest profession, ecdysiasts in the West continue to thread their way through the dichotomy that perniciously divides women into Madonnas or whores" (5). And the women in *Oldest Profession* weave these two female figures together into a story of nostalgia, vulnerability, and cultural crisis.

This sense of crisis was brought out in Signature Theatre's production by the insertion of specific references to Major Koch's attempts during the 1980s to "clean up" Times Square, which resulted in the displacement of many prostitutes and striptease clubs, and

the subsequent commercialization of the area. Vying for space in this competitive and commercial world, Mae yells at the "ally prostitutes," who are part of the "whore diaspora." She asks, "Where the hell is their pride? Where the hell is their ambition? This is America, where any girl can start in the ally and work her way up to Madam!"[28] Riffing on one of the most enduring promises of American capitalist culture, Mae interjects women and female sexuality into this national narrative of upward mobility. Perhaps the most disturbing sign of crisis comes when Mae starts to lose her memory, a detail added to the Signature Theatre production. Confessing to Vera that she's "losing it," Mae embodies a memory loss that acts as a microcosm of the nation's memory loss, and the "forgetting" of members of society who are old, ill, or otherwise marginalized. The most visible signals of crisis in this production are in the gradual decline of the women's physical appearances. Whereas at the beginning of the play, each women's identity is signaled through the style of her well-tailored suit, when Vera and Edna appear toward the end, they look dowdy and disheveled, a faded leopard print on Edna's boxy trench coat the only reminder of better times. Edna and Vera seem, at this point, frantic, considering looking for work at MacDonald's or getting married as a way out of their financial destitution. After the play's penultimate blackout, we see Vera, laying on the bench, alone and trying to shield herself from the elements with a worn-out trench coat and a newspaper. This image of total desolation, so common on urban streets, is jarring here, and deeply saddening. After listening to her recall her mother's red beans and rice, we now see Vera, skittish and desperate, digging through the garbage for a half-eaten sandwich. This stark image is juxtaposed with the rest of the women, still visible at the

[28] Again, these lines were added in the 2004 Signature Theatre production and do not appear in the published text.

side of the stage, singing "Sunny Side of the Street" from within the security of the brothel. This final dialectical image juxtaposes a mythic past with a desolate present. It is a dialectical image that mobilizes a nostalgic burlesque to expose the social vulnerability of two forgotten or discarded forms of labor—the prostitute and elderly women.

Vogel describes the difficulty is getting *Profession* produced, stating one case where Jon Jory of the Actor's Theatre of Louisville, which produced *Profession* in the 1980s, was "horrified and so shocked that I would have my grandmother as a prostitute . . . that he and I didn't work together again" (qtd in Bigsby, *Contemporary* 301). Interestingly, just as Vogel described her play as inspired by her grandmother, so too does Mamet describe *The Duck Variations* as inspired "from listening to a lot of old Jewish men all my life, particularly my grandfather" (qtd in Fraser 7). Vogel believes, "I think by and large women playwrights are not given the same leeway in terms of developing muscles that, say, the critics may give David Mamet" (Interview with Linden 257). When asked by Linda Winer, "As a woman, if there is one thing that you could do to change theatre today, what would it be?" Vogel responded, "I would ask artistic directors to read the scripts written by women as though they are every bit as universal as scripts by David Mamet" ("Women in Theatre"). At the same time, however, Vogel has stated, "I don't believe there's any such thing as the universal in theatre anymore" (Coen 2), apart from the collective sharing of the theatrical moment. In this sense, then, "universal" could be redefined as what Jill Dolan calls a "complex universal" that "doesn't insist on transcendent value but . . . sees itself as a moment in time, as progressive, partial, unfinished, and open" (*Utopia* 162). This complex universal is like the utopian performative, which Dolan theorizes as a particular "experience of performance, and the

intellectual, spiritual, and affective traces it leaves behind," which cultivates a sense of communal spectatorship and "can provide new frames of reference for how we see our future extending out from our more ordinary lives" (20).

Mamet's and Vogel's play-worlds offer two different visions of the volatile period of the 1970s and 1980s, as the women's movement and its subsequent backlash produced a polarized America and American theatre. While male playwrights, such as Mamet, Sam Shepard, and John Patrick Shanley, were critically praised, feminist playwrights were producing work on marginal stages. The three women to be produced on Broadway in the 1980s—Wasserstein, Henley, and Norman—were scrutinized by both popular and feminist critics, and ultimately positioned as "women's theatre," a label that crystallized the gender divide in American theatre. Vogel's three earliest plays, *Meg*, *Desdemona*, and *The Oldest Profession*, begin in the 1970s and 1980s, and yet found their largest audiences in the 1990s. That these plays did not find large audiences until many years later (or, in the case of *Meg*, not at all) suggests that they did not fit within the climate of gender polarization in the 1980s. Her play-worlds are not structured around binary categories, but dialectical relationships. These three plays express Vogel's conflicted engagement with a dramatic canon and a feminism that both inspires and excludes her. If *Meg* enacts a demythologization of literary history, then *Desdemona* moves toward a parody of gender and sexuality in the tradition of classic burlesque. In its foregrounding of the figure of the prostitute, *Profession* gestures toward an embodied American history, a history with women performing center stage. These plays offer a unique way of unraveling, revealing, and reinterpreting women's place in the dramatic canon, in the drama of American cultural history, and in the dramas enacted throughout the history of

the legitimate and burlesque stages. Writing part of that history, Rachel Shteir describes the shift in burlesque during the 1970s and 1980s:

> In the 1980s, in many American cities, the new generation of 'topless and bottomless' strip clubs flourished while the AIDS crisis made ordinary people more fearful of sex than they had been since the 1950s. The corresponding sexual counterrevolution would inspire Americans to be more cautious, even suspicious, of the 'liberation' of the previous two decades. And yet in 1980, when Tempest Storm, fifty-two, stripped at the Valley Forge Music Fair, she held up a crowd made up of men, women, and children. (335)

The women of *The Oldest Profession* find historical company on the same stage inhabited by Tempest Storm, while simultaneously talking back to the canonical texts of David Mamet and Arthur Miller.

Meg, *Desdemona*, and *The Oldest Profession* interrogate the conventions that govern traditional historical accounts, the dynamics of female relationships, and forgotten forms of female labor, which have often either been degraded or discarded. In the next chapter, the focus shifts toward social constructions of family and fantasy. In *Hot 'n' Throbbing* and *And Baby Makes Seven*, two different family portraits are presented: the first is perhaps the more familiar configuration of a single parent family; the second is the less familiar configuration of the three-parent family. In both plays, fantasy infuses everyday life, structuring relationships and shaping bodies and identities. Whether generative or destructive, pornographic or literary, fantasy is a narrative form in these plays, highlighting the ways in which supposed fictions give truth to daily life.

II. Chapter 2: Family, Fantasy, and Feminist Camp: *Hot 'n' Throbbing* and *And Baby Makes Seven*

> Whatever else any great American playwright has done, each one has created, and in turn become identified with, a personal vision of the American family. If anything, the measure of achievement in American drama has been a writer's ability to place a vivid family portrait within a larger societal frame—or, more to the point, to make the family represent not only the writer's inner life but a set of outer conditions.
>
> Samuel G. Freedman, *New York Times*[29]

The family has often been the grounds on which American playwrights examine, contest, and reproduce broader cultural values. From Eugene O'Neill to Tracy Letts, family dynamics in American drama are often a condensation of broader social conflicts. The centrality of the family emerges in part from its institutionalization. As David M. Newman and Elizabeth Grauerholz point out, "Unlike most social groups, the family is also considered a social institution within larger society" (8). As both a nationally sanctioned formation and a social group within which identities, patterns, and roles are learned and rehearsed, the family bears the emotional weight of the production of both national principles and individual identities. Since national principles are largely abstractions, the family is where they take a more concrete, material form. Thus, emotional attachments to national ideals become inextricably tied to emotional identifications within the family. As Arland Thornton and Linda Young-Demarco argue, the integration of national principles of equality, individual freedom, and commitment will continue to challenge family formations into the twenty-first century (10037).

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[29] This passage is Freedman's introduction to his review of Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind* in "Sam Shepard's Mythic Vision of the Family." *New York Times* December 1, 1985. H1, 20.

Since families reproduce class-specific values and social roles, they often echo the larger struggles played out in national culture. The bodies and voices of Vogel's characters are consistently situated within the broader national context, and family is the arena in which individual and national conflicts converge. As Vogel states, "It's important that the family be put in its social context, that there is a world beyond" (Interview with Holmberg). Indeed, it is the world beyond that produces the family as a social unit, while the family reproduces the world beyond. And as the primary arena through which we learn to embody gender, the family is a fundamental field for exploring gender formations. Using a camp aesthetic with a feminist eye, Vogel's *Hot 'n' Throbbing* (1995) and *And Baby Makes Seven* (1984) reveal the relationship between family, fantasy, and gendered relations of power and pleasure.

In contrast, Edward Albee and Sam Shepard construct dramatic universes that appeal to aesthetic notions of the supposed universality and autonomy of art, which obscures the historical context that produced them, as artists, as well as enabled the consecration of their work. Albee and Shepard got their starts in New York theatre in the late 1950s and early 1960s, respectively, when radicalism in the theatre was championed and American playwrights were translating European absurdism into a specifically American social critique.[30] While Albee fashioned himself a social critic, Shepard's concerns remained largely removed from any sense of social context or historicity. Yet, the plays of both

[30] David Krasner describes how American playwrights adapted the nihilism of European absurdism. Since the pessimism of absurdists, such as Ionesco, Sartre, and Beckett, is counter to an American belief in progress, Krasner points out that by, "Incorporating the playfulness of many European playwrights [,] . . . American dramatists turned the absurd into political statements" (64). Christopher Bigsby further elucidates several reasons why absurdism is not compatible with American drama. The first reason is that the American tradition of actor training, which is committed to psychological veracity, is ill-suited to absurdism; the second reason is that American theatre is at odds with the absurdism's denial of social conflict; the third, and perhaps most salient reason is that absurdism "was in radical conflict with basic American myths having to do with the integral self and the inevitability of progress" (*Modern* 125).

seem to exist in a no-time and no-place. Relying on a binary system of meaning to structure their play-worlds, and the characters in them, Albee and Shepard seem themselves to be stuck between two eras: a modernist era of universal categories and a deconstructivist era in which those categories are being radically problematized. Writing in a time of rapidly changing notions of gender and sexuality, both Albee and Shepard bemoan the loss of a social world governed by male-defined principles, and their plays read as personal responses to a changing social landscape, a railing and mourning that assumes the guise of personal artistic vision. It is precisely the universalizing tendency in the production and reception of these playwrights that Vogel addresses in her responses to their texts. In particular, *A Lie of the Mind* (1985) universalizes a masculine crisis of authority as a way of preserving what was in the process of being challenged, whereas *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962) dramatizes this crisis, only to reestablish male authority at the end of the play. Vogel, in contrast to both, broadens the context of the crisis, by historicizing family, giving a material reality to fantasy, and positioning female subjects at the center of dramatic and social conflict—and social change.

"…because obscenity begins at home": [31] **Vogel and Shepard Stage "American Violence"**

> Domestic violence respects neither gender, race nor class. No politically correct approach can encompass all aspects of this problem. I worry that there is no longer a civic space—the theatre—to confront the disturbing questions of our time. I remain scared of the dark—scared of our darkness—and I seek a communal light in the darkness of our theatres.
>
> Paula Vogel, Author's Note

I think there's something about American violence that to me is very touching. . . .

[31] From Author's Note, *Hot 'n' Throbbing* (1999). The entire epigraph reads: "*Hot 'n' Throbbing* was written on a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship—because obscenity begins at home" (4). Vogel wrote this epigraph—and this play—partially as a response to the NEA's refusal of funding to art that it deemed obscene. This came after a legal battle in 1993 with Tim Miller, Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, and John Fleck. The quotation that follows is also from Author's Note.

> In its full force it's very ugly, but there's also something very moving about it because it has to do with humiliation. There's some hidden, deeply rooted thing in the Anglo male American that has to do with inferiority, that has to do with not being a man, and always, continually having to act out some idea of manhood that is invariably violent.
>
> Sam Shepard, Interview with Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times*

In her Author's Note to *Hot 'n' Throbbing* (1995), Paula Vogel writes, "I was interested to learn that 'obscene' came from the Greek, for 'offstage.' Violence in the Greek theatre was kept 'offstage'" (231). What is striking in this etymological discovery is that contemporary debates regarding definitions of "obscene" revolve almost exclusively around representations of sexuality, rather than violence. Equally striking, in the above quotation from Sam Shepard, is how seamlessly Shepard moves from "American violence" to "the Anglo male American." According to Shepard's logic, then "American violence" has its roots in white (and implicitly heteronormative) masculinity. Michael Kimmel argues, "Violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood" (Kimmel 132). Moreover, since "violence is deeply embedded in the type of stories Western civilization tells itself" (Trend 13), there is a long-standing connection in literary history between these two "deeply rooted" and "deeply embedded" aspects of western culture. It is not surprising, then, that violence enacted and authored by men seems self-evident. Since the defining characteristics of dominant masculinity—competition, aggression, and anxiety (Kimmel 124)—are also the defining characteristics of living under capitalism, this produces a naturalized system of gendered power relations.

Domestic violence, however, remains largely a private issue. And as Cynthia Gendrich and Angela Hattery point out, it is also typically thought of as a "women's issue" (295). Discussions surrounding domestic violence almost invariably resort to simplistic categories of victim/victimizer. Rarely does talk get to the ways in which

family structures, normative gender constructions, and social and economic circumstances inform domestic abuse. Significantly, after an interdisciplinary study that staged *A Lie of the Mind* in conjunction with interviews of men and women in abusive relationships, Gendrich and Hattery reformulated domestic violence as a "masculinity issue" (295). In Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind* (1985), the male protagonist, Jake, beats his girlfriend, Beth, before the play begins. Thus, this act of violence provides the initiating action that begins the play, and yet is not staged as part of the play itself. It is kept offstage, obscene. As such, the audience only witnesses the poeticized results of the violence—Beth's brain damage and loss of linguistic control. In *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, Vogel juxtaposes domestic violence and pornography, revealing the ways in which discourses of sexuality—from literature to science to film—structure relations of gender and power, and infuse our everyday lives with fantasies of dominance and submission.

Bigsby summarizes Vogel's and Shepard's theatre using the ideas of sexuality and violence, respectively. In Vogel's work, "Sexuality becomes a language, the site of her drama, a central metaphor, a vital aspect of character and even a key to social and political values" (*Modern* 415), while in Shepard's plays, "You feel the pressure of an imminent violence which presses against the characters from within. There is a physical menace in the plays, sometimes an almost sadistic reveling in conflict, a battle for dominance; but the real violence is an internal pressure which threatens to implode character, disassemble it along lines of primitive fears, needs, and desires" (166). In Bigsby's useful distinction between these two playwrights, we get a sense of Vogel and Shepard's different approaches to theatrical representation: Shepard's private, yet primal

violence versus Vogel's socially and historically informed investigation of sexual learning, teaching, and enacting in late twentieth-century America.

Both Shepard and Vogel incorporate pieces of American popular culture into their plays, both include music, and both combine humor with more disturbing elements. However, while Shepard's play-worlds are inwardly focused, thematically repetitive, and mythologized, Vogel's are outwardly oriented, recursive, and politicized. My aim in bringing these two playwrights together is to examine the implications of representing (or not) obscenity on stage, especially as it relates to the relationship between gender and violence. By isolating his characters from any social or political forces, Shepard's obscenity is doomed to repeat itself. His non-representation of physical abuse against women ensures that it remains obscene, hidden, "mysterious." In short, he creates a mythology of obscenity. Conversely, Vogel remains committed to putting on stage images and language that unsettle her and her audiences, not for the sake of titillation, but for the sake of public dialogue. As she insists in her "Author's Note" to *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, "If we cannot confront domestic violence on our stages, we will not be able to eliminate it from our living rooms" (231). It is this refusal to keep violence obscene—offstage, private, secret—that makes *Hot* such a difficult, and important, play.

The words "myth" and "mythic" are often used to described Sam Shepard and his plays. In his early 1977 essay, "Visualization, Language and the Inner Library," Shepard himself writes, "Myth speaks to everything at once, especially the emotions. By myth I mean a sense of mystery. . . . A character for me is a composite of different mysteries. He's an unknown quality. If he wasn't, it would be like coloring in the numbered spaces" (55). In other words, "mystery," for Shepard is an expression of the artist's interior

vision, a kind of individual creative expression of the ineffable. This mystery, in Shepard's work, is obsessively focused on violent relationships, between men and between men and women. Gesturing toward his shift in focus from homosocial to heterosexual relations, Shepard states, "It always seemed to me that there was more mystery to relationships between men, and just now, it's coming to a territory where I'm finding the same mystery between men and women" (Kakutani H1). "Mystery" acts in the same way as "myth" in discussions of and by Shepard; both words obscure actual social relations of power. Homosocial and heterosexual "mystery" in Shepard's plays works toward a mythologization of a violent masculinity.[32]

Writing the majority of his plays during the 1970s and 1980s, Shepard and his plays are part of a volatile period, in which the changing social relations prompted by feminism, race relations, and the "culture wars" created an atmosphere in which the political and artistic authority of white males was being challenged from multiple angles. In response, playwrights such as Shepard moved away from the conflicts of the cultural wars and toward a metaphysics of male angst. As one critic wrote in 1985, "In the works of many young dramatists, America is portrayed as a strange country, violent and metaphysically blind" (Lamont H3). Shepard seems to have consciously developed his craft based on the exclusion of material forces, stating, "the power of words for me isn't so much in the delineation of a character's social circumstances as it is in the capacity to evoke visions in the eye of the audience" ("Visualization" 53). Striving for a theatre that transcends the messy material world, Shepard's theatre elevates violence, family, and

[32] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines "homosocial" as the primacy of relationships between men, including, "friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry, and hetero- and homosexuality" (*Between Men* 1). In *Oldest Profession* and *Desdemona*, Vogel depicts female homosocial relationships, which is an important counterpart to understanding any homosocial situation.

gender to the level of myth. His continued focus on a now-faded myth of the frontier has as its central protagonist the lone and divided man, whose relentless desire for a return to social stability and wholeness generates the action of all of his plays. Yet, as Carla J. McDonough argues, "Ultimately, Shepard's men are unable to come to terms with the notion that their fantasies of power and wholeness may never be made a reality . . . and furthermore that these fantasies may be the root of their problems in the first place" (41). Indeed, his male—and female—characters are trapped in a world of their own making, and rather than examining the social processes that went into its construction, Shepard turns to the metaphysics of myth.

Developing a theory of myth in his study of early America, Richard Slotkin defines, "mythology [as] a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling narratives" (6). The problem is less with the construction of mythologies than with the selection process of choosing which narratives will be part of this constellation. The most pertinent myth emerging from these national beginnings Slotkin labels "captivity and Indian war" narratives. "In its structure," Slotkin writes, "this myth-narrative follows a variation of the initiation into a new life or a higher state of being or manhood that is a myth-theme as old as mankind" (22). The metaphysical aspect of mythology is clearly tied to a kind of evolutionary model of masculinity. And this captivity narrative is everywhere present in Shepard's theatre, particularly in the sense of entrapment of his play-worlds and the violent conflict between the male characters.

Roland Barthes offers a different definition of myth, describing it as a sign system through which dominant culture "transforms history into nature" (129). Since "myth is

constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things" (142), it naturalizes representation by obscuring the socially embedded codes of signification. As Barthes suggests, myth is depoliticized speech, "with political being understood in its broader sense, as describing the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world" (143). Myth's primary aim is to disable critical response to representations, which are portrayed as natural and therefore unalterable. One of the most pervasive myths in modern culture is the naturalness of masculinity, its unproblematized and intrinsic relationship to the male body. This myth of masculinity obscures its historicity.

Not surprisingly, the height of Shepard's career in the 1980s coincided with a period of backlash against the social changes initiated by second wave feminism. As Susan Faludi notes in her 1991 study, *Backlash*, "Domestic-violence shelters recorded a more than 100 percent increase between 1983-1987" (xvii).[33] It was a decade of both growing awareness around issues of equality and growing feelings of hostility towards women who seemed suddenly to be asking for too much. As discussion and dialogue was being initiated in the media regarding "women's issues," such as domestic violence, violence on the American stage was being mythologized.

Many critics respond to the violence in Shepard's work by either romanticizing it or universalizing it. Gerald Berkowitz's interpretation of *Fool for Love* elevates the violence to a poignant part of "being human": "To be human, says the play, is to be made of forces so large they cannot be controlled, so essential they cannot be escaped, so extreme and contradictory that tenderness cannot be separated from violence or love from hate, so

[33] While this statistic is unsettling, it may not reflect the possibility that this rise might have had to do with an increasing awareness among women of the help available to them. It may be that there was a 100% increase of *reported* instances of abuse, but not necessarily in actually occurring abuse.

inherent in the fact of being human that their story can have no real beginning or end" (189). Such criticism itself aspires to myth. Similarly, Peter L. Podol, who connects Shepard's violence with Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, glorifies Shepard's depictions of violence. In Shepard's "unique and provocative" uses of violence Podol sees a "definite evolution in his approach to theatre" (149). After elevating Shepard's violence into the realm of myth and ritual exorcism, Podol concludes by replacing one myth with another: "Shepard's demythification of America's legendary past incorporates a paradoxical affirmation of the 'true west,' of the authentic and passionate elements in man and society" (154). Shepard's gift to American theatre, then, is his creation of a new mythology of masculinity out of the ashes of the old. And this mythology is careful to maintain the oppositional structure between the individual man and society, as well as between masculinity and femininity.

The critical and popular acclaim of Shepard's plays participates in a kind of mystification of the production of theatre, as a middlebrow art form, in the broader field of cultural production. Theatre hovers precariously between large-scale market production (which is defined in relation to public consumption and economic capital) and restricted production (which revolves around the symbolic power of prestige and celebrity and a disavowal of any connection to economic capital). Pierre Bourdieu defines middlebrow culture as "the product of large-scale production, because these works are entirely defined by their public" (125). "The theatre," Bourdieu states in a French context, "can earn institutionalized consecration of academies and official honours, as well as money" (51). David Savran describes the middlebrow anxiety of American theatre. He writes:

> If one defines the most salient characteristics of middlebrow to be an unstable, unpredictable, and anxious relationship between art and commerce, the category can provide a key to understanding the histories of American theatre and dramatic writing in part because it allows one to recognize them as sites of constant, sometimes fierce, and often futile struggle for different forms of capital. (17)

Moreover, Savran points out, "the symbolic power of middlebrow has derived historically less from its innate characteristics than from the determination of arbiters of taste to use the category to secure their own intellectual authority" (*Queerest* 17). The celebration and canonization of Shepard's plays participates in a self-perpetuating system of consecration and legitimization, of both the playwright himself and those who praise his work as a universal, timeless expression of the romance of masculine violence. Here, the mythologization of masculine violence obscures the symbolic violence of its cultural legitimization.

Ignoring historical or material influences, Shepard's theatre represents family, gender, and violence as somehow unchanging, timeless forces with which the male protagonist must engage in his struggle toward a longed-for autonomy. And yet, since the scant material forces represented in Shepard's play are themselves part of a mythic realm, there is no sense of any possibilities beyond the perpetuation of the violent crisis of masculinity. In his discussion of Shepard's 1975 play, *Action,* Savran points out, "the one irrefutable fact is the immutability of the present." This "impossibility of thinking beyond the present" ("Conceptual Prison" 69) results not only in a sense of stagnation and entrapment, but also in resigned acceptance of what is. While Shepard's theatre, at its most intense and violent, may produce an exhilarating jolt, it does little to inspire thoughts of the implications of that violence or the cultural values embedded in different forms of violence.

Shepard's plays of the 1980s began to formulate a connection between national identity and a violent masculinity. As Leslie Wade states, Shepard's early plays of the 1970s are "highly elliptical, and somewhat solipsistic, self-conscious attempts to investigate his own particular nature and practice as an artist," while his family dramas of the 1980s are his attempt to "speak on a broader level of cultural conversation" (291). In his family dramas, Wade argues, "Shepard explored the American family and in doing so exposed deep-rooted aspects of the national character. In these plays the West is not so much a backdrop to the action but a state of mind and a complex of values that inform the conflict and emotional upheaval of Shepard's dramatic world" (Wade 291). The "deep-rooted aspects of national character" that Shepard constructs in his plays are inextricably tied to "that deeply rooted thing in the Anglo male American." The complex of values that conveys a sense of national character emerges from a mystical combination of masculine "inferiority," "violence," and "humiliation," all woven into a national mythology.

His plays of the 1990s and early twenty-first century feature less violently conflicted male protagonists; these plays have also been received with much less praise than his earlier work. This waning of popularity suggests that the inner struggles of a central white heterosexual male protagonist are perhaps not quite as central these days. Shepard's monocular focus on the crisis of white, heterosexual masculinity has certainly lost some of the currency it might have had in the 1980s. However, even in 1981, Bonnie Marranca pointed out that Shepard "writes as if he is unaware of what has been happening between men and women in the last decade" (30). Reading his plays today, one wonders the same thing. And yet, one of his most celebrated plays—*True West*—was

revived in New York in 2000, suggesting his continued relevance in American theatre and culture. In a *New York Times* interview coinciding with this revival, he reveals his own persistent concern regarding what he sees is a crisis of masculinity in America. He says:

> It sounds a little trite, but there's not a whole lot of men who know what a man is, and I always thought it was weird that American men haven't resolved this, the American male is in conflict, uniquely in conflict in cultures of the West. You're either a rassler or you're a book guy, and I think they're getting farther and farther apart, there's a bigger gap between the macho man and the other one.
> (Weber AR 10).

This passage suggests that Shepard's crisis of white masculinity, ultimately, comes out of homosocial anxiety. That he reduces masculinity to an ambiguous and reductive binary of "the macho man" and "the other one" is revealing. The "other one" is an indistinct category that works here as a catchall for all the masculinities that threaten the centrality of an aggressive, autonomous male in twenty-first century America. By focusing on this unspecified "American male" who is "uniquely in conflict in cultures of the West," Shepard finds a mode of representation in which the crisis of masculinity in American culture is glorified and mythologized. Indeed, his plays continue to be produced, through the backlash period and the culture wars of the 1980s, through the identity politics of the 1990s, and into the global politics of the twenty-first century, even though, yes, at this point, he sounds a bit trite.

A Lie of the Mind revolves around the abusive relationship between Jake and Beth, whose respective and equally dysfunctional families intervene after Jake badly beats Beth in a jealous rage. The play begins with brothers Jake and Frankie talking on the phone on opposite ends of the stage. This spatial set-up configures this as the primary relationship in the play, and their exchange substitutes for any representation of Jake's beating of his

girlfriend, Beth, before the play's action begins. Speaking to Frankie, Jake is erratic and unreliable, insisting of Beth, "She's Dead!" (3), even as he maintains, "I see her. She's right here with me now!" (2). Beth is, for Jake, both a body to be battered and a tenacious fantasy, and he cannot reconcile this division. When they are together, she is an object to be possessed; when they are separated, she is something that possesses him. This lack of control over Beth fills Jake with fear. He confesses to Frankie: "Why am I afraid to lose her when she's already gone? And this fear—this fear swarms through me . . . it turns to a fear for my whole life" (14). The fear that consumes Jake's entire life concerns his loss of a stable masculine authority, which can only be maintained through his possession of a dependent femininity. The play is thus locked in these male-defined dichotomies—masculine power/feminine neediness, possession/freedom, body/mind, lie/truth—and continues to repeat the damaging deadlock that they perpetuate. Since the "overriding emotion is fear" (Kimmel 129) within homosocial relations, fear becomes the pervading emotional element in the play. This fear consumes Jake and is projected onto Beth—both psychically and physically—and allows no point of identification for the spectator beyond its paralyzing effects.

The following scene reveals a bruised and beaten Beth, in the hospital with her brother, Mike. She speaks in broken, incoherent fragments, which are at times poetic and even beautiful. The violence inflicted on Beth is romanticized by Shepard and thus depoliticized. Her broken speech becomes a metonym for women's lack of narrative and linguistic power, both in the play and in the broader cultural. As Johanna Dickey points out, "Beth's brain damage offers Shepard a convention in which he can play with language for a variety of effects and yet still remain in the stylistic genre of naturalism"

(544). Here, then, domestic violence is turned into a poetic device, an artist's experiment with language.

Beth also enables Shepard to experiment with more complex female characters, while using them as puppets to voice his own persistent concerns regarding absent, domineering, and/or alcoholic paternal figures. In an article on Shepard in the *New York Times* coinciding with the 1985 premiere of *Lie*, Samuel Freedman writes, "The presence that looms over Mr. Shepard's recent work—and one would surmise, over his life—is that of his father" (H20). Beth becomes a kind of surrogate for Shepard, allowing him to maintain his masculine mystique, while mourning the loss of paternal authority. Here, in Beth's most poetic speech, is Shepard's female masquerade:

> This—this is my father. He's given up love. Love is dead for him. My mother is dead for him. Things live for him to be killed. Only death counts for him. Nothing else. This—This—(*She moves slowly toward Frankie*.) This is me. This is me now. The way I am. Now. This. All. Different. I—I live inside this. Remember. Remembering. You. You—were one. I know you. I know you. I know—love. I know what love is. I can never forget. That. Never. (57)

Beth acts as Shepard's poetic experiment, and his puppet, while the bruises on her face are the transfiguration of Shepard's psychic wounds.

In this play, however, there is a distinct move toward seeing gender in less dichotomous terms, and it is the notion of performance that enables this move. As an actress, Beth represents the ephemeral and changeable aspects of performance, which contrast with the timelessness and universality of myth. Beth relishes the power of fantasy that is liberated through performance. And, yet, Beth's career as an actress is what incites Jake's jealous rage and beating of Beth. He insists to Frankie, explaining his anger, that Beth's performances of romantic desire on stage were merely rehearsals for her eventual infidelity. Uneasy with the challenges to any stable notion of identity that

performance poses, Jake insists, “I know what this acting shit is all about. . . . Try to believe so hard they’re the person that they actually believe they become the person” (9). Beth’s acting signals a move toward a female identity that is more fluid and less easily defined, and thus is a threat to the stability of Jake’s identity and his authority to define Beth solely through her status as an object of his desire. The indeterminacy of Beth’s identity and desire leads to Jake’s near-fatal beating of her. Telling Frankie about how Beth’s acting unsettled him, Jake says, “Changed her hair and everything. Put a wig on. Changed her clothes. Everything changed. She was unrecognizable” (10). As Butler states, “our very sense of personhood is linked to our desire for recognition, and that desire places us outside ourselves” (*Undoing* 33). Jake cannot recognize Beth except as a reflection of his own fear or an object of his desire. And yet, this desire itself is a radical challenge to his sense of stable and autonomous selfhood, the foundations of traditional definitions of masculinity.

Jake’s crisis is his inability to reconcile his desire for Beth and the position of indeterminacy and dependency that his desire places him in. Since sexuality is not a set of characteristics, but rather “a mode of being disposed toward others, including in the mode of fantasy, and sometimes only in the mode of fantasy” (Butler, *Undoing* 33), sexual desire radically undermines any notion of stable selfhood. Sexuality, then, always involves “being beside ourselves” (33), an ecstasy that challenges autonomy and requires being vulnerable to another. “As sexual,” Butler writes, “we are dependent on a world of others, vulnerable to need, violence, betrayal, compulsion, fantasy” (33). It is precisely this vulnerability to another that Jake cannot tolerate. Thus, performance, as the conjuring

of desire, is here depicted as a threat to male autonomy and control—the masks of femininity threaten the naturalness of masculinity.

Conversely, Beth can imagine agency only through adopting a paternally protective male masquerade. Beth yearns for masculinity as a source of protection and power, while femininity signifies dependency and vulnerability. Further, she is drawn to Jake's less erratic brother, Frankie, hoping that he might soften into a "woman-man" (76):

> Pretend. Because it fills me. Pretending fills. Not empty. Other. Ordinary. Is no good. Empty. Ordinary is empty. Now, I like the man. . . . Just feel like the man. Shirt brings me a man. I am the shirt man. Can you see? Like father. Like brother. (75)

Although the above passage suggests a kind of gender transferability and a redistribution of power, it ultimately leaves femininity, and a gentler masculinity, in a position of powerlessness. Frankie is repulsed by this idea of becoming Beth's "woman-man," but cannot escape to his car because he was shot in the leg by Baylor, Beth's father. Since, as Kimmel asserts, "Historically and developmentally, masculinity has been defined as a flight from women, the repudiation of femininity" (126), the inability to flee suggests a failed masculinity, helpless in its dependence on the feminine. Frankie's physical immobility acts as a parallel to Beth's linguistic disempowerment. There is no room in this play-world for transforming the performance of gender, however violent. In this play, femininity is "Empty," something to be filled with masculine power. The women in Shepard's plays operate as the promise of the temporary unity of male subjectivity—"You. You—were one"—or they pose a threat to that unity. As Meg tells Baylor, "You think your whole life went sour because of me. . . . If only your life was free of females, then you'd be free yourself" (106).

The central focus in *A Lie of the Mind* is the relationship of loyalty and rivalry between Jake and Frankie, who together embody the quintessential Shepardian motif—the divided male subject. David Savran defines this division as "the split between a passive and humiliated self and an active and violent self" (*Queer* 144-5). This self-contained, self-perpetuating masculine universe defines much of Shepard's drama, and explains why there is a kind of compulsion to repeat the same cycles of violence over and over. Savran identifies this masculine position as a reflexive sadomasochism, which emerged in response to several historical events in the 1970s and 1980s, such as the feminist movement, the gay and lesbian movement, the loss of the Vietnam war, and the end of postwar economic prosperity (149). For a contemporary white, heterosexual male, adopting a reflexive sadomasochistic position "authorizes him to be both wild and domestic, to cultivate a 'feminine' part of the self… and at the same time to subjugate it violently, and to take on roles simultaneously of aggressor and of casualty of feminism and affirmative action. It allows him to play the part of victim and yet be a man" (152). This internal division becomes a desperately violent way of preserving some semblance of autonomous individuality.

The "lie" and the "mind" of Shepard's title evokes a duality, each one implying its opposing term—in this case, truth and body. These opposing terms are, in the end, embodied by Beth. Jake's vision of an undamaged, unbeaten Beth at the end of Act One affirms the fact that Beth is both an extension of Jake's fantasy of wholeness and a threat to that wholeness. The stage directions describe Beth:

> *She is uninjured now—no bandage, her hair soft and beautiful. She is oiling her shoulders and chest from a small bottle beside her. JAKE just stares across at her as the light very slowly rises on her. She continues oiling herself slowly and seductively, unaware of Jake. She is simply his vision.* (41)

Frank Rich waxes poetic about this central scene in *A Lie of the Mind*: "Ahead of Jake, far off in the mysterious distance and illuminated only by a high green moon, is a woman whose nude back beckons with the mesmerizing lure of a distant, flickering neon sign along a desolate Western highway" (C3). Beth disappears as soon as he tries to move toward her, and Jake is left with the ashes of his dead father. Rich ends his review with a meditation on this moment: "When Jake tries to achieve communion with his father by gently blowing a plume of ashes into the moonlight, it's as if Mr. Shepard had emblazoned a man's timeless destiny like a star shower across a Western sky" (C3). Such infatuated criticism romanticizes a violent masculinity, while positioning it as an intrinsic aspect of a "timeless" national mythology. Moreover, this mythology depends on an equally romanticized vision of a femininity that is divided into an idealized fantasy and a degraded reality.

Jake's overbearing mother, Lorraine, exemplifies the ways in which women internalize and perpetuate misogyny. When she hears that Jake may have killed Beth, Lorraine replies, "Woman who lives with a man like that deserves to be killed" (23). While, in performance, this line might provide dark humor, its implications are far reaching. Suggesting that an abused woman must have done something to "ask for it" reinforces the idea that women's bodies can only signify as object, and if they act as a subject, particularly a sexual subject, then they must suffer the consequences of a "naturally" aggressive, uncontrollable male sexuality. Lorraine insists that Beth must be a "bimbo" (22), because she is with Jake. Lorraine immediately defines Beth, through her relationship with Jake, as a hypersexual object of violence. Moreover, Lorraine sees her daughter, Sally, as a threat to her bond with Jake. When Sally threatens to leave, Lorraine

replies, “Then leave, girl. This is my boy here” (27). That women are at odds with one another is not surprising in a world where they exist solely as objects of exchange or fantasies of a violent male desire.

In a classic recognition scene (in both the Hegelian and the Aristotelian sense of the word), Jake tells Beth, “These things—in my head—lie to me. Everything lies. Tells me a story. Everything in me lies. But you. You stay. You are true. I know you now. You are true” (128-9). Jake realizes that Beth exists apart from him, and that it is his desire for her, his desire to possess her, that is the lie. And yet she still remains an object to be possessed by the gentler Frankie, who does not want her. After Beth is “given” to him, he yells, “JAKE!! Jake, you gotta take her with you!! It’s not true, Jake! She belongs to you! You gotta take her with you! I never betrayed you! I was true to you!” (*Lie* 129). The function of women in *Lie* is to act “as currency that has no inherent value, but takes on value only in circulation among men” (Sedgwick 52-53). As is the case in most of Shepard’s work, the woman functions in his play-worlds as the grounds on which male conflict is violently played out.

Yet, *A Lie of the Mind* and *Fool for Love* are often cited as the first plays in which Shepard attempts to create complex female characters. In a curious choice of words that themselves connote submission, Johanna Dickey contends that, in this play, “Shepard allows his women to become stronger and more independent” (544), stating, “*A Lie of the Mind* is, in the end, a love story” (545). The word “allows” suggests the control associated with male authorship. Moreover, by subsuming the violence of the play within the generic safety of “a love story,” Dickey neglects the fact that, in the end, Beth is only an object of exchange between Frankie and Jake. Susan Bennett champions *Lie* as “a

Shepard play which does not demand [the female spectator's] defeminisation as a condition of reception" (178). However, it encourages her identification with positions of neediness, suffering, and linguistic disenfranchisement. Moreover, I am uncomfortable with reifying positions of spectatorship in terms of gender, since one of the joys of theatre (as opposed to film, for instance) is that it enables fluid and multiple viewing positions. The problem with Shepard, however, is that his plays revolve around binaries; male/female, body/mind, and truth/lie all operate on opposing poles, and the dramatic tension in his plays depend on them remaining there. As Inés Cuenca-Aguilar argues in her discussion of the three plays that precede *A Lie of the Mind*, "Shepard's female characters are treated as objects in the power of masculine violence" and "that such violence is seen as a trifling incident in the general plot of these plays" (339). Although they are given more dialogue, the female characters in *Lie* seem little more than the projected fantasies and nightmares of a masculine imaginary.

Lynda Hart describes the repetitive representations of violence—and indeed heterosexual relations themselves—in Shepard's plays as emerging from a "pornographic vision." She argues that the male gaze and control over representation is similar in both pornography and realism. However, the pornographic nature of Shepard's representations, Hart argues, is consolidated through the repetition of violence and a "realistic structure which perpetuates and indeed reproduces the male dread of women" (80). In an important distinction, Hart points out that "Pornography is not a sexual practice . . . it is a form of representation," and "a reproductive recovery of the past" (81) that operates through obsessive repetition. Shepard relentlessly returns to this past, dredging up fragments of myth and fantasy, which he repeatedly reconfigures in different

ways in different plays. "If he does indeed," Hart writes, "present us with images that imitate psychic/mythic geography of contemporary social relationships, then we must begin to ask whose desire he is fulfilling and to what purpose" (81). Not surprisingly, there is a return to the same at the end of the play, with Meg and Baylor folding the flag, which symbolizes national tradition and (as?) paternal authority, so that it is "letter perfect" (130). This ritual suggests that these violent family patterns—and the patterns of Shepard's plays in general—will continue to repeat themselves. This play, as with most of Shepard's work, remains trapped in dualities that cannot be resolved into wholes, and that Shepard seems unable to think of dialectically. Jake rails against his possession by Beth—"this thing in my head" (85)—while fearing that this "thing" might eventually "Explode with a voice" (85). In Vogel's *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, this voice does indeed explode onto the scene—embodied and historicized.

If *A Lie of the Mind* is trapped in ahistorical, depoliticized dualities, *Hot 'n' Throbbing* deconstructs the words, images, and discourses that shape our cultural understandings of sexuality and violence. The stage is divided into two play worlds: "the stage lights and the red lights—reality, constructed as we know it, and a world that sometimes resembles the real—as we fantasize about it" (*Hot* 6).[34] These two worlds, however, are far from separate. David Savran refers to the two stage spaces as signaling "two orders of reality" ("Hot 'N' Throbbing" 105), rather than a binary division between reality and fantasy worlds. Crucially, this set design makes visible what is typically kept private—the domestic sphere and erotic fantasies—and makes it available for public viewing. As such, the audience is positioned as voyeurs, and complicit in the action that unfolds. The notes for the set state, "The red light arenas and the living have this in common: They are

[34] All quotes will come from the 1999 version of *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, unless otherwise noted.

stages for performance, for viewing" (6). Further reinforcing our cultural habits of viewing and image consumption—TV screens, computer screens, phone screens—the Arena Stage set included several televisions sets, which played scenes from film and television, ranging from horror film to boxing to classic Hollywood love stories. The images on the screen often conflicted with the action on stage, and at other times offered a more romanticized version of the stage action. The two stage spaces and the characters in them were in constant dialectical tension—the stripper and the single mother writing erotic fiction to make ends meet, the girl dancing erotically and the daughter being praised by her dad for her sexual appeal, the horror film scenes and the play's final scene in which Charlene is killed by her ex-husband. Vogel represents pornography and domestic violence not as obscene (offstage) but as a spectacle for public witness.

In some ways *Hot 'n' Throbbing* depicts a typically dysfunctional family: Leslie Ann (or Layla, as she prefers to be called) and Calvin are the daughter and son of divorced couple, Charlene and Clyde. The family has a history of abuse. Leslie Ann and Calvin are described in the character list as "voyeurs, as teenagers are, hooked on watching—TV, Nintendo, music videos, parents" (5). The subtle addition of "parents" at the end of the list of media images that kids consume publicizes private relations, while emphasizing the ways in which children—experts at watching—absorb and learn primarily by watching their parents. Vogel stresses the everydayness and domestication of voyeurism, and points out that we do a great deal of this vicarious and voracious looking at home. The other two members of the cast are the Voice, who is male, and the Voice Over, who is female. The Voice acts as a kind of omniscient embodiment of male-dominated discourses. At times, he narrates literary passages, and at other times he acts as bouncer

in a strip club or a police detective. In the 2005 Signature Theatre production, he resembles a *film noir* detective, slinking in and out of Charlene's living room, taking books from Charlene's bookshelf and reading passages that conflict and converge with the words she is writing. The Voice is the insidious presence of a dominant culture that slips easily from public to private space, while rendering this very distinction ineffective. Moreover, as a representation of Charlene's fictional detective, the Voice invokes a genre that fetishes dead bodies, fatally erotic women, and a truth-seeking, radically individualistic male protagonist.

The Voice Over is a "sex-worker" and Charlene's "inner voice," who narrates the erotic scripts that Charlene writes for Gyno Productions, a feminist film company that produces women's erotica. Significantly, the Voice Over is both the embodiment of erotic discourse—as a sex worker—and the narrator of Charlene's screenplay. That is, she is both body and voice. Throughout the play, the Voice Over initiates scene changes by commanding, "CUT TO." She is narrator, director, and performer of Charlene's film script. Moreover, since they read from texts and scripts not of their own writing, both the Voice and the Voice Over disrupt the notion of the autonomy of the speaking subject. In her discussion of the female voice in film, Kaja Silverman writes, "Western metaphysics has fostered the illusion that speech is able to express the speaker's inner essence, that it is 'part' of him or her" (43). Realism, as a form coming out of this tradition, attempts to locate "the subject of speech in the same ontological space as the speaking subject, so that the former seems a natural outgrowth of the later" (43). Vogel's play deconstructs precisely this notion of language originating from the individual speaker, and thus expressing the speaker's private, individual thoughts.

In the 1999 Arena Stage production of *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, directed by frequent Vogel collaborator, Molly Smith, the Voice was played by Craig Wallace, an African American actor, while the Voice Over was played by Sue Jin Song, an Asian American actress. In this production, these embodied voices take on an additional layer of meaning, as the roles they perform and the texts they speak converge with racialized sexual fantasies. The Orientalist "Lotus Blossom" fantasy and the fantasy of the hyper-sexualized black male—both stereotypes constructed by an imperialist white imagination—add a history of sexual discourse onto the layers already present in the text. Again, the (predominantly white, middle-class) audience is made quite aware that they are watching their own cultural fantasies being staged, from a dizzying variety of historical perspectives.

The temporal structure of *Hot 'n' Throbbing* produces a historically dense theatrical experience, one that simultaneously distances and engages. The time of the play is "ten years ago and ten years from now" (7). By positioning the audience in the present, and placing the play in the past and future, the play achieves the seemingly impossible—an experience of all temporal registers at once. Using Heiner Müller's notion of the synthetic fragment, Vogel holds in tension past, present, and future. Heiner Müller, one of Brecht's most innovative successors, developed the notion of the synthetic fragment to incorporate the third dimension of time—the future—into a dialectical understanding of history. As Carl Weber describes it, Müller developed the synthetic fragment as a form "dispensing with linear plot, or fable," in favor of performance texts constructed "out of quite disparate parts, often barely linked by a shared theme or image. The desired effect is juxtaposition rather than unity of form or content—clash of themes, images, and structural patterns." Recalling the structure of *Hot*, the synthetic fragment produces an

effect in which "[p]erformers and spectators are confronted with a constant change of narrative or dramaturgical techniques and in such a way experience a content that aligns or intertwines personal interactions and emotions with history of past and present" (41). The synthetic fragment operates in theatre in much the same way as a surrealist montage operates in film; both mobilize unusual juxtapositions to jar the spectator out of complacent reception of the spectacle, thereby encouraging a more active spectatorship. This dramaturgical technique captures the style of Vogel's play, as it brings together disparate historical texts and images, while continually disrupting narrative flow. Both Müller and Vogel dispensed with Brecht's insistence on the fable as the most effective political theatre, and turned instead to experiment with form and dissonant juxtapositions.

Productions of *Hot,* which typically recall the popular culture, décor, and fashion of the eighties, create a camp effect by setting the action in the not-so distant past. By invoking images, texts, and music from a slightly outdated popular culture, Vogel defamiliarizes the audience's understanding of the present culture. As Susan Sontag writes, "many of the objects prized by Camp taste are old-fashioned, out-of-date, démodé" (288). Andrew Ross distinguishes Pop from camp, stating, "While Pop tries to disavow traces of production behind its objects of attention, camp cultivates an attitude toward the participation of the producer, past and present" (321). In this way, camp is a "rediscovery of history's waste," and subsequently, "*the recreation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor*" (320; Ross's emphasis). Less commodifed than vintage or retro, camp retrieves historical objects and recreates their use value and cultural function. As a producer of porn, Charlene recreates surplus value from two typically forgotten forms of labor—sex work and motherhood—while attempting to transform this labor into different

understandings of female sexuality. Recycling images from horror, popular music, and television, Vogel encourages the audience to read them in a "double sense" (Sontag 281), as both "then" and "now," or more precisely, as the then of now. The defamiliarizing effect of camp relates to Elin Diamond's assertion that there is "a powerful dialectical movement in Brechtian historicization of preserving the 'distinguishing marks' of the past and acknowledging, even foregrounding, the audience's present perspective" (49). She describes this historicization as "*a way of seeing*, and the enemy of recuperation and appropriation" (49; Diamond's emphasis). *Hot* uses camp sensibility to defamiliarize and historicize sexualized female stereotypes, in media and literature, and the family as the wholesome and sacred center of American culture.

The temporal setting allows Vogel to examine sexual stereotypes and family structures from an historical and moral distance. "Time liberates the work of art from moral relevance, delivering it over to the Camp sensibility" (Sontag 288), thereby allowing what is taboo (a mother using her children's sexuality as material for her pornographic screen plays) to become briefly dislodged from the habituated responses of moral categorizing. Further, since "time contracts the sphere of banality[,]…. [w]hat was banal can, with the passage of time, become fantastic" (285). The seemingly banal topic of family dysfunction can, with the aid of a camp sensibility, be rendered fantastic—that is, unreal and unfamiliar. Sontag refers to bad movies as "extreme and irresponsible in their fantasies—and therefore touching and quite enjoyable" (285). By invoking just such "bad movies," Vogel sets their irresponsible fantasies beside the ones we weave at home. Outmoded and "bad" popular culture animates *Hot*, giving a sense of "a new, more complex relation to 'the serious'" (288).

Furthermore, there is a specifically feminist camp sensibility in the play's emphasis on a woman's attempt to become a producer of cultural images and narratives, especially those surrounding gender and sexuality. Pamela Robertson argues that through feminist camp, "we can better understand not only female production and reception but also how women have negotiated their feelings of alienation from the normative gender and sex roles assigned to them by straight culture" (22). Here, the Voice Over embodies the eroticized fantasy images of women that have been cultivated through literature and popular culture, while Charlene embodies the more banal image of the single mother, one of the most morally-laden images of femininity created by dominant culture. These images are both rewritten, by Charlene, and underwritten, by the images on the stage TVs and the text spoken by the Voice. Charlene's writing is in perpetual struggle with historical discourses, and she both appropriates these discourses for her own use and is appropriated by them. This dialectical struggle for narrative control and representational power provides the central tension of the play.

Music is a crucial element in all of Vogel's plays, and it is especially evocative in *Hot.* In Vogel's work, music acts as a kind of soundtrack to history, a replaying of the messages we received regarding our bodies, our hopes, and our fantasies. Music has a peculiarly powerful way of bringing back an entire cultural moment in a flash, one that is at once personal and cultural. Vogel writes her all of her plays to soundtracks, and here she used everything from Janet Jackson's "Nasty" to the theme from "Silence of the Lambs" to Frank Sinatra to "Red Hot + Blue," the 1990 AIDS benefit album that featured contemporary pop performers doing covers of Cole Porter songs. "The main thing," Vogel writes in her notes for music, "is that the music changes from erotic to terrorific."

Highlighting the connection between terror and eroticism, Vogel suggests that music play throughout the scenes, since "Music always helps to get it up" (7). Shepard places similar importance to music, although less to convey a cultural moment and more to set the tone and mood of the play. His music notes to *Lie,* call for "Music with an American backbone," suggesting a soundtrack that expresses a kind of national virility, which then underscores the play's own "backbone." Vogel invokes music in order to defamiliarize its messages. It is part of the strategy of separating and unraveling the elements of both textual and cultural production, present and past.

