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SHAPES, FORMS, AND SHADOWS: THE SEARCH FOR THE SELF IN THE PLAYS OF
SHAWN, NAGY, WELLMAN AND PARKS

by

BETH SCHACHTER

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2000

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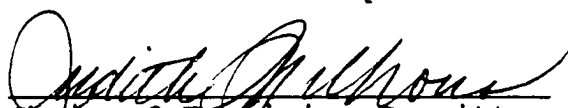
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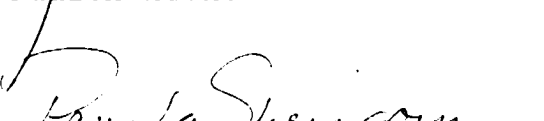
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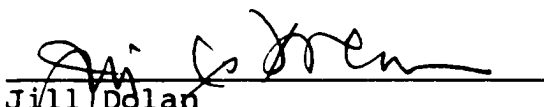
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Abstract

SHAPES, FORMS, AND SHADOWS: THE SEARCH FOR THE SELF IN THE PLAYS OF
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by

Beth Schachter

Adviser: Professor Judith Milhous

Among avant-garde American dramatists, our postmodern moment has produced Wallace Shawn, Phyllis Nagy, Mac Wellman, and Suzi-Lori Parks. Working with feminist Neo-Bakhtinian theories, this study examines their texts, productions, and reception. Case studies focus on the raced and gendered somatic shapes in their non-linear work from 1985-1999. Incorporating dramatic literary, economic, and political contexts, I define mainstream American theater and how its terms of visibility marginalize these writers. Shawn's *The Designated Mourner* reveals how interdependent the constructions of Jewishness, whiteness, and heterosexual masculinity are in this Holocaust-inspired futurist play about 'passing' in various shades of white. Lesbian writer Nagy creates a surreal dramaturgy integrating music, choreography, and visual elements to subvert "reality." Her plays create a feeling of utopia and I focus on the outlines of the abjected, grotesque, masculinity in Wellman's plays. His critique of heteronarrativity confronts the

sexplosive politics of the body during the NEA-4 culture wars. For Parks's *Venus* and film, *Girl 6*, I use post-colonial critiques to examine how black female identity is seen and sold as product in contemporary America. *Venus* describes a formative nineteenth century moment in cultural stereotyping, and *Girl 6* takes place in the present. Together, they foreground the alluring power of being a commodity fetish entangled with the disempowerment of being a fetishized 'Other'. These case studies of American theater reveal the possibilities for and material obstacles to experimental drama.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank Professor Judith Milhous, chairperson of my dissertation committee, for her continuous support of my work. Professor Milhous's keen insights and productive questions guided my study, helping me to integrate new and complex approaches to dramatic literature and theatrical research. I am also deeply indebted to Professors Jill Dolan and Marvin Carlson for raising many theoretical questions and for enthusiastically sharing their knowledge of the contemporary American theater scene.

There are several individuals who have given generously of their inspiration, support, and unflagging interest during my writing process. I am indebted to Professor Michael Cadden for his guidance on the selection of my topic and the dramatic literary and theoretical analyses he offered along the way. Among my peers and friends, I owe special thanks to the members of the reading/writing group that helped shape my thinking: Jim Wilson, Jay Plum, Maurya Wickstrom, and Sharon Green. Jim Wilson brought his inspiring scholarship, friendship, and editing into my life during this process. Particularly early on in the process, Jay Plum offered great help drawn from his depth and breadth of intellectual resources. In addition, I cannot adequately describe the value of the readings and contributions of my friend and fellow-questioner, Jennie Snyder. To the many family members and friends who supported my journey, I thank you all for giving me the buoyancy of your love.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION: SETTING THE SCENE: DRAMATIC LITERARY, ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL CONTEXTS FOR THIS STUDY.....	1
II. MASQUERADES OF REALISM: WALLACE SHAWN'S <i>THE DESIGNATED MOURNER</i>	48
III. DESIRE AND VISIBLE DIFFERENCE IN PHYLLIS NAGY'S WORK.....	103
IV. MAC WELLMAN'S MASCULINE SHAPES AND SHADOWS.....	155
V. <i>HABEAS CORPUS</i> : HAVING THE BODY IN SUZAN-LORI PARKS'S <i>VENUS AND GIRL 6</i>	202
VI. CONCLUSION: DESCRIBING THE PRESENT AND WRITING FOR THE FUTURE.....	240
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	264

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

SETTING THE SCENE: DRAMATIC LITERARY, ECONOMIC, AND POLITICAL CONTEXTS FOR THIS STUDY

As director Travis Preston's New York University workshop of Mac Wellman's *Infrared* began, mysterious figures peopled a landscape of miniature Manhattan skyscrapers. On this playground of architectural archetypes the lights revealed the following characters: a young blonde actress as a sort of Lewis Carroll "Alice," an intense, brooding, trenchcoated young man with a feather in one hand and the remains of a small, nude, male mannequin in the other, and an exotic chorus of actresses in Anubis masks. Close to the audience, another actress stood discretely at a microphone. As "Alice" lipsynched, the actress at the microphone spoke the opening lines of the play drolly:

I suppose you would like to know who I am, and
if not "who" then "what."

Pause.

There is a problem with this.

Pause.

I don't know what I am, and I am not
sure there is a "Who" to be found there.

Or here, I mean.

Pause.

This worries me.¹

The undefined being questions not only its identity, but also the very categories by which

¹Mac Wellman and Jane Geiss, *Infrared* (unpublished manuscript, NYU undergraduate workshop performance, 1997), 2. Jane Geiss is the puppeteer with whom Wellman collaborated on this play. All subsequent page numbers for quotations from the play will appear in the text.

that identity is constructed. “Who” or “what” does not find a resolution in *Infrared*. Instead, Wellman takes the audience on an episodic, mysterious, and opaque journey to see what may be underneath the normative constructions of character, identity, and theater. Simultaneously staging different manifestations of the monstrous figures (the young man, his mannequin, the offstage voice of the actress), Wellman’s physical and symbolic representations communicate both the tension and power of the body as a complex sign.

When the monster wanders off the stage at the stopping point of the play, he leaves with no greater insight into his subjectivity than he possessed at the opening. Wellman himself describes the character as “Our Narrator, an ungainly self in search of himself” (1). In the text (although not in the workshop), the Narrator is initially visible as a large unshapely shadow with a claw, horny head, tail, and a tendency to destroy other characters who interrupt him: the shadow of the “whole, vast bulk of our Narrator. . . swoops over the Man, we hear a crunching noise. The shadow withdraws and the little Man is squashed flat” (3).

In the “infrared” world below the surface of the streets, the play challenges spectators to make their own associative connections and to let go of conventional expectations. I am interested in the kind of identity confusion expressed by this monster and the dramaturgical acts of resistance some contemporary American playwrights use to create this kind of uncertainty. Just as Wellman’s fragmented narrator challenges the audience to consider his identity confusions, many avant-garde American artists are exploring the categories and boundaries of subjectivity within the liminal space which

theatre provides.

The theatre has often been a site in which to confirm individual and community identities (sometimes in keeping with the culture's *grands récites* and sometimes rebelling against those master narratives). To cite Craig Owens's description, our postmodern moment is marked by a "crisis of cultural authority, specifically of the authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions."² This instability produces theater artists like Wallace Shawn, Phyllis Nagy, Mac Wellman, and Suzan-Lori Parks, who play with a new awareness of the constructed nature of our public and private institutions. They write questions about the boundaries and nature of the self through forms as challenging as their concerns and they map a search for the self and for the aesthetic choices that expand the transformative space in which identities can be created. Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks, all address the question "who, or what, am I?" and eschew realism's fixed verisimilar boundaries of subjectivity in favor of an "infrared," or x-ray post-structuralist vision of ideology rendered visible.

These are writers whose hybrid forms defy easy categorization. but they are all dramatists invested in exploring, as Marc Robinson describes it, "the systems by which one organizes and reflects on one's experiences."³ When audiences are confronted, for instance, with the everlastingly being killed and but not yet dead Black Man, in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, they will find no easy

²Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 57.

³Marc Robinson, *The Other American Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3.

interpretive referents. The Last Black Man is not a ghost, nor is he solely a symbolic character. In order to comprehend his subjectivity, one may be asked to consider new ways of seeing African Americans, whiteness, and even the history of our culture. As seen in Richard Foreman's production of Parks's *Venus*, Parks evokes the conflicting streams of desire, possession, and execution that flow through the history of African American bodies. In doing so, her play interrogates and revises myths of American identity, challenging audiences to confront (and critique) the illusion of certain socio-economic norms as natural and permanent. This study examines the plays, productions, and careers of Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks with a focus on the somatic shapes that people their stages. I will explore the possibilities for theatrical bodies within their plays as well as the implications for the American body politic communicated through their theatrical re-visionings.

Interrogating the nature of subjectivity by deforming the generic shape of traditional realistic narrative structures, Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks also mark the presence, absence, and fragmentation of both characters' and performers' bodies. I will examine the work of these four writers as case studies that focus on the question of how contemporary American experimental writers create transgressive characters whose identities critique normative constructions of gender, sexual identification, race, and ethnicity. Then, tracking the playwrights' differing marginal relationships to the mainstream theater realm, I will attempt to read their works in light of the political and cultural stakes of the 1980s and 90s. While Shawn and Wellman have been writing since the 1970s, and Nagy and Parks since the 80s, I focus upon their crossover period in the

years of Reagan-economics and the Bush administration—a period in which government funding for the arts became a favorite conservative scapegoat.

In this introduction, I will set the theatrical scene of the decade upon which I focus, and explain why I have selected these four writers to represent a cross section of American experimental playwrights. In doing so, I will address the parameters of this study and the range of theatrical work these four case studies represent. The next section describes the economic and aesthetic distinctions between marginal and mainstream theater worlds in New York City, the locus of much of their work (and the city that determines whether their plays will be produced in America). In order to set them apart from their commercial counterparts, I provide a brief overview of the origins and ongoing power of realism, the familiar form of mainstream culture. In order to understand the ideologically imbricated realistic form, it is useful to touch on how realism initially functioned and how it is now performing cultural work in America.

Having described the realistic dramaturgical form against which Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks all rebel, I will present the theoretical tools that help me articulate the goals and methods of their dramaturgical strategies. In particular, I will spend some time discussing M.M. Bakhtin's theories of the carnivalesque and grotesque. A combination of materialist feminist analysis and Bakhtin's conceptual frameworks have proven important in seeing the subversive structures within these plays and productions. In addition, I incorporate Marvin Carlson and Michael Vanden Heuvel's approaches to post-modern "chaotic" and fragmented dramas. Lastly, I offer brief overviews of the chapters devoted to the individual playwrights.

In setting the boundaries for this study, I am limiting myself to writers whose plays remain in the literary tradition of the theatre. They bend a text-based inheritance in radical ways that artists in the dance theater or performance art forms do not. I have not, therefore, considered artists such as Reza Abdoh, Ping Chong, Karen Finley, or The Wooster Group. Their pieces critique American cultural structures with acuity, but rely far more on dance and performance tools than the scope of this study can encompass.

While there are numerous compelling experimental writers, I selected Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks for several reasons. These four represent a useful cross-section of success and recognition. They have various degrees of visibility within the avant-garde theater world and larger mainstream theatrical circles. As I am specifically interested in exploring the cultural implications of how dramatists are rendered marginal, I have chosen not to address better known artists, like Tony Kushner, Sam Shepard, or David Rabe, men whose works also employ dramaturgical subversions. While these writers have also written in unconventional idioms, their careers have, at least at certain moments, found wider visibility in mainstream productions.

For related reasons I choose not to address the work of such major experimental figures such as Adrienne Kennedy or Maria Irene Fornes. While they do not receive mainstream production opportunities, both these writers attract a great deal of scholarly interest. In addition, their plays circulate regularly in university curricula in ways that the plays selected for this study do not. Lastly, as writers with more than thirty-five years of work behind them, their plays now attract revival interest. For instance, both Fornes and Kennedy have been selected for seasons at the Signature Theater, a company that

dedicates its entire season to a single writer's plays. Fornes is the 1999-2000 season's writer at the Signature Theater, and Kennedy was given the 1996-7 season.

Scholars often look backwards in order to explore the influences of one artist upon another. Marc Robinson, for instance, locates Shawn, Wellman, and Parks in a genealogy which descends matrilineally from Gertrude Stein's modernist aesthetic. Rather than focusing on the family tree of dramatic literature from which these four writers might spring, my study examines their plays in their contemporary New York City context from the mid 1980s to the late 90s. And while my concern is primarily with the dialogue between these plays and American culture, I will also discuss Shawn and Nagy's British careers. These two writers have, in effect, become so marginal in America that they have looked for (and found) production bases in England where they have subsequently built strong careers.

Within these parameters, the four writers of this study represent various degrees of opposition to realism and, as case studies, their plays model many of the deconstructive possibilities pursued by experimental dramatists. Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks belong to what Robinson describes as an alternative fabric of modern American drama: writers for whom "language, gesture, presence" are paramount.⁴ Their oneiric stage worlds disdain many components of linearity. Each of these writers bends, or breaks, realistic dramaturgical structures in her or his efforts to upend what they perceive as a non-productive form.

Capturing what a majority of audiences and scholars would term "realistic" is a

⁴Robinson, 3.

little like being one of the ten blind men attempting to describe an elephant. Before post-structuralism's unveiling, realism was often described as an objective rendering of reality, but today it is more likely to be described, at least by scholars, as that constellation of highly subjective criteria which make a play or a production seem to be a faithful copy of reality. Despite the amount of scholarship on the topic, from Raymond Williams to Jill Dolan, realism resists a clear definition. William Demastes writes, "The fact of the matter is, this term has a chameleon-like existence, changing colors at almost every turn and blending into a context appropriate to whatever needs a particular practitioner or critic deems appropriate for his or her goals."⁵

In order to draw some parameters of realism for my own study, I want to begin with a brief summary of its entrenched place in Anglo-American culture. Williams's discussion of the origins of naturalism and expressionism offers insight into why this form has so much power in Western culture. He describes how, from the 1870s through the 1890s, the period of *A Doll's House* and *Miss Julie*, naturalism arose as part of "a liberal revolt against orthodox liberalism . . . of bourgeois revolt against the forms of bourgeois society."⁶ Naturalism and its evolution into the more internally and psychologically focused form of realism, have their roots in bourgeois urban society.⁷

⁵William W. Demastes, "Preface: American Dramatic Realisms, Viable Frames of Thought" in *Realism and the American Tradition*, ed. William W. Demastes (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 9.

⁶Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968) 341.

⁷William W. Demastes and Michael Vanden Heuvel, "The Hurlyburly Lies of the Causalist Mind: Chaos and the Realism of Rabe and Shepard, in Realism" in *The American Dramatic Tradition*, ed. William W. Demastes, (Tuscaloosa: Univeristy of

Realism's family drama remains the most popular dramatic form in America. Feminist critics, such as Dolan, Elin Diamond, Catherine Belsey, and Alisa Solomon have analyzed realism's staying power out of their concerns with its gender limitations. As Diamond says, because realism "depends on, insists on a stability of reference, an objective world that is the source and guarantor of knowledge," it necessarily reaffirms the ideologically determined norms with which people live.⁸ Belsey also discusses how a realistic text's functions assure its opportunities to continue asserting its power.⁹ The text, literary or dramatic, interpellates the reader or spectator in numerous invisible ways (at least, the goal of realism is that its interpellations seem inevitable and natural). Under the pretext of the spectator judging the text's "truth," the spectator is actually judging "the coherent, non-contradictory interpretation of the world as it is perceived by an author whose autonomy is the source and evidence of the truth of the interpretation" (67). These illusions of autonomy make it difficult to see identity as conditioned, or constructed, by the network of ideological forces that feminists and other post-structuralists want to foreground. If these Foucaultian forces remain naturalized and invisible, then an individual could see herself as having a complete, autonomous, and unchanging identity without

Alabama Press, 1996), 255-274. "Zola's determinist requirements were informed by the dominant episteme of his age, of which Newtonian causation was a primary discourse. Naturalism has thus become a term associated with linear causality, which proceeds from a classical scientific assumption that small and large causes beget effects of value equal to their causes. For the naturalist, where one begins on this solid earth virtually foreordains where and how one will tread upon it" (255).

⁸Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 4-5.

⁹Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1980; London: Routledge, 1992), 67-75. All future citations will be quoted in the text.

challenge—and without the possibility for change. Belsey goes on to describe the relationship between realistic text and a spectator as a “model of intersubjective communication” in which the “shared understanding of a text which re-presents the world, is the guarantee not only of the truth of the text but of the reader’s existence as an autonomous and knowing subject in a world of knowing subjects” (68).

But, in the last five years or so, scholars have begun to reconsider the possibilities for realism. Demastes writes that the “charge that realism is a tyrant stems from the conclusion that realism is a structurally unambitious, homogenous, tunnel-visioned form, its every product churning out the same fundamental message and denying creation of a more open, pluralistic theatre.”¹⁰ Realism has come to be seen as catering only to already visible identities and values, largely those of a middle-class heterosexual family structure. While I do not agree with the extreme position which rejects realism completely, neither do I find myself in sync with other scholars, like Brian Richardson, who advocate for realism’s continuing powers of social amelioration.

Richardson suggests that realism can individualize representations which the dominant culture captures only as stereotype. He comments that “it should be noted that the compelling power of realism is and always has been its ability to expose and demystify impoverished and inaccurate worldviews.”¹¹ His discussion of older realistic plays, like *A Raisin in the Sun*, seems sound and points to the importance of historicizing productions;

¹⁰Demastes, “Preface,” in *Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition*, ix.

¹¹Brian Richardson, “Introduction: The Struggle for the Real— Interpretive Conflict, Dramatic Method, and the Paradox of Realism” in *Realism and The American Dramatic Tradition*, 3.

Raisin in the Sun, he argues, had the power to deepen the sense of African American characters who had rarely been allowed to take center stage as specific individuals in a highly visible commercial arena.

Certainly, the production history of *Raisin in the Sun* attests to its cultural importance. Robert Nemiroff, editor of the twenty-fifth anniversary republication, reminds readers that the Broadway production was the first play by “a black (young and unknown) woman, to be directed, moreover, by another unknown black ‘first,’ in a theater where black audiences virtually did not exist—and where, in the entire history of the American stage, there had never been a serious *commercially successful* black drama!”¹² Since that time, however, the black matriarch, Mama, has been subsumed by a stereotypical version of herself. The stereotype is so powerful that it drew George C. Wolfe’s parodic fire in *The Colored Museum* (1985). In “The Last Mama-on-the-Couch Play” section, Wolfe explodes Mama-as-stereotype and critiques the domestic realism of *Raisin in the Sun* as insufficient, at present, to accurately represent the complexities of African American lives. The Narrator announces the segment by saying “We are pleased to bring you yet another Mama-on-the-Couch play. A searing domestic drama that tears at the very fabric of racist America.”¹³ Wolfe’s parody indicates that classic realism may no longer be the most effective way to voice marginal critiques of a dominant white culture because individual characters can be easily contained by stereotyping them.

¹²Robert Nemiroff, “Foreword,” in *A Raisin in the Sun, Unabridged 25th Anniversary Edition and The Sign in Sydney Brustein’s Window*, by Lorraine Hansberry (New York: Random House, 1987), x.

¹³George C. Wolfe, *The Colored Museum*, in *New Plays USA* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1988), 205.

With contemporary audiences' increasing sophistication about representational styles (fostered by postmodern debunkings of any style which purports to be the truthful copy of nature), it may be more difficult for realistic and individualistic characterizations to have the same kind of revelatory impact. In addition, while realism remains ubiquitous, it may have lost some of its subversive power. As Williams notes, when a form such as realism becomes separated from its original impulses, becoming a conventional style rather than a deliberately chosen genre, its cultural function shifts. If Hansberry's *Mama* no longer has the same impact on mainstream audiences as she originally did, Parks's welfare mother of five, Hester, from her recent play, *In the Blood* (December 1999), seems to hit a nerve with audiences at the Public Theater. Hester is caught in the vise of her own poor choices (having five illegitimate children) and the Woyzeck-like social forces bearing down on her. She is, to some degree, a contemporary reworking of the individual known as "Mama" in *Raisin in the Sun*, but wrestling with social institutions, she has no rest upon—nor does she even own—a sofa.

Yet, as I will discuss in my conclusion, *In the Blood* is the first of Parks's plays to incorporate a quotidian and conventional causality. Scholars with various points of view on realism all describe credible causality as an essential component of realistic representation. Richardson, for instance, comments that "a key category of both the apperception of the world and of realist aesthetics is that of causality. The hidden source of the strength of realism's appeal is that it accurately reproduces the same canon of probability that also governs everyday existence."¹⁴ He helpfully foregrounds this idea

¹⁴This and subsequent quotation from Richardson, 9.

with the historical context in which realism was born to disavow the “excessive ‘happy coincidences’ that vitiated both romantic plays and nineteenth-century melodrama,” and is, therefore, a form entwined with the appearance of everyday causality.

David Rabe, a playwright who pushes at traditional theatrical boundaries and quarrels with the limitations of what may be considered credible causality, critiques precisely this aspect of realism. In realistic work, he writes, “one thing leads to another in a rational, mechanical way, a kind of Newtonian clock of a play, a kind of Darwinian assemblage of detail which would then determine the details that must follow, the substitution of the devices of logic for the powerful sweeps of pattern and energy that is our lives.”¹⁵ For the purposes of this study, I believe that, at present, dramatic realism encompasses the highly verisimilitudinous “superrealistic” plays such as David Mamet’s early work or Franz Xaver Kroetz’s texts and the highly theatrical, less probable constructions, such as those in David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*.¹⁶

In addition to the closed predetermined quality of realism, I suggest that, even with these loose parameters, realism can be recognized primarily by its desire to render its own constructedness invisible. It is the authoritative text, raising no questions its own form cannot answer, that creates a tightly knit affirmation of an individual spectator’s stable sense of reality. In turn, that static set of givens guarantees the tenacious and naturalized presence of this form in Western culture.

However, these same efforts to conceal its own constructedness also render the

¹⁵David Rabe, “Afterword,” in *HurlyBurly* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 259.

¹⁶I am indebted to Brian Richardson for introducing the term “superealism” and offering the examples mentioned above.

connection between dramatic realism and cultural reality a target for late twentieth-century subversive theatrical strategies. As I will show in each chapter, Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks practice just such subversions. For example, when Nagy's highly dysfunctional family drama, *Butterfly Kiss* (1994), turns out to be an anti-thriller tale of matricide, domestic drama is made to dance to new tunes. How do these writers stretch the boundaries of what Diamond describes as "permissible visibility"?¹⁷ Do they push the boundaries of cultural dialogue about constructions of gender or race? Do these dramaturgies make visible provocatively transgressive bodies?¹⁸ If so, what are the possibilities created by these new ways of seeing sexuality, gender, and ethnicity? Production histories and reception research informs my discussions of how these plays may function in society. By looking at press releases, published photographs, reviews, and theatre location, for instance, I will lay out some of the factors that contribute to the multiple readings audiences generate upon seeing these plays in performance.

In addition to production and reception research, I will employ a number of different theoretical methods to read productions from several vantage points. M. M. Bakhtin is one of the major theorists whose ideas enable me to offer answers to the questions I have raised. His contributions to an understanding of the complex cultural and political possibilities of language speak tellingly about all the texts I am examining.

¹⁷Diamond, 85.

¹⁸Rebecca Schneider, "See the Big Show: Spiderwoman Theater Doubling Back," in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, ed. Lynda Hart & Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 227-255. Schneider discusses Spiderwoman's performances, and she talks about how the performers' large, middle-aged, Native American bodies boldly cross cultural expectations about the appropriate way for a woman to present herself.

Bakhtin's own history reveals a great deal about his ideas. His work started to become widely available in this country in 1968 when *Rabelais and his World* was first translated into English.¹⁹ Since then, American scholars have discovered new frameworks for a variety of disciplines within Bakhtin's writings. As Helene Keyssar notes, Bakhtin's ideas have been incorporated and addressed by everyone from feminists to Marxists, anti-Marxists, linguists, cultural studies scholars, literary critics, and philosophers; his work offers them all a lens focusing on the external powers constituting identity and popular rebellions against those forces.²⁰ It is important to remember that he wrote his theoretical and literary texts during the Stalinist years of the Soviet Union. Michael Holquist makes the historicizing point that Bakhtin began writing about novels only after 1934, suggesting that when Bakhtin wrote *Rabelais and His World* he was responding directly to the strictures of Stalin's dictates about Social Realism. Bakhtin was:

proposing his vision of the novel genre as a celebration of linguistic and stylistic variety as a counter to tight canonical formulas for the novel (and for other areas and even media, such as films or painting) proposed by official spokesmen for the Soviet government. The 'grotesque realism' of which so much is made in this book [*Rabelais and His World*] is a point-by-point inversion of categories used in the thirties to define Socialist Realism.²¹

The four writers in this study have been chosen largely because of their own dramaturgical

¹⁹Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (1968, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Reprint. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

²⁰Helene Keyssar, "Drama and the Dialogic Imagination: *The Heidi Chronicles* and *Fefu and Her Friends*," in *Feminist Theatre and Theory*, ed. Helene Keyssar (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 109.

²¹Michael Holquist, "Prologue," in *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), xvii.

inversions. In my argument, I propose that they are turning upside-down the conventions of contemporary American realism, a form that has come, in a large degree, to possess the unofficial imprimature of America's dominant, conservative culture.

Much of what I see as subversive in the plays of this study comes within the rubric of Bakhtin's ideas of "the carnivalesque." I am particularly indebted to Russo (*The Female Grotesque*), and Stallybrass and White, whose book, *The Politics & Poetics of Transgression*, has provided me with an important model for examining cultural events with a Bakhtinian focus on the "socially peripheral" that is also "symbolically central."²² Stallybrass and White incorporate recent critiques of Bakhtin's utopian notion of carnival's revolutionary power to invert hierarchies. In addition, Russo addresses scholars, like Juliet Mitchell, who question Bakhtin's utopian hopes for carnival as a site of social change. Mitchell writes that, "You cannot choose the imaginary, the semiotic, the carnival as an alternative to the law. It is set up by the law precisely in its own ludic space, its area of imaginary alternative, but not as a symbolic alternative."²³ To a large degree, I feel Mitchell's critique is accurate; indeed, many Bakhtinian scholars find his vision, of a revolutionary power manifesting itself in the carnivalesque, unduly idealistic and universalizing. I do not feel, however, as Mitchell does, that the carnival space is solely contained and controlled by "the law," and, therefore, never functions as a space in which change can begin. Rather, my position resembles those of Russo, Stallybrass,

²²Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics & Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 5.

²³Juliet Mitchell, *Women, the Longest Revolution: Essays in Feminism, Literature and Psycho-analysis* (London: Virago, 1984), 291.

White, Keyssar, and Laura Mulvey, who see the possibilities for and the containing of the ludic eruptions described by Bakhtin.

As Mulvey has articulated it, the space of the carnivalesque is neither revolutionary nor completely contained by the dominant hierarchy. The carnivalesque is “rather an intermediate that hovers on the threshold . . . the terrain in which desire nearly finds expression, in which stuff (magra) is repressed by the dominant political culture, and in which the psycho-analytical structures of society erupt into gesture.”²⁴ Gestures do matter and can contain the seeds of change, whether the gestures are those of the Black Power movement in the 1960s or the shirtless group of Dykes on Bikes who have participated in New York City’s lesbian and gay parade since its inception. Also, as with the yearly conflict over whether the lesbian and gay Irish groups can participate in the St. Patrick’s Day parade reveals, these carnivalesque ludic spaces empower certain ways in which society constructs itself and rations out power. Stallybrass and White point out that “transgressing the rules of hierarchy and order in any one of the domains [psychic forms, the human body, geographical space and the social order] may have major consequences in the others.” I suggest that in small theaters, in classrooms, occasionally in film, and always on the page, Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks contribute to transgressions in all these domains.

Stallybrass and White also describe the carnivalesque as that which “mediates” between the classical body and its repressed Others, “what it excludes to create its identity

²⁴Laura Mulvey, “Changes,” *Discourse* 7 (Fall 1985): 28.

as such.”²⁵ Russo describes the Bakhtinian image of the classical body as one that is “monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism.”²⁶ Its Other, the grotesque body, “is the open, protruding, extending, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change.” In the social process of negotiation power,

discourses about the body have a privileged role, for transcodings between different levels and sectors of social and psychic reality are effected through the intensifying grid of the body. It is no accident, then, that transgressions and the attempt to control them obsessively return to somatic symbols, for these are ultimate elements of social classification itself.²⁷

Stallybrass and White applied Bakhtin’s attention to somatic symbols in their explorations of nineteenth century bourgeois hysteria, and, in a similar vein, I am exploring how these four writers challenge American bourgeois discourses as they are embodied by realistic theatrical conventions.

The four experimental writers selected for this study seem to see stage realism as a closed classical body, or perhaps, a preserved corpse. Realism’s tight lines of causality and contained resolution can be compared to the properly proportioned, beautiful and static, classical sculpture. This tension between the classical and the grotesquely excessive body runs through all of the plays addressed in the dissertation. This trope can

²⁵Stallybrass and White, 26.

²⁶This and subsequent citation from Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 63.

²⁷As Stallybrass, White, and subsequent scholars make clear, Bakhtin’s approaches to the binaries of high/low and to carnival as revolutionary have been complicated by later scholars. His more absolute, and perhaps naive, ideas need not be an impediment to working with his productive critiques of cultural resistance.

be seen in Shawn's presentation of a masculine hysteric in *The Designated Mourner* as opposed to a normative contained masculine identity. The dialectical tension appears, as well, with Parks's *Venus*, a play that quite literally revolves around a black character's oversized and discernibly artificial posterior. The "properly proportioned" white Bride-to-Be ultimately performs her side-show opposite, masquerading as Venus. She wears a gorilla-like mask and faux Venus-buttocks to embody "The Wild-Thing," in a representation of the physically excessive Venus.

I will focus on the way these plays' central characters inhabit Bakhtin's carnivalesque bodies. The body of Rabelasian grotesque realism, as Bakhtin articulated it, is "always in process, it is always becoming, it is a mobile and hybrid creature, disproportionate, exorbitant, outgrowing all limits, obscenely decentred and off-balance, a figural and symbolic resource for parodic exaggeration and inversion."²⁸ This grotesque hybridity materializes in many different shapes and in all degrees of textual subtlety in my observations about bodies and gender in this study. The most subtly carnivalesque of the transgressive characters discussed in this study is Jack, the anti-hero at the center of Shawn's most recent work, *The Designated Mourner*. However, Jack's grotesquery insinuates itself quite slowly, even delicately, over the course of the play. At the other extreme, Wellman's Monster-Narrator announces itself almost entirely in the corporeal terms of a Bakhtinian grotesque: "At times I felt as though I possessed a tail. At times I felt as if I were a tail. . . . Nowadays it is difficult for me even to turn around so I cannot be sure whether I possess a tail, or am one" (2).

²⁸Stallybrass and White, 9.

All of these bodies “becoming” raises questions about representations of gender and sexual identification as cultural constructions. Suzan-Lori Parks’s figures also resist boundaries while challenging ideas of the body’s classical (normative) limits; Miss Miss, the daughter in *Pickling*, keeps her memories and various parts of her mother in pickling jars. The character Venus refuses to stay put in her historically confined identity. Her genitals have long been preserved in formaldehyde in the Musee de L’Homme in Paris, but Venus takes center stage to insist on being seen and heard. Like these other writers in my study, Parks asks for no quarter from audiences in presenting her uncontainable characters, and she gives no quarter with regard to the stage time, narrative space, and dignity she demands on their behalf. In a more celebratory note, Phyllis Nagy’s writing offers hybrid grotesques (particularly with regard to sexual identification and gender) and dramaturgical explosions of form to make room for those figures. In *The Strip* and *Weldon Rising*, in particular, Nagy presses audiences to identify with unconventional lesbian, gay, and transexual characters (unconventional even within the conventions of lesbian and gay writing) who people her darkly comic imaginings as heroines and heros.

Given the unruly ludic forms created by each of the four playwrights, it is important to briefly articulate why Bakhtin took such a closed attitude to what he considered theater’s prescriptive artifice. Keyssar’s article discusses Bakhtin’s “Drama and the Dialogic Imagination,” in which he articulates his critique of theater as monological, as being locked into a single point of view. Keyssar teases out Bakhtin’s complaints about theater and his celebrations of so many aspects of the novel, particularly those novelistic qualities that might be defined as theatrical. She comes to see that, “What

Bakhtin demands is no less than that we rethink what it means to accept a still-prevalent Aristotelian understanding of drama, and then, to query both the accuracy and the virtues—politically, socially, aesthetically—of the Aristotelian model.” Keyssar points out that Bakhtin’s critique of the classical model centers around the unities, which come together in *The Poetics* as the Unity of Plot. She suggests that Bakhtin was repelled by Aristotle’s exhortations to writers to avoid the episodic: “that which is neither probable nor necessary to the essential structural elements of peripeteia and anagnorisis (reversal of fortune and discovery),” and instead to focus on “an action that is complete in itself.”²⁹ Unity, above all, is Aristotle’s prescription. Keyssar concludes that Bakhtin’s sense of drama, therefore, was formed by this notion of forced unification, a structure which would overcome dialogic oppositions, and, therefore, could not voice the polyphony he sees in Rabelais’ work.

The closed nature of the Aristotelian form, as Bakhtin seems to have understood it, makes it impossible for the theater to possess “dialogism, unfinalisability, linguistic diversity, the persistence of ‘loopholes’ of meaning,” that he sees in the multi-voiced novel. Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks’s dramaturgical revisions of realism indicate that they might agree with Bakhtin’s criticism of a monological authoritative theater.

Holquist sums up Bakhtin’s desire for the productive messiness of life by commenting that “‘the novel’ is the name Bakhtin gives to whatever force is at work within a given literary system to reveal the limits, the artificial constraints of that

²⁹This and the subsequent two citations from Keyssar, 111-2.

system.”³⁰ To novelise, then, adds “an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openedness, a living contact with unfinished still-evolving contemporary reality (the opened present).”³¹ These novelising qualities give the plays I will discuss much of their impact.

In order to explore what transgressive identities take the stages in these writers’ worlds, I would like to foreground the strategies of embodiment they employ. When I bring Bakhtin’s theoretical critiques together with feminist writing by such scholars as Dolan, Kate Davy, Diamond, Peggy Phelan, Lynda Hart, and other performance theorists whose work addresses the female body in performance, I am able to foreground the gender questions generated by the mobile and hybrid bodies examined in this study.³² Diamond’s writing, for instance, on the process of a feminist Brechtian historicization offers specific ideas to complicate our understanding of dramaturgical transgressions. In combination with other critiques of race and ethnicity, these theoretical lenses frame a series of questions about how power, society, and desire intersect in the marginalized

³⁰Michael Holquist, “Introduction,” in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), xxix.

³¹*Ibid.*, 131.

³²I draw primarily from the theoretical concerns of feminist and cultural studies scholars who combine Bakhtin’s pre-feminist ideas with contemporary feminist concerns of gender, power, and identity. These neo-Bakhtinians include Helene Keyssar, Mary Russo, Peter Stallybrass, Allon White, Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, Katerina Clark, and Michael Holquist, among others. Keyssar and Russo, in particular, have addressed much of the gender-blindness found in Bakhtin’s writings. While there are important feminist critiques of Bakhtin’s obliviousness to gender, his theories of hybridity and the carnivalesque are important for my explorations of the four writers’ plays. Both Mary Russo’s *The Female Grotesque* (New York: Routledge, 1994), and Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow’s collection, *A Dialogue of Voices: Feminist Literary Theory and Bakhtin*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), offer introductions to feminists’ criticisms and productive adaptations of Bakhtin’s theories.

bodies present in my discussions of specific productions. Do these dramaturgies liberate what Rebecca Schneider calls Spiderwoman's celebratory "inappropriate" bodies? If so, what are the cultural possibilities created by these new ways of seeing in the fringe "theatron"?

Each writer uses novel physical scenarios and images to depict their unconventional characters' processes of becoming. A play's physicality may generate resistance to coherent realistic characterization by supporting performance styles which make use of flatness, alienation, and a self-conscious sense of performativity. As I will discuss, the negative reviews Foreman's production of *Venus* received speak to Americans' unfamiliarity with a distancing and overtly presentational style.

As part of their deconstructions of gender, these writers also rely upon strategies of absence, dismemberment, and dislocation. Plays like Nagy's *Disappeared* and Parks's *The America Play* gather much of their force around questions of corporeal presence and absence. I believe that the body is an even more than usually significant sign for these writers. As the language and narratives of their plays can be confusing, either through novelty or opacity, their plays rely upon the body as a matrix of signification to guide audiences through their nonlinear, nontraditional dramaturgies. The premiere production of Shawn's *The Designated Mourner*, for instance, manipulates conventions of what a character's on stage presence indicates. Throughout, three conversing characters seem quite alive; it is only toward the end of the evening, as two of the three exit the stage, that it becomes clear that they have been "dead" the entire play. In Nagy's *Disappeared*, a fraught absence takes center stage as a mystery-manqué swirls around how and why a

young woman has vanished. Did she miraculously “walk on air,” as the suspected murderer suggests, escaping into a dematerialized realm of possibility, or, is her absence the signifier of her death?³³ Nagy’s plays often implode “reality” into what may be utopian possibilities. With *Weldon Rising*, for instance, the temperature in New York City seems to respond to a gay-bashing murder with a rapidly rising mercury: from 120 degrees to 140 degrees and, finally, with the Brooklyn Bridge melting and cars levitating, 200 degrees. The audience sees the dead rise, lesbians make love on stage, and a gay character exits to his fate by breaking through the map-backdrop upstage. What, if anything, is to follow?

While not necessarily explaining what follows the destabilizing theatrical gestures of these works, their characters can also be articulated through what scholars like Linda Hutcheon, Marvin Carlson, and Michael Vanden Heuvel have come to describe as postmodern double-coding. Carlson, quoting Vanden Heuvel, characterizes this as a doubleness that “consciously juxtaposes elements, idioms and functions ‘to create ironic and transformative space between them.’”³⁴ This kind of double-coding occurs when familiar generic conventions are interpolated, deformed, and subverted. In *Deathtraps*, Carlson offers excellent examples of postmodern deformations of the genre of comedy thrillers. He discusses how the detective dramas of the 1970s and 80s “emphasized such postmodern concerns as self-reflexivity, epistemological incertitude, and subversion of

³³Phyllis Nagy, *Disappeared*, in *Plays: I* (Great Britain: Methuen Drama, 1998), 176.

³⁴This and subsequent citation from Marvin Carlson, *Deathtraps: The Postmodern Comedy Thriller* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 11-12.

traditional codes (both within the performance and governing its relationship with the audience).”

Much like this definition of a space created by double-coding, Bakhtin’s term, “dialogical,” describes a post-positivist modern conditional world in which meaning is contextual. This same “dialogical” tension lies at the heart of all of the texts and the characters in this study. Clark and Holquist have a useful description of Bakhtin’s sense of dialogical: “a word, discourse, language, or culture undergoes ‘dialogization’ when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same thing.”³⁵ These qualities of de-privileged self-awareness are the very ones realism strives to suppress. Nagy, Parks, Shawn, and Wellman regard realistic structures as one of the competing definitions for what is “true” and “real” to them. By double-coding realistic conventions, they open up transformative spaces for their characters. In an interestingly perverse approach, for example, Shawn’s *The Fever* and *Aunt Dan and Lemon* double back on the traditionally dolorous structure of dramatic jeremiads, those moral tales meant to shame the hearers. Shawn writes purposefully failed jeremiads which undo, rather than uphold, clear delineations of morality. Instead, these works create troubling slippage around what seemed to be narrators’ authoritative (as in, endowed by the author’s point of view) moral centers. In doing so, Shawn prods viewers to look for ways to renegotiate their positions with regard to these narratives.

Vanden Heuvel’s *Performing Drama/Dramatizing Performance: Alternative*

³⁵Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (London: Harvard University Press, 1984), 31.

Theater and the Dramatic Text introduces new models for examining the apparent structural messiness that characterizes unruly dramaturgies. Vanden Heuvel offers perspectives borrowed from physics, and he articulates ways in which theatre scholars can bring the nonlinear systems dynamics of quantum physics to bear on chaotic-seeming postmodern narratives.³⁶ Vanden Heuvel points out that it is important to embrace the creative aspects of chaos; positive possibilities have sometimes been masked by the unsettling aspects of deconstructed indeterminacy. I suggest that the audiences who regularly attend the productions of Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks have also been pushed to integrate ways of experiencing the positive potential of non-traditional dramatic structures.

In their pursuit of these new chaotic-seeming possibilities, each of these authors creates texts deemed difficult enough that they are rarely produced above 14th Street.³⁷ They are all “downtown” writers, and their plays are very much of an experimental arts culture. Even when they are seen in a small midtown theater, as on those occasions when Wellman’s work is produced at Primary Stages, these plays make such unusual demands upon spectators that many audiences balk. While Nagy now resides in Europe, this is a New York City centered study, and I will set the stage by delineating the circles and hierarchy of theaters specific to New York in the period from 1985 to 1997.

³⁶Michael Vanden Heuvel, *Performing Drama/Dramatizing Performance: Alternative Theater and the Dramatic Text* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 90.

³⁷New York City is divided into many distinctive neighborhoods, and “below 14th” designates a downtown location with art, the avant-garde, some homosexual communities, and cheap tiny experimental theater.

Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks are, of course, representative of a large range of experimental writers working in the 80s and 90s. Writers as different as Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw (*Belle Reprieve*), Paula Vogel (*How I Learned to Drive*), Len Jenkin (*American Notes*), Eric Overmyer (*On the Verge*), Marlene Meyer (*Moe's Lucky Seven*), Ellen McLaughlin (*Iphigenia and Other Daughters*), Donald Margulies (*The Loman Family Picnic*), David Greenspan (*II Samuel*), Holly Hughes (*The Well of Horniness*), Tina Howe (*Museum*), Charles Ludlum (*Bluebeard*), Jeff Jones (*Seventy Scenes of Halloween*), and Jeff Weiss (*Hot Keys*) among others, might all be considered colleagues in this grouping of marginal writers who create inventive and subversive dramaturgies.³⁸ But, the artists I selected have a number of advantages for the goals of this study. Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks have all come from an impoverished fly-by-the-seat-of-the-pants tradition of experimental work, and they have all moved on to larger production opportunities while maintaining their dramaturgical subversiveness.

When selecting writers, I looked for those for whom playwriting remains primary and who continue to produce plays regularly. Among the larger group above, writers such as Jones, Weiss, Overmyer, and Greenspan no longer devote most of their energy to playwriting. Several of them are primarily engaged with acting careers, while others have shifted their attention to television. Indeed, many writers in this era have changed their focus from theater to other media, where they can earn a living. Overmyer, for instance,

³⁸I recognize that discussing only American playwrights constructs an arbitrary boundary separating out British playwrights. Caryl Churchill, for instance, also had significant New York city productions during this period. I leave a discussion of the cross-pollination of British experimental dramatists and American writers to another time.

writes for television's popular show, *Homicide, Life on the Streets*.