Hot 'n' Throbbing continually invokes the history of male-authored discourses on sexuality. The implications, as we see in the play, are a lack of narrative control for women writers seeking a way into this discourse. The play holds in tension a number of dialectical struggles: sexuality and violence; body and voice; fantasy and reality; public and private; high culture and low culture. All of these struggles play out through the dynamics of gender: masculinity and femininity. As David Savran points out, "masculinity and femininity are always historically contingent, always in the process of being reimagined and redefined according to changing material conditions." In addition, "gender is always an imaginary identification. It is based not on an allegedly universal sexual dimorphism but on fantasy" (*Taking it Like a Man* 8). *Hot* highlights this dialectic of gender formation, as both historically and imaginatively constituted. The play asks: Who gets to write the narratives that define gender and sexuality, and consequently, our bodies? What happens when women try to author their own fantasies? Is there a vocabulary for that? By invoking the canon of literature—from Herman Melville to Vladimir Nabokov to Henry Miller—Vogel stages the history of men authoring fantasies

of female pleasure, and the particularly insidious ways that women, in turn, have internalized these fantasies, thus casting themselves as object of another's desire.

The passages from Miller, Melville, Nabokov, and Joyce are not merely chunks of text inserted for a fragmented, postmodern effect. Rather, they illustrate the dynamic relationship between high and low cultural forms, the mind and the body of culture, so to speak. Moreover, they serve, in conjunction with the physical violence and sexual display, to remind the audience that these discourses shape the bodies, thoughts, and lives of these characters. Yet, as David Savran points out, "the most chilling thing about the play, the *truth* of the play lies in the reality of fiction, that is in the fact that *Moby-Dick* and *Lolita* (unlike Charlene and Clyde) really exist, that these cornerstones of modernist fiction have inspired generations of fervent readers and generations of college students" ("'Hot 'N' Throbbing'" 109). Thus, the intertextual references underscore the relationship between the consecration of canonical texts, which involves the symbolic violence of treating these texts as somehow beyond social conditions of production and reception, and the material effects of this consecration in terms of physical violence and collective sexual fantasies. As Jennifer Doyle writes of *Moby-Dick*, in particular, "*Moby-Dick*'s relevance to gender studies extends beyond its importance as a portrait of men and their attachments to each other. It is just as powerful an example of how deeply play can be embedded into the scene of writing and reading itself" (4). Taken together, this text, along with *Ulysses* and *Lolita* and *Plexus*, emphasize the modernist literary canon as exemplifying the obsessive attempts of male writers to find new ways of defining and authorizing sexual desire—male and female.

Yet, Vogel is not suggesting we dispense with these texts; she is encouraging a critical engagement with them, as with all historical objects that we inherit. In *Hot*, she is concerned with finding new ways of representing female sexuality and new ways of talking about violence, which might then enable other ways of imagining and enacting desire. As she relates to Bigsby, "We are still using a legacy, a language, if you will, of male pornography while trying to transform it into female erotica" (*Contemporary* 316). Early in the play, the word "throbbing" is unraveled, suggesting the ways in which language is informed by gender. As synonyms for "throbbing," the Voice Over offers "Pulsating," "Heaving," "Pulsing," while the Voice suggests synonyms with more violent connotations: "Beating" and "Battering" (22). This deconstruction offers the striking revelation that relations of sexual power and violence are embedded in language. In *The Scandal of the Speaking Body* Shoshana Felman says of the erotic nature of language: "the scandal lies not so much in the fact that that the linguistic is always erotic, but in the much more scandalous fact that the erotic is always linguistic" (78). Sexual desire and eroticism are, thus, products of language and representation.

Through intertextual references and the display of media images, *Hot* inundates the audiences with the ways in which our cultural imaginings of sexuality, gender, and violence are shaped by a history of textual and filmic representations. Moreover, by articulating this history through the embodied characters of Voice and Voice Over, Vogel displaces the speaking or writing subject as the origin of discursive authority. That is, the historical body of language is always set in tension with the individual body of the speaker. Silverman argues that "The voice is the site of perhaps the most radical of all subjective divisions—the division between meaning and materiality" (44), the organic,

biological subject and the social body of discourse. The Voice and the Voice Over enact the historical body of language with which Charlene inevitably has to negotiate—consciously and unconsciously. Charlene's authorial power comes from the capacity to initiate material effects through her writing, which has its most immediate effects in the bodies and lives of her children. As Charlene explains to Clyde the satisfaction that writing gives her: "And I write down these words. And the words become flesh. *(Beat)* And the pay's much better" (55).

Vogel strips away layers of ideological assumptions regarding the conventional family structure as the normalizing "training ground" for heterosexual development. Again, the play works to undermine the ideological separation of public and private spheres. As the center of what is considered private and yet is also responsible for the reproduction of the public, the family becomes the critical field for disrupting this very separation. In *Hot*, the nuclear family reproduces the sexual objectification of young women, an erratic and violent masculinity, and a maternal role that positions the woman as both the moral and financial anchor of an otherwise disintegrating family structure. As in most of her plays, Vogel radically defamiliarizes traditional notions of family as the realm in which sexuality is learned in a "natural" way. Here, Charlene finds her erotic inspiration in her daughter's and son's burgeoning sexuality; Clyde and Calvin watch their daughter/sister dance erotically under the red fantasy light; and Calvin masturbates while watching his mother smoke a cigarette. Sexuality knows no boundaries between public/private, real/fantasy boundaries; it is everywhere present as a force that is absorbed and enacted by the characters. The ideological unraveling of family dynamics reveals the sexual

messages learned through seemingly mundane family interactions, which lays bare the sexual subtext at the center of this most sanctified of institutions.

Moreover, the high and low, private and public of sexual discourse is, in *Hot*, juxtaposed to reveal the pervasive messages of sexual training. As Calvin masturbates into his baseball mitt, the Voice Over reads from *Moby-Dick* (23). This contrasts with the later scene in which Leslie Ann and her friend watch a horror film, both titillated and confused by the fantasies it conjures. Linda Williams highlights the "rhetoric of violence" in the terms "jerk" (horror film) and "jerk-off" (male masturbation), pointing out "the extent to which viewers feel too directly, too viscerally manipulated by the [horror film] in specifically gendered ways" (705).[35] While women learn to become eroticized objects of this violence, young men learn to become active subjects. In both cases, this "rhetoric of violence" comes from a language that defines a masculine sexual eroticism. Leslie Ann and Calvin's sexual training is inextricably bound to this rhetoric of violence, both as it is depicted in film and television and in the canonical classics. The defamiliarization of family and sexual development in *Hot* shocks the audience into a reconsideration of the inviolability of this most central unit of American culture.

One critic used the word "horror" three different times to describe the "audience's" reaction to *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, writing, "Charlene's earlier, self-serving explanation in defense of her writing doesn't absolve her from our horror when we realize that she uses her own children as models for her fantasizing" (Stanley 366). Vogel dares to sexualize the most desexualized of American icons—the mother—while implying that sexual fantasies are produced by family patterns. Parents learn about sexuality from the children as surely as children learn from their parents.

[35] I will return to the significance of the horror film later in this section.

Even more telling is the above quoted critic's reference to Charlene as "self-serving" for choosing a career as an erotic fiction writer. That Charlene would prefer to imagine "beautiful, strong bodies touching each other" (53) rather than work for minimum wage at a hospital, "Cleaning up messes. Bodies and mess" (54) goes against the notion of motherhood as martyrdom. Charlene's decision to write pornography is self-serving only if one defines motherhood exclusively in terms of self-renunciation and unquestioning devotion to her children. Moreover, since women are typically reduced either to messy body matters (birth, bleeding) or exalted for the purity of their bodies, Charlene's work offers a possible way out of that persistent duality. Here, she is the subject, imagining and creating bodies of pleasure. In this play, Vogel is rewriting the patterns of sexuality as they are institutionalized in the family, in the media, and in the social sciences, and literature. However, this is no simple task, or even one that Charlene accomplishes. In her Ph.D. dissertation, "Theatre of Transgression: Power, Sexuality, and the Body in Paula Vogel's Plays," Carrie Ellen Ameling examines *Hot*, as well as *Desdemona* and *How I Learned to Drive*, using "feminist discourses that are positioned similarly to Foucault's philosophy of sex and sexuality" (26-7). Mobilizing somewhat indistinct Foucauldian notions of power, transgression, and subversion, Ameling argues, "Vogel's characters defy easy interpretation, break away from traditional gender representations, and subvert the authority of dominant culture" (iii). While Vogel's plays certainly challenge structures of power, they do so, not by subversion (which is a difficult thing to gauge), but by deconstructing the historical discourses that go into creating and maintaining these structures. Vogel thrusts her characters into the fray of history, so that they can tell their side of things.

In the following exchange, Charlene attempts to explain to Clyde how she comes up with language to write her screenplays:

> **Clyde:** Just relax, will ya? So where do all these words come from?
>
> **Charlene:** I don't know. When I really get going, it's like a trance—it's not me writing at all. It's as if I just listen to voices and I'm taking dictation.
>
> **THE VOICE**: Sometimes when I'm waiting for the body bags, I'll look at the victims. Sometimes they're real pretty. And I'll think—she's young enough to be my daughter. . . . Frankly, it scares the shit out of me.
>
> **Clyde**: Doesn't that spook you? I mean, whose voices are these? Who's in control?
>
> **V.O.**
> But she was in control.
> (The Voice and the V.O. begin to make out behind the sofa)
>
> **Charlene:** Well, they're the characters speaking. . . . Right now I'm writing something with this detective who goes to investigate a homicide and he meets a woman. And there's this incredible physical attraction at the crime scene. (37-38)

The Voice interjects a narrative that both conflicts and converges with Charlene's erotic voice, suggesting again the decentering of narrative authority. Significantly, Charlene's line from the 1995 play-text, "And I am in control" (260) is omitted in the 1999 revision, while the details of the eroticized homicide scene are added. The detective scene further suggests that Charlene needs to draw from the erotic images and narratives already formed by film and television for her scriptwriting. Moreover, the Voice and Voice Over continually provide an embodied performance to go along with Charlene's words, thereby reinforcing the materiality of language.

Brian Richardson refers to Charlene's incorporation of these voices into her text as "materialist metatheater," defined through "a creative, nonviolent recursivity [that is] an alternative to the more deeply ingrained verbal habits and behaviors of the culture at large" (690). However, this description does not address the ways in which those voices

often inhibit Charlene's ability to generate female-centered fantasies. In this sense, the history of discourses on sexuality, embodied and articulated by the Voice, suggest that women's entry into this history is not by any means unproblematic. The (fabricated) excerpts from Krafft-Ebing's 1886 work, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, suggest the enormous historical baggage that accompanies discussions of sexuality.[36] In this work, Krafft-Ebing defines four main categories of sexual perversions: sadism, masochism, fetishism, and contrary sexual instinct. In a remarkable theoretical move, he defines sadism as "an innate desire to humiliate, hurt, wound or even destroy others in order thereby to create sexual pleasure in oneself" (53), and then quickly normalizes this impulse by defining it in relation to heteronormative gender roles:

> This sadistic force is developed by the natural shyness and modesty of woman towards the aggressive manners of the male…. Woman no doubt derives pleasure from her innate coyness and the final victory of man affords her intense and refined gratification. (53)

A bit later, Kraft-Ebing theorizes sadism a "natural" part of "normal" masculinity, stating, "It affords man great pleasure to win a woman, to conquer her," which is the reason that "nature has given him an aggressive character" (56). This naturalization of male violence and female submission has its roots, not only in film and literature, but also in scientific discourse. It is a male-authored fantasy that assumes the guise of rational thought.

In addition to juxtaposing historical texts with Charlene's attempts to write her own, *Hot 'n' Throbbing* reinforces the pervasive ways that modern media teaches us about gender and sexuality. In the Arena Stage production, television sets were positioned upstage, facing the audience, depicting scenes ranging from classic Hollywood cinema to

[36] These Krafft-Ebing excerpts are omitted from the 1999 version. Lines from *Othello*, *Moby-Dick*, and *The Amityville Horror* are added.

boxing matches to chase scenes. At one point in the play, Leslie Ann nervously tells her friend about her newly-emerging sexual fantasies: "do you think of them, like, 'hurting' you? Well, I don't mean like hurting you, but like, you're tied down and you can't stop them and they do things to you that hurt you, that make you scream but you can't… and it makes you get hot only it's 'cause it's not for real?" (57). The fantasy of imagined powerlessness that Leslie Ann finds erotic is one that women are encouraged to identify with in various ways, as spectators of commercial film, readers of canonical fiction, and wives, daughters, and mothers of traditional family structures. Women learn to find pleasure in these fantasies specifically through their designation as what is "not real." That is, there are strategic reasons for keeping distinct the boundaries between what is called real and what is called fantasy. If reality-fantasy are maintained as binaries, then the material effects of fantasy cannot be examined, and thus it remains a private realm of personal pleasure in which there is no need for accountability. Linda Williams makes an important call for a more thorough examination of women's erotic imaginations, particularly the pleasure they derive from masochistic fantasies. She states, "There is thus a real need to be clearer than we have been about what is in masochism for women—how power and pleasure operate in fantasies of domination which appeal to women. There is an equal need to be clearer than we have been about what is in sadism for men" (708). The difficult part is talking about these positions without pathologizing either one. These gendered power relations are, like the performative quality of gender itself, consolidated through the repetition of acts; they are not naturally rooted in male and female bodies, but are positions taken to deal with specific social situations. The "fantasies of domination" in female masochism are not limited to film spectatorship or sexual acts; they play out in

real social situations as part of everyday performances of heteronormative femininity. Williams makes an important call: we need to interrogate the pleasures we derive from these gendered power relations, both in our fantasy life and our everyday life.

Significantly, the girls are watching a horror movie while discussing these fantasies. Williams groups together pornography, horror film, and melodrama under the category she labels "body genres." All of these genres feature a woman's body in various states of ecstasy—that is, "beside itself"—with tears, screams, or orgasm. In each of these genres, "the bodies of women figured on the screen have functioned traditionally as the primary *embodiments* of pleasure, fear, and pain" (704). These genres are all culturally marked as low, due to "an apparent lack of proper aesthetic distance [and] a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion" (705). Moreover, these genres are all marked as low because "the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen along with the fact that the body displayed is female" (704). Invoking these genres in her play, Vogel points to the ways in which, historically, women's bodies have been reduced to a site of emotional excess—an object of pleasure and pain with which female spectators are encouraged to identify. Horror film and pornography perhaps most blatantly fetishize the female body in various states of pleasure-in-pain.

Equally pervasive cultural messages teach young men how to perform their gender and assume their social and sexual position. In a brief yet telling exchange, Calvin reveals his admiration for Charlene's detective character. He states, "I really like the detective, mama. He's cool," to which Charlene replies, "I'm kinda proud of him" (21). It is easy to forget that this sweet exchange between mother and son concerns the pornography that

the mother is writing and that the son is apparently reading. It is one of many moments in the play in which Vogel radically reorients the audience's perspectives on family and sexuality. Calvin's admiration is both an expression of his genuine praise for his mother's writing talents as well as a suggestion of his identification with and incorporation of the type of masculinity that the detective represents. What this exchange also points to is the erotic allure of the detective, for both male and female, young and old. Frank Krutnik writes regarding the detective figure in *film noir*:

> the "hard-boiled" private eye represents an "Americanisation" of the classical detective. The world through which he moves and which he seeks to order is comparable to the mythologized Frontier of the Western, a world of lawlessness . . . and dominated by assertive masculine figures of self-appointed authority. The lawless context of the "mean streets" world legitimizes the private eye's own aggressiveness in pursuit of his mission to establish a regime of truth. (93)

While this masculine figure, in its Frontier form, pervades Shepard's work, and seeks to reestablish "a regime of truth," in this play, Vogel deconstructs the "self-appointed authority" of the detective by foregrounding that fact that he is in a narrative that someone else—a woman, a mother—is writing. Moreover, his mystique is humorously deconstructed when he, embodied by the Voice, offers the following information:

> What the TV dramas don't show you is that we spend most of our days sitting on our butts, drinking stale coffee. And when you do get to the crime scene, the trails and traces are so stupid a kid could tell you who done it. And the action has come and gone long before you turned up. And so you feel like one limp dick. (*Hot* 33)

In a few lines, the Voice reduces the allure of this mysterious figure to a bored, impotent child. While filmic fantasies are brought down to earth, Vogel reveals the ways in which families and domestic spaces are themselves hotbeds of fantasy production.

In *Hot*, voyeurism is revealed as a rite of passage for the American male, and once again, it begins at home. Seeing Leslie Ann's developing body, Clyde says to his son

Calvin, "that body of hers…you know what I mean? You got to control her," adding the more generally sexist suggestion that "Girls' bodies at her age…they should be *licenced*" (48; original ellipses). They both watch Leslie Ann, who is standing somewhat shyly under the red light, learning the seductive moves that the Voice Over performs. Her father and brother watch, "with glazed attention" as the Voice narrates Cleo's striptease dance from Henry Miller's *Plexus*. As Clyde teaches Calvin how to offer a dollar bill to the Voice Over, who is enacting the part of Cleo, the Voice reads the final line from Miller's passage: "it was tantalizing, especially to a sixteen year old who had still to know what it feels like to make a grab for a woman's bush" (49). The convergence of father-son bonding and legitimized pornography reaffirms the ways in which young men are trained as aggressive sexual consumers. Later, Clyde gives Leslie Ann five dollars, just as any father would, which again juxtaposes the supposed immorality of sex work with the everyday exchange of money between father and daughter (60). These incongruities are startling and bold—and have far-reaching implications. Female sexuality is "normalized" within the nuclear family in much the same way as it is in popular culture; women are encouraged to be financially dependent on men for whom they will then become sexual objects.

When Clyde bursts into Charlene's house, drunk and lonely, he becomes a spectacle himself, performing a kind of mock-burlesque:

> **Clyde**: I'm here to audition. To Give You. New material. The E-Rot-icly UnEmployed. . . .Ta-DA!! And Now! The Burlesque Theatre of Langley Park! Presentin'! SEX—ON—WELFARE!... BWAH-BWAH-BWAH!!! . . . bum-bum **BWAH**—bum-bum. (30)

Clyde is both emphasizing his own humiliation, while simultaneously mocking Charlene's new career. Charlene responds to his burlesque of burlesque by calmly getting

a gun and shooting him in the buttocks. Here, the relationship between the voiceless stripper and the phallic gaze of the male spectator is inverted so that Clyde mocks his own erotic failure, while Charlene responds to this spectacle with a parody of self-defense. In an apt comment, Rachel Shteir, in a faint echo of Sontag's "failed seriousness," writes, "the history of striptease is one of men and women failing together and apart" (8). In this scene, the absurd history of heterosexual desire is revised and replayed. Shteir writes:

> [W]hat is interesting about striptease is that it flaunts female sexuality—and male sexuality too—in spectacular forms, along the way making fun of those forms. Striptease . . . told stories about identity, drive, and passion and evoked sex in a strange, essential way by mocking desire's absurdity. Confronting Americans with a private act in a public space, the best stripteases wove together the mask of humor with corporeal unmasking, intellectual dazzle with physical prowess. At its most archetypal, striptease embodied great theatre's antic spirit—albeit in a limited way—with the 'polymorphous perversities' and roguish transgressions that all great theatre contains. (8)

When the audience finds out that Charlene has a restraining order against Clyde and that he has cut the phone lines before barging into the house, their history and the history of the spectacle they have just enacted converge as a history of the dark absurdity of sexual desire. Clyde feels humiliated by his lack of economic success and threatened by Charlene's new career, a career that does not involve coming home from the night shift in time to send her husband off to work with an erection. Charlene's choice of a non-traditional job is both practical—it provides food and sneakers for her son and daughter—and empowering. She says to Clyde, "This writing is saving my sanity. I'm never going back" (55). Writing for Charlene is an attempt at controlling her life; it is, quite literally, a way of gaining authority over her thoughts, words, and material circumstances. She has entered into the history of a discourse that, as a woman, she has

historically been excluded from. The challenge is finding a language that does not return to the same scripts of male domination and female submission. The embodiment of Charlene's newly-emerging erotic voice in the form of the character of the Voice Over is crucial to highlighting the fact that this hypersexualized figure is part of Charlene's history of sexuality, and thus shapes, along with the Voice, Charlene's consciousness and her writing. Moreover, both Charlene and the Voice Over are characters in the history of women in performance. The burlesque performer, the stripper, the mother, the sex worker—this is women's history of sexuality in America, on and off stage.

As Vogel was writing *Hot 'n' Throbbing* over the span of more than a decade, the pornography debate was in full swing. Vogel's first thoughts of the play began in 1985, after she witnessed a domestic dispute in the streets of her Providence, Rhode Island home. Also in 1985, the Reagan administration established the Meese Commission on Pornography, which brought porn to the forefront of public attention. Both domestic violence and pornography positioned women as victims of male violence. Yet, it was pornography that was deemed a socially abhorrent pathology. Daniel Wolff describes the perspective of the Meese Commission: "the Commission's major concern is less with the female victims of porn than with its effects on the power structure—which is to say, men" (3).[37] The Commission defined pornography as a crime, not as a representation or expression, thereby skirting the issue of freedom of speech. As Wolff states, "this strategy allowed the Commission to present pornography as a purely moral rather than a political issue" (3). And here is where the debate remains, with conventional notions of femininity and masculinity firmly intact. As Vogel reveals:

[37] I would like to note that later in this article, Wolff quotes porn star, Veronica Vera, who contends that, "We do not see ourselves as victims" (4).

> I am a first amendment feminist, although that's not to say that extreme forms of pornography do not disturb me. I simply think, though, that there's something wrong with a movement where feminists get into bed with the Christian right, as in the anti-pornography movement. And if we begin to censor pornography, believe me, it will be women's control over our erotic imagination that gets censored first or second. (Raskin)

Charlene agrees: "It's only pornography when women and gays and minorities try to take control of their own imaginations. No one blinks an eye when men do it" (*Hot* 13).

There is a plethora of pornographic genres, ranging from nonviolent "soft-core" forms to extremely violent forms. And with the proliferation of internet porn, it seems futile to try to distinguish between genres or define subcategories. The Oxford English Dictionary defines pornography as "1. explicit description or exhibition of sexual subjects or activity in literature, painting, films, etc., in a manner intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic feelings; printed or visual material containing this. **b.** In extended use: **the pornography of violence** the explicit description or depiction of violence in a manner intended to stimulate or excite. **2.** A study of prostitution" (OED). Interestingly, extreme violence—even without explicit sexual display—is itself considered pornographic. Perhaps even more significant is that the determining factor of what will be defined as pornography is the work's artistic value. Defined as what is opposed to pornography, art becomes the gatekeeper of public morality. Thus, the symbolic violence of aesthetic judgment protects the public from the physical violence of pornography. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, the process of consecration that an art object undergoes involves two related forms of capital: symbolic and economic. The art object thus becomes both a "commodity and a symbolic object" (113), with the legitimacy of the symbolic capital obscuring the object's reliance on economic capital. This process of consecration Bourdieu calls symbolic violence.

The second definition of pornography traces its connection directly to female sexuality. John B. McConahay reveals that the word "pornography" comes from "a Greek word—*pornographos*—which translated literally would be 'writing of harlots'" (36). There is a definite, although ambiguous, connection between pornographic representation and female prostitution. That is, pornography has its roots in the representation of a commodified female sexuality; however, it is unclear as to whether the "writing of harlots" refers to the writing *about* or the writing *by* harlots. In any case, the prostitute—that most demonized (by some) and romanticized (by others) of female sexual stereotypes—is both subject and object of the history of pornographic representations.

Although pornography and obscenity are often used interchangeably in public discourse, McConahay points out that "something could be pornographic without being obscene and not all thing obscene are pornographic" (36). Both terms are morally loaded, but carry different legal connotations. Obscenity laws enable the censorship of pornographic practices. Obscenity law requires that three conditions be met: 1. whether the "average" person would find that the work as a whole appeals to prurient interest; 2. whether the work describes or depicts sexual conduct in a patently offensive way; 3. whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value (36-37). Obscenity laws, then, work to keep pornographic representations offstage, and if taken in conjunction with the above definitions, those representations are historically bound to violence and female prostitution. Thus, obscenity laws imply that representations of female sexuality are not welcome onstage at the same time as representations of violence, unless these representations are considered to be of artistic value. Thus, the consecration of a work as a work of art—as opposed to a work of

obscenity—replaces representations of sexual violence with a "legitimate exercise of symbolic violence" (121).

As the anti-pornography debate coincided with speech act theory, the collapse between language and action became almost total complete. Catharine MacKinnon's stance forecloses the possibilities of agency within erotic representations; she insists on the total congruity between speech and act: "expressing eroticism is speech-think for engaging in public sex…. To express eroticism is to engage in eroticism, meaning to perform a sex act. To say it is to do it, and to do it is to say it" (32-33). Utterly lacking in nuance, this argument is put in more visceral terms by Andrea Dworkin: "pornography is the orchestrated destruction of women's bodies and souls; rape, battery, incest, and prostitution animate it; dehumanization and sadism characterize it; it is war on women [;] . . . it is tyranny" (xxvii). It is striking how thoroughly women are placed in the role of passive victim in these discussions. There is no alternative position in this brutish world. Daniel Wolff describes the "strange and sexless marriage" between Dworkin and Meese as born of a conflation of pornographic representations and sexual acts. For both Meese and Dworkin, "porn *is* sex, not its depiction" (3). What is most unsettling about this alliance is that Meese was able to feign support for women's rights, even as he was "leading the fight against abortion rights, constitutional freedoms, and the voting rights of blacks in the South" (3). While legislatively ineffective, the Meese Commission brought pornography into the realm of public discourse, while forging a bond between feminism and the right.

Judith Butler offers a way of approaching pornography that does not lapse into either linguistic essentialism or radical relativism. Butler contends that "pornography is the text

of gender's unreality" (68), which is why it is compelled towards repetition. Butler states, "In this sense, to the extent that an imperative is 'depicted' and not 'delivered,' [pornography] fails to wield the power to construct the social reality of what a woman is" (*Excitable* 68). Thus, Butler argues for

> a feminist reading of pornography that resists the literalization of this imaginary scene, one which reads it instead for the incommensurability between gender norms and practices that it seems compelled to repeat without resolution…. To read such texts against themselves is to concede that the performativity of the text is not under sovereign control.… This raises the possibility of *re*signification as an alternative reading of performativity and politics. (69)

This incommensurability is precisely what *Hot* stages in its incongruous and theatricalized juxtapositions of family, fantasy, media, high literature, and violence.

There are many feminists who argue that there is agency available for women in pornographic practices. Lynn S. Chancer makes a cogent claim that "Sexual pleasure needs to be protected and sexism to be challenged" (81), and one way of doing that is for women to participate as producers of pornography and therefore producers of erotic fantasies that appeal to women and men. As Alison Assiter and Carol Avedon point out, female consumers make up 40% of the pornography video market (15), yet have not yet become a presence as producers. It is through representational practices that women can begin to effect changes in how gendered power relations are enacted in everyday life. As Charlene insists, in *Hot*, "You have to believe you can change the story line."[38]

Pornography is perhaps the most contested avenue for feminist redefinitions of female sexuality. In defense of her choice to write erotica, Charlene insists, "I am not a pornographer. I write erotic fiction designed for women" (39). While erotica may have less violent connotations, it borrows from the same imagery that pornography uses. The

[38] This line was added to the Signature Theatre production; it does not appear in either printed edition of the play.

distinction is difficult, if not impossible to make, and suggests a kind of sanitized, middle-class version of "lower-class" pornography. However, Charlene explains her writing strategy by emphasizing that it audience that defines the genre: "For one thing, desire in female spectators is aroused by the cinema in a much different way. Narrativity—that is, plot—is emphasized" (39). In a passage that suggests something of Vogel's own playwriting strategy, Charlene describes her work as an erotic writer, "Most importantly, we try to create women as protagonists in their own dramas, rather than objects. And we try to appreciate the male body as an object of pleasure" (40). Clyde's mockery of Charlene's writing is similar to Jake's suspicion of Beth's acting; both are reactions to the loss of male authority over representation. However, Charlene seeks to become an author, creating erotic fantasies from which other women may derive pleasure. Bucking conventional notions of beauty and erotic appeal, Charlene creates Rosie the Rhino—the mascot for Gyno productions—who, in pink pasties and a G-string, invokes and revises the history of striptease. But infusing humor into representations of female sexuality, Charlene hopes to find other ways of depicting female eroticism, ways that are not dependent on an affirming and authorizing male gaze. Clyde expresses his disdain for Rosie, saying, "A Rhino in a G-string does not inspire me" to which Charlene replies, "it's supposed to be funny…for women" (*Hot* 36; ellipsis in original). In Rosie the Rhino, there is a convergence of the history of burlesque and feminist camp. As Robertson argues, feminist camp is "a kind of parodic play between subject and object in which the female spectator laughs at and plays with her own image—in other words to imagine her distancing herself from her own image by making fun of, and out of, that

image—without losing sight of the real power that image has over her" (17). This is "a humor [that] transforms" (Newton 107).

In response to the shift in gender dynamics incited by Charlene's narrative power, Clyde's masculinity begins to lose its potency. Clyde, like Jake, is himself alienated by normative constructions of masculinity. Masculinity remains persistently bound to notions of stability and power, even as decades of social liberation movements have formed and reformed to challenge historical inequities based on gender, sexuality, and race. And although Freud pointed out over a century ago that both masculinity and femininity are "theoretical constructions of uncertain content (20), we persistently cling in our culture especially to notions of masculine power and virility. As a working class, white male who does not fit the ideal of economically successful and socially powerful American male, Clyde maintains his claim to power through physical force and verbal humiliation. Clyde is described in the character list as, "over forty. Holes in dungarees. Almost a beer belly" (5). Vogel insists that whoever plays this role has "to go gangbusters. . . . The bigger the asshole you are, the more we'll love you. Trust me on this" (5). Indeed, Clyde's hyperbolic performance of a failed masculinity induces a kind of empathy, as though he is, in some ways, powerless over his words and actions; his erratic performance is a flailing for some other way to "do" his gender.

Michael Kimmel points out, "All masculinities are not created equal" (124). Masculinity is determined in and through class and race. Hegemonic masculinity continues, in America, to be defined according to economic success, social power and education. Kimmel describes the ways in which capitalism has produced what is currently the hegemonic masculinity in America—Marketplace Man—whose defining

characteristics are competition, aggressiveness, and the inevitable anxiety involved in maintaining a self-evident cultural supremacy (122). Both Jake and Clyde perform an aggressive masculinity, which is an anxious response to the challenge posed by women who are taking up the power of representation—Beth as an actress and Charlene as a writer. Both men attempt to reassert their social (and sexual) power through a violence that repeats itself pornographically. Significantly, the three traits associated with abusive male partners are: suspicion, control, and humiliation (Gendrich and Hattery 296-303). These characteristics are inextricably bound to their more acceptable, Marketplace Man counterparts. Competition breeds suspicion, aggressiveness is a means of control, and anxiety emerges from a fear of humiliation. Violence does indeed seem to be "deeply rooted" in the Anglo male American. Kimmel writes, "the story of the ways in which Marketplace Man becomes American Everyman is a tragic tale, a tale of striving to live up to impossible ideals of success leading to chronic terrors of emasculation, emotional emptiness, and a gendered rage that leave a wide swath of destruction in its wake" (124).

In the final scene of *Hot*, the fantasy world and domestic space converge as the spontaneous erotic encounter between Charlene and Clyde suddenly turns violent. Clyde confesses that he came to see Charlene after realizing he did not have enough money to afford a prostitute. This confession leads to a more humiliating confession—that he is no longer sexually turned on by "the usual…uh…escapes" (65; ellipsis in original). His fantasies are interrupted by the thought that perhaps "some woman is writing them . . . or she's someone's mother" (65). As Charlene's newly cultivated authorial power begins to infiltrate Clyde's erotic imagination, he becomes impotent. Out of compassion for his vulnerability, Charlene offers to play the part of prostitute—for the bargain price of

$18.37—and indulges Clyde's sexual fantasy. Yet, the combination of Clyde's humiliation, his emotional vulnerability, and his discomfort with Charlene's new writing career lay the ground for the spontaneous and sudden shift from sexual desire to violence that provides the climax of the play. The precise shift from eroticism to violence occurs when Charlene assures Clyde that she has protection. The Voice, as the detective, asks, "What is she doing with condoms in the house?" (67). This concrete suggestion of Charlene's sexual agency crystallizes Clyde's feelings of powerlessness and failure. Lynne Segal's article, "Sweet Sorrow, Painful Pleasures," investigates the rupture between the fantasies generated by pornography and the daily lives of those who consume it: "The last thing men . . . 'want' the women in their lives to be—whether wives, daughters, friends, workmates, lovers, or whatever—is the ubiquitously sexually desiring, universally sexually available, creature of much pornographic fantasy" (66). Male sexual power, it seems, has much invested in maintaining distinguishable boundaries between what is designated as the real and what is designated as fantasy in relation to female sexuality. Indeed, it is a boundary built to secure and protect the power to define female sexuality. As fantasy and reality converge, Charlene and Clyde seem suddenly to be caught in gendered scripts and performances that neither of them is able to control.

Thus, the Gyno film turns into Clyde's dark fantasy, a snuff film, and Clyde enacts a role and a script that he seems simultaneously to direct and to have no control over. The camp effect in this scene emerges from the stark contrast between high and low, performativity and theatricality. Kathryn Bond Stockton defines a form of "dark camp" that "keeps the violent edge of debasement visibly wedded to caprice" (205), which aptly

applies to this scene in the culmination of the play's primary juxtaposition—sexuality and violence. Charlene is unable to heed the Voice Over's warnings, spoken "*A la horror movie*": "Get out of the house!" (60), and the Voice has replaced the Voice Over's directives of "CUT TO," with his own commands of "Jump Cut" to repeat scenes. Charlene is no longer in a narrative her own writing. The snuff film has replaced the Gyno production and the children watch the unfolding violence from the sliding glass doors. Facing the audience, Calvin, Leslie Ann, and the audience are all implicated in the event as voyeurs. As Clyde beats Charlene in a stylized slow motion, he lip-syncs a violent script spoken by the Voice, a script he seems to recite unconsciously: "You.Goddamn.Whore… You're the one making me do this, Charlene" (71, 73; ellipsis in original). The lip-syncing and "elaborate pantomime" (71) work to separate body and voice, act and agent, the speaker and the history that the language contains. Indeed, it is a melodramatic exaggeration of a "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, *Gender* 191) that stages the violent extremes of gender's performativity. Moreover, the exaggerated theatricality distances the audience from the brutality, thereby expanding its implications to broader social level, rather than a private, personal one. We are all familiar with Clyde's words; they are not his alone.

As Clyde strangles Charlene, the Voice reads Molly's soliloquy from James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Juxtaposing high and low cultural forms, erotic language and violent language, literary history and contemporary culture, this scene is saturated with the power of sexual signification. Joyce's authorship of Molly's pleasure and his authorization of her consent stands in stark contrast with the silence of Charlene's lifeless body and the helpless warnings of the Voice Over. It is a moment of tremendously disturbing proportions.

Joyce's creation of Molly as narrator is often held up as an example of gender masquerade, exemplifying Joyce's masterful ability to "accurately" voice female sexuality, with Molly's soliloquy standing as the apex of this achievement. As an example of critical praise of Joyce's linguistic triumph, Rebecca West wrote in 1928, that her soliloquy is "one of the most tremendous summations of life that [has] ever been caught in the net of art" (22). Lisa Sternlieb points out that "Joyce's ventriloquy has been read alternatively as mindless misogyny . . . [and] as a rare example of *l'écriture feminine*, a woman writing her own body" (757). While Gilbert and Gubar argue that Molly's narrative is obscene (232), Kimberly J. Devlin emphasizes the control she has over her narrative and, consequently, her identity, stating, "Molly is the poseur who nonetheless sees through all poses—actress, stage director, and critic of the gender theatre itself" (98). And yet, there is no critical attention paid to the fact that Joyce's authorial force is part of a long history of cultural production, in which male authorship constitutes and legitimizes performative acts of gender and sexuality. As a major canonical figure, Joyce is invested, again and again, with the authority to voice and define female sexuality. In Vogel's play, unlike in *Ulysses* and *A Lie of the Mind*, poetry is used to expose the ways in which language can obscure violence. The Voice whispers Othello's deadly poetry just as Clyde tightens his grip on Charlene's neck: "Put out the Light and then Put out the light" (73).

Three different endings have been staged in productions of *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, suggesting Vogel's difficulty of finding a way out of cycles of violence. The ending published in the 1995 play-text was staged during the first full production of *Hot* at American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts in April 1994, under the

director of Vogel's then-collaborator, Anne Bogart. This ending is disturbing in its suggestion of a generational repetition of violence. After Charlene is killed by Clyde, Leslie Ann enters. She sees her dead mother, then walks under a spotlight where she strips to the music of the "stripper theme," although "She does not bump or grind" (294).[39] The jarring juxtaposition of sexual violence and sexual spectacle, both stripped of all eroticism, invokes the history of women on the stage—from Desdemona to Gypsy Rose Lee. Here, Leslie Ann's female spectacle is neither glorified nor vilified; her striptease enacts her emotional vulnerability, both in terms a grieving for her mother's death and an apprehension about facing a future without any sense of alternative possibilities. The stage directions read, "If this were a film script, we would see The Girl age before our eyes" (294). As she takes off her clothes and dons her mother's, she takes her mother's place at the computer, and types the words that begin the play: "She was hot. She was throbbing. But she was in control. Control of her body. Control of her thoughts" (295). This ending suggests that Charlene's attempts as obtaining some kind of narrative authority were in vain. Indeed, this ending leaves the audience with the sense that there is no way out of cycles of violence.

The second ending emerged from a conflict of opinion between Vogel and long-time collaborator and artistic director of Arena Stage, Molly Smith. Vogel wanted to find a way out of the disturbing cycle suggested by the first ending, and so wanted to flash forward to Leslie Ann as a university professor, giving a lecture to her students on the relationship between sexuality and violence. However, Smith wanted a more cryptic ending, with Leslie Ann coming in to find her mother's dead body and freezing in a tense

[39] This citation is taken from the 1995 play-text, published in *The Baltimore Waltz and Other Plays*. ed. David Savran.

pose of fear and anger. The Voice Over then says in a soothing, maternal voice, "It's okay. It's all right," and Leslie Ann's body relaxes. It is unclear what this ending suggests, but Vogel was unhappy with the decision to stage it that way. Its very ambiguity, to Vogel, seemed irresponsible toward those in the audience who have experienced abuse. This marked the end of the professional relationship between Vogel and Smith.[40]

The third ending, the one that was staged at Signature Theatre in 2005, with Les Waters directing, flashes forward ten years, to show Leslie-Ann as a literature professor and Calvin as a Hollywood screenwriter. Bringing together the fields of critical pedagogy and mass media, Vogel's preferred ending points to new ways of depicting and understanding representations of sexuality and violence in language and images. Not surprisingly given her commitment to teaching, Vogel's third ending emphasizes the possibilities of change that emerge from an intellectual engagement with the past, a critical questioning of the ideas and images that have been passed down to us, and a revision of the texts that continue to inform our bodies and imaginations. Moreover, this ending suggests ways of cultivating dialogue and awareness that move beyond moral categories of good and bad, and the reductive and immobilizing roles of victim and victimizer. The play ends with Leslie Ann instructing her students regarding their *Moby-Dick* essays: "I expect you to be in control of your arguments, in control of your words, and in control"—then Leslie Ann and her mother's voice say in unison, "of your thoughts" (75). Suggesting the power that personal ghosts wield on our thoughts and words, the stage directions read: "*Leslie Ann Dwyer freezes at the sound of her mother's voice*" (75). This moment of maternal haunting explains Vogel's epigraph to the play:

[40] This information came from a conversation with Vogel in New Haven, CT, on November 7, 2008.

"Some plays only daughters can write" (4). This maternal echo perhaps signals a new legacy—although by no means an uncomplicated one—of discursive tools passed down from mother to daughter, tools with which to engage with a history of discourses that have consistently excluded their voice. As Butler writes:

> The voice that emerges "echoes" the master discourse, but this echo nevertheless establishes that there is a voice, that some articulatory power has not been obliterated. . . . Something is persisting and surviving and the words of the master sound different when spoken by one who is, in the speaking, in the recitation, undermining the obliterating effects of his claim. (*Undoing* 201)

The question of who has control over language and the ideas and bodies it constructs echoes throughout *Hot*. And as the conflicting and converging voices suggest, no one is. That we can never fully control our words and our thoughts reveals that both language and consciousness are products of history, and so are the bodies and voices that enact them. However, this third ending offers the most hope for altering the script of sexual violence. The continued revisions of *Hot* are Vogel's attempt to find a true ending to the play, one that neither forecloses on the possibilities of change nor promotes a naïve, overly idealistic optimism. Instead, it suggests that change can only be imagined and accomplished through a critical engagement with and understanding of the past. In this case, critical engagement with canonical texts produces an understanding of the power of discursive authority. Finally, the multiple endings of *Hot* suggest that, for Vogel, a play is never finished, and that, yes, it is possible to "change the storyline."

Critics' responses to *Hot 'n' Throbbing* ranged from defensive to confused to bored. *Washington Post* reviewer Lloyd Rose was remarkably resistant to the Arena Stage production of the play, and its dialectical struggle between changing the script of sexual violence and reenacting more firmly entrenched, familiar ones. Indeed, Rose overlooked

the play's historicization of gender, preferring, himself, to stick with more familiar, and essentialist, notions of gender. Positioning *Hot* as a male-bashing counter-statement to Mamet's *Oleanna*, he writes:

> In the center of this play there's some genuine, risky ugliness—the female suspicion that masculine strength will always ensure masculine control; that a woman's tender emotions—her socially approved love and compassion—are her worst enemies; that there's something fundamentally, unalterably wrong with men. Vogel slaps these nasty fears smack in the audiences faces. "Hot 'n' Throbbing" ought to be on a double bill with David Mamet's fear-of-feminism "Oleanna." (C101)

New York Times critic Jason Zinoman wrote of the 2005 Signature Theater production, "the play seems too busy, an academic exercise so overstuffed with ideas and theatrical tricks that any trace of humanity has been crowded out" (E5). This suggests a kind of lazy spectatorship that insists on comfortable laughter, cleverly biting dialogue, and a quickly moving, linear plot. Conversely, Lynne Follmer Thorne was bored by *Hot*, suggesting that the play inundates the audience with more of that same: "The O.J. Simpson case aside, we've seen so much of the plot on television in recent years that it can be difficult to bring something new to the mix" (T13). Yet, as Vogel says in an interview, "We don't forget because things are hidden, we forget because things are right in front of our faces. . . . Forgetting is a way of not looking" (Interview with David Savran 271). Moreover, as the Simpson trial became a media frenzy, Vogel states that artistic directors refused to stage *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, since they thought it would be too disturbing for audiences, "the same audiences," she points out, "that pack *Pulp Fiction* (Author's Note 231). One of the prevailing habituations in modern culture is image consumption, which, within capitalism, works toward obscuring the social relations embedded in them by promoting, through repetition, a mythology of images. There is a

persistent disavowal of violent images that do not appeal to a predictable or titillating narrative pattern. In response to violent images, we tend toward sensationalizing, moralizing or, simply, covering our eyes.

While *Hot 'n' Throbbing* was being workshopped at Circle Repertory in 1993, Tina Turner's biopic, *What's Love Got to Do With It?*, opened in theaters. In a review of the film, critic Harry Pearson described it as "a horror movie." Pearson felt that the beating scenes between Ike and Tina were "inherently inflammatory," making it impossible to take the film seriously (334). This review suggests the limited vocabulary available to talk about different types of screen violence, especially when neither narrativized nor stylized nor eroticized. Moreover, he had no words for a filmic representation of a form of violence that is culturally defined as private. Pearson's invocation of the horror genre reveals that his only cultural touchstone for violence against women is a genre that fetishes that violence. What is repugnant to Pearson is internalized as erotic to Leslie Ann. In *Hot*, Vogel holds together sexuality-violence, private-public in dialectical tension, encouraging the audience to see how the everyday is laden with historical images and texts that teach us how to embody and enact our sexuality, with all of its violent contradictions and comic absurdities. Through its wildly theatrical feminist camp aesthetic, *Hot* leaves us to consider how we might learn to imagine and write different stories.

Uses of Fantasy, Language, and Performance in Vogel and Albee

> [P]laywriting is really not about writing. It's about structuring, about gaps between language that are really filled in by the collaborators and the process.
>
> Paula Vogel, Interview with Ann Linden

> It's collaboration as long as they do what the playwright is after.
>
> Edward Albee, Interview with David Savran

Like *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, *And Baby Makes Seven* (1984) revolves around family dynamics and the infusion of fantasy in everyday life. However, if *Hot* highlights the dangerous aspects of fantasy, *Baby* revels in its playful side. And while the family dynamic in *Hot* is painfully familiar, it is significantly reconfigured in *Baby*. *Baby* is as fun to watch as *Hot* is difficult. As in *Hot*, the emphasis in *Baby* is on the possibilities of narrative revision, and its material effects on the lives of the characters. As Ruth asks Anna, "I don't see why we can't change the…the narrative at this point" (Vogel, *Baby* 105; ellipsis in original), which recalls Charlene's desire to "change the storyline" of traditional pornography.

Baby is in many ways a traditional burlesque of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? (1962), particularly in its inversion of Albee's central premise: the destructive effects of a life based on "false illusions." Vogel turns that premise on its head, insisting instead that life is greatly enhanced if animated by the creative potential of fantasy, and that a vivid imagination fosters a greater connection to those closest to us, rather than becoming an alienating battleground on which to wage warfare. Further, the imaginary son in Albee's play is, in Vogel's *Baby*, embodied and performed—in triplicate—by a lesbian couple, Ruth and Anna. The differing strategies of Albee and Vogel are captured in their relationship to language and performativity: Albee's emphasis is on the performative power of language, while Vogel's emphasis is on the performative power of embodied performance. As the above quotations from Vogel and Albee indicate, these two playwrights differ widely in their conceptions of writing, theatre, and language. For Albee, language and the text are primary, the performance secondary. In

this way, Albee is a modernist writer, insisting on the play as literature as opposed to embodied (and thus changeable) performance. Albee insists, "I will defend to my dying day my theory that an important play is rarely improved by performance" (Interview with Savran 7-8). Casting himself as a writer of "important plays," Albee articulates an aesthetic argument that positions the work—and the artist—above the unpredictability of performance and its collective reception. In both the production and reception of her plays, Vogel foregrounds what Shoshana Felman calls the "scandal of the speaking body," which is to say that language always exceeds the individual speaker. Albee, and his characters, say what they mean, with no excessive significations, and no room for misquoting.

Albee, like Shepard, uses his playwriting to mourn the loss of national values. Yet, neither playwright offers any alternatives. But while Shepard mourns a faded myth of the frontier, Albee laments the failure of "American revolutionary principles" (20), which explains the symbolic meaning of George and Martha's names. By invoking the first American President and first First Lady, Albee can both comment on national values and family structures in American culture. And within this framework, the imaginary son becomes the symbolic promise of these revolutionary principles. National ideals constitute a shared fiction that bonds people to abstractions that otherwise would have no emotional force. Analogously, within this framework, children constitute the shared fiction that bonds otherwise emotionally void marriages.

In the preface to his 1961 satire, *The American Dream*, Albee emphatically states his objectives:

> The play is an examination of the American scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values, a condemnation of complacency, emasculation and

> vacuity; it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen. (53-54)

Railing against the emasculated male figure is a consistent theme in Albee's plays, from Peter in *The Zoo Story* to Daddy in *The American Dream* to Tobias in *A Delicate Balance.* Albee places partial blame for this emasculation on the traditional family structures along with the emergence of the assertive, masculine women. As a "demonic social critic" (Bigsby, *Modern* 127), Albee's implied objective is, in part, to scrutinize the decade of "Leave it to Beaver" so as to reveal that it is not quite as "peachy-keen" as film and television portray it to be. He turns the "image of the nuclear family in the nuclear age; isolated, sexually charged, cushioned by abundance, and protected against impending doom by the wonders of technology" (May 3), into a dark, dystopic world of illusion. Ostensibly, the "artificial" substitutions of "complacency, emasculation and vacuity" that Albee so despises have taken the place of the lost revolutionary principles. These artificial values, it seems, are what the games—and the exorcism—in *Woolf* revolves around, what they aim to dismantle. Martha and George's games are an attempt to restore a kind of virility to domestic relationships and national principles. Coming out of an era of the organization man in the gray flannel suit, Albee seems to be making a call, a call not unlike Shepard's, for the reinstitution of principles of progress, individualism, and masculine virility. Indeed, both Albee and Shepard mourn the feminization of the Anglo male American and the masculinzation of the American women. Albee's absent son (in *Woolf*, as well as in many of his other plays) is akin to Shepard's omnipresent father. Both playwrights are concerned with the loss of a national mythology founded on masculine principles, truths that once seemed self-evident. In

Albee's play-world, the women are sterile, and it is up to the men to reassert their authority, thereby restoring the revolutionary principles to the "American scene."

Albee is a transitional figure, writing as the 1950s era of containment and conformity comes to a close and the subsequent youth rebellions of the 1960s begin to emerge. C.W.E Bigsby writes, "Edward Albee is, in his themes and his concerns, a post-nuclear writer. Apocalypse and eschatology are in the air. . . . The overwhelming mood is elegiac. His subject is loss, desolation, and spiritual depletion" (*Modern* 125). As the country transitioned from Dwight D. Eisenhower to John F Kennedy, from 1950s economic prosperity and mass culture to 1960s youth-inspired movements and pop culture, Albee wrote with a curious blend of old-fashioned and rebellious, traditional and cutting edge. In his depiction of language as a creative (and destructive) tool and his emphasis on role-playing, Albee is remarkably innovative; yet, in his invocation of binaries of truth/illusion and real/artificial, he is a product of Enlightenment thinking. Albee elaborates on his intended theme: "And of course, who's afraid of Virginia Woolf means who's afraid of the big *bad* wolf . . . who's afraid of living their lives without false illusions" (Flanagan 12). Albee describes this as a "typical university, intellectual joke" (12), which has hints of elitism. His view of language, illusion, and fantasy emerges from a unified humanist subject who speaks the words and meanings he intends to speak. I would suggest that Albee's ambiguous term, "false illusions," is closely connected to traditional understandings of "false consciousness."

Stuart Hall's important critique of the Marxist concepts of ideology and false consciousness is a valuable way of comparing Albee and Vogel, especially in terms of their approaches to language and fantasy/illusion. Hall challenges traditional

understandings of false consciousness on multiple levels, the most significant to this discussion are that the "false" suggests a "true" consciousness somewhere beneath; the second problem in traditional understandings of this terms are that false consciousness is primarily an epistemological problem, rather than a material one. Hall writes, "The obscuring effects of ideology are no longer seen as the product of a trick or a magical illusion. Nor are they simply attributed to false consciousness, in which our poor, benighted, untheoretical proletarians are forever immured" (39). There is something of Albee in this version of false consciousness. Hall redefines false consciousness to mean a mode of relationship to the social world that is "partial," "inadequate," or "one-sided" (39). In this sense, he writes, "the market is no more or less 'real' than other aspects—production, for example" (37). In the same way, fantasy is no more or less real that other aspects of daily life—work, for example. "The real relations in which people exist," Hall points out, "are the 'real relations'" (39). Similarly, the real fantasies that animate our relationships are real fantasies. The shift from Albee to Vogel, then, can be seen as parallel to the shift in the notion of false consciousness, from "the premise that it is not the subject that produces ideology as ideas but it is ideology, conceived as a material instance of practices and rituals, that constitutes the subject" (Larrain 48). In short, it is the shift from the Enlightenment era to the poststructuralist era. And, yet, what makes Albee so interesting is that he problematizes the very boundaries that he uses as the basis of his social critique.

Perhaps the most telling exchange in the play, in fact, deliberately obscures any tidy division between the real and the illusory:

> **Martha**: (*Pleading*): Truth and Illusion, George; you don't know the difference.

> **George:** No; but we must carry on as though we do.
> **Martha:** Amen. (203)

The couple agrees, with great religious ceremony, at times, to live with the indeterminacy of these two realms. The "false illusions" that generate the electricity between these two couples revolves around the power of language—fictional, imaginative language—to create very real effects. The couple's imaginary son is a symbol they created to animate their relationship; yet, the symbol becomes so powerful that its effects on their relationship are material. Albee has described the son as a "realistic symbol" that Martha and George have created for themselves; George and Martha are "not deluded," Albee insists, but rather smart, sensitive people who play "the most serious game in the world. And the nonexistent son is a symbol and a weapon they use in every one of their arguments" (22). As Martha says, simultaneously with George's Latin requiem, "The one light in all the hopeless darkness…our SON" (*Woolf* 227; ellipsis in original).

Few plays garner as much attention as *Woolf* did in 1962.[41] The seemingly straightforward plot of two couples drinking and talking late into the night was, in Albee's hands, turned into a vivid and electric examination of the subtle ways that words and roles can become an elaborate scheme to manipulate and control, as well as entertain and enliven. The *New York Times* review of *Woolf*'s premiere in 1962 is remarkably vivid in its word choice: "brutal," "cruel," "seething," "sardonic," "biting," "grim," "bitter," "savage," "acid," "tortured," and "diabolical" are just some of the adjectives used to lure readers to "hasten to the Billy Rose Theater" (Taubman 33) to see Albee's

[41] The 1966 film version also garnered much attention, both because of its stars and because of the film's historically important challenge to the Production Code. Indeed, this film was pivotal in the transition away from the Code and toward the rating system. See Leonard J. Leff's article, "A Test of American Censorship: 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" *Cinema Journal* 19. 2 (1980): 41-55.

play. Most initial critical attention focused on the central binary: truth and illusion. From an historical perspective, this debate is interesting for its genuine search for what, in the play, is true, and what is false. For example, Ruth Meyer argues, "[George and Martha's] games involve mainly the concealment of the truth about themselves, through the assumption and abandonment of false dialogue and false roles" (62). Yet, what is beneath these false roles? These debates, rooted in a humanist notion of a unified subject, seem irrelevant in today's poststructuralist climate. It is not whether George and Martha's performances are true or false; rather the question is: What are the effects of their performances?

No critic was as overtly ruffled by *Woolf* as Richard Schechner, who saw the success of Albee's "perverse and dangerous" play as perpetuating the "lie of decadence" (8). That Schechner railed against the play because he sees "no real bedrock of suffering" (8) suggests a kind of aesthetic judgment that emerges from a presumption of the nobility of suffering, and its edifying effects on an empathizing audience. And yet, significantly, Schechner sees the counterpart to this "lie of decadence" in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, which had its New York premiere in 1961, referring to this play as "a paean to nostalgia," which perpetuates "the lie of painless goodness" (10). Again, implied is a lack of real suffering, a too easy road to salvation. Yet, it is Albee's lie that is "more dangerous—for it is a lie in current usage these days, and one which is likely to have an infective and corrosive influence on our theatre" (10). Albee's success is threatening Schechner with the death of high art as a transcendent system of consecration, edification, and redemption. Schechner's *ad hominem* attack comes into focus when he states his homophobic outrage at the "morbidity and sexual perversity" of plays that "are

there only to titillate an impotent and homosexual audience" (10). Schechner was not alone in his distaste of this new "decadent" American theatre, dominated as it was by three reputed gay playwrights, Albee, Tennessee Williams, and William Inge. Stanley Kaufman and Donald Kaplan expressed their disdain for corrupt American theatre that is built on a "homosexual ideology" of deceptiveness and illusion (Kaplan, qtd in Bottoms 177).

In his vehement attempt to de-legitimize Albee, Schechner voices his fear that "we are on the verge of becoming the silly role we are playing" (8). His words are prescient, given that, forty-five years later, performance has become the axiomatic way of talking about identity, and Schechner himself has become the founder and guru of "Performance Studies," a discipline that has been, since its inception, at pains to differentiate itself from Theatre Studies. As Stephen J. Bottoms points out, theatre has become associated with "the acting out of dramatic literature in a purpose-built building" (173), while performance encompasses almost everything else. Performance Studies associates itself, simultaneously, with the primal and the aesthetic. Performance is efficacious; it is productive; it does things. Conversely, theatre is a middlebrow entertainment dependent on artifice and a conventional dramatic structure. And what in the past, Bottoms argues, would have been "regarded as 'theatrical' has been annexed of and relabeled 'performative'" (173). Bottoms argues, somewhat reductively, that "theatre is still linked integrally and stereotypically with homosexuality, and particularly with male homosexuality. . . To be involved in theatre is—ergo—to be feminized, if not downright effeminate" (175-6).[42] Schechner uses a revealing metaphor to describe theatre, referring

[42] The association between theatre and male homosexuality is a relatively recent one. (Indeed, the term "homosexual" only emerged in 1890s.) The relationship between femininity and theatre has a much longer

to it as, "the call girl of money and ambition" (quoted in Bottoms 176). In these formulations, theatre is associated with effeminacy, a hunger for economic capital, and prostitution. Ironically, in the end, Schechner and Albee seem to be fighting the same battle in American theatre and culture: the battle against emasculation. In Schechner's call for a theatre that refuses to submit to the "ineluctable urge to escape reality and its concomitant responsibilities by crawling back into the womb, or bathroom, or both" (10), he sounds not unlike Albee's critique of complacency, emasculation, and vacuity in American culture. And what is at stake for both Schechner and Albee is, ultimately, the distinctions between reality and fantasy, specifically who has the power to make those distinctions. What Vogel does in *Baby* is recuperate the queer possibilities of fantasy, and thus to reclaim theatre as a space that does not deny or repress fantasy, as *Woolf* does, but reveals the ways in which it infuses daily life with a dimension founded in imaginative play.

Albee denies any closeted elements in his play, stating that it is "*not* written about four homosexuals" (14) and demands proof "from the text" (13) by anyone making that claim. Indeed, Albee's instance on the primacy of the text and the intentions of the author stem from his belief in the autonomy of the work of art and the status of the artist as the unequivocal master of the meanings his work conveys. He insists that it is the "critic's responsibility" to judge his play on aesthetic terms, stating, "the ultimate judgment of a

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history, going at least as far back as Plato. Thus, the bias against theatre and its concomitant associations with femininity have more to do with their shared associations with artifice and masquerade, and thus cannot be reduced to associations with an effeminate male homosexuality. In *Professing Performance* (2004), Shannon Jackson offers a very useful genealogy of the relationship between Performance Studies and Theatre Studies, discussing Schechner's role, as well as the relationship between femininity and theatre. As Jackson states, "Attributions of masculinity and femininity in the study of theatre can cut both ways and change with definitional relation. Sometimes, theatre's association with artifice and deception reproduce classical stereotypes of the feminine. Sometimes, theatre's practice of collectivity and publicity align it with a masculine performance of democratic citizenship" (37). Thus, the gendered associations of theatre revolve around distinctions between reality and fantasy, truth and falsehood, rather than sexuality.

work of art, whether it be a masterpiece or a lesser event, must be solely in terms of its artistic success and not on Freudian guesswork" (14). Embedded in this statement is Albee's assumption that aesthetic judgment somehow transcends subjective interpretation, that the aesthetic has a set of object criteria that will then prove a work's value, and that the artist has ultimate authority over the reception of his work. His view of art and his role as writer suggests that Albee—and his characters—mean what they say and say what they mean. That is, language is a tool to be used and manipulated by the author/speaker, but it is not something that constitutes the author/speaker himself.

Woolf's dramatic energy comes largely from the verbal virtuosity of its central characters. Indeed, perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Albee's play is its emphasis on role-playing, performance, and the performative power of language to create the reality it names. *Woolf* proposes what was at the time a revolutionary idea: that language creates—rather than merely reflects—the reality it represents. Indeed, Albee's major concern is with how "People use whatever means they can to make communication" (Gardner 64). Language is not a predetermined system, but a productive and potentially harmful body of social codes and signs. The emphasis on language and identity as a game is everywhere present, and it is George who gets the games going, first with Humiliate the Host, followed by Hump the Hostess, and then Get the Guests. By naming the games, George establishes himself as director and performative authority. And his goal is to dispossess Martha and Nick of their performative force, while putting on a good show for everyone, including the theatre audience.

References to Martha's demonic linguistic abilities are numerous. The play drives toward the necessary expunging of this discursive power, since Martha assumes a

masculine position that must be repossessed by George. As George tells Nick and Honey, as if in preparation for their eventual witness to the exorcism, "Martha is a devil with language; she really is" (21). Martha's demonic possession of and by language is emphasized again as George responds to her goading, "(*Deeply serious*) My God, you're a wicked woman" (71). In contrast to Martha's antagonism, Nick agrees, somewhat unwittingly, to participate in this performative game, stating, "I'll play in your language … I'll be what you say I am" (150). Although later he tries to renege, insisting, "I AM NOT A HOUSEBOY" (202), his words contain no force, no authority, until Martha affirms his masculinity, "No; you're not a houseboy," and George authorizes the speech act by saying, "So be it" (202).

Importantly, it is George who legitimizes Martha's performative. He must, however, legitimize his authority by *proving* it to Nick, Honey, Martha, and the audience. As Clare Virginia Eby argues in her cogent essay on masculine competition in *Woolf*, post-World War II masculinity is not defined according to physical demonstration of male domination (unlike, for example, the frontiersman of the nineteenth century), and so masculinity must to be proven among and between men. Thus, Eby argues that *Woolf* "presents post-war heterosexual masculinity as fundamentally competitive" and since "it takes one man to prove another's masculinity, an attentive and ultimately vanquished male audience is necessary to complete the performance" (602). The dynamic could well be applied to *The Zoo Story*, Albee's earlier play involving an encounter between a middle-class man and an erratic younger man with no obvious place in society. I would extend Eby's argument by suggesting that Albee wishes his plays to participate in that

kind of masculine competition in relation to his audience, with his virile writing demonstrating its potency to an attentive and emasculated audience.

If Martha's strength derives solely from her ability to emasculate George, then he must oscillate between masculine dominance and emasculation for their dynamic to work properly. However, if as one critic interestingly suggests in 1965, "Martha is an apotheosis of consumerism . . . she chews up ice cubes, George, the young men" (Baxandall 31), then George's emasculation is related to his inability to produce, which in this context means producing literary texts. George's failure to author (which literally means to father a child) a book is indicative of his failure to make knowledge and meaning in written language. However, his discursive power is performative, not constative. His power is not written language, but spoken. It is in the power to authorize the act of which he speaks that George derives his power.

It is interesting to observe how the play's emphasis on verbal wit and performance imbues it, in retrospect, with a camp sensibility. Indeed, in Esther Newton's definition, George and Martha enact a kind of camp-drag dynamic, based foremost on "verbal agility" (Newton 111). In addition, Newton states, "If moral deviation is the locus of the perception of incongruity, it is more specifically role deviation and role manipulation that are at the core of the second property of camp, *theatricality*" (107). Martha's demeaning digs at George position her in a traditionally masculine role, while her seduction of Nick is a moral deviation ironically underscored by George calling her "Chastity" (199). George and Martha's camp exchanges theatricalize heterosexual relations, thereby showing the elaborate games required to perpetuate their validity. *Woolf* underscores—

even as it criticizes—"the perception of 'being as playing a role' and 'life as theatre'" (Newton 107).

The distance that George and Martha maintain from the roles and games they are playing suggests their self-conscious awareness that they are, indeed, playing roles. As Martha says to Nick regarding his sexual performance, "You're certainly a flop in some departments," but is quick to clarify, "I was talking about your goddamn performance" (188). Nick's identity is not that of a flop, but only his failed performance. People's roles emerge from their actions, but their identities are not determined by those roles. Roles change as soon as someone changes the game. Martha then applies her critique to everyone in the room, stating, "You're all flops. I am Earth Mother, and you're all flops" (189). At this point in the play, Martha has assumed the role of director and performative authority. Casting herself in the incongruous role of Earth Mother, Martha shifts the balance of power by assuming the authority to name herself and others.

Newton describes the defamiliarizing aspect of drag: "The double stance toward the role, putting on a good show while indicating distance (showing that it is a show) is the heart of drag as camp" (109). In their emphasis on games and role-play, George and Martha perform a drag of marriage: "The drag concept implies distance between actor and the role or 'act.' . . . Role playing is *play*; it is an act or show" (109). Oscillating wildly between amusing and "ugly" (207), the games George and Martha play are a show intended to entertain and manipulate. They are, ultimately, impersonating the dynamics of heterosexual marriage. And rather than viewing the play in Robert Brustein's terms as a "comedy of concealment" (29), it is perhaps more productive to look at the play in terms of the effects of its verbal wit and linguistic force. The camp humor of Albee's play

emerges from the use of language to dissolve the very boundary between concealment and an underlying truth. In this sense, the play moves toward deconstructing the binaries that it relies on for its force as a social criticism. As Newton elaborates, "Camp . . . is a *system* of humor . . . [and] the humor does not cover up, it transforms" (109).

Yet in Albee's play, the humor also destroys. There is little room in this play-world for language as a productive tool used to cultivate closeness; rather, it is used as a weapon. This verbal violence imbues the play with a "coldness," which is further underscored by its immaculate linguistic precision and its disembodied imaginative play. Their son is merely a linguistic construct possessing Martha. As Taubman wrote in his *Times* review, "For 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf' is possessed by demons" (Taubman 33). Indeed, the demons are embodied and voiced by the "harridan," Martha. In a moment of self-conscious distance from her role, Martha offers to Nick a kind of synopsis of her relationship to George:

> George who is good to me, and whom I revile; . . . who can hold me, at night, so that it's warm, and whom I will bite so there's blood; who keeps learning the games we play as quickly as I can change the rules; who can make me happy and I do not wish to be happy, and yes I do wish to be happy. (191)

Here the demon possessing Albee's play speaks her contradictory words, revealing with her relentless impulse to suck George's masculine virility, since he "has made the hideous, the hurting, the insulting mistake of loving me and must be punished for it" (191). An early critic championed George's placation of Martha as a triumph of his "manly strength" over Martha's emasculating verbal power: "George . . . exorcises the child. In doing so, he tames Martha without abusing her and establishes his strength as the foundation and sustenance of their renewed marriage" (Adler 69). This critic's unsettling description is so unsettling particularly because it is so accurately summarizes

the play's resolution. If emasculation is one of the "artificial" values that Albee laments, then George's exorcism and subsequent reassertion of masculine dominance is one of the revolutionary principles that Albee hopes to reinstall on the "American Scene."

Thus, at the play's conclusion, masculine authority is restored, and language reduced to its most basic units of communication. George asks the taunting question that punctuates the text, "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf…?" to which Martha replies, in total submission, "I…am…George…I….am…" (242; ellipsis in original). The demon has been exorcised; the husband and wife restored to their natural position of domination and submission. Martha's biological sterility—she "doesn't have pregnancies at all" (97)—is matched by her linguistic sterility. Her identity is stripped of all self-determination—all performative force—apart from the most basic assertion of one's existence—"I am…."

Much of the criticism of *Woolf* participates in the continued canonization, both of Albee and his play, by continually making grand claims regarding its allegorical, philosophical, and artistic significance. As Savran argues in relation to the canonization of Eugene O'Neill,

> The consecration of the legitimate theatre during the 1920s and the policing of generic boundaries were a boon not only to playwrights and producers. Because the legitimate stage could no longer be valued merely as an agreeable public amusement and because the significance of the challenging, new drama was no longer immediately evident to all onlookers, an army of experts was required to interpret the plays and separate the good from the bad, the profound from the shallow. (*Highbrow/Lowdown* 231)

It was at this point that the artist-critic relationship was consolidated, each depending on the other for their continued legitimacy. Furthermore, the legitimate American theatre was consecrated by its distance, culturally and economically, from popular forms, such as burlesque and vaudeville.

Albee's and *Woolf*'s canonization over the past four decades has been effected through its positioning as an important literary (as opposed to theatrical) text, one that comments more broadly on national values while at the same time achieving a universal message. George's position as a history professor and his quoting of philosophical historian, Oswald Spengler, near the end of Act Two, are often elaborated by critics as exemplifying the way that the play comments not only American history, but the history of the West. George reads from Spengler: "And the West, encumbered by crippling alliances and burdened with a morality too rigid to accommodate itself to the swing of events must—eventually—fall" (174). Many critics elaborate on this quotation as illustrating the significance of George as a figure that is, like the West, encumbered by a morality too rigid. Orley I. Holton allegorizes the play, by suggesting that George is burdened by his alliance with Martha. He goes on to argue, "[Spengler's] observation on the movements of history, read in connection with the events of George's personal history, is a splendid example of how Albee has managed to endow the events of the family drama with a deeper significance, suggestive of larger events and movements" (46). This is an apt example of the ways in which texts are canonized through a universalizing of the play's characters and themes, an insistence on their philosophical importance, and a subsequent diminishing of the particular cultural context from which the play emerged. As Holtan points out, "One of the principal myths on which this country was founded was the notion that America was New Eden, a second chance ordained by God or Providence" (47). By situating the play as an extension of this myth, both American national identity and the theatrical canon achieve a kind of sacred status, a universality that transcends the chaotic conditions of production and reception. This

process of mythologization and canonization is a self-perpetuating practice of consecration, through which texts and their critics maintain their cultural and symbolic power by legitimizing one another. Historically, this has been a way of guarding and perpetuating male authority (which is deemed universal), while barring women from the realm of the universal, the philosophical, and the historical. Women are an integral part of the mythology, but only as actors, not as authors.

While Albee's emphasis is on language, Vogel's emphasis in *And Baby Makes Seven* (1984) is on the relationship between fantasy, narrative, and the performance of everyday life. The coldness of Albee's tone and language become a warm vitality in Vogel's play. And whereas the son in *Woolf* remains a discursive weapon, the three imaginary boys are, in Vogel's play, embodied and vibrantly enacted by Anna and Ruth, who are about to have a child fathered by their gay male best friend, Peter. The women adopt the roles of the boys to animate their lives and express their angst about the impending birth. Ruth plays two characters—Orphan McDermott, a boy raised by wolves, and Henri Dumont, a French boy from the film, *The Red Balloon* (1956). Anna plays the precocious Cecil Bartholomew, a young genius who offers instruction and advice, both to the children and the adults. Like *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, this play is punctuated by literary quotations and popular culture references, and is animated by various registers of living—from the fantastic to the mundane. And, like *Hot*, *Baby* also revolves around questions of family structures, narrative power, and the difficulty in finding an appropriate ending to the complexities these questions raise. Vogel has said of *Baby* that she hopes "we feel a sense of inclusion when we leave the theatre. I hope we . . . expand the boundaries of what we think parenting is. I always hope that the boundaries are a little . . . expanded at the end of

any play" (Bilowit 5F). In all of Vogel's plays, there is a sense of both inclusion and expansion, a generosity as well as a broadening out into less comfortable territories.

As Vogel has suggested, the three boys represent, roughly, the id (Orphan), the libido (Henri), and the superego (Cecil) (Bigsby, *Contemporary* 304). In this sense, the children are a materialization of the women's emotional life. The characters enable a range of emotional expression, as well as a variety of hilarious scenarios. This is less impersonation than it is an exaggeration of psychic impulses, a concretization of emotional energy, and a conscious incorporation of fantasy into the activities of daily life. Moreover, the children enable the women to voice what might otherwise be considered childish and socially unacceptable feelings of anxiety regarding the major upheaval they are all about to experience. Anna-as-Cecil says to Ruth as Henri about all three of the adults: "They're not themselves. Ever since that baby" to which Henri replies, "Yeah. I hate that baby" (94).

As the children start to dominate the household, Peter begins to feel both alienated and frustrated, and like many soon-to-be fathers, he feels left out. Thus, the three adults agree that, as Ruth says, "We're going to tidy up the plots. No loose ends dangling. Starting tomorrow. We're going to kill them" (84). Yet, as the most imaginatively committed of the house, Ruth also insists, "I want to get my last inch of fantasy out of them" (84). As they kill off the boys one by one—with much more creativity than George's symbolic murder of his and Martha's son—there is, of course, a sense of loss, but also a sense of genuine panic at the finality, and drudgery, of a life without fantasy. Ruth says to Anna, "I don't see why we can't change the…the narrative at this point," to which Anna replies, "We can't stop now. Not in the middle of the story" (105; ellipsis in original). The

metatheatrical undertones are unmistakable; however, there is also a literal sense of fantasy taking on its own reality, its own logical trajectory, and its own set of emotional meanings. By giving an embodied dimension to the imaginary children, Vogel brings fantasy into material visibility, while breaking away from binary notions of identity.

Perhaps the most metatheatrical—and the most humorous—scene is Orphan's highly dramatic death scene. Coming home after getting groceries, Anna discovers Ruth-as-Orphan bound and gagged. After diagnosing Orphan with rabies, Ruth decides that it is time to put him down. Quoting texts as diverse as *The Exorcist*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, Ibsen's *Ghosts*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Lassie*, Orphan expresses his primal fear of death and the psychosis that emerges in the liminal moments between life and death. The polyvocality of this scene emphasizes the ways in which the voice can articulate the divergent aspects within an individual person: "Fuck Me, Jesus!" "Out, d-damned spot," "Mother, give me the sun," "that unwashed gggggrrr-grape has transported her soul" and "woof, woof, woof" (88) constitute an intertextual montage that works as a parody of popular and highbrow representations of possession, death, and, most significantly, madness. Indeed, Ruth's ventriloquism of classic and popular canonical texts works as a burlesque of mad scenes, as well as a parody of famous death scenes, comic revisions that implicitly ask the question: Who gets the last word?

The reference to Blanche Dubois from Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* is, perhaps, the most salient. Ruth channels the line, "that unwashed gggggrrr-grape has transported her soul" (88; *Streetcar* 136), which Blanche recites as she is being taken away by to the psychiatric hospital. In this context, Ruth's parody of madness operates as a burlesque of dramatic depictions of unconventional female sexuality as a form of

psychosis. Blanche's marriage to Allen Grey, who was both younger and gay, and her reputed sexual promiscuity, characterizes her sexuality as deviant, which then emerges in the play as a form of psychosis. As Anca Vlasopolos writes, "Blanche's fall from authority, her subjection, is masterfully captured by Williams in her being turned over to the supreme authority in charge of language, in charge of interpreting the past and predicting the future in the twentieth century: psychiatry, the scientific judgment of the soundness of the soul" (325). In contrast to Blanche's pathologized sexuality is Stella, the embodiment of traditional femininity, which is aligned with what is real, true, and sane. Blanche's antagonist, however, is Stanley, the hypermasculinized counterpart to her hyperfeminized performance. Ruth, Anna, and Peter could be read as a burlesque of Blanche, Stella, and Stanley. Anna and Stella, both pregnant, embody a conventional, fecund femininity, Peter and Stanley act as the masculine antagonistic force, and Ruth and Blanche represent unconventional sexual impulses and a belief in the reality of fantasy.

The tension in *Streetcar*, as in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, is between illusion and truth, masculine dominance and female submission. And both plays conclude with a reassertion of male dominance (associated with truth) and female submission (associated with illusion). In both Williams's and Albee's play, the women are dispossessed, while the men maintain the power to define what is real. In scene seven of *Streetcar*, Blanche sings the popular ballad, "It's Only a Paper Moon," which expresses her definition of reality as being the product of a mutual creation between willing participants. As long as two people believe in the same illusion, the song suggests, "it wouldn't be make-believe" (*Streetcar* 99). Significantly, as Blanche sings her ballad, Stanley relates to Stella the

rumors of Blanche's affair with a seventeen-year-old boy. Juxtaposing Blanche's definition of what is real with Stanley's revelation of her sexual history underscores the tension between reality and illusion as the power to define the meaning of Blanche's sexuality. And, in this play, her sexuality is a form of madness.

In *Baby* the distinctions between illusion and reality, masculine dominance and female submission are humorously dismantled. What the play is concerned with is the ways in which different registers of reality are constructed and the struggles involved in negotiating who has the authority to do the constructing. And this authority is not determined, in Vogel's play-world, according to gender or sexuality, but according to ongoing negotiations with the historical texts of which we are all products. In this sense, identity is a collection of quotations, a collage of our cultural identifications and disavowals. And in the "mad scene," Ruth-as-Orphan is possessed by the texts that constitute her identity as a woman, a lesbian, and as a character in a death scene.

Ruth and Anna exploit the rupture between language and the body, thereby theatricalizing the excess of significations that embodied performance inevitably unleashes. In this sense, they are ventriloquists. Challenging the authority of the speaking subject as the originator of the words they speak, ventriloquism exaggerates the disconnection between the speaking body and the words spoken. In this sense, it produces both a defamiliarizing and camp effect. Vogel mobilizes ventriloquism to emphasize the polyvocality of the individual speaker, a polyvocality that expands the bounds of communication even as it destabilizes any sense of autonomous selfhood. Doing away with the notion of linguistic sovereignty and the authenticity and originality of the

speaker, ventriloquism instead allows for communicative play—impersonation, role-playing, and fantasy scenarios.

As with Shklovsky's defamiliarization, the effect of ventriloquism is not physical but perceptual. Defined as "[t]he art or practice of speaking or producing sounds in such a manner that the voice appears to proceed from some person or object other than the speaker, and usually at some distance from him" (OED), ventriloquism represents a perceptual dislocation—spatially and temporally—between the speaker and words spoken. With its etymological roots in fears of witchcraft, ventriloquism also has an interesting connection to the history of "deviant" femininity. [43] As a "devil with language," Martha is a ventriloquist, in this historical sense of the word. Anna, Peter, and Ruth in *Baby* are literally possessed (often hilariously) by cultural texts and discourses, and in this way, they ventriloquize contemporary culture, even as they reinvent and reconfigure family structures. In *Baby*, the defamiliarizing effect of a voice spoken by an incongruous body underscores the fact that our identities are a patchwork of internalized identifications, and thus can never be anything but contradictory and fragmentary.

Shoshana Felman's compelling examination of Austin's theory of performativity brings the body into discussions of performativity. Indeed, this embodied performativity underscores the very incongruity that *Baby* theatricalizes—the incongruity between body and voice. Moreover, Felman historicizes this incongruity, by bringing together Austin and Marx, as each seeks, in different ways, to articulate the conundrum of the individual body and the collective meanings its enacts:

Marx was above all preoccupied with the schism between "force" and "meaning":

[43] Interestingly, the first use of the term ventriloquism came in 1584, in a text called, *Discovery of Witchcraft:* "A wench, practising hir diabolicall witchcraft and ventriloquie" (OED). Moreover, it was thought that the ventriloquized voices were ghosts, voices from the grave.

> it is precisely this schism that he christened "ideology." Marx, in other words, like Austin, was preoccupied with the *disparity* between "saying" and "doing"—insofar as this disparity is constitutive of the ambiguous, problematic, contradictory truth of the *social speaking body*. Austin and Marx can thus be seen as materialists of the speaking body. (107)

Vogel, too, is a kind of materialist of the social speaking—and performing—body, as she examines, from multiple perspectives, the fissures between the speaking body and the history that her body speaks. In this play, the disparity allows for openings into new ways of thinking about identity, performance, and the meaning and force embedded in the notion of family.

The family is perhaps the most symbolically and historically laden institution in American culture. As Vogel was writing the first draft of *Baby* in the early 1980s, the pro-family movement had crystallized as a powerful cultural force. Emerging in reaction to the women's liberation movement, the gay rights movement, the invention of the birth control pill, and the landmark *Roe v Wade* decision in 1973, this movement was (and is) an attempt by the Christian right to preserve the stability and sanctity of the family as a national institution. Sociologist Judith Stacey argues that "The Reagan period was indeed the time when the once-modern familial and social order had become the past" while "the meaning of its passing shifted decidedly to the right" (94). The reaction to the women's movement, in particular, saw a backlash in the form of "a nostalgia for the modern family, and even for patriarchal kinship patterns [both] within feminism as well as elsewhere" (94).

The pro-family movement is defined by what it rejects—gay rights, feminism, divorce, and abortion rights—and it has had enormous effects on peripheral areas, such as art censorship and school curriculums (Hunter 188-9). As one of its most visible

spokespeople, Anita Bryant, a second runner up for Miss America in 1959, launched her campaign to save the family in the 1970s, primarily through ongoing attacks against homosexuals, whom she viewed as the primary threat to the traditional family. The Miss America pageant has recently spawned yet another spokesperson for homophobia and the preservation of traditional family structures, Miss California 2009, Carrie Prejean. Since her comments against gay marriage, Prejean has become a spokesperson for the National Organization of Marriage (Dobuzinski), defending the sanctity of heterosexual marriage while at the same time trying to explain the topless photographs that were taken of her. Significantly, both Bryant's and Prejean's hyperfemininity is held up as the image to promote the American family and to fight against homosexuality. Their hyperbolic display of conventional femininity is a reassuring message that heterosexuality and masculine power is not, in fact, being threatened, and the family will continue to be the realm in which gender and heterosexuality are reproduced as normatively as possible. In the twenty-first century, the notion of the nuclear family continues to have strong emotional and ideological force in America, despite the fact that few families fit that definition. The persistence of the ideology of family is due in part, to the dearth of representations depicting alternative ways of creating family.

An expansion of constructions of family requires, first and foremost, an interrogation of heterosexist constructions of gender. One way of doing that is by viewing gender as not only a role but also as a kind of cultural trope. As Anne Fausto-Sterling writes, "If nature really offers us more than two sexes, then it follows that our current notions of masculinity and femininity are cultural conceits" (376).[44] This notion of gender as a conceit is enacted by Ruth and Anna's fantasy life, as they slip seamlessly from feminine

[44] Fausto-Sterling is Vogel's wife. They were married in Massachusetts on September 26, 2004.

positions to not-yet matured masculine positions. The incongruity of Anna, for instance, as a pregnant lesbian woman, acting like a bright nine-year old boy, does more than disrupt the symmetry between sex and gender; this incongruity suggests that the significations we attach to gender are somewhat absurd fictions. Moreover, when Henri (played by Ruth) tries to seduce Peter, declaring, "I want to have your baby!" (66), all traditional systems for understanding gender and sexuality suddenly become insufficient. Indeed, Henri's erotic attachment to Peter suggests that fantasy enables one to perform their sexuality beyond the limiting binaries of homosexual/heterosexual, male/female. Not only is the notion of "family" expanded at the end of this play, but of sexuality and gender. Yet, when first staged in 1984, *Baby* was not kindly received by lesbians, largely due to the gender of the imaginary children and their role in the women's private life. However, as Vogel insists, "I don't speak for all lesbians and I don't want to" (Druckman H6).

Although *Baby* is Vogel's most "out" play, its depiction of a lesbian relationship does not fit with the "butch-femme aesthetic" that Sue-Ellen Case developed in her path-breaking essay. Fusing Jean Baudrillard's notion of feminine seduction, Joan Riviere's theorization of womanly masquerade, and camp, Case describes the butch-femme couple as the "dynamic duo" (283), who can reveal masculine and feminine roles *as* roles, and thus create a feminist subject position that is "outside ideology" (283, 292). If only ideology had such an easily attainable "outside." Case champions the butch-femme couple as "playfully inhabiting the camp space of irony and wit, free from biological determinism, elitist essentialism, and the heterosexist cleavage of sexual difference" (298). Vogel's representation of gender does not use parody, or even irony, to try to free

the female body from biological determinism. Rather, she suggests that biology itself is laden with cultural significations. Vogel is less concerned with finding an elusive outside to ideology, and more concerned with finding ways to look at what seems natural and self-evident within dominant ideologies. In *Baby*, this examination is performed through a ventriloquism of classic texts and a comedic imitation of identity formation within family structures.

Susan A. Glenn points out that social and theatrical concepts of imitation dominated both vaudeville and burlesque, and were "fueled by contemporary fascination with mass production, the role of the artist as critical observer, and debates about the significance of imitation for the constitution of the self" (76). Thus, imitation became a theatrical tool that enabled women to mobilize "a cultural reorientation toward new concepts of selfhood" (88). Since, as Glenn points out, "To imitate is not only to copy; it was also to invent something new" (95). Related to camp humor, imitation is a system of humor "that does not cover up, [but] transforms" (Newton 109). What animates *Baby* is precisely this transformative effect of humor and imitation, which infuses all realms of daily life, from getting groceries to plotting elaborately staged death scenes. Indeed, as Bigsby contends, "The fact is that this trio constitute a comedy act" (*Contemporary* 305).

The form of *Baby* resembles a kind of sketch comedy routine, with the "straight" parts between Anna, Ruth, and Peter, interspersed with the more slapstick parts where the children take over. The incongruity of these juxtapositions, similar to those in *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, is meant to confound audience expectations and reorient habits of spectatorship. Vogel says:

> I think the structure of the play *is* the meaning of the play. These three people are taking a journey, and it's a journey that a lot of people face at some point in

> their lives, which is that kind of insane crisis period just before you have a child, when you know your entire life will change but you're not sure how. . . . And there is that sense of high anxiety and great exuberance and hope, and fear. There is a sense of comic crisis in the structure of the play itself. (Bilowit 5F)

And, as Vogel insists, "where there's conflict, there's comedy" (5F). Indeed, even in the deaths of the children, there is comedy, as each one goes out in a kind of mock-tragedy, which both parodies high drama and underscores the creative (and therapeutic) possibilities of performance. The comic crisis in *Baby* is reminiscent of the broad comedy and physical humor of vaudeville. Since the family is constructed as the glue that binds together American society and vaudeville was part of the consolidation of the American middle class, it is fitting to bring the two together in a vaudevillian revision of the American family.

Both vaudeville and burlesque reached their apex of popularity in 1910. However, while burlesque appealed to a working class male audience, vaudeville aspired toward a more respectable reputation among the middle-class.[45] As Robert W. Snyder writes in his study of vaudeville in New York City, "By the 1890s, immigration and industrialization had made New Yorkers a people of divergent nationalities, religions, races, and classes—all of them wrestling, it seemed, with the definition of proper roles for men and women" (xv). Although vaudeville became gradually more restrained and self-censoring, "Vaudeville's great characteristic was not that it reduced people to a uniform mass, but that it spoke to and with a highly varied public that was divided by class, ethnicity, and

[45] Allen distinguishes vaudeville from burlesque in the following way: "Although some variety acts played both burlesque and vaudeville in the 1890s and despite the fact that the two forms today are often confused, their underlying principles were as different as night and day. . . . Whether the impertinent impersonations of masculinity in Thomsonian burlesque, or the overlaying of gender difference on racial otherness in female minstrels, or the later running battles with municipal authorities over its sexual transgressiveness, burlesque was all the things vaudeville wanted no part of" (189).

gender" (xxii). Indeed, it was during vaudeville's attempt in the 1910s to shake off Victorian mores and to appeal to an audience of middle-class women that it became more restrained (133, 141). Like burlesque, vaudeville performed a sort of comedic negotiation of cultural difference. However, while middle-class women were taking their seats in vaudeville theatres, working class women were taking their place on the increasingly marginalized stages of burlesque theatres.

Perhaps the most successful vaudeville circuit was that of Benjamin Franklin Keith, who "publicly touted vaudeville as the realization in popular entertainment of American democratic ideals" (Allen 187). Interestingly, Keith was partners with Edward F. Albee, the grandfather of the playwright (Albee Jr. was adopted by Reed A. Albee, son of Edward F.). While, on the one hand, this is mere coincidence, it also points to the paternal lineage operating in the theatre, which is related to the paternal lineage in the theatrical and literary canon, both of which depend of the marginalization of identities and ideas that disrupt accepted standards of aesthetic and cultural values. As Allen points out, vaudeville marked the consolidation of the bourgeoisie via "the suppression of difference both in the audience and onstage" (187). By the 1920s, vaudeville, marked the successful "standardization and mass production of popular entertainment" (189). Allen goes on to argue, "Burlesque was structured around the body of the burlesque performer, its size and display foregrounding sexual difference and marking it as the body of the low other. Without the performer's body, there was no burlesque. Vaudeville had no body" (189). The distinction Allen seems to be making is that vaudeville was increasingly associated with the voice, burlesque with the female body. If Vogel's structure in *Baby* borrows from vaudeville, then it does so by highlighting, rather than suppressing,

differences within and between individuals and between her play-world and the world outside the theatre. Further, Vogel brings the body back into vaudeville, fusing burlesque's emphasis on the body with vaudeville's emphasis on the voice.

Scene four is perhaps the most vaudevillian moment in the play, and the one that best emphasizes the pleasure that fantasy can bring to simple daily tasks. Henri is in the kitchen fixing a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and singing a "*medley of Maurice Chevalier hits*" (79), when suddenly his instinctual hunger brings out Ruth's other persona—Orphan. And thus, the "*Strangeglovian battle*" ensues between Ruth two hands, "*each fighting for possession of the peanut butter and jelly*" (81). The scene works wonderfully theatrically, while also comically rendering the often conflicted and contradictory nature of identity. It reinforces that we are not the sole author of our actions, that we internalize conflicting impulses that disrupt any sense of stable selfhood. By acting those contradictions out, Ruth-as-Henri-and-Orphan transform what is typically conceived of as psychic fragmentation into a comedic performance of a multiply divided identity. Just as vaudeville played out cultural contradictions on the stage, so to do we enact them in our everyday tasks.

Perhaps the most poignant scene of the play occurs between Cecil and Peter, just before Cecil's death. It suggests the possibility of changing generational patterns, a theme running through much of Vogel's work. Changes in family patterns, Vogel suggests, ripple outward into changes in cultural patterns. When Peter expresses his anxieties about becoming a father, and about repeating the patterns that he learned from his own father figures, Cecil suggests, "just make it up on your own, this father thing, okay, Uncle Peter?" (113). Here, parenthood is demystified as the natural roles that men and women

assume as a rite of passage into heterosexual adulthood. Rather, they are roles that we learn to play, and we are not locked into performing them the same way over and over. Cecil (embodied by Anna) tells Peter, "Anna modeled me a little bit on you" (112). Here, Cecil suggests that we can choose with whom we identify, we can choose whom we take as role models, and we can choose to incorporate into our selves the best aspects of those we love. The child persona enables Anna and Peter to have an intimate moment of connection, one that reveals that Peter was not left out of the women's fantasy lives after all. Indeed, Cecil was "born," in part, from Anna's affection for and identification with Peter. And Cecil, in this exchange, assumes the position of adult, reminding Peter that, like Leslie Ann, he can change his storyline.

In Ruth, Anna, and Peter's search to find a fitting end to their imaginary children's existence, there is a suggestion of the death that happens at the end of any story. Bigsby describes *Baby* as "almost perversely metafictional," not only because of the many literary references, but also because of the parallel it draws "between the creation of a text and the creation of the child" (*Contemporary* 306). In this sense, the children's death scenes are Vogel's attempts to finish the play. Aptly, given her perspective that a play is never finished, the children come back to life at the play's end. Indeed, *Baby*'s mock-tragic, misquoted death scenes suggest something of Vogel's relationship to the canon. Stuart Hall's reformulation of theoretical work is aptly related to Vogel's engagement with the theatrical canon. Suggesting a "different metaphor for theoretical work," Hall proposes "the metaphor of struggle, of wrestling with the angels" (265-266). Vogel's theatre is just such a struggle with the canonical angels—and canonical demons like Edward Albee.

By way of conclusion, I would like to juxtapose the two closing tableaus of *Woolf* and *Baby*, while suggesting that they each represent the *gestus* of the plays themselves. In doing so, I hope to highlight their differing social messages. As Elin Diamond writes, "The explosive (and elusive) synthesis of alienation, historicization, and the 'not … but' is the Brechtian *gestus*, a gesture, a word, an action, a tableau, by which, separately or in a series, the social attitudes encoded in the playtext become visible to the spectator" (Diamond 54). Here is *Baby's* closing image, shortly after the trio's son, Nathan, is born, and diapers and a different kind of chaos become part of their daily life:

> (*We see Peter, Anna and Ruth cradling Nathan in their apartment—one apartment among hundreds of their neighbors. The lights stream from adjacent windows where other families in privacy keep their own nightly vigils. The play ends as we hear Nathan's giggles and squeals*). (125)

This reverse zoom contextualizes this new family within the larger cultural sphere, while theatre—literally "a place to see"—intrudes voyeuristically on this private moment. The end, therefore, offers a moment of public witness to the changing configurations of family structures in the late twentieth century, a period that is "*after* the modern family order but before what we cannot foretell" (Stacey 96). It is in this emergent, not-yet defined space that Vogel's play participates in what Jill Dolan calls "a utopian performative," in which performance releases the audience from "the inhibiting restraints of the 'as is' for the more liberatory possibilities of the 'what if'" which is a perspective that speaks to the "common human need to hope" (21), and works to redefine "concepts and values once held dear but more recently exhausted under the terms of postmodernism and the political ascendancy of a hardly compassionate American conservatism" (20), concepts such as "humanity," "*love, truth,* and *beauty*" (163). Significantly, the play begins and ends with a creation story of sorts. The Prologue features the three boys

talking squeamishly about "how baby's come to be made" (63). The play's Epilogue offers a different creation story, a cultural counterpart to the biological one that begins the play. It is a story of how families come to be made—and remade. This closing tableau is a kind of collective experience of a moment that is both shared and private. It is, in every sense of the word, an expansive theatrical moment.

Compare this with the closing image of *Woolf*, as Martha utters her final line, in complete submission to George's performative taunt, "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?": "I … am … George …. I … am …." (*George nods, slowly*) (*Silence; tableau*) (242; ellipsis in original). In the film version, the two are positioned so that Martha (Elizabeth Taylor) is sitting with George (Richard Burton) standing over her, which concretizes their newly established power dynamic. George's performative authority needs no vocalization, only a silent nod to confirm Martha's submission. Further, the silence rings cold and empty in comparison to Nathan's squeals. In *Baby*'s multidimensional world, the imaginary children can coexist with the new child. Here, fantasy is generative, not destructive. The *gestus* of *Woolf* is, finally, a restoration of a competitive masculine virility through the purging of female discursive power. Conversely, the *gestus* of *Baby* is reconception of the very structures through and on which those power dynamics are defined and enacted—fantasy and family. While language and fantasy are used as weapons in *Woolf*, in *Baby*, they are used to create a sense of vitality in everyday life and connection within our relationships. Vogel's play, above all, emphasizes the necessity of an expansive imagination, both in animating everyday life and in envisioning social change. As Butler writes, "What happens at the level of cultural fantasy is not finally dissociable from the ways in which material life is organized" (*Undoing* 214).

The play was first staged in 1984 at the 18th Street playhouse in New York City, directed by Vogel herself. After substantial revisions, the play was produced again in 1993 in New York, by Circle Repertory. In his unfavorable review of the 1993 production, Michael Feingold describes Ruth and Anna as resembling "two borderline psychotics" (97). Feingold structures his review around a comparison between *Baby* and Vogel's earlier, critically celebrated work, *Baltimore Waltz*, stating that *Waltz* exemplifies "more creative uses for [Vogel's] sense of fantasy." He concludes with the hope that "her next play has less coyness, and a stronger sense of pain" (97). There is a faint trace of the "bedrock of suffering" that Schechner thought was so totally lacking in Albee's play. Why is it that great drama requires suffering? This smacks of a Christian notion of salvation through suffering, transformed into aesthetic criticism. A review of a 2002 production of *Baby* in Melbourne, Australia, offers a more incisive reading of the play. "What makes *And Baby Makes Seven* fascinating is not its lesbian parenting, or its ménage à trois, but its brilliant unsettling of our notions, not of sexual boundaries, but of the 'real'" (Thomson 4). Indeed, the vibrant theatricality of Vogel's play stages fantasy as the energetic undercurrent of change. As Butler states, "The critical promise of fantasy . . . is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings that elsewhere home" (*Undoing* 29).

It is just this capacity of fantasy to "imagine ourselves and others otherwise" that Vogel's theatre makes possible. Through the theatricalization of the everyday, Vogel suggests the ways in which public and private fantasies intersect, producing and

reproducing one another. Fantasy is shown, in Vogel's plays, to structure the social identities and relations we perform in daily life. Unlike the dramatic worlds of Albee and Shepard, in which little change is suggested or even imaginable, Vogel's play-worlds continually invoke a history of images and texts, bodies and voices that convey contradictory messages, while simultaneously offering the possibility of reinterpreting these messages. By restructuring the way we see and receive these cultural messages, Vogel's theatre reminds us of the possibility of social change, the necessity of an expansive imagination, and the reality that a story—and history—is always open to revision.

III. Chapter 3: A Burlesque of American Social History: *The Mammary Plays*

> I actually take what I do as a playwright very seriously. I'm always asking, "What should we do? What should playwrights do?" Go back and look at what the Greeks did. One could not be a Greek playwright and write a tragedy without writing a satiric comedy on the same subject.
>
> Vogel, "Women in Theatre"

> Comedy is complicity.
>
> Vogel, Interview with Holmberg

At least since Aristotle, comedy has been viewed as a less important form than tragedy. While comedy is often bawdy and base, tragedy appeals to the more noble emotions of suffering, pity, and fear. Tragedy's fate-driven, linear plots and cathartic conclusions have long been the hallmark of high drama, while comedy has traditionally been seen as "an imitation of those who are inferior," involving no actual suffering, "no pain or destruction" (Aristotle 23). From within the context of American culture, Susan Sontag points out that, although "comedy and tragedy divide the dramatic universe" (135), tragedy has never fit comfortably within the American dramatic tradition, perhaps because its deterministic view goes against the national disposition toward optimism and a belief in progress. Comedy, however, has continued to be one of most productive and vital popular forms in American culture, with its emphasis on "conscious self-manipulation," "invulnerability" to serious suffering, and "role-playing" (135) resonating with a nation that views individual and collective identities as never fixed, mobility as always possible, and change as inevitable. Not only does comedy's depiction of a mutable world suggest the possibility of transformation, but it also foregrounds the experiences of the ordinary person, rather than a person of nobility, thereby appealing to the democratic impulses in American culture.

In popular culture, comedy, like the musical, has offered interesting and complex ways of approaching the political. Since these genres do not carry with them the burdensome expectations of moral edification or intellectual provocation (even though they often do provoke moral questioning and intellectual thought), they can approach the political from the perspective of pleasure and enjoyment. Indeed, comedy and the musical are, in many ways, the political voice in American culture. From Charlie Chaplin and the Marx Brothers to Stephen Colbert and "Saturday Night Live," comedy is the medium of American political criticism. In his study of American film comedy, Christopher Beach points to film comedy as "an intriguing instance of a popular form that provides moments of genuine social critique while also fulfilling its primary function as a source of mass entertainment" (3). In relation to the differences between male and female comics, Stephen Wagg adds, "The gender of a comedian always affects the production and reception of comedy" (305). Indeed, Susan A. Glenn points out, "The female comic who uses satire, irony, and other forms of social criticism to poke fun at contemporary values and mores has historically been seen as a transgressor of women's traditional stance of social and intellectual subordination" (43). Women who are publicly funny implicitly position themselves within a history that has sought to keep their voice private and apolitical.

Traditionally, male writers, performers, and directors have dominated comedy in both film and theatre. While preparing to write *Mineola Twins*, Vogel wondered, "Would it be funny if women told the jokes?" ("Women in Theatre"). Vogel argues, "comedy is very hard for women to do. Comedy is traditionally a critique of society, and we still have problems accepting critiques from prodigal daughters, as I call them" (Interview with

Greene 430). Traditionally, the female comic has achieved success primarily through grotesquerie. Glenn argues that women comics made humor out of their perceived excess: "Too-muchness—too much fat, too much noise, too much physicality, too much political or worldly ambition, too much of whatever exceeds the normative standards of femininity—has provided the comic grist in many different societies" (46-47). Women making fun of themselves and their performative excesses are very much in line with Robertson's definition of feminist camp, which she argues allows women to distance themselves from their own image "by making fun of, and out of, that image" (17). However, what happens when women comics go beyond a parody of femininity, and offer a parodic critique of the social values that define its limits? And what if they cast themselves as the center of action? That is, what would happen if women were positioned as both vocal social critic and performing social body?

Women in comedy have often met with resistance from both fellow male comics and audiences that cannot reconcile a woman being both a speaking voice and a body to be looked at. In a recent interview in a popular women's magazine with some of the most talented comics of the last five decades, one thing was evident: things have changed, for the better, if you are a woman in comedy. The older generation, Joan Rivers, Penny Marshall, and Phyllis Diller, all agreed that comedy was, from the 1950s up to the 1990s, an unabashed boys club, and the only way to be successful as a female comic was to be as unattractive as possible. Joan Rivers said, "Phyllis Diller used to dress like a fool," while Jay Leno stated, "They used to say in the 60s and 70s that if you were an attractive woman, you couldn't be a comedian because it would be really distracting" (Kohen 106). Margaret Cho agrees, stating, "I remember seeing beautiful girls do stand-up, and it was a

disaster every time. Not only were people not gonna listen to you because you were a woman, if you're good-looking, people *really* don't want to listen to you" (106). And yet, with comedians such as Sandra Bernhard, Sarah Silverman, Amy Poehler, and Tina Fey, it is no longer necessary to employ self-mockery to be a funny woman. The interview ends on an optimistic note, with "Saturday's Night Live"'s Kristen Wiig stating, "That boy's club thing . . . that I'm not familiar with. Because it seems very equal to me right now" (110).

Vogel's plays are both funny and political. Sometimes the humor is shocking, sometimes corny, sometimes slapstick, sometimes vaudeville, and often edged with loss. Vogel has said, "Whether I'm writing a comedy or a tragedy, they come from the same source. This is what I'm worried about. This is what I'm fearful about" (Hicks 18W). She uses the emotional dynamics of each form to underscore the political complexity of some the more disturbing questions of contemporary culture. Humor lures the spectator to look more closely at a social issue, while preserving its contradictions. Moreover, Vogel often uses humor as a way of expressing loss. She explains: "For me combining sadness and comedy heightens both. The collision of tones makes both more extreme" (Holmberg). In fact, the juxtaposition of two seemingly opposite emotions reveals their close proximity. What makes us cry and what makes us laugh are equally suggestive of prevailing cultural attitudes, values, and beliefs. *The Mineola Twins* (1997) and *How I Learned to Drive* (1998), published collectively as *The Mammary Plays*, are written with just such combination of sadness and humor, though with different ratios in each play. Together they tell a vivid story of young women coming of age in the last half of twentieth-century America.