Writers whose early work seems quite unconventional, such as Howe and Margulies, often move into the mainstream by shifting to a more accessible, and perhaps less radically critical, realistic work. Howe's first widely produced play was the three character realistic piece, *Painting Churches*, and she has continued to succeed with the memory play, *Pride's Crossing*. Similarly, while Margulies's less conventional earlier works had been produced at prestigious theaters like Manhattan Theatre Club, it was not until *Sight Unseen*, his most straightforwardly realistic work, that he had commercial success. The play ran for seven months Off-Broadway in 1992 and was second only to David Mamet's *Oleanna* in new American plays given regional theater productions in the 1993-94 season.³⁹ Similarly, Vogel continues to play with theatrical form, when she manipulates time sequences in *How I Learned to Drive*, for instance, but her work remains primarily narrative and accessible to mainstream audiences in ways that Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks's do not. Writers like Marlene Meyer and Ellen McLaughlin, on the other hand, tend to be produced in the Off and Off-Off-Broadway by producers like the Women's Project, whose budgets are several steps up from the studio theaters below 14th Street, but this scale of production rarely generates longer runs or significant press interest.

The careers of lesbian and gay artists such as Weaver, Shaw, Ludlum, and Hughes, are also successful, but their visibility exists primarily within their subcultural circles.

³⁹Jan Herman, "Since 'Unseen,' a Higher Visibility," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 December 1995, Orange County Edition.

Hughes's career, for instance, was nurtured in the lesbian community and WOW Theater, while Ludlum self-produced work in his company's own space, The Ridiculous Theater. In this way, these artists created and stayed within a certain gay and gay-friendly niche, a theater in and about the gay community that psychologically and geographically surrounds them. None of the writers selected for this study have as clearly delineated an audience, nor do they have their own theater spaces. While Nagy's plays, for instance, often address lesbian and gay issues, and have been produced by specifically lesbian organizations like London's Gay Sweatshop, her work also appears at the better-known Royal Court Theater. The career mobility of the four writers selected gives me a chance to see the gradations of dramaturgical experimentation in a variety of theatrical and cultural frames.

What was happening theatrically in New York City while these four writers were making their way up various ladders of theater production? Issues of race and ethnicity garnered increasing stage time, as writers like George C. Wolfe (*The Colored Museum*), Migdalia Cruz (*Miriam's Flower*), Jose Rivera (*Marisol*), and Milcha Sanchez-Scott (*Roosters*) were produced Off-Broadway, and Hwang's *M. Butterfly* had a successful run on Broadway. Previously unacceptable sexual material was incorporated into commercially successful works, like *How I Learned to Drive* at The Vineyard Theater (1996), which dealt with a loving portrait of a child molester, or Theresa Rebeck's *Loose Knit* at Second Stage Theater (1993), about sexual harassment and a woman's politically incorrect passion for her harasser. While musicals dominated a thriving Broadway, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America, A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1993-4) marked a growing mainstream familiarity with AIDS and homosexuality. His shows proved that

there were Broadway ticket-buyers who would go to see hours of dramaturgically complex and politically challenging gay leftist theater.

I will briefly discuss a significant Off-Broadway production during this period that characterizes some of the cultural tensions of the moment. David Mamet's *Oleanna* (1992) and its commercial success reveals some of the underlying tensions around feminist progress and multicultural advances in many social arenas. Mamet directed and produced *Oleanna* at the Orpheum Theater, a small space in the East Village area of New York.

Oleanna is the story of a male college professor who is accused of sexual harassment by one of his female students who initially came to his office for help. The student, Carol, ruins his chance at tenure, and her claims threaten his livelihood and family. In the play's second act, the audience sees her pressuring the professor, John, to remove from his reading list all texts that her female supporters, her "group," rejects. When John realizes that he is ruined, he physically beats Carol. This physical attack often inspired audience members to cheer John's actions. Mary McCann, the second actress to play Carol in the original production, was leaving the theater after a performance but became so frightened by audience members shouting "Bitch" that she ran back inside.⁴⁰ In his article on *Oleanna*, Marc Silverstein discusses the play's gendered cultural conservatism as resonating with:

large sections of the middle class who, buffeted by rapidly shifting economic and social winds, seek an explanation for the crisis that does not call into question the political/economic order from which it has derived its well-being. When this audience responds positively to Carol's beating, it reads the violence less as an act

⁴⁰This and subsequent citation from Marc Silverstein, "'We're Just Human': *Oleanna* and Cultural Crisis," *South Atlantic Review* 60, no. 2 (May 1995), 103 and 113.

of aggression than as a form of defense. . . .

The play is fundamentally anti-feminist, perhaps even misogynistic, and its profitable run reveals the selling power of paranoia about the changes feminism has wrought. *Oleana* serves as a useful touchstone reminding us of the national sensibility, for, as noted earlier, Mamet's play was the single most produced play of the regional theaters in their 1993-4 season. It is true that, as a two character single-set play, *Oleana* had great budgetary inducements for the regional theaters, but, they would not have produced the play in such numbers had it not struck chords with them, their boards of directors, and their audiences.

Defining the mainstream theater of that almost-millennial decade also requires looking at commercial theater. The heart of mainstream commercial theater in this country is Broadway. In this era, Broadway was dominated by musical spectaculars and a few dramatic works that transferred from large, Off-Broadway, not-for-profit theaters such as the Manhattan Theater Club, Second Stage, and Lincoln Center Theater. For purposes of this study, when I refer to mainstream theater I am gesturing to the profitable (even if not-for-profit) circle of theater which has Broadway as its hub.

The high prices and international audiences of Broadway shows demand that most of its productions materialize as visually accessible entertainment packages. This is by no means to say that productions on Broadway, or in Off-Broadway theaters looking for hit shows, are necessarily any less compelling than those pieces running for sixteen performances on an equity-waver contract at a studio theater downtown.⁴¹ Nor, as is

⁴¹Equity-waver contracts are those made between low-budget showcase production which pay actors only carfare, charge less than \$12 for tickets, and play to audiences of fewer than ninety-nine. If the productions run past sixteen performances, the

clear from my discussion of *Oleanna*, am I arguing that plays produced in small theaters in the East Village are necessarily radical simply because the theaters are hard to find, their ticket prices are cheap, and beer is sold from a temporary bar in the lobby. There are, however, interesting socio-economic differences between how challenging downtown theater functions as distinct from a more conventional uptown theater, with its producers looking for clear narratives and an authoritative sense of how to interpret those narratives.

With the exceptions of musical revues like *Fosse* or *It Aint Nothin' But the Blues* (running in the fall of 1999) Broadway producers prefer a well-told story. In addition, the mainstream market demands a clear selling point for each show, a recognizable commodity. This commercial hook may be a star, like Lauren Bacall in Noel Coward's *Waiting in the Wings* (2000), whose presence on stage functions as a reliable brand marking, or a spectacle, as in *Miss Saigon* (1991), or any other clearly marked attribute that audiences can predictably appreciate and comprehend. As the works of the experimental writers of this study suggest, avant-garde texts tend to be less focused on deep character development and are, therefore, less appealing projects for stars. It is not that Nagy would be uninterested in seeing Drew Barrymore in her play, *Girl Bar*, for instance, just that it is unlikely ever to be an option.

Interestingly, despite the preponderance of musicals, August Wilson's single-set, small cast, character-driven plays, like *The Piano Lesson* (1987), were able to find homes on Broadway even without major star appeal. The fact that so many of his plays moved from Yale Repertory Theater to Broadway houses is a testament to both Wilson's writing

producers must renegotiate with Equity to a more expensive contract.

and to the institutional power of an important regional theater. Lloyd Richards, Wilson's director and collaborator, was, for most of this period, the Artistic Director of Yale Repertory Theater. During the 1980s and 90s, they brought four productions to Broadway. Wilson's plays were quite accessible, in terms of linear narratives and realistic characterization, but they also pushed the usual limits of realistic causality to a significant degree. Their tendency towards a kind of magic realism often drew the ire of critics, who seemed to feel that Wilson had simply not written the plays well enough to solve certain dramaturgical difficulties.

These were the same years when older white theater artists and critics could be heard complaining, as Robert Brustein does in his discussion of one of the NEA crises, that the arts had lost sight of "excellence" under a barrage of multiculturalism and political correctness. He discusses how the NEA used to dispense funds based solely on "artistic quality regardless (rather than *because*) of color, sex, ethnicity, or creed. . . ."⁴² Brustein then goes on to describe how

excellence was a goal toward which any talented person could strive, and it was considered the function of government, rather than the obligation of the arts, to foster the social conditions that would help all qualified people attain it. Today this concept is under general attack as racist, elitist, or discriminatory by those who have substituted relative values for absolute standards.

While Brustein has, upon several occasions, criticized Wilson's reliance upon what he sees as an old-fashioned realism, one that functions as if the absolutes of a pre-Newtonian world were true, he is happy to espouse an absolute "excellence." Excellence, like the

⁴²This and the subsequent quotation from Robert Brustein, *Reimagining American Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991), 262.

previously described idea of objectivity, has very much been complicated by greater insight into how subjective its criteria turn out to be.

Of course, objectivity has little to do with what makes a production successful or not. The power of audiences' complex subjective attitudes is highlighted by an experiment created specifically to bring less populist, more demanding theater pieces to Broadway during this period. Starting in 1990, Rocco Landesman and the Jujamcyn producers sponsored the experimental Alliance agreement to allow regional theaters to bring productions to Broadway houses at lower costs (through special union contracts) and to sell tickets at a top price of \$45, as opposed to the \$60-100 tickets for regular Broadway productions.⁴³ The financial costs to mounting a Broadway production have risen by roughly 350 to 400 percent since 1987.⁴⁴ At these exponentially increasing costs, Broadway has proved less than hospitable to many dramas. The Alliance contract seemed like an excellent solution to this financial pressure, but its largely unsuccessful track record reveals the iron grip of theater-as-entertainment-product and consumers' commodity fetish psychology.⁴⁵ While individual production quality affected the track record of Alliance shows, it seems clear that to many ticket-buyers cheaper tickets meant that the shows

⁴³Internet Source: "Labor, management and the creative crafts, by agreeing to salary, royalty or manpower reductions and with concessions from theatre operations, producers and suppliers, they have created a plan wherein plays may be capitalized for \$750,000 with production costs not to exceed \$610,000. . . . The plan designates only certain Broadway Theatres."

⁴⁴Alison Stateman, "Les Miserables? Revitalizing Broadway," *Tactics* (Internet Magazine), 2.

⁴⁵Jim Barnett, "Broadway is Facing Serious Doom," *New York Times*, 9 January 1998.

were literally “not worth as much” as the full-price productions. This psychological barrier is important to keep in mind as a component of the cultural distinctions drawn between downtown and uptown theaters. Because small-budget productions are restricted to charging only \$12 a ticket, they may well suffer the cultural prejudice that they must not be worth very much.

Despite the prejudice against these lower cost productions, Terrence McNally’s *Master Class* (1996) was one of the rare commercial successes of the Alliance. Less than seven years after this effort to bring more straight plays to Broadway, the Disneyfication of Times Square, (with *Beauty and the Beast*, 1994, and the marketing juggernaut of Julie Taymor’s *The Lion King*, 1997) has transformed both the area and the nature of doing business on Broadway. With its vertically integrated marketing and product lines, Disney overwhelms many other producing organizations.

Even as Broadway boomed with cartoons and revivals, the 1980 and 90s were also an era of harder times for many not-for-profit theaters. During these years Republicans recognized that Democrats could be made vulnerable around the tax-dollars given to provocative work. Government grants began to disappear. As private businesses turned their grant-giving from the arts (too controversial) to areas such as education and health, theaters found their funds dwindling. The financial exigencies of experimental theater in this country pressure artists. There are great rewards in larger production opportunities: reaching larger audiences, ample budgets for productions, and a writer’s own scale of remuneration. All of these factors may induce writers to adjust their styles and topics to move their work into the mainstream.

In these years, many Americans seemed to eschew Great Society policies in favor of states rights, NRA members' rights, and the general rights of the wealthy. As the 1996 United States Census Bureau information reveals, the four lower quintiles, or fifths, of households found their aggregate income levels decrease from 1987 to 1997.⁴⁶ The top quintile, and in particular, the top five percent of that highest quintile of household income holders had an increase in their aggregate incomes over this period. In 1987, the lowest fifth of the income quintiles earned 3.8% of the entire distribution of income, while the top five percent earned 18.2%. By 1995, these respective percentages were 3.7% and 21% of income distributed. Looking even further back, the Census Bureau reports that from 1967-1996 the average income of households in the top quintile grew 48.9 percent. Over this same period, the lowest quintile's average income grew by only 22.3 percent.⁴⁷

During this period, when the widening gap between wealthy and lower-income households became increasingly apparent, these four writers offered oneiric views from the cheap seats. Their plays offer widely differing views on social issues and the government's economic programs. However, all of their productions reveal the workings of power in large social structures and, often, in the elite cultural realms of experimental theater, Ivy League colleges, and institutional granting organizations. Wellman, for instance, undresses the naturalized images of government, organized religion, and

⁴⁶U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, P60-197, *Money Income in the United States: 1996 (With Separate Data on Valuation of Noncash Benefits)*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1997. All information on income distribution and inequity is taken from the Census Bureau Report posted on the internet.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 11.

heterosexuality in *7 Blow Jobs*, a fierce satire of Senator Jesse Helms and the NEA-4 crisis. I will contextualize my readings of the avant-garde's responses to the post-Reaganite economic and political legacy of this era. Materialist analyses of these theatre productions are important because they can demystify the cultural work behind the artistic work and, in so doing, complicate readings of these plays. At a time when American myths of living in a meritocracy flourish to the detriment of many, it seems important to follow artwork through its socioeconomic development. I hope that this detailed contextual material will contribute to debunking illusory myths of canonical merit; without this kind of frame, the details of an experimental writer's production process remain a veiled mystery.

Because each of these writers has positioned her or himself outside the aesthetic mainstream, they have also placed their careers on less visible, less commercial tracks. Hewing to their "unpalatable" aesthetics, they have removed themselves from certain opportunities for production. This is not to say they have made a conscious decision to turn away from commercial careers as an act of sacrifice, as if they needed to feed aesthetically needy and financially disadvantaged cultural arenas. Rather, the significance of their work comes precisely because they are less culturally visible.

This dissertation is composed of five chapters and an epilogue: this contextualizing chapter and then a chapter devoted to each of the four writers. In chapter one, I discuss Shawn's recent work in relation to realism, exploring his liminal position between the worlds of avant-garde and mainstream theater. Of the four, Shawn is currently the best known and the most successful at negotiating the leap between those theatrical circles.

Shawn's work has recently been discussed in detail in W. D. King's *Writing Wrongs* (1997), and, of the writers I discuss, his plays get the most newspaper and national magazine exposure. He is, however, currently far more often produced in England than America. Although he was once regularly supported by the Public Theater, since Joseph Papp's death, Shawn has no American theatrical home. Some theaters wait until Shawn's plays have become hits in London before they will consider mounting his work, but, even then, New York City producers seem to shy away from supporting the unfamiliar dramaturgy that characterizes his work.

Shawn has been writing and having his work produced since the early 1970s, and the early works, *The Hotel Play* (1973), *The Family Play* (1973), and *The Hospital Play* (1973), relied upon shocking physicality and disgusting images (a vivid conversation about diarrhea in a restaurant in *Marie and Bruce*, for instance). They seemed to emerge straight from an unconscious attempting to process humanity's darker drives. Shawn's plays have often pushed at the limits of how far it is permissible, as Elin Diamond articulates it, to take theatrical bodies. His play, *A Thought in Three Parts* (1975), is a disturbing work of utterly loveless, mechanically satisfying, and emotionally vacant, sexual couplings on stage (1977). To date, *A Thought in Three Parts* has yet to be produced in America.

Shawn's early works in the 1970s into the early 80s all possessed grotesque somatic elements. In the last decade, however, Shawn's attention has turned consistently to the pitfalls of late twentieth century American liberalism. He traces the routes by which liberal thinking desires to do right but slides, via the easy pathway, into a moral abyss.

Shawn's more recent plays, such as *Aunt Dan and Lemon* (1985), with its unsettling proto-Nazi thought corruptions, belong to the longstanding American tradition of dissent. As Sacvan Bercovitch has characterized this myth of dissent, the prophet offers his (and in this case the pronoun is specific) jeremiad against the sins of the people.⁴⁸ As exemplified by the self-flagellating excoriations of *The Fever* (1997) and the fascistic despoiling of culture in *The Designated Mourner* (1996), Shawn's grueling jeremiads press audiences to confront the moral uncertainties of privilege. His plays incorporate structural conundrums in the form of foiled conventional narratives, and they are fueled by a dramaturgy of displacement.

The first chapter of the dissertation focuses on this shift in Shawn's topical interest towards more overtly historical and political topics as well as the dramaturgical styles employed on those themes. His last three plays are among the most mainstream addressed in this study. The narrative text of *The Designated Mourner*, for instance, is, in Brechtian terms, the most "edible" of these four writers' non-culinary plays. In addition to examining how Shawn manipulates realistic dramaturgy, I will address the complex critique of whiteness and Jewish masculinity in *The Designated Mourner*. The subtle nature of the resistance set up by Shawn's work offers the best vantage point from which to begin exploring the transgressive characters and unusual anti-realist dramaturgies generated by these four playwrights.

Examining Nagy's work next enables me to generate questions about what makes

⁴⁸Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 311.

these writers so hard to produce in America. Nagy's plays contravene many rules of realism in the areas of causality and resolution: they move forward along surreally causal plotlines. Unlike Wellman, and Parks, Nagy focuses primarily on character-driven suspenseful stories. Within these narratives, Nagy utilizes some of the excess and grotesquery Shawn employs. Unlike Shawn's later work, however, Nagy's apocalyptic, lesbian feminist plays are in no way subtle as they manipulate realistic components. Making use of a number of postmodern dramaturgical structures, Nagy self-consciously explores subjectivity through pastiche, genre parody, and destabilized or contradictory "realities" which remain resolutely, sometimes confoundingly, open. Spectators may find the loopholes of meaning in her dramaturgy resemble nothing so much as holes in the logic of her work.

Nagy's writing primarily addresses prejudice, often focusing on, but not limited to, the marginalized lesbian and gay communities. Plays like *Weldon Rising* (1992) and *The Strip* (1995) are controversial in their indictments of how fears trouble the characters' abilities to recognize difference without rejecting it within the lesbian and gay communities. I will read her plays through a lens of gender studies, looking particularly at how lesbian and heterosexual female characters are constructed.

Most of Nagy's plays have been well received in England. Of the four writers in this study she has had the most recent start, but the success gives her a fast-moving visible European career. A *Financial Times* review described her as "the finest playwright to have emerged in the 1990s."⁴⁹ Critic Michael Coveney from the *London Observer* has

⁴⁹Review, *Financial Times*, 30 June 1995.

written laudatory pieces about her work, suggesting that Nagy writes “sinuously and elegantly, working consistently towards a theatrical coalescence of plot, dialogue and swiftly changing scenic representation that is as exciting as it is unusual.”⁵⁰ Matt Wolf of *Variety* lauds *Disappeared* even when he finds the production unsatisfying; the play, he writes, shows “a comparable desire for the sublime expressed in the works of colleagues of her generation like Tony Kushner.”⁵¹ But even with her recent run of successes, Nagy’s work has rarely been addressed by academics. As of February 2000, there are no articles in print about Nagy’s plays. Claudia Barnett’s paper, “Phyllis Nagy’s Fatal Women,” presented at ATHE Conference (1996) is one of the few scholarly considerations of Nagy to date. Perhaps Nagy’s lack of invisibility on the American theater scene has kept more scholars from writing about her work.

Wellman’s career, unlike Nagy’s explosion onto the London scene, has maintained an important level of recognition within the small niche of experimental theater over a period of nearly thirty years. His longevity in the hardscrabble world of underfunded experimental New York City theater has won him a large share of the limited attention paid to avant-garde playwrights in this country, and his presence in the academic arena as a teacher and essayist has given him additional exposure. Wellman’s science fiction satires often seem absurd (as, for instance, when people die under mudslides of radioactive chicken-shit), but his rigorous questioning of capitalism’s cost to ourselves and to our environment indicts as it amuses. In my third chapter, I will discuss his nearly opaque

⁵⁰Michael Coveney, “Introduction,” in Nagy’s *Plays: I*, ix.

⁵¹Matt Wolf, *Variety*, 27 March 1995, 83.

narratives in order to consider the extreme examples of symbolic and somatic dramaturgy that characterizes his plays. Venturing the furthest into the realm of a surreal grotesquery, Wellman engages with masculinity from a different critical vantage point than Shawn. I will continue to develop my discussion of whiteness, normative heterosexual masculinity, and how those constructions are tied to “the foursquare American sentence” which Wellman describes as “a tidy little neo-Aristotelian microcosm.”⁵²

Wellman’s reputation for opacity is matched by his prolific output. Twelve of his nearly forty plays have been published. He has written essays for *Theatre* and *Performing Arts Journal*, and has published both poetry and novels. Wellman has also been influential in bringing colleagues’ plays into print; he selected the plays for *Theatre of Wonders: 6 Contemporary American Plays* (1985) and *7 Different Plays* (1988). In addition, he has won several large grants: McKnight and Rockefeller Foundations awards in 1989, New York Foundation for the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, and Guggenheim Foundation Fellowships in 1990. In 1994, he won the America Award (The Ferns) for *The Hyacinth Macaw*. Although his plays are most frequently produced in experimental spaces below 14th Street, they consistently attract reviewers like Frank Rich, Ben Brantley, and Mel Gussow of the *New York Times*. Additionally, Casey Childs, Artistic Director of Primary Stages (a small midtown Off-Broadway theater very far west), championed and produced many of Wellman’s plays for nearly a decade, making it possible for Wellman’s work to be seen in better equipped, more financially supported productions. In the past

⁵²Mac Wellman, “New Writing and the Classics: An Exchange,” *Theater* 21, no. 3 (Summer/Fall 1989): 14.

ten years, experimental companies around the country, like Sledgehammer in San Diego and the Frank in Minneapolis, have begun to present Wellman's work. But, though Wellman's tenacious career has been well-supported by granting organizations and small (fewer than ninety-nine seat), risk-taking theaters, despite awards, grants, and rave reviews in the *Village Voice*, he remains a kind of coterie artist.

Of the four writers, Wellman has the most direct impact on the upcoming generation of experimental playwrights; not only have his radical departures inspired younger writers, but as a teacher at Yale's School of Drama, Princeton University, and, currently, as Chair of Playwriting at Brown University, he encourages student dramatists to take the meandering paths away from realism. His years as a member of New Dramatists and advisor to BACA Downtown's Obie-award winning New Works Project also put him in positions to select and support the next generation. Among the many young writers inspired by his drive towards a rigorous questioning of assumptions are Erik Ehn, Thalia Field, and Suzan-Lori Parks.

I have chosen to discuss Parks's work in my last chapter so that I can draw upon the previous chapters' explorations of whiteness, gender, and lesbian and gay identities. And her work brings together some of the most powerful dramaturgical subversions practiced by the other three playwrights. Parks burst fully upon the scene with the New York City productions of her plays, *Imperceptible Mutabilities* (1986, 1989) and *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1989, 1992). She is one of the most important young African American writers in America, and has, accordingly, generated the most scholarly interest. Alice Rayner and Harry Elam are among those who

have written several articles on Parks's work. Her plays have all been published and are frequently anthologized. Clearly indebted to Adrienne Kennedy, Parks also cites Samuel Beckett as an influence. However, she describes Faulkner, Joyce, and jazz music as even more important in creating her unique blend of lyrical ritual structures and "figues of language."⁵³ I want to focus on how Parks's narratives construct complex African American identities. Specifically, how does she transform the burdens of representation, with regard to sexualized African American women's bodies, into new and powerful subjectivities?

Parks's plays have been discussed for their methods of articulating the absence of African Americans in history,⁵⁴ but they have not been read with regard to the complexities of representing African American sexual identities. Parks creates a trope of dislocated body parts that enables sexual, and sexualized, African American figures to take center stage in her plays. Black hair, for instance, is a complex sign and has stood, in distinct ways for different receptive communities, for Otherness.⁵⁵ So, too, have the lips, teeth, nose, posterior, and dancing feet of African Americans symbolically replaced the

⁵³Robinson, 189.

⁵⁴There are two significant articles on Parks's work in this vein. Alice Rayner and Harry J. Elam, Jr., "Unfinished Business: Reconfiguring History in Suzan-Lori Parks's *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*," *Theatre Journal* 46 (December 1994): 447-461, and Alisa Solomon, "Signifying on the Signifyn'[sic]: The Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks," *Theater* (Summer/Fall 1990): 73-80.

⁵⁵Along these lines one could consider Whoopi Goldberg's solo character work on Broadway; she wrapped a sweater around her head and took on the character of a little black girl who yearned for flowing blonde tresses. In addition, George C. Wolfe's *Colored Museum* contains a remarkable scene of personified wigs, while Anna Deveare Smith's impersonations of individuals like the Reverend Al Sharpton rely, in part, upon her wearing lookalike hairdoes.

presence of a complete human being. Parks's plays self-consciously work with this dismembered self (the scattered pieces of the body-as-text); she animates these previously disempowered, dismembered parts. As Elinor Fuchs has noted of Parks's work, *The America Play*, "The central image . . . the Great Hole of History, is also an absence."⁵⁶ The "hole" of his-story has held within its mysterious lack of representational presence the wholeness of African American identities. I will concentrate my discussions on the politics and power of gesture within several of Parks's productions to bring a new critical perspective to a writer whose works are primarily approached through linguistic and literary points of entry.

Each of the writers in this study invokes some version of what Vanden Heuvel has described as "authorial impotence."⁵⁷ Vanden Heuvel uses this term as he describes Beckett's desire to decenter and undermine privileged meanings. These four writers, in highly differentiated ways and with widely different goals, all pursue a Beckettian annihilation of monolithic authorial meaning. They accept and often feature the elusive and destabilizing nature of language. Also, they are committed to exploring "what stands under"⁵⁸ structures, rather than exploring life within the discourses and conventions that attempt to contain the chaos, or the grotesque, below. Instead of using ostensibly transparent language to map psychological disruptions within probable identities, Shawn,

⁵⁶Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 4.

⁵⁷Vanden Heuvel, *Performing Drama/Dramatizing Performance* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1993. Reprint, 1994), 74.

⁵⁸Richard Foreman, in particular, uses this description to convey his interest in creating theater that rejects conventional notions of "reality."

Nagy, Wellman, and Parks dive into the complexities and ambiguities of chaos.⁵⁹

In lieu of a closed classical realistic form, these writers generate a variety of carnivalesque plays, works that mediate between realism and more dialogical, unfinalisable forms with persistent 'loopholes' of meaning. Traditional narrative paths do not serve their imaginations or their politics. As Parks points out in *Venus*, the only stories available to discarded ingenues end with an asp, or, perhaps following "thuh classical response," hanging. Alternatively, as the Mother-in-Law-To-Be lists options for her anxious Daughter-in-Law-To-Be, she comments that the "Elizabethan response would be tuh drown yrself. . . . In modern dress they slit their wrists. . . [use] sleeping pills. . . To simply waste uhway — " (65). When well-worn plots restrain new possibilities, ingenue-heroines cannot find new arcs. In Parks's work, characters such as the Venus Hottentot may not escape the history of traditional narratives, but they can raise questions beyond those available to many realistic characters. Most narrative plays ask only those questions that a linear system can answer, while Parks's work embraces uncertainty and unanswerable concerns.

Despite the obfuscation and apparent lack of visible (stable or recognizable) plots in these plays, they do move forward through meaningful structures. I believe that these writers embrace the undecidability of postmodern identity without giving in to the resigned sense, as Frank Lentricchia has described it, of how deconstruction may only reinforce the

⁵⁹Chaos, as Vanden Heuvel pointed out, is productive, and, as many scientists are now describing it, chaos does not mean random. Chaos does mean that the patterns guiding the causality of a given event is too complex for us to see at this point.

notion that all our undoing leaves nothing to be done.⁶⁰ These writers all create new identities in the face of postmodern liberty and chaos. As these characters struggle to face their monstrously doubled, dismembered, and sham selves, their authors offer strategies for moving towards self-definition. By incorporating socioeconomic and cultural frames in my readings, I hope to illuminate the political implications and possibilities made visible through a materialist approach to studying these productions as cultural objects.

Mimicking Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks, I would like to raise questions about the sometimes invisible processes by which playwrights become situated in dramatic literary and theater history narratives. What functions do their plays perform in a progressive politic dedicated to seeing and addressing how American capitalism (as constituted in the theater producing and play publishing industries) constrains identity formations that do not serve its gender, race, and sexual identification categories? Their difficult narratives, provocative critiques of our society, and marginal presence in mainstream culture render them particularly appropriate subjects for these case studies.

⁶⁰Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 51.

CHAPTER II

MASQUERADES OF REALISM: WALLACE SHAWN'S *THE DESIGNATED MOURNER*

The Designated Mourner is a kind of answer to *Schindler's List*. . . What Wally Shawn is saying is that you don't survive these terrible situations by behaving well but by behaving appallingly, which is how Jack behaves.

—David Hare being interviewed for First Look
press release on *The Designated Mourner*

What is the naturalist structure of feeling? It is perhaps a particular stage of bourgeois society, in which the decisive action is elsewhere, and what is lived out, in these traps of rooms, are the human consequences: in particular, the consequences of a relatively leisured society.

—Raymond Williams, *Drama From Ibsen to Brecht*

If you aint the big Daddy you aint nobody.

—Lyle Lovett

Realism is the thriving form and the well-worn armchair of twentieth-century American theater. The narrator of Wallace Shawn's *The Designated Mourner*, Jack, has several thoughts about "facts" which are relevant to the play's dramaturgical relationship to realism: You see, I think we ought to be precise about facts —I mean, very, very precise about historical facts. Or I mean, for God's sake, let's *try* to be. Or I mean, for God's sake, let's *pretend* to be.¹ Indeed, *The Designated Mourner* pretends to be a realistic play in order to question the conventions of the "culinary" theatrical world and

¹Wallace Shawn, *The Designated Mourner* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 10. All subsequent citations from the play will be cited in the text.

their corollary, naturalized liberal humanist views of twentieth century history and twenty-first century problems.

The Designated Mourner tells a ghost story of high culture's demise in a fascistic nation that resembles a combination of America in the near future and an abstracted Latin American country in the recent past. The play consists almost entirely of direct address to the audience and has been described by one reviewer as a "sonata."² Jack, the play's narrator and eponymous mourner, tells the audience stories of his life with his wife, Judy, and her father, Howard. Judy, Jack's wife, is a refined woman with poetic ideals and a cool exterior, "cocooned in her own world of finer feelings."³ Her father, Howard, is a writer, scholar, and once-in-his-youth-political-activist, thanks to a revolutionary essay he wrote when he was in his twenties. Structurally, the play relies upon Jack's masquerade as the charming and reasonable voice representing the intelligent, liberal spectator. Jack yearns to be an intellectual but describes himself as a "former student of English literature . . . who went downhill from there" (10). As the three characters speak to the audience in monologues, it becomes clear that Jack failed to either win Howard's respect or to separate Judy from the father whose hypochondriacal martyrdom and vaguely incestuous intimacy binds them all together. The keys to Howard's high-culture circle remain unavailable to Jack. He feels he is not accepted in Howard's group of intellectual liberals whose elite status is derived (in Jack's mind) from their ability to read John Donne's work with ease.

²(London) *Sunday Times*, 28 April 1996.

³Michael Billington, "Patrician Culture," *Guardian*, 25 April 1996.

Jack, Judy, and Howard talk about their lives together and describe the signs of a brewing revolution; the have-nots, or as Howard calls them, “the dirt-eaters.” threaten the current regime (22). The government’s response is a violent purge which includes intellectuals and other potential troublemakers. Howard’s past places them all in a degree of danger. And, one night a brick shatters the window of Howard’s home, where they all live. This *Kristallnacht* type of violent threat physically impinges on Howard’s elite circle.⁴ This sudden escalation of danger frightens Jack deeply and he flees. He rationalizes his flight into dissociated serenity by turning his back on the higher impulses of conscience. Destroying the part of himself that held to ideals allows him to be comfortably in denial while Judy, Howard, and their friends are executed. As Robert Egan describes it, Jack decides that “the pleasures of television, film magazines and masturbation are far preferable to reading the metaphysical poets.”⁵ Where Jack opens the play by announcing that the evening is a kind of memorial service, and he ends the play feeling absolved of any memory—or responsibility. It seems, at the play’s conclusion, that the only witnesses to the cost of forgetting history may be the audience.

The play takes spectators on a journey through Jack’s evolving “precipitate of

⁴Vera Schiff, *Theresienstadt and the Town the Nazis Gave to the Jews* (Toronto: Lugus Publications, 1996), 13. *Kristallnacht* translates as “Night of Shattered Glass.” Schiff describes how on November 9, 1938, nearly two hundred synagogues were destroyed. *Kristallnacht* takes its name from the broken glass of the roughly seven thousand German Jewish stores that were ruined. Schiff also notes that at least one hundred people were murdered outright and many others were injured.

⁵Robert Egan, review of *The Designated Mourner*, *Theater Journal* 49 (May 1997): 236-7.

identifications,” the memories and connections from his past that make up his identity.⁶ By the end of the play Jack appears to be transformed through this process of recounting memories and turning his back on them. As John Lahr writes, Jack becomes “not selfless but empty.”⁷ Jack discards the past on two levels: his personal memories and the larger sweep of history. Diana Fuss’s writing on Fanon aptly describes the dual functions of memory in *The Designated Mourner*; Jack’s identifications “name not only the history of the subject but the subject in history.”⁸ Jack’s memories of his relationships, dreams, and private and public experiences as a citizen mark him as the recipient of historical burdens. In the tradition of realism, he also remains a representative figure of today’s exhausted liberal believer. Fanon’s crucial point, as Fuss articulates it, that “the psychical operates precisely as a political formation” is crucial to seeing how *The Designated Mourner*’s dramaturgy functions.

By focusing on the map of Jack’s psychic journey, this chapter’s analysis foregrounds the manner in which the play’s dramaturgy functions. The play offers spectators a chance to look at how historic constructions of ethnicity, whiteness, and heterosexual masculinity are all tied together. *The Designated Mourner* points up its own refusal to embrace what Bakhtin (and many subsequent theorists like Henry Giroux) calls for as productive culture; in his essay “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse”

⁶Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 126. Diamond is reworking Freud’s “The Ego and the Id.”

⁷John Lahr, “The Dangling Man,” *New Yorker*, 15 April 1996, 51.

⁸This and subsequent quotation are from Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 165.

Bakhtin describes heteroglossia as “the problem of internal differentiation, the stratification characteristic of any national language.”¹⁰

This chapter examines the formal aspects of *The Designated Mourner* in the context of Shawn’s career. I begin by describing how Shawn’s work has changed over time to locate *The Designated Mourner* within the body of his work. I then discuss the London premiere production of *The Designated Mourner* to examine how the directing, acting, and design choices function as part of Shawn’s dramaturgy. I offer a reading of how the play mimics normative, mainstream, realistic structures of theatre and the contemporary values of liberal humanism that are imbricated in that genre.¹¹ At the same time, I read the play for its subversive undermining of itself as a safe-seeming, digestible piece of theatre fare. What content requires this form? How does Jack’s morally repugnant behavior make room for a spectator to experience the contradictions within her relationship to the past?

Shawn’s works have addressed heterosexuality, and masculinity in particular, in

¹⁰M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* ed. Michael Holquist, transl. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. In University of Texas Press Slavic Series, No. 1. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 67.

¹¹As discussed in the Introduction, my use of the term “liberal humanism” refers to the leftist movements of the 1970s - 1980s when advocacy for revolutionary change was replaced by belief in social progress through moderate efforts for change within the system. It is possible to trace this category, liberal humanism, as far back as the Enlightenment. Yet the specific American history of this set of changing ethical-political beliefs became a powerful cultural force in the New Deal era when government programs reached out directly to support and care for many of the citizens in need. When Jesse Helms derided a Democrat as a “card-carrying liberal,” it became clear that liberal positions had become increasingly marginalized in the years after the Civil Rights movement. The 1990s can be characterized, it seems to me, by the nationally televised interview in which Studs Terkel made a brave effort to recuperate liberalism as he defended his decades’ long membership in the American Civil Liberties Union.

many different ways throughout his thirty year career to date. In order to situate his recent work, I will give an overview of his career. Known as a stylistic chameleon, Shawn has written plays, films, and one opera, that span a range of expressionist, lyrical, and menacingly parodic dramaturgical styles. However, his focus on ethical-political issues and how they appear as sexualized power struggles has remained constant. Whether he was attempting to grapple with the Vietnam War in *The Hospital Play* (1973), the ugly power politics of marriage in *Marie and Bruce* (1980), or living with an awareness of socioeconomic inequities in *The Fever* (1991), each work invests as more in the ethics of human interactions than individual characters. In *The Designated Mourner*, Shawn finds new ways to create urgency around these kinds of ethical concerns; in order to accomplish this, he completes a shift towards an anti-theatrical dramaturgy that he began with *Aunt Dan and Lemon*.

My discussion of the material essential to *The Designated Mourner*'s dramaturgy focuses on Shawn's incorporation of images and stereotypes of Jews in the twentieth century. Reading *The Designated Mourner* through this lens of whiteness and Jewish ethnicity is not meant as a psychoanalytic critique of Shawn, as if outing him as a Jewish writer generates a "truer" reading of his plays. Rather, teasing out the ethnic colors subsumed by the apparently all-encompassing whiteness of Shawn's characters contributes to what Richard Dyer calls the ongoing cultural project of distinguishing shades of white. Dyer reminds us how easy it is to become convinced that "white is coterminous with the endless plenitude of human diversity."¹² Mitchell Cohen's article, "In Defense of

¹²Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Image* (London: Routledge Press, 1993), 145.

Shaamez,” discusses Jewish identity in the context of the contemporary academic turn towards multiculturalism; he points out that he sees a sort of absence, a “numbness,” when it comes to incorporating Jewish Studies work into multicultural texts.¹³ This study explores this numbness in numerous critical responses to Shawn’s plays. Reviewers and scholars have canonized Shawn as “The Holy Fool” of the contemporary American theatre for his provocative jeremiads against privilege, but few of the critical discussions examine how this excoriated privilege is bound up with whiteness.¹⁴

W. D. King has written the only book-length study of Shawn. *Writing Wrongs: The Work of Wallace Shawn* (1997). He reads Shawn’s works primarily through the lens of modernism. Looking more at written texts than productions, King focuses on how Shawn’s plays:

differ radically from the likes of *The Iceman Cometh* or *Endgame* because he goes beyond the modernist challenge of traditional structures to an art that approaches a negation of the theater itself. The modernist tradition undermines usual patterns, especially Aristotelian form, but uses the theater to make an even bolder, purer statement. Thus, O’Neill . . . can still use affective mechanisms and write masterpieces, whereas Shawn continually defuses the affect and concentrates instead on an antithetical approach that begins with minority — the minor effect.¹⁵

He also reads Shawn’s works productively with a focus on liberal humanist belief systems and politics. He argues that, “Each of Shawn’s plays can be read as a statement of debits

¹³Mitchell Cohen, “In Defense of *Shaamez*: A Politics for Jews in a Multicultural America,” *Outsider Insider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, ed. David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 44.

¹⁴Ross Wetzsteon, “Wallace Shawn: The Holy Fool of the American Theater?” *Village Voice*, 2 April 1991, 35-37.

¹⁵W. D. King, *Writing Wrongs: The Work of Wallace Shawn* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 13.

and credits in an ongoing account of liberalism.”¹⁶ I have been influenced by his discussions of liberalism and his incorporation of material on Shawn’s acting career. But, though King argues quite convincingly for his literary history approach to Shawn’s writing, he never examines the plays in dialogue with other contemporary experimental playwrights. I hope to augment King’s readings, which are shaped by a retrospective look at modernism, by placing Shawn’s work in the context of contemporary theoretical concerns.

There are few other scholars writing on Shawn. In *The Other American Drama*, Marc Robinson devotes part of his last chapter, “Afterword: New Directions,” to Shawn’s plays. Robinson focuses on Gertrude Stein and her theatrical matrilineage, and in that vein, he looks at how a Steinian incompleteness functions for Shawn. Robinson describes Shawn’s plays as attempting to “break the spell” of wit and rational discourse by engaging spectators with a character who ultimately stops thinking and “settles for a conclusion.” It is in that final gesture of shutting down effort and inquiry that Robinson sees Shawn’s unique contribution.

Since the relatively visible production of *Aunt Dan and Lemon* at The Public Theater (1985), Shawn’s work has regularly received attention from most of the major papers and several serious magazines like *The New Republic* and *The Nation*. Some reviewers respond quite passionately to Shawn’s self-declared provocations. Shawn has longtime fans like John Lahr, who describes Shawn as “one of America’s most dangerous

¹⁶King, *Writing Wrongs*, 22.

playwrights,”¹⁶ and Ross Wetzsteon, who writes that Shawn is “the uncompromising scourge of our stage.”¹⁷ There are also those who acknowledge Shawn’s talents but deplore much of his work. Robert Brustein’s review of *The Fever* for the *New Republic* and Thomas M. Disch’s for the *Nation*, for instance, both dismissed the play for what they considered its self-serving disingenuousness. Disch closes his review by saying that “the remedy for Shawn’s purported agony is one that any minister, social worker, and indeed, most dramatists could prescribe in two words: . . . Practical Charity.”¹⁸ Brustein could only conclude that Shawn must be having a mid-life crisis.¹⁹ Despite these assessments, the production was a moderate success and its run was extended.

Most of these reviewers, however, even the most critical, choose not to discuss how whiteness undergirds all of the aspects of privilege *The Fever* explores. Even one of the few negative academic critiques of Shawn’s writing, by critics Bonnie Marranca, Elinor Fuchs, and Gerald Rabkin, does not really touch upon the issue. They discuss the limitations of Shawn’s politics as manifested in *The Fever* at The Public Theater (1991), and Marranca criticizes Shawn’s attacks on liberal privilege by noting that he is “class-bound by his own privileged life and background,” and therefore “makes strange assumptions about the life of the poor. As if to say that only a privileged life is a sensual

¹⁶This and the subsequent citation from Robinson, *The Other American Drama* 6, no. 6, 185.

¹⁷Ross Wetzsteon, “Wallace Shawn, Subversive Moralist,” *American Theatre* 14, no. 7, September 1997, 17.

¹⁸Thomas M. Disch, Review of *The Fever* at The Public Theater, *Nation*, 7-14 January 1991, 26.

¹⁹Robert Brustein, review of *The Fever* at The Public Theater, *New Republic*, 21 January 1991, 29.

life and that the poor are relegated to a horrible family life.”²¹ But, when Marranca points out that Shawn never makes clear whether he is talking about the poor in Latin America or the poor in New York, she indirectly raises a question about ethnicity and whiteness

It is not surprising that the reviews of the London production of his recent play, *The Designated Mourner*, also neglect to discuss the whiteness and socioeconomic nature of privilege at stake in the play. *The Designated Mourner* received largely positive notices from the British press. Michael Billington’s review for the *Guardian*, for instance, declared that “Shawn has written . . . an unnerving tract for our times that equates spiritual and political fascism.”²² There were also several critics in London and New York who declared the play undramatic or, in another vein, a self-congratulatory event for those enough in the know to attend the play’s limited performances. The play did not move to a larger theater in London nor did it come to New York City.²³

Most reviewers focused on the play’s surface conflicts over a Harold Bloom crisis of high versus low culture, the intellectual cry that “the barbarians are no longer at the gate.” that instead, we have become the barbarians.²⁴ Michael Billington writes that “Shawn denies us many of the conventional satisfactions of drama,” but that what “he has to say is crucially important: that we live in a world that preserves high culture for the few.

²¹Bonnie Marranca, Elinor Fuchs, and Gerald Rabkin, “The Politics of Representation New York Theatre Season 1990-91,” *Performing Arts Journal*, no. 39 (September 1991): 3.

²²Michael Billington, “Patrician Culture,” *Guardian*, 25 April 1996.

²³The American premiere of the play took place May 1997 at Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theatre. That production did not receive national attention.