The 1950s saw the beginning of an explosion of interest in and images of female sexuality, spurred to a large degree by Alfred Kinsey's 1953 publication of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*,[46] which Susan Douglas states, "suggested that some women actually liked sex and that premarital intercourse wasn't as rare as everyone thought" (63). In addition, the 1950s saw the publication of *Lolita* (1955/58) and *Lady Chatterly's Lover* (1959), while Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn* were published shortly after, in 1961. With the title's overt emphasis on bodily humor, *The Mammary Plays* insert both the body and comedy into this period of America's history, specifically the female body and the female comic. As Vogel sees it, "Breast jokes are rife with cultural anxiety about female sexuality" ("Women in Theatre"), and thus they provide a way into understanding the social codes embedded women's bodies. Describing, "how gendered matrix is at work in the constitution of materiality," Judith Butler suggests that "feminists ought to be interested, not in taking materiality as an irreducible, but in conducting a critical genealogy of its formulations" (*Bodies* 32). *The Mammary Plays* participates in just such a critical genealogy, using fake breasts and wigs to hyperbolically stage the material signs of female embodiment. These material signs reveal the cultural history inscribed in women's bodies and how women, in turn, enact this history, whether consciously and unconsciously, comically or tragically.

Breasts are perhaps the most publicized and parodied of female body parts. Iris Marion Young points out, "Breasts are the most visible sign of a woman's femininity, the signal of her sexuality. . . . Capitalist, patriarchal American media-dominated culture objectifies breasts before a distancing gaze that freezes and masters. The fetishized breasts are valued as objects, things" (78). This description helps explain the ways in

[46] This was the companion publication to his earlier text, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948).

which women see their own bodies as objects, becoming alienated at an early age from a coherent sense of their own embodiment. L'il Bit revealingly refers to her breasts in *Drive* as "these alien life forces, these two mounds of flesh [that] have grafted themselves onto my chest" (57). L'il Bit's large breasts immediately saturate her body with sexual significations, before she is old enough to understand what those significations mean. Her chest elicits reactions—from both men and women—that create a rupture between her sense of self as speaking subject and as a visual object. Vogel's plays highlight the history of the female body, a history that is inevitably bound up with the culture that produces it as an intelligible body. With the breasts as a social *gestus*, *The Mammary Plays* stage the sexualized bodies and political voices of women, during a period of American social history that, in many ways, worked to keep them separate.

In order to highlight the relationship between gender and genre, I would like set Sam Shepard's *True West* (1980) alongside Vogel's *Twins*, and Nabokov's *Lolita* next to *Drive*. It is indeed part of Vogel's broader burlesque strategy to defamiliarize and resignify texts such as these and the male-centered worlds they represent. However, the balance of this chapter shifts slightly. Rather than spending as much time talking about the canonical intertexts of Vogel's *Mammary Plays*, I would like to treat *Mineola Twins* and *How I Learned to Drive* as dialectical counterparts to each other. That is, I would like to examine the ways in which *Twins* burlesques the social questions raised in *Drive*. Vogel's comment that *Twins* is "the burlesque version of *Drive*" ("Women in Theatre") has, in fact, been a major inspiration for the way this entire study has been framed. This point in Vogel's writing career seems to signal a shift away from a direct response to a past text or texts, and toward a broader dialogue with national politics and social history,

as well as a more involved engagement with rewriting her own work. In these plays, and in the plays discussed in the following chapter, her tone becomes at once more personal and intimate as well as more political and historical. In this sense, her burlesque strategy involves both emotional exposure and social satire. In *The Mammary Plays*, the camp aesthetic and burlesque dramaturgy that I have been teasing out in Vogel's work comes to an apex, dramatizing the humor and empathy, exposure and concealment, the comedy and tragedy of American (white, middle-class) femininity and American politics in the last half of twentieth century.

Mineola Twins and *How I Learned to Drive* take two very different journeys along the same timeline, covering the period from the 1950s to the beginning of first Bush administration. Alongside Vogel's plays, which might be positioned culturally as upper-middlebrow,[47] I would like to examine two other cultural fields, both of which participate in the production of women as a sexualized spectacle: popular culture and its low counterpart, burlesque. All three fields—theatre, popular culture, and burlesque—are interrelated areas of cultural production, generating and disseminating images of femininity, which are then internalized, performed, reproduced by consumers. Like *The Mammary Plays*, burlesque foregrounds the eroticization of the female body, while using humor to address cultural attitudes and beliefs, and both place women center stage, as both sexual bodies and speaking subjects. In addition, since the signs, sounds, and images of 1950s and 1960s popular culture pervade *The Mammary Plays*, a particular focus will

[47] In *Highbrow/Lowdown*, Savran argues, "the paradoxical triumph during the 1920s of a commercial theater that was constantly insisting it was really an art theatre . . . firmly consolidated the upper-middlebrow status of the legitimate stage" (142). While I would argue that Vogel's plays could be categorized as upper-middlebrow, the cultural positioning of any play must take into account the venue, audience, and overall context of its production and reception, and not just the play itself. Moreover, location does not necessary determine the cultural position of a work. For example, the stage version of *Shrek*, playing on Broadway, is middlebrow; David Mamet's *Race*, also on Broadway, is upper-middlebrow.

be on the ways in which they have produced an iconic femininity that still persists today. This emphasis on popular culture is meant to provide a broad context for the broad comedy of *Twins*, as well as subtler comedy of *Drive*, while pointing to the ways in which these images continue to participate in marketing the female body as a sexualized spectacle.

In the 1950s, burlesque split into several different cultural forms. It was simultaneously domesticated, projected onto the film screen, and pushed down the cultural ranks into strip clubs and exotic dancing. This is an apt example of the complex and contradictory movements of cultural struggle. Dominant culture adopted and adapted burlesque by repackaging and remarketing it as a form that represents three more palatable and familiar images of femininity—the mother, the film star, and the sex worker. Intriguingly, burlesque was domesticated in the 1950s, allowing women to explore their seductive sides and husbands to enjoy this exploration as their private audience. Shteir describes the genre of "music to strip by" that was marketed to married women in the 1950s. The most popular album was "How to Strip for Your Husband," which included "not just music, but its very own G-string and instruction manual" (Shteir 312).[48] Targeting of married women, I would argue, was both a way to "tame" and contain burlesque within the institutional bounds of marriage, while also keeping it alive as a profitable popular cultural form. However, what was happening simultaneously onstage was a shift from burlesque to exotic dancing. Shteir writes, "although the number

[48] In addition to instructional albums, there were also magazine articles teaching women how to strip for their husbands. Shteir describes this new form of stripping pedagogy, stating, "Some of these articles purported to educate women 'how to.' Indeed, in 1937, *Life* ran a titillating feature titled 'How a Wife Should Undress'" (197-8).

of burlesque halls nationwide had dropped from 60 to 25, the number of exotic dancers had quadrupled" (288). Sex, it seems, was usurping comedy.

Yet, at this point, burlesque was still considered a form of comedy. Shteir explains the fusion of popular forms, writing, "Striptease took all of vaudeville's elements and eroticized them through music and form (121), pointing out further how many postwar burlesque performers believed that "striptease was comedy, as well as being the only popular art form America had produced" (325). Indeed, striptease became women's comedic voice in American culture and a vibrant part of popular culture. And yet, with the infusion of sexuality into burlesque, which was inseparable from its feminization, it simultaneously became something to be contained and something to be commodifed. Thus, the voice of the burlesque performer was contained, while her body was commodifed.

By the 1960s, the division between the stripper's body and her voice was total. Gone were the pasties, the humor, and the direct engagement between audience and performer. In its place, came the silent exchange of money between performer and (usually male, heterosexual) spectator. The lines became clearly drawn: She does not talk to him and he cannot touch her; she offers her body for his pleasure and he shows his gratitude by giving her money; she remains silent and he shouts suggestively at will. The proliferation of sexual images and public expressions of sexuality in the 1960s made classic burlesque seem out-dated, while striptease became defined increasingly as sex work. Shteir writes, "Whereas in the Jazz Age the dance craze had worked to create striptease, in the early sixties a new dance craze, go-go, pushed striptease further to the cultural margins" (317).

[49] The increased visibility of sexualized women in popular culture and her marketability produced her more commodified, yet less visible dialectical counterpart, the stripper. Although the differences between the stripper and the burlesque striptease performer are, I believe, more crucially located around issues of voice and visibility, the distinguishing detail, for legal purposes, is the disappearance of the pasties. Full breast exposure is not allowed in burlesque shows, only in strip clubs, and, as Shteir writes, "The road to the disappearing bra was paved by the shrinking skirt" (317).

The emerging women's liberation movement also worked to push striptease onto the darker stages of male-dominated strip clubs. Understandably, feminists wanted to move away from being defined solely through their sexuality, and thus saw striptease as "part of the widespread tyranny against women, something created by a capitalist and patriarchal culture to imprison them without their knowledge" (Shteir 330). The massively influential publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) encouraged women to cultivate a sense of self-awareness during a period when postwar gender roles were no longer fulfilling for all for women (or all men). Friedan's aim in her book was to address this reduction of women to the domestic roles assigned to them:

> the problem for woman today is not sexual but a problem of identity. . . . My thesis is that as Victorian culture did not permit women to accept or gratify their basic sexual needs, our culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfill their potentialities as human beings, a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role. (77)

The 1960s was a time of dissent, disagreement, and contestation. And women were at the center of these struggles, defining their political voices in ways that would create a shift

[49] Go-go dancers are a consistent feature of neoburlesque shows. The dancers provide entertainment during the intermission and are the only performers to solicit money from the audience while they dance. The other burlesque performers typically come out after the show to pass around a bucket for their tips. This allows a chance for a verbal exchange between the performer and audience members.

in consciousness and take shape in the 1970s Women's Liberation movement. Vogel's *Mammary Plays* situate women at the center of this political struggle. In particular, *The Mineola Twins* adapts the theme of the warring siblings to stage the polarization in American politics, while theatricalizing the myriad ways in which white, middle-class American women have been both products and producers of American culture. Shepard's *True West* also invokes the theme of the warring siblings, and yet it does so in order to reproduce the myth of a masculine quest for individualism, which has served as a founding nation-forming narrative for many western cultures.

Ford Cars and Maidenform Bras: Gender and Popular Culture in Mineola Twins

This ad was printed in the June 1956 issue of *Good Housekeeping*. Accessed online on July 9, 2009: http://www.vintageadsandstuff.com/viewmaidenform49.jpeg

Revealing her deliberate shift to comedy, Vogel admits, "The *Mineola Twins* was created by me thinking, 'Okay, I wrote *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, it's time for me to laugh'" ("Time to Laugh" 24). She has also suggested, "*The Mineola Twins* is very much me rethinking *And Baby Makes Seven*" (Interview with Savran 281). Taken together, *Twins* may be described as a domestic comedy written as political farce. Vogel describes the broader, national scope of the play as follows:

> I have been extremely upset at the Republican right taking over our Government. So I thought, okay, let's go back to the 50s, with its quintessential combination of comedy and terror. As a culture then, we went into science fiction, invaders from Mars, instead of looking at those who were invading us from within…. We used our fear of aliens to mask our terror at what was the heart of America. I used the image of twins that war: Jacob and Easu, a blood hatred between them. It's where we are emotionally as a country. (Witchel 5)

Vogel positions *Twins* within the long history of warring twins, competing brothers, and split male protagonists. Inserting the story of Myrna and Myra into this tradition, Vogel suggests that there is another version of the cultural myth, one that presumes that women are active political subjects that shape history. From this perspective, I would like to position *Twins* as a burlesque of Sam Shepard's *True West* (1980), another play about warring siblings, Lee and Austin. This comparison will, I hope, highlight the role of gender in cultural mythologies, the function of genre (specifically realism and the western) in the fabrication of these mythologies, and the process of consecration at work in the reception of Shepard's play.

The theme of battling twins, with its Biblical resonance and cultural significance, has traditionally been a masculine theme. If female twins are used in theatre or film, it is for the purposes of sexual humor, rather than political symbolism. Two longstanding

narratives in this tradition are the story of Cain and Abel, sons of Adam and Eve, and the story of Jacob and Esau, sons of Isaac and Rebecca. The story of Cain and Abel has been revised in literary texts from Dante's *Purgatory* to John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* and *Of Mice and Men*), suggesting the continued influence of this narrative. This enduring relevance lies, I believe, in the way the fraternal conflict participates in the symbolic construction of the moral categories of good and evil. That this morality is constituted and preserved through male violence is significant, since it suggests that the moral foundation of societies is constituted through the crisis of dualistic masculinity. All of these narratives seek to resolve this dualism into a masculine individualism. And the continued revisions of the story of Cain and Abel, as well as Jacob and Esau and Shepard's brothers, perpetuate and reaffirm this tradition. We can perhaps recognize *West*'s brothers in Cain's insistence, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:10).

The story of Jacob and Esau is significant to this discussion since it is a nation-forming narrative. Both brothers became fathers of nations, suggesting the myth's broader political significance. Jacob, the "good" twin, was later renamed Israel, and was made the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Esau, the "bad" twin, becomes the father of the doomed nation of Edom. At war with one another even in the womb, Jacob and Esau embody the notion of primal conflict in human societies, as well as the moral distinctions between good and evil. (Genesis 25-36). Interestingly, Vogel's twins seem at first to fit into this tradition, since they embody divided aspects of a cultural collective and designated with the moral categories of "good" and "bad." However, their respective goodness and badness are rooted in their sexual dispositions, and not their social positions. Thus, although they are constituted *by* moral categories, they are not invested

with the authority to constitute these categories. Shepard's brothers are the more easily recognized inheritors of this tradition, since they evoke established icons of American masculinity that are inextricably tied to constructions of a mythic national identity.

Like *Twins*, Shepard's *True West* depicts two siblings in conflict. Yet, while Vogel's twins represent a divided collective, Shepard's represent a divided male psyche. Shepard explains his play by contending, "I think we [men are] split in a much more devastating way than psychology can reveal" (qtd in Weber, "Role Reversal" AR 10). That is, as argued in the previous chapter, Vogel's female characters are situated as part of a broader historical and cultural body politic, while Shepard's male characters represent the divided inner landscape of male subjectivity. In *True West*, Lee and Austin represent a revision of the classic theme of warring siblings. The uncivilized and individualistic Lee makes his way through life as a petty thief, while the Ivy-league educated Austin earns his living as a Hollywood screenwriter. Implicitly, then, Lee's life of rough and rugged realities are set against Austin's life of domesticated and clichéd illusions. The action of the play unfolds from within the suburban house of brothers' mother, who is away in the "other" last frontier, Alaska. Just beyond the suburban limits lies the unnamed desert, where the family's absent father lives in poverty. The play begins as Lee bursts into the house, disrupting Austin as he writes a screenplay while house-sitting for his mother. The tension builds as Lee begins to take Austin's place as screenwriter, weaver of cultural fantasies, and Austin becomes the erratic and violent renegade. In short, they each turn into the other.

The masculinities that the brothers embody signify aspects of American national identity. David Krasner argues that Austin and Lee evoke the two American icons:

"corporate success and the lone cowboy," which "represent America's twin paradigms of wealth and individualism" (110). As a husband and father, Austin is the successful corporate man, while Lee's rugged, not to mention criminal, individualism is an alluring and enduring emblem of American masculinity. Shepard describes *True West* as follows: "At its heart is a conflict between the intellect and the emotions, the physical wild man part and the reasonable intellectual side. You know, what it really means to be a man" (qtd in Weber AR 10). Shepard's conflict is both masculine and individualistic. That is, the disintegration of a unified of masculinity is an individual, psychic conflict and not a broader cultural problem. Wendy Lesser writes, "On the superficial plot level (and—perhaps regrettably—on a deeper psychological level), *True West* is about two brothers who are opposites" (18). Curiously, however, both Shepard and his critics treat the brothers, and the masculinities they represent, as irreconcilable oppositions, rather than dialectical counterparts. In this sense, Lee and Austin are not irreconcilably divided; they are indivisible.[50]

Like Vogel, Shepard incorporates a variety of comedic styles, from slapstick to absurdism to parody, alongside violent conflict. *True West* works, on one level, as a satire of Hollywood, the search for authenticity within a world of fabrication. As each brother begins to take on the identity of the other, comedy and violence ensues. Austin tries his hand at petty thievery, lining up toasters he stole from the neighborhood houses overnight, trying to make the perfect piece of toast. Meanwhile, Lee is writing the "true-to-life Western" (Shepard, *West* 1374) that his brother could not. When their mother returns home from Alaska at the end of the play because she hears that "Picasso's in

[50] In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams states, "Individual originally meant indivisible" (161), but due to developments in scientific, political, and economic thought, the individual is now understood as being in opposition to (rather than indivisible from) society (164).

town" (1387), she brings to the play a kind of absurdist humor, which both heightens and diffuses the tension between the two brothers. Calmly watching as Austin strangles Lee with a cord, she says to Lee, "He won't kill you. He's your brother" (1388). She repeats the same to Lee, "Well you can't kill him" (1388). Her seemingly naïve statement is significant, since it affirms that, in fact, the brothers cannot kill one another because they are two aspects of the same identity. As Raynette Smith points out, "attempts to integrate these two opposing facets of personality . . . into a complete human being are thwarted, [since] being opposites, they neutralize and destroy each other" (283). Like Myra and Myrna's attempts to destroy each other, Lee and Austin's attempts are futile, since to destroy the other is to destroy their own self. Thus, they necessarily remain in conflict. However, Vogel's play moves toward dialogue, not the destruction or unity of opposites.

Shepard's play is a self-conscious study of his own writing practice. In that sense, it is meta-theatrical in the same way as *Hot 'n' Throbbing*. However, while *Hot* positions Charlene amidst a history of discourses, Shepard positions Austin and Lee as extensions of his the individual masculine consciousness, expressions of an individual quest. As *True West* progresses, we get the sense that brothers Lee and Austin are not two separate people, but the expression of divided masculinity. As Lee says to Austin, "I always wondered what it would be like to be you" (Shepard, *West* 1376), it becomes apparent that each brother is an opposing aspect of a single male consciousness. Lee describes the dynamic in the form of the western script he is weaving in Austin's place:

> So they take off after each other straight into an endless black prairie. . . . What they don't know is that each one of them is afraid, see. Each one separately thinks that he's the only one that's afraid. And they keep riding into the night. Not knowing. And the one who's doin' the chasin' doesn't know where the other one is takin' him. And the one who's being chased doesn't know where he's going. (1377)

It is just such an endless, self-perpetuating cycle that drives all of Shepard's plays. Vogel's twins are engaged in a similarly self-perpetuating cycle; however, the Voice, both as an anti-realism device and as an aural signal toward dialogue, disrupts the seeming inevitably of this cycle. Moreover, since there is an epic historic scope in Vogel's play, the audience is better able to see the ways in which these cycles and the fears they perpetuate are products of history and are therefore changeable.

Shepard's invocation of the western genre perpetuates dualities and caters to a nostalgic yearning for an untamed (that is, undomesticated and unfeminized) masculinity. Unlike Vogel's invocation of sci-fi, which works to highlight the emotional undercurrent of the cold war era and the persistent and deferral to the easy political categories of "us" and "them," the western in Shepard's work is an exercise in nostalgic recuperation of a past in which those categories were clearly marked. As John Clum argues, pointing out that Shepard was weaned on the westerns of the 1940s and 50s, "The postwar American Western was always an exercise in nostalgia" (184). Shepard's *oeuvre* revolves around this nostalgia, which he rearticulates as a modern crisis of the divided American male. Clum concludes that "The Western fantasy is not only fiction; it represents a masculine drive that is Shepard's *idée fixe*" (187).

In *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins argues that the western genre emerged as a cultural response to the social tensions incited by women's increasing visibility and audibility in the political sphere, particularly during the period that saw the rise of suffrage, the expansion of popular culture, and explosion of burlesque. Thus, it seems that the genre attempted to differentiate the boundaries between public and private at a time when New Women and the suffrage movement were disrupting that boundary.

Tompkins writes, “The West functions as a symbol of freedom, and of the opportunity for conquest. It seems to offer an escape from the conditions of life in modern industrial society” (4). Tompkins writes, “the Western owes its popularity and essential character to the dominance of women’s culture in the nineteenth century and to women’s invasion of the public sphere between 1880 and the 1920s” (44). The 1970s women’s movement, then, seems to lurk in the background of Shepard’s fascination with the western genre. Not surprisingly, the family in Shepard’s plays does not act as a microcosm within which we learn to be social subjects, but rather serves as the persistent threat to male autonomy and individualism. And mothers, sisters, and girlfriends are associated with feelings of entrapment. In *West*, the climax occurs as Austin and Lee begin to fight violently with one another, destroying their mother’s house in the process. As Clum argues, the “violent destruction of domestic space is a visual counterpart to the damage done to basic familial relationships” (187). Significantly, as the brothers each yearn for a life of unencumbered freedom in an unnamed desert, they remain, at the end of the play, inside their mother’s house. This domestic containment reinforces the male-freedom and female-entrapment paradigm that Shepard rehearses in so many of his plays, a paradigm that leaves his male characters both trapped and fueled by a drive without a purpose beyond itself.

In addition to the western genre, *True West* works within the genre of realism, specifically naturalism. His directions for the set design are meticulous in its detail:

> The set should be constructed realistically with no attempt to distort its dimensions, shapes, objects, or colors. No objects should be introduced which might draw special attention to themselves other than the props demanded of the script. If a stylistic “concept” is grafted onto the set design it will only serve to confuse the evolution of the characters’ situation, which is the most important focus of the play. (Shepard, *West* 1368-9)

The "evolution of the characters' situation" suggests the conventions of naturalism, while the props and set signal realism. The Note on Sound evokes the naturalistic aspects of the play, with the "intense and maniacal" yapping of the coyote that punctuates the play's action evoking the wild, uncivilized masculinity embodied by Lee, while the "sound of crickets" Shepard writes, "can speak for itself" (1369). Indeed, Shepard's crafting of the sound and set suggests his subtle collapse of realism and symbolism, a strategy that makes the masculine crisis he conjures seem both natural and mythic.

The production history of *True West* is an interesting example of the process of cultural consecration. Premiering in 1980 at San Francisco's Magic Theater to great acclaim, the play moved to New York City's Public Theater later that year, under the direction of Joseph Papp. However, Shepard was unhappy with Papp's treatment of the play and disowned the production. It was not a success. Frank Rich wrote that, while "this failure is an orphan," he believed, "'True West' seems to be a very good play—which means that it's one of the American theatre's most precious natural resources" ("Shepard's 'True West'" C9). Contending that Shepard and his collaborators "owe New York a *true* 'True West'" (C9), Rich places his faith in a playwright already proven successful, especially after the success of his previous play, *Curse of the Starving Class* (1978), also produced by Papp at the Public. Rich is unabashedly enamored of Shepard's skills, stating that "Shepard is an awesome writer" and that "such is the collective power of this playwright's words that even his wilder conceits seems naturalistic" (C9). Rich had consecrated *West* even before seeing its "*true*" production.

Thus, the stage was primed for the play's second New York run, which occurred two years later at the Cherry Lane Theatre. Starring Gary Sinise and John Malkovich, this

production solidified the play's and the playwright's status as one of the best in American theatre. The actor's themselves have the same sort of celebrity status as Shepard; all of them are kind of renegade independents who have found success in conventional popular culture, yet have never seemed quite at home in that realm. Mel Gussow praised the production, describing it as "a rambunctious and spontaneous play about sibling rivalry and the cronyism of popular culture" ("Shepard's 'West' Revived and Restored" C18). Stating that "it can now take its place among the best of Shepard" (C18), Gussow confirmed its canonical status within American theatre. Its 2000 New York revival, the play's first appearance on Broadway, with John C. Reilly and Phillip Seymour Hoffman alternating in the brother's roles, confirmed its canonical status. Ben Brantley wrote, "this production makes a persuasive case for 'True West' as a great American play, arguably Shepard's finest" ("Finding Out" E1), stating that the play "has a primal, even eternal quality" (E4). This elusive "eternal quality" is a description rarely applied to plays authored by women, but is often used to legitimize male-authored plays. Perhaps this is women's experiences are so often characterized as superficial, mundane, or kitschy. While *True West* is a fine play, it is interesting to look back to see how popular critics anticipated its canonization so eagerly, presuming its status in the canon American theatre. Vogel's *Twins* had no such welcome, even with her previous success with *Drive* and *Waltz*. In this revision of the warring siblings narrative, two sisters take on the roles of a divided collective, and a divided femininity. Vogel's play challenges Shepard's claim that "the American male is on a very bad trip," whereas "American women at least have the pretense of being involved in some kind of sisterhood" (qtd in Kakutani H2).

Twins is set in the middle-class Long Island community of Mineola, a landlocked neighborhood sandwiched between the hectic diversity of Queens, NY, and the eerie calm of Long Island's more affluent suburbs. Blasting through three eras—the 1950s, 1960s and the late 1980s—each signaled by skirt lengths, wig styles, and current hot-button issues, the play's high-energy action is punctuated by surrealistic dream sequences in which the twins, Myra and Myrna, talk unconsciously to each other. The first set of scenes takes place in the fifties of Eisenhower's administration; the second period takes place during Nixon's post in the late sixties; and last scenes take place during 1989, just as Bush senior takes over from the Reagan administration. In the fifties, the twins are polarized according to their sexuality; in the sixties, they are divided by their political beliefs; and in the late eighties, they are separated by their cultural values and lifestyles.

The play's formal symmetry matches its historic trajectory. The subtitle of the play, *A Comedy in Six Scenes, Four Dreams, and Six Wigs*, reveals Vogel's attention to structure, her characteristic humor, and her theatricality. The play's symmetry is further highlighted by the use of the same actor to play both twins, a classic comic theme. In the 1998 New York premiere, Swoozie Kurtz played Myra and Myrna, winning an Obie award for her virtuoso performance. Her enactment of polarized female stereotypes was undeniably a form of female impersonation, a kind of pop culture version of Divine in John Water's *Female Trouble*. However, unlike Divine, Kurtz is a woman impersonating a woman. To use Robertson's description of Mae West, Kurtz enacts a female drag that "parodically reappropriates—and hyperbolizes—the image of woman from male female impersonators so that the object of her joke is not the woman but the idea that an essential feminine

identity exists prior to the image" (34). In *Twins*, Kurtz moved through three time periods in full female drag, imbuing these historic moments with a feminist camp aesthetic.

The play's casting and production notes themselves suggest a camp aesthetic, while the tone and structure of the play resemble that of burlesque. That is, camp/drag is the visual aesthetic, and burlesque describes the play's satiric humor, its focus on female sexuality, and its variety show-type structure. Vogel suggests two ways to do the play: "1. With good wigs 2. With bad wigs." "Personally," she writes, "I prefer the second way" (Production Notes, *Twins* 97). The various wigs that the twins wear signals both a certain type of femininity, as well as a distinct historical period, suggesting that femininity is not a mysterious essence nor merely a masquerade, but a product of ongoing historical and cultural forces. The other characters in the play include Jim and Sarah (played by the same actor), who are the romantic partners of Myrna and Myra, respectively; Ben and Kenny (also played by the same actor), who are Myra and Myrna's respective sons; and two mute male characters who move furniture, play psychiatric aides, and act as wardrobe assistants. The final casting element includes, like in *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, "The Voice." However, unlike in *Hot* where The Voice acts as an omniscient mouthpiece of male authority, here the Voice is the shared consciousness of the twins. It is both the sisters' voice—or "the amplified prerecorded version of the actor who plays Myra and Myrna" (97)—as well as the voice of the culture of which they are active parts. The central tension *Twins* lies in the dialectical dynamic between the sisters' social subjectivity and their sexual objectification, their (political) voices and their (sexualized) bodies. The Voice is the indissoluble tie that binds the twins together, psychically and

socially. Vogel describes the Voice: “Either brainwashing or subliminal seduction, it’s the way the sisters talk to each other. In dreams” (97).

The plot of *Twins* travels episodically through the decades, with cultural clichés and stereotypes recycled as campy jokes and juxtaposed with the ominous terror of impending cold war doom. The farcical tone of the play is set to sci-fi film music interspersed with popular period songs, and driven by the manic energy of the twins, who embody the contradictory messages of popular culture as well as the political polarity that has become so firmly entrenched in postwar America. The bipolarity of America is captured hysterically in the sisters’ wild swings from right to left, from activism to radicalism, and from gay to straight. The only visible difference between the twins is the size of their breasts; the virginal right-wing Myrna is “Stacked” (96), while the promiscuous leftist Myra is “Flat as a pancake” (111). As a gestic “not…but,” their incongruous bust sizes reveal the social significations inscribed on their bodies. By defamiliarizing the most visible sign of female sexuality, the social signs embedded in female bodies are made visible, while underscoring the ways in which women do not always get to choose how their bodies are read. That the twins’ bodies “read” differently than they “act” suggests something of the choices available to women; while they may choose not act according to the way their bodies signify, they are still subject to the cultural codes by which others read their bodies. So, although Myra is promiscuous, her chest signifies as chaste, and although Myrna is chaste, her chest signifies as promiscuous. Sex was in the air during this period, causing an explosive combination of anxiety, curiosity, generational conflict, and volatile energy, and it is this energy that *Twins* expresses. Suggesting the connection between sexual and social tensions, Vogel

writes in her description of the characters, "With the single exception of Sarah [who appears later in the play as Myra's lesbian partner], all characters should be played in a constant state of high hormonal excitement" (*Twins* 96).

Twins is, in many ways, Vogel's most Brechtian play. In its episodic structure, its use of double-role and cross-gender casting, and its mobilization of history as method of illustrating our capacity for change in the present, *Twins* is an epic play in the Brechtian tradition.[51] However, Vogel has a "love/hate relationship with Brecht" (Interview with Savran 275), and so just as Vogel revises other male playwright's work, so too does she revise Brecht's theories of epic theatre, alienation, and *gestus*. Indeed, as Diamond states, "Brecht's account of the *gestus* alerts us to the vectors of historical change written into dramatic texts, but he makes scant provision for gender in representation or as the ground of social struggle" (57). Diamond offers a theory of what she calls "feminist *gestic* criticism [which] would 'alienate' or foreground those moments in a playtext in which social attitudes about gender could be made visible" (54). Vogel's theatre encourages just this type of spectatorship, taking apart and theatricalizing the social codes and messages that constitute our bodies. As Diamond writes, "Twentieth-century performance dreams of the body that will gesture and present, not imitate and represent" (38). *Twins* stages that dream, with frenzied gestures and bold presentations.

Vogel departs from Brecht most dramatically in the way she cultivates an emotional connection to history and to the characters in her plays. She states,

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[51] The complete table distinguishing Dramatic theatre from Epic theatre can be found in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic.* Ed. and Trans. by John Willet. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964. 34. The other salient elements of epic theatre that apply to Vogel's aesthetic are: 1. an emphasis on narrative rather than plot; 2. encouraging the spectator to become an active observer of the stage action; 3. use of defamiliarizaion—or alienation, in Brecht's appropriation—as a way of turning humanity and history into an object of study.

> The connection I have with time is something that causes enormous emotional repercussions for me. . . . I don't think that there's a neat demarcation, politically, ethically, between history and the present moment. It's a continuum. History is simply a way of us being enough out of the picture to analyze shifting interconnections among politics, social history, economics, culture, gender. History is simply the name we give a discrete moment when we analyze those connections. (Interview with Savran 283)

History does not operate in Vogel's plays as a defamiliarization device, but rather as a way of bringing the audience closer to the action. History can, with an incongruous comic twist, turn the familiar into the strange—or the even the absurd. History can be mobilized as a feminist "not…but."

As Diamond theorizes it, the feminist "not…but," a defamiliarization technique that is fusion of the Brechtian *gestus* and Derridian "differences within." The theatricality of the "not…but" enables the spectator to see in the actor's movements and words the differences within identity, the choices not made. The feminist "not…but" in Vogel's play is typically rooted in the body, and here it is rooted in the incongruity between the bodies of the twins and their respective sexual and political identities. The exaggerated emphasis on breasts was underscored further in the New York production with a stage curtain onto which was superimposed a giant image of the bust of a woman in a Maidenform bra. This looming image that frames the play, along with the breast jokes that punctuate the play, continually remind us of the body of history, and the ways in which we both enact that history as subjects and become objects of a history that is inscribed onto female bodies. Significantly, burlesque emerges from the growing emphasis on women's bodies. As Shteir writes, "The sheer amount of undressing in the theatre as America approached World War I impelled theatre critics to pay increasing attention to women's bodies" (61). The popularity of burlesque marks a cultural shift in

which women's bodies became an object of public scrutiny, ridicule, or glorification; this shift would transmute, in the 1950s, into a vision of the female body an object that women themselves should work to produce and perfect.

The rigidity of stereotypes of femininity and the equal rigidity of political positions that the twins embody is contrasted with the fluidity of the genders and sexualities of the supporting characters. In the 1998 New York production, the cross-gender acting was handled with great theatrical skill. Mo Gaffney (as Jim/Sarah) and Mandy Siegfried (as Kenny/Ben) played all their parts without ever attempting to fully "become" the gender of their role. Directing the production, Joe Mantello, who originated the role of the Third Man in Vogel's earlier play, *The Baltimore Waltz* (1992), was able to exploit the theatricality of Vogel's script. The effect was a kind of campy cartoon aesthetic that in many ways captures the way we remember the 1950s and 60s—as a one-dimensional assortment of Technicolor images and stereotypes. All of the characters in the *Twins* are composite figures, products of the machinery of popular culture, as well as the machinery of the political system.

During a highly theatrical inter-scene act reminiscent of the go-go dancers of burlesque, Gaffney and Seigfried came out in front of the curtain and performed a striptease act in between the scenes where they changed roles, taking the costumes of one character off and artfully donning the clothes that signified their new role. With the help of two mute male assistants, they, literally and figuratively, changed from one role to another, one gender to another, and one sexuality to another. In the middle of the striptease act, a visually androgynous stage thanks to generic undergarments and hair covers, only their movements signaled which gender they were enacting. For example, as

Seigfried changed from Kenny to Ben, she signaled gender and character through dance movements. Although she was playing roles of the same gender, Seigfried exploited the in-between state of her role-switch by oscillating between gestures that signaled her own biological sex and gestures that signaled the theatrical role she was donning. Dancing seductively and showing her midriff as her girl-self, she then, in preparation for her next scene, quickly assumed the role of "boy," rolling down her t-shirt to cover her midriff, while changing the rhythm of her movements so that they signal the jerky and cocky struts of a teenage boy. In this highly effective theatricalization of the relationship between sex and gender, Seigfried reveals the performative nature of both. This deconstructive display of gender performativity recalls the history of burlesque, as the comedy of gender's incongruity and theatricality.

The casting of the New York production of *Twins* is worth dwelling on for a moment, if only to point out its historical resonance with late-nineteenth century burlesque. Unlike other productions of *Twins*, the Roundabout production used an all-female cast, with the notable exception of the two silent male figures, who assist the action on stage. These male assistants operate like background characters in a slapstick film, or as Ben Brantley describes them, "cheesecake assistants in an old variety show" ("Not Triplets" E1). Seigfried played both Ben and Kenny in a Brechtian *gestic* style, which further highlighted the play's emphasis on the constructedness of identities. Mo Gaffney's Jim was a vivid emblem of the failed organization man, although the "man" part was always left ambiguous. Kurtz's performance beautifully blended comic abandon with a kind of genuine belief in each character. Together, the cast captured America's "postwar schizophrenia" (Douglas 51), while mobilizing a style similar to classic burlesque.

In *Twins*, as in classic burlesque, cultural hierarchies and the biological/material markers of gender and sexuality are humorously juxtaposed, with no gender being presented as normative. William Dean Howell's description of Lydia Thompson and her troupe aptly describes the cast of *Twins*:

> [T]he members of these burlesque troupes, though they were not like men, were in most things as unlike women, and seemed creatures of a kind of alien sex, parodying both. It was certainly a shocking thing to look at them with their horrible prettiness, their archness in which there was no charm, their grace which put to shame. (642)

The multiple incongruities in this passage are remarkable. The gender ambiguity of the burlesque performers evoked in Howells a response of ambivalent horror, and his choice of adjectives such as "alien," "shocking," and "horrible" would apply equally well to a science fiction or horror film. Howells continues, posing the question of burlesque's morally ambiguous character. He remarks, "Yet, whoever beheld these burlesque sisters, must have fallen into perplexing question in his own mind as to whose wrong was involved" (643). Implicit in Howell's question is: If everyone was deriving pleasure from the spectacle, who was responsible for its social transgressions?

Richard Grant White expressed similar ambivalence toward the blurring of gender distinctions in burlesque. Describing the famously popular show, *La Belle Hélène*, White wrote in 1869: "as mere caricature in acting is insufficient in interest, the element of beauty is added, and in monstrous form—that of women playing men's parts, and dressed, for incongruity's sake . . . in the costumes of men centuries ago" (259). *Twins* presents a similar theatrical effect—the incongruous juxtaposition of both gender and history. Although white saw in burlesque the potential collapse of cultural hierarchies, stating, "burlesque casts down all the gods from their pedestals" (256), neither he nor

Howells was condemning burlesque as immoral; rather, both were simultaneously suspicious of and seduced by the immense popularity of the comic female performers. Moved by his experience of seeing Lydia Thompson at Niblo's, White wrote, "It was as if Venus, in her quality of the goddess of laughter, had come upon the stage" (260). Indeed, burlesque was conjuring a kind of divinity on stage, one based in women's incongruous bodies and irreverent voices.

Mineola Twins conjures just this combination of incongruous bodies and irreverent voices. Interspersed among the six scenes of the play are four dream sequences, which suggest the subliminal subtexts of popular culture, family conflict, and political climate of each period. The play begins with the first dream sequence, set in the 1950s. It is titled "Myra in Homeroom. Myra in Hell" (99), and is more like an apocalyptic nightmare, a combination horror film, nuclear holocaust, sci-fi movie, and Sock Hop. Its tone sets the stage for the play's campy theatricality. In contrast, in the next scene takes place in a candy-colored soda shop, as Myrna, the "good" twin, alternates between making out with her fiancé Jim, cooling his hormones whenever they reach the boiling point, and working the lunch shift. In the fifties, the twins—and the femininities they represent—are captured most obviously by their sexual dispositions. Myrna is a chaste and pure, which Jim both cherishes as the "only absolute goodness in my life" (115) and laments as a source of "agony" (114). Myra is, in contrast, the "Whore of Babylon" (106), who has slept with the entire first string of the football team, and is working on the second string. The sisters are at continual war with one another, and this antagonism is symbolized in the dirty sock that Myra leaves on Myrna's side of their bedroom. They pass the dirty sock back and

forth over the decades as a way of placing blame onto the other for everything that is wrong with their home life, with Mineola, and, finally, with the nation.

Although Myra is shown in a less caricatured way than is Myrna, neither twins' beliefs nor their political positions are represented as ultimately right or true. As Ryan Claycomb points out, "Vogel doesn't allow for an uncritical idealization of Myra any more than she does of Myrna" (122). Indeed, Myra's anti-corporate stance is undermined as she chugs a Coca-Cola whose "imperial profits," Kenny reminds her, "fuel the war" (Vogel, *Twins* 147). However, she rationalizes, "Sometimes you've got to use the system to crush the system" (147). Myra and Myrna, like political right and left, depend on each for the meaning and coherence of their respective beliefs. As dialectical counterparts, the twins cannot exist without one another, and their opposing sexual dispositions—the prudishly good Myrna and the whorishly bad Myra—are equally dependent on one another for their meaning. And yet, the femininities embodied by Myrna—the "good" girl who dreams of becoming a wife and mother—and Myra, the "bad" girl who acts out, challenging sexual roles and stereotypes even as they circumscribe her actions—are distinctly postwar femininities, produced by advertising and marketing campaigns who were busily conjuring fantasies for female consumers buy, perform, and propagate.

The advertising industry in the 1950s began, with enormous success, to redefine the image of American femininity, in particular through the construction of an internally divided female sexuality. The marketing of this new brand of femininity that said, to borrow the words of Revlon, "in every good woman there is a little bad" (Sherrow 225), pervaded popular music, cosmetic, and clothing ads. In the most successful advertising campaign in cosmetic industry history, Revlon's 1952 "Fire and Ice" campaign fabricated

a new image of the woman who was both a good wife and mother and a sexual seductress. One of its famous tag lines was: “She’s a tease and a temptress, siren and gamine, dynamic and demure.….This is the ‘Fire and Ice girl’ (Are you?)” (226; ellipsis in original). These campaigns invited women to embody a newly adventurous sexuality, which worked to crystallize a pervasive notion of a dualistic femininity, defined exclusively in terms of sexuality. Significantly, American women were not passive participants in this manufacturing of a new hypersexualized femininity; they were active producers. As Juliann Sivulka crucially points out, “By 1950 women accounted for about one-third of the workers in the advertising industry alone” (Sivulka). Indeed, “The three most famous cosmetic and fashion campaigns of the 1950s were created by women, Kay Daly for Revlon, Mary Fillius for Maidenform, and Shirley Polykoff for Clairol hair coloring, and all used sex as a basis of their appeals” (Sivulka).

Since women were the major consumers, it made sense that the industry would hire them also to develop slogans for products ranging from cosmetics to cars. Women in the marketing industry became cultural mediators, learning to see themselves both as consumers and producers, subjects and objects. Women’s participation in this image-making process greatly complicates any notion of an objectifying male gaze that conjures fantasy images of sexually passive females. Indeed, the supreme achievement of these campaigns is the internalization and perpetuation of these messages by women so that they seem self-evident. Thus, women begin to see their consumerism as an active assertion of their agency. It is an important historic development, one that helps explain the ways that women have learned—and have taught each other—how to perceive and

project themselves as seductive objects.[52] Like the burlesque performers of days gone by, women marketers developed humorous dialogue to go along with the products they were selling to the public. However, it was a different kind of seduction, a kind of reverse striptease, in which women were encouraging each other to put this on, try that, cover-up and conceal, so that another image will emerge—the glossy image of a dream femininity. While Gypsy and Ann Corio exposed their flesh to increasingly smaller audiences, the 1950s culture industry worked to put a shiny veneer over the female middle-classes.

With the campy humor and burlesque performances, *Mineola Twins* undermines the stability of this persistent image of femininity by having the twins embody the exaggerated stereotypes associated with femininity and female sexuality. Aside from their chests, the differences between Myra and Myrna are best captured in their dreams for the future. As Doris Day belts out a tune from the jukebox, Myrna relates her dreams for the future to Jim:

> Once I've learned stenography and typing—when my rising young executive-husband comes home with work from the office—he can put his feet up on the hassock while I Take Dictation. We'll have a son, and by the time he's three or four, we can afford a three-bedroom house in Great Neck with an office downstairs. Then we'll have a dog, and maybe a daughter too—(109-110)

Compare Myrna's dream to Myra's, which Myra also relates to Jim, after she generously puts him out of his sexual "agony":

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[52] This relates importantly to one of the more ambiguous aspects of neoburlesque: that can operate as a form in which women watch, learn, and teach each other how to perform their femininity. Upstate NY burlesque performer Madame Trixie states, "we've been pleasantly surprised that the females have responded even better than the males! We've got more compliments from the ladies, mostly giving us credit for being brave and how they love the costumes and props" (Kahley 12). My experience at burlesque shows is that straight women make up the majority of the audience members, and are also the most vocal in the praise of the performers. While this can be seen as an empowering dynamic, I wonder if it can also function as a regulating relationship that reinforces a performative norm. Lady Rizo admitted that she is often approached after shows by women, accompanied by their boyfriends, who want her to know that "they find me hot" (Rizo). These responses to Lady Rizo's performance, especially since it takes place with the boyfriend as audience, these seem still to be framed within a male-defined fantasy of female sexuality.

> There's never been a movie made that's even close to how I'm going to live. I'm making it up from scratch. No marriage. No children. No suburbs. Just freedom! (122).

Significantly, both Myrna and Myra's dreams are constructed out of the objects and images of popular culture. Even though Myra strives to "make it up from scratch," the point of reference is still popular culture, which sets the standards and limits of what they can imagine their lives to be. Jim's definition of both twins revolves around their sexuality, with Myrna's chastity providing a moral comfort and Myra's promiscuity a physical relief. Both their sexualities serve as a subordinate source of support to his career developing ad campaigns for Ford. However, just as Jim was busily marketing a new icon of American masculinity, women were also producing the slogans and images selling a new brand of femininity, dreaming up all sorts of scenarios within which they might find a sense of fulfillment and an outlet for their desires.

Dreams were a recurrent theme of 1950s popular culture, a theme undoubtedly reinforced by its inevitable connection to one of the most pervasive national mythologies —the American Dream. In addition, the emphasis on dreams perhaps reflects the enormous influence of Freud in 1950s popular culture; dreams could offer a glimpse into one's unconscious desires and wishes. In an era of unprecedented economic growth, dreams also signaled the promise of prosperity and material fulfillment. Barbara J. Coleman writes, "Whether it was a dream house, Dream Whip, dream kitchen, dream cake, or 'Dream Lover,' the opulence and technology of the decade optimistically suggested that many of these dreams could come true" (Coleman). I would add to this that the 1950s saw the emergence of a new image of postwar femininity, an image founded in consumerism and projected as a divided sexuality. Dreams, popular culture

told women, could be bought in the form of a bra; and dreams could also give expression to both sides of this divided femininity—the vamp and the housewife—with the simple application of the right shade of lipstick or hair color, or by donning the right bra.

From 1949 until 1969, Maidenform ran a massively successful "dream campaign" that influenced the way women saw their undergarments and their fanasties (Sivulka). The campaign involved soliciting women to send in descriptions of their dreams to be used in the ads, thereby giving a sense of agency and voice to their target consumer. Maidenform ads then repackaged these dreams written by women across the country, and created a plethora of ads, showing women in a variety of fantastic situations. Some of the dreams depicted surreal situations, such as a woman drifting above the crowds at the opera in a hot air balloon; others involved women in unconventional careers, such as firefighter, lawyer, toreador, and cowboy. No dream was unattainable, the ads say, "in my Maidenform bra." These campy ads are fascinating for the ways they mobilize both a sense of freedom and possibility, while depicting a phantasmic and highly theatrical femininity. The ads were created to tap into "women's conscious or unconscious exhibitionist tendencies" (Sivulka), the same tendencies tapped by ads marketing striptease albums to housewives. This new image of femininity, constructed as a spectacle in which women crave to expose themselves, perhaps emerged from new perspectives on an active female sexuality incited by the Kinsey reports. A rather effective way of containing the potential threat evoked by an active female sexuality is to turn it into a commodity, and sell it back to the women it supposedly defines. One of the most questionable effects of the Maidenform campaign, I would argue, is that the dreams

seduce women in order to placate them, convincing them that they could attain sufficient agency in their consumer fantasies, rather than in their long-term goals and pursuits.

In the Maidenform advertisement that begins this section, the fantasy of a divided female sexuality is, like in *Twins*, imagined and literalized as two female bodies. Here, the female as both sexual subject and object is reified in the image of the twins. And these Maidenform twins sell a new image of femininity, one that finds joyous fulfillment in courting appreciative gazes. The caption of the advertisement reads:

> I'm beside myself with joy! For when I walk down the street, everyone I meet looks twice at my Maidenform lines. The duet of dream bras!

John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, originally published in 1972, captures the effects of this type of marketing strategy on the configuration of gender relations and the constitution of performative acts. He writes,

> *men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of women in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and particularly an object of vision: a sight. (41)

These prescient words characterize modern femininity as the performance of an internalized objectifying male gaze. In contrast, the classic burlesque performer flaunted her body as a visual object even as she undermined this objectivity by asserting herself as the subject of the performance. The internalized objectification that Berger articulates helps explain how figures like Mae West and writers like Vogel, who impersonate a man impersonating a woman, demystify the cultural codes of femininity in ways that more straight-forward impersonation fails to do. They perform this internalization by theatrically externalizing the signifiers of femininity while assuming an observing,

"awarish" stance in relation to their performance. That is, they become both the seductive object and the internalized, observing male subject, thereby revealing femininity as performance, not essence. I would add to Berger's statement, however, that it is not a simple male-female interaction. What becomes clear in the above ad, and in the success of campaigns like this one, is that women have become as adept at looking at one another. Indeed, in the above Maidenform ad, the twins capture not just a male gaze, but the gaze of "everyone." This collective gaze positions the Maidenform twins simultaneously as a sexual object, and also as a model female subject that other women will then seek to reproduce. The ad manufactures a female gaze, which women use among one another, thereby ensuring a performative norm. This gaze then produces competitive female homosocial relations not unlike those seen in *Desdemona*, as women compete with one another, while perfecting their roles as visual objects rather than productive subjects. The Maidenform dream campaign ended in 1969, "as more women began to pursue careers and make their dreams a reality" (Sivulka), and because, I would add, women's bodies and voices were becoming more politicized. Undoubtedly, the Maidenform ads shaped an iconic image of femininity, with the smooth yet defined lines of their bras producing a female form that signals an entire era. This iconic image remains in popular television programs such as *Mad Men,* and its implications remain evident in the production of images that depict the female body, not as a body that does things, but as a body to which things are done, an object of labor, rather than a subject.

In contrast to the seductive images of advertising, *Twins* incorporates dream sequences that theatricalize the underbelly—the unconscious—of popular culture. The second dream sequence in the play, entitled "Myrna in the Hospital. Myrna in Hell"

(Vogel, *Twins* 142), is a marvelous burlesque of Hollywood musical, only this scene is set in the mental hospital into which Myra has been committed by her sister. Here, the mute male orderlies dance in perfect harmony with the institutionalized Myrna, who works a straightjacket as elegantly and magically as Ginger Rogers works high heels. And with a streak of white in her wig, à la Bride of Frankenstein, she simultaneously invokes the antithetical genre of horror. The incongruous effect produced by juxtaposing the romance of the Hollywood musical and the terror of the horror genre suggests the many contradictory codes in popular culture, codes through which we construct our bodies and our dreams. This dream sequence revolves around Myrna's wish to obliterate Myra, and it culminates in a moment of genuine violence, as Myrna holds a gun to Myra's head, saying, "This is real, you asshole, this is happening" (143). As the sound of a beating heart thunders through the theatre, Myrna pulls the trigger only to see a bouquet of flowers explode from her sister's neck. It is an enormously effective scene of horrifying and humorous juxtapositions, all of which work toward the notion that Myra and Myrna cannot escape the other, cannot destroy each other, and cannot survive without each other.

Nightmares were also an undercurrent of the 1950s and 60s, often taking form in science fiction films. Sci-fi was a massively popular form during this decade. As a genre, sci-fi operated as an escape valve for expressing cultural anxieties surrounding not only Communism, but also racial and homophobic tensions. The success of both genres lies in their appeal to what Peter Biskind refers to as "the Manichean Us/Them habit of thought that was an occupational hazard of the cold-war battle of ideas" (111). Victoria O'Donnell reports that over five hundred science fiction features and shorts were

produced in Hollywood between 1948 and 1962 (169). The basic premise of these films, however imaginatively recycled, remained fairly consistent: a terrifying alien invader threatened the safety and stability of the family, community, nation, and globe. Depending on the political leanings of the film producers, the alien was either something to be purged at all costs (the right's version) or befriended as a peaceful ally (the left's version). The tone of sci-fi was apocalyptic melodrama, and it influenced the tone of much of 1950s popular culture. These anxieties incited a corresponding emphasis on "the secure, abundant family life" as the key element of a secure nation (May 17). It is precisely this false sense of security that *Twins* works to unravel. The play exploits the tension between security and paranoia, terror and titillation, while unraveling the codes of gender and sexuality that were constructed to uphold a sense of political security and stability. Both in terms of political paranoia and an overemphasis on a dualistic female sexuality, we seem still to be living in the expansive cultural moment that began with the massively influential marketing campaigns, popular songs, films, and television shows of the 1950s.[53]

In *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female in the Mass Media*, Susan J. Douglas offers a genealogy of the 1950s to the 1980s from the perspective of "where the girls are" (10). In this sense, her social history offers a parallel to Vogel's theatrical history in *The Mammary Plays*. Douglas writes, "This is a different sort of archeology of the 1950s, 60s,

[53] Popular culture is, of course, not a fifties invention. But its alignment with a large youth population and mass culture—television, film, and radio—is a particularly fifties dynamic. Morris Dickstein writes, "Another radical turn of the forties and fifties was the explosive emergence of youth culture" (10), which he argues created an "edgy and unsettled" postwar culture with "powerful and subversive social energies roiling beneath the placid surface of the Truman and Eisenhower years" (15). During the 1950s, popular culture joined forces with the mass media to create a form of entertainment that, as Michael Kammen argues, encompassed the "multiple interests, curiosities, and desires" of the American public and cut across cultural boundaries of highbrow and lowbrow, thereby producing a popular culture that was both "democratic and distinguished" (244-245).

and 70s than we are used to, because it excavates and holds to the light remnants of a collective female past not usually thought of as making serious history" (10). While James Dean, Elvis, and Marlon Brando are considered an inextricable part of social history, Douglas asks why "Girls and women come across as the kitsch of the 1960s—flying nuns, witches, genies . . . go-go-boot-clad dancers in cages" (5).

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, kitsch is a demeaning designation that, when used, exempts the speaker "from the contagion of the kitsch object" (155). Unlike camp-recognition, which acknowledges "that its perceptions are necessarily creations" (156), kitsch-attribution presumes a knowledge of cultural value. Just as "critics declare not only their judgments of the work but also their claim to the right to talk about it" (Bourdieu 36), those who attribute the designation "kitsch" to an object participate in hierarchical ordering of cultural objects, as well as their makers, consumers, and critics. Importantly, Sedgwick compares kitsch to both art and camp. As categories of taste, all involve the dialectical process of consecration and disavowal. Sedgwick distinguishes kitsch and camp in the following way:

> Unlike kitsch-attribution, camp-recognition doesn't ask, "what kind of debased creature could possibly be the right audience for this spectacle?" Instead, it says, *what if*: What if the right audience for this were exactly *me*? What if, for instance, the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of attention and attraction that I am able to bring to this spectacle are actually uncannily responsive to the resistant, oblique, tangential investments of the person, or of some of the people, who created it? And what if, furthermore, others who I don't know or recognize can see it from the same "perverse" angle. (156)

All of Vogel's plays pose this performative "what if," an implicit question that Jill Dolan posits as the utopian impulse of theatre, which participates in the "hopeful process that continually writes a different, better future" (*Utopia* 13). In *Twins*, Vogel takes the kitsch of the past forty years, refunctions it as camp, and presents it as a performative burlesque,

an unraveling of the social codes and acts that constitute our bodies. Incorporating popular culture into every aspect of the play, including the bodies and voices of the characters, Vogel suggests that women are both products of and producers of a massively influential American postwar cultural industry.

The media is the most pervasive and powerful producer of cultural images. Douglas argues, "mass media helped make [women] the cultural schizophrenics we are today, women who rebel against yet submit to prevailing images about what a desirable yet worthwhile woman should be" (8). Douglas argues that these messages produced a "cultural identity crisis" within which women were ambivalent "toward femininity on the one hand and feminism on the other" (8). Douglas argues that "one of the mass media's most important legacies for female consciousness [is] the erosion of anything resembling a unified self" (13). She writes:

> Along with our parents, the mass media raised us, socialized us, entertained us, comforted us, deceived us, disciplined us, told us what we could do and what we couldn't. And they played a key role in turning each of us into not only one woman but many women—a pastiche of all the good women and bad women that came to us through the printing presses, projectors, and airwaves of America. (13)

In a description befitting the contradictions embodied by Myra and Myrna in *Twins*, Douglas writes: "Pulled in opposite directions—told we are equal, yet told we were subordinate; told we could change history, yet told we were trapped by history" (8-9).

Such contradictory cultural messages might be understood through Stuart Hall's definition of the dialectic of cultural struggle, which he frames as a dynamic tension between dominant and popular culture:

> I think there is a continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle, by the dominant culture, constantly to disorganize and reorganize popular culture; to enclose and confine its definitions and forms within a more inclusive range of dominant forms. ("Deconstructing the Popular" 233)

Significantly, Hall's discussion of popular culture focuses on the period between 1880-1920s, the height of burlesque. American popular culture flourished during this period, along with the images, stereotypes, and desires that it produced, reproduced, and reconfigured. The complexity of cultural relations, Hall insists, can never be reduced to movement between domination and resistance. Rather, cultural forms "play on contradictions" (233) and cultural struggle takes many forms, such as "incorporation, distortion, resistance, negotiation, recuperation" (236). Popular culture of the 1950s and 1960s was particularly concerned with disorganizing and reorganizing the codes and meanings of gender and sexuality, simultaneously insulating and inundating the masses with eroticized images and products. As a way "to ensure civilized order" popular culture was especially preoccupied with teaching a specifically middle-class heterosexuality, targeting many of those teachings toward young women.

Infused throughout *Twins* are the codes and messages from popular music, conveying the cultural codes that we internalize and use to make sense of ourselves as social subjects. In her notes to the play, Vogel writes, "It would be nice to score this production with female vocalists of the period—Teresa Brewer, Doris Day, Vikki Carr, Nancy Sinatra, etc. These singers were on the Top Ten; as a country, we should not be allowed to forget this" (Production Notes 97). Vogel believes, "Music speaks directly to the emotions . . . It is also important as a way of saying 'This was gender in 1960'" (Holmberg). Douglas argues that female vocalists of the 1950s and 1960s sent conflicting messages to young girls, positioning them somewhere between "entrapment and freedom" (98). Douglas sees this period as pivotal in that it was during the 1950s and 1960s that popular culture began to offer women a variety of "different personas, some of

them strong and empowering and others masochistic and defeating" (90) from which to choose. Girls could sing along with "My Guy," "I Will Follow Him," and "Baby it's You." Alternatively, they could rally around "Don't Make Me Over" and "You Don't Own Me." Douglas argues that the collective emotional energy among young girls incited by these powerful musical messages "planted the tiniest seed of a social movement" (98), a movement that would flourish in the 1970s. The integration of period-specific music and cultural signifiers such as Ford cars and Maidenform bras in *Twins* reveal the social forces at work in the construction of postwar heterosexuality.

In terms of masculinity, the automobile is perhaps the most resonant icon of the 1950s, symbolizing affluence, mobility, freedom, and autonomy. In *Twins*, Jim works for a company that is helping Ford develop cars that will appeal to young consumers, and he talks excitedly about the new model that he is involved in developing. He tells Myrna,

> I'm pledged to secrecy—but you've never seen anything like this car! . . . And wait till you see the grille on this baby—well, I helped a little to come up with the design—it looks just like… like—*(Jim gets flushed)*—Well, I can't say. Guys are going to go crazy over this buggy. (Vogel, *Twins* 109; second ellipsis in original)

The similarity between the smooth yet articulated curves of the grille of a 1950s car and the smooth yet articulated curves of a woman in a Maidenform bra needs little elaboration. The similarity points to the relationship between two equally seductive commodities marketed during this period: Cars and female sexuality.

However, women were also working in the car industry. Jim tells Myrna an interesting detail, "The firm's even hired this poetess to come up with lyrical names—like Fiesta or Bronco or Ford Epiphany!" (109). In fact, women were hired for their input on car functionality and design. To the major industries, "such as the automotive industry, women represented the largest, most powerful market in the world" (Sivulka), since they

were the ones driving around getting groceries, doing errands, and ferrying the children here and there. So, it was not only the Jim's of the 1950s marketing industry designing suggestive grilles on cars, but also women developing the everyday functionality and appeal of the car. While men focused on the "engineering and body styling, women offered their input on color harmony, luggage space, seat adjustments" (Sivulka). Thus, it was not a matter of men creating and selling images, and then imposing them onto passively consuming women; women participated in the production of these images. And both men and women began to learn and enact the codes of gender and sexuality that these images projected.

In *Twins*, Jim is the voice of a dominant culture, which is parodied, in part, through his androgyny (he is, after all, played by a woman). With Jim as its representative, dominant culture is not as male-dominated as it might seem, nor is it as stable. It is, however, self-serving. Defining the sexuality of each of the twins in terms of their accessibility to his own sexual desires, Jim's theories of female sexuality change according to his own self-interests. He is, however, positioned precariously in relation to constructions of masculinity that were being redefined during this period. His corporate "organization man" masculinity is precariously constructed within a male homosocial environment in which power is determined, not by individual strength of body or character, but by the market and membership within the corporate collective. William H. Whyte Jr.'s, whose influential 1956 book *The Organization Man* gave a label to this new form of American manhood, railed against the effects of the organization life, which he argued led to the demise of the Protestant work ethic and the power of individual to

create his own destiny, both of which were sacrificed to the corporation (Whyte 1-22).[54] Significantly, one of Whyte's aims in recuperating a virile individualism is to "defend the American Dream" (5). Suggesting the effects of a Fordist model of production on individual knowledge and ambition, Whyte writes, "Where at General Electric a young man is likely to talk about managing, in short, at Ford he will talk about cars" (127), never able to see the "big picture" (127). An unnamed Ford executive, quoted by Whyte, insisted that "'the colleges that send these men to us ought to put more emphasis on *doing things*'" (127).[55] It was an era in which mass production and consumption led, it seems, to a loss of agency and autonomy for men, and, conversely, a new sense of agency for women, an agency cultivated through buying things.

Yet, another form of female agency was also developing during this period, an agency informed by political beliefs and a rebellion against convention. Articulating an anti-American dream, Myra's future plans include, "No marriage. No children. No suburbs. Just freedom!" (122). Jim counters her rebellion, insisting, "But you're a girl! You can't do that!" (122). Here, Jim is the voice of the reductive essentialist, while Myra is the social constructionist. Their debate on gender culminates in Jim's explanation:

> … Men are defined by what they do –their actions in the world. It's different for you—you're a girl. There are…absolutes in their world for girls. Girls don't do, they just are. (125; ellipses in original)

[54] Whyte develops a new term for the postwar era, which he calls a "Social Ethic" (6). He argued that this new ethic would lead to a "reinstatement of individualism" (6) and "create an equilibrium in which society's needs and the needs of the individual are one and the same" (7). The three propositions of Whyte's Social Ethic are: "a belief in the group as the source of creativity; a belief in 'belongingness' as the ultimate need of the individual; and a belief in science to achieve the belongingness" (7). These are based on, Whyte admits, "a utopian faith" (7). Interestingly, Whyte's understanding of the individual is close to its original meaning—indivisible.

[55] The phrase "doing things" echoes J.L. Austin's highly influential *How to Do Things with Words*, a text that has informed theories of performativity, from Jacques Derrida to Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Austin first articulated in his theory of performative utterances in his 1955 William James Lectures at Harvard University. These lectures were collectively published in *How to do Things* in 1962, which distinguishes performative and constative utterances, utterances that perform the act that they speak (performative) versus utterances that describe or define (constative).

Compare Berger's theory of an internalized male gaze to Jim's above theory of gender. Both Berger and Jim point to the tenacious correlation between active-masculine and passive-feminine that has traditionally characterized gender roles and relations. Together, their statements capture the double bind of femininity: It is both appearance and essence, artificial and natural, illusion and ontology. In short, femininity is both unbelievable and unchangeable.

Within this framework, Myra does not have the power to define her sexuality, even if she does have the power to enact it liberally. While Jim and Myra meet on common sexual ground, agreeing to sleep together behind Myrna's back, they do so on different terms. Jim sleeps with Myra as a way of preserving the virginity and "absolute goodness" (115) of his soon-to-be wife, Myrna. Myra, however, "raked" (122) Jim as part of her larger project of renouncing middle-class conventions of marriage, monogamy, and suburban domesticity. In a clever revision of the United States Army's policy on homosexuality, Myra proclaims, "Don't ask, don't tell. The formula for modern marriages" (122). In the end, Jim's actions aim to maintain the status quo, while Myra's mean to disrupt it. And yet, she is not invested with the cultural power to redefine her own sexuality. Like Vogel's Desdemona, Myra realizes that her promiscuity is not an exercise of sexual "freedom," since it does not automatically invest her with the power to define her own sexuality or femininity. Her sexual subjectivity is, in other words, always also an object of culture and history. Jim articulates a gender dynamic in which the productive, creative power of masculinity defines and determines an essentialized, passive femininity, a binary that Myra tries unsuccessfully to undo with her sexual activity. Myra looks to the 1960s for more significant change, saying to herself, "I hope

my next decade is better than this one" (125). Indeed, it was reductive views of femininity like Jim's that 1960s popular culture began to shake up, with marketing campaigns that sold a malleable femininity and music that expressed a simmering sexual awakening.

Leaving the fifties behind, the next time period that *Twins* burlesques is 1969. In this middle section of the play, the twins are negotiating Nixon, Vietnam, the explosion of social movements, and the ever-present threat of the cold war. If cars were the symbol of a bright, prosperous future in the 50s, they become a symbol of paranoia in the Nixon era. Unlike the seductive curves of Jim's dream grille, cars in this period are emblematized as "unmarked white Fords" (Vogel, *Twins* 131) that follow Myrna when she is mistaken for her sister, who, in an act of social rebellion, took to robbing banks during this decade using fake breasts (and thus her sister's identity) as a disguise. Moreover, if Jim's masculine power was invested in the success of Ford's new model, his divestment of that power in the 1960s is signaled by the loss of his job with Ford and his new employment as a teller at the local Mineola bank, the same bank that Myra robs. In this period of social unrest and dissent, the sisters are becoming increasingly politicized, polarized, and paranoid. Myra is a radical anti-war activist, while Myrna is a Long Island housewife with a philandering husband and a nervous condition stemming from time spent, thanks to her sister's intervention, in a psychiatric ward. Just as Myra has Myrna committed to the psych ward, Myrna retaliates by giving the police information on her sister's whereabouts, leading to her arrest. While Myra does time in jail, she "discovers" lesbianism. The twins' respective sons, each of whom has political views opposite to that of their mother, further emphasize this dialectical tension. Myra's son Ben seeks out

Myrna for guidance on his blossoming right-wing beliefs, while Kenny is drawn to Myra's freewheeling radicalism. Here, Vogel again suggests the generational repetition of a polarized national politics. Crucially, Vogel is not arguing for a unity of opposites, a reduction of two into one. Rather, she is urging dialogue between the warring factions. The Voice reminds us that the twins share an unconscious dialogue, however conflicted and terror-filled it is at times. Vogel's play works to raise that dialogue to the level of consciousness, thereby highlighting its comic absurdity and implicit violence.

By the time the play reaches the Bush administration, the culture wars have taken place, the cold war has ended, family values have been reasserted, and the free market deregulated. And while Myra was radicalized in the 1960s and 70s, it is during this period of the first Bush administration and after the feminist backlash of the Reagan era that the conservative Myrna becomes radicalized. Whereas Myra has settled into a comfortable domestic life with her partner Sarah and son Ben, Myrna, now divorced, has become a right-wing radio shock jock, who decries the influences of multiculturalism and "tofu-eating-feminazi-fetus-flushing" critics for the eradication of true American "cultural values" (167). As the author of *Profiles in Chastity*, she is the icon of the 1980s American right. Just as McCarthyism and the anti-Communist frenzy of the 1950s and 60s was used, as Dickstein argues, as "a political wedge . . . by the Republicans to fracture the New Deal coalition," the strategy of the right remained the same two decades later, as they sought to "recapture power by demonizing liberalism in the 1980s" (7). Sharon Monteith describes the persuasive tactics of the right in the 1980s, which insisted that "conservatism [would bring] a return to cultural norms following the 'disharmony' of the sixties" (182). Thus, the stage was set for an idealization of the peaceful and

prosperous 1950s, and its conservative restaging in the 1980s in the form of an economic individualism and the deregulation of the market. And yet, perhaps suggesting the emotional aftermath of the cold war, the mood is one of fear. In the 1950s, Myrna confesses to Jim about her twin: "she…scares me" (Vogel, *Twins* 106; ellipsis in original). In the late eighties, Myra says the same thing about her right-wing son, Ben—"he…scares me" (175; ellipsis in original). With caricatured conceptions of each other, a lack of dialogue, and no outside enemy on which to focus their fears, Myra and Myrna both insist, " We will never give this country back" (166, 176). The polarization between left and right during this period is almost total.

Twins works marvelously as a way of emphasizing the ways in which politics play out through women's bodies, their choices, and their everyday lives. With more and more women in the work force, demanding reproductive freedom, and asserting their general rights to equality, the political fissures in the nation in the 1980s were most visibly seen in the lives and bodies of women. For every Murphy Brown there was an Anita Bryant. The play's climax occurs as Myrna plants a bomb in the abortion clinic at which Myra works. Realizing that she was mistaken in her belief that the clinic was empty and her sister is inside, the Voice-as-Myrna warns her sister to "Get to the door NOW" (182). In this moment of urgency, the voice through which the sisters have fought with one another throughout the years becomes a voice of warning, of survival. Unlike the Voice Over's helpless warning to Charlene in *Hot*, the Voice in *Twins* seems to have more power, more authority. And yet, in both plays, the Voice and Voice Over suggest a crisis of divided femininity, split between disembodied voice and spectacular body. In *Twins*, this crisis takes on a national scope. The threat of total annihilation is apparently the impetus

necessary to encourage dialogue between the two sisters, and between the two political positions they embody. The play's final dream sequence shows Myra "*summoning up all of her courage*" to say to Myrna, "And I really wish…I wish we could be closer" (184; ellipsis in original).

The final scene is, significantly, a dream sequence. More specifically, the final scene is a dream within a dream within an actual disaster, a sequence that blurs the distinctions between the real-life scenes and the dream sequences. The scene opens with the sisters' voices talking to each other, and longing for some kind of reconciliation. This is Myra's dream, and it is interrupted by "*crash and flash of light*" (184), which replays the disaster that happened in the previous scene, when Myrna bombed the abortion clinic where Myra works. Awakening Myra from this dream into the second register dream, Sarah, Myra's lesbian partner, offers reassurance as Myra mournfully remembers a time when fears were more clearly rooted in fiction, and not everyday life. As she says to Sarah, "In the fifties we were scared of Boris Karloff. We weren't sacred of riding the Long Island Railroad or working in clinics" (185). In a line recalling *And Baby Makes Seven*, Sarah jokes, "We almost blew up together, just like any other happy nuclear family" (185). This dream within a dream within an actual disaster produces a melding of dream and reality in the play-world, as well as in American popular culture and politics. The play ends, appropriately, with in a quiet domestic dream, which is interrupted by the nightmare of two sisters destined to obliterate each other. At the end of the cold war era, this is the family scene, the revised American dream. As Myra says nostalgically to Sarah while they lie in bed during the play's only peaceful moment, "Sometimes I miss the fifties" (185). The play concludes with Doris Day, the quintessential 1950s American everygirl,

singing "I'll See you in My Dreams," as The Voice ominously says "Sweet Dreams" (187), creating a dissonant tone that highlights the persistent polarities of American politics and American femininity, and popular culture's exploitation of those polarities.

Twins had its New York premiere at the Laura Pels Theatre, Roundabout's off-Broadway theatre that showcases new work by established playwrights. [56] Since critics and the public had already become familiar with Vogel through *The Baltimore Waltz* and *Drive, Twins* was received as an unsophisticated attempt at political farce. One wonders, however, if there was resistance to women in drag, acting as both comedians and representatives of political positions and national values. That is, I wonder if the critics could not reconcile boob jokes with the fact that it was the women who were making them. And I wonder if there was a resistance to reading the twins as representatives of collective values, and not just icons of sexuality. Ben Brantley criticizes Vogel for "manipulating cultural clichés" without "necessarily ris[ing] above them" ("Not Triplets" E1). He writes, "much of [Vogel's] gender-twisting satire would undoubtedly seem stale to a downtown audience who have sat through more advanced variations on the same themes by performers like Lypsinka and Five Lesbian Brothers." Moreover, Brantley warns that, for spectators familiar with Vogel's work via *Drive*, they will "have difficulty recognizing her voice here," suggesting that the pathos and seriousness that *Drive* offers is missing in *Twins*. Brantley does not place *Twins* within the tradition of political farce, but rather dismisses "Myra and Myrna of Mineola" as caricatures who are "never much more than the sums of their slogans and fashion accessories" (E1). In his review of the play, Vincent Canby of the *Times* thought, "The politics of the play are fairly

[56] *Twins* was workshopped during 1995 at the New York Theatre Workshop, and had its world premiere at the Perseverance Theatre in Douglas, Alaska in November, 1996, with Molly D. Smith as Artistic Director. It was also produced in March 1997 at Trinity Repertory Theatre in Providence, Rhode Island.

rudimentary" ("The Mad History of Women" E12). The title of his review alone—"The Mad History of Women as Told by Twin Barbies"—is itself revealing. Reducing Myrna and Myra to replicas of the world's most ubiquitous doll, while describing the play as an insane history of "women," and not of the country, is telling. Women's history in America is, for Canby, reducible to commodified images of popular culture, while satiric humor, written and enacted by women, cannot be applied to the broader culture. While the conflict in *True West* conflict is primal and eternal, that of *Mineola Twins* is superficial and kitschy.

Michael Feingold of the *Village Voice* is the only critic to point to the play's "femaleness" as a feature that "some male critics will no doubt resent" (161). For Feingold, the success of the play was in the "triumphant performance" of Swoosie Kurtz. "Kurtz," Feingold writes, "is definitely the show" ("Double Takes" 161). Perhaps the most damning comment came in Feingold's comparison to Wendy Wasserstein's most successful play: "*The Mineola Twins* is a simple, loosely strung narrative, a sort of low-rent *Heidi Chronicles* times two" (161). Comparing *Chronicles,* one of the rare woman-authored plays to move to Broadway, to *Twins* is revealing. Wasserstein's play presents a much more familiar, and therefore unthreatening, femininity than *Twins*—that of the flailing and somewhat neurotic young woman seeking to find herself—while *Twins* presents a non-realist caricature of a schizophrenic American femininity. This comparison also suggests the inevitable comparisons that occur between plays by women playwrights. Women playwrights are still a minority, and women-centered plays even more so. Thus, they inevitably become a kind of genre in and of themselves. Whether labeled feminist theatre, women's theatre, or lesbian theatre, women playwrights are not

often referred to as just playwrights. While *Twins* has received little critical attention, it has been produced quite regularly over the past decade, increasing in relevance as time passes. In a well-received 2007 production in Baltimore, the play is described as a story about "these schizophrenic times" told "through two women." The reviewer writes, "*The Mineola Twins* is a comedy, and now that boomers are getting more reflective, it also deserves to be classified as part of an expanding genre: the critical history of post-war self-absorption" (Barry). The play's popular success and political relevance has overtaken its initial presumed lack of sophistication. And as with many of Vogel's plays, such as *The Oldest Profession* and *Desdemona*, it achieved a rather delayed success, as the history it invokes has resurfaced as a more distant, and thus more palatable, cultural memory.

The social significance of *Twins* has changed since its first full production in March 1997 at Trinity Repertory in Providence, Rhode Island. When the play had its New York premiere in 1999, comparisons were drawn between Monica Lewinsky and Hillary Clinton. In 2008, one cannot help but draw comparisons between Myra/Myrna and Hillary Clinton/Sarah Palin. Interestingly, the reception of the play between then and now reveals both the increased visibility of women in politics, as well as highlighting the even more firmly entrenched political polarization in post-9/11 America. Palin and Clinton were battling not only each other, but also an entire history of women on the public stage. And comedy is an apt form to draw attention to the cultural dissonance between women's political voices and the cultural codes inscribed on their bodies. Palin and Clinton, particularly in their Saturday Night Live incarnation, bear a remarkable resemblance to Myra and Myrna. In its clashing convergence among politics, gender, and popular

culture, *Twins* offers an entertaining and enlightening tour through four centuries of American history.

Drive and *Twins* are meant to be companion plays, working dialectically to unravel the social processes that produce female subjects—and female objects—in the latter half of the twentieth century. Vogel reveals that she "wanted the plays to travel the same time period, from the end of the 1950s to the end of the 1980s," with "one play . . . looking at the culture from the outside and one . . . exploring how the culture feels on the inside" (Interview with Greene 441-2). The "exterior, pop mentality" of *Twins* thus works dialectically with *Drive*, which "dramatize[s] the interior" experience of postwar femininity. These plays are, as Vogel describes, a "History of white, middle-class femaleness" (442). That this particular part of American history is told with female subjects at the center of the experiences is a crucial part of Vogel's strategy as a playwright, as she encourages the audience—male and female—to identity with female protagonists who are at the center of political action, and who are also complex and conflicted characters who express the contradictions of a society that both glorifies and degrades women's body. Like burlesque, her plays publicize women's bodies and their voices, which often produces an incongruity between what is said and what is seen. Vogel had envisioned her strategy of having the "ha-ha funny" tone of *Twins* produced before she dug in with *Drive*, which implicitly says, "'This is how it feels on the inside'" (442). However, the reverse happened, with *Drive* premiering in New York first—to wide acclaim—and *Twins* following its trail of praise, only to be received as a frivolous follow-up to the more serious and sensitive tone of its predecessor. Thus, the dialectical dynamic between these two plays was lost.

If *Twins* presents a farcical vision of the split within American politics and American femininity, *How I Learned to Drive* gives us another picture of the past four decades—the rupture between the body and voice within female subjectivity. Whether individual or cultural, this radical split suggests the myriad ways in which the female body has been constructed as an object, in part, through the silencing of the female voice. In burlesque, the silencing of the burlesque performer's voice "confirmed the authority of the male spectator to visually possess her" (Allen 170). In *Drive*, this voice re-emerges in the character of L'il Bit, who articulates an irreconcilable rupture between her narrative voice and her objectified body.

A Drive Down Mammary Lane: *How I Learned to Drive* as a Picaresque Play

> One of the special delights which ladies find in Cadillac ownership is the pleasure of being a passenger.
>
> 1959 advertisement for GM's new pink Cadillac[57]

> I want to *seduce* the audience. If they can go along for a ride they wouldn't ordinarily take, or don't even know they're taking, then they might see highly charged political issues in a new and unexpected way.
>
> Vogel, Interview with Stephen Druckman

During my first visit with Vogel in New Haven, Connecticut, she invited me to a rehearsal of her most recent play, *A Civil War Christmas*. As I settled into the passenger side of her Toyota Prius on our way to the Long Wharf Theater, I remarked that it was my first time in a hybrid car, to which she replied, "This car teaches you to drive all over again." Just as Vogel is continually revising her own and others' work, I thought to myself, she is also, apparently, continually learning how to drive. In Vogel's most critically successful play, *How I Learned to Drive*, L'il Bit, like her creator, is in the driver's seat, taking the audience along a different path to familiar territory.

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[57] This slogan is quoted in Juliann Sivulka's essay, "The Fabulous Fifties." *Advertising and Society Review* 9.4 (2008).

Vogel's performative burlesque in *Drive* is an "undoing" of the binary categories of victim/victimizer, masculinity/femininity, individual/collective, body/voice. And she enacts this burlesque using a dramaturgy of seduction. As quoted above, Vogel says she wants to "*seduce* the audience" in *Drive*, taking them "along for a ride they wouldn't ordinarily take." Seduction is, itself, a kind of journey, meaning "to lead astray, often with sexual connotations" (OED). As the "tease" of striptease, seduction is the promise of something more—and something less. Indeed, like sexuality, seduction's promise of more always necessitates a loss, a giving over of one's own desires to those of another.

Vogel's dramaturgy of seduction in *Drive* draws from her fascination with Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita,* which she has read more than a half a dozen times since high school (Bigsby, *Contemporary* 319). The even-handedness and neutrality of the novel intrigued Vogel, as did the subtle shift in the power dynamic between Humbert Humbert and Lolita. What Vogel sought, however, was *Lolita* shown from the perspective of the "nymphet" rather than the wry Humbert Humbert. Vogel's Lolita is L'il Bit, the subject of the play, who tells the story of her objectification. Her voice is intertwined with the voices of the other characters, as well as songs and signs from popular culture. Hearing the story from L'il Bit's perspective is crucial, since, as Vogel points out, "women have been trained to empathize with male subjects," whereas "Men have not learned how to empathize directly with a female character" (Interview with Savran 272). Vogel develops a dramaturgy that, like burlesque, encourages the audience—men and women—to identify with a female character. Blending empathy, humor, and pop culture, Vogel brings into often uncomfortable focus, the dissonant experience of postwar femininity,

while revising one of the most influential texts of the latter half of the twentieth century—*Lolita.*

Published in the United States in 1958, *Lolita* was, and continues to be, a novel of dubious reputation. As Frosch points out, "*Lolita* was the subject of a major literary-social controversy at the turn of the 1960s involving the relation of unconventional sexuality to the indeterminate borderline between literature and pornography" (55). Not unlike *Hot*, Nabokov's novel deals in that ambiguous territory where fiction becomes uncomfortably real, as he exploits the anxieties and fascinations surrounding female sexuality, using a confessional voice to parody American cultural forms and attitudes.

Lolita is a parody of literary forms, forms as diverse as the detective novel, a Freudian case study, and a picaresque narrative. *Lolita* is also a parody of American popular culture, especially its sexual fixations and avid consumerism. Morris Dickstein describes Nabokov's novel as both a "send-up of the lyrical novel," as well as "a parody of *On the Road* even before it appeared" (123). As Dickstein argues, "For Kerouac, the road is a metaphor of movement, of breakthrough; through Humbert's European eyes, it stands for aimless flight, a feigned sense of 'going places,' an illusory progress through a phantasmagoric landscape of cultural kitsch and inward fixation" (123). *Lolita* is also, Dickstein argues, a black comedy that "negotiates moral boundaries and shatters taboos" (127), while satirizing American popular culture. As Thomas R. Frosch points out, any notions of narrative authenticity in the novel are undercut by "the rapid and unpredictable shifts in tone" and the perpetual "intrusion of the burlesque" (40). In this sense, *Lolita* is a burlesque of at least two genres—the first-person confessional narrative and the picaresque novel.

The novel begins with a parody of psychotherapy, in the form of a letter written by Dr. John Ray, who frames the novel as a "case study" that, he hopes, will "make all of us—parents, social workers, educators—apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world" (Nabokov 6). The facetious tone suggests Nabokov's parody of American sexual moralism and the language of psychoanalysis that was so common in the 1950s. Significantly, Dr. Ray is unsure of what to title his fictional case study, "*Lolita, or the Confession of a White Widowed Male*" (3), explicitly revealing the ambiguous narrative perspective that the novel maintains: who is the subject seducing and who is the object being seduced? Who is the protagonist? In the end, the first-person narrative voice positions Humbert as the subject, and as Dickstein underscores in the following description, Lolita as an object:

> Lolita is . . . a complete product of American popular culture, the teenage consumer for whom the ads were written, the movies were filmed, the candy bars confected, the roadside attractions promoted. In enslaving himself to Lolita and escorting her forcibly across the country, Humbert, like other fifties runaways, is both escaping and discovering America. (125)

In this description, Lolita is an object among other cultural objects, a commodity to be consumed, and a nymphet to be captured and taken on a road trip. From this perspective, Humbert and commercial culture are the active subjects, while Lolita is a passive consumer. In *Drive*, Vogel asks: From what is Lolita escaping and what is she discovering? And further: Where would they have gone had Humbert let Lolita drive?

As the observer/narrator of the tale, Humbert begins as a unified subject, and we witness him gradually coming undone by his erotic attachment to Lolita. Describing her in the distinctly dualistic terms with which femininity and female sexuality is has historically been cast, Humbert confesses in his journal:

> What drives me insane is the twofold nature of this nymphet—of every nymphet, perhaps; this mixture in my Lolita of tender dreamy childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity, stemming from the snub-nosed cuteness of ads and magazine pictures . . . and from very young harlots disguised as children in provincial brothels; and then again, all this gets mixed up with the exquisite stainless tenderness seeping through the musk and the mud, through the dirt and death, oh God, oh God. And what is most singular is that she, *this* Lolita, *my* Lolita, has individualized the writer's ancient lust, so that above and over everything there is—Lolita. (Nabokov 44-45)

This passage revealingly lays bare the ways in which a divided femininity—here divided into pure and chaste versus commodified and sexualized—is a globally distributed, historically dense product of male fantasy. Humbert sees the ubiquitous images of popular culture and degraded realities of prostitution as residual historic stains on Lolita's pristine femininity, polluting her singular yet transient perfection. Indeed, it is her particularity, her embodied reality that enables Humbert to give a material reality, in the form of his writing, to his erotic desire, which subsequently becomes the text we read and the archetype of femininity it had produced. One of the most powerful feminine stereotypes of the last four decades, and undoubtedly the most commercialized, is the stereotype of the seductive and seducing nymphet, the girl-woman who embodies both purity and taboo, virginity and carnality.[58] This myth of female sexuality is framed in the above passage as the very inspiration of male authorship, the necessary Muse of male authorship. When Humbert insists, "I am not concerned with so-called 'sex' . . . a greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets" (Nabokov 134), he reveals this illusive nature of his desire as the very driving force of his narrative. Humbert is seduced, not by Lolita herself, but by the effects Lolita has on him. As Frosch

[58] Examples of the continued exploitation of this female stereotype in contemporary popular culture can be found in the obsessive and often violent focus on the lives of Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan (as well as both of their younger sisters), Miley Cyrus, Taylor Swift, and Jessica Simpson. In all of these cases, there is a fairly predictable narrative trajectory in the way the popular media represents these celebrities. First, the media glorifies them, and then they launch an ongoing critique of their bodies, followed by a relentless scrutiny of their private lives. Finally, there comes a prurient interest in their various downward spirals into addiction, failed relationships, and mental breakdowns.

suggests, Nabokov turns Lolita "into a symbol of his monomania" (44). In this sense, "my Lolita" (309) is the accurate description of this character; she is Humbert's mythic creation—that obscure object of his desire.[59]

It is this contradictory cultural fixation of female sexuality as both carnal and virginal that Nabokov parodies in his novel. Nabokov parodies the specifically 1950s creation of the "Lolita" myth. Taking Humbert's perverted perspective as an expression of the larger culture's fascination with female sexuality, Nabokov sets this new "American Eve" (Goldman 87) alongside the popular discourses of detective fiction and the road novel, and the scientific discourses of psychoanalysis. Eric Goldman argues that Nabokov, like the scientific discourses of the decade, "challenged myths about the presumed 'innocence,' or 'sexual naiveté, of American women" (87). Indeed, Humbert's—and American culture's—fascination with and commodification of female sexuality are precisely what Nabokov parodies. Scientific discourses developed theories of an active female sexuality, which fed into sexualized images of young women in popular culture. Goldman states, "Nabokov points up the way a scientific approach dehumanizes as well as 'normalizes' young women like Lolita" (102), so that any actively sexual female will automatically fall into this new stereotype. Goldman points to "Humbert's mythologizing of Lolita" (102), which he reads as the "feminist statement Nabokov makes about the connection of myth to misogyny" (103). However, any such feminist statement made by Nabokov seems unlikely, since he did not deconstruct the mythology of Lolita; rather, he *reconstructed* it in order to parody American culture's sexual attitudes. Legitimized by scientific discourse and taught through popular culture, the promiscuous "nymphet"

[59] This is a reference to Luis Buňuel's 1977 film, *That Obscure Object of Desire*, which has many similarities to *Lolita*, both in its tone and treatment of male desire for an illusive female sexuality.

crystallized as a tenacious myth in the 1960s, and continues to be a vital way of imagining female sexuality today.

What Vogel does in *Drive* is place the "Lolita" myth, the myth of a female sexuality that is both innocent and "deviant" (that is, active), in dialectical tension with the socially stigmatized child abuser, thereby showing the connections between them and the cultural contradictions that produce them as social categories. Positioning L'il Bit as the speaking subject, Vogel reorients the audience to see female sexuality from a particularly difficult and conflicted perspective. While Nabokov and Vogel's projects are similar, Vogel does not use irony to tell her tale of seduction, but rather a kind of melancholic burlesque. Moreover, unlike the novel, which is a form suited to individual reception, theatre automatically engages in multiple perspectives, both in its production and reception.[60] And thus, Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* is, like *Lolita*, a tale of seduction, an experiment in form, an examination of American culture, and a picaresque narrative told from the perspective of a young girl coming of age in the late twentieth century. Unlike *Lolita*, however, *Drive* puts the nymphet in the driver's seat, giving her the voice with which she tells the fragmented story that begins, or in this case ends, with "the last day I lived in my body" (Vogel, *Drive* 90).

How I Learned to Drive was the most produced play in America in 1998, and it won numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for Drama (1998).[61] After the rousing romp through four decades of America history in *Twins*, *Drive* "dramatizes the interior"

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[60] Interestingly, Edward Albee adapted *Lolita* for the stage in 1981. The play received terrible reviews, with Frank Rich calling it "the kind of embarrassment that audiences do not quickly forgive or forget." See "Albee's Adaptation of 'Lolita' Opens." *NY Times* March 20, 1981. C3.

[61] *Drive* received numerous "best play" awards, including the Lucille Lortel, Obie, Outer Critics' Circle, Drama Desk. Mary-Louise Parker (L'il Bit) and David Morse (Uncle Peck) also received Lucille Lortel and Obie awards for their performances.

of a young girl's coming of age, and coming apart. The adult protagonist, L'il Bit, recollects her relationship with her Uncle Peck, a relationship that lasted throughout her adolescence and taught her about some of the most tender and most destructive effects of erotic desire. That Peck first made sexual contact with L'il Bit when she was eleven years old is revealed late in the play, after the audience has witnessed the development of their relationship through a different lens, not the one that would automatically stigmatize him as a pedophile or pervert. David Savran describes *Drive,* as a play that "does far more than explain the effects of sexual predation on a young girl." It reveals an experience that "splits her into two—a body and a voice—in order to represent the radical alienation of Self that results from having been molested" (Introduction to Paula Vogel Interview 264).

Although it seems apt to describe *Drive* as the tragic counterpart to the burlesque comedy of *Twins*, it is not a tragedy. Some critics define *Drive* as "a love story" (Bigsby, *Contemporary* 319), others as a sensitive depiction of "child abuse" (Feingold, "All for Love" 97). Vogel, however, states, "I actually describe *Drive* as a comedy. Of course it's not, but the first half very much functions as comedy. At some elemental level, it is who I am. My family had the most inappropriate moments of humor at funerals. Maybe it's a survival strategy. Some people say that this comes from Jewish genes" (Holmberg). She also has described the play as "a history play . . . observing that the notion of gender has changed for eleven-year-old girls, or for sixteen-year-old girls. . . . It's a way of using history to see what we are naturalizing now" (Interview with Savran 276). Using comic moments and historical signposts to defamiliarize the present, the play incorporates Brechtian elements (signs indicating scene titles and driving instructions), elements of confessional drama (a woman narrator), pieces of popular culture (doo-whop numbers

and period music), and classical Greek conventions (the use of a chorus, or in Vogel's cases, multiple choruses). As a burlesque of traditional theatrical forms, *Drive* works to deconstruct and expose the various structures and conventions we internalize to understand our lives and bodies. The play travels back and forth through time, unraveling the social codes and messages of sexuality and eroticism, while juxtaposing those messages with their implications in a painfully conflicted and completely genuine relationship between a young girl and her uncle. Perhaps the most appropriate description of the plays is "a journey" (Bigsby, *Contemporary* 289), which Vogel frames as a driving lesson, a road trip.

Drive can be described as a picaresque play, a young woman's journey from childhood to womanhood as remembered in fragmented retrospect. The journey in *Drive* moves back and forth, folding in on itself, suggesting the ways in which memory accumulates new meanings over time, with each layer of new experience changing the way the past is recalled. With her memories as the road map, L'il Bit navigates the signs, relationships, and social forces that shape her story. As Jonathon Boyarin writes, "Memory cannot be strictly individual, inasmuch as it is symbolic and hence intersubjective. Nor can it be literally collective, since it is not superorganic, but embodied" (26). By invoking the genre of the road novel, America's version of the picaresque, Vogel taps into the powerful myth of the freedom, individuality, and mobility of the American road, reconfiguring it as a winding journey of loss, conflicted interconnectedness, and the recursive movements of memory and history.

The picaresque is a novelistic genre that dates back to sixteenth century Spain, and is not unlike burlesque in its emphasis on satire, low culture, and episodic structure.

Picaresque style is "characterized by social satire and realistic descriptions from low life" (OED). The genre emerged as "a comic response to spiritual autobiography and Renaissance Humanism" (Friedman 225). In this sense, the picaresque was a form of literary burlesque. Howard Manning points out other salient characteristics of the genre, including its use of first-person narration, a protagonist of low station, and the focus on surviving in a "hostile and chaotic world" (182). Indeed, the form has a long history, and a flurry of scholarly attention exists around the genre in the late 1960s to the 1980s. Writers such as John Kerouac and John Barth no doubt brought renewed attention to the genre, as did the legacies of rebellious outsiders, such as James Dean, Holden Caulfield, and Marlon Brando.

Picaresque is, historically, a masculine genre. Edward Friedman argues that even the rare female pìcaro, such as Daniel Defoe's *Roxana* and *Moll Flanders*, are "gradually removed from the discourse" (xv) by their male authors, thereby losing "authority in a text that professes to represent her" (225). In theatre, however, the struggle for narrative authority does not exist in the same way, since the body of the actor on the stage has its own authority. Put another way, performance has an authority that exists apart from the written text; thus, in theatre, authority comes both from the body and the voice. In discussing *Drive* as a picaresque play, I hope to emphasize such elements its episodic structure, its humor, its emphasis on the survival of the protagonist in a chaotic world. As with all of her engagements with past forms and texts, Vogel revises the picaresque, so that it includes a non-linear structure and an emphasis on the female narrative voice. Unlike traditional picaresque novels, Vogel's play places the body and voice of its female protagonist center stage, so that the audience can witness their radical dissociation.

Again, as in Vogel's other plays, popular culture is woven into all aspects of *Drive* as a way to situate the characters within a social context that both produces them and which they produce. Suggesting the same slapstick-style comic undercurrent that animates *Twins*, Vogel writes in her notes on music, "The vaudeville sections go well to the Tijuana Brass or any music that sounds like a *Laugh-In* soundtrack" (Production Notes, *Drive* 5). This comic tone takes on an added, somewhat dissonant, dimension in *Drive* with the inclusion of music that Vogel describes as "rife with pedophilish (?) reference," such as "Roy Orbison's 'Dream Baby' and The Mamas and the Papa's 'Dedicated to the One I Love,'" along with "Other sixties music [such as] 'You're Sixteen' genre hits; The Beach Boys' 'Little Surfer Girl'; Gary Puckett and the Union Gap's 'This Girl is a Woman Now.'" And Vogel insists, "Please have fun" (5). Positioning a comic impulse alongside familiar popular music works to defamiliarize the codes through which our culture sexualizes children. Vogel states:

> A lot of people are trying to turn this into a drama about an individual family. To me it is not. It is a way of looking on a microcosmic level at . . . [h]ow we are taught at an extremely early age to look at female bodies. One of the tag lines I had in my head when I was writing this play was, it takes a whole village to molest a child. Jon Benet Ramsey was not a fluke. When we Americans saw the video tape of her at the beauty contest when she was five, a chill went up our collective spines. At what age are we sexualizing our children in a consumer culture to sell blue jeans and underwear? (Interview with Holmberg)

Thus, L'il Bit's journey is at once a personal recollection and collective confrontation with our cultural tendency toward sexualizing youth. *Drive* is a kind of melancholic burlesque of the picaresque, since it edges the humor and satire of the genre with loss and sadness, following the journey from the perspective of a young girl trying to survive in a hostile and chaotic world.

Vogel's use of negative empathy in *Drive* encourages the audience to empathize and even identify with Peck, a man that, in the media and everyday discourse, would be unequivocally labeled a child molester. Boldly encouraging a more complex view, Vogel disrupts what political correctness seeks to smooth over. Yet, Vogel insists, "you have to go against the grain. . . . In my sense of the political, you can never be politically correct. To be political means to open up a dialogue, not to be 'correct'" (Druckman H6). Crucially, she wanted "to see if audiences would *allow* themselves to find this erotic; otherwise, the only see victimization without empowerment" (H6). If the spectator finds the relationship erotic, they are immediately implicated in Peck's seduction of L'il Bit.

True to a dialectical movement, if Peck's role as victimizer is complicated, so too is L'il Bit's role as victim. Here, form is everything. The backward movement of the play lures the spectator to perhaps identify L'il Bit as the seductress, the sexually deviant young "Lolita." The spectator may place L'il Bit in the "Lolita" category, which is, then, at the end of the play, radically undermined by the category of "victim." In a speech that places blame on L'il Bit and pity on Peck, the female Greek chorus, acting as Peck's wife Aunt Mary, says directly to the audience:

> *(Sharply)* I'm not a fool. I know what's going on. I wish you could feel how strongly Peck fights against it—he's swimming against the tide, and what he needs is to see me on shore. . . . And I want to say this about my niece. She's a sly one, that one is. She knows exactly what she's doing; she's twisted Peck around her little finger and thinks it's all a big secret. Yet another one who's borrowing my husband until it doesn't suit her anymore. (Vogel, *Drive* 67)

This speech is itself a lure, a seduction toward identifying L'il Bit with this firmly entrenched conception of a destructive and demonic active female sexuality. This speech redoubles the effects of the final scene, in which we see Peck seduce eleven year-old L'il Bit. The disorienting effects of seeing the same character in such different ways in the

same play exposes the unsettling contradictions of female sexual development. *Drive* is less a play about two individuals, and a much more a play about the meanings projected onto and embedded within our bodies, the sexual positions we are taught to inhabit, and how these positions place us in a certain relation to cultural power and authority. It tells a story of the ways in which sexuality is misused and distorted as a form of power, as well as a form of escape. If the eroticism of the play is examined, it suggests a great deal about the ways in which young girls learn to transform their position as both a sexual object into a form of agency, while men who feel powerless and alienated may seek a misplaced form of power through sexual relations with children.

In his essay, "The Pedophile in Me," Andrew Kimbrough argues compellingly that *Drive* "testifies to the radical and self-implicating belief that community begins when we recognize that what we find most abhorrent and intolerable in others is really that which we find most fearful and shameful about ourselves" (49). This precisely articulates Vogel's position toward the political and social elements in her plays, particularly in a post- 9/11 climate. "The only way Americans can bond right now is against the terror without. That's the only way we can ignore what I call the terror within" (Hicks 18W). This works on both a national and an individual level. Demonizing Peck for his desire is a way of naturalizing our own desires and ignoring the ways in which, as a culture, we fetishize youth and sexualize girls and boys at an increasingly young age. The counterpart to this eroticisation is a hyper-vigilance regarding potentially inappropriate relationships between adults and children. Kimbrough reminds us, "the past two decades have witnessed a sharp rise in the awareness of perceived sex crimes against children and the propagation of the unquestioned belief that these crimes are on the rise" (49). Indeed, the

naming of the crime itself is a performative gesture, a making of the morally and socially pathological category "pedophile," which then fuels the paranoia surrounding his or her recognition. The escape valve for this paranoia is, I would suggest, the voyeuristic consumption of popular culture images of hypersexualized young women, which offers some of the same titillations sought by the pedophile, but from a safe and morally sanctioned position.

The play is structured around the disjointed recollections of a now-adult L'il Bit. The play's structure and its staging allows the audience to gradually come to a full understanding of the dynamics between L'il Bit and her Uncle Peck. Significantly, the first scene occurs when L'il Bit is seventeen years old, and takes place in Peck's car, where he both teaches her how to drive and tries to undo her bra. From there, the narrative moves back and forth throughout the years between eleven and eighteen. The minimalist set design in the original production included several chairs, which the audience imagines as Peck's Buick Rivera. The unrealistic set distances the audience from the emotional volatility of the scene, as does the innovative staging. For example, as Peck fondles L'il Bit's breasts, they sit on the chairs, facing the audience without touching one another or moving their bodies. The stage directions read: "*Their bodies remain impassive. Only their facial expressions emote*" (Vogel, *Drive* 8). This non-realistic staging is crucial, both for the emotional distance it creates from the action being mimed, and in its implication of the audience from the outset. Refusing the distance and comfort of the fourth wall or other conventions of realism, the play works as a kind of community staging, an encounter between audience and performers. To further defamiliarize the action, each scene is introduced with a sign, with instructions read in the

voice of a driver's education teacher. The signs tell us which lesson is being learned, what gear is being used, the direction in which we are moving, and the precautions we should take. The driving instructions also signal shift in L'il Bit's memories, as they move back and forth between 1962 and the play's present.

L'il Bit starts the journey in the Maryland of her youth, a landscape littered with the detritus of America's history—"the crumbling concrete of U.S. One . . . one-room revival churches, the porno drive-in, and boarded up motels with For Sale signs tumbling down" (7). She begins the play by telling the audience: "Sometimes to tell a secret, you first have to teach a lesson" (7). Recalling Foucault's "repressive hypothesis," the play draws in the audience with the promise of an exposed secret, the revelation of this woman's true self. In a statement aptly describing the lure of L'il Bit's opening line, Foucault writes, "What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the* secret" (35). In both Christian confession and psychoanalytic "talk therapy," the aim has been to uncover and expose this sexual secret, which is the secret of identity. Hence, sexuality becomes the hidden secret of an individual's identity. In *Drive*, Vogel exploits the seductive lure of (private) secret, by subverting it with a (public) lesson, a lesson that she is about to give the audience about the complexity of sexual desire and the cultural codes that produce bodies that can be radically alienating places in which to live.