²⁴Matt Wolf, Review of *The Designated Mourner*, *Variety*, 29 April 1996.

That it is leading to a dumbing-down of the mind and coarsening of the spirit and that is poised on the brink of a return to the Dark Ages.”²⁵ David Finkle’s piece in the *Village Voice* concurs, describing *The Designated Mourner* as “a scary embodiment of the death of literacy, the dumbing down of civilization.”

None of the commentary on the play addresses the specific historical images brought to mind (to Jack’s and spectators’ minds) by the play. Only Marco Capalbo, writing for *Westsider*, a small New York paper, focuses on the Holocaust associations in the play. He points out that the German-born Mike Nichols has relevant personal history, as an escapee from the Nazis at the age of seven, and that performing Jack must have had “special resonance.”²⁶ Capalbo is also one of the few reviewers to connect the high-low conflict with history: “one of the roles of culture is to remind us of that past and keep it alive.” The play’s original director, David Hare, describes *The Designated Mourner* as “an answer to *Schindler’s List*,”²⁷ a film that has been described as the only Holocaust movie with a happy ending. *The Designated Mourner* works in an anti-Hollywood direction. The film of *The Designated Mourner* undertakes to give the now overly conventionalized mainstream images of the Holocaust a new resonance, despite our culture of crisis-fatigue. The film unsettles some of the conventional explorations of the Holocaust and also attempts to interrupt spectators’ easy consumption of historical images already worn smooth with exposure. I believe that the elision in the critical reception of Shawn’s work

²⁵Billington, *Guardian*, 25 April 1996, 2.

²⁶This and subsequent citation from Marco Capalbo, “Ask Not for Whom the Bell Tolls: *The Designated Mourner* Indicts Western Society,” *Westsider*, 8-14 May 1997, 19.

²⁷David Hare, Interview in First Look Pictures’ Press Release, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts Billy Rose Theater Archive, 1996, 16.

regarding the centrality of Jewishness in *The Designated Mourner*, points to the subtle process by which whiteness effaces its own constructedness, especially concerning the illusion of autonomy. In this case, Shawn specifically examines heterosexual masculinity as a key pillar of the dominant fiction of a natural individual freedom.

The Designated Mourner is structurally ambivalent in its manipulations of realism. In addition to those formal subversions, the dramaturgy relies upon a historical-political frame suggested by the play's elliptical images of the modern history of Jews and, in particular, the Holocaust. In *Theater on the Margins*, Erik MacDonald asks how, "without accounting for inexplicable tears in the sociophilosophical fabric of the West, such as the Armenian genocide or the Holocaust, how is it possible to account for the most basic elements of theatre, including illusion, except by ignoring history?"²⁸ In other words, how can theatre, which so relies upon a contract of conventions between spectator and dramatic character, continue to function as if the world operated by a universally agreed upon rational causality? How can theatre continue to presume that realism's psychologically deep revelations plumb human "Truth" when the humanist model of stable identity (one that reveals itself over time) cannot encompass our own history? I would like to turn MacDonald's question around to ask: how do Shawn's dramaturgical rips in contemporary, American, realistic dramaturgy engender a new contact with twentieth century history? If realism strives to smooth over those tears in the Anglo-American sociophilosophical fabric in its quest for the recontainment of the past and present, *The Designated Mourner* is a multi-layered play in which the unruly past demands refuses to

²⁸Eric MacDonald, *Theater at the Margins: Text and the Post-Structured Stage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 24.

be silent, demanding to be accounted for.

The Designated Mourner is unique in this study for the subtlety of appropriation of realistic dramaturgy. I suggest that *The Designated Mourner* embraces a contemporary kind of post-Brechtian anti-illusionism (anti-theatricality) in the service of bringing a Bakhtinian carnivalesque impulse into realism's living room. In fact, all of Shawn's works can be productively read through the lens of the carnivalesque. King describes Shawn's early work, *A Thought in Three Parts* (1982), as part of the Jarry and Warhol tradition of "fuck-you . . ." theatre.²⁹ In his discussion of the pornographic-seeming exposure of genitals in *A Thought in Three Parts*, King describes that play "as a form of torture with excruciating effect, bleak and unerotic."³⁰ All of Shawn's works perform this same function to various degrees, some through shocking physicality and some through manipulations of realistic text. What King sums up as a torturous expression, I see as the powerful thread of the grotesque carnivalesque running through Shawn's works.

Shawn's early works like *The Hotel Play* (1973), *The Family Play* (1973), and *The Hospital Play* turn on the impulses and subversive power of the kind of grotesque body described by Bakhtin. The term grotesque, introduced in my previous chapter, as

²⁹This and subsequent citation from King, *Writing Wrongs*, 86.

³⁰The audience is subjected to the grindingly grim series of sexual couplings the characters march through en route from need to emptiness. The play was so shocking, in its simulations of sexual acts, that it gained the attention of the London equivalent of the Vice Squad. With their investigation, the play came to the attention of the House of Lords, and they raised a furor over the government funding used to support the Institute for Contemporary Arts (1977). The police chose not prosecute, but this NEA-like uproar drew playwrights, Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill, David Hare, and Barrie Keefe, to write a public letter supporting the production. King discusses this event in some detail (79).

described by Stallybrass and White is an:

open, protruding, extending, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the Classical body which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism; the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world.³¹

In Shawn's early works, this grotesque body might literally be on stage displaying its uncontainable process of being.

In *Our Late Night* (1975), one of the characters describes "an overwhelming lust" that overcomes him on a vacation in a tropical land.³² This guest, Tony, goes on what King calls "a tour de force of sexual paranoia" as he describes his desperate efforts to rid himself of his erection with a native woman, cold water, masturbation and, finally oral sex with his wife. Producer Joseph Papp recounts how "the audience went crazy at that scene. . . . Some were shouting and one man got up and walked around in a menacing way—they didn't even know they were doing it."³³ In an Artaudian moment of *physicofillia*, the unleashed carnivalesque spirit infected the audience.

Shawn ostended the limits of theatre by venturing into this disturbing physicality of sexual acts on stage. *A Thought in Three Parts* created a pre-Annie Sprinkle confrontation with flesh on flesh that had all the resonance of plugging a light into a socket. While the first of the three part play has an oddly flattened out and sped up dialogue, the second piece, "The Youth Hostel," begins with Bob pushing unwanted sex

³¹Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics & Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 26.

³²This and the subsequent citation from King, 73.

³³Lucinda Franks, "The Shawns—A Fascinating Father-And-Son Riddle," *New York Times*, 3 August 1980.

on Judy. Following that sequence, Bob and Judy have a masturbating contest. The play then continues as a series of sexual events. There was no effort to induce identification or empathy, only to provoke profound disturbance. *A Thought in Three Parts* has never been produced in this country.

Both *The Hotel Play* and *The Hospital Play* are structured around the groping desires of the grotesque. In *The Hotel Play* the characters also relate physically. The Hotel Clerk and the Girl guest move quickly and mysteriously through gestures of sexual desire, nausea, and her bloody suicide. The play ends opaquely as the surviving character sits in the bloody room, eats a peach, and has nightmares of pumpkins rolling down a road. Thus, the play defies the movement to the rational, psychologically based revelations of traditional realism: in rejecting a comprehensible answer to "why?" the play also refuses to cater to the mythic tenets of bourgeois individualism which demands a return to order, a recontainment of the inexplicable mess created by the carnivalesque unleashing of unbounded desires. *The Hospital Play* continues this messy concatenations of sex and death. It opens with a shocking noisy tableau set in a hospital ward. There are young lovers kissing immediately next to two patients sobbing and coughing, and an unseen patient is crying out at a doctor's ministrations while a woman masturbates nearby. This is just the beginning of the play's horror, for it incorporates the gruesomeness of *grand guignol* to function, as Shawn describes it, as the Vietnam War.³⁴

These carnivalesque structures continue in Shawn's works but, over time, they become less embodied, no longer dramatically depicted or staged. Most recently, the

³⁴King, 62.

grotesque elements peek out of the texts themselves, in the dialogues and monologues of *Aunt Dan and Lemon* (1985), or in the solo story of *The Fever* (1991), and in *The Designated Mourner*'s trio of voices. These three plays reveal a new reliance on speech and a commensurate move away from the gestural language of bodies on stage.

Aunt Dan and Lemon marks the beginning of Shawn's experiments with the lure of character charm, intimacy through direct address, and the seductions of an audience's desire for narrative. *Aunt Dan and Lemon* is also Shawn's first work built around a primary narrator who cultivates a deep relationship with the spectators. It is with *Aunt Dan and Lemon* that Shawn lets go of the highly confrontational, theatrical, heightened language and the shocking physicality of his earlier works. His last three plays, *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, *The Fever*, and *The Designated Mourner*, appear to be less theatrical, more palatable, more mainstream-seeming plays than Shawn's earlier works. *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, for example, incorporates the hybridity of carnival in an unusual way; the play appears to be structured around the leading character, Lemon, having conversations with the audience. The play is an anti-*lehrstucke* in which Lemon, the appealing young girl, is corrupted by her family friend, the Oxford Don Dan (Danielle). The delicate (anorexic) Lemon is the narrator, and she spends the evening sharing her memories and her admiration for the Nazis. At the end of her *bildungsroman-manque*, Lemon leaves us with thoughts such as: "The thing is that the Nazis were trying to create a certain way of life for themselves," and were doing a good job until they were stopped (77). By traveling through rhetorical tropes and intellectual arguments, Lemon pushes the audience to join her in her conclusion that Jews and cockroaches may both legitimately be exterminated.

Gerald Rabkin describes the play's structure, which allows Lemon to close the play with her pro-Nazi views unchallenged, as "a strategy deliberately intended to disturb the liberal audience's moral complacency."³⁴

John Lahr describes Shawn's plays as "a trap for consciousness."³⁵ This notion of the event of the play taking place in each spectator's mind is predicated upon an unusual degree of participation by the audience. Because Shawn holds back a moderate, ethical viewpoint from the ending of *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, spectators may be provoked enough to become active as they try to bring their theatrical experience to a satisfying conclusion. In a subtle way, the spectators may be drawn into a more participatory relationship with the play than they would at a more conventionally concluded drama. Spectators are left with the burden of finishing the play for themselves. In effect, they are asked to shift from a consumer's disengaged position to a more participatory role, as they attempt to complete their theatrical experience.

The carnivalesque is usually associated only with "lowbrow" excursions into the power structures of the elite, but Shawn uses the reasoning voice of a racist thinker to overturn ostensibly stable ideas, in this case—liberal thinkers' rejections of racism. In *The Female Grotesque*, Mary Russo describes how:

The masks and voices of carnival resist, exaggerate, and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society. It is as if the carnivalesque body politic had ingested the entire corpus of high culture and, in its bloated and irrepressible state, released it in fits and starts in all manner of recombination, inversion, mockery, and degradation. . . . Carnival and the

³⁴Bonnie Marranca, Elinor Fuchs, and Gerald Rabkin, "The Politics of Representation New York Theatre Season 1990-91," *Performing Arts Journal*, 3.

³⁵Lahr, "The Dangling Man," 46.

carnavalesque suggest a redeployment or counterproduction of culture, knowledge, and pleasure.³⁷

This recombination has most often been used to describe popular inversions, such as a Mardi Gras parade, but, in *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, Shawn reveals the redeployment of culture from a David Dukes point of view. Beneath Dan's and Lemon's masks of reasonableness, masks which seem familiar to an educated intellectual audience, their grotesque desires flourish. Shawn espouses this counterproduction as a deliberate provocation for the audience in whom he hopes to incite anger and change. Wetzsteon's article quotes Shawn on the play's relationships to spectators: "My plays are really about the audience. The main character is you."³⁸

The Fever also embodies the heterogeneity of carnivalesque "speech and spectacle," as Russo describes carnivalesque hybridity. She writes that carnivalesque speech and spectacle are heterogeneous, in that they contain the protocols and styles of high culture in and from a position of debasement.³⁹ The self-narrating single character, played originally by Shawn himself, describes rather than enacts the sewer-like abject world of his vomiting, the water bugs crawling by him, and the images of an execution that fill his mind. Within the textual reality, the character speaks from a literally debased position on the floor by the toilet. While shivering feverishly, he speaks lyrically about the beautiful presents he received as a child, and about his current inner conflict upon seeing that his pampered life only exists because of the suffering of others. Originally performed

³⁷Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 63.

³⁸Wetzsteon, "Wallace Shawn, Subversive Moralist," 17.

³⁹Russo, *The Female Grotesque*, 62.

by Shawn in wealthy people's homes in 1991, *The Fever* goes much farther than *Aunt Dan and Lemon* in embracing an anti-theatrical style. Shawn describes using this route through individual's living rooms as being in keeping with his performance as "one member of a certain of the more privileged class of society directly addressing other members of that same class."³⁹

As the word got around, Shawn was invited to perform the piece at The Public Theatre. He did so, taking care to keep the anti-theatricality of the piece in terms of its lack of staging, and transparent-seeming design contributions like the empty stage set, no light cues, and street clothes as costume. The work is meant to be performed by a single performer in street clothes sitting in a chair and talking, as if to an intimate group, about his journey through a Latin American country. In a delirious state, the narrator slips back and forth from defending his love of high culture to terrified images of becoming a victim of the revolutionary forces. At one moment he insists "I like Beethoven. I like to hear the bow of the violin cut into the string" (10). Immediately after he imagines the violence being perpetrated upon innocent people: "Suppose that they *are* being dragged into a stinking van with a carpet on the floor and stomped by boots till their lips are swollen like oranges, streaming with blood" (10). Artistic beauty and uncontrolled murderous impulses come together in what Russo captures as the outcome of carnival resisting, exaggerating, and destabilizing the boundaries that usually appear to "maintain high culture and organized society."

As part of the lack of traditional theatricality on stage, particularly with *The Fever*

³⁹Lawrence Christon, "Wallace Shawn Turns Up the Heat," *Los Angeles Times: Calender*, 12 May 1991.

and *The Designated Mourner*, the characters have almost no scenes in which they physically “act out” events. There is none of the onstage, excremental, carnivalesque dramaturgy in the tradition of Jarry which fueled plays such as *Our Late Night*, and *Marie and Bruce*.⁴¹ These later plays are situated in traditionally cultured spaces, and they seem, ostensibly, more readable than earlier works. The language in *The Fever* and *The Designated Mourner* is tamer and more conversational than that of previous plays. In these most recent plays the excesses of sexual, violent, and base bodily desires mingle with a dramaturgy that seduces the audiences by relating compelling, amusing, safe-seeming stories. Shawn seems to have moved from mimicry to masquerade. He has shifted from the “parodic hyberbolization” of roles in the 1970s and 1980s to the “nonironic imitation of a role”⁴² found in *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, *The Fever*, and *The Designated Mourner*. Undergirding these disingenuous hybrid dramaturgies is what I describe as a modified anti-theatricalism.

When I use the term “anti-theatricalism,” I am talking about a contemporary American strand of a particular verisimilitude: an artless-seeming life-like style of performance presented in combination with several non-illusionistic (not verisimilar) elements of theatre. As Demastes points out, “Minimalization of theatricality is very much a central gauge of realism, upon which rests a fundamental criterion of the realism mode.” It is precisely this invisibility, this effacing of the crafting of the production and the evidence of the crafter, that makes realism such a dangerous form. When audiences do

⁴¹King, 86.

⁴²Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers*, 146.

not see the work behind the production, they may be more inclined to feel that the events are not one individual's view of reality, but simply an absolute rendering of reality. As discussed in my Introduction, terms like "realism," "naturalism," "theatrical," and even "anti-theatrical," can be understood in many ways depending on the context. King uses the term "antitheatricalism" in his discussion of *Aunt Dan and Lemon* to refer to "a strategy for revealing the dangerous myths of the basic theatrical contract, what binds an audience in a submissive relationship to the very power of drama."⁴³ I would agree that King's description defines one aspect of the possible impact of antitheatricalism, but I do not agree that Shawn's plays function in this Brechtian manner

I think that King oversimplifies the wide variety of reception experiences to Shawn's work. For instance, the category of realism may be understood quite differently by a New York City audience in the 1990s and a regional theater audience in California. Spectators who have seen a large range of realisms, like a theatre-going individual in New York City, may have a far more elastic sense of what constitutes representative life on the stage than a spectator who only has access to three or four professional theaters. To point to a specific example of the contemporary vocabulary of "the real" on stage, I see an extreme version of anti-theatricality in Spalding Gray's solo pieces. There is usually a simple table, chair, and glass of water for Gray set on the stage. This simple set presents itself with no pretensions towards *being* a set, and therefore eliminates much of the boundary between reality on stage and a spectator's reality from her theater seat. In effect, the anti-theatricality of the production ensures a powerful mystification of Gray's

⁴³King, 126.

process of creating the piece, with its casual spontaneous quality. Gray strolls out on stage acknowledging the audience and sitting down with his cards and glass of water. The quality of his performance and the dinner-party conversational tone of his text achieve an illusion of authenticity and artlessness. Grey's "authenticity," of course, is particularly strong because of the autobiographical nature of his material. Audiences know that he has ostensibly gone through the experiences he recounts. Grey's apparent lack of pretenses create an impression of present realness that he exploits to great artistic effect.

Shawn comes close to this apparent abdication of theatricality with *The Fever*, but his character's language remains heightened and there is no sense that the narrator wants to engage with the audience in any immediate (unplanned non-textual) way. In both *Aunt Dan and Lemon* and *The Designated Mourner* there is no implication that the narrative has its actual origins in Shawn's own life. If Shawn were to play Jack, as he plans to do someday, that layering of writer—actor—character would generate a more complex mixture of the authentic and the made-up. *The Designated Mourner* clearly does have a set in the conventional sense, but the design makes no attempt to locate the scenes in a literal space. Given the impact of film's ability to bring realism to an audience in forty-foot detail, theater has shifted to accord a natural-seeming stage life a greater range of abstraction and selectivity. While one might argue that environmental shows like *Tamara* engage spectators in a "close-up" kind of verisimilitude, contemporary theater nonetheless evokes "reality" more often than it attempts to capture it inch by inch. What appears artless and "natural" is, of course, a constantly changing cultural norm and the stage, therefore, never actually captures life but only verges upon its momentary appearance.

Shawn's recent plays explore numerous ways to render theatrical devices and structures natural-seeming. For instance, direct address that abrogates both fourth wall realism and traditional notions of soliloquy creates an anti-theatrical quality. There are many contemporary plays that successfully incorporate this kind of direct address; Richard Greenberg's recent *Three Days of Rain* uses a great many speeches and comic asides to engage audiences while gracefully delivering paragraphs of exposition. In the first act of *Three Days of Rain*, for instance, characters move smoothly back and forth between their realistic-seeming, concrete, and specific stage reality and the undefined in-between-time of chatting up the audience. John Guare's highly successful *Six Degrees of Separation* utterly relied upon Ouisa Kittredge's sharing of her inner conflicts directly to spectators to give tragic depth to the comic scenes. In both these cases the speeches to the audience are really that: theatrical speeches. They never attempt to cover over their own nature as part of an artificial form.

Each of Shawn's three recent works incorporates this non-illusionistic style of presentation in combination with "classical" bourgeois realism. Offering spectators what appears to be the structure of deep psychological revelation, the bread and butter of theatrical realism, Shawn's plays break their part of the covenant of realistic theatre. Ultimately each play cannibalizes its own realistic components. The plays begin with open conversational speeches to the spectators such as Lemon's "Hello, dear audience, dear good people who have taken yourselves out for a special treat, a night at the theatre,"⁴⁴ or "I'm traveling— and I wake up suddenly in the silence before dawn in a strange hotel

⁴⁴Wallace Shawn, *Aunt Dan and Lemon* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1985), 1.

room, in a poor country where my language isn't spoken, and I'm shaking and shivering— Why?" from *The Fever*.⁴⁵ This approach reaches its apex in *The Designated Mourner* where, as Bert O. States describes naturalism, Shawn has created "the casual masquerad[ing] as the casual."⁴⁶

Turning to the material history of these last three plays, it is important to note that *The Designated Mourner* marks a major change in Shawn's career. *Aunt Dan and Lemon* was the first work to garner Shawn the playwright widespread attention in the United States (the film *My Dinner with Andre* being the early exception to Shawn's marginal status).⁴⁷ *The Fever* also received significant critical attention, but *The Designated Mourner* placed Shawn in a position where he might have moved into the group of widely produced off-beat playwrights like John Guare, Eric Overmyer, and David Rabe. John Lahr, one of America's most astute theatre critics, wrote about *The Designated Mourner* before it opened. He described it as an "event [that] has already generated a lot of excitement, and has all the markings of a theatrical break-through."⁴⁸ Shawn's play, however, did not achieve rave reviews or enough popular support to propel the drama into mainstream theater-going audiences' imagination. And, while the initial run of the play was to be only twenty-five performances available to a total of 7,500 patrons, superior

⁴⁵Wallace Shawn, *The Fever* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1991), 1.

⁴⁶Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: An Essay on the Phenomenology of Theatre* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 67.

⁴⁷Ever since 1977, with the controversial London production of *A Thought in Three Parts*, Shawn's works have garnered more attention and production support in England than in the United States. I will return to this issue in my discussion of Phyllis Nagy's largely British career.

⁴⁸Lahr, 46.

reviews might have brought the show to New York, thus garnering numerous other production slots.⁴⁹

The critical and public attention to the premiere production was generated in large part by the collaborators who came together on the project; the well-known writer David Hare directed both the premiere production at the Cottesloe (1996), one of the Royal National Theatre's spaces, and the subsequent film (1997).⁵⁰ The cast also created a great stir, primarily because the performer, comic writer, and director Mike Nichols went on stage for the first time in thirty years to create the leading character, Jack. In addition, the well-known theatre and film actress, Miranda Richardson played his wife, Judy, and the veteran British stage actor, David de Keyser, was Judy's father. Howard Shawn told John Lahr that with the scale of this opportunity, "I decidedly lose my underdog status with this production. It's being done in a way that anyone in the world would envy."⁵¹ While Shawn's own sense of his career as that of "an underdog" may be partly a defensive modesty, this production was positioned as a break-out.⁵²

In addition to the glittering cast and director, the play received an elegant physical production. Realism has always been bound up with illusionistic designs inside of which characters interact. Andre Antoine's Théâtre-Libre, for instance, achieved its fourth-wall

⁴⁹David Finkle, Review of *The Designated Mourner* Film, *Village Voice*, 30 July 1996.

⁵⁰This chapter addresses the film version of the London premiere, the London production, and the published text. The same collaborators generated both the stage and film versions of *The Designated Mourner*.

⁵¹Lahr, 46.

⁵²For further information on Shawn's production history, see King's *Writing Wrongs*.

production with the help of Antoine's mother; she provided her own tables and chairs to complete the room behind the shop in *Jacques Damour* in order to make it "real."⁵³ Realism has since loosened illusionism's grip and is no longer bound to inhabit only complete and faithful reproductions of settings. While it is true that the 1999 Broadway season offers realistic productions such as *Iceman Cometh* set in an accurate-seeming fully stocked bar, naturalistic fidelity is no longer a necessity. Contemporary realism often demands multiple settings for a given play and, in today's economic structure, single design unit sets suggesting various locations are popular. Economic duress and design developments have pushed realistic set design to become more suggestive and abstract. Bob Crowley's set design for *The Designated Mourner* is a suggestive rather than illusionistic design. None of the design choices present specific information about the time of day, or even the nature of the physical space. The design also refrains from overt authorial and ideological judgements. The visual choices, of course, characterize Jack, Judy, and Howard, but they do not offer judgements about the "goodness" or "badness" of these people.

All of Crowley's design choices, however, resonate with qualities of the leisure class, in this case a highly cultured intelligentsia. The set consists primarily of a large wooden table with three chairs upstage, one for each character. The three characters spend almost the entire uninterrupted two hours of the play seated at the table. Upstage of the table, as a frame and backdrop, is a reflective free-standing wall that appears to be made of gold mosaic tile. This backdrop piece was evidently inspired by the elegance of

⁵³Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 13.

Richard Avedon's dining room, where an initial reading had taken place.⁵³ James Campbell's review of the theatre premiere of *The Designated Mourner* for the *Sunday Times* (London) describes the setting as consisting of a rough wooden table placed running from stage right to left. This table was propped up by trestles and boxes, giving it "a provisional" quality.⁵⁴ He adds, however, that the books and other bric-a-brac connote a settled work place. Benedict Nightingale describes the table as resting on boxes packed with books and the table overflowing with books, pointing out that "behind it sit three people whose lives have had rather a lot to do with books."⁵⁵ The set design does not locate the world of the play in a home or lecture hall, but instead contextualizes the characters with representative objects and atmosphere.

The setting for *The Designated Mourner* also eschews the perspectival satisfactions of a proscenium stage, but as Alisa Solomon's discussion of Ingmar Bergman's *Doll House* and Deborah Warner's *Hedda Gabler* points out, those productions were powerful because the directors understood that "Ibsen's realism never demanded total immersion in the fictive world of the play: to peer into a recessed box at the end of a darkened theatre and grant plausibility to the events that took place there was not to relinquish awareness of artifice."⁵⁶ *The Designated Mourner's* audience can

⁵³First Look Pictures' press release for *The Designated Mourner*, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts Billy Rose Theatre Collection, 1996.

⁵⁴(London) *Sunday Times*, 28 April 1996.

⁵⁵Benedict Nightingale, "Inspector of the Thought Police," (London) *Times*, 26 April 1996, 36.

⁵⁶Alisa Solomon, *Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 67.

combine their awareness of artifice with acceptance of the reality of the characters facing them.

Crowley's set seems to be the grown up, rich, and imposing version of Spalding Gray's standard storytelling table and chair. Grey has created a unique anti-theatre style of performing with a single chair behind a small table with a microphone and glass of water as props. Like Jack in *The Designated Mourner*, Gray always speaks directly to his audience and creates a sensation of dialogue with them. Una Chaudhuri points out that Gray manages to create a theatre that "regains its function as a certain kind of home for the direct sharing of experience."⁵⁸ *The Designated Mourner* borrows some of that sense of direct sharing. Working with this suggestive realism, the audience gets much of the characterizing visual information about the characters that an illusionistic set offers, but in this case, spectators are also signaled to accept a kind of non-theatrical approach. This anti-theatrical form accepts its own incomplete fictive world conjuring its stage reality through language. By its very incompleteness, the set design seems to speak to spectators in an open non-dictatorial style. A set piece placed in the middle of a proscenium stage with no realistic walls announces the need for spectators to fill in the remaining imaginative space. This kind of abstraction may particularly appeal to a sophisticated spectator who differentiates film's verisimilitude from theatre's less literal and dictatorial translation of space.

While spare, *The Designated Mourner*'s designs are enough to provide a bridge to realistic ideas of the place, time, and socioeconomic status of the characters. The actors'

⁵⁸Chaudhuri, *Staging Place*, 83.

costumes, for instance, had a casual quality and looked as though they might be their street clothes. Each actor wore attractive contemporary clothes in dark tones. Howard wore a shirt, soft cravat, and trousers in dark tones. Judy wore a dark sleeveless cocktail dress, and Jack, the most casual, wore a dark shirt without a tie, jacket, and trousers. The characters all appear to be upper-class bookish figures whose nicely arrayed bodies are politely arranged; they do not seem highly theatrical in pose or clothes. Audience members might recognize these characters as “our people”: fellow white liberal intellectual types invested in culture. In this case, the seating arrangement with actors looking out at the audience from behind the table, a kind of Last Supper arrangement, could have created the formal feel of a panel discussion, but other production elements create an intimate dinner party tone. In either case, the characters’ civilized, conventionally clad bourgeois bodies generate an atmosphere of non-threatening conversation.

In *The Designated Mourner*, Shawn exchanges traditional physically active characters for these aestheticized “bodiless” figures who rarely move. The static stage, with its three seated figures focused only on the audience, signals spectators that there will be no graphic bodily events on the stage before them.⁵⁹ Given these visual and linguistic signals, a spectator might expect the characters to exhibit only the behavior that any casually well-dressed (white) individual might engage in while in public. It is only the bodies in the stories told by these three that cavort, pursue animalistic pleasures, and die

⁵⁹In an interesting choice, Shawn offers very few stage directions in the printed text. The occasional stage direction describes only whether a character is speaking to the audience or more rarely to another character. There are no stage directions for physical activity.

violently.

While *The Designated Mourner* relies upon many realistic components, Shawn's dramaturgy cuts out many of the conventional physical pleasures of a stage production to achieve its atmosphere of anti-theatricality. There is virtually no physicality to the staging. There are entrances for each character, final exits, small activities at the table with cigarettes, water, books, and so on, but no fascinating stage pictures. There are no revealing physical tensions and confrontations. Even when Jack and Judy seem to be replaying the text of a terrible fight between them, the characters remain seated. Judy says to her husband, "Jack — *people cry at funerals*" (55). Jack's reply is like a verbal slap: "I know that Judy. I know that, you see. You stupid bitch. . . . now you're blaming *me* because *you* didn't pay any fucking attention? You cold, unfeeling, inhuman bitch" (55-6). During this, the play's most passionate scene between two people, neither actor moves from their chair. It is as if the close-up on Jack and Judy, from the waist up only, channels all the play's energy into talk. This interchange seems an excellent example of how the violence in *The Designated Mourner* can be powerful without physicality. Richard Dyer has noted that, in many films, the black characters appear to have "more life" while the white characters (who make choices based on their perceptions rather than their connection to life) seem to have more deathliness.⁶⁰ *The Designated Mourner's* bodilessness (a relative to deathliness) arises from the characters' conflicts between their impulsive animal desires, and the dictates of their consciences. This talking-heads event implies a kind of whiteness that contains, or effaces, the life of the grotesque lower body.

⁶⁰Richard Dyer, "White," in *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (London: Routledge, 1997), 141-63.

A lady, and by implication a white lady, never farts in public, and white high culture engages almost entirely with the head. The lower body has carnivalesque desires, needs, and generative processes, and, in order to enter into a high cultural sphere, those messy attributes must be regulated. As Pierre Bourdieu notes, “The concessions of *politeness* always contain *political* concessions.”⁶¹

In their physical reality, the actors maintain a polite spatial relationship with each other and moderate energy in their speeches and stage presence. These choices reinforce the sensation that there is nothing of great danger waiting in the wings. Stanley Kauffmann’s review of the film for the *New Republic* describes the work as promising that “we don’t have to brace ourselves for the an onslaught of woe, we are seduced into compassion.”⁶² As Stephen Holden’s review of the film for the *New York Times* noted, the actors maintain a “quintessentially civilized tone — somewhere between that of a college seminar and a sedate cocktail party.”⁶³ All of the destruction seems to exist only in the events the three figures describe. It is the offstage bodies, such as Jack’s own self-described sexually unruly body, which are grotesquely driven by sexual desires while being disconcertingly disconnected from sympathetic human responses.

With his evocative writing, Shawn exploits the amplitude of language to take both Jack and spectators on a journey downwards into the Bakhtinian sewer of lower bodily impulses. Jack’s description of getting caught with the Danish girl at his birthday party, for

⁶¹Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 95.

⁶²Stanley Kauffman, “A Wry Requiem,” *New Republic*, 24 March, 1997, 28.

⁶³Stephen Holden, “The Satisfactions of Watching People Talk,” *New York Times*, 27 April 1997, Sunday, sec. 2, 15.

instance, barely seems to connect with the witty raconteur before the spectators. He explains that she seemed inexplicably attracted to him and so they went to the garage and “somehow . . . without giving the whole thing a great deal of thought we were somehow kissing, and . . . [I was] fondling her breasts” (50). When Howard suddenly walks into the garage, the three of them scatter farcically. Jack describes going into the tool shed. He says, “Well, there was nothing really to do in the tool shed, so I sat there simply playing with my dick” (51). Spoken quite conversationally, the self-deprecating image of Jack masturbating in the tool shed, his birthday party happening all around, does not necessarily erode his reliability as narrator.

Because the destruction of bodies happens offstage, Shawn is in no way limited by the boundaries of actors’ actual bodies on stage. Diamond notes that “the actor’s body is a site of experience that cannot in fact *have* experience, physical death is always a matter of a toy gun while in language the body can be immolated and resurrected.”⁶⁴ *The Designated Mourner* avoids this concrete difficulty because the play functions as a long messenger’s speech conjuring up unseen terrible events. Shawn never needs to bring bodies out on the *ekkyklema*; the tragic sights have already filled the audience’s imagination.

It is, of course, always problematic to discuss the range of experiences spectators may have at any given production. Alisa Solomon comments that “all critical writing about theatre (including feminist writing) makes assumptions about the audience’s response — we couldn’t talk about plays if we didn’t. Concepts like suspense or the

⁶⁴Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, 165.

comic rest on ideas of audience reactions. Obviously they rely on cultural assumptions.”⁶⁵ It is true that Shawn’s audience largely consists of “white” culturally sophisticated viewers and may, therefore, have fewer variant readings than the audience at the recent Broadway production of *The Iceman Cometh*.⁶⁶ Critic Laurie Winer pressed Shawn about the audience’s experiences with the lack of a moderate voice in *Aunt Dan and Lemon*; she asked him how he felt about those audience members hissing at the end of the play. Shawn responded: “One can only feel a kind of humility in front of those people because they are obviously hurt, personally, by the arguments that Lemon is espousing. They may not have a certain literary sophistication to understand the play and it may be inappropriate for them to be there.”⁶⁷ One can appreciate Shawn’s honesty about his change-from-the-top ideas of political intervention, that it is to his peers in the world of wealth and intellect to whom he speaks. Shawn describes his sense that his desire to make social change is often frustrated by this image: “we’re all like seventeenth-century French aristocrats, sitting around in our powdered wigs, and I’m the aristocrat who turns to the aristocrat next to him and says, ‘I say, my dear fellow, isn’t it dreadful about those atrocities that the

⁶⁵Solomon, *Re-Dressing the Canon*, 14.

⁶⁶*The Iceman Cometh* may have drawn an unusually diverse audience because of Kevin Spacey’s film successes. There may have been many spectators who would never, otherwise, attend theatre and may have known nothing about Eugene O’Neill. On the other hand, there were theatre scholars and theatre enthusiasts eager to see a powerful contemporary interpretation of a seldom produced O’Neill. There may also have been international tourists who come to see several Broadway shows; they may not have realized they were in for such a long evening of talk.

⁶⁷Laurie Winer, “My Breakfast with Wally,” *Wall Street Journal*, 20 November 1985, 30.

aristocrat who turns to the aristocrat next to him and says, 'I say, my dear fellow, isn't it dreadful about those atrocities that the King committed last week?'"⁶⁷ Shawn's audience comes primarily from this relatively homogenous "aristocratic" subculture. Even so, in my effort to discuss a normative spectatorial reading, I have chosen not to focus upon the infinite variety of individual resistant readings to each individual. Solomon points out that feminist theatre criticism need not universalize spectators' experiences, but rather "looks at how performance produces itself in the temporal event of theatre, all the while instructing its audience in a means of regarding it."⁶⁸ One can never say that plays are completely knowable, but conventional readings can reveal a great deal about cultural expectations. Realistic productions, in particular, strive to be readable. Diamond articulates this function of realism's project as "always ideological, drawing spectators into identifications with its coherent fictions."⁶⁹

It is often the reliability of realism's coherent fictions that entices audience members into putting their own usual sense of self (and boundaries) at risk by investing emotionally in characters, by identifying. The disruption in the world of the text evokes what Belsey calls a "precariousness of the ego and offers the reader the sense of danger and excitement which results from that recognition."⁷⁰ While Belsey is describing the

⁶⁷Mark Strand, Interview with Wallace Shawn, "The Man Behind the Voice." *Interview* 19 March 1989, 74.

⁶⁸Solomon, 15.

⁶⁹Elin Diamond, "The Violence of 'We': Politicizing Identification" in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 393.

⁷⁰Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Routledge, 1992. Reprint, Methuen & Co., 1980), 75.

what is at stake for an audience member identifying with a character. A spectator at *The Designated Mourner* for instance, would generally pick one of the three characters with whom to identify. As I will discuss in detail at a later point, identifying with Jack turns out to be a risky and fraught action. The dramaturgical structure of the play finally turns on the spectators who have identified with him; Jack betrays Judy, Howard, himself, and those who placed trust in his “heroic” journey.

Belsey’s sense of the spectator’s precarious ego describes the same theatrical fulcrum Diamond explores in her discussion of identification and the work of Adrienne Kennedy.⁷² A safely bounded and temporary danger to one’s own sense of self is a convention of mainstream realistic drama. How does realism’s linear progression lure spectators into making these leaps of identification with characters? Realism is constructed around recognizable character types traversing predictable paths with enough suspense to engage audiences.⁷³ Suspense is an equation based on the known, recognized, and unknown information available to characters and, through them, to spectators. *The Designated Mourner* creates suspense and offers what initially appears to be a familiar narrative journey. For instance, spectators may be curious about whether Jack will be able to pry Judy away from Howard to save their marriage. What will Jack do about his rising resentments at Howard’s circle and everyone connected to the high culturati? Once the

⁷²Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, 106-141. Diamond discusses the surprisingly subversive possibilities for identification. She writes that “The process of becoming aware of and politicizing one’s identifications, like the process of identification itself, is potentially transformative.”

⁷³As Solomon notes in her discussion of *Hedda Gabler*, it was not that spectators and reviewers rejected Hedda as a believable individual, but, rather, that could not locate her within their lexicon of female dramatic characters, 65.

do about his rising resentments at Howard's circle and everyone connected to the high culturati? Once the violence begins to tear their world apart, how will each of them bear up? Most urgently, when will Jack accept the heroic responsibilities attendant upon his "role" in the patterns of realistic drama?

Early on, the possibility for change within the narrative must *appear* reliable in order for the audience to feel at ease with their identifications. It is key to the play's suspense, for instance, and its appearance of illusionistic transparency that the audience not know what the characters knew all along: Judy and Howard are already dead. If their murders were revealed earlier the play would lose the open unfixed sense that events move forward "naturally" from unknown to known in a linear, causal progression. The development of Jack's alienating transformation is also carefully calibrated so as not to lose the audience too early in the play. Even Jack's flight from Howard's house, for example, need not mark a turning point for those identified with him. His rush from the house plays comfortably in the groove worn by American characters for whom escape is the core plot structure.⁷³ Una Chaudhuri points out that it this pattern of escape is clear in *A Doll's House*, in which "the heroism of departure becomes elaborated as a *victimage of location*."⁷⁴ In that longstanding realistic pattern in which leaving home is liberation, Jack's departure can be read as a positive action.

⁷³Raymond Williams, "Social Environment and Theatrical Environment: The Case of English Naturalism," in *English Drama: Forms and Development*, ed. Marie Axton and Raymond Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 217. I am indebted to Una Chaudhuri's *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* for bringing this essay to my attention.

⁷⁴Chaudhuri, *Staging Place*, 63.

visual signs. The focus in this play, however, quickly shifts to conversation and stories. Despite the fact that the play consists almost entirely of three intercut monologue threads, and notwithstanding the play's nature as a memory play, much of Jack's language has a charming extemporaneous quality, as if the events were immediate rather than recounted. Mike Nichols's years as a comic sketch performer with Elaine May no doubt give him the techniques needed to perform such seeming spontaneity. The only previous work in Shawn's writing that comes close to this engaging informality can be found much earlier in *My Dinner with Andre*⁷⁵. Jack's is the predominate voice in *The Designated Mourner*, and his naturalistic monologues have the disarming quality of cocktail party chat. James Campbell's review for the *Times Literary Supplement* notes that *The Designated Mourner* has a text "so stylized as to seem unscripted," and points out how Mike Nichol's "ambling on stage" points to the ways in which "Shawn's formalism is cloaked in informality."⁷⁶ This off-the-cuff quality helps to efface the effort the play expends getting spectators to accept Jack as a reliable voice of reason. The dramaturgical structure strives to give spectators the feeling of having, as Belsey described it, a "shared understanding of a text which re-presents the world," and therefore "guarantee(s) not only of the truth of the text but of the reader's existence as an autonomous and knowing subject in a world of knowing subjects."⁷⁷ The audience does not recognize until much later that they have been given misleading impressions of the given circumstances of the play. They are

⁷⁵Disch, *Nation*, 24.

⁷⁶James Campbell, "Conversation and Its Discontents," (London) *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 May 1996.

⁷⁷Belsey, 68.

actually being hailed as complicit, guilty, and, like Jack, lacking a sense of history.

Familiarity of realistic types, such as Jack, underdog, outsider and naive flaneur, also stimulate identifications between spectators and characters. With the same bumbling charm as Shawn's character in *My Dinner With Andre*, Mike Nichols begins *The Designated Mourner*⁷⁹ capturing a sympathetic position with spectators by puncturing his father-in-law's pomposity as the self-nominated leader of an intellectual coterie. Jack's self-deprecating humor locates him as the comic relief. It is true that Jack opens the play with a grave speech announcing his role as the designated mourner but he remains serious for only a few lines. He immediately interrupts himself with "Christ, you know, I remember so clearly the moment— when *was* that?— years ago— when someone was saying, 'If God didn't like assholes, He wouldn't have made so many of them,' and the person who was saying it looked right at me as he said it— ha ha ha—" (5). Jack identifies himself as the self-acknowledged loser, the butt of the joke in his first two speeches. When someone then asked him if he was all right, Jack replied that it did not bother him: "I'm fine, really. . . . 'I'm fine really?' Ha ha ha— I must admit, it was an expression I always absolutely hated, but anyway, you know, we all used it— aha ha ha—" (5-6). This forced laugh and Jack's self-disparagement confirm his status as the guy who never fits in the character spectators usually root for in his struggles as the outsider.

Judy's and Howard's early speeches also define each of them. In significant contrast to Jack's disarming cocktail party chat, Judy introduces herself to the audience in

⁷⁹As of November 1998, *The Designated Mourner* has only been produced on stage in London and Chicago. My discussion incorporates reception material from both the film and the London stage version.

a self-conscious way, “I guess the search for more refined forms of punishment never comes to an end. . . . I loved him so much, it was a kind of torture” (6). Judy’s lyric passages, particularly her speeches about her love for Jack, art, and the poor, characterize her with their pretensions. She speaks of the things she loves:

I love the silence, the beauty of silence. The shadows of trees. Japanese monasteries buried in snow, surrounded by forest. Loneliness, death, in the dark forest. But my life was different, a different way: A city. People. Concerts. Poetry. Altogether, I was lucky—one of the few—because I paid a little price for the things that I thought. I paid a price, so my life was not nothing, my life had something in it. (9)

Her mannered speech sets her up as a poetic aesthete who moves quickly from one mood or thought to another; perhaps none of them meaning much of anything. A high-strung idealistic neurotic figure, Jack’s comment about her need to constantly look for subtle beauty types her as naively sensitive.

Howard is not only characterized by the pretensions of his early comments, but he is also painted as an absurd and hateful figure by Jack. Before Howard can establish his own point of view, Jack preempts by describing Howard in the first seven pages of the play. His humorous discussion of Howard’s contempt for all those beneath him, which evidently included most mortals, gives the audience a picture of Howard as a well-known pompous professorial type, as self-important and certain as ever a *Dottore* was. Jack asks rhetorically, “How should I begin to tell you about this remarkable man who responded so sensitively to the most obscure verses and also to the cries of the miserable and the downtrodden, sometimes . . . without ever leaving the breakfast table?” Ten pages later, when Howard does begin to tell his own stories, he seems to fulfill Jack’s ironic sketch. Howard lays down opinions like facts:

But you see, there you're judging another human being. Aren't you? Jack? I mean, you're putting your energy into praising people or blaming people and saying who is better and worse — and meanwhile your attention is entirely turned away from the human suffering that is going on all around you. . . . (20)

Howard's certainty is unshakable. Whether he is speaking about Jack or discussing how seeing the injustices of society led him to tremble "with fear like the blind girl in the fairy tale," Howard exudes petty pretentiousness. The audience's familiarity with these three character types helps this play move forward with no "plot" or stage action.