Drive positions L'il Bit's body and voice in perpetual tension with the voices of the community. On stage, this enacts "a tension between the auratic body and the dialectical image, between private recollection and cultural memory" (Diamond, *Unmaking* 150).

Indeed, memory is the vehicle in which L'il takes the audience on the journey. And it is a memory located both in L'il Bit's body and in the broader culture. Put another way, L'il Bit's embodied memories are both hers and part of a larger history of sexual discourse. As Jonathon Boyarin writes, "identity and memory are virtually the same concept" (23), and, by extension, cultural identity is nothing more or less than the memories it chooses to legitimize and commemorate. In an explanation particularly relevant to the ephemeral nature of theatre, Boyarin writes, "memory is not only constantly disintegrating and disappearing but constantly being created and elaborated" (22). Memory is "neither something preexistent and dormant in the past nor a projection from the present, but a potential collaboration between present consciousness and the experience and expression of the past" (22). This is the experience that *Drive* offers, as L'il Bit negotiates between her past and present selves, trying to come a somewhat coherent understanding of her own history.

The central metaphor the play is driving lessons, and the play takes the journey back and forth in time along as we witness how L'il Bit has learned from her uncle how to drive, how to navigate the twists and turns of gender and sexuality. One of the lessons she learns from Peck is how to take a traditionally masculine position, both in the driver's seat and by extension in broader cultural relations. In this scene entitled, You and the Reverse Gear, Peck states to a fifteen-year-old L'il Bit:

> When you are driving, your life is in your own two hands. Understand? . . . You're the nearest thing I have to a son I'll ever have—and I want to give you something. Something that really matters to me. There's something about driving—when you're in control of the car, just you and the machine and the road. . . . A power. I feel more myself in my car than anywhere else. And that's what I want to give to you. There's a lot of assholes out there. . . . And you have to be ready for them. I want to teach you to drive like a man. . . . Men are taught to drive with confidence—with aggression. . . . Women tend to be polite—to hesitate. And that

can be fatal. (Vogel, *Drive* 50)

Here, Peck teaches L'il Bit how to embody and perform masculinity. In teaching her "to drive like a man," Peck teaches her how to assume a position of masculine power and authority and survive in a world that constructs her as an object. Gendering her as a man, L'il Bit's female sex is also, of course, in the forefront of Peck's mind; she is taught by Peck to act like a man and yet is treated by him like a woman. She is both subject and object. When he tells L'il Bit, "Treat her with respect" (51), the line might initially be interpreted as Peck's advice to L'il Bit about how she should treat her own body; yet, it takes on a sadly ironic line when understand it in retrospect, after witnessing his initial encounter with L'il Bit. When she questions why Peck refers to the car as "she," Peck responds, saying, "It doesn't have to be a 'she'—but when you close your eyes, think of someone who responds to your touch—someone who performs just for you and gives you what you ask for" (51). Peck's relationship to his car reflects the cultural relationship of masculine dominance over a feminized object, in general. However, Vogel complicates this relationship through the complexity of L'il Bit's own desires and drives. Considering Peck's advice, L'il Bit assumes the position of subject, and says, "I close my eyes—and decide not to change the gender" (51).

Vogel explains this complicated relationship through the story of *The Gift of the Magi:* "I wanted the play to be that they give each other . . . the wrong gifts, with great love" (Craig 230). Having been "taught" by Peck, L'il Bit is better able to handle being ostracized at school for her unusually developed body, although the cost is that she also develops a sense of her sexuality in a much different way than her peers, which in the end alienates her in another way. Additionally, Peck's weekly "lessons" with L'il Bit allow

him to abstain from alcohol, although he merely substitutes one abuse for another. They care for one another, providing comfort and guidance during difficult periods. Indeed, L'il Bit offers to listen to Peck, to keep him company in his restless loneliness, and Peck treats L'il Bit with a loving respect that few others offer her. Ann Pellegrini argues, that Peck's "legacy to her—love and loss, recognition and refusal—fails to resolve into pious and self-contained certainties. Uncle Peck is the only one of L'il Bit's relatives who really sees her. But this recognition is also a form of seduction, and worse, in the play" (482). As Butler points out, our desire for recognition is necessary for "our very sense of personhood" (*Undoing* 33), and yet it is a desire that, like seduction, "places us outside ourselves, in a realm of social norms that we do not fully choose, but that provides the horizon and the resource for any sense of choice that we have" (33). The hurt that Peck both tries to prepare L'il Bit for and subjects her to is the inevitable result of their relationship, which both transgresses and reinforces the social norms that define them both.

The balance between individual narrative voice and collective, social voice is theatricalized in *Drive* by the use of multiple Greek Choruses, which, as in the classic tradition, acts as a kind of communal voice. Again suggesting Vogel's belief that a playwright ought to look back to the Greeks to see what they were doing, Vogel mobilizes the classic convention of the chorus, but represents it not as a unified collective voice, but as a collection of disparate, conflicting voices. Moreover, since a contemporary audience is not used to seeing a representation of the community onstage, the choruses in *Drive* work as a defamiliarizing device, removing the focus on the individual actors—Peck and L'il Bit—while placing them within a cultural context. Three actors play the

male, female, and teenage choruses, and enact the roles of L'il Bit's family, her classmates, a restaurant waiter, and even L'il Bit herself. They also punctuate the scenes by performing doo-whap numbers and singing base refrains from Motown classics. The choruses give advice; they criticize; they insult; they sing in three-part harmony; they witness the relationship between Peck and L'il Bit; they give L'il Bit a voice when she is unable to speak. The choruses are the voice of the culture that shapes L'il Bit, Peck, and the audience. They provide both comic relief, formal complexity, and perhaps most importantly, they provide distance from the action onstage.

The choruses provide the most conventional guides to social norms. In a theatrical version of the "Mama Said" advice songs of the 1950s and 60s, L'il Bit's mother offers "A Mother's Guide to Social Drinking." While it is not acceptable to get "sloppy," a lady "may, however, get tipsy and a little gay" (Vogel, *Drive* 24). If she has had too much to drink, she should dunk her head in water, since "A wet woman is still less conspicuous than a drunk woman" (27). The comedy of this monologue is set against the more troubling scene that it frames, in which Peck takes L'il Bit out for dinner to celebrate getting her license, and buying her drinks until she is well beyond being "a little gay." Here, Peck becomes increasingly predatory, while L'il Bit assumes a more active sexual role. When L'il Bit asks Peck, "Aren't you taking me upstairs?" she begins to assume the role of seducer. He replies, "Do you want to go upstairs?" (31). As if suddenly their entire relationship has come into sharp focus amidst the haze of her drunkenness, L'il Bit realizes, "Someone is going to get hurt" (33). Throughout the play, with the crucial exception of Peck's initial violation, L'il Bit draws the boundaries of how far Peck can go with her. In terms of their relationship, then, she is in the driver's seat. Peck teaches her

how to be a sexual subject. The conflicting lessons regarding sexuality taught to L'il Bit by the female chorus do little to prepare her for this moment. The mother offers somewhat comforting words, such as "It's important that he loves you" (43), while the grandmother insists on instilling fear as a way to promote abstinence: "Tell her it hurts! It's agony! You think you're going to die! Especially if you do it before marriage!" (42), to which L'il Bit replies, "Why does everything have to hurt for girls?" (43).

Other pieces of advice that L'il Bit receives from her family are not quite as amusing or helpful. When L'il Bit states her desire to go to college, her grandfather, Big Papa, replies, "What does she need a college degree for? She's got all the credentials she needs on her chest" (17). Asking "How is Shakespeare going to help her lie on her back in the dark?" (14), Big Papa articulates the cultural division between the intelligent female voice and the degraded female body. While Gypsy Rose Lee was able in the 1930s to make a living doing striptease, while quoting literary passages, today this seems an absurd incongruity. In Big Papa's world, a woman can only be *either* smart *or* sexual. Reinforcing the emphasis on sexuality and gender training in the home, L'il Bit states, "In my family, folks tend to get nicknamed for their genitalia" (13). While Peck and Big Papa's names need no elaboration, her name comes from the "little bit" (14) her family discovered between her chubby newborn legs. This subtle and seemingly whimsical detail works to disrupt the supposed sexual dimorphism upon which gender is constructed. Particularly in relation to her well-developed chest, L'il Bit's little bit confuses distinctions between masculinity and femininity, male and female, active subject and passive object.

L'il Bit narrates an affecting emotional journey that moves, at turns, by exposure and withholding. It is a kind of emotional striptease, dramaturgical burlesque. Indeed, L'il Bit's—and Vogel's—dramaturgical strategy is expressed most clearly when L'il Bit relates a bus trip to upstate New York in 1979. She is twenty-seven and a teacher. It is in this scene that we realize how well L'il Bit has learned the intricate art of seduction from Peck, as she masterfully seduces a seventeen-year old high school senior. Writing and directing the scene of seduction, L'il Bit tells us that "I was only into the second moment of conversation and I could see the whole evening before me":

> And dramaturgically speaking, after the faltering and slightly comical "first act," there was the briefest of intermissions, and an extremely forceful and *sustained* second act. And after the second act climax and a gentle denouement—before the post-play discussion—I lay on my back and thought about you, Uncle Peck. Oh, Oh, this is the allure. Being older. Being the first. Being the translator, the teacher, the epicure, the already jaded. This is how the giver gets taken. (41)

This scene is both metatheatrical and metasexual, complicating how we think about the dynamics of power, gender, and sexual desire as learned, strategic positions. Here, L'il Bit describes the scene of seduction in theatrical terms. Not only does she describe sex as a performance, but specifically as a comedy. And as L'il Bit acts as director and dramaturg and actor, she recalls from whom she learned her technique. Here, teaching is described in terms of seduction, a reenactment of past lessons that evoked desire and pleasure. And as Shoshana Felman writes, "teaching, like love, becomes a performance of *promising*, an act of commitment . . . that indeed *engages* desire and pleasure" (74). Peck's lessons in driving are transformed by L'il Bit into dramaturgy of seduction, a dramaturgy not unlike the one Vogel crafts for her audience.

And yet, before mastering this dramaturgical strategy, L'il Bit must travel through some of the more painful moments of adolescent, learning how to live in her rapidly

changing body, while simultaneously learning how others read her body. In a poignant trio of scenes entitled, "1966. The Anthropology of the Female Body in Ninth Grade—Or A Walk Down Mammary Lane" (52), we get a vivid image of L'il Bit's mortifying experiences at school stemming from her early breast development. The three choruses play various roles as L'il Bit's peers, who make insensitive jokes about her large breasts. L'il Bit's isolation and shame are painfully apparent when hesitates to undress and shower with the other girls, all of whom have placed bets on whether or not her breasts are real. When the girls burst into laughter at the sight of a naked L'il Bit, a driving instruction sign comes onstage reading "Were You Prepared?" as "(*L'il Bit tries to cover up; she is exposed).* L'il Bit has been prepared, although not in the traditional way. Peck has taught her about her body. Suddenly the scene shifts in setting and tone, as "*1960s Motown fills the room and we segue into*:) The Sock Hop" (54-55). The signs and signals of adolescence are unraveled by Vogel's dramaturgy, so we can witness the alienation of a girl's coming of age. L'il Bit is both alienated from her body and shackled to what it signifies. Trying to articulate her alienation at the dance to a group of girls, L'il Bit confesses:

> But sometimes I fell like these alien life forces have grafted themselves onto my chest, and they're using me until they can "propagate" and take over the world and they'll just keep growing, with a mind of their own until I collapse under their weight and they suck all the nourishment out of my body and I finally just waste away while they get bigger and bigger and—*(L'il Bit's classmates are just starting at her in disbelief).* (57)

Evoking the melodramatic terror of sci-fi films, this scene is a humorous take on the ways in which our bodies are so encoded with cultural meanings that, in many ways, they seem not ours at all, but the property of a hostile, cold, and alien culture. Although the audience is not yet aware, chronologically, this scene takes place after Peck's objectification of

L'il Bit in his basement in 1965. The only indication we get of this past experience is her awareness of Peck's watchful presence. As stands awkwardly at the high school dance, "*(she tenses, aware of Peck's gaze)*" (56), and we sense that she has already learned the indelible lesson of her objectivity.

At thirteen years old, L'il Bit learns the pivotal lesson of seeing and knowing herself as a sexual object. The scene is entitled "1965. The Photo Shoot." As David Savran argues, "it is in this scene that L'il Bit most graphically—and theatrically—becomes an object for her Uncle Peck and, more ominously, for herself as well" (*Queer* 197). It takes place in the basement of Aunt Mary and Uncle Peck, which is perhaps a setting detail meant to suggest how deeply embedded this memory is in L'il Bit's consciousness. This scene is pivotal in a number of ways: it shows L'il Bit's awareness of herself as a sexual object, and her movement from child-like curiosity to shame; it also shows her broadened understanding of Peck, whom she was attracted to as a figure of love and comfort, and has now become someone who has the power to violate and hurt her; it also shows L'il Bit's swift shift in perception of her body as an extension of her subjectivity to an object and a commodity.

The scene is constructed around Peck's desire to take erotic photos of L'il Bit in order to create a portfolio to later send to *Playboy* magazine. L'il Bit's shyness about posing erotically is subtly replaced by a growing awareness of her sexuality, her seductiveness. She smiles for the camera, while Peck encourages her, saying, "Ooooh, great. That one was great" (63). Here, L'il Bit learns how to be a seductive object, seeing herself through Peck's appreciative eyes. Here, she becomes a body for Peck's disembodied gaze, as Peck reassures her, "No—I'm not here—just my voice. Pretend you're in your room all

alone on a Friday night with your mirror—and the music feels good" (62). When she recoils after hearing his intention to sell the pictures, Peck takes his seduction to its final stage, telling a vulnerable and ashamed L'il Bit, "I love you. . . . You know that? *(L'il Bit nods her head yes)* I have loved you every day since the day you were born" (66). Following Jacques Lacan, who suggests that the entire constitution of the subject emerges from the look and its structuring of desire, psychoanalyst Aldo Carotenuto observes, "The power of the look in the seductive game becomes even more radical. The look that subjugates me and that, paradoxically, at the very point at which it renders me an object, confirms my existence as a subject, can occur or not occur independent of my will" (144). L'il Bit *becomes* for and because of Peck's gaze.

The sexualized and objectified female body and directing male voice become clearly demarcated in this scene, and L'il Bit learns what her body is worth in the broader cultural sphere. Iris Marion Young points out, "The subject, outside all objects, fixes the object in its gaze, mastering it and knowing it with unambiguous certainty" (78). It is precisely this position that Peck assumes in this scene, fixing L'il Bit as his object. Peck tells her, "You're doing really great work. If we keep this up, in five years we'll have a really professional portfolio" (64). In a flash, L'il Bit's sexual self-awareness turns from a sense of pleasure to an experience of hurt and shame, hurt that Peck would share the images with other men and shame about how these other men might react. Since "Practically, the object is property" (Young 78), L'il Bit's body becomes a commodified piece of Peck's property.

In a flashback much earlier in the play, L'il Bit takes us to the period "During 1970. A Nixon recession" (21). While Nixon was explaining to the nation why it was necessary to

invade Cambodia,[62] and Myra and Myrna were in Long Island, bombing banks and trying to hold together a disintegrating domestic life, L'il Bit was getting kicked out of college because, some say, "she fooled around with a rich man's daughter" (21). However, she's "not talking" (21). What she does tell us is that, rather than going to class, she was taking her 1965 Mustang on whiskey-fueled car rides. Cruising the Beltway and the back roads of Maryland, "Fully tanked," L'il Bit realized that "just one notch of the steering wheel would be all it would take, and yet . . . He taught me well" (21), says L'il Bit. Realizing that driving is perhaps the only way to maintain control over her body, L'il Bit transforms her feelings of disempowerment and alienation into an empowered relationship to her car and driving. Significantly, the car was made the year L'il Bit was 13 years old, the year she learned that her body was an image to be sold to *Playboy* by her uncle. Thus, in driving her 1965 Mustang, L'il Bit moves from a position of object to that of subject, with the car working as a surrogate for her objectified past self.

During the late sixties, striptease and sex work were in tension with the political voices of second-wave feminists, as the degradation of strippers' bodies became the cultural counterpart to the vilification of the angry feminist voice. Perhaps the most revealing example of this tension occurred during the growing rift between men and women within various social protest movements. Shteir reports:

> On January 19, 1969, a day before Nixon's inauguration, women radicals erupted again, motivated by growing fissure between men and women in the Student Democratic Society (SDR)…. The trouble started in Washington, at a meeting of the National Mobilization Committee, an antiwar forum, when the young radical,

[62] On April 30, 1970, Nixon described the "actions of the enemy" in order to justify the invasion of Cambodia. This moment is worth highlighting since it points to the historic American tendency, occurring today in the Middle East, to locate "the heart of the trouble" out there, rather than looking into troubles that exist closer to home. Nixon tried to familiarize his tactic by telling Americans, "Vietcong occupied territories - these sanctuaries which serve as bases for attacks on both Cambodia and American and South Vietnamese forces in South Vietnam-… are as close to Saigon as Baltimore is to Washington. The full text of his speech may be accessed here: http://www.mekong.net/cambodia/nixon430.htm

> Marilyn Webb took the podium. No sooner had she begun her speech with the words "We as women are oppressed…" than the men in the audience responded by hooting and jeering and shouting "Take it off!" and "Take her off the stage and fuck her!" as though, one observer noted, they were at a burlesque theater. (330)

It is no surprise, then, that striptease and the rhetoric it inspired was viewed as counter to feminism. The powerful image of a hostile and vocal audience of men, trying to silence, objectify, and "fuck" a recalcitrant woman suggests the long cultural road traveled by burlesque. No longer part of popular entertainment, no longer comedy, burlesque was virtually equivalent with an aggressive sexualization of women's bodies and a silencing of their voices. With this in mind, one does wonder if the current revival of retro burlesque, which specifically evokes the burlesque of the 1920s to the 1940s, is perhaps an attempt to reconstruct a performance of femininity and female sexuality that is not politicized and problematized by second-wave feminism.

In the devastating penultimate scene of *Drive*, L'il Bit confronts Peck in her college dorm room, refusing ever to see him again. This scene is perhaps the most reminiscent of *Lolita*, staging the diametric shift in the dynamics of their relationship. However, when Humbert asks Lolita to "Come just as you are. And we shall live happily ever after" (Nabokov 278), and she rejects his plea, he maintains a sense of detached dignity that is the sole privilege of narrating one's own story. In Vogel's play, this privilege is granted to L'il Bit. Here, Peck is vulnerable and desperate, asking L'il Bit to marry him, to stay with him. L'il Bit refuses the details of her sexual life several times throughout the play, but perhaps most significantly in this scene. She answers Peck's question, "Are you seeing other men?" with "I—no, that's not the reason—I—well, yes, I am seeing other—listen, it's not really anyone's business!" (80). L'il Bit asserts her agency powerfully in this scene, deciding what pieces of information she will share with Peck and the

audience. In a last plea for her affection, Peck asks her, “Of your own free will. Just lie down on the bed with me. . . . Because sometimes the body knows things the mind isn’t listening to” (81). Peck expresses the idea of an embodied memory, a memory that contains a knowledge, a logic, and a trajectory of its own. As Peck and L’il Bit lay side by side in her dorm room bed, the chorus narrates, along with L’il Bit, fragmented memories of her love for Peck, memories in which he becomes the object of her desire: “Warm brown eyes,” “A splash of Bay Rum,” “Neatly pressed Khakis,” “His heart beating Dixie” (82-83). After her final refusal, L’il Bit tells us, “It took my uncle seven years to drink himself to death. First he lost his job, then his wife, and finally his driver’s license” (85). It is only then, after we are filled with (negative) empathy for Peck, that Vogel stages their first encounter.

It is only in the final scene that we witness the full history of L’il Bit and Peck’s relationship. Here, L’il Bit’s voice is ventriloquized by the teenage chorus. This dislocation of body and voice underscores the degree to which the experience has wrenched apart body and voice, while also theatricalizing the psychic distance she must still maintain from that initial experience. In 1962, Peck offers his first driving lesson, asking the eleven-year old L’il Bit, “Do you want to drive?” (88). Ushering her onto his lap, he begins teaching her to drive with caution and control, while placing “*his hands on her breasts*.” As the lesson continues, he “*tenses against L’il Bit*” (90), as she says to herself, “*Trying not to cry*,” “This isn’t happening” (90). It is a tremendously powerful and visceral moment, one filled with a mixture of uncomfortable eroticism, revulsion, and panic. There is an urge to plead with Peck, along with L’il Bit, “please don’t do this” (90). And yet, there is also a moment of recognition, a painful awareness of the

inevitability of such an encounter in a culture saturated with images far less sensitively drawn. Returning to her adult self, L'il Bit tells the audience, "That was the last day I lived inside my body. I retreated above the neck, and I've lived in the fire in my head ever since" (90). In a misplaced and ultimately self-serving lesson, Peck taught L'il Bit how to assume a masculine position of authority and control, while simultaneously damaging her relationship to her body. L'il Bit tells us, "The nearest sensation I feel—of flight in the body—I guess I feel when I'm driving" (91).

As the picaresque narrative comes to an end, L'il Bit gets into her car, adjusts her seat, tunes the radio, and fastens her seatbelt. In Nabokov's novel, Humbert narrates a similar scene after his rejection by Lolita: "And presently I was driving through the drizzle of the dying day, with the windshield wipers in full action but unable to cope with my tears" (Nabokov 280). Unlike Humbert, who drives off alone in an image of solitary self-pity, L'il Bit bears the weight of her history, and recognizes that both the pain and the love it carries with it will be part of her journey. This acceptance of her past instills a belief "in things like family and forgiveness" (Vogel, *Drive* 91). The play concludes as L'il Bit gets into her car, and "*a faint light strikes the spirit of Uncle Peck, who is sitting in the back seat of the car. She sees him in the mirror. She smiles at him. He nods at her. They are happy to be going on a trip together*" (92). Two Flying Dutchman, both looking for someone to release them, they drive away, with the past trailing them at every turn.

In this final image, L'il Bit incorporates Peck into her sense of self, her identification with him a perpetually conflicted negotiation between what he gave her and what he took away. It is a form of gender melancholia that Butler explains emerges when "the child whose love is exploited may no longer be able to avow that love as love," which, in turn,

"produces its own melancholia, the suppressed and ambivalent alternative to mourning" (*Undoing* 159). It is in the act of incorporating this avowable love that L'il Bit performs a melancholic burlesque.

Drive premiered in February 1997 at the Vineyard Theatre,[63] playing for fifteen months, and went on to be produced all over the world, including South Africa, Japan, and London. Her success with *Drive* solidified Vogel's reputation as a daring playwright, while the Pulitzer created an aura of symbolic capital around any future productions of her plays. Directed by Mark Brokaw and featuring Mary Louise Parker and David Morse in the lead roles, *Drive* was mounted by an off-Broadway theatre devoted to producing new works "by ground-breaking artists dedicated to developing the theatre of tomorrow."[64] Thus, *Drive* was positioned as a provocative and emergent work that is working to shape the direction of regional theatre's future.

Indeed, the reviews of *Drive* were almost unanimous in their praise of its sensitive yet bold treatment of the sexual relationship between L'il Bit and Peck, and its skillful blend of humour and pathos. While Brokaw, Parker, and Morse received acclaim as well, most of the accolades were directed at Vogel's deft and delicate writing. Indeed, Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* writes, "It is hard to say who is the more accomplished seducer. . . Uncle Peck, surely the most engaging pedophile ever to walk across an American stage, or the woman who created him" ("Pedophile" C11). Brantley's take on the play uses the explosive connotations surrounding pedophilia, while domesticating it, describing the play as a representation of a pedophile that "even a mother could love." Although Vogel's play avoids sensationalism, Brantley's review capitalizes on it, simultaneously

[63] The production moved to the Century Theatre across the street in April 1997, closing in May of 1998.
[64] This description is taken from their website: www.vineyardtheatre.org.

luring readers and legitimizing the play. In contrast, Jill Dolan's review in *Theatre Journal* points out, "*Drive* is only 'about' incest after the scene of Li'l first molestation" (128). Dolan offers more insightful comment on the way the play's temporal structure eases the audience into the recognition of sexual abuse. Michael Feingold's begins his review in the *Village Voice* with a critique of "her last two productions," which he describes as "weak, overly cute early works" (97).[65] Like Brantley and Dolan, Feingold praises Vogel's playwriting tactics: "She doesn't flinch from any of the awfulness involved… but the mixture of gentleness and precision in her touch is so reassuringly authoritative that you accept the picture completely" ("All for Love" 97). He writes, "This is, quite simply, the sweetest and most forgiving play ever written about child abuse" ("All for Love" 97). While all three emphasize Vogel's artistry as playwright, Feingold and Dolan avoid the sensationalism evoked through Brantley's repetitive use of the pedophilia as the play's subject. As Pellegrini argues, "None of the terms usually used to describe their relationship—'incest,' 'child abuse,' 'pedophila,' 'trauma'—is adequate to either the complexity or weight of L'il Bit's connection to her uncle" (482). Similarly, Dolan writes, the play is, ultimately, about "forgiveness and family, about the instability of sexuality, and the unpredictable ways in which we learn who we are, how we desire, and how our growth is built on loss" (128).

However, some critics were disturbed by what they saw as a lack of clear moral perspective. In a 2004 review of the play, Michael Toscano of the *Washington Post* wrote that, because Uncle Peck was played "with such skill and precision, combined with Vogel's seeming inability to clearly state who or what is right or wrong," the play's

[65] Presumably, Feingold is referring to *The Baltimore Waltz* (1992) and *Desdemona* (1993), both of which were produced at the Circle Repertory Theatre in New York City.

"message becomes so muddled as to be nonexistent" (T05). And yet, this is Vogel's aim—to muddle the moral categories into which Peck and L'il Bit would be typically placed. The desire to have a clear and edifying message is part of theatre's history in America; since the Chautauqua circuit, theatre has often been mobilized as a didactic tool that shapes the moral consciousness of the people. However, Vogel is using theatre to teach a different lesson, one that suggests that morality does not operate in fixed binary categories, but within the flux and interconnections of history and culture and in the messily unpredictable movements of desire. The reviewer was disappointed that as a "courageous feminist, lesbian playwright" (T05), Vogel did not "take a strong position. . . that the predator would clearly be evil" while not making it perfectly clear "who is preying on whom" (T05). This critique emerges from precisely the kinds of rigid stereotypes that Vogel's plays work to deconstruct; assuming that since she is a feminist and a lesbian, she should portray the woman as the unequivocal victim is exactly the kind of essentialism that Vogel's plays work to unravel. Not placing L'il Bit in the immobilizing position of victim is part of Vogel's strategy. *Drive* does not seek moral clarity, but rather moral complexity.

Readings of the play that utilize a therapeutic model to analyze Peck and L'il Bit's relationship operate within similarly dualistic frameworks. In her MA thesis, entitled "*How I Learned to Drive*: A Critical Look at the Acceptance of abuse Myths in the Play and in its Reception", Kim Bowers criticizes "the way in which Vogel failed to clearly illustrate the way the perpetrator easily manipulates the victim in the midst of adolescent confusion about sex" (101). Again, the play does not seek to clarify the issue of sexual abuse; it seeks to complicate it. Similarly, in her PhD dissertation on representations of

trauma on stage, Cecilia R. Petit discusses the ways in which "The application of psychoanalytic principles of trauma requires the establishment of a victim/perpetrator paradigm, which in this case reveals that L'il Bit suffered from the trauma of sexual abuse from the age of eleven through eighteen at the hands of her uncle" and "the psychological ramifications of having endured a long-term incestuous relationship were no doubt severe" (279). While psychoanalysis may yield great insights, especially if taken up critically as a discourse with its own history, it does not help to elucidate a play that works against a victim/perpetrator paradigm. The play-world of *Drive* is not dualistic. Moreover, by analyzing the characters as though they are real people, which they are not, perpetuates a unidirectional mode of spectatorship, in which the audience observes and analyzes from the comfort of their seats, comes out of the theatre morally satisfied, with their own lives unquestioned and their beliefs affirmed. In this sense, psychoanalytic readings of characters operate in a similar way to catharsis in classic tragedy; both work to purge the emotions within the confines of the theatre, so that they do not emerge in daily life. In contrast, *Drive* encourages an understanding of our complicity in Peck and L'il Bit's relationship.

Drive emerged during a period populated by confessional plays, and thus fit easily into an established context.[66] London reviewer Paul Taylor singles out Vogel's play from

[66] In the late nineties, many British plays revolved around experiences of sexual abuse. Sarah Daniels's *Beside Herself* (1990), David Spencer's *Killing the Cat* (1990), Claire Dowie's *Easy Access* (1997), and Simon Gray's *The Late Middle Classes* (1999) all examine the topic sexual abuse, tapping into its increasing ubiquity in public discourse. *Drive* taps into this same discourse, as well as the longer feminist tradition of confessional narrative as a means by which women might assume some kind of agency over their bodies and voices. Confessional writing, generally, has played a major role in feminist theories of representation. As Irene Gammel points out, in confessional literature (as in some forms of burlesque), "women take ownership of their erotic body pleasures and self-representations, actively constructing their sexual identities in life-writing" (11). However, performance imbues the confessional form with the added weight of the historical significations that accompany a woman speaking and performing onstage. Confessional performance in feminist theatre flourished in the 1970s and 80s, with such artists as Meredith

a cluster of sexual abuse plays that had been produced in the 1990s. He argues that *Drive* represents "an ambiguous image of empowerment, sexual temptation and suggested [a] complicity" that leaves the spectator "feeling faintly soiled" (11). And yet, it is precisely these uncomfortable ambiguities that the play cultivates. As Vogel states above, *Drive* is not about an individual family, or an isolated relationship between an uncle and his niece. Rather, it is a drama about community and conflict, family and isolation, gender and sexuality, teaching and learning, love and loss. It is about the culture that created Peck.

While *Twins* paints American social history in broad, colorful stokes, *Drive* draws the same history in a series of intricate etchings. Together, *The Mammary Plays* present a burlesque of history as well as being a parallel to the history of burlesque. In their focus on women's voices and bodies in performance, both *The Mammary Plays* and burlesque involve the perpetual negotiation between women's subjectivity and their objectivity, the pleasure and the politics that their bodies convey onstage and off. Both display, sometimes flagrantly and sometimes mournfully, women as both products and producers of history.

In the plays discussed in the following chapter, *The Baltimore Waltz* and *The Long Christmas Ride Home,* the focus shifts away from female sexuality and toward a broader exploration of the politics of fantasy, family, memory, and sexuality. In these plays, Vogel continues with her bold formal experimentations, while mobilizing memories animated by fantasy and rooted in her own history. It is from within this dialectic of

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Monk, Carolee Schneemann and Barabra T. Smith performing autobiographical works. These confessional works might be contrasted with the more confrontational solo performance of Karen Finley, who desecrates her body and refuses an erotic gaze. In the 1990s, solo performers such as Spalding Gray, Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, and Paul Zaloom mobilized confessional theatre as a queer performative strategy. These forms coincided with identity politics of the 1990s, as both performance and politics of this decade became centrally concerned with the formation and articulation of individual and group identities based on gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity.

individual and collective memory that *The Baltimore Waltz* and *The Long Christmas Ride Home* operate as both personal and public commemorations.

IV. Chapter Four: Plays of Commemoration: *The Baltimore Waltz* and *The Long Christmas Ride Home*

> Commemoration: A calling to remembrance, or preserving in memory, by some solemn observance, public celebration
>
> *Oxford English Dictionary*

> Memory cannot be strictly individual, inasmuch as it is symbolic and hence intersubjective. Nor can it be literally collective, since it is not superorganic but embodied. . . . What we are faced with—what we are living—is the constitution of both group "membership" and individual "identity" out of a dynamically chosen selection of memories, and the constant reshaping, reinvention, and reinforcement of those memories as members contest and create the boundaries and links among themselves.
>
> Jonathon Boyarin, "Space, Time, and the Politics of Memory"

> More and more I've been focusing on how, for me, playwriting is about structuring memory for an audience. . . . A communal memory. Our memory together: we start a play at eight, it's over at nine-thirty or ten. Where and what do we remember?
>
> Paula Vogel, Interview with Savran

In the two plays discussed in this chapter, *The Baltimore Waltz* (1992) and *The Long Christmas Ride Home* (2003), Vogel uses the theater as a communal space for remembering and celebrating, thus presenting the possibility for drama to operate as a cultural medium of commemoration. Alan Shepard and Mary Lamb argue, "Vogel makes her characters preoccupied with the topos of memory itself as well as the memories recollected on stage. . . . As they open up symbolic spaces that house some piece of their history, they vicariously engage us in their efforts to tell the memories anew in light of the personal and national changes that form the backdrop of the action" (199). Both plays involve journeys, which suggests that the process of remembering is not a fixed or unidirectional process, but a mobile and recursive one. Commemoration in these plays involves the expansive malleability of the imagination, revision, and a circular return. *The Baltimore Waltz* is Vogel's tribute to her brother Carl, who died of AIDS on January

9, 1988. The play's dedication reads, "To Carl—because I cannot sew," gesturing toward her play as a substitute for participating in the national commemorative project of the AIDS quilt. In *Waltz*, Vogel gives her brother a kind of immortality by placing him in the theatrical present tense.

The Long Christmas Ride Home: A Puppet Play with Actors employs techniques of Japanese Bunraku puppet theatre, while paying homage to Thornton Wilder, a playwright whose influence can be felt everywhere in Vogel's work. *Ride* deconstructs some of the most fundamental conventions of theatre—linear time, unity of body and voice—and some of the most conventional rituals and structures of American culture—Christmas, family, and religion. In this way, the play enacts a formal burlesque, taking apart the elements of theatre so that they operate as a fragmented totality. The play suspends and expands a single, frozen moment in time, a dialectical image in which past, present, and future converge and clash. Deconstructing the auratic qualities of performance, cultural rituals, and social structures, the play reveals the aura as the "repository of past experiences" (Diamond, *Unmaking* 145), rather than an ahistoric confirmation of authenticity. Like *Waltz*, there is a note of commemoration in *Ride* regarding AIDS, specifically regarding a culture that has not yet developed a way of talking about AIDS productively, without moral judgment, paranoia, and prejudice. Vogel reveals that, in *Long Ride*, "I am revisiting one of my primary concerns, which is that it's homophobia, not so much as AIDS, which kills us in this country" (qtd in Raymond 57). Again and again, Vogel unravels social "issues," in order to get at the fears and contradictions that give them their force.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick describes the "virulent homophobia of the 1980s" which led to the reconstruction of "a category of the pervert capacious enough to admit homosexuals of any gender" (38). Suggesting the relationship between lesbians to AIDS, Sedgwick argues, "The contributions of lesbians to current gay and AIDS activism are weighty, not despite, but because of the intervening lessons of feminism. Feminist perspectives on medicine and health-care issues, on civil disobedience, and on the politics of class and race as well as of sexuality have been centrally enabling for the recent waves of AIDS activism" (38-39). Vogel's plays participate in this activism, while developing a mode of camp that, in its commemorative function, takes a reparative approach to both performance and politics. In *Touching Feeling*: *Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Sedgwick theorizes camp in a way that is highly resonant with Vogel's dramaturgical interests:

> To view camp, as among other things, the communal historically dense exploration of a variety of reparative practices is to do better justice to many of the defining elements of classic camp performance: the startling, juicy displays of excess erudition, for example; the passionate, often hilarious antiquarianism, the prodigal production of alternative historiographies; the "over"-attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste or leftover products; the rich, highly interruptive affective variety; the irrepressible fascination with ventriloquistic experimentation; the disorienting juxtapositions of present with past, and popular with high culture" (149-150).

Vogel's own "prodigal production of alternative historiographies" and "ventriloquistic experimentation," as well as her continual juxtapositions of high and low cultural forms suggest a dramaturgical practice that participates in the production of "shared histories, emergent communities, and the weaving of intertextual discourse" (150).

In his essay "'It's My Party and I'll Die If I Want to!': Gay Men, AIDS, and the Circulation of Camp in U.S. Theatre," David Román articulates the potentially generative

relationship between camp and AIDS discourses in American theatre. He writes, "As spectators, we too are involved in the production and distribution of the discourses that comprise the social phenomenon we call AIDS" (327). Suggesting the potential of camp to articulate opposition, support, and alternatives within AIDS discourse, Román argues,

> Such a project—to intervene in the dominant representations governing AIDS—must involve a serious interrogation of the discourses, imagined or available, by which we fashion our identities to counter AIDS. The goal to fight back and stop AIDS is, moreover, securable to all of us who participate in the collective and localized enterprise we call theatre. No doubt, for some of us, it's the role of a lifetime. (327)

Reading Román's description of camp in theatre alongside Sedgwick's elaboration of lesbian and feminist interventions in AIDS activism and reparative camp practices, we get another definition of feminist camp, one that can be mobilized as a political and dramaturgical practice. The theatre, moreover, can act as a place where bodies gather to perform and witness collectively. As Judith Butler points out in *Precarious Lives*, "each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies" (20), which explains why the theatre works so powerfully as a place of commemoration. And "when we think about how few deaths from AIDS were publicly grievable losses" (35), we realize the urgent need for places in which to watch and listen, grieve and celebrate. In *The Baltimore Waltz* and *The Long Christmas Ride Home*, Vogel uses the theatre as a public place of commemoration—a ceremony and celebration of personal and collective memories—even as she camps and burlesques the canon.

Fantastic Journeys and Language Lessons: *The Third Man* and *The Baltimore Waltz*

> Fantasy is not simply a cognitive exercise, an internal film that we project inside the interior theatre of the mind. Fantasy structures relationality, and it comes into play in the stylization of embodiment itself. Bodies are not inhabited as spatial givens. They are, in their spatiality, also underway in time: aging, altering shape, altering signification—depending on their interactions—and the web of visual,

> discursive, and tactical relations that become part of their historicity, their constitutive past, present, and future.
>
> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*

> *Dear Paula*: I thought I would jot down some of my thoughts about the (shall we say) production values of my ceremony. Oh God, I can hear you groaning—everybody wants to direct. Well, I want a good show, even though my role has been reduced involuntarily from player to prop.
>
> Letter from Carl Vogel to Paula Vogel, Playwright's Note to *The Baltimore Waltz*

> Is it too much to ask of performance, that it teach us to love and to link us with the world, as well as to see and think critically about social relations?
>
> Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*

Vogel has said, "*The Baltimore Waltz* will be for me the greatest play I ever wrote" ("Women in Theatre"). This play stands out from the rest of Vogel's *oeuvre* in that it is not a response to a canonical text, but rather, to a moment of personal loss. Vogel wrote *Waltz* in response to her brother Carl's AIDS-related death on January 9, 1988. As David Savran points out, Vogel uses the conceit employed by Ambrose Bierce in his story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" of an extended moment that is dilated by the shock of death (Savran, "Loose Screws" x). In Bierce's story, the entire action of the narrative takes place in the moment the protagonist is about to be hanged. Similarly, the entire action of *Waltz* occurs in the moment that Anna hears her brother has died. Crucially, however, the audience does not realize this until the play has ended, and thus we watch the play unfold believing that it is Anna who has ATD (Acquired Toilet Disease) and Carl is the healthy brother who accompanies his sister on a rousing romp through Europe. And since ATD is transmitted through contact with toilet seats used by school children, and not through sexual intercourse, Anna attempts to "fight the sickness of the body with the health of the body" (Vogel, *Waltz* 29) by sleeping with every "Thomas, Deiter, and Heinrich" (42) along the way. The play is a montage of scenes that alternate between

burlesques of *The Third Man*, travelogues, language lessons, riffs on psychiatric models of grief, and satiric political references to AIDS, art funding, and medical care. The defamiliarization technique of this film-like structure and parodic humor places AIDS in the background of the play's action. What takes center stage is the relationship between Anna and Carl, the interplay between memory and fantasy, and the triangulated dynamic among the play's three characters—Anna, her brother Carl, and the Third Man.

Like a Viennese Waltz, *The Baltimore Waltz* moves seamlessly between forward and backward movements. And like *Drive* and *Ride*, *Waltz* involves a journey. The journey, here, emerges as an imaginative mobility between the recursive movements of memory and fantasy. The play works to bring these two faculties together in symbiotic relationship, so that the distinctions between reality and make-believe, past and future become indistinguishable. *Waltz* is both a commemoration of Carl's life and a theatrical condensation and displacement of the emotion that emerges in a moment of irrevocable loss, when there is an urge to flee from the finality of death, if only through the boundless possibilities of fantasy.

Quoted above is the first paragraph of Carl Vogel's letter to Paula, in which he outlines his wishes for his funeral. Offering Vogel options for "the piece of me I leave behind," Carl's writes:

1. Open casket, full drag
2. Open casket, bum up. (You'll know where to place the calla lilies won't you?)

3. Closed casket, internment with the grandparents.
4. Cremation and burial of my ashes.
5. Cremation and dispersion of my ashes in some sylvan spot.

As for the score, Carl states, "I would really like good music. My tastes in these matters run to the highbrow: Fauré's 'Pie Jesu' from his *Requiem*, Gluck's 'Dance of the Blessed

Spirits' from *Orfeo*, 'La Vergine degli Angeli' from Verdi's *Forza*. But my favorite song is 'I Dream of Jeannie'" (qtd in Playwright's Note 5). Sharing a sibling bond in their appreciation of both low and high culture, Carl and Vogel also share a sense of humor and warmth that pervades every moment of *Waltz*.

The premise of a European trip in *Waltz* stems from a trip Carl had asked Vogel to take with him in 1986, an invitation that she declined, not having the money and not realizing Carl was HIV positive. He died just over a year later, and Vogel wrote her play as a way to take that trip with him. As a commemoration of a beloved brother, *Waltz* is a play demonstrating the possibilities of a utopian performative, the possibility for theater to transform past loss into future potential, grief into hope, and the forgotten into the remembered. As Jill Dolan writes,

> I go see performances anticipating transformative experiences, ones that will let me see a sliver of a vision, let me feel for a moment in my body and soul what the world might be like were some form of social justice or progressive social change or some consistent act of real, human love, even partially accomplished. The performatives I'm engaging with here aren't iterations of what *is*, but transformative doings of what *if*. This kind of hope represents an opening up, rather than a closing down, of consciousness of the past and the future in the present. (*Utopia* 141)

The fantasy journey taken in *Waltz* presents a faith in the theatrical "what *if*," a hope that, by remembering the past and imagining the future, we might mobilize the transformative potential in a moment of crisis. Vogel hopes that her plays will resonate differently for each spectator, and believes that this depends on her own commitment to her reasons for writing a play. She contends, "If you know why you're writing the play, the audience will know why they are watching the play. They will construct a personal journey for themselves—if a playwright constructs a personal journey through the material" (Interview with Savran 271). Out of her personal journey, Vogel weaves a communal

experience, by situating the action in a particular historical moment that is both signaled and resignified through the use of parody, Hollywood film scores, and biting political references.

Not surprisingly given Vogel's commitment to teaching, *The Baltimore Waltz*, like *How I Learned to Drive*, uses the metaphor of the lesson to characterize the relationship among the characters and the subject matter of the play. Speaking to *The Advocate*'s Gerard Raymond, Vogel says, "One of the great gifts my late brother gave to me was an understanding that homophobia and misogyny are all about policing our gender—what it means to be a man or a woman in this country. . . . I think it is culturally universal, but I don't think it is innate. In the words of Rodgers and Hammerstein, 'You've got to be taught carefully'" (qtd in Raymond 57). Like in *Drive*, pedagogical techniques are, in *Waltz*, the method through which the characters assimilate the past and imagine the future; in these plays, teaching is both a form of seduction and a method of socialization. The driving lessons in *Drive* become language lessons in *Waltz*. Whereas L'il Bit's driving lessons teach her about both exploitation *and* agency, the language lessons revolve around assimilating—discursively and emotionally—loss and grief. Thus, just as *Drive* is not "about" pedophilia, *Waltz* is not "about" AIDS. In both plays, the lessons are the method through which the characters comment on the play's action, while attempting to incorporate this action into their character. And, in a truly effective pedagogical strategy, while the characters narrate the lessons of the play, they learn new ways of understanding the past and teach the audience new ways of seeing the present.

There are three players in *Waltz*—Anna (Vogel's stand-in), Carl, and the Third Man/Doctor. The costumes suggested for Anna and Carl are a blend of *film noir* and

sleepwear: “Anna might be dressed in a full slip/negligee and a trench coat. Carl is dressed in flannel pajamas and a blazer or jacket” (Vogel, *Waltz* 6). The actor playing the Third Man alternates between performing a series of roles as Anna’s multicultural sexual partners, narrating memories from Anna and Carl’s childhood, and reenacting the role of Harry Lime, Most sinisterly, the Third man also plays the role of the Viennese urologist, Dr. Todesrocheln (translation: “death rattle”), who is developing an underground treatment for ATD, which involves drinking one’s own urine. In all of these roles, the Third Man wears a pair of latex gloves that suggest, perhaps, the increasingly paranoiac measures taken in the name of safety and protection. In his turns as language instructor, polymorphous sexual partner, a mad urine-drinking doctor, and a parody of perhaps the most famous *noir* villain, the Third Man in *Waltz* disrupts any attempts to construct her play-world in binary terms. Importantly, by acting as both Anna and Carl’s sexual partner, the Third Man also disrupts the homo/hetero binary that organizes sexuality in our culture. In his review of *Waltz*, David Román points out one of the most interesting aspects of director Anne Bogart’s staging of Vogel’s play at Circle Repertory. Román writes, “Bogart stages the three actors and the minimal set and props so that at any given moment whatever’s on stage enacts a triangle” (“Review” 520). “The effect of the triangle,” he suggests, “is such that it never intervenes on Anna’s centrality; rather it quietly serves to frame the action and suggest Carl’s reality in Baltimore all the while” (521). However, rather than emphasizing Anna’s centrality, the triangulation disrupts any attempts at constructing a central focus in the play, as well as suggesting that the play is operating in three registers simultaneously—Baltimore reality, filmic fantasy, and memory. Like the two stage realities in *Hot ‘n’ Throbbing*, Vogel’s stage directions for

Waltz describe, "*Three distinct areas on stage*" (7), with each player moving between these registers or modes of representation. The triangular structure works also to dismantle the binary categories that we use to understand gender, sexuality, fantasy, reality, and disease, as the play seeks another language through which these terms might be understood and lived.

The play begins with Anna practicing her language lessons in preparation for her imagined journey. Her first words are "Help me please. (*Recites from memory*) Dutch 'Kunt U mij helpen, alstublieft?' 'There's nothing I can do.' French (*Searches in vain*) I have no memory" (7). Implicitly engaging the audience's help in her linguistic powerlessness, which here is related to a loss of memory, Anna sets up the theatre as a place in which to reconstruct a personal and communal memories. All of the linguistic exercises in *Waltz* relate back to the moment when the doctor at the John Hopkins hospital in Baltimore, Maryland says to Anna, "I'm sorry. . . There's nothing we can do" (9). This ominous line echoes throughout the play and provides the point of return at the play's end, only then it is spoken in past tense: "I'm sorry. There was nothing we could do" (56). *Waltz* takes this moment of powerlessness and loss, and expands it into a journey, a lesson, and a performative act of personal and cultural commemoration.

Another line that is repeated throughout the play is: "the language terrifies me" (7, 9, 10). Emphasizing Anna's search for a sense of discursive understanding, the language lessons are a way of absorbing the unbearable finality of the pronouncement that begins and ends the play: "There is/was nothing we could do." The verbs "to leave" (*verlassen*) and "to do" (*faire*) are conjugated in various theatrical ways throughout the play. Both verbs signify activity, and depending on the tense, also position that action temporally,

either in the seeming finality of the past, in the imminence of the present, or in not-yet of the future. And yet, in this context, these verbs also signal loss and a sense of powerlessness. Early in the play, the Third Man introduces "Lesson Number Three: Pronouns and Possessive Case. I, you, he, she, and it. They and we. Yours, mine ours." It is a lesson that reveals the importance of the subject in relation to the verb "to do":

> THE VOICE OF ANNA: There's nothing I can do. There's nothing you can do. There's nothing he, she, or it can do. There's nothing we can do. There's nothing they can do.
> ANNA: So what are we going to do?
> CARL: Start packing, dear sister.
> ANNA: Europe? You mean it? (14)

Using the verb "to do," a verb that describes the work of all performatives, a disembodied Anna conjugates the verb, which, through the use of various pronouns, has the effect of engaging the audience in her feelings of helplessness, as well as in her future action. While Anna can *do* nothing to change the meaning of Carl's death, she can mobilize her imagination, and performatively construct a fantasy future that helps to assimilate her present loss.

Linguistic emphasis on "Subject position. I. Je. Ich. Ik" (9) suggests that radical undermining of coherent selfhood initiated by grief. As Butler writes, "grief displays the way in which we are in thrall of our relations with others . . . in ways that challenge the very notions of ourselves as autonomous and in control" (*Undoing* 19). The erratic movements of Anna's fantasy journey is itself the work of mourning, in the sense that "mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation the full result of which you cannot know in advance. So there is losing, and there is the transformative effect of loss," and like Anna and Carl's European trip, "this latter cannot be charted or planned" (18). The play's wild juxtapositions and composite characterizations create the effect of a

dream-like splintering of self, in which all the players seem to refract and reflect the emotional upheaval of a single, unresolved moment. Much of the play involves Anna reconstructing pieces of her memory through a relearning of language, which seems to offer a way of retracing her steps back to the initial moment of loss.

In this play, language and memory are rooted in the body; and these embodied memories, constituted in and through language, are both sensual and sexual. Here, Anna becomes the teacher, giving lessons on the ways to create memories inscribed in moments of bodily pleasure and love. During her tryst with the Munich Virgin, who is ambiguously described as "*very young*" (Vogel, *Waltz* 40), Anna assumes a position not unlike that of L'il Bit in relation to the young boy on the bus trip in upstate New York. However, Anna's seduction of the Munich Virgin has a tender, almost maternal quality. It is a compassionate lesson, rather than a seductive strategy. She tells the virgin:

> ANNA: Listen. I'm a schoolteacher. May I tell you something? A little lesson?
>
> When you're a much older man, and you've loved many women, you'll be a wonderful lover if you're just a little bit nervous…like you are right now. Because it will always be your first time.
>
> MUNCH VIRGIN: You are a very nice woman.
>
> ANNA: The human body is a wonderful thing. Like yours. Like mine. The beauty of the body heals all sickness, all the bad things that happen to it. And I really want you to feel this because if you feel it, you'll remember it. And then maybe you'll remember me. (41; ellipsis in original)

Here, Anna articulates a mode of remembering that is inextricably bound to the body. Moreover, remembrance is connected to moments of past pleasure; it heals, rather than destroys. The lesson Anna teaches the Munich Virgin is how to cultivate a memory located in the sensations of the body, in desire. In this way, memory becomes a source of empowerment and joy, rather than helplessness and pain. In an earlier scene, Anna says

to Carl, "when I hold your hand, and I kiss it…I try to memorize what it looks like, your hand…I wonder if there's any memory in the grave?" (28; ellipsis in original). Here, memory, grief, and desire converge in the sensual body; in this convergence, unified selfhood disintegrates. As Butler writes:

> Let's face it. We are undone by each other. . . . If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire. One does not always stay intact. . . . [D]espite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of another, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, by the memory of the feel. (*Undoing* 19)

As Anna unleashes her sexuality with various European partners, she is trying to recollect her pieces of selfhood, a selfhood "undone" by grief. And it is this "undoing" of the self that fantasy initiates, memory transcribes, and theatre gathers back together and performs.