Once spectators begin to identify and see through Jack's eyes, they are buoyed up for much of the play by the energy generated by his disparaging disavowals of his own feelings, a key aspect of his stage type. Jack's character resonates as a still familiar Jewish American type functioning in many forms of literature and popular culture: "the jolly good fellow." Harley Erdman has described this stereotype in his examination of historical origins in *The Jew on the Stage*.⁸⁰ The "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" stereotype of male Jews appeared as part of the first commercially successful period of Jewish comedians in America at the end of the nineteenth century. The nebbishes, schlemiels, and self-deprecating ironists flourish today in the works of Philip Roth, Woody Allen, and Shawn's own acting and writing. Erdman notes that historically these characters "occupy a sympathetic center stage with their madcap antics and tales of tribulation. They perform a low comedy which presents the possibility of an audience laughing with them, although

⁸⁰Harley Erdman, *Staging the Jew: The Performance of an American Ethnicity 1860-1920* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 64. Erdman describes this melodramatic character citing the "nefarious conspirators Moses Bullheimer and Patrick Green" who sing "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" in the melodrama *In the Trenches* (1898). Bullheimer is an Irish character while Green is the stage Jew, and their song testifies to their mutual fellowship and partnership in crime. Ultimately, however, Green betrays his Irish partner, and Bulheimer must pay for their crimes with imprisonment, 64.

the boomerang of their biting humor always threatens to arc back on itself and make these stage Jews the objects of the same laughter that they seek to elicit.”⁸¹ Jack spends much of the early part of the play claiming this sympathetic and ethnic spot center stage. This is not to say that the underdog type is solely an American Jewish phenomenon, only that this particular combination of intellectual yearning and self-acknowledged failure strike a historically resilient, stereotypical, and Jewish note. Mike Nichols’s jowly, hairpiece-askew, slightly ludicrous looking Jack creates an appealing schlemiel. David Biale, Daniel Boyarin, and Ann Pellegrini have all written about the feminization of Jewish males, and this stereotype’s long-lived presence in American culture.⁸² Jack’s comic and humiliating account of being publically intellectually eviscerated by Howard seems to play out the jolly good fellow’s scene of joking about his own scapegoated, metaphorically castrated fate. Jack sets up the scene of his humiliation with this comment: “Sometimes Howard would pick *me* to play the role of the idiot—Well, I guess he *always* did—ha ha ha—and that

⁸¹Erdman, 64.

⁸²Ann Pellegrini, *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Pellegrini discusses Freud’s theories through the lens of Jewishness as gender. David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992). Written five years before Erdman’s historical study, Biale locates the stock Jewish schlemiel’s recognized characteristics in the Yiddish theater and Borscht Belt material of the early twentieth century. “By the time Roth composed his fiction, this myth [of the schlemiel] was well established and immediately recognizable: Roth’s self-conscious exploration of the myth of Jewish erotic neurosis only works because Roth’s readers already know the codes. Besides Roth, no one has mined this stereotype more than the film-maker and writer Woody Allen. . . . [In] *What’s New Pussycat?*, . . . he portrayed what was to become a stock figure, the little man with the big libido and the even bigger sexual neurosis, a character comically unable to consummate his desire” 205. Daniel Boyarin, “What Does a Jew Want?; or, The Political Meaning of the Phallus,” in *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, ed. Christopher Lane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 217.

was really quite fun in a way” (17). This humorous description is intended to ally spectators with Jack against the critical, judgmental, know-it-all Howard.

This “coloring” of Jack as a misfit type fuels all of his character’s motivations and, therefore, the audience’s journey along with him. I suggest that Jack’s internal conflict over his identity drives the play. He struggles to locate himself with regard to the pressures of the stereotype, which is to say, he is internally split between his ethnic past and his present identity. This subtextual conflict remains the unacknowledged and disavowed object of the play. The surface conflicts, high versus low culture or barbarians versus aesthetes, creates an emotional impact because it is fueled by this repressed conflict. Benedict Nightingale’s review suggests this mysterious subtextual event. He writes that the play lures spectators for some time into “thinking that Shawn’s main target is cultural pretension and radical chic.” but that, ultimately, the play is after something far more subtle and indirect.⁸³ Unlike traditional realism’s secrets which are always revealed in the *peripeteia*, this story of ethnicity is neither confronted nor resolved. This play turns on disavowal rather than catharsis and has connections to Artaud’s anti-purgation.

Lorraine Gamman and Merjka Makinen describe psycho-sexual disavowal as:

an *incomplete* attempt at detachment from reality — hence the oscillation between knowing and not knowing. Because the repression is incomplete, it allows for real genital orgasm to occur, while safely protecting the fetishist from fully realising the threatening fact (of female castration).⁸⁴

The stereotypes and images of Jewish history never tear completely through the play’s

⁸³Benedict Nightingale, *Times* (London), 26 April 1996, 36.

⁸⁴Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, *Female Fetishism* (1994; reprint, New York: New York University Press, 1995), 42-43.

realistic boundaries, but they create a constant pressure which empowers the otherwise Manichean philosophical conflict between “barbarians” and high culture.⁸⁵

In *The Designated Mourner*, high and low culture become the fetishized holding positions for the subtextual conflict. For purposes of this study, I would like to work with Gamman and Makinen’s definition of fetishism as “a displacement of meaning through the synecdoche, the displacement of the object of the desire onto something else through the process of disavowal.”⁸⁶ In this case, the argument of high or low culture becomes the fetish in the work of disavowing the subtextual conflict. Even when Jack believes he has experienced a liberating catharsis upon murdering his former identity, spectators can see how his repressed conflict continues to exact its cost

I went up to the figure, the unpleasant little self threw it on its back and kicked it smartly in the face and then I sat on top of it, grabbed its neck, and choked it and strangled it and bashed its skull against the floor until it stopped squealing. . . . (91)

Those spectators who maintain their identification with this new freed Jack will be pushed to disavow him as his final actions present a threat to normative notions of civilized behavior.

A significant part of Jack’s unacknowledged conflict revolves around his inadequate heterosexuality. Jack draws a vivid picture of himself as sexually incompetent, reproducing what is, I argue, an important aspect to the stereotypes of Jewish masculinity. Describing his love affair with Judy, he jokes about his own incompetent love-making:

the comical part was that I happened to know, and Howard didn’t, that I wasn’t

⁸⁵Matt Wolf, Review of *The Designated Mourner*, *Variety*, 29 April 1996, 148.

⁸⁶Gamman and Makinen, *Female Fetishism*, 45.

actually a good lover at all. God, no—I was really awful! Ha ha ha! I had no control over my own responses. I used to remind myself of my college friend Jorge who had this pet lemur which he kept on a leash and which was always leaping up at people unpredictably, or else lying down in some public place and refusing to budge, or starting to scream and refusing to stop (29-30).

Judy, evidently, has so little comparative evidence that even Jack's lovemaking still seemed romantic. Jack, however, is painfully aware of his shortcomings and disavows his feelings around his inadequacy, turning painful disaster into comic fodder. He says that an earlier lover had told him "the way you approach a woman's body is simply wrong" (30). Another complaint about his lovemaking was that "wrestling is really not the right model" (30)

Shawn's own acting career and public persona shed light on this central subtextual conflict. As a highly successful character actor Shawn has been immersed in the belief systems and ideologies fueling the entertainment business's selections of physical types for romantic roles. He has had painful first-hand experience of Hollywood's narrow boundaries regarding gender and heterosexual masculine prowess. Shawn knows what it is to always play the "underdog." The particular issues Shawn faces as a character actor revolve around his physical type and vocal quality. Shawn has an odd face, bald pate, and slightly pudgy physique. His voice is relatively high and his speech is marked by a lisp. Partly because of these qualities, he has succeeded by playing the comic butt of the not-quite jokes, he is not-quite masculine and sometimes he is not-quite white in his otherness.

Despite Shawn's commercial success he is frustrated at how he has been typed. He says of Hollywood casting directors, "I sort of feel insulted that these people don't

think that I could be the father of the family, the husband, the lover. Why instead, do they see me as the bizarre priest who lurks on the edges of life, the peculiar, sexless psychiatrist who skulks in the corner of the lives of the real people?"⁸⁷ As King notes, none of Shawn's acting roles require him to embody or display sexuality. In fact, Shawn makes a specialty out of androgynous-seeming men. In his first movie role, Shawn becomes the punchline in Woody Allen's joke. In the film *Manhattan* (1979),⁸⁸ Shawn played the ex-husband of Allen's leading lady, Diane Keaton. Keaton's character describes her ex-husband as a remarkably sexual man. King describes how "When Woody (short and skinny) chances to meet his predecessor (short and plump) in a clothing store, he is shocked to find that the man she was referring to was 'this little homunculus.'" Scholars frequently locate Jewish stereotypes in the body, and, as Sander Gilman describes in his essay on Jewishness, "It is in being visible in 'the body that betrays,' that the Jew is most uncomfortable. For visibility means being seen not as an individual but as an Other, one of the 'ugly' race."⁸⁹ Shawn has made a career out of being in just such a "body that betrays." Shawn describes himself as "an underdog" while Jack characterizes himself as a failure, in particular as a sexual schlemiel.

These identifications, by Shawn and by Jack, are key to understanding the play's subversiveness. Jack's failure to affirm a classic masculinity creates a space into which doubt and a carnivalesque spirit creep. Because Jack absents himself from the dominant

⁸⁷Strand, "The Man Behind the Voice," 73-76.

⁸⁸This and the subsequent citation from King, 10.

⁸⁹Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 193.

fiction of normative gender assumptions, he opens the door to the Bahktinian disruptions bubbling up from below the "classical" contained identity. Jack himself recognizes that he lacks normative masculine (classical) containment. In keeping with the persistent American construction of Jewish men as feminine, Jack's immature sexuality connects with the uncontrollable quality of an hysterical female body rendered grotesque by its irrational uncontainable nature⁹⁰ When Jack initially confesses his masquerade of masculinity to the audience, it is amusing: "Ha ha ha! I had no control over my own responses" (29). By the end of the play however, Jack fails to uphold what Kaja Silverman's influential work on film and gender, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992) calls the powerful illusion of stability deriving from "the adequacy of the male subject."⁹¹

In addition to his uncontained sexual efforts, Jack also goes to a more grotesque level of the erupting carnivalesque in the stories he tells: he describes plunging into a world in which his physical desires rule. One reviewer describes the new liberated Jack as "Falstaff without the jokes."⁹² Early on in Jack's separation from Howard's world, he questions whether Howard and Judy's lives, with their ostensible love of high culture, are

⁹⁰These stereotypes of Jewish men in America continue to haunt contemporary constructions of Jewish identity. As a Jewish male caller to the Michael Feldman's National Public Radio show "What'dya know?" claimed, "Sandy Koufax is more important to Jewish men than Maimonides. (November 14, 1998) Jack subsequently refers to his limp penis which, despite Judy's efforts to arouse him, lies curled up in his shorts as being "like a lunch packed by Mother"(86). This image speaks to the image of a cosseted, mollycoddled, Jewish princeling whose circumcision marks him as castrated, and, according to certain norms, feminized.

⁹¹Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 15.

⁹²Egan, *Theatre Journal*, 237.

merely shams. There is a key moment when he takes himself away from the house to stay overnight in a hotel, just after the rock has been thrown through the window. After listening to the couple in the next room making love, he decides to watch television rather than return to his book. Watching television long into the night, he begins to characterize peoples' expressions of passion for "high" art, like Rembrandt, as lies. He sees a Manichean division between pretending to like Rembrandt and, without that lie, becoming "simply a zoo animal, you become an empty thing, you're nothing more than really than a large balloon with a mouth, genitals, paws and an asshole, a nice great big one" (37-8)

This description of an individual as a combination of orifices depicts a nightmarish extreme of the Bakhtinian grotesque open, protruding, desirous and base carnivalesque body.

Later in the play in his own "slummy" apartment, Jack gets relatively close to that "empty thing" he had described when he urinates and then defecates on a book he has placed in his bathtub. By killing all of his civilizing impulses, he emerges as a regressive boundary-crossing monster. In what he calls a successful "experiment," using the book and tub as a toilet, Jack violates several cultural boundaries and taboos⁹³

With these violations, the arc of the play moves along increasingly unconventional

⁹³Juliet Steyn discusses Jewishness and dirt in her essay, "Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist: Fagin as a Sign," in *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity*, eds. Linda Nochlin and Tamar Garb (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1995), 48-9. She explores Fagin's urben den and his uncleanness in such a way that she also seems to be describing Jack's descent into his slummy life and his "Experiments in Privacy." She writes that, "The urge to cleanliness, according to Freud, originates in the compulsion to get rid of excreta which are themselves associated with a shameless, abandoned, animal sexuality. . . . Fagin's dirtiness, his bad smell, is both a reminder of the primitive sexuality of the Jew and a threat to sociality, or, to follow Freud's argument, to civilization itself."

lines. Kaja Silverman's discussion of America's dominant fictions reveals that:

our . . . ideological 'reality' solicits our faith above all else in the unity of the family, and the adequacy of the male subject. If ideology is central to the maintenance of classic masculinity, the affirmation of classic masculinity is equally central to the maintenance of our governing 'reality'. . . within our dominant fiction the phallus/penis equation occupies absolute pride of place.⁹⁴

The adequacy of the male subject supports a sense of stable identity and knowable reality for both genders, and, as a parallel structure, it also supports realistic drama. When Jack abandons any effort to maintain a masquerade of heterosexual white masculinity, the play loses more of its familiar, and reliable-seeming, structures. Rather than the unchanging ideal of Michaelangelo's "David," Jack proclaims himself to be only "a pile of bric-a-brac," a random collection of identifications (89). Jack's transformation is the core of the play, and as he unravels, rather than moving forward in a linear way, spectators become incapable of making his "hero's" journey fit with conventional expectations. As Solomon insightfully points out with regard to the uproar over the early productions of *Hedda Gabler*, audiences found Hedda intolerable "not because she was unlike any actual person . . . but because she didn't behave like other female *characters*."⁹⁵ Jack becomes intolerable in just the same way; he refuses to behave like any familiar realistic character. Realism, as de Lauretis has noted of sadism, demands a story with pain, but Jack refuses to suffer in a traditional way. Ultimately, audiences can not filter the play's arc through conventional structures of heroic sacrifices that lead to clarity or even redemption.

However, Shawn's bodiless dramaturgy allows the audience to read the play

⁹⁴Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, 15-16.

⁹⁵Solomon, 65.

through these conventional structures for most of the evening, sustaining the audience's identification with the narrator for much of the play. Spectators attempting to map their experience of the play with conventional sign-posts hang onto that identification until Jack's "offstage" activities impinge on the immediate moment and cannot be ignored. Until that final moment, however, Jack's descriptions of how his philandering was spotted by Howard and even the moment when he defecated on the book do not enter into the play's reality in the same way they would if those scenes had been staged before the audience. If the spectators had watched the event, most might have been repulsed by Jack. Instead, the event is described only from Jack's point of view; spectators may begin to disidentify, but neither Judy nor Howard are given opportunities to capture identifications in these moments; they are almost never inhabiting the same scene as Jack and therefore neither speak about it nor react to it. In another success of this non-staging, Jack and Judy describe how Howard has been beaten by a group of unnamed men, but Howard's prissy, dapper, authoritative presence at the end of the table enables spectators to remain somewhat distant from the corporeal reality described. This offstage distancing functions just like Jack's own emotional distance does for him; there is a remove that keeps immediate visceral horror at an arm's length.

The imaginary space of disembodied victims becomes the area in which history nearly ruptures the play's surface. In the night after the attack on Howard, for instance, Jack dreams that he has been wounded and taken to a hospital. In the dream he resists, rejecting the food they bring, and in the middle of his long night in the hospital he sees a nurse sitting near him. "At one moment I wake up and I see her smiling. She looks right

in my eyes and draws a finger across her throat” (64). As Jack recounts his nightmare, Judy and Howard together repeat a litany, “Let’s go quietly” (64). They repeat this litany four times contrapuntally before and after Jack’s speech, but Jack rejects this vision of his own sacrifice and imminent death. That morning he leaves the house for good.

The nurse’s throat-cutting gesture, while universally understood, also resonates specifically with the Holocaust. In both Claude Lanzmann’s well-known epic documentary, *Shoah* and Spielberg’s film, *Schindler’s List*, characters use this gesture to capture a triumphant power over the Jews as they are enroute to the death camps. *Shoah* is a nine hour film released in 1985, the same year that *Aunt Dan and Lemon* was produced. In the first half of the movie, Lanzmann interviews Henrik Gawkowski, a former conductor of the death trains, as he stands by the train tracks leading into Auschwitz. Upon questioning, Gawkowski shows the director how the Poles used to gesture to the Jews as they went by on board these trains bound for Auschwitz. Gawkowski slowly draws his thumb across his neck. That well-known Holocaust image has become significant largely because Gawkowski’s point of view seems intensely ambiguous. He has an enigmatic expression on his face which seems full of a triumphant sadism yet he sighs sorrowfully (perhaps) for the dead Jews.⁹⁶ This complex meaning to the gesture generates the same kind of tension for Jack as it does for the viewer watching *Shoah*.

Individual members of an audience, of course, may or may not make these

⁹⁶Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 124-125.

historical connections picking out these associative references. But, the audiences who frequent Shawn's plays, and certainly the New York audience that went downtown to see the limited engagement run of the movie, share a significant amount of cultural capital. Shawn himself describes his previous play, *The Fever*, for instance, as being for, about, and by, a member of the *culturati*. Even without the specific historical connection for individual audience members, these references affect Jack with the force of the past, and the audience can sense the weight of this complicated image of a Nurse warning (or threatening) his death. Members of the audience who identify with any of the numerous threatened ethnic groups who have faced genocide in the last half century might well feel the resonance. Jack's response is predicated upon that level of fear and that kind of instinct for survival.

As the play nears its climax these historical images become more significant to the sometimes elliptical moments of the play. At what would normally be the moment of recognition and transformation Jack's story takes a final derailment, never to return to the realistic pathway. The *perepitea-manque* comes when Jack sees a picture in the newspaper of Judy as one of several victims of a state execution. Face to face with his last chance to save his soul, Jack flops about not knowing what to do: "stand up, remain seated, stay in, go out?" (98). In the play's anti-epiphany he chooses to reach for his pornographic magazines. As he does so he sees a "tiny personal advertisement near one of the pictures [which] asked the unknown reader a simple question: "'Have you ever ridden on the train which carries the bodies of the dead?' . . . 'I have, and I was given a berth right next to theirs'" (98). Jack, too, had a berth right next to the dead. As the

escapee Jack knew that if he stayed in his marriage to Judy, if he had stayed in that house with Howard, he might ride on the death-train.

With their deaths, Judy and Howard make their only exit. Jack reiterates his self-appellation from the opening of the play: "I am the designated mourner" (5). In the play's final moments Jack rises to narrate and reenact a small ritual of burning a piece of paper at a café table to commemorate the select tribe that has passed away. Jack tells the audience

Although I heard John Donne crying into a handkerchief as he fell through the floor -- plummeting fast through the earth on his way to Hell. His name . . . would not be remembered, it turned out. The rememberers were gone, except for me, and I was forgetting: forgetting his name, forgetting him, and forgetting all the ones who remembered him (101).

Mike Nichols's performance of Jack reveals a man who represses pain in an anti-heroic effort to forget. With this erasure of lives, Jack comes to embody the idea bitterly described by Auschwitz survivor Tadeusz Borowski (author of *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*) that without witnesses, "The living are always right, the dead are always wrong."⁹⁷ Within the play itself there is no sense of the dead being honored. It is only through audience responses to the play that one may challenge Borowski's fear of seeing his own suffering and history written over. Jack's final utterance promises just this kind of erasure. He asks,

What were we waiting for? The appearance of the Messiah? Was all this for nothing? I was quite fed up with the search for perfection. And rather amazed by all that I had—the lemonade stand with its lemonade, the café with its irritable customers and staff, the carousel, the squirrels, the birds, the tree" (102).

⁹⁷Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, trans. Barbara Vedder, with an Introduction by Jan Kott, trans. Michael Kandel (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 26. This Borowski quote is from the Kott introduction and does not appear in the body of the book.

Jack makes peace with the past by letting it disappear.

Shawn offers no indictment of Jack to salve the audience with the stable values of an absent author's judgment. Structurally, it is Jack's failure to "act like a man," i.e., a dramatic hero, that forces spectators to look inwards for narrative recontainment and meaning, the usual realistic rewards. Jack fails the test of being able to live "up to their society's expectations of how one must perform oneself as a man," and therefore fails to fulfill realism's conventional plot trajectory.

It is only after the lights have gone down, after the theatrical evening is over, that the audience can move forward past the ending without closure. A frame that would render an audience's experience with Jack meaningful and commodifiable never appears. A spectator may discover that her engagement has eroded into disturbing complicity, and this revelation echoes back through the play in strange ways, unraveling earlier perceptions. Jack's comic disavowals in the beginning of the play functioned as successful bait to engage the audience; if the spectators never allied themselves with Jack, they would never experience his betrayal of them.

Shawn wants to provoke spectators. Commenting on the furor provoked by *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, Shawn says, "I think it's more interesting not to put my own attitudes into the play, which would allow the audience to go home satisfied. The audience has to react to this play, otherwise it's a disaster."⁹⁸ It is this betrayal which completes Shawn's unique dramaturgical structure. As Wetzsteon writes, "You can react to Shawn's plays in

⁹⁸Michael Billington, "A Play of Ideas Stirs Political Passions," *New York Times*, 27 October 1985, sec. II, 30.

one of two ways—you can get angry, or you can reevaluate your life.”⁹⁹ With numerous genres, such as thrillers and horror movies, audiences are educated to read the conventional-ness, i.e., safeness, of a given piece. It is only when movies, and plays like *The Designated Mourner*, break their contract of conventions, betraying that trust with the audience, that they threaten spectators with a keener danger as Shawn does.

The Designated Mourner shows how easily elisions can be made in history. The play also describes the costs to both those who make these erasures and to the culture which supports those acts of forgetting. It is also true that at each performance Jack recounts the story of his coming to abjure memory, to cut off history and its burdens. Jack’s final action can be read as his nightly beginning the play again to add his memories to the cultural pool so that the act of forgetting itself may be remembered in all its destructive power.

This issue of memory and erasure also appears in the names Shawn has given his characters. The character’s names in *The Designated Mourner*, for instance, are quite unrevealing about their ethnic and religious affiliations. Each of their first names can be read as a Jewish name or a gentile one. And because the play is denuded of surnames, there is even less information about the character’s family backgrounds. Similarly the names of their family friends are opaque, not uttering clues about roots, relations or family trees. With the exception of Lars, a clearly Scandinavian name, none of the people mentioned in the text seem to have specific ethnic names. That is, until Judy mentions a distinctly marked Jewish name; after being released from prison, she attends a play called

⁹⁹Wetzsteon, “Wallace Shawn, Subversive Moralist,” 17.

The Stone by a playwright named Abromowitz.

This playwright's surname is the only unmistakable marker of Jewishness in the play. The specific name Shawn has chosen for the playwright conjures up a connection to Sholem Jacob Abramovitch, also known as Abramovitsh. The playwright, Abromovitsh, was also known by a pen name, Mendele (after his most famous character, Mendele the Bookpeddler), and is one of the grandfathers of Yiddish literature.¹⁰⁰ One of the first to create literature written in the vulgar parlance of the peoples' Yiddish rather than the educated vocabulary of Hebrew, Abramovitsh wrote in many different genres over a long career, but he is best known as a satirist. Mendele was his free-speaking, roving, parodic character who revealed the hypocrisy of those all around him. Shawn's identifications and masquerades create a secret connection to the past (through Mendele) while also confronting audiences with the devastated future embodied by the monster Jack becomes. To pass is to erase history, both personal and epic, and Shawn has written an eloquent ambivalent play of passing.

¹⁰⁰Charles Madison, *Yiddish Literature: Its Scope and Major Writers from Mendele and Sholem Aleichem to Isaac Bashevis Singer* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 43.

CHAPTER III

DESIRE AND VISIBLE DIFFERENCE IN PHYLLIS NAGY'S WORK

Because the "real" of female homosexuality was historically displaced onto women of color and working-class women, the white middle-class lesbian was considered an impossibility. And yet the lesbian, like the whore, is perceived as "not-woman" and therefore also not "really" white.

—Lynda Hart

Guardian reviewer Michael Billington wrote about the images associated with the title of Phyllis Nagy's recent play, *The Strip*, explaining that the strip is the "stretch of fantasy land in Las Vegas."¹ He goes on to describe how "it also refers to the idea . . . that by stripping away our protective social selves, we can achieve a sense of life's endless possibilities. . . . The implication is that fixed identity is a myth and that we can re-make ourselves according to our dreams: not for nothing is Nagy a transplanted American." Nagy became an emigre to England in good part because of her lack of production opportunities in the United States. The self-proclaimed "best-known-unproduced-playwright-in-America," Nagy was productive (she wrote five plays) but unhappy in her

¹Michael Billington, "Strip-searchers Road-movie Gaiety and Shifting Sexual Identities in Phyllis Nagy's Play *The Strip* at the Royal Court," *Guardian*, 3 March 1995.

artistic life in the United States.² As a member of New Dramatists, a prestigious New York City playwrights organization, she went to the Royal Court Theatre as part of an exchange program in 1992. Nagy had an exciting and successful trip: the Royal Court supported her work, and she fell in love with Mel Kenyon, then literary manager of the Royal Court.³ Two months after returning to Brooklyn, Nagy left again for London, this time for good. Since then, nearly all of her twelve plays have been produced.

Her work has since been presented at the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool Playhouse, the Gay Sweatshop, the Almeida Theatre, Leicester Haymarket, and several theaters in America, among them, the Denver Centre Theatre, Classic Stage Company, and the Actor's Theater of Louisville. Nagy's early years may not have had many production opportunities, but, like Parks and Wellman, she won numerous grants, receiving support from the NEA, McNight Foundation, and the Arts Council. She was a joint recipient of Mobil Playwriting Prize (1992) and, most recently, the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize (1995), among others.

Nagy's work is known for the wildness of her unresolved plot lines, the musicality of her dialogue, and the daring of her erotic and ironic portrayals of lesbian and gay characters. Her bold scenes of lesbian sexual physicality led Benedict Nightingale to joke, in his review of *Weldon Rising*, that "young people should think twice before taking their

²Phyllis Nagy, "Preface" in *Plays 1: Weldon Rising, Butterfly Kiss, Disappeared, The Strip*, ix.

³"Forty Women under 40," *Independent* (London), 28 September 95. Kenyon has subsequently taken over the late Peggy Ramsay's literary client list and works as an agent.

parents to see Phyllis Nagy's play."⁴ The play contains loud music, Nightingale notes, and "some fairly robust lesbian lovemaking." Nagy also became known as a fin-de-siecle, "close-of-millennium" playwright; several of her plot-resistant plays end with apocalyptic scenes that imply an American (if not global) destruction, and the transformation of those characters courageous enough to step into the new world.⁵ These scenes involve violent lightning and thunder storms, set pieces shaking as if from earthquakes, and, frequently, lesbians making love in public settings. These and other volcanic dramaturgical constructions make it possible for spectators to experience her plays as non-rational, sensory, flesh on flesh visions, which then unleash utopian possibilities

As my readings of Nagy's later plays will make clear, character transformation occurs primarily from without, rather than through small, psychologically credible, moment-to-moment shifts in their internal states. Nagy's characters desire to cross boundaries of time, place, and identity, yearning for realities that represent them as *they* see themselves. In order to play at this epic level, Nagy substitutes an extensive use of tableau, music, and spectacle, illustrating and catalyzing her characters' external metamorphoses, in lieu of domestic tragedy's internal conflicts, so familiar in more realistic works. In order to sustain a dramaturgy of heightened and fantastic events, Nagy relies a great deal upon music. Herself a classical and jazz pianist, Nagy's characters frequently dream of expressing themselves through music (that most direct and sensual of

⁴Benedict Nightingale, "A Walk on the Very Wild Side," *Guardian*, 10 December 1992.

⁵Nightingale, "Out of Control," *Times* (London), 15 January 1998.

artistic forms)

I will address six of Nagy's twelve works in the order in which they were written, rather than in order of their productions. This chapter does not include Nagy's two adaptations, *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*; while they are certainly relevant and worthy of study, I will focus on the works where Nagy originates all aspects of the play. I begin with a discussion of Nagy's first play, *Girl Bar* (1988), to bring Nagy's own questions of race and sexual identification into play in my readings. The subsequent five plays selected for this chapter, *Butterfly Kiss* (1989), *Awake* (1991), *Disappeared* (1991), *Weldon Rising* (1992), and *The Strip* (1995), share dramaturgical and content similarities; it is their sensory and corporeal connections, their dramaturgies, and their implications, that are the focus of this chapter. My discussions of the plays are organized around questions of how Nagy constructs her plays, and to what end. What does Nagy achieve through her emphasis upon magical-seeming moments? To what do her plays aspire, given that her fantastical scenes seem to have so much in common with what might be considered escapist musical theater? How are those same scenes capable of critiquing class, race, and sexual identity?

In order to see how Nagy manipulates genres, engaging and then challenging conventional expectations, I begin by laying out some of the theoretical terms needed for these readings. Having already discussed Bakhtin's ideas of excess and the upheavals possible through the carnivalesque, I add an additional frame by incorporating Richard Dyer's writings on utopia. Lastly, I provide a description of the dramaturgical forms which Nagy draws upon: realistic melodrama, murder mysteries, and musical theater.

Integrating music, choreography, and surreal visual elements, Nagy's dramaturgy subverts assumptions of an objective reality. Richard Dyer's concept of how musical theater can generate the *feeling* of utopia, rather than the ideas of it, offers a way to discuss these non-linguistic texts. While the term "utopianism" is not the first that comes to mind when reading Nagy's apocalyptic seeming work, I will specify how this large term can be narrowed for my purposes. Dyer extrapolates from Western representations of utopia and suggests that it has a "characteristic dynamic, its sense of moving beyond what is to what ought to be or what we want to be."⁶ He further defines the idea of a utopian sensibility as "temporary answers to the inadequacies of the society which is being escaped from through entertainment." Some of these compensatory "alternatives, hopes, wishes" possess qualities such as abundance, energy, intensity ("excitement, drama, affectivity of living"), transparency ("open, spontaneous, honest communications and relationships"), and community. For Nagy, these dramatic structures generate a space in which to experience lesbian and gay visibility, even while foregrounding the social systems in which they are imbedded. Through her manipulations of realistic and melodramatic forms, Nagy reframes class, whiteness, and an array of sexual identities.

Nagy's aesthetic crosses several styles and can generate a sense of unease for spectators, as they try to find the conventions to guide them through her work. In most of Nagy's plays, a dystopian event has already taken place. The world of the play is already wounded: someone's lover has been killed (*Weldon Rising*); a wife has been abandoned by

⁶This and the next four citations are from Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1992), 18-24.

her husband (*Butterfly Kiss* and *The Strip*); or a character has made a fateful, and dangerous, choice (*Disappeared*, *The Strip*). Yet, despite this list of problems, Nagy's plays are humorous, making her work difficult to categorize. Her work is neither camp nor playful in the ways that the texts of Holly Hughes or Split Britches are. Furthermore, while Nagy's plays incorporate surprising moments of dark levity, they do not make use of the parodic and satirical approaches present in a piece such as the Five Lesbian Brothers' play, *The Secretaries*. Nagy's unique mix of dramaturgical tools and tones give her plays a quality of naive fantasy mingled with cool irony.

While her dramaturgy integrates several of what appear to be Brechtian tools, such as direct address and representative (as opposed to realistic) characters, Nagy does not primarily use musical theater interruptions to draw attention to choices in a Brechtian manner. For in Nagy's plays, the song and dance interludes of alternative realities are often framed *as* fantasy, albeit a fantasy that can come true. These digressive scenes undermine the conventional melodramatic, domestic drama, and murder mystery plots upon which her plays are largely structured. In addition, unlike any of the other writers in this study, Nagy incorporates a significant number of detailed stage directions, addressing all elements of design, in order to privilege the visual, aural, and dynamic experience of her plays. By giving theatrical and spectacular reality to fantastic (as yet unrealized) possibilities, Nagy creates worlds in which these subversive figures can take center stage. Teresa de Lauretis has described how artists may eschew the real in order to find the "possible world, [that] . . . entails a conceptual reorganization of semantic space and, therefore, of material and social relations, and makes for an expanded cognitive horizon,

an epic vision of our present social reality.”⁷

Nagy’s simultaneously utopian and ironic approach creates an unsentimental but intensely romantic aesthetic. When Nagy’s plays are seen in the context of Dyer’s discussion of how song and dance scenes can feel liberating (even if cataclysmic looking), their unique subversions become very clear. As I will explore in detail, *Awake* (1990), for instance, ends with a four-minute climactic kiss between lesbian lovers. Their passion and erotic contact is so explosive that it triggers the deluge; *Awake* ends with the cataclysmic thundering of heaven underscoring this scorching kiss. Nagy’s works drive toward this kind of carnivalesque explosion and revolutionary climaxes meant to supersede normative perceptions of reality and its limitations.

While Nagy’s plays vary a great deal in their constructions, she has frequently mined a hyperbolic and surreal stylistic vein. As I will demonstrate, most of her plays employ highly theatrical and formal gestures. *But Never Land* (1995), Nagy’s recent play, is an exception to the dramaturgical structures I discuss in this chapter. As the play is so distinctly different, I have chosen to address its dramaturgical shift, from the spectacular and melodramatic towards realism, in my conclusion. *The Strip* represents her furthest experiment towards what Michael Vanden Heuvel calls “a productive chaos.”⁸ By working chronologically through her most successfully produced plays, I can explore how

⁷Teresa de Lauretis, “Signs of wonder,” in *The Technological Imagination*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis, Andreas Huyssen, and Kathleen Woodward (Madison: Coda Press, 1980), 170.

⁸Michael Vanden Heuvel, *Performing Drama Dramatizing Performance: Alternative Theatre and the Dramatic Text* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 1-4.

Nagy's dramaturgical anarchy makes space for subversive representations.

Nagy's earliest full-length work, *Girl Bar* (1989), provides the best opportunity to see how race, class, and sexual identity come together in her work. For, while *Girl Bar* is the most didactic, presentational, and openly Brechtian of her plays, it also incorporates all of Nagy's major concerns and many of her dramaturgical explorations. This *lehrstucke* play exists entirely within the physical and metaphorical lesbian world of the Girl Bar. The play's mixture of realistic scenes, direct address (asides and monologues), and digressive fantasy scenes, presages much of Nagy's more mature dramaturgy.

Nagy describes the play as a "'pageant' set in the lesbian bar 'of our dreams'."⁹ In an episodic progress, the characters teach spectators, and each other, about the prejudices without and within the lesbian community. The characters have all come to the Girl Bar in order to find love, to find themselves, and, each in her own way, to be found out—to be seen and heard. Throughout the ongoing attractions, seductions, and anxieties amongst the women, there are an equal number of self-consciously theatrical performances designed to tease and confront the spectators with their own misconceptions about what a lesbian bar might be like. Charlotte, the play's narrator and director, guides the play's lecture-demonstration scenes performed (by the characters who take on certain stereotypical roles) for the audience's amusement and education. The levels of performance and multiple narrative threads are reminiscent, in the fluidity of the role

⁹Phyllis Nagy quoted in an interview by Michael Phillips. "Girl Talk," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 28 August 1997.

playing, of some of Split Britches' work. Charlotte asks Jean (the play's African American character), for instance, to perform a pick-up scene as the spectators might envision it. Jean and Mollie (the play's pretty straight white girl) perform a seduction sketch worthy of *Saturday Night Live*. Afterwards, Jean chooses to reimagine the scene to rewrite it so that it truthfully represents her life and world in the Girl Bar. These "performances" intersect with the realistic characters' stories in a variety of ways; the seduction scenes, for instance, pressure Jean to talk with the audience and other characters about her rage at the black stereotypes which she must constantly battle. Nagy's manipulates the play's multiple functions (and lines of forward motion) so that the highly presentational scenes and stand-up like monologues support, rather than impede, the characters' realistic arcs.

The play has received productions at several small theaters in America: Penumbra (1990), the Celebration (1994), and Diversionary (1997) companies. Penumbra, in St. Paul, is a highly respected African American theater, and its press release described the upcoming *Girl Bar* as "a comedy about female relationships," which seems rather to miss the mark.¹⁰ The play received good notices in San Diego, at Diversionary Theater, and Los Angeles, with the Celebration Theatre. Richard Stayton comments on the Los Angeles *Girl Bar*, noting it was not "a sedate 'Last Summer at [sic] Bluefish Cove' Except for one straight girl who's cruising the wild side of feminism, Phyllis Nagy's

¹⁰Peter Vaughn, "Penumbra Able to Take Bow for Sweet Success," *Star-Tribune* (Minneapolis-St. Paul), 3 August 1990.

women are so far out of the closet they're beyond lesbian chic."¹¹ The earlier San Diego production was lauded by a *San Diego Union* reviewer, who appreciated how the play "exploits and explodes lesbian archetypes."¹²

It is a testament to the centrality of race in *Girl Bar* that Penumbra presented the work. In the stage directions, all of the characters, with one exception, are assumed to be white, and they run the gamut from Drew, "butcher than butch. Late thirties, terrifying crew cut, wears custom-made suits from Barneys," to Mollie, "the straight girl. Young and pretty beyond our imaginations."¹³ Nagy describes Jean as "the ultimate outsider: a young black femme." It is clear early on that Jean is self-consciously aware of the power issues and saturated stereotypes in which she is caught.

At one point, Jean gives one of the numerous "recitation" monologues in response to a request by Charlotte to come and explain something about the Girl Bar world to the audience. Jean lists the elegant tastes and cultural interests of "two happy gals who talk deep into the night. We speak of philosophy and religion and much later, of Dante" (11). She goes to parodic lengths, mentioning how much they enjoy polo matches and how studiously they avoid direct sunlight "because we are overly concerned with our complexions," to foreground unspoken assumptions about lesbians as white and wealthy

¹¹Richard Stayton, "'Girl Bar': Call It a Little-Seen Classic," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 March 1994.

¹²Michael Phillips, "Bar's Biting Commentary Served Straight Up," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 6 September 1997.

¹³Nagy, *Girl Bar* [Dramatis Personae]. All subsequent citations will appear in the text.

(11). While it is true that skin tones of all hues and pigmentations are affected by the sun. Jean's comment about complexions particularly points to what Lynda Hart describes as the legacy of psychoanalytic and legal discourses which, together, produced lesbians "in representation as overwhelmingly white and middle-class"¹⁴ Jean tells the audience: "I have a problem and it isn't very pretty. I'm a black dyke. Bad enough to be a dyke in this city. worse to be a black woman. But to be both, and consistently at the same time."

Jean also resists any attributes of aggression or excessive sexuality in her efforts to avoid being trapped under the burden of a supersaturated stereotype of the black lesbian (16). As she comments wryly about her doubly invisible experience. "well, like my friends tell me. it's the same as being the Invisible Man. Except I'm not running around in white gauze and sunglasses" (15). Hart also notes that "the invert in sexological discourse was not identified merely as a sexual subject, but was always also a race- and class-specific entity. . . . If we were to make a composite of Ellis's 'typical' invert, she might well appear as a working-class woman of color who was either a criminal or a lunatic." Jean struggles mightily to throw off these multiple markings, particularly being branded as a criminal type.

For the first performance of the two seduction scenes (designed to show the audience their own stereotypical expectations), Jean specifies that she'll need a pretty girl. And, although it seems self-evident from seeing the entire rest of the Caucasian cast on

¹⁴This and subsequent citation from Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 11 and 4.

stage, Jean specifies that she needs a white girl. Mollie volunteers, and I suggest that she becomes Jean's first partner, in part, because she identifies herself as straight and middle-class. She may be the "whitest" of all the characters. Kate Davy's discussion of white womanhood points out that white women can "signify hegemonic, institutionalized whiteness by virtue of their association with a pure, chaste, asexual before-the-fall-womanhood . . . attained and maintained via middle-class respectability, with its implicit heterosexuality."¹⁵ As Mollie is the only woman who announces her allegiance to heterosexuality, she is particularly safe, within her privilege, to participate in Jean's lesson-demonstration.

I will address subsequently the question of how white women, as Davy points out, can also signify a postlapsarian sexuality, as "embodied by some white women (prostitutes, white trash, lesbians) and all women of color." It is the white woman's proximal osmosis of white male privilege, as Davy articulates it, that endows her with mobility. Depending upon the intersection of class and sexual identity, a white woman can possess the privilege to travel either towards the dangerous primitive stereotype of woman or, in the other direction, toward the domestic goddess of European civilizing influence. In their presentation of the first pick-up scene, Jean and Mollie perform in "their best, broad dyke-as-trucker take," a sketch comedy style, in which they assume parodic

¹⁵This and the following citation are from Kate Davy, "Outing Whiteness: A Feminist/Lesbian Project," *Theatre Journal* (May 1995): 197.

characterizations of themselves (16). Mollie approaches Jean and asks her to dance. As they talk, Jean seems to become more ensnared in the double typing precipitated by her position as a black lesbian. As the scene proceeds, Jean's trucker-dyke character becomes identified with danger and violence; her "character" is presumably involved with a lover who is ostensibly away beating up an ex-lover, and, as a Scorpio, Mollie's trucker explains, Jean is likely to be a shoplifter. Ultimately, when Jean *is* ready to dance, Mollie is not. At that point, Jean asks, "Do you maybe wanna fuck me?" (18). Being spurned by an increasingly evasive Mollie, Jean explodes with "You asked for a dance, bitch. Fess up FESS UP" (19).

Jean then turns to the audience and comments that this particular picture of life in the Girl Bar may have some truth, but that "there's something meaner going on between us, we black and white dykes" (20). What is it that is "meaner"? Perhaps Jean refers to a silent racism hiding beneath white bourgeois manners and liberal ideas of sisterhood, a racism even more pernicious than open fear and distrust.¹⁶ Interestingly, Nagy has edited out what was to have been Jean's next line to the audience: "And you should know this story better than we. It's been going on a hell of a lot longer with you, after all" (20). While Nagy ultimately took out the line, its spectral presence indicates how much this

¹⁶Nagy herself declared, at a Glass Ceiling symposium at the National Theatre, that "What I'm really impatient with is the blanket assumptions people make: that if you're all sitting in a room together, then you all believe in the same thing. . . . Clearly, there is no sisterhood." Nagy was quoted by Claire Armistead, "It Started with a Kiss," *Guardian*, 7 January 1998.

scene resonates with the three hundred years of race history that Davy explicates.

In the second version of this scenario, this time played by Jean and Claire, Jean initially takes on a second persona, performing as if she were an up-scale commodities broker. Spoken and performed in a relatively subtle realistic style, their scene becomes increasingly focused on Jean's frustration with Claire's contradictory interest and racially inspired rejection. As Claire, performing what may well be her true "character" as an art's administrator, refuses to tell Jean details about which major museum she works for, Jean begins to get more sexual and more aggressive. Finally, Jean confronts Claire, asking her if she has ever been to bed with a black woman. Out of frustration with Claire's boundaries, Jean escalates her language: "Do you know just how attracted I am to you? I find you so attractive that I'd like to take your face and bury it deep into my bush. I'd like to take my hand and ram it right up inside your tight white cunt and rip your fucking heart out. But I won't. Because I understand" (28).