In the scene that directly follows, the Third Man teaches the audience the different tenses and moods of the verb *verlassen*, which he translates as "To leave, to abandon, to forsake" (41), while Anna and Carl have a fight in the hotel room about Anna's sexual escapades. The Third Man introduces each exchange, signaling the time and mood of Anna's nightly ventures:

> THIRD MAN: The future tense of the verb *verlassen.*
> CARL: Will you be leaving me alone again tonight? I'm ready for bed.
> ANNA: I will be leaving you alone. Just for a little while. (42)

In this poignant displacement of loss and illness, it is Anna who leaves Carl alone. As she goes "traipsing around," in an attempt to experience every last moment of health her body will allow, she begs Carl, "Please understand. I don't have much time. I spend as much time with you as I can, but while I still have my health… please?" (42; ellipsis in original). The scene that directly follows is a series of memories from their childhood, narrated by the Third Man, Carl, and Anna. While the Third Man states, "As children

they fought," Carl and Anna both try to explain: "CARL: We never fought, really." ANNA: Not in a physical way. He was a sickly child" (43). This scene is one of several in which Carl and Anna invoke childhood memories as a way of communicating and revisiting their past, as if to suggest that their time together is never finished or truly past, but as present as "the scent of your own breath and his seven-year-old body" (17) mingling together under the covers at night, or the smell of "Crayola wax, crushed purple and green" and "chalk dust" (46) in her classroom. Again, with memories located in the sensations of the body, and juxtaposed with the fantasy trip to Europe, the play combines the past and the future in the theatrical present tense.

The tone of *Waltz* is, like Vogel's other plays, an unpredictable combination of imaginative theatricality, pathos, and a generous dose of humor. Christopher Bigsby describes the play as "a celebration, a memorial, a camp display of the kind for which her brother had called" (*Contemporary* 309). Displacing the stereotype of the promiscuous homosexual while deconstructing the homo/hetero binary in relation to AIDS discourse, Vogel places Anna at the center of the crisis. Doubly defamiliarizing the 1980s activist rhetoric that emphasized the innocence of AIDS victims, Vogel makes the "innocent victim" a single, heterosexual schoolteacher named Anna, who contracts Acquired Toilet Disease (ATD) from using the toilets of her grade-school students. This ironically-inflected innocence stems from what Vogel admits as "the rage that she felt whenever she heard the phrase 'innocent victim' in discussions of AIDS, as if there were those who invited and hence deserved the disease and those who acquired it innocently" (Bigsby, *Contemporary* 311). As Harry Lime states in *The Third Man*, "I never really feel comfortable in these kinds of thing. Victims? A bit melodramatic" (Reed).

Waltz is a play overflowing with humor, stylistic juxtapositions, and oblique political references. The Production Notes, Vogel recommends, "The lighting should be stylized, lush, dark and imaginative, in contrast to the hospital white silence of the last scene" (*Waltz* 6). This juxtaposition creates sense of sterility in the last scene, which contrasts with the creative chaos of the fantasy that precedes it. Moreover, the silence in this last scene is contrasted with music that Vogel suggests ought to conjure "every cliché of the European experienced as imagined by Hollywood" (6). Again, as in the rest of her plays, *Waltz* incorporates popular culture in order to denaturalize the messages it teaches and the images it constructs. Most resoundingly, *film noir*, specifically Carol Reed's and Graham Greene's *The Third Man* (1949), operates as the popular culture intertext to *Waltz*, providing a visual backdrop for to Anna and Carl's trip to Europe, while infusing the play with an undercurrent of anxiety and paranoia similar to that surrounding AIDS in 1980s America. The film's desolate *mise-en-scène* comes from its postwar Vienna setting, a city occupied by the Allied Forces and Russians seeking out defectors. As the opening Voice-Over of the film announces, "I never knew the old Vienna before the war with its Strauss waltzes, its glamour and easy charm" (Reed).[67] Vogel camps and refigures the anxious tone of the film, using the Strauss waltz as the rhythm of her play and zither music as the score for a highly stylized homoerotic rendezvous. Vogel mobilizes *film noir*'s historical and cultural connotations of intrigue and paranoia and, in

[67] Director Carol Reed spoke these opening lines in the UK version of the film, while Joseph Cotton voiced them in the American version.

particular, plays up *The Third Man*'s homoerotic subtext to address a contemporary cultural moment of homophobia and anxiety surrounding AIDS.[68]

As a genre, *film noir* offers rich material for Vogel to mine in her investigation of the moral anxiety and hush-hush paranoia surrounding AIDS, homosexuality, and female virility. As David A. Cook argues, film noir is "a cinema of moral anxiety" (469). Like the science fiction vogue of the 1950s, *film noir* expressed what was unsettling to traditional cultural values, such as homosexuality, an aggressive female sexuality, and racial difference. As James Naremore states, "classic film noirs are preoccupied with eroticism and decadence, often showing encounters between straight white males and homosexuals or sexually independent women" (7), a description that could stand as a casting note for *Waltz*. Michael Sinowitz argues that the years after WWII marked an aesthetic shift in *noir* films: "Turning away from modernism, American and European writers clearly began engaging the ideas of existentialism" (407). Naremore confirms this, calling *The Third Man* "one of the best and most representative films of a period when a certain kind of high art had fully entered public consciousness" (80), describing it as a film that balances the "melodrama . . . with modernist skepticism" (81). Indeed, with its traditional focus on a solitary male protagonist, Frank Krutnik argues that *film noir* may be read, generically, as a "form of 'masculine melodrama'" (164). The trailer for the American release of *The Third Man* supports this description, enticing its 1950s audience with the promise of a love triangle, a renegade hero, and an infatuated woman:

> (Male voice-over) The *Third Man*—the story of two men and one woman caught in an international love affair. The Third Man—hated by thousands of men.
> (Female voice-over) …desired by one woman.

[68] Regarding the film's famous chase scene through the sewers of Vienna, especially its final moment when Martin and Lime lock gazes before Martin fires the gun, American producer David O. Selznick told Reed and Greene, "It won't do boys. . . . It's sheer buggery" (qtd in Naremore 291, footnote 49).

Shepard and Lamb point out that, in the intertexual relationship between *The Third Man* and *Waltz*, there is an "analogy between Cold-War anxieties about subversive infiltration and the Reagan-era anxieties about the risks posed by those infected with HIV" (205).

Released in 1949, after the end of World War II and at the beginning of the Cold War era, *The Third Man* captures a period in which American cultural disposition was tending increasingly toward the paranoid. In her recasting of the film's central players, Vogel reorients the triangulated sexual dynamics between Anna Schmidt, Holly Martin, and Harry Lime, so that her play parodies the homoerotic relationship between Lime and Martin and turns "The beautiful and masochistically romantic Anna" (Naremore 77), played in the film by Alida Valli, into the sexually voracious Anna of *Waltz*, a woman who declares to her German lover, "the missionary position does not a revolution make" (46). Trading penicillin racket in the film for an underground experimental drug market to treat ATD, Vogel invokes the "underground" market for AIDS medicines in the 1980s. The dark and ominous cultural underbelly of classic *noir* film is, in *Waltz*, given a camp revision, as Anna, a burlesque of the *femme fatale* figure, leaves for an imagined trip to Europe, during which, she tells the doctor, "I intend to fuck my brains out" (*Waltz* 12).

Vogel makes the most of *noir*'s melodramatic tone, using it to amplify emotional unease surrounding homosexuality. Famously played by Orson Welles in the film, Harry Lime is, as Naremore describes him, "the most melodramatic character in the film" (77). The American, Holly Martin, played by Joseph Cotton, is the "'scribbler' who specializes in pulp westerns" (Naremore 78). Vogel recasts this character as the devoted brother in search for a cure for his sister's deadly disease. The *noir* genre is, in the film, juxtaposed with the pulp genre of the western, which Holly Martin pens for a living. During a press

conference, Martin says that he is "writing a new story called 'The Third Man'" and this story is "based on fact." One of Lime's old cohorts, Popescu, cautions, "Mixing fact and fiction is very dangerous," urging Martin to "stick to fiction" (Reed). The veracity and gritty realism of *noir* is implicitly compared to the fluff of popular fiction. However, as Richard Martin points out, the western is a "genre with mythical resonance that has much in common with the hard-boiled detective narrative (a quest structure, the loner hero, the final shoot out)" (73-74). Vogel complicates the traditional structure and focus of both *film noir* and the western by moving away from a solitary protagonist, by satirizing the sexual dynamics of both genres, and by persistently "mixing fact and fiction." That is, *Waltz* burlesques traditional representations of gender and sexuality in *noir* films, mobilizes the tone of moral panic for the purposes of exposing the homophobic fears circulating in contemporary culture, and confounds any attempts as making clear distinctions between fact and fantasy.

By disarticulating the relationship between AIDS and homosexuality, the play works to destigmatize homosexuality. The paranoia evoked in the play does invoke homophobia. However, crucially, this homophobia is comically presented in the form of a burlesque of *The Third Man*, while the stigma of disease itself is transferred to Anna (and by extension, all other single schoolteachers, who are the main demographic that the disease targets.) Moreover, by presenting an active female sexuality unencumbered by shame or social stigmas, the play also reworks conventional signs of female sexuality. With her virile sexuality, Anna is not coded as a whore. Rather she assumes a virile position traditionally coded as masculine. Put another way, since female sexuality masquerades as male sexuality in this play, then we could say that the play burlesques

gender categories and sexual dispositions, performativity rewriting the ways we enact, organize, and understand sexuality in binary terms. Indeed, the play as a whole, with its broad humor, parody, social satire, erotic subtext, and sketch-like structure, resembles a classic burlesque show. And as Ross points out, "All erotic performers, regardless of historical period, venue, audience, or degree of nudity, embody the Latin definition of burlesque, which is to lampoon societal morals and introduce risqué themes into the public arena" (242). Here, attitudes surrounding sexuality and AIDS are placed under the stylized light of *Waltz*, while Anna enacts a burlesque performance, unleashing an amplified libido as a life force to counter the death with which she is confronted.

Like *film noir*, burlesque films were immensely popular during the postwar period. And while *noir* films depicted a mysterious subculture, burlesque films were increasingly part of an underground market in American popular culture. Eric Schaefer points out that, "Between 1949 and 1959 at least fifty distinct burlesque features were on the market," and yet "these numbers are deceptive since many features (and possibly some shorts) circulated under two or more titles" (50). The films were re-cut and re-released, sometimes as 16mm films made for peep shows, sometimes for private use, and sometimes for visual material between live burlesque shows (50). In any case, "the mode of production and style of burlesque films were mobilized to turn the representation of women—strippers—into spectacle" (50). In contrast, Naremore argues that in their "cynical treatment of the American Dream, their complicated play with gender and sexuality, and their foregrounding of cinematic style," *film noir* and the *noir* genre as a whole have "become one of the dominant intellectual categories of the late twentieth century, operating across the entire cultural arena of art, popular memory, and criticism"

(2). Perhaps it is worth examining is how the burlesque film might operate as the low culture counterpart, the underbelly, of *film noir* and its popularization of modernist high culture. For instance, the burly film performatively exposes the sexuality that the *femme fatale* so threateningly embodies, while placing the male subject in the position of spectator, rather than lone protagonist. Moreover, burlesque has its own "complicated play with gender and sexuality" and stylistic self-consciousness. And whereas *film noir* produces an image of a solitary, truth-seeking masculine hero, classic burlesque produces a doubling of gender that, through the striptease, theatrically deconstructs the "truth" of femininity. From a certain angle, it might be argued that the burlesque film is to femininity what *film noir* is to masculinity, since both unleash the cultural anxieties surrounding categories of gender, sexuality, and class.

The structure of *Waltz* contains interesting similarities to a postwar burlesque film. As Schaefer describes, the burlesque films that proliferated during the postwar period had a distinct structure. He explains, "In the most basic form of the burlesque movie, performers danced, stripped, or did their comedy sketches in front of a single, static camera in one long take" (46). In a revision of this structure, *Waltz* offers a series of thirty scenes, which alternate between comedy sketches, sexual scenarios, and a final dance, all of which the spectator watches in "one long take" from a fixed position in their theatre seat. Perhaps the scene most obviously played for laughs occurs between Anna and The Little Dutch Boy at Age 50, who is dressed in shorts pants, wooden shoes, and a Buster Brown haircut. The entire scene involves him telling the tale his dramatic childhood encounter with a dyke that was giving way to the ravages of the North Sea, but that he heroically secured with his thumb. Concluding the story, he asks Anna, "So do

you want to sleep with me? All the women toeristen want to sleep with the little Dutch boy who put his thumb in a dyke" (Vogel, *Waltz* 33). Just as the comic and sexual animate the burly film and the tragic and sexual animate *film noir*, the comic, the tragic, and the sexual converge in *Waltz*, producing a burlesque of the fantasies that structure so many popular culture forms. And yet, crucially, *Waltz* mobilizes the theatre as form that, unlike film, foregrounds collective reception, and thus stages "fantasy construed not as a set of projections on an internal screen but as part of human relationality itself" (Butler, *Undoing* 15).

At the center of the play is a comic theatricalization of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of the terminally ill. In her highly influential 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*, Kübler-Ross challenged the mechanized approach illness, asking: "Is the reason for this increasingly mechanical, depersonalized approach our own defensiveness? Is this approach our own way to cope with and repress the anxieties that a terminally ill patient evoke in us?" (8). As a way of humanizing patients rather than pathologizing them, she posited five stages that the terminally ill travel through while coming to terms with death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. As in most of the scenes in *Waltz*, the Third Man introduces the subject of this scene, and here, he also announces each stage that Anna is experiences. Carl and Anna lay together in bed, shifting positions as Anna moves through the stages of grief. In "The First Stage: Denial and Isolation," Anna confesses, "I feel so alone" (Vogel, *Waltz* 26); in "Second Stage: Anger," Anna asks, "How could this happen to me! I did my lesson plans faithfully for the past ten years. . . . Which one of them did this to me? . . . . Susy Higgins? Because I called her out on her nose-picking?" (27). Through each stage, Carl comforts her:

> CARL: Calm down, sweetie. You're angry. It's only natural to be angry. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross says that—
>
> ANNA: What does she know about what it feels like to die?! Elizabeth Kübler-Ross can sit on my face!
>
> *(Carl and Anna change positions on the bed)*
>
> THE THIRD MAN: The Third Stage: Bargaining.
>
> ANNA: Do you think if I let Elizabeth Kübler-Ross sit on my face I'll get well? (27)

The final four stages, the last two of which Vogel revises somewhat, include depression, acceptance, hope, and lust. What Vogel includes as a sixth stage—hope—Kübler-Ross described as a constant throughout all the other five stages, writing, "The one thing that usually persists through all these stages is hope" (Kübler-Ross 126). She adds, "even the most accepting, most realistic patients left the possibility open for some cure, for the discovery of a new drug" (126). Hope, which always remains in the realm of fantasy, plays an important role, even, or perhaps especially, when confronting death. Vogel's inclusion of a final stage, lust, characterizes sexuality as a form of therapeutic eroticism, a physical remedy, rather than a moral vice. Sex is revised in this play as a restorative, healing act; it does not carry disease, but combats it.

Amidst the high comedy of the Anna and Carl's travels, however, there is a sense of urgency in the more overtly political references. After Anna opens the play with her language lesson, Carl comes on stage to tell an imagined group of children at the San Francisco Library, "Shelley Bizo, the branch supervisor, has given me my own pink slip. I got a pink slip because I wear this. (*He points to a pink triangle on his lapel)*" (8). As he gets the children to all make their own pink triangles out of pink construction paper, Mrs. Bizo asks him to leave "for an immediate vacation" (8). This explicit, though comic,

reference to homophobia is humorously connected to the vexed cultural climate in the 1980s, surrounding questions of sexual difference and AIDS. In her collection of essays, *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan/Bush Years* (1994), Sarah Schulman succinctly articulates the stakes of the AIDS crisis for gay men as well as lesbians. From the context of the mid-1980s, Schulman writes, "The AIDS crisis is being used to take away existing social and civil rights from gay people. While the medical crisis doesn't affect lesbians, the social crisis will. If we ever intend to make a stand to defend ourselves, this is the time to do it" (170). *Waltz* is Vogel's stand. And as Carl leaves his job at the library, he tells Mrs. Bizo, "We'll take it up with the union. . . . In a language you might understand: Up-pay ours-yay!" (9). The humor of the moment is immediately undercut by Anna's interjection into the scene with, "It's the language that terrifies me" (9). Language, in *Waltz*, is presented as both a tool of mystification that defines our realities as well as a tool for creating alternate versions of this reality.

Vogel makes pointed references to the lack of public attention and productive public attention surrounding AIDS in 1980s America. When the doctor's diagnosis of Anna's ATD comes with the highly ironic explanation that "Five year olds can be deadly" (11), Carl asks why people do not know more about the disease. The doctor replies, "we think education on this topic is the responsibility of the NEA, not the government" (11). Vogel's packs a deft punch in this exchange, suggesting that art has been handed the responsibility of generating awareness around major political issues, without being given the funding to do so. Indeed, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1990/1992) did more to bring AIDS into public discourse than did any media coverage. Alan Sinfield suggests that many early AIDS plays, such as Larry Kramer's *Normal Heart* (1985) rely on "very

traditional closure" (323), thereby stultifying any action outside the theatre. He argues, following Brecht, "Catharsis, and the therapeutic mode, tend to obscure the need for political change, and for a collective approach to its pursuit" (321). And yet, *Normal Heart*, like *Waltz* and *Angels in America*, position AIDS, not as a pathology afflicting a marginal community, but part of larger social problems, such as systematic homophobia and privatized health care. In one of *Waltz*'s most politically, and emotionally, charged moments, Carl says, agitatedly, "If Sandra Day O'Connor sat on just one infected potty, the media would be clamoring to do articles on ATD. If just one grandchild of George Bush caught this thing during toilet training, that would be the last we'd hear about the space program" (12). AIDS debates continually focus on sexuality as the central "issue" at stake when, in fact, sexuality acts in these debates as a decoy, masking the larger problems of a social system built not on collective welfare, but on individual opportunity.

Carl's stuffed rabbit, a toy to which he is deeply and anxiously attached, stands out in the play as an emblem of his childhood and his sexuality. And yet, *Waltz* does not yield much information about the rabbit. Even Anna says, "I didn't know you slept with… stuffed animals" (15; ellipsis in original). However, even though Anna is not privy to the rabbit's meaning, she is the only person Carl trusts with it. Reluctantly agreeing to smuggle it over the border for him, Anna insists on knowing what is so secretive and dangerous about the rabbit. Carl replies, "There are some things you're better off not knowing" (30). Anna smuggles Carl's rabbit over the border, significantly, by using her own sexuality as a decoy. Smiling at the customs official "*a bit lasciviously,*" and demanding "to be searched. In private" (30), Anna redirects the anxiety surrounding the rabbit with a comic performance of female seduction. The most suggestive scene

involving the rabbit occurs among Carl and Harry Lime, "On the Ferris Wheel in the Prater" (49), a burlesque revision of one of the most memorable scenes in *The Third Man*. Carl "*holds the stuffed rabbit closely*" (49) while he waits for Lime. As they engage in a brief discussion with undertones of their homoerotic history and hints of its "consequences" (51), the *noir* vibe conveys an atmosphere of AIDS paranoia. The criminal aspect of Lime, moreover, suggests the policing and general paranoia surrounding gay men in the 1980s.

Like his filmic counterpart, Vogel's Lime is a highly theatrical, charismatic, and self-serving opportunist, an emblem of the more sinister side of the "free market." In a pithy piece of advice that remains resonant, Lime tells Carl, "Listen, old man, if you want to be a millionaire, you go into real estate. If you want to be a billionaire, you sell hope" (50). And yet, to get the drugs, Carl must give up the rabbit, an exchange he is unwilling to make. Torn between getting the drugs for Anna and losing his precious token, the two men "*waltz-struggle for the rabbit, Carl is pushed and Harry Lime walks off with the rabbit*" (51). This scene is juxtaposed with a scene in which Carl narrates a memory from childhood: "You were not permitted to play with dolls; dolls are for girls . . . They gave you a stuffed animal—a thin line was drawn. Rabbits were acceptable surrogates for little boys. You named him Jo-Jo" (34). Taken together, the rabbit is a material emblem of Carl's infantalized sexuality that has been policed and contained since childhood, so that is laden with a kind of anxious intimacy. In this sense, the stuffed toy displaces a pathologized sexuality with an infantalized one. Speaking about himself in the third person, Carl says of the rabbit, "He taught you to trust in contact. You will love him always" (35).

Among the several clues throughout the play that we are watching Anna's imagination and memory unfold on stage comes when Carl and Anna show slides of their trip. Visually, it is a scene that effectively juxtaposes the harsh realities of Baltimore against the romanticized images of Bonn, Paris, and Vienna offered by Carl. It is the first real fissure between the registers of reality and fantasy in the play. As the Third Man wheels in the projector, Carl begins his European travel narrative: "Well, Bonn's as good a place top start as anywhere. This is the view from our snug little hotel we stayed in. The gateway to the Rhine, the birthplace of Beethoven and the resting place of Schumann" (36). This description stands in stark contrast to "(*SLIDE: The view of downtown Baltimore from the Ramada Inn near John Hopkins Hospital, overlooking the industrial harbor*)" (36). The meticulously realistic description of Baltimore and hotel in which Anna ostensibly stayed while visiting Carl at the hospital contrasts sharply with Carl's narrative. Descriptions of grand cathedrals and gourmet cuisine are juxtaposed against images of an "*impoverished storefront church*" and "*A close-up of a vendor placing a hotdog on a bun and lathering it with mustard*" (37). It also invokes the stylistic differences between Hollywood fantasy narratives and the gritty realism *film noir*. These stylistic contrasts work to highlight the disorienting effects initiated by the play's initial moment of loss, while also signaling forward to the moment when reality will overtake the fantasy narrative.

In the penultimate scene, the *noir* vibe and burlesque comedy shift toward dark humor and Dr. Strangeloveian horror. What is immediately felt in this scene is, however, Carl's absence, and his absence, it is implied, initiates the shift in mood from comedy to horror. The scene begins with Anna, alone, remembering a game she used to play "in the days

before I could read" (52). In this pre-linguistic game, Anna would "make up stories about my hands—Mr. Left and Mr. Right" (52). Significantly, she uses her body, not language, to construct her stories. She continues to describe the game, which acts as a microcosm of the play. She explains to the audience:

> Mr. Left would provoke Mr. Right. Mr. Right would ignore it. The trouble would escalate, until my hands were battling each other to the death.
> *(Beat)*
> Then one of them would weep. Finally they became friends again, and they'd dance. (52)

This game captures the ways in which children—and adults—externalize psychic conflict. It suggests the perpetual battles between brothers and sisters, between denial and acceptance, and between fantasy and reality. The war between her two hands acts as a metaphor—a trope of condensation—for the play itself. Remembering this game, Anna revives a time before language constructed her world, before it wielded the power to "terrif[y]" her. Reenacting this game, "*Anna's two hands dance together*" (52), bringing her back to her Baltimore present. As a transition to this return, however, Dr. Todesrocheln enacts a displaced and darkly comic performance of this childhood game.

Donning a fright wig and "*one sinister black glove*" (52), the Third Man morphs into Dr. Todesrocheln, a burlesque of the crazed scientist Dr. Strangelove from Stanley Kubrick's 1964 satire of cold war panic, *Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. This intertextual echo connects cold war and AIDS paranoia through the figure of the mad scientist, rather than through the communist or the gay male, thus inverting contagion and cure. After congratulating Anna on her urine sample, which he describes as an "interesting specimen" (52), Todesrocheln becomes increasingly preoccupied with consuming the specimen himself. The scene, part horror,

part slapstick, culminates in an eerie reenactment of Anna's childhood game, as Dr. Todesrocheln's right hand tries to stop his left hand from drinking the urine elixir. As his "*left hand seizes the flask,*" his right hand "*Trembling, with authority . . . replaces the flask on the table*" (53). After a series of brief struggles, his left hand finally outwits his right, and although his back is turned toward the audience, "*We can hear him drink in secrecy*" (54). Revolted by this display, Anna is also becoming skeptical of her own fantasy, asking the doctor, "Is that your real hair? . . . I don't believe that's your real hair" (55). Her lack of belief in the veracity of her own fantasy signals the return to her Baltimore reality. Dr. Todesrocheln's alarming question, "WO IST DEIN BRUDER?" jars Anna back into the moment that begins the play. Still with one hand gripping the of fantasy-turned-nightmare, Anna turns to see her brother lying on the hospital bed while "*The* Emperor Waltz *plays at a loud volume*" (55). Trying to wake Carl, Anna "*presses his body against hers, pulls his legs over the bed, tries to stand him up*" (56). Coming alive "*like the doll in E.T.A. Hoffmann, the body of Carl becomes animated, but with a strange, automatic life of its own. Carl begins to waltz with Anna*" (56). However, Carl gradually, "winds down" and a loud alarm clock sounds, abruptly ending Anna's fantasy and returning her to the initial scene of loss.

In the final scene, the John Hopkins doctor reappears and "*awkwardly peels off his latex gloves,*" gloves that perhaps have gone unnoticed since the beginning of the play, and so their removal jars the audience, along with Anna, back into the present. As the doctor gives Anna the odds and ends from Carl's hospital room, including travel brochures for Europe and a stuffed rabbit, Anna says, "I've never been abroad. We're going to go when he gets—*(Stops herself) (With control)* I must learn to use the past

tense" (57). And yet, Anna refuses the finality of the past tense. As a Strauss waltz softly begins to play, "*Carl, perfectly well, waits for Anna. He is dressed in Austrian military regalia. They waltz off as the lights dim*" (57). Choosing to remain in the "what if" of the utopian performative, the play yields to the generative effects of hope and fantasy, while utilizing the theatre as a public place of commemoration. In this sense, Vogel's play participates in a reparative project, which involves a certain kind of reading, or in the case of theatre, a certain kind of spectatorship, in which spectators actively—performatively—generate meanings from a text or performance and, in this way, create their own journeys. Sedgwick writes,

> No less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic, the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks. What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them. (150-151)

This reparative approach aptly captures the way *Waltz* rearticulates the cultural discourse surrounding AIDS, defamiliarizing the homophobic language and moral panic used to stigmatize those with HIV. This passage also describes the ways in which Vogel reads the canon, "extracting sustenance" from the objects of a "culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain" her.

The Baltimore Waltz was Vogel's breakthrough play. It received almost unanimously praise from critics. It premiered in 1990 at Alaska's Perseverance Theatre, under the direction of Molly Smith, and came to New York City's Circle Repertory Theatre in 1992, under the direction of Anne Bogart. It won an Obie award, and as Carolyn Casey-Craig states, "marked a turning point in Paula's career" (218). Frank Rich of the *New York Times*, however, wrote a rather derisive review that suggests his impatience with the

tone and structure of Vogel's play. His review begins by quoting the play's dedication—"To the memory of Carl—because I cannot sew"—only to wonder, "Who Carl is we can only imagine" ("Play about AIDS" C15). Rich describes the play as "a crazy-quilt patchwork of hyperventilating language, erotic jokes, movie kitsch and medical nightmare—that spins before the audience in Viennese waltz time, replete with a dying fall" (C15). Barring the barely veiled tone of disdain, this is an apt description of the play. Rich felt that *Waltz* was, by turns, "too clever by half or less funny than it wants to be" and "too flagrantly defies translation, lacking the internal logic that can make some dream plays . . . add up to their own idiosyncratic terms" (C15). Whose "internal logic" the play is failing to follow Rich does not say. Rich suggests the play enacts a kind of hubris in its attempt "to rise above and even remake the world in which the disease exists" (C15). Recall Rich's description of the scene in Shepard's *Lie of the Mind*, in which Jake gazes at Beth, who no longer shows signs of his beating, but is imagined, as, to use Rich's words, "a woman whose nude back beckons with the mesmerizing lure of a distant, flickering neon sign along a desolate Western highway" ("'A Lie of the Mind'" C5). The fantastic elements that Rich derides in Vogel's play as kitsch, he romanticizes in Shepard as the seductive siren call of a masculine ethos. As a bit of backhanded praise, Rich states, "Yet I respect what Vogel is up to and was steadily fascinated by it" (C15), and only hopes "for this brittle play's sake" (C19) that subsequent productions are handled with the skill of Anne Bogart's direction, Cherry Jones's "bravura display of seamless acting technique," and Joe Mantello's winning "burlesque turns in cameo roles of several nationalities and sexual dispositions" (C19).

David Román also reviewed the 1992 Circle Repertory production of *Waltz*, pointing out that *Waltz* was "one of the very first plays about AIDS written by a woman to receive a major production . . . [and yet it] offers the audiences an opportunity to participate in much more than merely markings of a historical moment" ("Review" 520). Román describes *Waltz* as "a beautiful play that celebrates with such honesty, warmth, and conviction the relationships we continue to lose twelve years and counting into this epidemic" (522) and as "one of the funniest plays of the past few years" (520). Reviewing the 2004 Signature Theatre production of *Waltz*, Charles Isherwood claimed that the revival of a play that, over a decade earlier, "touched a chord in audiences who recognized in its wild, reckless shifts in tone and style the authentic note of those confusing times," now, in the 2004 revival at Signature Theatre (directed by Mark Brokaw), "serves to illustrate the cruel tricks time can play on a once-potent work of art" (E5). Kristen Johnston's Anna, Isherwood rightly points out, ably performed the comic scenes, but "doesn't do vulnerability convincingly" (E5). Striking the balance between humor and exposure is key to the play's performative burlesque. However, both Rich's and Isherwood's evaluations are largely based on the relevance of *Waltz*'s treatment of AIDS, interpreting it as a "play about AIDS" (to quote Rich's headline.) This categorization implicitly asks the play to represent AIDS as an "issue," and make it its central conflict. As stated earlier, *Waltz* is not "about" AIDS. The play's continued vitality lies not on *what* it means, but on *how* it means. Whether or not its political references seem dated, *Waltz* mobilizes theatre as a place in which to share in a collective, commemorative fantasy that does indeed, if only momentarily, remake the world. As Román writes, "Anna remains, as do we, joined for a moment in the fantasy of

the theatre where AIDS can be rewritten at ATD and the living can stand in for the suffering of loved ones" (522).

Ritual Performatives, Performative Rituals: Thornton Wilder, Bunraku, and the Dialectic of Body and Voice in *Long Christmas Ride Home*

> In my plays I attempted to raise ordinary daily conversation between ordinary people to the level of the universal human experience.
>
> Thornton Wilder, Interview with Bob McCoy, in "Thornton Wilder in *Our Town*"

> For an American dramatist, all roads lead back to Thornton Wilder.
>
> Paula Vogel, Forward to *The Skin of Our Teeth*

If theatre is a form of ritual constituted by performative gestures, then it is a form that has the potential for reaffirming cultural attitudes and beliefs, as well as redefining those attitudes and beliefs. In *The Ritual Process* (1969), Victor Turner describes ritual as an "anti-structure" activity, as opposed to the structured activity of most other aspects of everyday life. As such, ritual offers a space for people to see from a distance, to think "in propositions that are not *in* cultural codes but *about* them" (22).[69] Theatre-as-ritual can transform the way audiences see and experience the worlds they inhabit, thereby serving a performative function. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick states, "in its deconstructive sense performativity signals absorption; in the vicinity of the stage, however, the performative is theatrical" (7). *The Long Christmas Ride Home* is, perhaps, Vogel's most precise example of these two aspects of performativity. Here, she incorporates the texts of Thornton Wilder and the stylistic principles of Bunraku and Noh theatre, in order to

[69] Referring to theatre as ritual inevitably invokes the work of Richard Schechner and Victor Turner, whose collaborations were an important part of the founding of Performance Studies as a discipline. Schechner and Turner combined anthropological theories of social dramas and rituals, with theatre studies, in order to forge linkages between performances in everyday cultural life and more deliberate staged performances. The most pertinent texts expounding the relationship between theatre and anthropology are Victor Turner's *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982) and Schechner's *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (1985). In my use of ritual, however, I do not mean to invoke this whole discourse; rather, I want mainly to emphasize the performative function of ritual, its capacity to make and reaffirm cultural meanings and values, while suggesting that theatre can also function in this way, as a meaning-making ritual.

theatricalize cultural rituals and summon a sense of belief grounded in the memories and desires of the body. From *The Long Christmas Dinner*, *The Happy Journey from Camden to Trenton* Vogel borrows and revises Wilder's experiment with time, his combination of the everyday and esoteric, and his focus on cultural rituals such as Christmas and family car trips. While Wilder's car trips and Christmas dinners move at a progressive, linear pace, as the plays work toward a timelessness and universality, Vogel's car trip in *Ride* comes to a standstill, as the characters move back and forth through time searching for ways to reconcile the "what was" with the performative potential of "what *if*."

One of the effects of canonicity is that an author can, over time, become associated with a single work. Such is the case with Thornton Wilder, whose name, more often than not, calls to mind *Our Town*, the play that earned him the 1938 Pulitzer Prize.[70] As Vogel writes in her forward to Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*, "We forget Wilder's vision and voice; in our memory, we assign his works to a nostalgic theatre of our youth," when his plays were the "theatrical equivalent of castor oil and honey" and presented as "literature that is good for our moral constitution dredged in sentiment" (viii). And yet, as Vogel insists, to read his work "is to be astonished" (ix). In his "subtle blend of humor and pathos, and his masterful balancing of abstraction and empathy" (ix), we can catch a glimpse of Vogel's own trademarks. Indeed, she affirms, "I remember anew how much I owe to him, and see in his works the works and parallels of so many theatrical forbears: Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, Lanford Wilson, and John Guare" (ix). In a remark especially relevant to Wilder's

[70] Wilder won two additional Pulitzer Prizes, the first, in 1928, was for his novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, and the third, in 1942, was for the play, *The Skin of Our Teeth*.

influence in *Long Ride*, Vogel writes, "Of all his innovations we are most indebted to the way Wilder transformed the passage of time on stage" (xi).

In his drama, Wilder's broke with realism and its reliance on an Aristotelian unities, and used the theatre to comment on the passage of time itself, on its cyclical repetitions, it relentless passing, and its numbing effects on daily life. What Wilder offered in place of realism, and what is so often overlooked, is a dramaturgical style that is formally innovative, sparse, understated, and, as Vogel put it, "astonishing." As Tyrone Guthrie wrote, "It is an essential part of Wilder's theatrical creed that the theatre is a place where actors and audience meet in a game—but a profoundly serious game—of make-believe" (27). And it is based on this same creed that Vogel wrote *Ride*, in which, as she writes in her Author's Note, "what I am after is they magic we feel from communal participation in the make-believe of the spirit" (5). It is in this communal game of make-believe—and of making belief—that Vogel's play finds the spirit of Thornton Wilder and that her play enacts a kind of performative ritual. In writing *Ride* Vogel borrows from Wilder's *Happy Journey* the iconic American experience of the family car trip, resituating it within the context of early twenty-first century America, and fusing it with the formal principles of Bunraku and Noh theatre. From Wilder's *The Long Christmas Dinner*, Vogel takes the cultural ritual of Christmas and the residual accumulations of history and memory, creating in *Ride* an experience of time that is not linear and progressive, but recursively flashing forward and backward—and, at times, standing still.

In his experiments with form and search for universality in art, Wilder might be called a characteristic modernist.[71] In his "Introduction to Miss Stein's Puppet Play," Wilder

[71] Paul Lifton argues that, although Wilder has been compared to everyone from Brecht to Pirandello, his plays draw most heavily from the French Symbolists, particularly in the sense of the tragic within the

explains the meaning of Gertrude Stein's play, *Identity*, which was produced in Chicago in 1936 using marionettes instead of actors. Wilder describes the play as examining "the relation between Human Nature and the Human Mind" (94). In a characteristically modernist emphasis on universal categories, Wilder states, "the Human Mind does not know TIME or IDENTITY or AUDIENCE. . . . Its highest activity is to write, because in writing there is no audience but itself" (94). Ostensibly, then, writing is the only escape from Human Nature and, by extension, the needs and desires of the body. Moreover, Stein's use of puppets in lieu of actors suggests an attempt to overcome the particularity of the body, which posed a problem to the universality sought in modernist art. Modernism, as Martin Puchner explains, viewed the human body as an irresolvable dilemma in the quest toward a pure aesthetic. Theatre, then, proved to be a challenge for the modernist artist. As Puchner writes, "the living actor becomes the obstacle for a truly modernist art" (4); thus, "the success of modernism in theatre depends on the theatre's ability to resist the personal, the individual, the human, the mimetic" (4). Hence Wilder's focus on universalized concepts of the time, the human mind, and human nature might be understood as a way of overcoming the specificity of the body in performance. But as poststructuralist theories and deconstructive practices have suggested, these categories—human mind, human nature, universality—are discursive, historically constituted constructions that cannot be isolated or self-enclosed and have no essential or transcendental value beyond the uses to which they are put. As such, if performance and the body posed problems in the modernist period, they have become central in the postmodern era. Thus, while Vogel and Wilder share an interest in formal

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everyday and the revelation of the "Idea" lurking behind ordinary phenomena" (118-119). Further Symbolist affinities exist in his limitation of décor, dramatic incident, and even spoken dialogue (125). However, like any writer or artist, Wilder's style cannot, perhaps, be reduced to any single influence.

experimentation as a way to explore questions of time and cultural rituals, their respective historical contexts produce different perspectives on the body, sexuality, and questions of universality and transcendence.

In 1952, Wilder wrote "Toward an American Language," an essay that implicitly attempts to preserve a sense of high culture within a democratic collectivity. Here, he outlines a distinctly American use of language, differentiated by its democratic quality and relentless reinventions. He states, "There are not two doors for words in America, not tradesmen entrance: all men can go in the front door. . . . The United States is a middle-class nation and has widened and broadened and deepened the concepts of the wide and the broad and the deep without diminishing the concept of the high" (37). Writing in a time when mass culture emerged as a powerful force that threatened all attempts at cultural distinctions, Wilder opted to mobilize language as a productive tool to redefine the very terms we use to distinguish class and cultural tastes. However, it still left the problem of the body, specifically a feminized body associated with the masses. As Andreas Huyssen argues, modernism's anxious articulation of a distinctly "high" art was implicitly a masculinization of a modernist aesthetic that was constructed in opposition to the feminized masses (44). In its unabashed theatrical display of the female body, burlesque was, it seems, the cultural antithesis to the aesthetic cultivated by Wilder and other modernist writers, and a key form that evoked anxieties regarding theatre's capacity to blur taste levels and class boundaries.

Among the forces that disrupted class and taste barriers in the 1930s and provided an embodied counterpart to a disembodied high art, burlesque emerges as one of the most

feminized and swiftly transformed of popular forms.[72] In a passage could very well be describing the townsfolk of Grover's Corners, Richard Grant White described the audience at one of Lydia Thompson's performances at Niblo's in 1869:

> I was surprised, not only with the merit of the lady herself, and some of her companions, but with the character of the audience. The latter I expected to find made up of coarse and flashy people, but, on the contrary, it was notable in the main for simple and almost homely respectability. Comfortable middle-aged women from the suburbs, . . . their daughters, groups of children, professional men, . . . farmer-looking folk, a clergyman of two. (260)

By the 1930s, however, burlesque began to draw increasingly working-class, male audience, and had acquired a more dubious reputation. As Bernard Sobel put it, "before the crash, burlesque had entertained the family with jokes and pretty women, but now, thanks to the Jazz Age excesses, striptease has turned burlesque pornographic" (qtd in Shteir 197). No longer respectable middle-class entertainment, burlesque became associated with striptease, rather than satiric humor. And as Ma Kirby adamantly proclaims in *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* after her son utters blasphemy, "Where'd we all be if I started talking about God like that, I'd like to know! We'd be in speak-easies and night clubs and places like that, that's where we'd be" (Wilder, *Happy* 84). And yet, despite such moral critics as Sobel and Ma Kirby, the 1930s became known as the golden age of burlesque, as the increasingly dubious reputation of burlesque led to the development of a form of literary striptease that was meant, I would argue, to counter the low culture connotations of undressing with high culture connotations of education and class mobility. Indeed, this period produced perhaps the most famous stripteaser in the history of the form—Gypsy Rose Lee.

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[72] Other forms that challenged these distinctions include vaudeville, jazz, musical revues, minstrel shows, and cabarets.

The iconic image of Gypsy Rose Lee, the subject of an eponymous musical and film (not to mention numerous plays about her life written by her contemporaries), combines two elements that make her irresistible material for an American story—upward mobility and seductive spectacle. She was born into the working class, and as Shteir points out, "like Mae West, she never relinquished her working-class roots" (179). Trained in vaudeville, Lee applied her physical and comic skills to the art of striptease. In 1936, she debuted an act with the *Ziegfeld Follies*, in which she dubbed herself the "Literary Stripper."[73] The ditty she performed for this show, called "A Stripper's Education," is an exemplary articulation of the intermingling of high and low and the crossing of class boundaries that was occurring in the 1930s.[74] As she stripped away layers of clothing for the Broadway audience of the *Follies*, Lee sang:

> Have you the faintest idea of the private life of the stripteaser?
> My dear, it's New York's second largest industry.
> Now a stripteaser's education, requires years of concentration
> And for the sake of illustration, take a look at me.
> I began at the age of three, learning ballet at the Royal Imperial
> School in Moscow. And how I suffered and suffered for my Art.
> . . . . . .
> My education was complete to make my professional debut on 14th Street

These lyrics reveal the position of striptease in New York's culture industry, while dryly suggesting the performer's high culture education, which is necessary to prepare her for the "art" of taking her clothes off. Ironically consecrating striptease as art has the effect of highlighting cultural distinctions so as to make them more visible. Interestingly, the words "take a look at me" work not so much to invite the spectator's gaze, but more as an

[73] Also in the 1936 *Follies* were Fanny Brice, Josephine Baker, and Bob Hope. (see Broadway database: http://ibdb.com/production.php?id=13606

[74] For an elaboration of the intermingling of popular and high culture in the 1930s, see pages 110-113 in Michael Kammen's *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the Twentieth Century.*

invitation to listen to what she says and take her seriously as a speaking subject. She continues:

> Now the things that go on, in a stripteaser's mind,
> Would give you no end of surprise,
> But if you are psychologically inclined,
> There is more than meets the eye.
> For example, when I lower my gown a fraction,
> And expose a patch of shoulder,
> I am not interested in your reaction,
> On the bareness of that shoulder,
> I am thinking of some paintings,
> By Van Gogh or by Cézanne. (qtd in Shteir 185)

The humorous play between high and low culture in these lines is again suggestive of the period's intermingling of taste levels and burlesque's participation in that intermingling.[75] The lyrics also encourage the audience to see the stripteaser not as a passive object, but as an active subject with an inner life—an imagination—that may or may not match up with her performance on stage. That is, her imagination has a degree of autonomy from the way she is constructed as a sexual spectacle onstage. The tension between her nakedness and her erudite dialogue creates a fascinating juxtaposition that is humorous in its incongruity and productive in its social implications. It is an interesting example of a woman signifying simultaneously as sexual, intelligent, and funny on stage, which suggests the performative possibility of a female sexuality that presents itself as a voice to be listened to even as it presents itself as a body to be looked at. As Shteir puts it, Gypsy was "an oddity because her affinity for swathing her routine in literary chat

[75] Another relevant example of a burlesque of high culture is the song "Zip!" from the musical (1940) and film (1957) *Pal Joey* (lyrics by Lorenz Hart). Sung by the character Melba, who strips as she sings (hence, the word "Zip!" that punctuates the lyrics), the song is a searing satire of high culture, as well as a self-conscious comment on the contemporary burlesque scene. For example, Melba sings: "Zip! I consider Dali's paintings passé./ Zip! Can't they make the Metropolitan pay?/. . . I don't care for Whistler's mother/or Shubert's brother./ Zip! I'm misogynistic./ Zip! My intelligence is my guiding hand. Zip! Who the hell is Sally Rand." For the full lyrics, see: http://www.lorenzhart.org/zip.htm

pointed to a brainy masculinity even as she took her clothes off and revealed her undeniable femaleness" (179). This incongruity is the stuff of which camp—and feminist camp—is made. And while Gypsy was performing on Broadway in the *Follies* in 1936, Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* would be produced two years later at Henry Miller's Theatre. The legitimate theatre, which worked to distinguish itself from popular culture, was in this period still jockeying for space in a cultural field that included striptease among popular culture entertainments.

Wilder entered the American canon during a period of fascism and economic depression, and his work appealed to a critical establishment and culture that sought timeless and transcendence in art. Unlike the socialist playwrights of the 1930s, such as Clifford Odets, Elmer Rice, and John Howard Lawson, Wilder did not directly address class struggle or champion socialist principles. And as Dayton Kohler wrote in 1939, this "complete detachment from the special concerns of our day" enabled his plays to achieve "a sense of the timeless and universal in human affairs" (1). Kohler states that Wilder's "art goes beyond the immediate concerns of his characters to give their speech and actions a significance which adds to our understanding of life and its essential truths" (3). Tyrone Guthrie described Wilder as, "essentially an American writer, a New England writer, writing about his own environment. . . . But at the same time his plays are sufficiently true to universal experience, sufficiently transcend merely local environment and character, to make them acceptable on a cosmopolitan level" (27). Unlike the social realism of the 1930s, which still today might not translate as a lively night of theatre, Wilder's plays suggested something other than the material shortages, brute violence, and sense of despair of the late 1930s. However, Wilder's drama is not the antithesis of Odets

and company. Or rather, perhaps more accurately, his theatre may be formally antithetical, but the voices of characters inhabit the same social world. Wilder traded the realism that dominated American theatre in favor of an experiment with form, with dramatic expansions of time and its effects on everyday day life. He wished to write plays that would both create and reflect an American culture for which neither realism nor melodrama would suffice as forms, since as he puts it, for Americans, "concrete things exists concretely, so solidly that these things do not exhale a deep emotion not invite it" (Wilder, "Toward an American Language" 37). Listening to the voices in his subtly textured plays, we hear a voice of American theatre that is both new and familiar, both specific and general, both solid and lighter than air. Vogel mined his plays for their innovative experiments with time, their focused examination of American life, and their creation of a theatrical effect that might be called a ritual performativity.

The Long Christmas Dinner covers ninety years and three generations of Christmas dinners in the Bayard home, all in one act. The specificity of the time and place is important. In "Toward an American Language" he criticized European modernism for evading the specific—the common and humble—in search for the sublime. He wrote, "the bigger the world is, the *less* you can be content with vagueness" (37). Moving toward a localized modernism, Wilder cultivated the sublime tensions found in cultural rituals. Here, as in most of his work, Wilder dispenses with plot and dramatic conflict in favor of a sharp focus on single moments, moments punctuated by common topics and routine tasks and propelled the pulse of time's passing. What Wilder wanted to bring to his audience's attention was the consciousness of time, since being unconscious of its passing produces a dulling effect on the rituals of daily life and relationships. However,

although many critics describe Wilder's plays as universal and timeless, his work is always situated within the particularity of time and place. He preserves this paradox by constructing a theatre based in the rituals of daily life, rituals that connect past, present, and future. As Patricia R. Schroeder put it, "the rituals themselves endure, but they change by retaining the imprint of each character who has enacted them" (61).

Long Christmas Dinner opens to reveal a grand dining table set for a holiday feast. At stage left there is "*a strange portal trimmed with garlands of fruit and flowers,*" symbolizing birth, and directly opposite is another portal "*edged in black velvet*" (Wilder, *Long Dinner* 7), which symbolizes death. The characters go into and come out of these portals throughout the play. In between their exits and entrances, the characters discuss common topics—the weather, the sermon at Christmas mass, and sciatica pain—while the mourning and celebrating of life and death go almost unspoken. Wilder's emphasis on the sublime in the everyday come in poetic comments on banal topics, such as Lucia's on the weather: "Every last twig is wrapped around with ice. You almost never see that" (8), a line echoed verbatim many years later by her daughter-in-law, Leonora (16). This sublime yet simple moment links generations, marks the flow of time, and makes everyday life significant.

Before her quiet exit early in the play, Mother Bayard acts as the voice of the family's history, a voice that echoes the absent patriarch. She says of the table, "what your dear father would say" (8), a line repeated by Lucia twice in the next several minutes of the play (9). Mother Bayard's wistful recollections signal her movement toward the black velvet portal, and as she approaches death, she takes account of her life and its relation to the broader cultural context. She recalls, "I can remember when there were still Indians

on this very ground" (8), followed by a brief synopsis of her ancestry, all of which she urges her daughter-in-law Lucia to "write it down somewhere" (8), perhaps realizing that history is often the end of memory and hoping that writing might be a way of giving memories a material form before they are lost completely.

Certain moments in the play anchor it in an historical context and ground the play's meditation on time. As Charles, mother Bayard's grandson, states, "Time certainly goes very fast in a great new country like this" (21). The death of Samuel, Mother Baynard's grandson, in the World War I situates the play's historical trajectory, while his mourning incites the characters to reflect on the "passing of time" (22). This swiftly turns into a focus on time that reflects contemporary modes of factory production. In a father and son disagreement, Charles argues with his son Roderick about his future. Charles orders him to work in the Bayard factory, while Roderick insists, "I have better things to do than go into your old factory. I'm going somewhere where time passes, my God!" (23). To the youth of the early twentieth century, factory work meant routine drudgery—stagnant time, rather than progress. Earlier in the play, however, shortly after this same factory was built by Mother Bayard's son, it was indeed a sign of progress, and held the promise of wealth and prosperity. Its potential success incited angst in Lucia, who insists, "I shall be very uncomfortable if we're going to turn out to be rich" (12), a comment that suggests a great deal about the class-consciousness in America, especially during the Depressions years of Wilder's writing. The paradox of national identity founded equally in a faith in the free market and a belief in democracy is perfectly captured in Cousin Brandon's hopes and Lucia's self-conscious anxiety regarding the prospects of wealth and class mobility.