Then, she proceeds to drop a level of role playing: Jean tells Claire that she will "not confirm" her fears (28). She says, "I will not suddenly reveal that I work in the Star Bright Boutique where I sell sequined mini-skirts to hookers for a living" (28). She goes on to describe the stereotype she rejects, and asks Claire, "Would it make you feel better to believe that about me?" (28). The play takes no clear stance on whether either of Jean's autobiographies has any truth outside of the girl bar space. Having gotten no

further in conversation with Claire, Jean places Claire's hands on various parts of her body, trying to elicit her honest reactions. It is only when Jean places Claire's hands upon her head, and she feels the specific texture of her African American hair, that Claire recoils. Claire, however, won't admit to her own fear, continuing to keep her distance with statements such as "I really am uncomfortable" (30). However, through the visual aspects of the scene, Nagy invokes race as Claire's unnamed source of discomfort.

In what seems as if it might be a moment of connection at the end of the scene, induced by Jean's persistence and patience, she asks Claire to come close and tell her something surprising, something "of consequence" (30). After a pause, Claire says, "I work at the Whitney. I make seventy-five thousand dollars a year. And I am very happy" (31). The stage directions which follow describe Jean slapping Claire "hard and fast across her face" (31). It is as if instead of connection, there is a final hardening of privilege and boundaries. It is not clear whether Claire is taking the risk to share personal details of her life, or if, in a defensive move, she reveals her socioeconomic status in an attempt to place herself safely above Jean. Perhaps Jean responds to three hundred years of white women maintaining their mobility on the backs of African American women. Embracing the power of theatricality, role-playing, and fantasy, even as it endeavors with all zeal to change spectators' understanding of lesbians outside the theatrical realm, *Girl Bar* holds no illusions about how difficult it may be to reach across stereotypes and ingrained investments in privilege.

None of Nagy's other plays attempt to communicate so didactically with spectators, but I believe her dramaturgical choices continue to tackle the same goals. Most of Nagy's subsequent plays center around a crime, and, superficially, she uses positivist structures, such as those found in murder mysteries, to guide audiences through her work. Those familiar conventions and structures appear to set the terms of representation, but, as each play progresses, these forms spiral upward and out of normal parameters. For instance, Nagy's plays rarely come to what might be called traditionally satisfying endings. Not only do most of the questions raised by the plays remain unanswered, but the works themselves attack, and actively reject, a sense of restorative closure.

In his discussion of the satisfactions provided by the murder mystery form, Marvin Carlson also articulates the power of other traditional narratives: "We are trained . . . to seek a pattern of relationships in which the individual characters, or actants, continue to relate to one another, and to the narrative as a whole, in fairly predictable ways."¹⁷ Stage murder mysteries, in fact, require a fidelity to positivism, just as realism does. For a whodunnit to function, it requires an authoritative world in which Truth can be found out through a rational examination of the facts which must, then, lead to the guilty party's confession and, finally, to the restoration of a naturalized stability.

¹⁷Marvin Carlson, *Deathtraps: The Postmodern Comedy Thriller* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 49.

There are several subgenres of murder mysteries available for Nagy to deconstruct. the most prominent of these is the modern “whodunnit.”¹⁸ These murder mysteries tend to take place in isolated settings, so that there is only a small group of possible murderers. The murder itself occurs early on in the play, and must take place in the dark, so that the crime itself is not witnessed by anyone (including spectators) except the murderer. This form relies upon the “detective-hero” to enter the scene, and use his intensely scientific rational process to unmask the criminal.¹⁹

Carlson enumerates the codes of murder mysteries and how some contemporary playwrights are mining those forms for postmodernist “use and abuse,” as Linda Hutcheon describes it.²⁰ He notes that modern detective drama seems an unlikely candidate:

for the eruption of avant-garde experimentation into mainstream theatre, but . . . the simultaneous celebration and subversion of conventional procedures . . . is a process particularly suited to a highly and clearly codified genre of this sort, with its extremely predictable rules of construction and expectations (so strong as almost to amount to rules) of its type of setting, characters, character relationships, dialogue, and so on.²¹

Nagy’s plays also use and manipulate this codified genre in playful and subversive ways.

¹⁸There are various spellings for “whodunnit” and I have chosen to follow Carlson’s version of the term.

¹⁹Carlson, 5.

²⁰Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 23.

²¹Carlson, 9-10.

While her work foregoes the focus on self-reflexivity key to the postmodern works Carlson explores, Nagy's texts practice turning detective dramatic structures topsy-turvy in carnivalesque inversions.

Hart describes similar subgenre distinctions in *Fatal Women*, her study of the many points at which lesbians enter representation as aggressive and criminalized females. Like Carlson, Hart describes the thriller as a different genre from detective narratives: "the thriller . . . reverses the situation of the classic whodunnit. In the latter, the detective enjoys a certain immunity. Never a victim himself, the detective can be thought of as a 'pure and unpunishable murderer, who 'kills' (literally or figuratively) the first murderer."²² She points out that, whereas the detective, the "subject-supposed-to-know," had been safe in the whodunnit dramaturgical machine, thrillers turn the whodunnit upside down, making the detective vulnerable to erroneous judgment and danger. Variations of detective whodunnit and thriller structures resonate in five of Nagy's plays: *Butterfly Kiss* (1989), *Awake* (1990), *Disappeared* (1991/2), *Weldon Rising* (1992), and *The Strip* (1995).

Butterfly Kiss is the first of Nagy's plays to revolve around murder, and the second of her works to open in England (1994). The Almeida Playhouse is described as "a small north London theater off a street where drunks jostle for space with yuppies. . . . The playhouse is the 303-seat . . . onetime music hall whose modest auditorium has become a

²²Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 125-6.

talking point of the British-and increasingly, the international-theater.”²⁴ The Almeida has been in operation only since 1989, and its artistic directors, Ian MacDiarmid and Jonathan Kent, quickly created a successful theater capable of launching productions into ongoing runs in the West End. While the Almeida is a small theatrical newcomer located in an off-the-path area, it is still many levels above many Off and Off-Off theaters in New York. Kent and MacDiarmid hired Steven Pimlott to direct; he had already directed the successful premiere of *Weldon Rising* in 1992.

Butterfly Kiss is a lyrical palimpsest of matricide, a work of eroticized violence. The play presents many of the tropes and themes of Nagy’s work to come: rage-filled selfish mothers who pillage their daughters’ lives; women and crime; and lesbians as the most dangerous women of all. The play exists within the mind of Lily Ross, a lesbian character, and addresses the question of why she murdered Jenny Ross, her alcoholic shell of a mother. Lily is a would-be composer who used to work in a hospital gift shop. Lily wants to compose; Jenny wanted to be an opera singer and her own mother. Sally Ramona, is enraged because she saw herself as the singer in the family. Sally’s competitive relationship to her daughter can be accurately construed from a casual, devastating, comment she makes to Jenny. “You’re a vegetable in a party dress.”²⁵ The play captures not only the enmeshed and destructive relationship between Jenny and her mother, but also the sadomasochistic connection between Lily’s Medea-grandmother.

²⁴Matt Wolf, “Tomorrow the World: The Rise of the Almeida Playhouse,” *International Herald Tribune*, 12 October 1994.

²⁵Nagy, *Butterfly Kiss*, in *Plays: 1*, with an introduction by Michael Coveney (London: Methuen, 1998), 53.

Sally, and Jenny.

The entire play takes place within the jail cell where Lily is imprisoned, and all other places (scene settings) exist through minimalist transformations of the components of the cell. Jeremy Kingston described the setting as consisting of “germ-free surfaces, brilliant and white.”²⁵ Within this white box, several other figures appear as characters in the enacted memories brought up in Lily’s conversations with her lawyer and her lover, Martha. Lily’s father, Sloan, an ex-Marine and an escapee from the working class, became an academic lepidopterist (an entomologist specializing in the study of butterflies and moths) and left Jenny and Lily for a faux Countess with a Queens accent. The grotesque perversity in Sloan’s behavior, and, indeed, this twisted family drama structure, is captured in Jeremy Kingston’s title of his review of *Butterfly Kiss*, “Father Knows Beast.” Rounding out this cast of characters is Teddy, Sloan’s slow, polite, ex-marine comrade, who becomes Lily’s first lover, with Sloan’s voyeuristic assistance.

Thrusting us into a landscape of emotional memory, Nagy refuses to let a realistic, objective-seeming frame settle comfortably around *Butterfly Kiss*. The memory play structure of this work relies upon the conventions of the murder whodunnit in a variation on the unmasking form. In this retrospectively focused structure, the unmasking of the criminal and her motives remains the traditional end to classic detective narratives. Forcing a confession from the guilty party, for instance, restores causality to its proper role in a unified representation of events. As discussed in my introductory chapter, the relation of realism and an appearance of quotidian causality is key to the success of that

²⁵Jeremy Kingston, “Father Knows Beast,” *Times* (London), 15 April 1994.

form. In this case, however, spectators are never allowed to relax into the familiarity of everyday causality. Both Lily's lover, Martha, and her lawyer, Jackson, stand in for spectators eager to solve the mystery, as they try to plumb Lily's version of the truth. In a telling choice, Nagy has Lily give her confession to Martha alone; Jackson is never privy to Lily's secret version of the murder. Jackson has previously described himself as emotionally unaffected by defending murderers; he declares, in a somewhat defensive manner, that what he does is "safe. Most of all it is safe, what we lawyers do" (64). But, though he claims the subject-supposed-to-know position of invulnerable authority, he never penetrates Lily's elusive responses to her secrets.

The play combines its retrospective gaze at scenes from Lily's past with the anticipatory tensions of a thriller. Hart notes that this dynamic tension is one of suspense, "whereas the whodunnit's formal conventions depend on a reconstruction of the past, the thriller's form is in the mode of anticipation and uncertainty."²⁷ Lily's memory scenes provide numerous psychological clues, but no clear resolution. Why did Lily's father give her his old German Luger, the gun with which she shoots Jenny? Lily confesses to Martha that her mother asked to be killed, but the play never provides any evidence of that request; Jenny is delusional at the end, and it seems unlikely that she could articulate such a request to her daughter. The play offers audience members multiple possible reasons for the crime, yet it also refuses to fulfill our desire for rational, and therefore, containable, motivations. This dramaturgical resistance is unusual and uncomfortable because women.

²⁷Hart, *Fatal Women*, 126.

as Hart notes, are supposed to *be* the fetishized secret, not possess the secret.²⁸ In a traditionally closed and causally bound murder mystery, all plot questions would be answered. Nagy, however, chooses to leave a Bakhtinian kind of “unfinalisability” with “loopholes of meaning,” the quality of openness that he sees in the multi-voiced novel.²⁹ In these voids of fixed meaning, Nagy is able to question the usual pattern of neatly resolved action, instead presenting spectators with an opaqueness that resists a single reading. Thus, *Butterfly Kiss* attempts to keep itself from being reabsorbed into a traditional murder mystery frame, rewriting the genre even as it engages in it.

Nagy manipulates narrative structure to give her character, Lily, a space in which she can engage with—but not be controlled by—stereotypes of lesbian-as-criminal. In a parallel process, Lily shifts the narrative frame around the historical murder cases she discusses with her lawyer. In particular, Lily describes a matricide case in which a young woman microbiologist graduates from Harvard, but cannot find a job. The young woman returns home, and, after a period of time, shoots both her mother and father. Pronounced criminally insane, she is sent to a state institution. Ten years after the murders, the young woman grants an interview to explain why she did it. She says, “My mother had a habit of going out every evening at the same time. She told me she’d be back within the hour, but each time she left she wouldn’t return until the next morning.” Lily summarizes what happened: the young woman “allowed her mother to do this for six successive evenings.

²⁸Ibid., 70.

²⁹Helene Keyssar, “Drama and the Dialogic Imagination: *The Heidi Chronicles* and *Fefu and her Friends*,” in *Feminist Theatre and Theory*, ed. Helene Keyssar (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 112.

On the seventh evening, she shoots her. She figures while she has the shotgun handy, she might as well take care of her pop”(61). In Lily’s opinion, the young woman’s explanation is completely plausible, but, evidently, no one took her reply seriously. The journalist (representing dominant culture) was relieved to discover, as far as he was concerned, that the woman was simply crazy. To give credence to the murderer’s reasoning would be to face an alternately structured world. Society would have to recognize the outsider’s rage at finding no place for herself. A well-trained female microbiologist, she could not get a job. A fat woman, she stood little or no chance of winning a husband or her own family. These factors may have catalyzed her actions, but, finally, the young woman refuses to share her secret motivations.

Similarly, Lily seems perversely mute with regard to her own defense. Claudia Barnett suggests that up until Lily took action (killing her mother), she felt guilty for not having saved Jenny. In this scenario, committing the murder relieved her culpability. Barnett points out, “Lily’s crime is not murder but her mute observations of her mother’s misery.”³⁰ While an interesting proposition, Barnett’s idea does not seem to illuminate why a much-relieved Lily would not raise a hand to save her own life. While I also do not fully agree with Barnett’s generalization that “in Nagy’s plays, action is never criminal, and inaction is worse than murder,” her statement does describe the pattern of several of Nagy’s heroines. With Lily, in particular, there is a tremendous denial of the societal power which currently holds her in its grip. She wants to go to Europe with Martha. She

³⁰Claudia Barnett, “Phyllis Nagy’s Fatal Women,” (Paper delivered at the ATHE Conference, 1996), 11.

fantasizes about a different past, and wishes for a limitless future the way she imagined it to be.

Throughout Nagy's work, characters challenge the laws of nature, such as time, place, and gravity. From *Girl Bar* to *Weldon Rising*, characters speak of their desires to walk on water, walk on air, and transcend corporeal limitations. I suggest that these fantasies of revolutionary possibility are linked with melodramatic structures, as is the privileging of action over internal contemplation. Robert Heilman calls "wholeness" a key to melodramatic character structures. He suggests that a character's wholeness:

implies neither greatness nor moral perfection, but rather an absence of the basic inner conflict that, if it is present, must inevitably claim our primary attention [In melodrama] man's loyalties and his directions are neither uncertain nor conflicting. He may indeed be humanly incomplete, but his incompleteness is not the issue. It is in tragedy that man is divided.³¹

As opposed to the psychologically tortured tragic figure, a melodramatic character is caught up with external conflicts only; her or his difficulties are with the world, not a self-aware inner dilemma. Perhaps psychological motivation is simply not the arbiter of truth for Nagy's women.

If her characters are constructed without the "composition of divergent inner forces that would push [them] into the arena of choice and self-knowledge," it is no surprise that these female characters appear to possess secrets. Their secrets are preserved by their utter confidence in their own, often radical, views of the world. This is not to say that there they experience no internal development brought about through

³¹This and the subsequent quotation from Robert Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), 79-80.

psychologically motivated action. Indeed, Lily's action seems psychologically overdetermined. But, ultimately, her behavior defies analysis and deconstruction; Lily keeps her wholeness, her secrets, and in this way, Nagy attempts to turn spectators' gazes back onto external social forces, history, and even themselves.

While Nagy's manipulations of a realistic murder mystery do not, in her earlier work, play as much havoc with expectations as they do subsequently, *Butterfly Kiss* opens up a rift between our generic expectations and Nagy's representations. Lily's refusal to disappear into a predictable narrative continually nudges "normal" off-kilter, thereby asking spectators to construct their own subjective point of view on the possible "realities" offered in the play.

Similarly, Nagy's later crime stories each subvert different parts of conventional murder mysteries. *Disappeared* (1991-2) foils spectators' conventionally fostered desires for restoration of rational order. Like *Butterfly Kiss*, *Disappeared* moves forward retrospectively, and, at the same time, drives inwards towards the revelation of the secret answer that solves and resolves the mystery of whodunnit.

Disappeared was written before *Weldon Rising* (1992), but was not produced until three years later, after Nagy's successful and quite visible productions of *Weldon Rising* (1992) and *Butterfly Kiss* (1994). When the play was finally produced at the Leicester Haymarket (to be followed by a regional tour), several critics who had thought Nagy a "slender talent" took notice.³² Charles Spencer, one such reviewer, confesses, "I

³²This and subsequent quotation from Charles Spencer, "Manhattan Madness and Murder Mystery," *Daily Telegraph* (London), 8 February 1995.

had done her an injustice. . . . There's no neat solution to Nagy's conundrum, just a fog of fear, despair, and most remarkably of all, a final mirage of escape. Spine-tingling stuff."

It is intriguing that *Disappeared*, a largely heterosexual play (with the exception of the uniquely sexually indeterminate Elston Rupp) should win certain critics over.

Disappeared tells the story of a young white woman who vanishes. The play explores an event that was either a crime or a miracle; either the working-class, "dazed and dreamy" Sarah escaped from her humdrum life into her dream, or she was killed.³³ It is either what Heilman calls a "drama of disaster" or an uplifting utopian vision.³⁴ This ambiguity is significant, for it determines much of the way we read her work. Nagy's purposefully ambiguous signs do not set spectators up with a clear stylistic route through her play. This uncertainty exerts a powerful impact on the experience of seeing the play because a spectator can not be sure what central event the play is retrospectively spinning back from. And, just like the audience, Nagy's characters are frequently trying to read the signs. Benedict Nightingale's review, "Dressed to Kill or Thrill?," points to just this experience of watching *Disappeared*: "Nagy's sly comedy-thriller raises our expectations only to subvert them."³⁵ Just before she walks out the door to her unknown fate, Sarah asks, "Whaddya think, Jack? Am I stepping out with a lawyer or with some maniac who

³³Jeremy Kingston, "All the Lonely People," *Times* (London), 9 February 1995.

³⁴Heilman, 82.

³⁵Nightingale, "Dressed to Kill or Thrill?" *Times* (London), 30 June 1995.

drowns women in his bathtub?”³⁶ Neither Sarah nor spectators can know, and the secret remains with Sarah’s missing body.

The play had originally been written as a murder mystery for the cable company HBO. But, when the HBO executives realized how mysterious and frustrating it was to follow the unresolved narrative, they passed on the project. The action of *Disappeared* centers around the missing Sarah and the man who may have murdered her: Elston Rupp. Elston is a Highsmithian Tom Ripley type of character—if Ripley had been small, unappealing, and socially inept.³⁷ In a junior version of Ripley’s successful impersonations of wealthy elite characters, Elston tries out the clothes and identities of the wealthy east-side patrons who donate their clothing to the thrift store which he manages. Constantly referred to as creepy, Elston’s vaguely homosexual leanings are less significant than his invasive efforts to connect with other human beings. Most reviewers commented upon the disturbing nature of Kerry Shales’s performance of Elston. Michael Billington, reviewer for the *Guardian*, describes how “in Derek Wax’s dark, claustrophobic production there is an unforgettable performance from Kerry Shales as Elston. Slight and balding like a slimline Wallace Shawn, he plays the character from his own point of view

³⁶Nagy, *Disappeared*, in *Plays: 1* (London: Methuen, 1998), 178. All subsequent citations will appear in the text.

³⁷Tom Ripley is the amoral and highly successful impersonator who murders his way to a new life in Patricia Highsmith’s novel, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and Nagy’s stage adaption of the same title (1999). Ripley becomes entranced by and identified with a wealthy young man named Richard Greenleaf. Through numerous sophisticated strategies, Ripley kills and then takes on Greenleaf’s identity.

as a man totally secure in his solitude.”³⁸ Like many of Nagy’s heroines, Elston wants another life, one imagined or stolen, but he will not trade the power of having secrets (as Other) for normalcy.

As with *Butterfly Kiss*, *Disappeared* tries to shift the audience’s focus from mystery (whether or not Elston murdered Sarah) to each character’s boundaries—and the chances each one might take to go beyond them. Sarah, for instance, has a job in a travel agency but has never traveled anywhere. She wants to escape her haranguing mother, who is pushing her to marry the pleasant but limited Italian hairdresser, Antony. Indeed, Sarah longs to flee her whole unutterably cramped existence, transfixed by the 1969 pop song, “Eleanor,” by the Turtles, she feels she was born in the wrong time with the wrong name. When Elston invites her to leave the Hell’s Kitchen bar with him and “walk on air,” she crosses out of her life into we know not what. In an even more opaque, less psychologically comprehensible way than in *Butterfly Kiss*, *Disappeared* leads spectators not to answers but to questions. What happens to Sarah? Does Elston help her commit a transcendent act over time, space, and socioeconomic realities? And, ultimately, what constitutes a life or an identity?

This question takes many forms in *Disappeared* but nowhere more directly than with Timothy Creighton, an entertainment attorney and the owner of the suit Elston wears on the night of the mystery. Elston finds Timothy’s business card in the suit and presents himself to Sarah as Timothy Creighton, entertainment attorney. In a surprising turn of the

³⁸Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 8 February 1995. It is interesting to note that the sexually indeterminate character has become a “Wallace Shawn” type.

screw, Elston-as-Timothy also claims to be a serial killer. Thus, Timothy finds himself part of the investigation, implicated in the press coverage of what appears to be a sensational crime. Yet, as he claims again and again, “it was only his suit” that was part of the crime, not him. The play simultaneously exposes how easy it is to lose one’s identity—to someone like Elston and to public perception—and, at the same time, how hard it is to break out of one’s expected life-narrative. Externals like costumes and names have as much, if not more, power than traditional definitions of a person’s natural “character.”

The play’s slippery identities are investigated, with a surprising degree of personal urgency, by a complex and unhappy Detective Ted Mitchell. In an excellent example of what Carlson describes as the postmodern comedy thriller’s destabilization of actant and traditional role, Ted fails to portray the role of detective as a heroic knight of truth and rational order. Instead, he presents a flawed and powerless human being who is trapped, like Sarah and Elston, in the socioeconomic reality of his life. Ted loathes his job, and is burdened with a wife and children from whom he is alienated. Irving Wardle’s review of *Disappeared* describes the note of longing underlying Ted, Sarah, and Elston’s restlessness: “What it [the play] does examine is the hunger for escape. . . . Escape to anywhere—into the lost paradise of the 1960s, into celebrity or foreign lands, or into the experimental identities of the opening scene. . . . All of them [the characters] would love to go missing, if only they dared.”³⁹

³⁹Irving Wardle, “Manhattan Murder Mystery,” *Independent* (London), 2 July 1995.

Despite the fact that the play does not take place in a traditional, whodunnit, single set, *Disappeared* does follow certain patterns. The ambiguous possible crime, for instance, happens early on, between the first and second scenes. As in old fashioned murder mysteries, the primary cause “murder” scene takes place (if it took place) beyond the view of everyone except the murderer. Initially teasing spectators with what seems to be Sarah’s death, the play begins to move both backwards and forwards: backwards into Elston and Sarah’s lives and forward into the scenes of the investigation.

Disappeared appears to abide by a more realistic code of representation than *Butterfly Kiss*. This seeming-realism is evidenced in a number of ways, and shows up particularly in the variety and specificity of the six settings. Unlike the single set of Lily’s cell, which actually contains many different times and places, *Disappeared* presents: “a run-down bar in Hell’s Kitchen; a railroad apartment in Hell’s Kitchen; an Upper East Side thrift shop; a midtown police station; a Lower East Side travel agency.” Interestingly, Nagy gives this information under the heading, “The Place”; she describes “The Setting” in a different paragraph, using it to denote the emotionally inflected experience of the place. She seems to be delineating the more objective locale from its subjective emotional geography. Under settings, Nagy describes the representation of those six locations as “a barren landscape with touches of the otherworldly. It should appear as if everything here, while maintaining certain aspects of naturalism, appears from nowhere” (106). Once again, Nagy’s aesthetic attempts to yoke the familiar realistic form with an unexpected theatrical world, a reality in which sets appear from nowhere like rabbits from a magician’s hat.

As distinct from the other three writers of this study who offer few stage directions, Nagy's plays are full of details regarding settings, lights, sound, costumes, and staging. Her last three plays, *Awake*, *The Strip*, and *Never Land*, increasingly complicate the traditional machinery of forward motion, along the arc of the main character's development, with multiple performance styles and causality tied significantly to events composed of sound, light, and bodies in space. Nagy's highly descriptive, indeed, prescriptive, stage directions constitute her effort to choreograph and musicalize the images of her work. As previously noted, Nagy's plays are scored to an unusual degree with very particular pop tunes, often from the 1970s. I am not arguing that because Nagy's work is saturated with music, her plays should be considered musical theater. But, in these three recent plays her emphasis on spectacle complicates the reception process because she borrows from several traditions at once: musical theater, for instance, and melodrama.

In looking at Nagy's body of work, it is no surprise that her as yet unproduced play, *Awake* (1990), best exemplifies this musical theater-like structure. I suspect that this unusual hybrid form makes it a difficult play to place with producers. As a creation of and about fantasy, *Awake* plays out numerous examples of wishes that materialize in the form of choreography. The play tells a compelling story of five New Yorkers who find themselves in various crises leading them all to a magical but deadly moment. The five characters of *Awake* come together out of doors in a Brooklyn Heights alleyway near the East River. The play opens with a complex visual tableau accompanied by a quintessentially American pop culture song, Frank and Nancy Sinatra's "Somethin'

Stupid.” While pundits may complain that Americans have been corrupted by the speed of MTV video frames rushing by, theatrical audiences have largely been educated on realistic plays whose narratives rely more upon dialogue than imagery. Nagy’s dramaturgy works through numerous kinds of theatrical texts without privileging dialogue over staging and design.

Echoing melodramatic tableaux, Nagy’s stage directions for the opening moments paint a vivid picture of each character in her or his scene performing a telling activity. Jessie, a young white lesbian, has just been dumped by her rich, blond, self-absorbed, lover, Isabelle. Jessie’s initial activity consists of moving essential belongings out of her apartment onto her fire escape. Isabelle, on the other hand, is in her large apartment obsessively weighing herself. One of Nagy’s few African American characters, Yvonne, a Jehovah’s Witness, appears in the play’s opening tableau inside the Brooklyn’s Witness compound shaking at its fence. There are also Jessie’s neighbors, Clifford, and his mother, Ginger, with whom he lives; they are white and working class. The two of them sit staring: Clifford watches Yvonne, and Ginger stares straight out at the audience. Nagy characterizes Clifford as “a young man without a purpose. . . . A mama’s boy gone berserk” (initial page). Clifford is obsessed with John Philip Sousa and his arsenal of weapons. Ginger spends much of her energy attempting to get Clifford to buy things for her, but she has a shaky grasp on reality and an even more tenuous relationship to Clifford.

Yvonne is articulate, angry, and determined to get out and get herself a life. Her first monologue is a wish-list for that imagined new life. If capitalist consumption is Yvonne’s (and America’s) sense of utopia, her speech mirrors much of what Dyer

describes as utopian desires envisioned to relieve a sense of deprivation and want.

Yearning for all sorts of products and experiences, Yvonne announces:

I want things. I want to wear Christian Dior stockings, not Hanes. I want sirloin, not chuck. I want I wantto . . . salute the flag. Take a blood transfusion. Vote in major elections. . . . Go to beauty school. . . . Ride the subway and feel like nobody's afraid of young black boys who wear those big white sneakers with the laces untied. I want money. I want to see the world end in a flood (5).

Though only one of these desires comes to pass, it is a spectacular event; the play culminates in a utopian scene of catastrophe and flood. As with several of Nagy's other works, *Awake* (the name of the Jehovah's Witness magazine of the impending apocalypse) culminates in the destruction of the old and birth of the new world.

As with Nagy's other works, *Awake* moves forward in the present but concerns itself with a series of digressions and memory scenes. The zig-zagging motion of the dramaturgy requires spectators to actively place each scene in its context. Jessie demonstrates, and then explains, her magical power to freeze the action of the play and, temporarily, change events. Spot-lit, Jessie speaks directly to the audience, "if a particular situation makes me feel like sucking my thumb, I . . . I . . . I . . . invent. An alternate situation. Parallel situation. A funnier situation." And, in the moment when Clifford shoves his shotgun into his mother's stomach, Jessie's mind, and the scene, rewind to her memory of meeting Isabelle. Jessie physically moves Ginger and Clifford, placing them into a couple-dance posture in which Clifford is dipping his mother. As Jessie snaps her fingers, Clifford and Ginger dance to the Gipsy King's "Volare." Jessie herself

acknowledges that her intervention will ultimately change nothing, but, for a few moments she envisions another possibility. Nagy's alternative scenes, like the one described, do not always end happily, but they nonetheless possess the intense energy, non-representational focus, and direct (non-linguistic) connections to spectators of musical theater.

These stimulating sensory events, with energizing music, light, and movement (and perhaps humor as with Clifford and Ginger's awkward pseudo-romantic dance), elongate time. The forward motion of time passing, conventionally a stable referent, is disrupted, and a Bakhtinian immediacy takes over. Lisa Gasbarrone writes about Bakhtin's ideas of what constitutes a dialogic dynamic suggesting that, "In its emphasis on the present, on concrete human history and becoming, Bakhtin's . . . dialogic discourse is radically *present*."³⁹ In *Awake*, the combination of real-time scenes, such as the one just before Jessie intervenes, and digressions, such as Clifford and Ginger's dance number, ruptures any illusion of objective time, place, and representation.

This deconstructive impulse can be clearly seen in the play's climax. The alleyway world erupts when Jessie and Isabelle come together and kiss, outside and with their neighbors looking on. Although the kiss is from Jessie's memory of their romance, it also takes place in the present, during a scene in which a young man shoots his mother. Jessie and Isabelle kiss for two and a half pages while violence erupts around them; they are oblivious. Finally, Nagy's stage directions call for thunder and lighting as "Isabelle and Jessie kiss and kiss and kiss. It begins to rain. It's a flood" (54). In a rising crescendo of

³⁹Lisa Gasbarrone, "'The Locus for the Other': Cixous, Bakhtin, and Women's Writing," in *A Dialogue of Voices: Feminist Literary Theory and Bakhtin*, ed. Karen Hohne and Helen Wussow (Minnesota: University of Minnesota, 1994), 5.

rain, thunder, and lightning, the play ends. This aural and visual event takes Jessie and Isabelle's private desires (their courtship) and creates a visceral public and present spectacle. Truly treating time as an elastic medium, Nagy's stage directions indicate that their kiss should continue for roughly for four minutes, so that its intensity overcomes linear distinctions. The kiss from their past is so powerful that it propels them forward into the climactic scene on the street and creates an apocalyptic, orgasmic, explosion, suggesting their wide-open future in a new world where lesbians love with impunity.

Weldon Rising also moves toward an orgy of destruction and possibility. But, for the first time, Nagy shapes her play's events so that the external spectacles and transformations are tightly linked to psychological and political concerns. In a variation on this kind of zig-zag dramaturgy, *Weldon Rising* retells and flashes back to its key event, a gay-bashing stabbing, and each time the scene replays, the events shift from one character's point of view to another's, in the manner of a cubist painting.⁴¹ Because of the subjective nature of each of these theme-and-variations repetition, Nagy is able to shift the spectator's attention from a more traditional hunt for the cause of the crime to an appreciation of its after-effects, with the psychic and social costs paid by American culture's Omega figures.⁴²

Weldon Rising (1992) was produced in the small upstairs theater of the Royal Court Theatre. Another of Nagy's geographically specific plays, *Weldon Rising* takes

⁴¹Anne Marie Welsh, "Unsavoury Drama Turns on Comic Collage," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 8 April 1997.

⁴²Omegas have the lowest status in an animal group, such as a wolf pack. The pack scapegoats the Omega in order to eliminate other dissension amongst the pack.

place in the meat-packing district of New York City at approximately 16th Street and nearly as far west as the river. The play depicts this area in the late 1980s and early 90s, before this part of New York underwent its recent gentrification with lofts and chic restaurants. Known at that time as an area for transvestite prostitutes, the play treats the meat-packing district as a marginal space in New York, but also one in which the world's future can be changed. This carnivalesque space, where characters live outdoors instead of in, and private sexual acts are performed in public, is the site for Nagy's exploration of a hate-crime (the murder of a gay man) and the homophobic self-loathing the murder reveals. Jimmy stands up for both himself and his fearful and closeted lover, Natty, in the face of a nameless young man's faggot-taunting threats, when he is stabbed to death on the street. We never know why, other than homophobia, the angry and beautiful young man so suddenly and violently stabs Natty's lover. The play engages spectators with the catalyzing eruptions of guilt, transformation, and love, that follow in the wake of the murder.

Two lesbian lovers, Tilly and Jaye, live nearby in the meat-packing district, and they witness the murder, remaining transfixed by the event. Tilly, who feels stunned and guilty, spends the week after the crime at her window, looking out at the spot where Jimmy bled to death. Out the window, she watches Jimmy's cowardly lover, Natty, who has moved Jimmy's clothes and his vanity table out into the street. Tilly and Jaye also witness the squabbles between Natty and Marcel, the transvestite prostitute who claims

this patch of road as his “nature preserve.”⁴³ Marcel is a kind of walking ludic event; without being feminine, he inhabits his outrageous female prostitute garb with grace. As the characters form relationships, through which they confront their guilt and cowardice over Jimmy’s death, the temperature spirals upwards into surreal heights of one hundred and twenty, one hundred and eighty degrees, and so on; the temperature rises until these four have re-viewed the crime “scene” three times and revealed their secret shame and fear. As with Jessie and Isabelle in *Awake*, Natty not only describes but also performs in scenes of his courtship with Jimmy. Like the return of the repressed, and, as Fanon points out, the oppressed, the murder plays itself out repeatedly as the foursome attempt to change the past and to confront the present.

The future arrives in spectacular form, as Nagy explodes certain realistic aspects of the proscenium stage’s perspectival approach. In the final scene of *Weldon Rising*, for example, Tilly inadvertently cuts herself on a piece of glass and cannot get the bleeding to stop; in alarm, Jaye shouts at Natty to shut up, “SHUT UP. MY GIRLFRIEND’S GOT FUCKING STIGMATA.” (42). In a kind of baptism, Tilly puts her head in a basin of water and emerges dripping wet and bloody; “I’m melting. I’m bleeding and wet and God. I LOVE THIS SONG,” says Tilly as Donna Summer’s “Prelude to Love/Could This Be Magic” fills the air (42). Tilly and Natty “bop along” to Donna Summer’s tune (42). Their dancing to this specific music functions on several levels simultaneously. This song, unlike previous music in the play, comes from an unknown source. Jaye asks directly

⁴³Nagy, *Weldon Rising*, in *Plays: 1*, 19. All subsequent citations will appear in the text.

“And where is this music coming from? WHERE?” (43). The non-diegetic song fills Tilly and Natty with “an odd sense of determination and direction” and, in answer to Jaye’s question, Tilly replies “Nineteen seventy-something. Before we were mean” (43). Taking the characters backwards in time, back to memories and second chances, this scene also transports them into a utopian breakdown of individual (and representative) fears and theatrical boundaries.

In *Weldon Rising*, the shape of the play itself, and the physical boundaries of the two couples, engage in fantastical metamorphoses. Tilly tells Jaye that she is “Melting. Moulting. Something” (43). Something is happening, a transformation turning these characters into braver, more honest, and more openly lesbian and gay selves. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe the Bakhtinian carnivalesque as that which “mediates” between the classical body and its repressed Other, “what it excludes to create its identity as such.”⁴⁴ The Bakhtinian classical form is one that is sleek, closed, and static.⁴⁵ In this context, the classical body is realism with its corporeal limitations of time, place, and natural laws of the universe, as we understand them. In *Weldon Rising*’s Nagy’s dramaturgy revolts against all of those constraints. In a kind of apotheosis, Marcel gets into what is described as an (offstage) levitating car. The vehicle and Marcel ascend off stage, as Tilly and Jaye describe the event. In the spirit of that carnivalesque image, the rest of the play’s climax celebrates the grotesque’s transformative, permeable, and

⁴⁴Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 26.

⁴⁵This and subsequent citation from Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 63.

excessive bodies, as the characters undergo a process of becoming.

In a carnivalesque version of a wedding ceremony, Tilly undresses completely, dresses in Jimmy's white *Saturday Night Fever* suit from the 1970s, and, finally, has her blouse removed by Jaye as they begin to make love. Natty asks the two women to clothe him. They do, in Tilly's suit. And, with Natty holding onto Jaye's hand, the two women begin to make love. Just after this moment, Natty's dead lover, Jimmy, returns to lead him upstage. Jimmy gives Natty the knife which the boy used to kill him, and urges Natty to slash through the map forming the upstage curtain: "Tear up the world for me. Make your mark." (45) I will quote Nagy's complete stage directions at the end of the play, for they reveal how Nagy perceives of a moment through staging and design. After Natty tears through that upstage theatrical reality, Jimmy lifts Natty into his arms

They step through the map. They're gone. Jaye and Tilly are a splendid sight amid the ruin. A glorious flash of white light and they disappear. The torn-up map begins to shake violently. Blackout (45).

It seems appropriate that what Lillian Faderman called "the love that had no name," should erupt into symbolic representation through corporeal presence rather than dialogue.⁴⁶ Tilly and Jaye's lovemaking does not require a name to trigger the destruction of an entire version of reality.

Their erotic choreography offers a vision of what, in Diamond's terms, might be called "the impermissible" taking center stage. Some of the relatively sophisticated audience at the play's premiere Upstairs at the Royal Court were, evidently, rocked by

⁴⁶Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1981), 154.

London's first staged lesbian love-making scene.⁴⁷ One can see Nagy's own approach to representing women's bodies as part of recent feminist explorations on the stage. Nagy herself indicates that she has been most inspired by two feminist scenes: Betty's masturbation monologue from Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* and the scene in which Liz Morden is measured for her hanging from Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good*.⁴⁸

There is, of course, no way to know how different spectators experienced Nagy's lesbian sex scene because of the "trajectories of scopic desire and identification that performer and performance text can only partially control."⁴⁹ But, Nagy takes the chance, exposing the two actresses' bodies to uncertain reception, in defiance of the power of a fetishizing gaze, so that a triumphant open (publically and safely performed) lesbian sexuality can, at least temporarily, command stage space and time.

Part of Nagy's insistence on specific visual and aural texts comes from her desire to structure, as much as possible, the reception of moments like Tilly and Jaye's lovemaking. *Weldon Rising*'s apocalyptic finale relies as much on non-representational

⁴⁷Claire Armitstead, "It Started with a Kiss," *Guardian*, 7 January 1998. Armitstead has also noted in her review of *Weldon Rising* (*Guardian*, 14 December 1992) that while gay male characters kissing on stage has become relatively accepted because of AIDS-related plays, but lesbian characters doing more than giving each other a quick kiss remains a shock for audiences.

⁴⁸Nagy, "Caryl Churchill and Timberlake Wertenbaker," from an interview with Caroline Egan, "The Playwright's Playwright," *Guardian*, 21 September 98.

⁴⁹Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis* (London: Routledge, 1997), vii.

signs as on representational ones.⁵⁰ Dyer describes representational signs as “verisimilitudinous. . . pointing to the way the world is, drawing on the audience’s concrete experience of the world,” while the nonrepresentational or “unreal” is all about visions of a better world.⁵¹ As Natty destroys the map, for instance, he uses a representational prop, a realistic looking knife, but the metaphor of Natty and Jimmy’s escape onstage into their future, Jaye and Tilly’s vanishing, depend upon a resonant nonrepresentational image.

Diamond raises an additional aspect to this kind of deconstructive spectacle: she writes that, with regard to the physical aspects of realistic stages,

the picture-frame or proscenium stage (which still dominates theater design) reinforces the pleasures of perspective space, in which each object has a measured and appropriate position within the whole — a “whole” produced by a “single and immobile eye [I].” positioned to see/know the relations between, and meanings of, the objects in view.⁵²

These moments of spectacle and music in *Weldon Rising* attempt to foreground and break through both the conventions of realism and the normally stable relationship between the stage representations and a spectator’s sense of wholeness.

Nagy’s dramaturgy of destruction seemed pointless to certain critics; Nightingale,

⁵⁰Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 18-19. Dyer describes non-representational signs as presenting us with color, texture, movement, rhythm, and melody. He suggests that “whereas the relationship between signifier and signified in a representational icon is one of resemblance between their appearance, their look, the relationship in the case of the non-representational icon is one of resemblance at the level of basic structuration” in a manner similar to Susanne K. Langer’s description of our relationship to music.

⁵¹Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 25.

⁵²Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, 4.

for instance, missed the crux of the play and does not seem to have comprehended Nagy's exploration of the power of fear within lesbian and gay subcultures.⁵³ Nightingale evidently understood the play's narrative events but asked "to what end, and with what profit?" It is an odd coincidence that he critiques the play for not producing a clear "profit." Perhaps this language is a sign of his own investment in a more mainstream theater, a space in which plays resolve themselves so that spectators can ingest a more palatable consumer product. Perhaps Nagy baffled Nightingale's analytic theatrical receptors by privileging non-rational sensory images over any sort of rational causality. *Weldon Rising's* same theatrical excess did, however, lead Claire Armitstead to describe the play's finale as an "apocalypse [with] . . . a hallucinogenic melt-down, which is also a sort of orgasm, consciences are torn apart and prejudices examined."⁵⁴ It is important to note that while Nagy's climactic spectacles appear destructive, they actually attest to Nagy's faith in her methods of representing emotional and political realities in the theater. It is that re-creation which liberates new "inappropriate" identity possibilities, the combination of painful truth and a new willingness to dream, desire, act for characters and, perhaps, spectators as well.

Nagy was not so fortunate with her next attempt to take spectators on a roller-coaster ride of experience. *The Strip* was Nagy's first production on the Royal Court's bigger main stage and her only experience with largely negative reviews. Her previous

⁵³This and subsequent citation from Nightingale, "A Walk on the Wild Side," *Times* (London), 10 December 1992.

⁵⁴Armitstead, *Guardian*, 14 December 1992.

productions, particularly *Disappeared*, had all been provocative successes, and, as one essay noted, the critical failure of *The Strip* created “the inference . . . that, in some way, she hadn’t made the grade.”⁵⁵ As I commented at the beginning of this chapter, *The Strip* is the most extreme of Nagy’s ventures into anarchic seeming structures. Reviewers, in general, struggled to describe the vast episodic canvas Nagy painted: ten characters with interwoven narratives and criss-crossing vectors. Critics with more enthusiasm for the play’s productive chaos declared it to be a “freewheeling road-movie gaiety about the trek across America, from Long Island to Las Vegas, of a woman female impersonator who is loved both by the gun-toting lesbian hack and a smitten repo man.”⁵⁶ and “a nihilistic comedy-parable . . . Everybody is on the run or in pursuit. . . . The structure is a bit like Schnitzler’s *La Ronde* (he meets her, she meets them, they meet him, he meets it, it runs like hell, etc .) and they all converge on Las Vegas and witness an eclipse of the sun.”⁵⁷

Those reviewers who felt more frustrated at the play’s perplexing holes and unfinished plot lines had harsher comments. Spencer, for instance critiques the play for being ill-served by theatrical possibilities: “In the theatre, the beguiling strangeness of Nagy’s imagination is constantly running into the pedestrian limits of stage presentation. [*The Strip* is] a road movie trying to be a play.”⁵⁸ Nagy’s declared inspirations, Euripides

⁵⁵Armitstead, “It Started with a Kiss,” *Guardian*, 7 January 1998.

⁵⁶Billington, “Strip-Searchers Road-Movie Gaiety and Shifting Sexual Identities in Phyllis Nagy’s Play *The Strip* at the Royal Court,” *Guardian*, 3 March 1995.

⁵⁷John Peter and Robert Hewison, *Times* (London), 5 March 1995.

⁵⁸This and subsequent citation from Spencer, “Completely Lost in Las Vegas,” *Daily Telegraph* (London), 3 March 1995.

and jazz, give some clues as to what inspired her to push at what Spencer aptly names the pedestrian limits of the theater. Her dramaturgy exploits those rifts where theatrical surfaces crack under the strain of trying to accommodate Nagy's demands for staging and intellectual comprehension. Just as bodies in many of her works are revealed as indeterminate, uncontrollable, and full of desires, so too are the worlds she creates. As with the other playwrights in this study, Nagy can not cram her characters into realistic forms, for those structures would explode. Nagy purposefully generates an incomprehensible (with regards to plot) unresolvable (in its ending) and impossible series of theatrical requirements around character and bodies.

The forward motion in *The Strip* is so complex as to seem, to certain reviewers at least, random. As introduced in my first chapter, Vanden Heuvel's ideas of productive chaos aptly describe just such a structure. The order guiding its development, in this case, develops like a jazz theme with variations and individual riffs. Though this structure may seem random, there is an associative order underneath guiding its development. In *The Strip*, each of the ten characters on individual quests take their own routes to the fulfillment of their desires, a journey leading them all to meet at the Sphinx outside the Luxor Hotel, Las Vegas. Rather than developing any single relationship in great depth, Nagy focuses on the web of relationships, the patterns and subversions of space, time, and mainstream cultural norms that can be, indeed must be, crossed by these characters in order for them to find a personal contact to take them into life, into relationships.

Another way to read *The Strip's* form comes from feminist theoretical recuperations of hysteria as a subversive structure. Diamond's discussion of hysteria

illuminates *The Strip*'s anti-rationalist structure which frustrated reviewers. I suggest that the inexplicable plotting of *The Strip* can alienate spectators (to a remove beyond any connection). Spencer seems to speak from that alienated position in his review. He says, "In a script like this where anything seems possible, nothing really matters. Nagy appears to be making it all up as she goes along, raising questions she has no intention of answering. Reading the script after the performance, I found that there is a good deal less here than meets the eye."

His frustrated dismissal echoes that of doctors attempting to diagnose hysterics, particularly female patients, with symptoms of illness but unfathomable causes for their physical states. As Diamond comments,

Whether we situate the hysteric empirically, as a historico-medical object, whose unreadable symptoms derive in part from the material and gender constraints of bourgeois life . . . or discursively, as a 'speaking body' that defies the grammar of the patriarchal symbolic, hysteria in feminist discourse has become meaningful precisely as a disruption of traditional epistemological methods of seeing/knowing.⁵⁹

Whether or not this Royal Court production of *The Strip* brought spectators the enjoyment Nagy envisioned, it certainly accomplished a disruption of conventional ways of seeing theater.

The play frequently refutes and subtracts even highly theatricalized versions of causality, such as the scene in which Ava speaks to her mother on Kate's phone. It is surprising that Ava and her mother can locate each other at this point in the play, and, the event exceeds rational credibility when Kate informs Ava that her phone has been

⁵⁹Diamond, 4.

disconnected for months. If “hysteria [is] . . . the trope par excellence for the ruination of truth-making,” it is no surprise that traditional approaches to the story of *The Strip* seem futile.⁶⁰ Diamond suggests that “hysteria throws a wrench into the system, upsetting its socio-linguistic and gender arrangements,” and, because Nagy never reveals the secret motivations behind Otto’s manipulations, the play withholds rational comprehension from both its characters and spectators.

Hysteria can also be described as “the eruption of the lower, the animal, signifying a sexuality that is anti-social, even criminal, and—worst of all—*inexplicable*” (emphasis added).⁶¹ Because motivations remain inexplicable, spectators may have significant difficulty recuperating the play into a rational, conventionally psychologically structured event. These secret causes fueling the play’s anarchic forward motion also resemble Bakhtin’s description of the grotesque and carnivalesque, those forms that rise up and ruin the neatly contained categories of society’s hierarchies.

I suggest, however, that reviewers might have found an alternate way in to the experience by focusing upon the racial incident that sparks the play. In order to discuss this event, described only in exposition, I begin by giving a sketch of the play focusing on the play’s initial tableau. *The Strip* declares its scope and style (its level of distance from psychologically deep characters) with its initial underscored visual scene. The characters appear in different sections of the two-tiered set which has, as a dominating presence, a

⁶⁰This and the subsequent citation from Diamond, 5.

⁶¹Diamond, 8.

faux Sphinx which has the face of Tutankhamun and a “neon-ribbed” pyramid.⁶² This Sphinx structure remains on stage for the entire production, and we come to understand that it is the exterior of the Luxor Hotel, Las Vegas. In the text, it is clear that this first scene, underscored by Madonna’s “Rescue Me,” jumps from Long Island to London, then from there to Las Vegas and on to Arlington, Virginia, but this specificity may not have been available to all spectators initially.

The performers immediately characterize each role as the set frames them. Upstage on the set’s second tier, Tom Warner and his flatmate, Martin Higgins, are busy. Tom is eating chocolate and Martin is doing “an impressive aerobics routine” (185) in their London apartment. Their friend and next door neighbor, Suzy Bradfield, is in her flat simultaneously watching television, eating potato chips, and masturbating. Suzy is a hack astrologer whose computer has recently started to generate predictions foretelling the future with disturbing acuity. Directly across from Tom and Martin’s apartment are Lester, Loretta, and Baby Ray in their hotel room. Lester watches Tom and Martin while polishing his cowboy boots from home (Roanoke, Virginia), Loretta bottle feeds the baby, who wears a tiny Ku Klux Klan robe. Ava’s mother, Tina, is in Las Vegas, bored and drinking, trying her luck on a one-armed bandit. Tina works as the cleaning lady for Otto Mink’s Las Vegas Club and was Lester’s first wife; Lester abandoned Tina and his daughter even before Ava was born. Ava Coe is a failed hairdresser who found, too late, that she was allergic to hair spray. In the tableau she is unsuccessfully auditioning as a

⁶²Michael Coveney, “To Be or Not To Be,” *Guardian*, 5 March 1995. Nagy described the Luxor Hotel’s Sphinx as having been, inaccurately, given Tutankhamun’s face.

female impersonator for Otto Mink (the Long Island club's owner), and Calvin Higgins (Martin's younger brother), the repo man who has come to take Ava's car.

The slipperiest character in this unstable world is Otto Mink, who is also known in England as Murphy Greene, owner of Greene & Greene's pawnshop (Tom manages the pawnshop). In America, Otto seems to be in the entertainment and gambling businesses and, in a related sideline, he is a self-described political media consultant. In a variety of roles and guises, Otto pulls the strings of most of the characters in the play, and attempts, with only limited success, to manipulate their lives to fulfill his secret agenda. He orchestrates events setting up individuals, implicating them and changing the direction of their lives. The most significant, and horrible, of these events is an act of terrorism spectators never see: before the play commences, a busload of African American Baptist ministers was blown up in Virginia. Otto convinced the arrogant and pliable Lester that if he did as he was told, he could end up in the Virginia House of Representatives. Evidently, as retold later by Loretta, Otto handed Lester a kind of joystick and told him to press the button; as he did so, the bus exploded killing the twenty-seven men inside. With this racist attack, all of the players are set in motion.

Despite the chaos (hysteria) Nagy orchestrates over the course of the play, this initial hate crime remains a haunting *primum mobile*. Structurally, the explosion functions as the hub of the play's wheel of fortune for all of the characters. Perhaps Nagy, who was raised as a Catholic, is mimicking a temptation scene, located in a capitalist Eden; the snake-like Otto seduces Lester with dreams of power. Spectators, however, are not given information about the crime directly nor do they get all the puzzle pieces until nearly forty

minutes into the three hour, three act play. In fact, due to Nagy's deliberately withholding dramaturgy, most spectators probably do not find out that Otto tricked Lester (by not telling him what the device would trigger), until the top of the second act.

It is interesting that Nagy chooses to make Otto's crime so specifically racist and peculiarly motiveless. As all the reviewers articulate, Lester is a rabid racist and a Klan member, but it remains a mystery why Otto would entrap him with this particular act. Also significant is the lack of discussion about Otto's motivation for this crime. There is an unspoken generalization that, in some way, Otto is merely facilitating a fantasy expression of Lester's ingrained racism. I suggest, however, that there is no evidence that Lester's limited notions of life and politics would ever have led him to take such a step. We discover, later in the play, that Lester is a fearful man; he is afraid of Martin, who picks him up (at a leather bar which Lester has confused with a Klan gathering place from home) and physically attacks him (grabbing Lester's testicles). Understandably, reviewers lose sight of the difference between Otto's and Lester's culpabilities over the messy course of the play. Lester's guilt comes up in several scenes, but Otto never addresses the crime in any way. There is some possibility that Otto creates this whole disaster in order to get rid of Lester so that he can marry Loretta (with whom he is madly in love). But, surely, Lester could have been dispatched in a far simpler maneuver. As is clear from *Girl Bar*, *Awake*, and her latest play, *Never Land*, Nagy is not a writer who takes issues of race for granted. What purpose does it serve to introduce this terrible and central story, and yet, keep the event in the periphery of *The Strip*?

The unseen African Americans never have a chance for justice, but Loretta and

Tom do. Otto leads them through the magically opening doors of long unused law courts in Liverpool, and, in a cross between judgement day and going to visit the Wizard of Oz, they claim justice for themselves. The whole concept of justice, however, is distinctly unreliable; if there is a great judge in the law court, he is an arbitrary and capricious god. Loretta desires to have “the bastards who make fun of my accent shot through their hearts” (233). She also wants forgiveness for Lester, and “a set of bone china. An Encyclopaedia Britannica for Baby Ray. And I want . . . titties as sweet and round as melons” (233-4). The range of her concerns suggests that the consequences of Lester’s crime do not weigh on her mind at all.

The other void in the play concerns Lester’s view of his own crime: he is never contrite or concerned about his part in the mass murder, even defending the assassinations to Martin. I believe that the utter absence of justice for the dead African American ministers is a sign pointing to the unjust god who sits in the seat of justice in Nagy’s version of America’s capitalist landscape. The event can be read as a parable in which Lester’s (i.e., America’s) hunger for something that looks like power is doomed to remain unfulfilled, and, thus far at least, true justice is yet to be found.

This lack of fairness and resolution is heightened by the play’s ending: the characters all suddenly find themselves outside the Hotel Luxor by the sphinx. Two by two, they appear in specific pairings, in what seems to be a nod to Noah’s ark and salvation. As the characters move towards each other, two particularly meaningful pairings materialize: Tina picks up Baby Ray, who seems to have appeared from nowhere, and Calvin embraces his brother, Martin, who is dying of AIDS (262). Immediately after

the two men embrace. Nagy's stage directions describe another apocalyptic event: "a sudden unearthly rumbling sound from the deepest bowels of the earth. The sphinx/pyramid splits open to reveal Otto, like Samson, pushing its walls apart" (263).

Otto then launches into a Mephistophelean confidence-man's speech:

What's your desire what's the situation I'll tell you the situation: I've got booze I've got car stereos I've got fax modems I've got what you want I've got what you want I've got what you WANT. *Otto laughs, a deep, malevolent, continuous laugh. The very walls seem to shake* (263).

It is as if the "mysterious, megalomaniac Englishman," reveals that this new world contains only consumption and the incitements to desire for more consumption.⁶³ He also seems redefined, in this mocking huckster's speech, as a grotesque figure. Rather than the contained certainty of his former puppeteer persona, this Otto Mink erupts from "the deepest bowels of the earth" as the monstrous other of a utopian structure. Like the uncontrollable carnivalesque impulse, capitalism's hungers threaten to reabsorb all of the characters.

After Otto's manifesto of consumption, Nagy writes that Baby Ray, who has hitherto been silent, begins to wail. His "oddly unsettling cry" captures the focus of everyone on stage (263). Tina, who is still holding the baby, attempts to soothe him by promising all of the possibilities Vegas has to offer: "There's lots of action. And chance" (263). But Baby Ray cries on and on, into the play's final blackout. As distinct from Nagy's earlier hopeful cataclysmic finales, *The Strip* seems to complicate what had been,

⁶³Spencer, "Completely Lost in Las Vegas," *Daily Telegraph*, 3 March 1995.

in her previous plays, visions of future transformations.⁶⁴ In this later work, Nagy combines the utopian and carnivalesque impulse generated by the electric connection of two homosexual bodies, with a sense of how ephemeral that utopian moment may be. It is as if Baby Ray wails over the brief life of the vision which was generated by Calvin and Martin's embrace: utopian desire must find ways to survive capitalism's voracious hunger (through Otto), and, as Tina says to the wailing Baby Ray, "We got possibilities, little fella"—but they are only possibilities—for a newly imagined future.

Nagy's defiantly difficult plays serve to open spaces for transgressive identities as they exist in the flesh. Her work takes on many feminist goals, attempting to intervene in symbolic systems, such as theatre, and discourses, like those around the identity categories of race and sexual identification. If one considers each of her hysterically structured plays as a female body, they all resist diagnosis and, even more importantly, reject the various interpretive cures offered by critics who wish to subdue the plays' unruly forms. In true carnivalesque fashion, Nagy's theatrical worlds spill over boundaries and binary distinctions. *Weldon Rising*, for instance, made space for not only lesbian and gay identities, but also for Marcel. When asked why he always refers to himself in the third person, Marcel replies, "Marcel IS the third person" (28).

⁶⁴With the character of Otto, *The Strip* follows a pattern begun in *Disappeared* which featured the manipulative and ambiguous Elston. While Elston had none of Otto's supernatural powers, he performed more than one identity and promised Sarah (just as Otto tempted Lester) a new life. With *The Strip*, Nagy deepens and theatricalizes the power and possibilities created by this kind of destabilizing character that she brought to life in *Disappeared*.

CHAPTER 4

MAC WELLMAN'S MASCULINE SHAPES AND SHADOWS

What are little boys made of? "Snips and snails, and puppy-dog tails."

—Anonymous

It is no exaggeration to say that men under patriarchy are not just empowered by their privileged position through the penis-phallus: they are also profoundly alienated from their own bodies, which are lost beneath its monstrosity. No wonder they are so often running scared.

—Peter Lehman. *Running Scared*

Recently an actor acquaintance described his audition for the role of Quasimodo in the Disney corporation's upcoming musical production of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. In the waiting room there were numerous would-be Quasimodos—all of whom were intently rehearsing the audition sides with guttural voices and distorted facial expressions. As each actor auditioning moved on from reading lines to singing, the faint tones of beautiful baritone notes could be heard leaking out from under the door. This Disneyfied dichotomy, true beauty emerging from surface grotesquery, was, he said, what the producers wanted.

Mac Wellman, on the other hand, creates grotesque figures whose hybrid natures seem to be made up in the Blakean fashion, as described by W. B. Yeats, in which "a

contrary is not a negation.”¹ Stallybrass and White point out that this mixture of grotesque and classical also corresponds to “a ‘deconstructed’ feminism, which undoes the binary oppositions of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ in order to unsettle patriarchal prescriptions for gender identity.”² Wellman’s Monster-Narrator of *Infrared*, for instance, is a sentient, brutal, and metaphysically inclined creature, akin to John Gardner’s love-struck Grendel.³ The Monster-Narrator encompasses the qualities of a philosophical Godzilla, a misshapen underworld Peter Pan, and any number of Joseph Campbell’s heroes. In this, Wellman’s most oneiric and religious text, the Monster-Narrator enacts a ritual of betrayal and resurrection while searching for his shadow and his identity. His quest takes him down to a surreal underworld in which the iconography of horror (and its parodies) intermingles with Christian imagery.

In contrast to the quintessentially Romantic and grotesque figure of Quasimodo, Wellman’s Monster-Narrator possesses no definite authentic self below the surface of his monstrousness. Certainly, the Monster-Narrator is not a prince in disguise with a pure heart; in fact, he (it) may not have a heart at all. As described in the my first chapter, the character has great difficulty even locating his own bodily boundaries: “At times I felt as though I possessed a tail. At times I felt as if I were a tail. The tail wagging the dog of

¹W.B. Yeats, *A Vision*, 2d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1962), 72.

²Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 44.

³John Gardner, *Grendel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). Gardner’s novel is a retelling of the Beowulf legend from the monster’s point of view.

some other existence.”⁴ This enormous figure cannot locate his own bodily boundaries. The Monster-Narrator’s hulking and unbounded body points to the importance of exploring Bakhtinian ideas of the somatic in Wellman’s work.

I will trace the cultural and theatrical implications of the carnivalesque disruptions of normative masculine desire generated by Wellman’s abjected male characters lurching across strange worlds, ascending into theatrical (and metaphorical) heavens, and infrequently, making sexual connections with one another. In this study, I propose to focus specifically on the outlines of the abjected, grotesque, monstrous masculinity in Wellman’s plays.

As part of Wellman’s critique of the construct of heterosexual white masculinity, he puts the disintegrating edges of authoritative communication in the foreground. In his essay “From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse,” Bakhtin describes heteroglossia as “the problem of internal differentiation, the stratification characteristic of any national language.”⁵ While this sense of multiplicity within language productively frames all the experimental theater of this study, Wellman’s work, in particular, invites audiences to focus on the chaos of the multiple meanings inherent to speech. Of the four playwrights I discuss, Wellman’s is the most willfully obscure, and his narratively impenetrable texts render his plays the least “edible” of all these non-culinary works.

⁴Mac Wellman and Jane Geiss, *Infrared* (unpublished manuscript), 2. Jane Geiss is the puppeteer with whom Wellman collaborated on this play. All subsequent page numbers for quotations from the play will appear in the text.

⁵M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* ed. Michael Holquist, transl. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. In University of Texas Press Slavis Series, No. 1. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 67.

Infrared is one of Wellman's least topical, most obliquely political, and most intensely somatic works, and I will ground this chapter in my reading of this self-mocking gender fable. It is the story of a masculine figure who confronts his alienation from his own body and receives absolution for his desires. After introducing the questions raised by *Infrared*, I will trace out the carnivalesque bodies that appear in Wellman's other significant plays of the late 1980s-1990s to explore how gendered bodies, particularly masculine figures, function in Wellman's highly cerebral works.

Several scholars and reviewers have written compellingly of Wellman's satirical attacks on American ideologies. Marc Robinson is the main contributor of scholarly writing on Wellman. In *The Other American Drama*, he elegantly characterizes Wellman's restless speakers and their turbulent jeremiads. Robinson places Wellman's dramaturgy in a matrilinear genealogy descending from Gertrude Stein, but he does not address issues of the body. And, while Wellman has been fortunate to have insightful and supportive critics, such as Alisa Solomon and Mel Gussow, review his productions, few critics have turned their attention to the somatizations presented in the texts or productions of his plays.

Although they offer unique and disparate dramatic voices, a subgroup of four straight white male dramatists from the late 1980s, Wellman, Jones, Overmyer, and Jenkin, are often seen as the "language playwright" posse.⁶ In Jones's own words, they are "the Huck Finns" or "literary juvenile delinquents" of contemporary American theatre.

⁶This and the subsequent quotation by Jeffrey Jones from Marc Robinson, "Don't Fence Them In," *American Theatre* 6 (September 1989): 34.

Robinson characterizes their theatrical styles as “disruptive, unpredictable and restless.” and, in their journey plays, they “chafe against the restraints of convention by writing plays full of actual departures.⁷ Robinson also describes how, through different non-realistic linguistically-driven styles, these writers create unmoored trouble-making characters who bring uncertainty to the perilous landscapes they visit.

With *Infrared*, Wellman once again explores a play of journey and escape. Travis Preston’s sophisticated staging of the play, produced by New York University’s Theater Experimental Wing, was presented by undergraduates. The Monster-Narrator recounts how he left his edenic home to sneak into New York City via the Holland Tunnel in search of some ontological certainty. He goes through the birth canal of the tunnel to look for truth in the wilds of the city. Once there, however, the Monster-Narrator finds only greater confusion when his shadow is stolen. Existentially concerned, he ultimately follows the siren-call of a Hole to enter the obverse infrared universe existing beneath the city’s surface.⁸ There he finds Cathy X, a self-described “normal girl.”

Once the Monster-Narrator penetrates the subterranean world, however, Cathy X

⁷Marc Robinson, “Don’t Fence Them In,” *American Theatre* 6, no. 6 (September 1989): 30.

⁸In Elizabeth Butler Cullingford’s “The Historical Poetics of Excrement: Yeats’s Crazy Jane and the Irish Bishops” (*A Dialogue of Voices*), she writes that his “use of . . . drains as a displaced metaphor for sex,” is part of a long tradition of “negative discourse of the body from Saint Augustine to Bataille, [which] springs from fear and contempt of female sexuality rather than from a joyful acceptance of the mingling of base and sacred during intercourse.” She points out that Yeats is recuperating the drains as a positive affirmation of bodies, and it is interesting to consider both aspects of this sewer metaphor with regard to *Infrared*.

undergoes a transformation becoming Christ the Destroyer. Through what Bakhtin might call a centrifugal repetition of speeches (a repetition which destabilizes the illusion of a unified communication), the Monster-Narrator discovers that he is her “Judas-man,” and that she had taken his shadow (27). Travis Preston’s staging of this recognition moment endowed one of the male performer’s bodies, one of the monster’s repressed selves, with the mysterious power of writing. The trenchcoat-wearing young man laid down the small, nude, one-legged mannequin which he had been carrying and placed his quill into his mouth. He turned upstage to look at Cathy X (Christ the Destroyer) sitting on her throne of judgment. Letting the trenchcoat fall to the ground, the Monster-Narrator revealed his nude body to be covered with hieroglyphic script. The phallic body of the male storyteller/ creator offered itself as text. Although powerful, mysterious, and dangerous (as Judas to Christ), the character’s masculinity was also framed as ludicrous: the actor posed, quill in mouth, mimicking Western classical statuary that signify the power of the male ideal. After posing, the Monster-Narrator kisses Cathy X. In doing so, he cuts through the stasis of the fetishizing structure in which the phallically powerful Cathy X both has *and* has not castrated him by appropriating his shadow. It is through this betrayal that the Monster-Narrator is briefly able to reclaim his “semblable.”

In a clear example of what Diana Fuss calls “the detour through the Other that defines the self,” the Monster-Narrator penetrates a Hole and ultimately, emerges as if whole.⁹ In a typically destabilizing dramaturgy, however, the play ends with the Monster-Narrator as hungry for knowledge as he began, and he is once again separated from his

⁹Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2.

shadow. No suturing of masculinity can resist the entropic forces which undermine the illusions of stable masculine subjectivities in Wellman's work. This allegorical fable rejects the closure of divisions between self and not-self for both the Monster-Narrator and for his female counterpart, Cathy X.

The voraciously devouring and siren-like holes which tempt the Monster-Narrator into the underworld can be read as symbolic vaginas and may speak specifically to the incestuous appeal of a daughter's sexuality. Looking to the adolescent daughters who appear in Wellman's four-play cycle, *The Crowtette*, Susannah and Tessera (a later version of Susannah who appears in *The Lesser Magoo*), one can see a pattern in which daughters appear as the objects of illicit, and perhaps hostile, desire. I will return to this incestuous desire in greater detail in my subsequent discussions of *The Hyacinth Macaw* and *Second Hand Smoke* (the middle plays from *The Crowtette*), but an example from *The Lesser Magoo* will, I believe, clarify this trope. In this final play of the cycle, several men and women are attracted to the beautiful young Tessera. Her witch-like Aunt Sycorica, for example, says "That little rabbit You bet I'd like to monkey with her bore-hole."¹⁰ Holes and tails. Y and X. This sexual binary is the structure which generates acts of violence, desire, and betrayal in Wellman's worlds. The Monster-Narrator of *Infrared*, for instance, takes the hero's plunge down the Alice in Wonderland rabbit-hole into the double-world below to find his identity and his sexuality. Whether his masculine seeker-characters cross to a new plane of reality (as Mr. William Hard does in *Second-Hand Smoke*) or descend into an underworld (as the Monster-Narrator does), they are always

¹⁰Mac Wellman, *The Lesser Magoo* (unpublished manuscript), 18.

wrestling with fearful desires. No matter how much Wellman's male characters seek to keep their desires (for sex, success, fame, power) down, they rise back up to haunt them.

This is not to say that only the masculine figures traversing Wellman's landscapes possess a grotesque, excessive, transformativeness. Cathy X has a genealogy going back through many of Wellman's earlier plays; she is related to the female girl hunts from outerspace and the demonic mothers who do in their families. But, though those grotesque females may desire freedom, power, and new lands, they do not quest for a holy grail of self; ultimately, Wellman's plays address sexuality, as a key to identity, through the lens of masculine desire.

Wellman's masculine characters experience their inability to control their sexual impulses through the instability of their narratives, their language, and their bodies. It seems as though "You can't keep that sort of thing down," fellow writer, Spalding Gray, notes of his own persistent erection.¹¹ In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz discusses western cultures' categorizations of bodily permeability and body fluids: her insights offer important routes to mapping masculinity as represented in *Infrared's* landscape. Grosz asks whether the construction of the male body as contained and unified (like the Bakhtinian description of the classical body) might serve as an effort by men "to distance themselves from the very kind of corporeality— uncontrollable, excessive, expansive,

¹¹Spalding Gray, *Monster in a Box* (audio-recording). Grosz make clear that she is attempting to describe how Western cultures have constructed images of male and female bodies, not that those bodies *are* in some way either more or less contained, more or less "leaking."

disruptive, irrational—they have attributed to women?”¹² Grosz continues her line of reasoning to conclude that anxiety over a permeable masculine body may help us understand why men seem to have a different relationship to their physical selves and to their sexuality than women. If, she suggests, the stereotypical pejorative critiques of women’s “leaky” and mysterious bodies function as an epiphenomenon of a masculine anxiety over those very aspects of their own identities, one can see more clearly why men (both gay and straight) might “regard their sexual desires as overwhelming or uncontrollable impulses . . . [and might] find themselves to be ‘different persons’ when comparing daily life with sexual encounters, [and] regard their sexual organs on the model of the homunculus, the little man within the man, with a quasi-autonomy of its own.” Perhaps the Monster-Narrator, who might or might not be the tail of some beast, represents this kind of phallic homunculus.

Wellman’s work is frequently unacceptable to a culture-marketplace looking for transparent communication; the lack of access to meaning constitutes and parallels many of the material aspects of his theatrical career. The invisibility of his productions within the larger culture mimics the invisibility of narratives in his plays. *Infrared* has twice been scheduled to be presented by En Garde Arts, but the production has never gotten off the ground; its scope and demands make it nearly impossible to produce in the smaller not-for-profit theater world. Even after two decades of continuous work with over a hundred productions, Wellman has few production options. Despite his prolific expenditure, his

¹²This and subsequent citation from Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 200-203.

plays remain outside the view of most theater-going audiences. Over the course of his career, most of Wellman's productions have been small, low-budget, equity-waiver runs of sixteen performances. These shows were produced by a few not-for-profit Off and Off-Off-Broadway producers such as Julian Weber at Soho Rep. Casey Childs at Primary Stages. Greta Gunderson at BACA Downtown, or Wellman himself

Overmyer's "Mac Wellman's Horizontal Avalanche," discusses Wellman's professional invisibility. Overmyer, a colleague of Wellman's, takes David Hare to task for writing that the only American playwrights who are political are David Mamet and Wallace Shawn. Overmyer retorts that Hare "means the only American playwrights he *knows* are those who have been done in New York in highly visible venues and then at the National, the RSC, and the Royal Court. An interesting idea of political "¹³ Overmyer, who understands from the inside the material rewards of being visible in the entertainment marketplace (i.e., being a commercial playwright), points out how the discourses defining theater and its nature are prescribed by the very assumptions that writers like Wellman interrogate.¹⁴ Similarly, four years after Overmyer's comments, Mel Gussow also questions Wellman's relative anonymity. In a piece for the *New York Times*, Gussow notes that, despite Wellman's forty plays, awards, and foundation grants, the playwright remains "largely invisible to the wider theatrical public" and "has never had a play

¹³Eric Overmyer, "Mac Wellman's Horizontal Avalanches" *Theater* 21, vol. 3 (Summer/Fall 1990), 55.

¹⁴Overmyer has had success Off-Broadway at The Second Stage with his play, *On The Verge*. In addition, he has, for many years, had a significant career in television writing and producing.

performed in any of New York's major institutional theatres."¹⁵

Marvin Carlson addresses some of these issues of visibility and marginality with his discussion of the location and semiotics of theater spaces in *Places of Performance*. In his discussion of theaters without banners on their facades, for example, he writes that "official invisibility has become a common feature in the new experimental theatres of the East Village."¹⁶ Having recently attended several performances of Wellman's work at a paradigmatically marginal space, I can attest to the secret-club quality of attending this kind of theater event. The House of Candles theater, at which I saw several of Wellman's shows, is the new space in what the ever energetic and optimistic Aaron Beall calls the Ludlow Street Arts Complex. But the theater has no sign. In fact, House of Candles occupies a narrow storefront on a two-block stretch of the lower east side that is mushrooming with boutiques, restaurants, bars, and this sixty-nine seat storefront theatre space.

Like many subcultural events, Wellman's productions have the added allure of being positioned as edgy and avant-garde. They happen in obscure places like the then-condemned Victory Theater (where *Crowbar* was presented), and become events. The private club/speakeasy quality helps to generate an alliance with some of the audience members who find their way beyond Delancy, below Canal, to the storefront between the bodega and the hat boutique. This same geographical obscurity and borderline

¹⁵Mel Gussow, "An Inventor Whose Laboratory is the Theatre" *New York Times*, 30 May 1994.

¹⁶Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 125.

neighborhood also alienates certain prospective audience members; just like the plays presented on their stages, these downtown spaces refuse to offer easy access or identification. Makeshift theaters, like House of Candles, are often grungy, poorly outfitted, and require a great deal of imagination (and forgiveness) on the part of the spectators. Audience members discover that these spaces do not function with the same methods of pleasant allure and plush enticements to which they may be accustomed.

It may seem, from his productions in elusive space, as though Wellman is not interested in attracting wider audiences, a position that might explain part uptown theaters' lack of interest in producing his work.¹⁷ Even reviewers who admire Wellman's plays sometimes critique him, as Jonathan Kalb does, for "making a fetish out of obfuscation,"¹⁸ or, as Peter Marks does less eloquently, for just "being difficult to follow."¹⁹ Wellman seems capable of making the writing changes necessary for his plays to gain greater recognition. Tellingly, when he works with accessible narratives, in plays such as *Sincerity Forever* and *7 Blowjobs*, he achieves significantly greater cultural visibility. Why does he remain so loyal to his subversive obscure dramaturgies? What can

¹⁷It is true that in 1990, Manhattan Theatre Club made a brave, if brief, foray into more formally challenging material for its subscribers; Manhattan Theatre Club audiences were given the chance to have the downtown theater scene come up to meet them in the safety and comfort of their neighborhood. The Uptown/Downtown program was made up of selected works from small alternative theaters such as BACA Downtown (one act of Parks's *Imperceptible Mutabilities*), and P.S. 122 (Mac Wellman's Obie-winning play for one, *Terminal Hip*). The program was not a success, and the Manhattan Theater Club has abandoned it.

¹⁸Jonathan Kalb, "(Mac)aw's Last Squawk," *Village Voice*, 7 June 1994.

¹⁹Peter Marks, "It's Raining Cliches As Doom Draws Near," *New York Times*, 21 January 1997.

the material circumstances of his career in context reveal about masculinity and his work?

A letter from Suzan-Lori Parks to Mac Wellman (1 a.m. September 1988), in response to the BACA Downtown production of Wellman's *Cellophane* casts some light on this issue. Parks was, at this time, one of the younger writers whom Wellman mentored through BACA Downtown New Work's Group. She asks:

who writes like what mac writes like? he writes like a person who by definition is forced to hide (by definition: via definition/by way of definition/toward definition/ (and Oz)/having once gotten there must stay hidden because if you were to come out they would kill you) therefore a person who by definition is invisible if he hopes at all to be visible.²⁰

Parks raises intriguing questions: what is Wellman hiding, and, what is he hiding from?

I suggest that Elin Diamond's discussion of Brechtian gestic moments points to an approach for reading both Wellman's plays and the cultural invisibility of that work: "If we read feminist concerns back into this discussion, the *gestus* signifies a moment of theoretical insight into sex-gender complexities, not only in the play's 'fable,' but in the culture which the play, at the moment of reception, is dialogically reflecting and shaping."²¹ For, as Stallybrass and White point out, those events which are socially marginal are often symbolically central to a culture.²² As Parks queries and Diamond proposes, "what does this say about the world?"

Wellman's exploration of masculinity reverberates with the Reagan-Bush emphasis on family values. As David Savran notes in his work on Miller and Williams, "Despite

²⁰Suzan-Lori Parks, "A Letter to Mac Wellman" Reprinted in *The Wellman Journal*. Private Publication (January 1998), 26.

²¹Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis* (London: Routledge, 1997), 53.

²²Stallybrass and White, 5.

masculinity's status as an illusion without ontological foundation, a sequence of postures, it has a profoundly real — and, many would say, devastating — impact on the world.”²³

Kaja Silverman writes about the power of illusions which constitute reality, or the “dominant fiction.”²⁴ Believing in this dominant fiction,

or ideological ‘reality’ solicits our faith above all else in the unity of the family, and the adequacy of the male subject. If ideology is central to the maintenance of classic masculinity, the affirmation of classic masculinity is equally central to the maintenance of our governing ‘reality.’ . . . Within our dominant fiction the phallus/penis equation occupies absolute pride of place.

Silverman's description of how ideology and masculinity function illuminates the ways in which Wellman's radical dramaturgy attacks a phallogentric myth of America. Wellman's critique of heteronormativity, heteronarrativity, and the corollary laws of the Father also reveals a subcultural *zeitgeist* of the intellectual avant-garde struggling to respond to an increasingly conservative national political scene, as well as the rise of multiculturalism, throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

As with all of the writers selected for this study, Wellman's work addresses what Lauren Berlant calls the “hygienic governmentality” that infantilizes citizens and intrudes into their personal lives in new ways.²⁵ Berlant points out that the conservatives have inverted the feminist call, “The personal is the political,” to support a “staged crisis in the

²³David Savran, *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 16.

²⁴This and subsequent citation from Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 15-16

²⁵Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 175.

legitimacy of the most traditional, apolitical sentimental patriarchal family values . . . [thus resulting] in an antipolitical nationalist politics of sexuality whose concern is no longer what sex reveals about unethical power but what ‘abnormal’ sex/reproduction/intimacy forms reveal about threats to the nation proper/the proper nation.”²⁶ Wellman’s explorations of subjectivity are directly linked to undoing those discourses of family (values) and nation which American culture upholds in the name of the Father.

During the Reagan-Bush years, white experimental artists, like Wellman, experienced a combination of multicultural and feminist pressures: they saw their share of the very small piece of a financial pie get even smaller as the increasing opportunities for artists of color, lesbian and gay artists, and female artists seemed to take priority. At the same time, progressive artists were expected to support these changes. As noted in my first chapter, in one of Robert Brustein’s responses to the NEA crises, he complained that the arts had lost sight of “excellence” under a barrage of multiculturalism and political correctness. He waxed nostalgic for the old days when the NEA used to dispense funds based solely on “artistic quality regardless (rather than *because*) of color, sex, ethnicity, or creed. . . .”²⁷ Brustein argued for a return to a positivist notion of excellence, and a rejection of what he perceived as the current attack on that approach as “racist, elitist, or discriminatory by those who have substituted relative [i.e., multicultural] values for absolute standards.” In a conversation with Michael Cadden (Chair of the Princeton Program in Theater and Dance) and myself, Wellman discussed Brustein’s article. Indeed,

²⁶Berlant, 178.

²⁷This and the subsequent quotation from Robert Brustein, *Reimagining American Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991), 262.

he agreed with Brustein's point, concurring that there were many less talented artists getting production support primarily because of their status as minorities. He suggested that the current trend of granting certain artists priority, simply because of their race or gender, was a new and unfortunate effect of cultural politics and arts funding pressures. When I suggested to him that gender and race had always had great sway over which artists received opportunities, and that, perhaps, it was simply that the criteria had only recently switched (from white male artists) to these subcultural groups, he was surprised. While Wellman seems oddly conservative in this regard, I suggest that his process of coming to terms with the changes in the cultural landscape appeared, in displaced form, in his incisive attacks upon conservative politicians and their beliefs. This is not to imply that Wellman's sincerely enthusiastic parodies of Senator Helms or Senator Thurman, for instance, came about solely as displaced targets for his response to a shrinking privilege as a heterosexual white male artist, only that the questioning in his work, as I read it, of the burden of a white normative masculinity is connected to the cultural and financial pressures he personally experienced.

In Wellman's theatrical worlds, fathers—and their attendant (fantasmatic) stable structures of meaning—are in the process of disappearing. Wellman's disorienting dramaturgy of excess (of words) and scarcity (of available traditional narrative structures and "meaning") works to deconstruct the phallogentric "reality" of America. While authoritative figures, such as Rudolph Guiliani, would vehemently disagree, Wellman's plays to explore worlds in which white heterosexual masculinity is no longer a stable author-ity.

I would like to continue my discussion of Wellman's disruptive bodies by looking now at Wellman's most accessible topical satires: *Sincerity Forever* and *7 Blowjob*s. Both plays respond to the early 1990s when the sexplosive politics of the body, to use Terry Eagleton's phrase for Bakhtinian disruption, presented itself on our national political stage in the culture wars over the National Endowment for the Arts funding of the work of Serrano, Mapplethorpe, and the four solo performers: Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller, known as the NEA-4.²⁸

In 1990, precipitated by Jesse Helms's re-election scapegoating of the National Endowment for the Arts funding of Serrano's "Piss Christ" photograph and the subsequent uproar over the Mapplethorpe photographs, Chairman John E. Frohnmayer rejected the peer panel's selection of Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller for NEA grants. Several months before the NEA-4 debacle Mac Wellman received a \$15,000 playwriting fellowship from the NEA and completed *Sincerity Forever*, which he described as "a satire . . . a little contemporary morality play" about "innocence and despair, and the prospect of divine providence."²⁹

Sincerity Forever presents the community of Hillsbottom, U. S. A., all of whom wear Klan robes and celebrate their ignorance of the universe:

I, too, may be as dumb as a post, and unclear about the multiplication

²⁸Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), 144. Eagleton talks about the "sexplosive politics of the body, the erotic, the licentious and semiotic."

²⁹Ira J. Bilowit, "Mac Wellman Takes the Money with a Nod to Jesse Helms," *Back Stage*, 24 August 1990.

table, the boundaries of more than a half dozen states. . . . Furthermore, I do not feel compelled by reason to accept this theory of evolution, nor the periodic table of the elements, nor the theory of global warming, nor the supposed crimes against the Jews attributed to one Rudolf Hitler.³⁰

The spiritual forces of good and evil materialize at this festival of the far Right.³¹ A petite, tough, African American, and female Jesus H. Christ makes an appearance to serve out justice to the obnoxious and ignorant Hillsbottomers. She also drives away the alien Furball creatures (who have come to possess the townspeople). In Jim Simpson's BACA Downtown production, the two Mystic Furballs who spew foul-mouthed rants of cynical rage pop up from the back seat of the rusted jeep that serves as the primary set-piece. Jan-Leslie Harding and Steve Mellor's Furball personas epitomized abjection, that which threatens the order, boundaries, and categories of pure and impure. Grosz's description of abjection, for instance, derives from Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (which itself relies heavily upon Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*): "Kristeva asks about the conditions under which the clean and proper body, the obedient, law-abiding, social body, emerges, the cost of its emergence . . . she designates by the term *abjection*."³² In this case, Wellman adopts furballs, the mass of ingested fur that a cat might haltingly vomit up to clear its gut of obstructions, as the symbol of American cultural repressions about religion, race, and sexuality. The Furballs' appearance in low-rent *Twilight Zone* wigs and make-

³⁰Mac Wellman, *Sincerity Forever* in *Grove New American Theater*, ed. Michael Feingold (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 105. All subsequent references to this play will appear in the text.

³¹Although Bakhtin described carnival as populist and progressive, Stallybrass and White note that carnival celebrants can turn against the weakest members of society in an act of "displaced abjection."

³²Grosz, 192.

up matched their slobbering guttural imprecations as they epitomized a “coughed up” version of the Hillsbottomers’ internal rage.

Shortly after the Furballs make their appearance, Jesus H. Christ delicately makes her way across the gravel floor.³³ In a speech intermingling high and low with impunity, Christ makes clear that, while she has come to berate the Hillsbottermer’s for their self-righteous hypocrisy, she will rescue them from the grotesque alien Furballs. In fact, the Hillsbottomers had drawn her ire; she is nauseated by their arrogant misinterpretations of her doctrine and has come to:

raise badass, obstreperous, antisocial, pestiferous . . . bloody hell . . .
Furthermore, whosoever puts words in my mouth concerning they fears of the so-called cabal of international faggotry, the scourge of the children of Ham, and the Hebrew contagion . . . all those who puts words in my mouth concerning these things I have no use for. What the fuck do I care who fucks with who? They fucking is they own concern, and may they use it wisely, and well. (129-130)

Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, R-Calif., described this speech as “a four letter version of the Sermon on the Mount,” accurately capturing the intermixing trick Wellman plays on the Christian conservatives’ own texts.³⁴

Christ’s “who fucks with who” speech reveals a great deal about Wellman’s techniques and dialogical qualities. This hybrid rant of colloquial obscenities and the Sermon on the Mount epitomizes one of a Menippian satirists’ favorite disruptive devices: the billingsgate speech, a form Bakhtin described in his discussion of Rabelais. Eric

³³Christ was played by an African American actor in Simpson’s first production at the Berkshire Theatre Festival, but the role was performed by the African American actress, Kenya Scott, in the subsequent production at BACA Downtown.

³⁴Porter Anderson, “The Sin in Sincerity,” *TheatreWeek*, 17-23 December 1990, 22.

McCluhan offers a helpful description of Menippean styles in his work, *The Role of Thunder in Finnegans Wake*. McCluhan describes the macroronic aesthetic of Menippean satire, pointing out that “other satires work on the readers’ concepts; Menippean satires on their percepts. Hence, the Menippists’ cavalier attitude about the reader’s getting the meaning, while (paradoxically) insisting on the prolonged study of the satire. . . .”³⁵

Menippean hybridity of all sorts, McCluhan notes, jolts the reader (or viewer) into changing, adapting to the demands of the text. Billingsgate shocks with its intermingling of high speech and coarse, low (fairground), obscene expressions like those in Jesus H. Christ’s tirade against the obtuse Hillsbottomers. Indeed, this literary approaches to carnivalesque eruptions of linguistic inappropriateness (low language expressing philosophically serious concerns) frame many of Wellman’s boundary-crossing dramaturgical strategies.

Wellman’s billingsgate speeches are often inspired by H.L. Mencken’s writing on colloquial language. Wellman has described how he became fascinated with “out-of-favor American speech” after reading Mencken’s work.³⁶ Wellman used nineteenth century American vocabularies to create an oppositional syntax, an anti-grammar. This nineteenth century American lexicon of speech appears in Jesus H. Christ’s language, marking a moment when, in Russo’s words, “It is as if the carnivalesque body politic had ingested the entire corpus of high culture and, in its bloated and irrepressible state, released it in fits

³⁵Eric McCluhan, *The Role of Thunder in Finnegans Wake* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 14.

³⁶Mac Wellman from an interview with Marc Robinson, “Figure of Speech,” *Performing Arts Journal* (January 1992): 44.

and starts in all manner of recombination, inversion, mockery, and degradation.”³⁷ This linguistic hybridity gives birth to new, previously unimagined dramaturgical and physical constructions of subjectivity.