The passing of time takes on an oppressive quality in Wilder's play, which culminates when Mother Bayard's granddaughter, Genevieve decides she must escape and "go abroad" (25). She explains her reasons, stating, "it's the *thoughts*, it's the thought of what has been and what might have been here. And the feeling about this house of the years *grinding away*" (25). The connotation of "grinding away" suggests that the accumulation of memories can have a visceral, corrosive effect on one's consciousness. Genevieve proclaims her desire to escape the history that weighs so heavily in the house. However, she escapes, not abroad, but into the black velvet portal. There is no escape from time's pulse in this play. And its passing is always edged with loss. David Castronovo argues that *The Long Christmas Dinner* "is Wilder's first significant blending of experimental technique and American subject matter" (104), and he describes the play as "the awesome spectacle of men and women enmeshed in petty concerns and accelerating toward death" (104). Family dinners, factory work, deaths in war, shifts in weather, religious ceremony, however, are not petty concerns; they are the stuff from which lives are made. Time is, for Wilder, relentless in its acceleration and linear in its progression. Vogel reorients this perspective on time, and yet keeps Christmas as the pivot point, a cultural and historical point of return.

Wilder's theatrical minimalism and experimental representations of time have been attributed to his interest in Noh drama. Schroeder suggests that Wilder found a freedom from the temporal limitations of realism in the works of Noh dramatists, "in which an actor's circling the stage," for example, "represents a long journey and the passage of much time" (59).[76] However, in his recently published letters, Wilder insists that he was

[76] Schroeder also suggests, "Wilder borrowed techniques for presenting 'cyclic history' from British medieval plays" (58).

not directly influenced by Chinese drama until after his major plays (588-589), but that he had read about Noh and was excited about the possibilities of a style of drama other than the realism dominating American stages (Wilder, *Selected Letters* 588-593). Donald Keene points out that the restrained, ritualized style of Noh is "intended to achieve beauty," adding that, although "Nō is a supremely aesthetic theatre [,] . . . even beauty is not the final object. Nō reaches out towards eternity through beauty and the elimination of the temporal and accidental" (17). It is the aspect of Noh that can be glimpsed in both Wilder's and Vogel's plays. Keene writes, "whatever the ancient manner of the presentation might have been, a feliticious Nō is today performed with the deliberation and gravity reserved in most parts of the world for sacred rites" (13). Filled with ghostly characters who observe the living, Noh offers a way of representing personal and collective histories. Emily in *Our Town* (and Stephen in Vogel's *Ride*) can be seen as Noh figures, as they observe the living from the other side of the grave, thereby offering the audience a metaphysical perspective on daily life that makes visible the many moments lost to trivial concerns and habitual behaviors. Whether or not Wilder admits to being directly influenced by Noh theatre, his plays are, like Noh dramas, anti-realist, focusing on gestures and ideas rather than plot and conflict.

Borrowing from Asian theatrical traditions was a common practice in the early twentieth century, as modernist artists sought forms other than realism, melodrama, and lavish bourgeois spectacles. C.D. Innes points out that "The value of cross-cultural impetus for Western modern and postmodern art can hardly be overstated" (18), adding "deriving, as it does, from nineteenth-century imperialism makes the nature of this stimulus deeply questionable" (18). Innes points to the "vogue for 'Japonisme' in the

1890s" (17), which provided dramatic techniques for writers such as Strindberg and Yeats, as well as later playwrights such as Brecht and Wilder, and avant-garde theatre artists such as Artaud and Peter Brooks. Brecht was drawn to the non-naturalistic, theatrically controlled acting style of Noh, while Antonin Artaud turned to Balinese theatre as a way to move away from the emphasis on the text and language in western theatre.[77] What this cross-cultural influence allowed many theatre artists to accomplish was the seeming incongruity between a condensed "emotional authenticity" and the "stylized movement or unnatural gesture to express it" (Innes 18). In other words, it offered a way out of realism and naturalism and, later, Method acting, all of which emphasize the inseparability of the actor's body and the acts and gestures he or she performs. And yet, unlike its experimental uses and avant-garde connotations in western theatre practices, traditional Asian theatre is generally performed in order to reaffirm cultural conventions, rather than reinvent or challenge them. As Inge C. Orr notes, "The traditional social functions of the Asian puppet theatre are: (1) the magico-religious, (2) the educational, (3) the reaffirming of cultural and social institutions, (4) the reinforcing of traditional ethics and moral standards" (79). Ultimately, Wilder, Brecht, and all the artists who looked to eastern traditions for tools and techniques to reinvent and revitalize their own practice can be seen as participating in a kind of aesthetic imperialism.

Lincoln Konkle, however, positions Wilder firmly in the Puritan tradition, arguing that "Wilder's use of the term 'progress' almost always resonates with spiritual or moral significance" and that "progress is not only a theme in the work of his thirties; it is also

[77] Schroeder points out Brecht's influence on Wilder, in his use of the distancing device of the Stage Manager and in terms of their shared belief in theatre as a tool of social change. However, Schroeder captures the most salient difference between these two dramatists in the contrast between Brecht's Marxism and Wilder's Humanism (61).

the form of the works themselves" (94). Further linking Wilder to Puritan writing, Konkle argues, "the clarity of the lesson rather than aesthetic appeal was the guiding principle in Puritan writing" (104), just as it is in Wilder's drama. Lifton's affirms Wilder's austere approach to playwriting, stating that he is "generally a straightforward writer, rejecting the vague and the nebulous in favor of the direct and unambiguous" (119). Perhaps what makes Wilder such a complex playwright is that he, in fact, wrote simultaneously within the Puritan tradition in which he was raised and the Chinese tradition in which he was immersed for several years of his childhood.[78] However, like his contemporary Gertrude Stein, Wilder was intent on creating a specifically American language and theatre, one that was not divided by distinctions of high and low, but rather, one that expanded outward to encompass the breadth of a middle-class nation.

The Happy Journey from Trenton to Camden is, like *Long Christmas Dinner*, a one-act play that seeks out sublime moments within the everyday, the universal within the particulars of American culture. After several small productions from 1932-35, *Happy Journey* received its first professional production in 1948, by New Stages in New York City. With no set or props, the play's simplicity serves to amplify rather than diminish its emotional effects. Castronovo describes the play in the following way: "stripped bare of fantastic elements and literary allusions" and "[w]ithout condescending or sentimentalizing, Wilder treats a limited world and draws unlimited theatrical capital from it. A car trip becomes an occasion for cosmic recognitions" (107). Again, the hallmark of Wilder's theatre is the juxtaposition of the everyday and the universal, or put another way, the concrete and the abstract. Indeed, it is in his abstraction of everyday—

[78] Although born in Madison Wisconsin, Wilder spent part of his childhood in Shanghai and Hong Kong, where his father served as Consul-General (McCoy 111).

achieved through limited scenery and props and a reduction of dramatic action—that Wilder finds his most powerful theatrical voice. And yet, as the title so carefully points out, the play is firmly situated geographically, even as it remains mobile.

As Donald Haberman points out, *Happy Journey* was Wilder's favorite play, and his first real success in theatre "using the stage as he wished and saying precisely what he meant" (103). Of *Happy Journey*, Wilder said, "It was the American family viewed as a fragment yet emerging as totality" (Clapp 49). He adds, in an interesting detail, "And the strangest part of it is that I saw it presented in Germany this year better than I have ever seen it done before" (49). This cultural transferability of the play, I believe, speaks to the clarity of its language, precision of its characterization, and simplicity of its set design.

In Wilder's *Happy Journey*, the Kirby family, and in particular Ma Kirby, embodies an American middle-class formed around a religious ideology that champions the Protestant work ethic, family, and a carefully monitored amount of pleasure. She is the moral anchor of the play and the pivot around which its dialogue centers. Her lines are embedded with the most resonant signs of the play's time and place, capturing a certain balance between stock phrases used by mother's on car trips everywhere and the more specific language of northeastern United States. As Haberman points out, the Yale Library manuscripts for this play reveal that Wilder had originally given it the subtitle "or, The Portrait of a Lady" (103), an ironic reference to Henry James and a clear reference to Ma Kirby as a focal point of the play, the family, and the moral fabric of the nation. Like Lucia in *Long Dinner*, Ma Kirby is put off by discussions of class, believing that moral soundness is worth much more than material wealth. When Caroline suggests that her sister Beulah's street is richer than the street they live on, Ma Kirby replies, "I

don't want to hear anybody talking about rich or poor when I'm around. If people are nice, I don't care how rich they are. I live in the best street in the world because my husband and children live there" (Wilder, *Happy Journey* 90). Although continually deferring to her husband with phrases such as, "if you say so, Elmer" (84) and "All right, Elmer. You know best" (85), Ma Kirby acts as the moral authority of the play, a social role that positions her, culturally, in dialectical tension with a performer such as Gypsy Rose Lee. The moral weight invested in the roles of mother and wife produces its dialectical counterpart in the sexual spectacle of striptease. Such is the way modern femininity is constructed, as either moral anchor of the family or the erotic image against which that morality is constructed.

Happy Journey marks Wilder's first experiment with the Stage Manager, the choric figure (or alienation device) who comments on the characters and events in the play and, at times, takes on small roles in the stage action. The opening stage directions of *Happy Journey* state that the Stage Manager is to read the "*lines of all the minor characters. He reads them clearly but with little attempt at characterization*" (Wilder, *Happy Journey* 77). However, when it comes to the role of the garage attendant at the gas station in Trenton, the stage directions read: "*in this scene alone he lays aside his script and enters into a role seriously*" (85). This interjection of a note of realism in a seemingly secondary role suggests Wilder's emphasis on time and place—Trenton, New Jersey during the 1930s. Trenton comes at the middle-point of the family's journey to see the married daughter and sister of the Kirby family in Camden. Dramatically, their stop in Trenton points toward the play's underlying note of loss. When the garage attendant comments that he was born near Camden, the father asks, "Your folks still live there?" (85), to

which he replies, "No, my old man sold the farm and they built a factory on it. So the folks moved to Philadelphia" (85). The garage attendant's loss articulates the broader social concerns of the period, as the effects of industrialization and the New Deal attempts at reform pervaded even the most mundane of family rituals. This sense of displacement and disruption of family ties is amplified by the play's lack of contextualization elsewhere and the neutral quality of the Stage Manager's other spoken lines. The moment stands out and makes the play seems far from timeless. As they drive away, Ma Kirby says, "That's what I call a nice man" (86).

The loss that propels the family journey is revealed only at the end, when the Kirbys reach Camden and greet the daughter and sister, Beulah. She embraces her father, asking, "Are you glad I'm still alive, pa?" (91), to which he makes no reply. Indeed, the play suggests that the purpose of everyday dialogue is, in fact, to avoid communication and evade the pain associated with loss. When we finally realize that Beulah has just given birth to a stillborn baby girl, we realize the purpose of the family car trip. And as Beulah lets herself sink into her mother's comfort and weep, Ma Kirby insists, "God thought it best, dear. God thought best. We don't understand why. We just go on" (92). Ma Kirby embodies the motto "Keep on keeping on," along with an unwavering religious faith that, for the righteous, answers all questions and quells all fears. As Beulah's hope for comfort returns to the daily task of preparing breakfast and planning for dinner, Ma Kirby ends the play by "*absent-mindedly singing*" (93) a refrain from nineteenth-century Christian hymn called "The Ninety-Nine." The last line of the hymn, though Ma Kirby does not get to it before the play's end, is: "Rejoice, for the Lord brings back His own."[79]

[79] This hymn can be found in the collection *Sacred Songs and Solos*. The lyrics are by Elizabeth C. Clephane and the music is by Ira D. Sankey.

When *Happy Journey* received its first professional production in New York City in 1948, Brooks Atkinson describes it as a "simple and endearing one-act idyll" ("'Happy Journey'" XI), which balanced out Sartre's bitter drama, *The Respectful Prostitute*, for which it served as a prelude. Atkinson points out the "quaint notion" of limited scenery or props that Wilder has "borrowed from the Chinese, who for about 4,000 years have been writing stunning dramas without scenery and with few routine props" (XI). In a prescient pronouncement, Atkinson writes that although "thoroughly enjoyable," "a play like 'The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden' will never be a hit on Broadway. It is too simple, too kind, too romantic, and too imaginative. . . . Only four kitchen chairs—imagine!" (XI). Seven years later, Tyrone Guthrie wrote an extended piece on Wilder in the *New York Times*, in which he too praised both *Long Christmas Dinner* and *Happy Journey* as "masterpieces of their kind," only to add, "Yet none of these works could truthfully be regarded as likely to hit the jackpot of popular favor" (26). Lacking the heat and drama of Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, Wilder's plays did not appeal to the Freudian fascinations of a mid-century America, nor did he offer a singular focus on a tragic hero, as did, for example, Arthur Miller. In Wilder's formal experimentations and stark aestheticism Vogel finds a rich theatrical resource. And as a gay male playwright, Wilder's ghost haunts Vogel's play, a Noh-like figure observing his playwriting descendent give new life to his works.

Vogel's method of playwriting enacts a kind of burlesque of form itself. She takes the templates passed down to her from her predecessors and reconfigures them within a contemporary context. In doing so, she exposes the historicity of form itself. Stephen Watt argues that the formal experimentation is defining feature of American modern

drama: “Modern drama, if it is to be modern, seems always in search of a new form, a fresh way of revealing truths and entertaining its audience” (124). Indeed, as Vogel suggests, “I think that one gets to the postmodern by deconstructing the modern. . . . I sort of see a play traveling through time as unraveling its own devices” (Interview with Linden 256). Plays are, for Vogel, perpetually in transit, remaining mobile while revealing their tricks and techniques to new audiences and new playwrights. And in Thornton Wilder, Vogel saw a modernist playwright with whom she could travel through time, unraveling the aura of family, cultural rituals, and unexpressed desires.

Ride takes a moment in time—a pregnant moment, as Brecht would call it—and unravels it into past, present, and future. The play revolves around a family’s car trip on Christmas Eve, as they travel, first to mass, then to dinner at the grandparents’ house. Vogel says of *Ride,* “I chose Christmas because for us in America, whether or not we are Christian, it is the closest thing to myth we have” (qtd in Raymond 57). Vogel “wanted the play to capture a kind of terrible beauty” (56), and she achieves this by unraveling of a single moment, one full in equal measure with hope and destruction. During this car trip, the mother and father—who are referred to in the character list generically as Man and Woman—argue in the front seat while their two daughters, Claire and Rebecca, and son Stephen sit anxiously in the back seat. As the argument escalates and the car veers out of control, ending up perched precariously on the edge of a slippery cliff, the father raises his hand to hit the mother. It is this moment that Vogel holds still, a dialectical image of violence, while children are propelled forward in time to their adulthood, as they each live perpetually in the aftermath of that frozen moment. Vogel suggests that her play be produced in “The before and the after aftermath” of Christmas (Author’s Note,

Ride 7), thus connecting the personal moment of crisis with the collective ritual of Christmas. What makes the play formally interesting is that puppets perform the parts of the children, and the puppeteers controlling their actions play the adult selves. Further disrupting the unity of body and voice, the Man and Woman narrate the thoughts of their children, in between verbal barbs they throw at one another. Her approach to defamiliarizing family, sexuality, and homophobia is to look back to Wilder, while borrowing from Japanese puppet theatre, Bunraku. As Vogel puts it, "This play is a fusion of a one-act and Bunraku theatre techniques—or more importantly, of one westerner's misunderstanding of Bunraku. The misunderstanding is key" (5). Taking the condensed action of a one-act and the stylized precision of Bunraku, Vogel creates a play that compresses time in order to release the emotional fallout of a frozen moment in time and deconstruct the aura of memory, cultural rituals, and the body and voice of the performing body.

In its separation of the conventions of western theatre, Bunraku drama, for a western audience, has a defamiliarizing effect. In her introduction to an interview with professional Bunraku puppeteers and musicians, Theodora Skipitares describes the structure of a Bunraku prodcution as "a series of three splits or fragments of the conventions of Western theatre (text, music, and puppet)" (13). She describes this effect as presenting "a total, though divided, spectacle in which each element retained a distance from the other and recalled Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*" (13). She adds, "What I loved about this spectacle was that the puppeteers were both visible and passive" (13). Operating as the agent controlling the action, the puppeteers challenge notions of individual agency by performing a theatricalized relationality. The puppeteers also act

like a diegetic audience, watching the action that they are making the puppet perform. This is precisely the distancing effect Brecht sought in his audiences, a mode of conscious spectatorship that, ideally, would incite change outside the theatre.

In its search for pleasure, beauty, and meaning *in* the world, *Ride* deconstructs some of the most fundamental binaries of western theatre and culture—body/voice, past/present, flesh/spirit. Bunraku, with its separation of elements, offers set of formal techniques that seems productive for such a deconstructive project. In "The Dolls of Bunraku," Barthes writes,

> Bunraku practices in effect three separate modes of writing, which allow us to read simultaneously three areas of the spectacle: the marionette, the manipulator, the vocalizer: the effected gesture, he who effects the gesture, and the vocal gesture. (46)

Pointing to the connection between Bunraku and the distancing effect championed by Brecht, Barthes describes the relationship between disunity of the Bunraku spectacle and *gestic* theatre: "As Brecht recognized in the oriental actor, whose lesson he hoped to receive and propagate, here reigns the *quotation*, the pinch of writing, the fragment of code," which dislodges the "metonymic contagion of voice and gesture, of the spirit and the body, which cements together [the Western] actor" (47). This dislodging was performed using the *gestus*.

In *Understanding Brecht*, Walter Benjamin was the first to use the term *gestus* to describe Brecht's "theatre of interruption" (19), in which the quotable gesture, by interrupting the action, exposes the social processes underlying it. Benjamin writes, "'Making gestures quotable' is one of the essential achievements of epic theatre" (19). The *gestus* enacts a twofold challenge: a challenge to the unity between actor and consciousness, as well as between actor and action. Puchner argues that Brecht's theatre

emerged from a modernist anti-theatricalism, writing, "Brecht shares his mistrust of the theatre with the modernist anti-theatrical tradition, and the central concepts of his reform—the estrangement effect, the epic theatre, the *gestus*—come directly from this anti-theatrical tradition" (140). Using a sort of controlled theatricality to expose social relations and critique a theatrical apparatus that, in Brecht's time, was consumed as a product of mass culture, the *gestus* quotes, or rather, "cites" social codes, thereby making them visible and open to change. In this way, the citationality enacted by the *gestus* anticipates in interesting ways discourses of performativity. The *gestus,* like performativity is "poised between a theatrical principle and an anti-theatrical one" (Puchner 156). However, the *gestus* seeks to de-authorize the social act that it conveys, while simultaneously establishing its own authority. The aim is to suspend the citation of a social action long enough for the spectator to see other possible actions. It is this deliberate theatricality that Diamond seizes upon for a feminist theatre practice, one that mobilizes "mimesis as a mode of reading that transforms an object into a *gestus* or a dialectical image (Brecht, Benjamin)" out of which "truths are produced in engaged interpretation" (ii). *Ride* has traces of Bunraku, Brecht, feminist *gestic* theatre, and the focus on family and ritual found in Wilder. The dialectical image of a car perched on a cliff and a husband about to strike his wife serves as the main *gestus* in *Ride*, a suspended moment out of which the audience might produce its own truths.

Vogel mobilizes the separation of elements in Bunraku to separate the cultural meanings embedded in language and the body. That is, the separation of music, text, and actor's body works to dissimulate the aura of gender, sexuality, and family, revealing their historicity. In its Mark Brokaw's 2003 production, *Ride* meticulously followed the

principles of Bunraku, using a score of traditional Asian music and wood block beats to punctuate the poetic dialogue, as well as a various forms of puppetry. Stylistically, *Ride* presents a New York audience with an unfamiliar theatrical experience. However, the setting, dialogue, characters, and action are all undoubtedly familiar. Whereas Brecht was fascinated by the impassive acting style of Noh theatre and Wilder saw in Noh theatre an alternative to the realism that governed the stage in the early twentieth century, Vogel looks to Bunraku to take Brecht's and Wilder's projects one step further, deconstructing the semantic systems that give realism its meaning and truth-value and demystifying the cultural rituals (religion) and social structures (family) out of which meaning and truth are constructed.

The Bunraku puppets, which were created by Basil Twist for the play's New York and New Haven productions, create manifold theatrical effects, such separation of body and voice, the separation between performative gestures and the authority of the performance, and the separation of past and present selves. Kaja Silverman points out that western metaphysics perpetuates the illusion that the voice is the expression of the speaker's very essence (43), and realist theatre practices foster this illusion, with the actors summoning a voice that expresses the characters' inner essence. However, as philosopher Mladen Dolar writes, the voice is both "the body at its quintessential . . . and at the same time it seems to present more that the mere body" (71). Dolar contends, "Every emission of the voice is by its very essence *ventriloquism*" (70), which suggests that the "acousmatic" (70) character of vocal emission makes it incommensurable with the speaking body. The voice always moves beyond the speaker's body, invisibly and yet inevitably into the social world.

The disjunctive narrative strategy in Vogel's play works to unravel the social aspects of the individual voice. As the Man and Woman narrate the thoughts of their children—and each other—the notion of a private consciousness is disrupted, and replaced by a circulation of thoughts and feelings that, although experienced as private, are publicly shared. For example, as Stephen listens to his parents fight in the car, his thoughts are consumed with the shame of his own burgeoning sexuality, thoughts that are narrated by the Man, his father. Stephen wonders the thoughts that his father speaks aloud to the audience, "Was he bad? For watching boys?/Think, Stephen, of something else/Without heat and motion" (Vogel, *Ride* 17). Later, we hear the Man tell Stephen to get his "Pansy Ass out to the car" (37), which connects a moment of shaming—its social voice—with its future experience in Stephen's body. Similarly, the Woman narrates her daughter Claire's thoughts: "She had asked for cowboy boots and guns/ . . . She had not noticed that slight crease in her mother's brow, a concern/A question too soon to be asked" (19). And the Man objectively narrates the Woman's thoughts during mass: "The mother thought perhaps she should have an affair/To feel the heat and motion of a man's body next to hers" (17). Ventriloquism disrupts the autonomy of the speaker, positioning the social aspects of the voice in dissonant tension with individual bodies. Whether child or adult, thoughts, and the voice used to articulate them, are never fully individual or private. In this sense, the voice is, like gender and sexuality, relational and resists claims to possession. As Butler writes:

> And so when we speak about *my* sexuality or *my* gender, as we do (and as we must) we mean something complicated by it. Neither of these is precisely a possession, but both are *modes of being dispossessed*, ways of being for another or, indeed, by virtue of another. (*Undoing* 19)

The voice, likewise, can never be "mine," but is always a product of the social world from which I speak.

The ventriloquism performed by the puppets, puppeteers, and the narrative style separates performative gestures from the authority that gives them their force and meaning. That is, as the Man and Woman narrate the thoughts of the puppet-children, the puppets perform or "cite" these narrated thoughts in the form of gestures. Thus, the relationship between thought and act is taken apart and made visible, theatricalized. And while the parents are invested with the authority of speaking the thoughts of the children, it is the puppeteers—the adult versions of the child puppets—who manipulate the movements of the puppets, thereby acting as the agent of the performative act, watching and listening to the act that they make their puppet-self perform. Enacting the "not…but," the puppeteer in Vogel's play moves their puppet-child self at the same time that they observe and reenact the actions they performed in the past. This temporal movement between past and present is made even more evident in the play's narration, which is written in past tense verse form. Crucially, the faces of the puppeteer-actors remain, like the puppets themselves, "neutral and unemotive" (Vogel, *Ride* 6), leaving the spectator in a position of engaged analysis, rather than emotional (over) involvement. The puppets might be read, then, as materializations of muted memories, while the puppeteers, in the act of remembering, orchestrate and replay their movements. The puppets are material emblems of the past, and the puppeteers play with these emblems as a way of integrating them into their present selves. As Boyarin writes, "memory is neither something preexistent and dormant in the past nor a projection from the present, but a potential for creative collaboration between present consciousness and the experience or expression of

the past" (22). It is this collaboration that the puppetry performs. In *Long Ride*, forward movement means, first, going back to recollect one "very cold Christmas in a long and cold winter—decades and days ago" (13).

Ride's invocation of Wilder is immediately apparent in the minimal set, which the original production included a few chairs to signal the car in which the family travels, as well as in the play's emphasis on family, time, and cultural rituals. The play begins as the family is on their way to Christmas mass at the nondenominational Unitarian Universalist church, which they attend since the Man is Jewish and the Woman is Catholic. After Claire, narrated by the Man, repeatedly asks her parents, "But what do we believe?" (24, 28), the Woman finally responds with, "When you are older, you will decide what to believe" (28). During the service, encounter Sheila Jackson, the woman with whom the Man is having an affair. This juxtaposition of sexual infidelity and religious faith challenges cultural attempts to keep separate matters of the body from matters of the spirit. As the Woman looks across to Sheila's pew, the Man narrates her thoughts: "Oh Christ, she looks ten years younger" (23). Meanwhile, the congregation sings "Good King Wenceslas looked out/On the Feast of Stephen," played "*in the tonality of Bunraku*" (22). The incongruity is highly effective, as the familiar Christmas carol suddenly sounds strange, as does the cultural ritual it signals.

The religious ritual in the play evokes the question of belief in a culture that has lost its faith in universal categories, transcendence, and timelessness. The characters search for something solid on which to build a belief. Religion, as well as art, involves constructing a system of belief, through which we make meaning of our lives. In the chapter entitled "The Production of Belief" in *The Field of Cultural Production*,

Bourdieu writes, "aesthetic conflicts about the legitimate vision of the world—in the last resort, about what deserves to be represented and the right to represent it—are political conflicts (appearing in their most euphemized form) for the power to impose the dominant definition of reality" (101-2). In particular, theatre has the capacity to make and remake different versions of reality. What is at stake, here, the authority to make distinctions between what is real and what is not, the authority to manufacture systems of belief.

Neither theatre nor religion is, in Vogel's play, about a belief based in the renunciation of the flesh. Rather, the body and belief are inextricable. The sermon given by the young Unitarian Minister emphasizes, "It is not only Joy to the World! It is Joy In the World" (Vogel, *Ride* 25). Moving away from binary categories and toward a dialectical theology, the Minister performs a didactic and performative function in the play, as he uses his authority to reconstruct other ways of looking at social and spiritual realities, one that does not divide the material from the spiritual, but sees them as animating each other. Showing slides of Japan's Edo period as part of his sermon, the Minister inadvertently reinforces the theme of his sermon by mistakenly showing his slides of a Japanese prostitute. Significantly, he describes the prostitute a "a lady of the…um, Theatre district of Edo. A working lady" (26; ellipsis in original). Trying to transform his mistake into a teaching moment, he continues:

> And on top a very nice gentleman, possibly of the warrior class.
> In our culture, we revere Mary Magdalene in a similar way.
> Although Mary Magdalene, um, renounced her line of work. (26)

This passage connects the sexualization of women performers in both western and eastern cultures with religious division of femininity into idealized virgin and degraded whore.

Indeed, the conventions and rituals of theatre, religion, and family, it seems, work in similar ways when it comes to constructing and containing female sexuality. Curious, Claire asks her mother, "'Did the Virgin Mary work?" and her mother answers, "'No. She stayed at home. Like your mother'" (27). In this juxtaposition of Mary the mother and Mary the sex worker, and its connection to Claire and the Woman, the play constructs a history of female labor out of the iconicity of Christian depictions of female sexuality.

The juxtaposition of eastern and western theologies reveals the ways in western religions, particularly Christianity, reinforce divisions between the body and spirit, while constructing these categories along gender lines. The spirit, associated with man and the divine is opposed to the female body, which is further divided into idealized virgin and degraded whore, a division enshrined in the iconicity of the two Marys. The Minister, like Vogel, looks toward Japan for tools to deconstruct the sprit/flesh binary that pervades most western religions mimics the formal elements of Bunraku that the play incorporates. As the Minister states, in what could be a definition of defamiliarization, "Sometimes using the distance and perspective/Of a Far-off land, of another people/We can return and see our home more clearly" (25). In sharp contrast to the denunciation of bodily desires and pleasures that characterizes most Christian theology, the Minister here looks to the east for religious philosophies that do not devalue the body and idealize the spirit. He tells his congregation "rather than renounce the joys of this world:/The pleasures of the flesh, the joys in watching/The heat and motion of the flesh. . . . Putting aside Western notions of guilt and shame about the/body—Why not embrace what will too soon be gone?" (25). He finds a way out of these deadening binaries in theology, but in the work

of “artists, courtesans, actors and merchants” who believed that the transience of the flesh cultivates a sense of reverence, rather than shame, and were thus “Determined to enjoy the flesh because it was ephemeral” (25). As the Minister explains, “Artists who wrestle with this relationship of man/And nature called this art ‘Ukiyo-e’/The Floating World” (25). Unlike the binary division of Human Mind and Human Nature in Wilder’s and Stein’s formulation, Vogel articulates this relationship as a dialectic, a productive interpenetration of two registers of living. The Floating World offers, like the utopian performative, a time and place in which art and its audience interact and produce meanings together. In its liminality (to use Victor Turner’s term), theatre is a kind of floating world, offering a medium for the performance of cultural rituals that uphold and reinforce beliefs, as well as interrogate them. Significantly, the play’s epigraph is a poem by Carl Vogel, entitled “Floating World,” which implies just this sort of liminal gathering, parting, and interacting among bodies and souls.

After mass, the family travels to the grandparents for dinner and, here, the Minister narrates the role of grandmother and grandfather, which has the effect of juxtaposing the meaning of these two cultural rituals as well as the social roles of religious leaders and family elders. And, here, during mass, the thoughts and tensions simmering beneath the surface bubble forth. The Man, who openly favors Claire, gives her a gold bracelet for a gift, which leads to fight that destroys the bracelet. The Man takes his anger out of Stephen, and when the grandfather challenges the father’s authority, the simmering subtext of unspoken family dysfunction escalates to the point of physical and verbal violence. As the grandfather yells “’Kike!’” and the Man responds with “’Cocksucker!’” (37), the “*the two men waltzed in a wrestler’s embrace*” (38), in a stylized fight not

unlike the one between Carl and Harry Lime in *Waltz*. The Minister narrates: "And the women and children keened a collective: ALL. 'Aaaahhhh!'" (38). Perhaps more than any other cultural ritual, Christmas annually repeats a lifetime of accumulated emotions, expectations, hopes, and disappointments, all of which repeat themselves year after year. Claire narrates this moment, remembering "feeling the shame./ The shame of being the golden girl. . . . /And whatever happened from that moment on/Moments linked to moments/It was all her fault" (40).

The dialectical image, like the *gestus*, is an interruption in historical time that yields social meanings in the present—or now-time (*Jetztzeit*), to use Benjamin's mystical term. As Benjamin writes in his essay "Central Park":

> The dialectical image is one flashing up momentarily. It is thus, as an image flashing up in the *now* of its recognizability, that the past . . . can be captured. The redemption which can be carried out in this way and in no other is always to be won out of the perception of that which is being irretrievably lost. (49)

As Elin Diamond explains, the notion of now-time "is key to Benjamin's Messianic Marxism—his visioning of revolution not as the logical result of class struggle in all its stages, but as the perpendicular collision of linear historical time with Messianic time, when, suddenly, history becomes 'citable' [meaningful] in all its moments" (*Unmaking* 147). The dialectical image works, in this vision of time and social change, "dialectical images challenge the myths of historical progress not because they exist ontologically, but because we *perform* that challenge in the disjunctive, '*Jetztzeit*' or now-time of our reading" (147). From this perspective of the now-time, "we are palpably, mimetically immersed in the unrecorded history of our social existence—in conflicting loops, vanishings, fragmented memories, in the very 'accident and repetition' (as [Bert] States puts it) that aesthetic time banishes" (147). These are precisely the movements of *Long*

Ride, its suspended moments and recursive returns offering opportunities for examination and revision. This is achieved by the creation of distance—the spectator's distance from the formal elements of the play and the characters' temporal distance from that frozen moment twenty-five years before.

The aura of religion, theatre, and the body is dissimulated by aesthetic distance. Benjamin's concept of the aura is typically associated with the presence and authenticity of a work of art, and something that is destroyed by mass production. However, the aura is not merely a kind of mystical presence exuded by an object; it is, rather, its accumulated history, a history obscured through its consecration as a work of art. As Benjamin writes in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," "The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced" (221). In this sense, the aura of an object or work of art can be deconstructed, its history unraveled. And authenticity is not the opposite of history, but rather, a product of history.

A feminist gestic theatre, then, could work to deconstruct the aura of gender and sexuality, by revealing them to be products of our individual and collective histories. As Diamond writes, "Benjamin links the 'experience of the aura' with a complex temporality; traditional auratic art is not just a reactionary 'cultic' component of bourgeois life but a repository of past experiences which might serve as a stimulus to change" (*Unmaking* 145). "To destroy the aura," Diamond suggests, "is to *release experiences*—emotions, understandings correspondences—for *exoteric* use in the present" (147). And as Jill Dolan writes, "Performance's simultaneity, its present-

tenseness, uniquely suits it to probing the possibilities of utopia as a hopeful process that continually writes a different, better future" (*Utopia* 13). Indeed, Diamond and Dolan are not far apart in their respective theorizations of a gestic feminist theatre and the utopian performative. As Dolan affirms, "utopian performatives are relatives of the famed German director and theorist Bertolt Brecht's notion of *gestus*, actions in performance that crystallize social relations and offer them to spectators for critical contemplation" (7). To the notion of the *gestus* Dolan adds her assertion that these social relations must be "not only intellectually clear but felt and lived by spectators as well as actors" (7). Here, then, we have a utopian performative and gestic feminist theatre that both insist on the productive possibilities of performances that are thoughtfully felt. And Vogel's play mobilizes the *gestus*—the dialectical image—together with the heat and motion of the utopian performative, so as to suspend a moment of trauma and, hopefully, revise its future effects.

The moment that is suspended in the *Ride* is brought about when the Woman says to the Man, sarcastically, "Well. What a lovely Christmas you've given me," and the Man responds by yelling, "Je-Sus-Christ!" and "*ritualistically draws back his hand to strike*" (41). The moment is frozen, and the play flashes forward twenty-five years to when the three children are all adults. The puppeteers now become the actors who play the adult roles of the puppet-children. Claire, Rebecca, and Stephen each have a parallel scene, in which they reveal their failed relationships, all of which are varied repetitions of the one they witnessed in the family car. Twenty-five years later, the three adults still live in this frozen moment in the family car. In their monologues, we see that each one is perched precariously between life and death, as if still in that family car perched on the icy cliff.

Having been locked out of their homes by unfaithful partners, Claire, Rebecca, and Stephen each, in turn, stand outside, isolated and abandoned. In the Brokaw's production, the unfaithful partners are played by looming shadow puppets, so that they audience only sees their massive silhouette in the background, without any defining or humanizing characteristics. As the three adults stand facing stage left to speak their lines, the shadow puppets perform broad, theatrical gestures behind a screen, the effect of which is to distance body and gesture, so that the emotional force is defamiliarized in its amplification.

As Claire, Rebecca, and Stephen perform their monologues, which are spoken in present tense prose form, the past continues to hover and haunt the present, wreaking havoc on their attempts to form lasting relationships. Ann Pellegrini argues that, as a whole, the play "reveals the fragility and the hope of human (re) connection" (482), and the characters "yearn for contact with each other, with the past, with lost parts of themselves" (483). In this scene, we see the radical alienation produced from a past that has not yet been resolved into the present. Rebecca, who at the moment her father was about to hit her mother promised "I will never have children!" (41), finds herself, twenty-five years later pregnant with a man named Chester, who is cheating on her. She lies down in a snow bank to die. Claire's girlfriend, Naomi, has met another woman, and Claire watches "*the lesbian law student puppets*" (45) make out in the apartment window above. She takes a revolver and "*moves the gun up to her mouth*" (46). "If only—if only I could stop time" (48), Claire laments. We can hear echoes of Wilder in Claire's feelings of powerlessness over time, its accumulated moments weighing heavily on her present life. In their suffering, both sisters invoke the memory of their brother, a memory filled

with equal doses of love, loyalty, and longing. And as Rebecca sits frozen in a snow bank and Claire holds the gun in her mouth, both are suddenly filled with that memory—the spirit of their brother—and they are both overcome by a renewed will to live. Stephen's ghostly intervention in their suffering comes in the form breath—the gust of life he breathes into their bodies as they reach their lowest points. As Dolar points out, "in many languages there is an etymological link between spirit and breath (breath as being the 'voiceless voice,' the zero point of vocal emission): the voice carried by breath point to the social irreducible to the body" (71). Put otherwise, "The voice is the flesh of the soul" (71). What the audience finds out shortly after is that Stephen has died of AIDS.

Stephen's encounters with his past partners are recollected in two parts: the first parallels his sisters' as Stephen stands outside his apartment building, yelling up to the window to the puppet representing his unfaithful lover, Joe. The second recollection occurs in a gay bar, in which Stephen meets a "*hunky version of one of the Village People*" (Vogel, *Ride* 49) and has unprotected sex in the backroom. As Vogel's stage directions read, claiming to be as equally ignorant of what happens in the backroom of a gay bar as she is of the intricacies of Asian drama, "[the puppets] *simulate a sexual act that means this play will never be performed in Texas*" (50). As the "*puppet thrusts*" behind the screen, Stephen, also behind the screen, moves from a state of pain to relaxation to pleasure, and finally to realization. After this brief encounter, the Ghost of Stephen enters, in the tradition of Noh drama and *Our Town*, telling the audience,

> How my sisters will cry. I could feel the virus entering my body. But I could not undo what had been done. And for the next several years, I could feel the virus multiply with a ferocious beauty—replicating patterns that changed and mutated. I could not see the beauty then, of course. . . . It is a very terrible beauty. But it is a beauty all the same. It takes distance to see the beauty in it. And now I have all the distance in the world. (50-51)

The aura, dissimulated and dispersed, now provides a way of understanding the world that does not demand rigid distinctions between living and dead, past and present, body and voice, beauty and suffering. The "terrible beauty" of the auratic distance that Stephen describes enables a new way of seeing, a critical and commemorative perspective that theatre can cultivate and belief can animate. Stephen is "granted a day each year to come back to the Floating World and observe it," a commemorative ritual he enacts every year from "the waning of Christmas Day to the waning of the Feast of Stephen—my feast day" (51). As if in answer to Claire's hopeful cry, "If only—if only I could stop time" (48), *Ride* achieves the seemingly impossible act of making time stand still, so that Stephen can return to remind the audience to see the beauty in this stillness.

Providing the visual center of the play is a dance piece, which was choreographed by John Carrafa for the play's 2003 Vineyard Theatre production. Formally, it is a version of the *mai-goto* portion of the *hayshai-goto* section in Noh drama. As Mervyn Cooke explains, every Noh drama has four structural divisions, called *shōdan*, of which *hayshai-goto* (instrumental piece) is one division. The *hayshai-goto* is then further subdivided into five categories, of which *mai-goto* (dance piece) is one category (Cooke 172).[80] The dancer, who is played by the same actor as the Minister, comes onstage and dances around Stephen, as if in a kind of artistic revision of the dynamics of their relationship and of the violent intrusion of AIDS into that dynamic. The effect of having the dancer played by the same actor as the Minister is to connect these two rituals—religious and aesthetic, spiritual and embodied, sacred and sexual—thus showing there

[80] The other four *shōdan* are: *katari-goto* (spoken pieces in prose); *utai-goto* (chanted pieces in verse); and *shijima-goto* (silent pieces). The other four subdivisions of the *hayshai-goto* are: *iri-goto* (entrance pieces); *de-goto* (exit pieces); *tsunagi-goto* (linking pieces); and *hataraki-goto* (descriptive pieces).

interconnectedness rather than their separation. Of the dancer, Vogel writes in her stage directions: "*oh, and let him be beautiful*" (52). In this scene, the heat and motion described by Minister in his sermon is embodied and performed. The dramatic *mise-en-scène* of this scene is constructed using only a red silk backdrop, which provides the symbolic subtext of the dance.[81] The dance brings together the juxtapositions that run throughout the play, by performatively enacting spirit *in* the flesh, suffering *in* pleasure, and beauty *in* pain. At the end of the dance, while the dancer is "*breathing hard . . . he takes Stephen in his arms and pours his breath into Stephen's mouth*" (52). As Stephen, who left breathing hard from dancer's gift of life, he says to the audience:

> How wonderful it feels to breathe! You cannot know how beautiful it is. When you are alive, you cannot see your breath. But we your ancestors can see the air move when you breathe. Your breathing creates a spectrum of color; the motion and heat of your life. And often—in a church or a meeting, in a mosque—or like now, in a theatre. . . . Whenever a family or an audience hold your breath together—a moment of silence before you collectively expel the air—Ah, the: Fireworks for the ancestors! (52-53)

This speech can be read as a commemorative moment in the broadest sense—a public celebration of the past, theatre, and community.

Directly after this metatheatrical moment, Stephen's Ghost takes us back to the frozen moment, the dialectical image around which the play revolves, saying, "There is a moment I want you to watch with me. A moment of time stopping" (53). As he breathes life back into the puppets and resumes his place as puppeteer, the play begins again at the moment when the Man is about to hit the Woman. Now, the audience understands the implications of this moment in the future lives of the three children sitting in the back

[81] Interestingly, a similar backdrop was used in the La Mama's recent 2008 revival of a 1978 Japanese play by Taeko Tomioka called *The Doll Sisters*, which uses Bunraku puppets to tell a feminist tale of two divided sisters. (Think of a Japanese version of *The Mineola Twins*.) The violent end used the rapid unfurling of a large piece of red silk, which the *New York Times* reviewer described as an effect that "speaks of the shedding of blood with as much force as a Quentin Tarantino movie" (Gates).

seat. As "*the man raises his right hand and backhands the woman, slowly, ritualistically. Woodblocks strike*" (53), at which point a cascade of hopeful questions erupt from each family member: "If I try harder—if I have another child" (55), wonders the mother, "If I dress a bit younger—If I say softer things" (56). However, as the car's driver, only the Man's answer to that "what if" will save them:

> WOMAN and MAN.
>
> If…
> *(Beat). The Narrators almost turn to each other.)*
> REBECCA
> And then our father thought of Sheila.
> GHOST OF STEPHEN.
> The cream of her breasts
> CLAIRE.
> The sliver of her thighs
> REBECCA.
> And he wanted to see her.
> He must see her. (56; ellipsis in original)

The Man conjures the heat and motion that animates his own life, and this remembered desire saves his family's lives. And as Rebecca recalls, in the past tense, "As one family and one flesh,/We breathed as one" (57). This shift, in which the child narrates her father's desires, signals an important moment in which the past is recognized and incorporated into the present. With a performative authority derived from integrating past and present, Claire and Rebecca discover a form of belief that is not opposed to the body and its desires, but immanent in it. Their acceptance of what was is the hopeful promise contained in the utopian performative's "what if." As Dolan explains, "Utopia is always a metaphor, always a wish, a desire, a no-place that performance can sometimes help map if not find. But a performative is not a metaphor; it's a doing, and it's in the performative's gesture that hope adheres, that communitas happens, that not-yet-

conscious is glimpsed and felt and strained toward" (*Utopia* 170). At the play's end, the Ghost of Stephen urges the audience to strain toward the utopian performative, which is imagined here as the unified breath of a gathered collective: "Ah! How beautiful!" he says, "Do you see it? *(The Ghost of Stephen watches the currents of color and air)*" (56).

Reviewing Vogel's play for *The Advocate*, Gerard Raymond writes, "*The Long Christmas Ride Home* bears all the Vogel hallmarks: humor, compassion, unflinching honesty, and a political voice filtered through family drama" (57). Indeed, the play contains traces of the suspended violence of *Hot 'n' Throbbing,* the notion of the journey and the car as memory machine in *Drive,* the commemorative impulse of *Baltimore Waltz,* and the focus on family as the primary tool of socialization, which can be found in most of her plays. In his *New York Times* review of the Long Wharf Theatre's 2004 production of *Ride,* directed by Oskar Eustis, David DeWitt describes Vogel's approach as "a revelation . . . pure as mathematics in its translation of the prosaic into the abstract," but that "the achievements of this production come with sacrifices" some of which are that the play "lacks gripping momentum, with long descriptive speeches that let action lag in the last half of the play" and that, as a whole, the production "is constantly chilly, seldom finding the heat of anything visceral or immediate" (14CN). Indeed, the play was lauded especially as a unique experiment in form. However, although it participates in the recent popularity of puppetry in contemporary theatre (from *Avenue Q* to *The Lion King* to La MaMa's International Puppetry Festival), it, ironically, seems to be too abstract for a postmodern era intently focused on the particularities of the body. Could it be that the play is, despite its verbal expressions of "heat and motion," actually coolly transcendent? Could it be that the play seems to be perched precariously between a particular time and

place and a sense of timelessness and universality that, in a postmodern context, feels alienating?

Perhaps universality might be usefully reformulated as a utopian performative, rather than an aesthetic ideal. As Dolan writes,

> A utopian performative gives us a mode of thinking and seeing; it can't be confined to a set of table, immobile criteria, because it relies on the magic of performance practice, on our belief in social justice and a better future, on the impact and import of a wish, and on the love for human commonality despite the vagaries of difference. (*Utopia* 171)

Indeed, perhaps that is only ever what any claim to universality can be. In *Excitable Speech*, Butler argues, "it seems important to consider that standards of universality are historically articulated and that exposing the parochial and exclusionary character of a given historical articulation of universality is part of the project of extending and rendering substantive the notion of universality itself" (89). The performative contradiction is that "The universal can only be articulated in response to a challenge from (its own) outside" (90). And since this "performative contradiction is crucial to the continuing revision and elaboration of historical standards of universality proper to the future movement of democracy itself" (89-90), Vogel's revisions of a masculinist dramatic canon are a necessary part of expanding the boundaries of universality. In words that echo Dolan's explanation of utopian performatives, Butler writes:

> To claim that the universal has not yet been articulated is to insist that the "not yet" is proper to an understanding of the universal itself: that which remains "unrealized" by the universal constitutes it essentially. The universal begins to become articulated precisely through challenges to its existing formulation, and this challenge emerges from those who are not covered by it, who have no entitlement to occupy the place of the "who," but who, nevertheless, demand that the universal as such ought to be inclusive of them. (90)

Crucially, then, universality is always a utopian promise, an "opened-ended *ideal*" (90). Thus, "one who is excluded from the universal, and yet belongs to it nevertheless, speaks from a split situation of being at once authorized and deauthorized" (91). It is precisely from this space that Vogel speaks, as she forges her way into the canon, while exposing both its limitations and its possibilities.

In words that might be read as her own commemoration of Thornton Wilder, Vogel writes:

> He believed that the most pertinent voices to listen to in times of crisis are the voices passed down through the ages. If, at this point in time, we may not share Thornton Wilder's confidence in the strength of canonic literature and great minds to pull us through, we can enjoy, in the words of critic Francis Fergusson, Wilder's "marriage of Plato and Groucho Marx." And now, more than ever, we can appreciate his legacy, his questioning mind and his belief that hope is the most necessary of civic virtues. (Forward xiii)

Vogel's deeply felt relationship to history and her appreciation and critique of the playwriting tradition that has been passed down to her has culminated in a body of work that takes its place among the canonical figures of dramatic literature. And, like the performances of her burlesque counterparts, Vogel's plays challenge, delight, and provoke, producing their own legacy, of which her students, her audiences, and her critics are the immediate and fortunate inheritors.

Epilogue

History, family, fantasy, comedy, sexuality, memory, and belief—these provide the pulse of Vogel's plays. Asking contemporary questions by responding to past canonical texts, Vogel is implicitly suggesting that the best answers come from the questions we ask of history. Moreover, her plays suggest that there can be no separation between social and literary history, that what is authorized in our culture is inextricably tied to what is authorized in the literary and dramatic canon. Of the many questions circulating in Vogel's plays, perhaps the most pervasive is one similar to the question posed by Angela J. Lantham, which was quoted at the beginning of this study: "How, in fact, have we come to the point where the female form is such an instantaneously recognizable emblem for sex?" (457). My belief is that the most fruitful answers, if always incomplete, emerge when pieces of history are examined side by side, both synchronically and diachronically. In this sense, Vogel's plays, which foreground female sexuality, question social codes and conventions, and employ humor as a distancing device, can be productively related to that ever-changing form known as burlesque. Although occupying different stages, Vogel's plays and burlesque performances both uncover cultural anxieties surrounding sexualized, publicized, and self-aggrandized female bodies. Together, burlesque and the dramatic canon act as the high and low counterparts to Vogel's theatre.

Burlesque is one of the rare examples in theatre history when women have taken center stage, commanding the attention of audiences with their brash displays and bawdy humor. This female-dominated form, however, was quickly reduced to sexual spectacle. In the history of burlesque, we can observe that during periods in which women have gained a degree of economic, sexual, or political agency (during the suffrage era, for

example, or when women went to work during World War II), there has been a concomitant cultural response to contain that agency by reducing femininity to a sexual spectacle. Simplifying the social transgressions of classic burlesque meant, first and foremost, the silencing of the burlesque performer's voice, a voice that was at once humorous, parodic, and seductive. I hear this same voice in Vogel's plays.

Both burlesque and Vogel's plays playfully invert codes of gender and complicate dynamics of sexual desire, thereby revealing some of the roles, lessons, and gestures that constitute performativity. Since Vogel's plays invoke a history of codes, forms, and conventions that have worked to silence women by denying their authority, ignoring their histories, and reducing their bodies to a sexual object, her plays might be read as a dialectical counterpart to the history of burlesque. In its contemporary forms, burlesque can both reclaim formerly disenfranchised identities, and it can also nurture a kind of longing for a female sexuality that it not complicated by second-wave feminism and its backlash. Burlesque, whether classic or neo, is not a uniform form, and thus cannot be claimed to be unequivocally empowering, transformative, or even interesting. But it can be all of those things, and more, depending on the audience, performers, and context. Its growing popularity in contemporary culture suggests that it merits further attention. It means something, as Richard White would say.

This study has meant to show the ways that Vogel rewrites the texts of a masculinist dramatic and literary canon, while unraveling the cultural codes that teach us how to live and act in our bodies. An unexpected result of this study has been what it has suggested about the process of canonization itself. The work of critics, in particular, is a powerful force in the creation of self-perpetuating fields, in which critic and artist legitimize and

reinforce the authority of each another. In this sense, I suppose, this dissertation has been my own attempt to consecrate Vogel, while simultaneously legitimizing myself as someone with the authority to do so. Additionally, this has also been a study of burlesque, an attempt to legitimize, and bring into critical focus, the meanings surrounding women performing on burlesque stages over the past century. Although my use of burlesque as a theoretical tool did not become as fully developed as I had hoped, it did provide grounding for my readings of Vogel's plays and women in performance, more generally, while paving the way toward future research into revivals of this form in contemporary culture. Moreover, the historical and aesthetic connections between gay camp and burlesque merits further research. One avenue of study might be a comparison between camp's use of the iconicity of the film star and burlesque's invocation of the theatrical tradition embodied by the showgirl. Vogel's plays, like burlesque, provide pleasure, provoke questions, and produce a feeling of (sometimes uneasy) anticipation that culminates not in a resolution, but in an exposure of the material performances that constitute performativity.

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