The actress playing Christ at BACA Downtown was a slender, five foot woman in her late twenties, costumed in what might be described as a nice churchgoing dress and gloves. Christ carried her crook and a round vanity-case, which turned out to contain her impossibly heavy burden, the sins of all Hillsbottomers all over America. It is interesting to note how much the gender of the actor playing Christ may have affected the audiences’ experiences of blackness and whiteness in these productions. Jake-Ann Jones, an African American playwright and former student of Wellman’s who attended the BACA Downtown production, has written an evocative response to that question:

Damned if Jesus H. Christ don’t show up
and he’s a black girl
Lord child
can we talk about black holes for a moment?
terrifying powerful out in space no doubt
but the black hole of the colored woman
shit on earth she got no clout

damned if Mac aint take the second coming of greatest white hope
turned him brown and took away his poke
now what the white man got to look forward to?
a heaven filled with negroes and ruled by blackgals too

that’s when I realized
Mac knows just what whiteness fears
and as he pulls them puppet strings with glee
I hear a loud laugh
maybe the (w)hole of western identity
slappin its fat ass knee

³⁷Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 62.

in gratefully shamefaced relief³⁸

As Christ's steps crunched on the gravel floor of Kyle Chepulis's Midwestern wasteland set (gravel, the rusted out jeep, and straggly tall weeds), her small enraged presence foregrounded not only the Hillsbottomers' desperate constructions of a "pure" whiteness, but also the whiteness of most of the audience at BACA Downtown—an experimental theater in a primarily black Brooklyn neighborhood.

Like the other wordsmith playwrights, Jones, Jenkin, Overmeyer, and Parks, Wellman relies upon Moebius strips of dialogue which reappear, operating like poetry and jazz, to highlight form and de-emphasize the single, linear development of realistic individual psychology. By repeating a banal date-in-the-car scene four times (much to their disgust, the Furballs find themselves mouthing the same platitudes) with minimal variation, Wellman not only parodies the limited range of conversation available to the Hillsbottomers, he also heightens the self-conscious theatricality of the experience. As Diamond notes of Adrienne Kennedy's reiterating texts, recognizable repetitions ruin "the discourse of individual identity, the fantasy of linear progress."³⁹ In addition, with these conversational loops, Wellman creates a situation where a single theatrical gesture can have great comic value; when, in a romantic interlude with two of the Klansmen, Lloyd begins to bend his head down toward Tom's lap, the audience is jolted into laughter. In these parodies of received notions of masculine power (Christ and the equally potent icon of the Klansman), Wellman replaces each with an-Other that would normally remain an

³⁸Jake-Ann Jones, "The Puppetmaster" *Wellman Journal*, Private Publication (January 1998), 101-102.

³⁹Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, 119.

invisible repressed impulse contained inside one psyche. Wellman's looping dramatic structure of repetition and revision surprises us with this revelation of homosexual desire. This sexual gesture was all the funnier for being the variation in a sequence of stereotypical boy/girl scenes. This kind of comic *gestus* upends numerous discourses of masculinity and power as they are embodied by the figures of the Klansmen.

In light of the transgressive speeches and images of *Sincerity Forever*, it is not surprising that, just before the New York production of this award-winning play, Wellman received a letter from the NEA asking him to remove them from his list of acknowledgments. Having signed the restrictive pledge that the NEA appended to its granting agreements, Wellman admits that he is "complicit," and says that he admires the artists, like Rachel Rosenthal, who refused their grants. He notes, however, that he preferred to "take the money and run" with the hope that the play will speak loudly and bother Jesse Helms.⁴⁰ Wellman kept his NEA grant and dedicated the play to Jesse Helms, attaching a note to the playscript which explains that the NEA has asked him *not* to thank them, despite his having received a grant. He sent a copy of the script to the Senator with his "compliments for the fine job you are doing of destroying civil liberties in These States."⁴¹ *Sincerity Forever* was quite well received by the reviewers, who seemed as delighted with Wellman's conservative nose-tweaking as they were with the play. The BACA Downtown production won two Obie awards and a special mention by Mel

⁴⁰Ira J. Bilowit, "Mac Wellman Takes the Money with a Nod to Jesse Helms," *Back Stage*, 24 August 1990.

⁴¹Mac Wellman, "Letter to Jesse Helms," in *Grove New American Theater* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 90.

Gussow in his 1990-1991 Off-Off-Broadway review.

Wellman functions, in some respects, as a jester at high-brow institutions of art and education. His livelihood and influence depend a great deal on his serving on numerous granting panels and teaching at many of the prestigious universities on the east coast: Princeton, Yale, and Brown, among others. Wellman's core audience consists primarily of educated, primarily white, avid theater-goers, fellow artists, would-be young artists, and (of key importance) some wealthy patrons. Casey Childs reveals to Joel Bassin, for instance, that his theater, Primary Stages, was able to produce *Second-Hand Smoke* because he "was able to go to Ted Rodgers [a Wellman supporter] and he gave us a nice chunk of money to help us mount it."⁴² In this case, the donation was for approximately \$20,000. In addition, in an excellent example of Wellman's position in the intersection of high culture marketing, adventurous art, and wealth, Wellman's *Land of Fog and Whistles* was produced as part of the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Although Wellman talks about his interest in speaking to new and younger audiences, his work primarily reaches a small, twenties on up elite audience.

In his role as elite-gadfly Wellman's underlying paranoia and sense of the millennial dystopia seem well-matched with Bakhtin's veiled anti-Stalinist critique; both men write secretly about the subversive power of the shadow meanings haunting every word. It is important to note, however, that Wellman in no way embraces Bakhtin's utopian notion of the social revolutions possible through mass rebellion. Indeed Wellman focuses primarily

⁴²Casey Childs from an interview by Joel Bassin, "Too Big a Mouthful?" *Wellman Journal*, 17.

on exposing flaws and deficiencies. As McLuhan wrote of most Menippean satirists, they seem to be saying “Wake up, you numbskulls!”⁴³

In fact, Wellman’s next play issued a wake-up call on the issues of art, civil rights, politics, and religion; in another trickster gesture, the play has an unprintable title, *7 Blowjobs*, and in that spirit the play is dedicated to

those supreme clowns of our sad time, Jesse Helms and Donald Wildmon; and also to Representative Dana Rohrabacher and the Reverend Pat Robertson, because they have shown such an abiding interest in my work. These Gents (God help them!) comprise the Four Harebrained Horseman of our Contemporary Cornball Apocalypse.⁴⁴

This play, whose title was not printed in newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *San Diego Tribune* (and, evidently could not be spoken on National Public Radio when doing a program on the play), refers specifically to the conservative efforts to shut down the shows presenting the Mapplethorpe and Serrano photographs which Helms and many conservatives deemed obscene and blasphemous.

7 Blowjobs is a keen exploration of what Diamond refers to as “the ideological nature of the seeable,” and the piece places Wellman’s ambivalence with looking and hiding in full view.⁴⁵ In October 1991, just as the nation was hearing new language on the CSPAN hearings of Clarence Thomas (such as pubic hair and dong), *7 Blowjobs* had its premier production at Soho Repertory Theater (1991), and a subsequent production at

⁴³McLuhan, 6.

⁴⁴Mac Wellman, “Dedication to *7 Blowjobs*,” *TheatreForum* 1 (Summer 1991): 24.

⁴⁵Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, 85.

Sledgehammer Theatre in San Diego (1992).⁴⁶ Although the play does not directly address that complex staging of national guilt and complicity, Wellman said that he felt *BlowJobs* did connect with the hearings; “I like to think that I’m writing about underlying crises in the culture.”⁴⁷

7 Blowjobs erupts in confusion, sexual desire, and political machinations following the anonymous delivery of a set of photographs to Senator Bob’s office. These photographs, which the audience never sees, depict seven stagings of unconsummated blowjob scenarios; as Reverend Tom points out “in these photos the things are not in actual contact with the other things.”⁴⁸ Initially Senator Bob, his office staff of Dot, Eileen, and Bruce, and the Senator’s ally, Reverend Tom, attempt to catalogue the festival of bodies in these photos. Is that the Pope or a blowjob? The high/low binary of Pope/blowjob is destabilized even further by the cornucopia of combinations that the Senator and his compatriots attempt to describe—Is it a radiator or an active participant? An arm or a leg; the look on her face or the look on his? Finally, unable to pin down the bodies and events taking place in the photographs, Reverend Tom can only conclude that these photographs offer images of “unnatural acts capable of making a full-grown man happy” (33).

The play directly parodies the conservative reaction to the homosexually explicit

⁴⁶For a discussion of the theatricality of the hearings, see Claudia Brodsky Lacour’s “Doing Things with Words: ‘Racism’ as Speech Act and Undoing of Justice” in *Race-ing Justice*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 127-158.

⁴⁷Mac Wellman, “Dedication to *7 Blowjobs*,” 21.

⁴⁸Mac Wellman, *7 Blowjobs*, *TheatreForum* 1 (Summer 1991): 32. All subsequent references to the play will appear in the text.

images in Mapplethorpe's photographs, but I would like to focus on several tropes activated within the larger parodic structure of the play. From the inarticulate garblings of all those who see the photographs, it is clear that the art (the photographs are ultimately revealed to be art which Senator Bob will attack to solve his re-election difficulties) exceeds the viewers' ability to describe it. Purposely, Wellman has created a play in which "art" cannot be contained, or even catalogued, by the characters, and similarly, it eludes the audience's vision. The excessiveness of the images renders most of the characters who see them unstable. Eileen, for instance, is especially susceptible to one photograph:

That part there is normal that is normal only when it is inside that other part way over there!?! . . . They never said that that could be bent or flexed like that. at the Dartmouth Review. . . . Because that part . . . should not be distended to such an extent that it flares out like that. It might pop . . . and God, that part is not where God intended, when he placed it, modestly, where it is, back inside, nestled like a little pink wild flower. (27)

The artistic exaggeration of the body, in this case of the clitoris, sends Eileen into an hysterical spasm. This same provocative, inverted image also makes the unfortunate Bruce feel uneasy. Not only does he have to sit down, he also begins drooling. As Dot says upon noticing Bruce's sleeve, "God, I hope it's drool" (28). Is it a borzoi, a potted plant, or a blowjob; drool or semen? In either event, Bruce's "leaky" body betrays his lack of what Grosz describes as our received notions of contained, coherent masculine bodies. The Senator fires Bruce, declaring that the "dumb fuck. . . . had a pronounced sado-momo-statistical drive . . . [who] would look at your pecker, if you were not careful" (30).

In the Soho Repertory production, Reverend Tom succumbs to desire, achieving a contact orgasm with Eileen as they pray together. His voracious sexual appetite (he also

gropes the two young men, Bob Jr. and Bob Bob Jr.) seems to increase the longer he looks at the photographs. In a final prayer to fend off temptation, he is reduced to weeping on his knees and whimpering:

Photos of homo-sad-mystical-maso-sado-mom-dodo, beasto-lesbo-sado-christmastree, eroto-catamitical-beasty-phallic-momo-centric, quasi-sodomitical-eroto-maniacal-beasty-philo-pro-phallo-centric . . . dodo-gomorrahmy . . . christmastree. (32)

The objects, the art objects of his gaze, succeed in exploding his previous assumptions of the reliability of subjects and objects within a universe of phallogentric signification.

Wellman himself wrote that *7 Blowjobs* was not “about the boring cliched debate over ‘federally funded art’ . . . it is about looking, the act of looking considered as an aggressive, seizing act. Looking as hostile possession.”⁴⁹ In an interview, Wellman ties this exploration of looking to the “people on Capitol Hill now looking at—or in their mind’s eye, imagining the dirty things that Thomas might have said. Or looking at Anita Hill’s breasts.”⁵⁰ In *7 Blowjobs* the carnivalesque images of excessive sexuality send those gazes ricocheting every which way.

Wellman’s efforts to explore this kind of colonizing gaze reverberates in several ways. The entire set for the San Diego production of *7 Blowjobs* (an office with a model of the capital building positioned as if seen through an upstage window), was raked and tilted slightly on an angle. The cock-eyed physical design enacted the disequilibrating of Wellman’s efforts to move the center off, to estrange it. In looking at various kinds of

⁴⁹Mac Wellman from Allen Havis, “Mac Wellman on *7 Blowjobs*,” *TheaterForum* 1, 20 January 1990, 4.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 21.

viewing, *7 Blowjobs* unveils what might be going on behind the signifying gaze of those white male senators in political power who decided the fate of the Supreme Court nominee (and, therefore, to some degree, the nation). Foregrounding the gazes and structures of white conservatives who see themselves as the norm and the center, Wellman reveals more and obfuscates less than in his more personal and family-focused plays.

The narrative of *7 Blowjobs* has a traditional, if sketchy, plot. More frequently, Wellman's texts, like those that make up the four-part series *The Crowtette*, give audiences few traditionally marked lines of character, causality, or credible suspense. His use of neologisms, strange syntax, outdated and super-specific language frequently renders translation a problem for audience members. Wellman loves "innerrable" stories, those whose meandering events make it almost impossible for viewers to construct a story that follows either a causal sequence or a recognizable fairytale (parable) form. Wellman builds towers of Babel through bricolage and pastiche, saying "no" to authoritative discourses in significant ways while exulting in the pleasures of nonsense.

Wellman's profligate spending of meaning and clarity, I believe, can be best read in light of Bataille's insights into excess and sacrifice from *The Accursed Share*:

In his strange myths, in his cruel rites, man is *in search of a lost intimacy* from the first. It is always a matter of detaching from the *real* order, from the poverty of things, and of restoring the *divine* order. Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane. Servile use has made a *thing* (an *object*) of that which, in a deep sense, is of the same nature as the *subject*, is in a relation of intimate participation with the subject.⁵¹

Theatre is one of the liminal secular sites where these strange myths and cruel rites are still

⁵¹Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 55-56.

enacted. Certainly given the short runs in small spaces that constitute the ephemeral art of the theatre as practiced by Wellman, theatre can only be seen as nonutilitarian, as celebratory waste. I would like to adopt this way of seeing theatre as ritual profitless expenditure to discuss Wellman's work. Rejecting the theatre as purveyor of a communication product, Wellman has articulated his desire to rescue theater from our late-capitalist consumer world in which art is often seen as "essentially a management problem, a repetition of commodities presumed to have the same form and function within a fixed social framework."⁵²

Wellman critiques commodification within his dramaturgy and through his material, production choices. At the BACA Downtown opening of *Cellophane* (1988), for instance, ushers offered audience members a slice of Kraft American cheese individually wrapped in cellophane. Written at the height of Wellman's experiments with what he calls "bad language," *Cellophane* is one of Wellman's most poetic non-traditional pieces, consisting of monologues composed of nineteenth century colloquialisms intermingled with his own puns and neologisms:

But they did not knowed cause if they hadda been
it could be told afore from how they was doing to
what they been up to up to then while all the rest
was going back and forth saying 'yup' and 'nope' and
all suchlike no nevermind don't you know sure as hell
or do it else.⁵³

These inscrutable speeches add up to an exhilarating but opaque event. In this case,

⁵²Mac Wellman, "New Writing and the Classics: An Exchange," *Theater* 21, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 14.

⁵³Mac Wellman, *Cellophane* (New York: The Playwright's Press, 1988), 8.

handing out the cheese-product seems to set up a contrast for the theater experience. While the clear cellophane ostensibly shows consumers exactly what they are buying: chemical-cheese (a sign for our synthetic progress), Wellman's own opaque surfaces, on the other hand, refract our gaze, pointing us obliquely back to glimpses of a personal, ephemeral experience. We get no guarantees of the "product" purchased with each spectator's ten dollar Off-Off-Broadway ticket. Wellman responds to the degradation of language through consumer communication by creating rituals of profligate excess, performances of great waste -- of words, meaning, and of possible narratives. He squanders phonemes and sense in a potlach of what might have been useful communication. By sacrificing words with American history or with specific discourse texture (such as his erudite physics vocabulary) to nearly incomprehensible poetic arrangements of phonemes, Wellman takes words out of their functions in productive discourse. These dense texts force audiences to rely on the third leg of Bakhtin's linguistic structure, context. But then, Wellman's unreliable plots upend even the contextualizing structures through which audiences interpret his obfuscatory speeches. This profligate squandering of words and meaning creates generative chaos; Michael Vanden Heuvel describes these chaotic-seeming systems of organization that appear random, but actually operate according to laws so complex that they may not be perceived.⁵⁴ The discourses of the sciences, for instance, may traditionally be thought of as monological, authoritative, and positivist. But, Wellman puns even with the language of

⁵⁴Michael Vanden Heuvel, *Performing Drama: Dramatizing Performance: Alternative Theater and the Dramatic Text* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 90.

chemistry, destabilizing numerous categories. “What is mettle again?” Ray asks Dora in *The Hyacinth Macaw*:

Dora. Any category of electropositive elements that are usually whitish, lustrous, and in the transition metals, typically ductile and malleable with high tensile strength.

Pause. Still puzzled.

Ray. What does Squeezre need high tensile strength for? She’s a girl. For Pete’s sake . . .⁵⁴

The dialogical nature of puns generates both confusions and revelations. Wellman takes discourses created to give meaning, boundaries, and shape to our lives and our world, and he turns them back on us as neologistic gibberish poetry.

Wellman unleashes his poetry on the American tradition of theatrical realism. With *The Crowtette* (1992 to 1997), Wellman creates four loosely connected family tragicomedies; the series includes *A Murder of Crows*, *The Hyacinth Macaw*, *Second-Hand Smoke*, and *The Lesser Magoo*. This group of plays constitutes a Wellmanian *Oresteia* haunted by absent fathers and references to the patriarch of English-language drama, Shakespeare. These are Wellman’s most intimate family dramas and, while they are less secretive, less opaque than *Cellophane* or *Terminal Hip*, there are secret gender stories buried in these plays. These works present key examples of Wellman’s ambivalent hide-and-show dramaturgy.

Wellman’s post-modern parodies of canonical American realism take place in dystopias, and they offer visions of varying bleakness for the near future. Nella equably

⁵⁴Mac Wellman. *The Hyacinth Macaw in Two Plays* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1994), 87. All subsequent references will appear in the text.

accepts the notion, for instance, that “no matter where you are you’re always downwind of something peculiar.”⁵⁶ Jenny Wolmark comments that “a favorite Science Fiction convention is that of the disaster, some cataclysmic event that has profound consequences for human society. This is a useful convention for allowing the social tensions and fears of the present to be extrapolated in a fairly direct way into the future.”⁵⁷ *The Crowtette* directly addresses Wellman’s environmental concerns. His radioactive despoiled landscapes speak to anxieties which began in the Cold War and have flourished in the Love Canal, Chernoble, SuperFund clean-up eras. The first three plays of the series specifically function in retro-futuristic, post-Chernoble, worlds of environmental apocalypse. The Primary Stages’ set for *Murder of Crows* (1992), for instance, was a dripping, rubber-coated landscape with a highly raked stage; water dripped off the set during the entire performance and the performers were occasionally deluged with rain. Where a house and porch should have been, only a porch remained. Downstage of the floating porch, a pair of “phosphorescent green boots poking up in the foreground is [Nella’s] deceased husband.”⁵⁸

In *The Hyacinth Macaw*, the dystopian world is subtler, but the apocalyptic upheaval presents itself first and foremost with the appearance of The Stranger from another reality. Peculiar things begin to occur with the arrival of Mr. William Hard (aka

⁵⁶Mac Wellman, *A Murder of Crows in Two Plays* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1994), 8-9.

⁵⁷Jenny Wolmark, *Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism and Postmodernism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), 113.

⁵⁸Aileen Jacobson, “A Crooked Journey, As the Crow Flies,” *New York Newsday*, 8 May 1992.

Vincent Hat, aka Johnny Sock), a combination of con man, clown, and monstrous gothic interloper, who shows up in the backyard of the Moredent family with an “official letter” and a dying moon in his suitcase. *The Hyacinth Macaw* is a parodic fusion in which a Rod Steiger style film-noir approach explodes through *Death of a Salesman* as Wellman puts a new spin on the story of an apparently American-type “nuclear” family consisting of Ray, Dora, and their daughter Susannah. From the recognizable signs of Mr. William Hard’s film-noir salesman attire (hat, dark suit, suitcase) and from the mysterious signs of his inscrutable spooky speeches, other characters and audiences alike can tell that he brings unsettling news, even if no one (Ray, Dora, or the audience) can tell what his letter means or what it signifies.

The Hyacinth Macaw offers the best opportunity to explore what happens to the bodies of the father. Ultimately, the letter is deciphered, and it declares that William Hard and Ray are doubles, and—there has been a mistake. As Ray later tells the audience, trying to grasp the phenomenon himself, “He is me” (93). The play is saturated with doublings, and in the case of the male characters, a triple reiteration of men who struggle to perform masculinity. Late in the play, in a highly incredible stroke, a third man appears, Mad Wu. All three pursue the romantic and sexual attentions of Dora, a kind of Medea in starched yellow aprons.

I will begin this discussion by looking at the moment that Ray bows to the authority of William Hard’s “Official” document. Ray gives over his place, his life, to William Hard and will go off to a shadowland to take up his “true” place. This transition between paternal regimes is marked by a ludicrous moment in which Ray and William

Hard complete a ritual of exchanging identity by exchanging trousers. Standing side by side in their underwear, these two actors (who need not be physically similar) trade trousers. Ray's identity as man and father is reduced, arbitrarily, to his pants. Instantly, that which might, in domestic realism, be seen as the most authentic presence, the phallic keystone to all the structures of the dominant fiction, is rendered inauthentic and vulnerable. In this moment, the tensions about male bodies and their sexual desires rise up briefly, so to speak, as farce. As the men stand with their lower bodies revealed, the comic grotesquery overpowers stable identity. This doubling of characters implies a splintered subjectivity in which "parts that ought to be inside," as Eileen says of the genitalia she sees so disturbingly poking out of the bodies in the blowjob mise-en-scene from *7 Blowjobs*, have burst out. Like those body parts which would not stay inside their appropriate containers, this doubled body of the father represents the excessive desires normally repressed within a single Father performing a masculine masquerade of unitary phallic power.

Similarly, in *Second-Hand Smoke* (1997), men in underwear once again represent some of the darker urges being kept out of sight under power suits. The most baroque and topical of these scenes (related to the Anita Hill/ Clarence Thomas events) occurs in the first act of the play. In another parodic 1940s film scene tribute, *The Primary Stages'* production opened with a single desk, off-center on the raked stage, illuminated through rising smoke by a flickering overhead lamp. At the desk, Mr. Glitter, played with brilliant comedic grotesquery by David Greenspan, charts and maps a pollution-belching radiation-leaking industry. As dictated by one of Wellman's few stage directions, Mr. Glitter has a

piece of dental floss hanging out of his mouth for most of the scene. In addition, Greenspan creates a bent-over crab-walk to match the peculiar quality of his effeminate nasal voice.

Mr. Glitter's grotesque body generates festivals of bad behavior. In a complex office ritual of hierarchical hazing, for instance, Glitter and his two male flunkies, Phelan and Custom, frighten Sylvia Palitsa, who has come from the Agency which oversees his office. She is trying to get some information on "the radionuclides in temporary storage near Route Six . . . that big creepy mound, with the vents and standpipes."⁵⁹ In a perfect example of displaced abjection, the three men, who had previously been playing castration-hierarchy games amongst themselves, turn on Sylvia and scapegoat her. In Richard Caliban's slapstick staging of this first scene, the three men in dark suits surrounded Sylvia. As they physically press up against her, she seems quite vulnerable in her tight, fuschia, businesswoman's suit. Although Sylvia is ultimately humiliated more than harmed, the secretary asks "What the hell did you guys . . . ? What? She walked by like she'd . . . I don't know. Like she'd seen a ghost" (15; ellipsis in original). As a culmination to this masculine ritual of sexual harassment, the men drop their pants, revealing red bikini underwear. Acting in concert, they open briefcases, out of which stream light, and don fezzes. As the weird music starts up, the three men join hands in a strange dance, embodying a perverse threat of sexual aggression. Wellman frames their harassment as a carnivalesque eruption; it could be an enactment of what women fear men

⁵⁹Mac Wellman, *Second-Hand Smoke* (unpublished manuscript), 14. All subsequent references will appear in the text.

do after they have left the office. It is also interesting to note that Wellman had originally requested that Mr. Glitter's secretary should be played by an African American actress. Wellman rarely mentions race in his cast description, so he clearly wanted to add a racial element to foreground the whiteness of these men, and once again points our attention to looking as an act of "hostile possession."

I will return to the issue of whiteness in *The Hyacinth Macaw*, but would first like to pursue the thread of doubled and homosocial relationships among Wellman's male characters.⁶⁰ The inverse relationship between William Hard and Ray, for instance, not only destabilizes numerous symbolic structures, it also functions as a familiarizing trope generating ominous suspense. The dyad of these two men taps into gothic couples like Jekyll and Hyde, their doubled nature tells us that only one can triumph. One can see the homosocial bond of their relationship displaced onto their competitive efforts to claim Dora. In *The Crowette* plays, the sham-double, the confidence man/trickster who takes one's identity, is always male. He is Christ and Satan, the victim and perpetrator of violence. In this case, William Hard's sexual interest in Susannah also suggests that he functions, to some degree, psychically, as Ray's projected (and rejected) incestuous desires; Hard's indicate a dangerous, free-floating, masculine, sexuality which threatens to transgress taboos.

Ray's hysterical body and speeches, on the other hand, do not seem dangerous.

⁶⁰I am using Eve Sedgwick's term, "homosocial," which hypothesizes the potentially erotic nature of the social bonds between men. For further descriptions see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

Rather, he seems impotent, engaging in a feminized hysteria. In Ray's first scene, for instance, he attempts to defend himself against Hard's official missive. Bursting out in a defensive rant, Ray protests that he has contained all of his "urges"—has tamed them "with patience, and little sweet gifts, cookies, chocolates, and the like . . ." (85). At Princeton University, where I staged *The Hyacinth Macaw* (1996), we looked for ways to somatize Ray's guilt-ridden response to his rival's intrusion. Ultimately, we focused on Ray's already damaged relationship to Dora, and his inability to sit comfortably in his own skin. Ray could not contain himself physically until he sat just behind Dora to speak these last lines intimately into her ear. Raymond added "All my urges, except one. You and I know which one, don't we Dora? Don't we know the fierce temptation to enact the urge which only the Evil One dare pronounce?" (85). His unspeakable perversion, the urge which dare not be named, conjures up homosexual vectors of desire—those same unnamed urges which drive numerous other dramaturgies of doubling, as it does for instance with the carnivalesque adventures of Jack and Ernest from *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Wellman also situates Ray's unspeakable urge within the performance of a white America both terrified by and overcompensatingly obsessed with various kinds of male Otherness. Foreignness, as constituted by the wearing of fezzes, for instance, fascinates all three family members. Dora inadvertently describes her own guilt when she describes her fantasies of "doing something bad in the barn, with someone . . . foreign . . . Someone big and stiff, with a fat lip, broken teeth, and a really tasteless demeanor" (110). By evoking these fantasies of sexualized Others, the family's whiteness is itself highlighted as a

performance of would-be propriety and power. Whiteness and its ghosting other, foreignness, spill out from Wellman's numerous ironic and nostalgic portrayals of middle managers, salesmen, and inventors. In *A Murder of Crows*, for instance, Nella reveals that she and her brother Howard are descended from "a rug merchant from Istanbul named Nebuchanezzar, Nebuchanezzar Babaghanouj" (39). Not even truly gypsies, they came from "a cheesy, Asiatic, mongrel tribe" (39). Shocked, Georgia queries her husband, "I thought you went to Choate and Yale." Howard replies, "I *did* go to Choate and Yale. But how the devil do you think I paid for it?" (40) This ludicrous exchange pushes issues of ethnicity and race to a parodic extreme and reminds us that whiteness is a commodity which can be purchased, like any other aspect of cheesy, ersatz Americanness.

Wellman sees very clearly that our "normal" language of communication is imbricated with ideologies of whiteness:

The current philistine has a very problematic relation to the current state of the American language. In truth, he would like to believe that such a thing does not exist, and that the hordes of Negroes, Latins, Arabs, Turks, and Hindoos who throng to our city streets do not have some linguistic impact on the pristine clarity of our speech The foursquare American sentence is a non-event, a tidy little neo-Aristotelian microcosm.⁶¹

Here Wellman articulates his own ironic version of Bakhtinian heteroglossia, a multi-voicedness that many Americans resist. American desire for a monological identity currently expresses itself in the numerous political battles over issues such as bilingual education, Ebonics, and standardized testing. Wellman's impulses towards a Whitmanesque populism can be seen here in his embrace of the heteroglossia of

⁶¹Mac Wellman, "New Writing and the Classics: An Exchange," 14.

contemporary America; he rejects the authoritative discourse of “the melting pot” with its tyranny of sameness over difference.⁶²

Just as language itself encompasses differences (the characters sometimes cannot understand each other; sometimes we cannot understand them), masculinity likewise disintegrates into different urges that had been previously contained within the illusion of coherent unity. Heteroglossia recognizes the otherness, the repressed unsaid meanings, within speech, and Wellman embraces this in his representations of masculinity as well. He confronts the negations oscillating within the ostensibly statuesque authoritative male presence. Ray’s Last Supper speech, for instance, highlights his inability to keep up his performance of self-contained masculinity. As Ray attempts to justify his existence in his farewell speech, loghorrea overtakes him, and an hysterical macaronic speech spews forth. He taps into what R. E. Foust called “the dystopian protagonist’s agonized attempt to remember his own past” in an effort to hang onto his own construction of self.⁶³ In this case, the effectively castrated Ray is in need of re-membering his dis-membered identity. As if to confirm Dora’s accusation of Ray as a “premature-anti-something-or-other,” his efforts here to trace his life and knowledge (of self, of physics, and of the nature of the universe) come to a spluttering end (96).

Ray’s fountain of words initially charts his intellectual success, including his

⁶²Robinson places Wellman directly in a genealogy with Walt Whitman, but I do not agree that Wellman shares many qualities with Whitman. Whitman’s brash, open embrace of sexuality, and his trust in human nature seem contrary to the secretive layers of Wellman’s satirical attacks on America and Americans.

⁶³R.E. Foust, “A Limited Perfection: Dystopia as Logos Game,” *Mosaic* 3 (September 1982): 85.

innovative dissertation on Clovis Man and the creeping dartworm, but it soon turns to his descent into sin. The verbal aria ends with an orgasmic build listing the aspects of his decadent behavior with its “careless discharge.” The list begins with “cigarettes, polkas, pinkie rings of horn and nitre, obscure deals” and ends with “pneumatic superinflatables, bluestreak disinterments, lace, lurchings, engineered fuddles, nude beaches, rigged sameness, reified urchins, dead mice, scarabs, scat” (106). Wellman notes that this final explosive sequence leaves Ray “completely out of steam,” and Mr. William Hard points to Ray who has collapsed onto the table. “The optic on all that, brothers and sisters, is the pornographic” (106). Ray allows his uncontrollable desires to make him a spectacle, the object of our gaze. But, in mainstream American culture, the object is supposed to be female. Russo notes the gendered distinctions between making a spectacle, the object of our gaze and exposing oneself: “Making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was of an exposure. Men, I learned somewhat later in life, ‘exposed themselves,’ but that operation was quite deliberate and circumscribed. For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries. . . .”⁶⁴ Wellman’s disintegrating masculinity, however, implies that exposing the secret desires of liberal, ambivalent, straight, white men may transgress gender and identity boundaries to create quite a provocative spectacle.

In contrast to this spectacle of masculine sexual incontinence, William Hard’s dangerous self-control presents itself most vividly in the breakfast scene that follows Ray’s departure. Although Wellman offers few stage directions in his texts, he situates this

⁶⁴Russo, *Female Grotesque*, 53.

this scene though a paragraph description of William Hard and Susannah in the kitchen with Dora peering in at them through a window from outside. Wellman notes that the “scene begins as Hard examines what’s in his bowl carefully, extracts something large and dark from it with thumb and forefinger. He rapidly conveys this to his mouth, as if he were afraid it might be alive. He chews doggedly on this object through the rest of the scene” (125). This chewing stands in as an effective screen for William Hard’s aggression and struggle to contain his “urges” now that he must pose as the authentic male figure. His endless jawing implies that his inability to satisfy one hunger will have to be assuaged with some other physical satisfaction. In addition, the fact that he cannot actually eat this bug, that it resists chewing (like a nightmarishly tough piece of calamari that chews back), reveals the limits of even the phallicly powerful Mr. William Hard, a character whose very name bespeaks his state of constant yet unfulfilled desire.

In contrast to Ray’s explosive speeches at dinner, the events at breakfast happen largely in the tense silences between William Hard and Susannah. As the scene builds to a climax, Susannah interrogates William Hard and finally she asks Hard whether he will fuck her mother. He replies that he will, and she then asks, “Will you fuck me?” (127). After a long pause, still chewing, Hard says that he will if she wants him to and “if he can get away with it” (127). After a long, silent staredown in which Susannah squirms with anxiety, she finally blurts out, “I don’t want you to” (127). Grimly taking the much-chewed bug out of his mouth, Hard acquiesces. In that moment of Susannah’s rejection of Hard, sexual desire is momentarily contained. No sooner has Hard’s faintly incestuous desire been stymied in the kitchen than another version of masculine desire bursts forth

above them in the form of Mad Wu romancing Dora. In my Princeton production this entailed a glitterball, a microphone, and all the utopian musical theatre glamour that an undergraduate in a white dinner jacket with a giant beetle on his shoulder could muster. Mad Wu, as in the crazy man pitching woo, presents us with another ersatz white masculinity. Not only is he *not* meant to be Chinese (William Hard identifies him as a harmless vagabond from over in Corntown), but he says of himself “My true condition is conditional. Conditional, contingent, conventional, and phantasmal” (136).

Costuming the highly “contingent” Mad Wu was one of the ongoing questions for my production. Wellman indicated that Mad Wu should have something physically wrong with his appearance, but neither the costume designer, the actor, nor I quite knew how best to concretize that notion. In Marcus Stern’s New York production (1994, *Primary Stages*), Mad Wu was presented as a sort of down-at-heels astronaut who made his first appearance magically rising up on an elevator section of the stage surrounded by smoke. Since Wellman expressed no satisfaction with that solution, I experimented with how to create a ludicrously sexy Lounge Lizard cum vagabond who was visibly damaged. Upon hearing that we were putting Mad Wu in a white dinner jacket, Wellman suggested that we tear one of the jacket arms off and cover the actor’s hand with blood. Since Wellman could not fully articulate why Mad Wu should be in this state and I could not understand how to integrate that idea into Dora’s arc, I found what I now see as a substitute, the large plastic beetle sewn onto Mad Wu’s jacket.

What I did not understand at that time was that Mad Wu is not only another “fake” or doubled male figure (he pretends to an exotic otherness in order to inhabit a Romantic

identity), but that, like Ray, he has been fundamentally damaged by his efforts to perform up to hegemonic standards of masculinity. The wound Wellman suggested might be a battle scar of twentieth century gender wars. It is also helpful to see Mad Wu as springing not from Dora's fantasies, but rather from Wellman's explorations of masculine desires and fears. What happens when Father is turned out? Another man appears to romance Mother, taking her away and leaving her daughter alone with the substitute Dad. These multiple gaps in male authenticity promulgate, as Christopher Craft noted of the Bunburying of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, "a vertigo of substitution and repetition" rather than a coherent sense of masculine identity⁶⁵

By constantly disrupting the conventions of straight white masculinity within the play, Wellman creates what Vanden Heuvel has described as "authorial impotence," generating a story without a single authorizing point of view.⁶⁶ Key to this fractured (fractal) dramaturgy is a moment at the center of *The Hyacinth Macaw* that occurs just after Ray disappears. Dora, Susannah, and the interloper, Mr. William Hard, stand in the kitchen of Dora and Ray's "American-type house" having just finished singing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." With the banishment of his double, Mr. William Hard sits at the table in Ray's patriarchal spot while Susannah huddles with her mother and asks, "Why did Dad have to go away?" (113) In the associative roundabout manner of much of Wellman's metaphoric text, Dora talks about "the mysterious work of the heart. Your father, Raymond X, Raymond X Dogsbody, knew this work, but could not name it."

⁶⁵Christopher Craft, *Another Kind of Love: Male Homosexual Desire in English Discourse, 1850-1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 22.

⁶⁶Vanden Heuvel, 74.

Susannah responds, "Our family name is Moredent" (114). Not only has Ray's corporeal presence been banished to Mimbreland, but even his signifying presence, the linguistic patronymic, has fragmented.

The name of the authentic but absent father has often been a linchpin in dramatic structures. Craft describes how, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the final revelation of the Father's name has such "powers of compulsion and organization, that (at least seemingly) it subdues the oscillations of identity, [and] straightens the byways of desire."⁶⁷ Taking up his point, Eve Sedgwick notes that Wilde's play offers the opportunity to consider *not* whether the family can be saved (or whether it can save us), but whether in fact we can stop redeeming a conservative ideal of Family in the name of the Father. "Forget the Name of the Father!"⁶⁸ Sedgwick says, suggesting that we move on to read for newly complicated and open structures. I would like to suggest that Wellman stages just such a forgetting in *The Hyacinth Macaw*. Masculinity is itself implicated and undone by the play's doubling and tripling. Not only is the authenticity of both the name and identity of the Father (Raymond X Dogsbody) a fake, but everything associated and previously resting upon his naturalizing phallic law, comes apart. After Ray's departure, for instance, the frustrated and confused Susannah asks, "Are we animal, vegetable, mineral. Are we paper, scissors, or stone? Are we a key locked in someone else's box?" (119) Her sense of the world, imbricated in her heteroglot rather than two-part (binary) questions, points to the new possibilities that now occur to her.

⁶⁷Craft, 120.

⁶⁸Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Duke: Duke University Press, 1993), 58.

This banishment of the name of the Father from *The Hyacinth Macaw* is key to Wellman's difficult language and obstinate refusal to come out of hiding (in either syntax, character, or story). Just after William Hard gives Ray a snake as a going away present, Ray has a moment of insight in which he sees, as Wellman notes with irony in a stage direction, "the truth in all its naked power." Ray speaks from a trance, "Shakespeare lived in this house. This is Shakespeare's house. He wrote all his books here. The one about geese. The one on gardens. And the one about the cemetery business" (111). This metadramatic joke spoken by Ray, a character whose adolescent perversions included writing and staging an obscene play in high-school, reminds us of our theatrical myths of canonical male authority. Not only does Wellman poke Oedipal fun at Shakespeare, he also offers a parodic paradigm of theatrical spectatorship. Shakespeare casts such a vast shadow over Western culture that his last name defines epochs, dictates aesthetics, and sells an inordinate array of art products. The myth of his plays' universality transcending our puny contemporary vision fosters productions that are presented, and consumed, as already authorized reinscription of the laws of the Father. In his critique of our consumerist theatre of the classics, Wellman argues that going to see an evening of Shakespeare often ends up merely reinscribing a sameness: "a repetition of commodities . . . the status quo by all that is most revered and respected in our cultural past" rather than providing a unique and immediate experience.⁶⁹ Wellman's dramaturgy of fragmented masculinity and concomitantly fractured stories disrupts numerous controlling master narratives—he reveals, instead, partly dressed subjectivities in the process of trying to

⁶⁹Wellman, "New Writing and the Classics: An Exchange," 8.

wear masculinity.

In the final moments of *Second-Hand Smoke*, William Hard attempts, Prospero-like, to give up his powers, to break his “wand.”⁷⁰ He demands that Susannah who has traveled with him, perhaps as a lover perhaps as a daughter, help him “play dead” by renouncing his powers for him (44). Susannah’s efforts fail, twice. She cannot help him to break his Prospero-like, authorial power. The play winds to an uncertain close as Hard comments, “From now on I do my own renunciations” (55) But before he has finished the sentence that would retake his power, Susannah talks over him, usurping his challenge. “Like, before too long?” (55) Wellman’s explorations of how to give up his authorial, authoritative, and monological powers are only partially successful. And in the tension between Hard’s struggles to give up his authoritative power, and his efforts to conceal what that central position protects, Wellman creates a theater of productive and liberatory resistance. He offers himself as a playwright caught with his pants down.

⁷⁰In The Primary Stages’ production, Susannah did not follow stage directions that indicate she should take out a wand and break it while speaking William Hard’s renunciation of powers.

CHAPTER V

HABEAS CORPUS: HAVING THE BODY IN SUZAN-LORI PARKS'S *VENUS*
AND *GIRL 6*

Is that lack or a million dollar pussy?
—*Village Voice* film critic's
review of Sharon Stone in
Basic Instinct

Walking up 6th Avenue from 42nd to 43rd Street in the fall of 1998, I passed a group of African American male teenagers walking by three African American female teenagers. One of the young men called out to one of the young women. "How much?" Her swift reply was, "How much is your mother?" Their repartee continued into more anatomical specificities as she parried the implied reality that because he could see her (and specifically, her jeans-clad derriere), he could buy her sexual services. I am not suggesting that the young man necessarily thought that he could or would make a successful transaction, but only that he felt free to interpellate her, to hail her as an available commodity. The representational economy of a New York City business area demonstrated for me one of the specific ways in which women, and perhaps particularly young black women, enter into the cultural dialogue around the possession and description of their bodies. Two of Suzan-Lori Parks's works, the stage play *Venus* and the screenplay *Girl 6*, explore the fleshy complexities of representing black womanliness. While most of her work spin centripetally around black bodies, *Venus* and *Girl 6* are unique in placing their heroines' sexuality at the center of their stories.

In the week of May 4, 1996 both *Girl 6* and *Venus* opened to the public, and in that week Parks's career rose to a new level. *Girl 6*, written by Parks and directed by Spike Lee, appeared in movie-theaters, while Richard Foreman's production of *Venus* opened at the Yale Repertory Theatre. For several years prior Parks had been recognized by the theatrical community of fellow artists and reviewers as one of America's most important young experimental playwrights. Like one of her mentors, Mac Wellman, her challenging aesthetic brought her devoted experimental theatre coterie-audiences, major grants (Lila Wallace and CalArts/Alpert), and supportive critics such as Mel Gussow of the *New York Times* and Alisa Solomon of the *Village Voice*. The non-linearity of her plays, however, had proved too difficult for nearly all of the regional theaters and had not seemed to suit the tastes of the self-identified black theaters like Crossroads. Parks's difficult non-realistic plays, like Wellman's texts, make great demands upon the effort, patience, and imagination of her audiences. While she has had no commercial success (all of her works have been produced in limited-run Off and Off-Off-Broadway theaters), Parks seems to be making an effort to swim in larger cultural pools with these two works. Which leads me to ask, was she making choices to invite more widespread media attention?

The two works on which this chapter focuses were poised to change Parks's career in terms of visibility: both *Venus* and *Girl 6* might have greatly expanded the size of the audiences for her work. *Venus* was Parks's fourth large production reviewed in New York in less than ten years and, when Richard Foreman agreed to direct the play, their collaboration marked a change in her career. One of the pre-eminent avant-garde

directors of the last thirty years, Foreman's collaboration with her raised the stakes and press visibility of this production. *Girl 6* was Parks's first feature-length screenplay to be produced, and it had the potential to mobilize a large crossover audience. Examining these works together will foreground how these pieces attempted to enter the mainstream. Both these works received mixed reviews, and neither was a popular hit; it is just this complex reception in the critical and market areas that interests me. Why do Parks's aesthetic and ideological questions, as offered in these works, generate an attentive but largely queasy, ambivalent reception?

bell hooks's writing on how minority groups achieve cultural visibility points to a productive way of reading this cultural event. She describes how the majority culture attempts to control minority groups by turning certain marginal identities into symbolically (perhaps not practically or politically) important fashionable images and products. If the subcultural group does achieve a significant presence in the culture, they often have to pay a heavy price in how they are represented and how they represent themselves.¹ Was Parks unwilling to make certain compromises? The respective "failures" of *Venus* and *Girl 6* speak tellingly to the specific problems that mainstream America has with the subcultural capital Parks explores: black female identity as it is seen and sold (as product and identity) in America of the late 1990s.

Girl 6 and *Venus* describe different epochs in the Western history of black women and several of the West's white narratives of black female sexuality. *Venus* is set in the early nineteenth century and describes a formative moment in stereotyping and cultural

¹bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 31.

myth-making when Europe was preoccupied with expanding its colonial holdings. Parks provides a critical view of how Europe's scientific discourses of race functioned as justifications for its expanding empires. Sander L. Gilman and Patrick Brantlinger are among the scholars mapping out the nineteenth century scientific discourses of anatomy, medicine, evolution, and theories of race as bodies of knowledge generated, in large degree, to rationalize and support the white European's sense of himself and herself as biologically different from the irredeemably primitive African races.² As Gilman makes clear, sexuality was included in the European vision of a chain of being in which the Khoi-San (called Hottentot by Europeans) "occupied the lowest rung [. . . and] the physical appearance of the Hottentot is, indeed, the central nineteenth-century icon for sexual difference between the European and the black."³ This idea of sexual difference as a mark of distinct species supported Europeans' missions to consolidate their civilizing colonizations.

Maintaining a colonizer's identity requires psychological and intellectual displacements: as Homi K. Bhabha has noted, one strategy of colonial power is to authorize its "subject peoples" through knowledge, often scientific, about the racial and cultural differences between the subjects and the colonized "others."⁴ According to Nancy

²Patrick Brantlinger, "Victorians and Africans" and Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature" in *'Race,' Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

³Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies," 321.

⁴Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 218.

⁵Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800-1960* (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1982), 45.

Stepan, mid-nineteenth century Britain, for instance, had adopted polygenetic theories of race so that “races were now seen as forming a natural but static chain of excellence” with Africans, of course, permanently ensconced at the bottom rung of this chain of being.⁵

Venus invokes one of the moments when the European myth of the inferior primitive black race focused on “excessive” African female sexuality.⁶ Working from discourses of disease, anatomy, and the physiognomy of white prostitutes, Gilman maps out the “proofs” of black women as degenerate, syphilitic, and physiologically different from white European women. Certain black women such as the Khoi-San were classified as “creature[s] who straddled that dreaded boundary between human and animal.”⁷ In this way, while the black female body became the object of projected fantasies rendering it excessively present, black female subjects as individuals were rendered invisible.

Girl 6 takes place in America in the 1990s when the origins of those colonial stereotypes and stories of excessive sexuality have already been occluded: however, their effects remain powerfully present. While the black teenager I mentioned earlier may never have heard of the Venus Hottentot, he does participate in representational systems

⁶Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature” notes that the anatomical work of that period focused on perceived physiological differences between white and black women’s buttocks and genitals - not on distinctions between black and white male genitals. Gilman’s reading across several cultural discourses leads him to conclude that black female sexuality accrued much of the displaced anxiety and erotic significance of the colonizing nation’s needs to negotiate their identity with regard to the colonized blacks (237).

⁷Stephen Jay Gould, “The Hottentot Venus,” in *The Flamingo’s Smile: Reflections in Natural History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), 293-295.

which situate a black women's sexuality, in this case, through the synecdoche of her *derriere*, as an available commodity. The young man may not have read about the role of stereotypes in colonial conquests, but he probably knows the lyrics to Sir Mix Alot's rap song "Da Butt." Without seeing the history of those colonizing images, and without grasping the power being practiced (through surrogations and identifications) through and upon him, that black teenager repeats the interpellations practised by the white Europeans in *Venus*. The young man's identity, and in particular, his sexual identity, can only become visible, present to himself, at the cost of commodifying the young woman he hailed. It is this same system, in which sexual availability is displaced onto a part of the black woman's body, which helps to make her disappear as an autonomous person. By examining *Girl 6* and *Venus* together I can foreground Parks's exploration of two key aspects of the young black woman's position, as embodied by her heroines: the alluring power of being seen as a sexual and commodity fetish entangled with the disempowerment of being a fetishized Other.

Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen's *Female Fetishism* distinguishes among various kinds of fetishism (anthropological, commodity, and sexual) while pointing out that all of these psychological and cultural maneuvers rely upon disavowal and displacement (also described as sublimation). Using the classical Freudian psychological model, Gamman and Makinen describe disavowal: "unlike displacement or sublimation, [disavowal] is not a total denial of the desire experienced Instead, through the mechanism of disavowal, the desire is granted a 'safe' expression and satiation in the external world Through the use of the fetish, the practitioner is able to continue to

believe the false, while also knowing that it can not be true.”⁸ I would like to bring this notion of incomplete repression to bear on my reading of Parks’s dramaturgical structures to examine how race and gender may be obscured through fetishistic substitutions.

Like one of her important predecessors, Adrienne Kennedy, Parks attends to cultural absences, schisms, and gaps while our received history posits only elisions and wholeness. With *Venus* in particular, Parks flays the surface skin of linearity, and reveals the limitations of earlier, ostensibly positivist, histories of Africans and African Americans. The central image in *Venus* functions as a literal example of the subjective spectatorship which exists beneath the smooth surface of mainstream history. Foreman’s production of *Venus* (1996) at the Public Theatre opens with a tableau in which Venus stands with her back to us, her arms over her head as if tied, facing the upstage wall upon which could be read in large letters, “VENUS HOT.”⁹ Foreman’s traditional lines vivisection the apparently shallow stage space illuminated by bright, visible, circus lights, and a chorus of male fops in top hats, tails, and white gloves appears over the top of the back wall to look at Venus. The slender actress wears a bodysuit that gives her protuberant buttocks and large thighs. Her halter top and thong bikini costume also accentuate her behind jutting towards the audience. Adina Porter, playing Venus, was clearly wearing a shape-changing costume but Venus’s *avoirdupuis* sometimes looked momentarily real. As critic Alexis Greene wrote, “Even though your brain tells you this

⁸Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, *Female Fetishism* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 45.

⁹All production notes refer to the New York Public Theatre production, May 1996.

is padding, albeit of an artful sort, the effect is disturbing, to say the least.”¹⁰ Precisely what aspect of this spectacle Greene found disturbing is not clear, but with both *Venus* and *Girl 6*, Parks generates a tense counterpoise balancing the opportunities as well as the oppression attached to this sexualized stereotype of black women. Watching the black woman's body in a production that points at its own processes of making her the object of the audience's gaze, may in and of itself generate discomfort: so much excess (her buttocks), so overexposed.

As an unusually visible African American woman writer, Parks, like Kennedy before her, is subject to numerous pressures: from the black intellectual and artistic communities, from critics, and from the producing marketplace. Parks herself has commented upon how the desire for racial diversity in American theatre has led to her being called upon to represent certain essentialist notions of a black community. Parks feels, for instance, that a simplistic version of multiculturalism found in the regional theater marketplace recognizes only what she calls “those I'm-gonna-get-you-whitey plays of the seventies.”¹¹ Consequently, black women artists like Parks are called upon to negotiate a number of loyalties and identifications. Paul Gilroy writes about how race and gender are especially entwined for black artists and their audiences. For instance, Gilroy describes how the press attention, public ire, and legal difficulties, arising from rap group 2 Live Crew's sexist language and sexual images of black women reveal gender as:

the modality in which race is lived. An amplified and exaggerated masculinity has become the boastful centrepiece of a culture of compensation that self-consciously salves the misery of the disempowered and subordinated. This

¹⁰Alexis Greene, Review of *Venus*. *Theater Week*, 20 May 1996, 18.

¹¹Alisa Solomon, “Signifyin’ on the Signifyin’: The Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks,” *Theater* (Summer/Fall 1990): 74.

masculinity and its relational feminine counterpart become special symbols of the difference that race makes.¹²

If gender stereotypes are so tied in to racial identity, then to question them, as Parks does, may be to place oneself in a critical relationship with that racial group.

Several reviews of *Venus* point to just such issues of divided loyalties. Abiola Sinclair's review in the *Amsterdam News*, for instance, attacks Parks specifically because of the politics of the play, as she perceives them. Sinclair wrote: "As a Black female, I found this play embarrassing and humiliating to Black women."¹³ Although Sinclair primarily targets what she perceived to be Richard Foreman's direction, she indicts Parks as well, claiming that "her role in this travesty cannot and should not be minimized. She, along with Foreman, have reduced Saartjie Baartman, the Venus Hottentot, into an object yet again." Sinclair questions numerous aspects of the production, demanding of each choice, "To what purpose?" Critiquing a particular moment when the character Venus licks chocolate off her fingers, Sinclair asks, "Whose idea was this? The actress? Some stupid invention of a white director and a sellout playwright?" Sinclair's review points to the issues of allegiance described by Gilroy: she accuses Parks of selling-out to white entertainment culture specifically because (as Sinclair experienced it) a black woman playwright depicts a black woman selling herself as a sexual object.

¹²Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 85.

¹³This and the three subsequent citations from Abiola Sinclair, "Notes on *Venus*, by Susan [sic] Lori Parks, directed by Richard Foreman, at the Public Theater," *Amsterdam News*, 4 May 1996.

I suggest that Sinclair's repugnance is also connected to this production's framing of Venus as a grotesque, in the Bakhtinian sense of that term. Sinclair's particular example, of Venus's licking chocolate off her fingers, suggests that this gesture, in particular, and many physical activities, in general, carry the powerful symbolic nature of what Stallybrass and White call the "low-Other."¹⁴ The "low" is often associated with the base qualities of the lower part of the body, those parts connected to the body's abjections, such as excrement. Stallybrass and White extend Norbert Elias's discussion of manners to comment that, as the "regulations of the body, [manners] thus become the site of a profound interconnection of ideology and subjectivity, a zone of transcoding at once astonishingly trivial and microscopically important." But, Porter's activity with the chocolate did not, as I experienced her performance, imply Venus's inability to eat with European manners. Instead, her gesture seemed redolent with erotic orality: Porter's slow and careful process of wetting her finger, rubbing the surface of the chocolate, and then licking her finger, seemed all about compensatory (and displaced) pleasure. By incorporating this activity, Porter's performance conjures up a visceral sense of Venus as sexual, but also raised the specter of her as childlike. Perhaps Sinclair's intense response came from seeing these qualities, many of which are loaded with stereotypical history, performed by a character in a slave's position. It seems as though the gap between my own experience of Porter's gesture and Sinclair's highlights the variety of reception responses to fraught areas of representation, such as the intensely

¹⁴This and subsequent citation from Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 5 and 89.

saturated gestural life of a black woman.

The topic of how to address black sexuality on stage has clearly been important to Parks. In the introductory essay to the anthology of her plays, "From Elements of Style," she creates a subtopic of information: "sex."¹⁵ Under that category she writes, "People have asked me why I don't put any sex in my plays. The Great Hole of History — like, duh." In Steven Drukman's interview with Suzan-Lori Parks about *The America Play*, he suggests that Parks's figures (i.e., characters) come from the fabricated presence of African Americans in history. Parks corrects him to say, "From the fabricated absence, actually. . . . That's where I start from. . . . It's the hole idea."¹⁶ There had been before *Venus*, however, a hole, a gap, in her recuperations of history: it is the sexual history of African Americans. It is not that she has never created black female characters whose bodies and sexuality are significant: the seductive Queen-then-Pharaoh-Hatshepsut of *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), for instance, exults in her ability to titillate and dominate men, yet there are no actual scenes of romantic love physicalized on stage. Until *Venus* and *Girl 6*, abstractions, like the great hole from *The America Play*, were Parks's primary strategy for fabricating the representational absence of black female sexual desires. This dramaturgy of abstraction often focused on powerfully symbolic and frequently stereotypical images, but largely avoided depicting moments when those characters related to their own lives through a

¹⁵This and subsequent citation from Suzan-Lori Parks, "Essay on Style," in *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 16.

¹⁶Steven Drukman, "Suzan-Lori Parks and Liz Diamond: Doo-a-diddly-dit-dit." *The Drama Review* 39, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 67-68.

fetishistic view of themselves.

Gamman and Makinen describe the ubiquitousness of fetishism in Western cultures: "objects in our culture take on meanings that connect them to, or stand in for, other meanings and associations: but the connection is lost or partially denied as a consequence of the fetishism."¹⁷ To talk about fetishes is to talk about cultural prestidigitation making complex truths, those that we may not want to recognize, disappear. Psychiatrist Robert Stoller's idea of an erotic fetish as a densely packed story also seems particularly apt when reading Parks's work. He writes, "I have a hunch about the dynamics of erotic fetishes An object . . . becomes a fetish when it stands for . . . meanings that are wholly, or in crucial parts of the text, unconscious: a fetish is a story masquerading as an object."¹⁸ *Venus* and *Girl 6* reveal some of the stories in which black female heterosexuality is seen as an object, and how these narratives conceal the costs of certain historical slights of hand.

With *Venus*, Parks looks back at an historical individual, Saartjie Baartman, an early nineteenth-century Khoi-San woman who became famous in Europe, displayed as an attraction for her steatopygia, or protruding buttocks.¹⁹ The play moves forward in a circular rather than linear direction as it tells the story of Baartman's brief years as The

¹⁷Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, *Female Fetishism* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 44.

¹⁸R. J. Stoller, *Observing the Erotic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 155.

¹⁹Saartjie Baartman's name has a number of variations. For consistency's sake, I am ascribing to the spelling used by Stephen Jay Gould.

Venus Hottentot. Baartman becomes, in effect, an indentured servant in The Mother Showman's freak show of "Wonders" in England. A French anatomist, The Baron-Docteur, buys Venus's freedom from The Mother Showman in a scene that alludes to the perverse limitations that manumission would hold for African American slaves. The Docteur offers Venus a choice of whether to work for him, which includes sharing his bed, or to remain with The Mother Showman as the poked, prodded object of derision and abuse. Venus asks rhetorically, as the scene makes clear, "Do I have a choice?" (58). Living together in Paris, Venus overcomes the Docteur's "polite" habit of masturbating rather than having intercourse, and they appear to fall in love. Their affair, however, ends as they circle back around to what Parks calls, in one of her Brechtian scene titles, "The Dis(-re-)memberment of The Venus Hottentot."²⁰ The Docteur will ultimately abandon her, indirectly killing her: after her death, he dismembers her and then metaphorically cannibalizes her body, identity, and sexuality to feed his own fame. Parks's effort to remember the fragmented and dissected individual Saartjie Baartman makes clear that part of conjuring her up includes an inevitable re-objectification as Parks incorporates the fabricated invisibility of her black heroine.

The play's plot stems from and returns to Venus's eroticised physicality. After modeling for the Docteur's anatomy students so that they can practice measuring her body, Venus asks her anatomist-lover, "What is maceration?" (68), as the anatomy students always say, "measurements will be corrected after maceration." "Maceration."

²⁰Suzan-Lori Parks, *Venus, TheatreForum* (Summer/Fall 1996): 59. All subsequent citations will appear in the text.

the Docteur replies after a brief pause, "Macerations french for lunch" (68). However, as the Negro Resurrectionist (the play's narrator-figure) tells the audience, maceration is "a process performed on the subject after the subjects death. The subjects body parts are soaked in a chemical solution to separate the flesh from the bones so that the bones may be measured with greater accuracy" (64-65). Maceration or mastication: will Venus be served her lunch as the French lady of the house? Or will she be consumed by this colonial culture with which she identifies and which does not love her back?

These two key tropes also point to the blurry erotic distinction between desire and identification.²¹ Freud himself had great difficulty keeping a boundary of difference between wanting someone (desiring them) and wanting to be them (incorporating them into oneself; introjecting them as an object into the self). The play oscillates back and forth on a fulcrum of the Docteur's and Venus's fetishistic desires (as representatives of the colonizer and the colonized figures.) Venus remains in England even when given a chance to return to her home because she has fetishized the money she believes she can earn. The Docteur loves Venus, but attaches great importance to his own identifications as a discoverer, a conqueror of the unknown countries of racial (anatomical) difference. His dreams of fame and his anxieties about the untenableness of his adulterous interracial affair finally tip the balance against his love.

The play's "overture" encapsulates this tension through its form and narrative: *Venus* begins at the end of what would be a traditional linear and historical progress. In a

²¹Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge Press, 1995), 45.

cross between a circus and a shamanistic ritual calling upon the spirits, the overture implodes in a carnivalesque compression of the entire play: characters call out each other's names and announce that "the Venus Hottentot is dead," and that "There wont b inny show tonite" (41). In Foreman's production the visual metaphor of the circus extends to the small carnival-like booths on either side of the stage. These booths become nineteenth-century audience boxes from which different characters watch the various spectacles and plays within the play. As other characters, and as the audience can see, the show goes on without Venus: from the beginning she is already a corpse, the dead haunting the stage. One of the chorus members says, "I look at you Venus, and see: / Science. You / in uh pickle / On my library shelf" (41). Embalmed already, this chorus member sees her as a magical commodity; the audience's experience begins with Venus's posterior and death.

The overture also sets up the production's examination of theatre itself, alluding to the ways in which figures may be doomed by the rigidity of their representations. Venus's gaze out at the audience sometimes seemed an effort to escape the ineluctable fate of losing all control over herself through spectacle. When exhibited by The Mother Showman, for instance, Venus finds herself playing out the carnival audiences' fantasies of sexual primitivism while enclosed in a cage performing a zoo scenario. Through her barker's pitch, The Mother-Showman positions Venus within increasingly animalistic stories. These bestial narratives come to a pitched conclusion when The Mother Showman proclaims that Venus has been sexually intimate with a gorilla. Venus wants to perform a linear progress tale in which her identifications with European colonial

values shine; she wants to recite a poem or perform a lesson in order to prove that she can “learn” to speak, but even these heroine’s plotlines are beyond the reach of her fixed stereotyped otherness. “You’re a negro native with a most remarkable spanker. / That’s what they pay for” (52). Her director, The Mother Showman, has the last word on Venus’s performances in these spectacles within the play.

Through these interactions with The Mother Showman, Parks specifically targets theater which panders to the masses. This metadramatic critique of theatrical representation also resonates ironically with the play within the play, a parodic series of tableaux that mimic Victorian domestic melodrama entitled, “For the Love of the Venus.” As Venus and the Docteur fall in love, intercut scenes of “For the Love of the Venus” tell the story of a white, upper-middle class, Victorian Bride and Groom. The Young Man’s affections for his Bride are distracted by his thoughts of “something wild” (51). Despairing of how to regain her prospective husband, the Bride turns to the Young Man’s Mother. In a section of text cut from the New York production the Mother casts about for plots for the Bride, working her way through all of the classical plotlines available to heroines in Shakespeare and neoclassical French drama.²² Prodding the Bride by offering her numerous conventionally accepted heroine’s narratives—all of which all end in death—she finally presents the Bride with her only alternative: to mimic and embody the exotic wildness that the young man desires. Constrained by her narrative options, caught

²⁴There are a number of speeches and sections of scenes which appear in the *TheatreForum* version of *Venus*, but were cut from the New York production. I suspect that many of these cuts came from concerns over pragmatic issues such as the play’s duration. None of the cuts make substantive changes in the events or characters of the play.

in a fix parallel to the more tragically limiting scenarios available to Venus, the white Bride also finds herself playing "Other" in order to secure her social role.

The production picked up the scene as the Bride literally incorporated the body parts necessary to mimic the otherness which has been foisted upon Venus. Cannibalizing Venus's excessively sexualized body, the silent Bride acts as an eroticized commodity fetish by wearing a black (gorilla) mask and black plastic derriere bustle. Her silence is ascribed to an illness: "direct address could kill her" (67). All embodiment and no language, she becomes a sign for a primitive sexuality. The "blackened-up" Bride becomes the highly sexualized female, and, therefore, as a commodity she serves fetishistically to magically increase the Groom's sexual mastery. As he "conquers" her animalistic black sexuality, he achieves confidence in his own hegemonic masculine whiteness.

The white woman can appropriate a black woman's sexuality with few of the black woman's costs. Although the character of the Bride makes a genuine effort to be Venus, her poor masquerade (consisting of a few costume pieces and a swaying hip motion), convinces only her Groom. The audience, on the other hand, sees a mimicry of exotic blackness. Diana Fuss describes the critical difference between masquerade and mimicry as the distinction between a inhabiting a role and the parodic characterization of that role.²³ Whether one reads any given performance as an intentional parody (even if a subtle one) or a natural role depends on numerous factors, but most importantly, upon "the degree and readability of its excess." Fuss's distinction helps to see how Parks's

²³This and subsequent citation from Fuss, 148.

layered theatricality enables this scene to subvert the stereotype of black female sexuality through the Bride's unintentional and ironic mimicry.

While Baartman lived, her audiences' fetishizing gaze was primarily directed at her buttocks, but the Europeans' anxious interest in Baartman's physiological differences primarily concerned her genitals. Gilman describes how this displacement, buttocks for genitalia, was part of the European medical and cultural view which conflated those female body parts as "the semantic signs of 'primitive' sexual appetite and activity," and how the perceived differences in female genitalia were key to polygenetic theories of races.²⁴ Stephen Jay Gould's discussion of Baartman notes that Khoi-San women did appear to possess physiologically unique genitalia: "genitalia are greatly enlarged in Khoi-San women, and may hang down three or four inches below the vagina when women stand, thus giving the impression of a separate and enveloping curtain of skin."²⁵ This "excess" rendered the Khoi-San women vulnerable to European projections of hypersexuality and contributed to their status as less than human. In *Venus*, the Docteur claims that Venus's "reproductive organs, / form, in this view, the centerpiece of Study" (70). The Docteur embodies Western post-Enlightenment efforts to rationalize the exploitation of certain races through sciences like anatomy.

As I will discuss subsequently, *Girl 6* presents these myths of black female sexuality still functioning in contemporary America: in Europe, Venus's labia remain on view at the Musee de L'Homme in Paris. As Venus says in an aside to the audience:

²⁴Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies," 237.

²⁵Gould, *The Flamingo's Smile*, 298.

“Loves corpse stands on show in museum. Please visit” (72). The fetishization and fragmentation so key to *Venus* are illuminated by reading them through a touchstone description from Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon describes how a white child calls out “Look, a Negro!” and Fanon finds himself “an object in the midst of other objects. I stumbled, and . . . the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there. . . . I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart.”²⁶ Caught and fixed as “Other” by the child’s interpellation, Fanon experiences psychic fragmentation. Already othered, the black subject can find no other through whom she can locate herself. Required to identify but not to become, the black subject must mimic, but never completely perform, the colonizer’s seemingly coherent self.

In the production of *Venus*, Porter frequently takes up poses in which she bends forward at the waist, hands raised and fingers curled, looking out at the audience. Caught in a maze of gazes, Porter looks like a wary traveler checking for danger, and this highly self-conscious, gestic pose draws attention to the action of looking. In scene after scene, Venus’s life is shaped by the ways in which people look at her, and what it is that they do not see. Venus quotes her own historical diary in “Footnote #4.” Turning to the audience, she says, “the things they noticed were quite various / but no one ever noticed that her face was streamed with tears” (51). Within a colonizing discourse, as in Fanon’s example, bodies are a matrix for subject-forming identifications, and Baartman pays physically for trying to become a coherent (colonial) subject.

²⁹Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 109.

As Venus attempts to become a French lady, the play offers audiences a seminar in the ironies of interpellation. Baartman is so taken over by colonial cultural values that she fantasies about taking the place of the colonizer: "Servant girl! Do this and that! / When I'm Mistress I'll be a tough cookie" (67). Yet even immersed in dreams of being a wealthy French lady, Baartman does not disown her eroticised blackness. A few lines further in the same monologue as quoted above (lines that were cut from the production), Baartman dreams on: "After my bath they'll pat me down. / 20 servants will attend me. / They'll rub my body with the most expensive oils / perfume my big buttocks and sprinkle them with gold dust!" (67). Here, she seems to revel in this fantasy of herself as an erotic commodity.

Looking back to Kennedy's characters makes clear how Parks's dramaturgy embraces the power and active pleasure still available to a fetishized black female subject. Kennedy's characters, on the other hand, express few pleasurable experiences of their bodies. Elin Diamond has pointed out that in Kennedy's works, as in the texts by Fanon, "symptomatic bodies 'speak' of political as well as psychic oppression."²⁷ In *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, for instance, Kennedy's characters are literally coming apart as their hair falls out. Their blackness translates into signs of disease and death, and these psychic concretizations figure forth the costly aftermath of colonial discourse for Kennedy's heroine. While Kennedy stages the aftermath, Parks dissects the cultural processes of colonial and capitalist dismemberment. Parks's reconstructions of history include the gaps and overlaps left by the fracturing forces of colonization and sexism.

²⁷Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis* (London: Routledge Press, 1997), 93.

Parks explains that she “explodes” realistic dramatic forms, not because she finds them boring, but because “those structures never could accommodate the figures which take up residence inside me.”²⁸ The characters from Kennedy’s early works implode from their inability to find a place for themselves in the canonical, white, European culture. But, Parks’s figures maintain a sense of self that survives even within a colonizing culture that tells them theirs are not stories worth telling. It is in the interstices between competing truths that Parks makes space for the subject and her desire to be heard.

Both the play’s story and its form hinge on the question of whether Saartjie Baartman exists as a fetishized object or an individual with some control over her life-story. Does Venus possess her own tale (story) or is she only the tail-end of a person? As dissected parts, she becomes a highly valuable commodity in the form of research: The Docteur publishes his “discoveries” and finds fame for himself through her genitalia. He begins to deliver his anatomical lecture at intermission, and his appearance outside of the immediate conventional boundaries of the play places him in a different position, dramaturgically, than Venus. The Docteur speaks directly to the theatre audience with the house lights up, identifying us as his fellow anatomists in *The Anatomical Theatre of Tübingen*. Although this is by no means a radical choice, I suggest that it has several interesting implications. He appears to see those of us in the house. The spectator, like Baartman, may become enmeshed in his colonizing gaze and confronted with the authoritative language of knowledge which Gilroy described. While the figure of

²⁸Suzan-Lori Parks, “Elements of Style,” in *The America Play and Other Works* (1995), 8.

Baartman can speak only within the framework of the rest of the play. The Docteur's incorrect positivist information exceeds the play's own purported stage-boundaries.

Racist bodies of knowledge, unfortunately, live on in numerous ways.

The Brechtian estrangement evident in the metadramatic scene described above foregrounds what Diamond calls "realism's fetishistic attachment to the true referent."²⁹ Parks's dramaturgy bulges with an excess of "medical" and "historical" documentation. Spoken footnotes and dictionary definitions interrupt the flow of more realistic interchanges between characters. Direct address, songs, and multiple role playing add to the obstacles placed between realistic coherence and the audience's experience. Production techniques, such as cross-gendered and cross-racial doubling of actors and parts, heighten the play's pointedly ridiculous efforts to cram itself overly full of documents: documents that, in a different and more realistic context, might support a positivist sense of history. Through the play's excessive attention to spoken "footnotes," historical letters, statistics, and so on, the narrative seems distended, unreliable. The bulging mimetic copying of "History" ostends the performative nature of the realistic scenes, forcing them to reveal themselves as only a parody of the masquerade demanded by realism. The play's engagement with history invites audiences to revisit moments of alternative possibility beneath modernism's seamless myth of progress. Parks mines the tension between what was and what might have been for visions of a different future. Her dramaturgy is invested in disrupting both the illusory sense of coherent history and the

²⁹Diamond, 85.

illusory nature of realistic theatre.

Although many reviews critiqued the production for its flatness and detachment, I believe that Foreman served Parks's desire to move beyond an individual's story. But, it is worth remembering that while Parks and Foreman seem a well-suited pair of intellectual experimental artists, their interests are quite different. Foreman's own plays rarely engage with the kind of socioeconomic and cultural external forces which are Parks's constant object. Also, of relevance to his work on *Venus*, much of Foreman's earlier formalist work from the 1970s explored the power of nude female bodies. Jill Dolan has written acutely criticizing Foreman's idea that "his representations are ideologically void," and she points out that in his work, "the female nude is valued over the other objects in the stage picture as an erotic object. . . . Her construction testifies to the conservative ideology to which this avant-garde artist subscribes."³⁰ No doubt Foreman's past attention to the female form on stage contributed to the distanced quality of his production of *Venus*. But, Parks may have desired that degree of alienation in her efforts to prevent the character of Venus being too easily recuperated into a pitiable stereotypical victim; she may have been concerned that her audience of predominately white spectators would, in a sympathetic connection, elide the differences between Venus and themselves. While individual spectator's experiences are beyond her control, Parks is very concerned to keep her plays from enabling a sense of sameness (between spectator and character) that denies the very historical specificity she dramatizes.

³⁰Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), 44-5.

Parks and Foreman share aesthetic commitments to eschew theatre based primarily on the pleasures of empathic identification and narrative closure. Instead, both artists generate work that examines processes rather than supplies answers. Foreman describes his theatre as an effort to “create a field which is isomorphic with what stands-under experience—which is not experience itself. . . . What stands-under experience are the laws (processes) of perception and other laws-of-configuration of the universe.”³¹ Their presentational production of *Venus* attempts to constantly foreground the cultural forces at work upon the Venus Hottentot in that historical moment, a formative time that continues to influence contemporary misrecognitions of black women.

Many reviewers criticized the production’s alienating aesthetic for interfering with their empathic insights into “the reality of the woman behind” the metaphor, the “human being” and her feelings.³² As a spectator, I shared this desire for more access to Baartman’s emotional life and point of view. I felt blocked by the opaque acting style: it was difficult being unable to plumb the psychological depths of the play’s central character. Yet, this obstacle to my empathetic identification may have helped to keep my focus on the external events in which Venus was caught. The critics’ response speaks to the seductive power of realistic conventions and to the difficulties of doing without

³¹Richard Foreman, *Plays and Manifestos*, ed. Kate Davy (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 188.

³²Ben Brantley, “Of an Erotic Freak Show and the Lesson Therein.” *New York Times*, 3 May 1996, sec. C. Also, Michael Feingold, “Carnival Knowledge.” *Village Voice*, 14 May 1996, 81.

customary spectatorial satisfactions. Although greatly concerned with respecting the historical woman about whom she wrote, Parks rejects the depth model of realistic characterization in favor of bringing our attention to the fabricated absence where that individual might have existed. Parks chooses not to valorize a hopeful progressive Venus myth, and, in addition, she endows Venus with several stereotypical qualities, such as her sensuous sexual and childlike pleasure. In so doing, Parks risks offending viewers and reviewers, like Sinclair. With the exception of John Lahr, critics attributed the production's distancing theatricality and insistence on surface (lack of emotional depth) to Foreman's predilections, but I believe they underestimated how much the play itself tries to subvert realistic representation.

Parks's dramaturgy is not a particularly joyful one. Rather than Baartman's body bringing forth any of the three children whom she conceived with the Docteur, her generative life becomes limited to that of a commercially productive corpse. Venus is declared dead at the very beginning of the play, and presumably "There wont b innny show tonite" (41). But there is a show: for the corpse cannot leave the stage. If, however, Venus is trapped in her historical role, she also refuses to be silent. Parks's rearview of Baartman's desire for love resists the taxonomy that would fix her as someone else's text. We are accustomed, in realistic plays, to the dissection of the psyche. In classical realism, the heroine or, more often the hero, generates the climax with a verbal spout of confessional text. Here, the roll call of Docteur's privileged language, the "secret" language of science that catalogues "truths" about Baartman, unveils only the limits of its own discourse. The fetishized object has her own story to tell.

Although silenced by history, this play attempts to give Venus back a voice. Venus has the last word in the play: Parks is, however, well aware that getting a voice does not mean that one's desires are fulfilled. Venus's last performative utterance will never be satisfied. "Kiss me," she says proclaiming her desire (72). "Kiss me," but the irony of history prevents anyone from comforting her.

Girl 6 also capitalizes on the ironic distance between its black heroine and the fulfilment of her desires. With *Venus*, Parks fools with time and sequence to foreground the processes fetishizing and destroying Venus. In a parallel structural move, *Girl 6* gives spectators opportunities to see the deconstructive contradictions within the film's own visual text. The film reveals the gap between what we, as spectators, see—innumerable close-ups of the beautiful black face of Teresa Randle, starring as Girl 6—while the numerous callers who project their fantasies onto her, "see" only what they wish to see, that she is white. In fact, it is never clear whether any of Judy's customers know that she is black. For a good half an hour of the film, we see her performing white, vocally passing as the white girl of the callers' fantasies.

Training the new phone-sex operators, Girl 6's African American boss Lil says, "All you girls are," and then turns in silence to write a word on a white plastic board with a black marker; she writes "W-H-I-T-E." The camera focuses back on Girl 6's face as Lil's marker underlines the word that no one ever speaks. As spectators, we see the substitution of the black female body standing in for fantasmatic white high-school bombshells and floor-scrubbing housewives, but for the callers, Girl 6's blackness is unimagined, invisible. The racist and stereotypical narratives about black female sexuality

depicted in *Venus* appear as naturalized assumptions in the contemporary American culture of *Girl 6*. But, it seems as if the unseen (by her customers) aural performances enacted by *Girl 6* allow her to achieve what *Venus* could not: power and financial autonomy.

Judy, the heroine of *Girl 6* is, like *Venus*, a performer. Judy is an impoverished actress trying to get work in New York City. Divorced from a kleptomaniac husband who attempts to win her back over the course of the film, she lives alone in a walk-up apartment across the hall from Jimmy, a baseball-card collector played by Spike Lee. For the first portion of the film, Judy is silenced and humiliated by various authority figures in the entertainment business: an arrogant film director, played with disturbing iconicity by Quentin Tarentino; a mocking acting teacher; and an inflexible assistant director in charge of film extras. Hitting financial bottom with jobs handing out fliers and checking coats, Judy turns to the phone sex industry. She lands a job and becomes *Girl 6*, "Six for sex darling." The rest of the film follows Judy's stellar success as a phone-sex performer and her simultaneous psychological descent, as the fantasies begin to take a toll on her sense of self. Judy's realistic acting helps her to disappear into those erotic versions of herself, into powerful and sexually fulfilling fetishistic object of her callers' desires; she gains pleasure from being both a sexual fetish and the magical commodity they have to purchase to possess.

Girl 6 is as focused on film and television as *Venus* was on theatre. The movie explores the liberatory transformational power available through these media and, at the same time, harshly critiques the entertainment industry's exploitation of black actresses.

Transformation through performance fuels the film's limited forward motion; Randle wears nearly fifty outfits and a score of wigs over the course of the film. While Venus's fixity as a stereotypical erotic object ultimately killed her, *Girl 6* appears to raise the obverse question: will Judy's protean ability to perform her customers' fantasies place her in danger of losing her subjectivity? Although these two structures, utter fixity and complete fluidity, appear distinctly opposed, they both find black women functioning as mirrors to the insistently interpellating cultures in which they strive to succeed.

Susan Willis, writing about the African American presence in commodity culture, says that "a simple, straightforward response to cultural domination cannot be mounted, let alone imagined, because domination is bound up with the media, and this with commodity gratification."³³ She questions whether mass culture is "by its very definition white culture with a few blacks in it?" *Girl 6* also seems to raise this question, but does present African Americans constructing identities even from the stereotypes and limited access they have thus far won within the world of commodified representations. Judy's performances as different phone-sex characters interconnect with television and film characters into whom she transforms. She uses her acting ability to make her callers, these "Giants in the boardroom, cross-dressers in private" happy, and separately, she creates private performances for herself of her favorite characters: Dorothy Dandridge in *Carmen Jones*, Foxy Brown, and Thelma from *The Jeffersons*. Rather than point to

³³This and the subsequent citation from Susan Willis, *A Primer For Daily Life* (London: Routledge, 1991), 127-28.

Judy's lack of choices or her lack of a genuine self, the film seems to frame these transformations as playful and creative constructions of Judy's being.

The film itself, however, equivocates on this liberatory notion. Many reviewers chided Lee for ostensibly taking the entertainment industry to task for exploiting an actress's sexuality while doing precisely the same thing himself. In the first scene of *Girl 6*, for instance, Judy is pressured to take off her top in an audition. The scene makes painfully clear how humiliating the experience is for her, but the camera sequence also provides the *Girl 6* audiences with a long look at Teresa Randle's breasts. This scene may go far to explain why Parks has been reluctant to create an embodied sexual black heroine: once a screen character enters into the representational economy, Parks has almost no control over how that character may be shown or seen. Although Lee's cinematography and theatrical sensibility make his collaboration with Parks seem well-suited: but, like Foreman, his works have often been critiqued for failing to provide a sense of agency for his black female characters. Lee's first film, *She's Gotta Have It*, for instance, was upbraided for its numerous sequences with his heroine, Nola Darling (Camilla Johns), lavishly displayed in the nude. *Girl 6*, in which Judy uses Nola Darling's first speech as her audition monologue, aspires to give Judy agency and sexuality, but the character seems to get caught up in yet another commodification of black female sexuality.

Critic David Denby describes *Girl 6* as a movie initially "framed as a liberation story" that does not, however, become a feel-good *Pretty Woman* for its African

American phone-sex heroine.³⁴ Parks's and Lee's film does not fit easily into genre categories and, indeed, reviewers complained about the absence of a strong narrative. Lee's comments in interviews indicate that he believed he had created a story in which Judy achieves autonomy and power, but the film itself undermines these claims. It is these ambiguities that make the film an intriguing cultural event.

As with reviewers' responses to the character of Venus, several critics were put off by their inability to experience an intimate emotional identification with Judy. Black feminist writer Michele Wallace, however, who has in the past taken issue with Lee's work, champions this film. She felt that audiences did not appreciate *Girl 6* because "it wasn't linear and action packed. It wasn't violent or even sexually explicit. . . . There are no fathers, no mothers, no conventional families. . . . It really didn't have much of a story."³⁵ It is true that the film's limited narrative becomes even less significant as it is frequently disrupted by a number of non-diegetic sequences: parodic fantasy scenes narrated by Judy, non-realistic production designs, and fish-eye lens distortions, for example, all take the film into a surreal kind of meandering narrative progress. Wallace feels, however, that the film addresses material issues of fantasy "versus the mundane, tar-baby realities of lived experience from a black-female point of view." Although one can see the film as a comparison of fantasy and reality, I would like to discuss how the film explores the difficulties of controlling the nature of one's identity after putting your

³⁴David Denby, "Who's That Girl?" *New York Magazine*, 1 April 1996, 48.

³⁵This and subsequent quotation from Michele Wallace, Review of *Girl 6*, *Village Voice*, Film section, 21 May 1996, 14.

sexuality on the market. By fully using her talents and “embodying” others’ desires, Judy fulfills a parody of assimilation. She does not just gesture towards these phone-sex characters. Judy dreams of being a great realistic actress, and she, therefore, tries to disappear into her masquerades of sexuality, to become the role rather than present the character.

Judy brings her identifications into the phone-sex business world. For example, she names her “girl-next-door” phone-sex persona, (the fantasy character to whom she is closest), “Lovely Brown.” As a character, Lovely Brown fuses Judy’s own identification with Pam Grier’s film character, “Foxy Brown” (a very hip “Black is Beautiful” female cop from blaxploitation films), with her own desire to be lovely. This connection appears visually through the non-diegetic Lovely Brown fantasy sequence: while playing out a triumphant Foxy Brown scenario, Judy flips her badge down in a close-up for the camera, and it says “Lovely Brown.”

Her performative self has more access to erotic pleasure than Judy has previously had with her husband. Judy explains to her ex-husband that she was always a sexually eager “freak” (someone excessively interested in sex), it is just that he failed to bring that quality out in her. Lee clearly has an investment in recuperating the term “freak” and, by implication, changing what might be considered excessive sexual desire into normative female sexuality, at least that is what Nola’s monologue indicates. But, Lee seems oblivious to the historical baggage weighing down black woman as already excessively sexualized and stereotyped as animal. Lee’s films, like Foreman’s early work with female nudes, are positioned as if striving for female autonomy, but *Girl 6* ultimately fails

to make a space for Judy's sexuality.³⁶

As Judy gets increasingly isolated in the validations of the phone-sex business, the boundary between her own fantasy identifications and the personas she plays for her callers becomes more porous. It is through this permeability, the intermingling of these identifications that constitute her subjectivity, that Judy faces danger. Having given her favorite customer, Bob Regular, her home phone number, this boundary blurring takes palpable form as Judy speaks to him on her hall phone while still in her Foxy/Lovely Brown outfit and wig. This scene, in which she agrees to meet him at Coney Island, is the fulcrum in her unraveling sense of self. In an elegantly romantic shot, Judy, dressed this time like Grace Kelly with a simple head scarf, sits by the ocean and sees a tall, handsome, well-dressed white man striding down the boardwalk, apparently toward her. As he passes her, ignoring her calls to him of "Bob! Bob Regular!", Judy's *Pretty Woman* mythology receives a mortal blow. Once begun, her decline accelerates. Told to take a leave from her phone-sex job to "recharge your batteries," i.e., freshen up the product, Judy instead begins work for a decadent phone sex madam played by Madonna.

Although a minor character appearing in two scenes only, Madonna's presence highlights the financial implications of racialized gender. Madonna's iconicity resonates ironically with her role as a panderer for women who answer phone-sex calls out of their homes. Her "home girls," as she describes them, are able to completely abandon themselves, "total freedom, no taboos." "Home girls" also refers to a black idiom for a

³⁶How much Parks contributed to the final cut of *Girl 6*, it is impossible to say. In general, screenwriters have much less control over production than playwrights. Ultimately, the decisions about form and content probably rested with Lee.

girl from one's own black neighborhood. Madonna's whiteness is elided by her connections to black culture. Joseph Roach refers to Madonna as "the White Goddess" who "rides the crest of a dark wave of Afrocentric cultural performances. She sings their songs and dances their dances, appropriating their rhythms and their styles. She is their surrogate."³⁷ Just as the white Bride hung onto her Groom and social position by acting as Venus's surrogate, Madonna has forged a spectacular career out of masquerading as black. Just as Venus pays for white Europeans' fantasy projections that she embody a "wild" sexuality, it is as a totally free "home girl" that Judy is endangered by Mr. Snuff, a self-named sadistic white caller.

Provoked by Judy's efforts to understand and "love him," Mr. Snuff reveals that he knows Girl 6's home address, and he promises to come over and act out his fantasy in person. Mr. Snuff is enraged by the threat of her subjectivity, by her demand that he recognize her as a human being who could love him. Up until this point, Judy has been able to exert enough practical and aesthetic control over the phone calls to feel empowered by them. Like Baartman, she mimics the stereotypical erotic performances that her culture and her customers require. Unlike Baartman, Judy escapes this particularly deadly trap created by her own success at turning herself into a commodity. Her crisis sends her off to Los Angeles to pursue her acting as she attempts to escape from "too much history" in New York.

³⁷Joseph Roach, "Tragic Octoroons," *Theatre Survey* 33, no. 2 (November 1992): 187.

Lee talked about Judy as ending up “very much in control.”³⁸ The film’s ending, however, undermines its own loose narrative of autonomy for Judy and reminds viewers of the strength of history’s grip. In a scene parallel to the film’s first section, Judy auditions for another white film director who wants to see her without her top. This time, she refuses the demand and stands her ground to say her monologue. It turns out that Judy’s audition monologue is still Nola Darling’s speech from the opening of *She’s Gotta Have It*. The monologue focuses on Nola refuting people who look down on her for having several lovers at once. Judy speaks Nola’s lines: “The only reason I’ve consented to do this is to clear my name. . . . Some people call me a freak. . . . I consider myself normal, whatever that is.” This monologue appears to function as an affirmation of Judy’s cultural power and possession of her own sexuality. Judy can be seen as rejecting Hollywood’s fetishizing her, and rendering her powerless because she is an erotic fetish in a business of sexuality as product.

Two aspects of the final scenes, however, complicate such a reading. The first problematic part of Judy’s triumphant autonomy has to do with the audition itself. The film or television project for which Judy is auditioning seems to be pornographic: before doing her monologue, Judy reads the role of a housewife who, upon meeting a delivery boy at her door, immediately begins making love to him. This classic lusty housewife scenario hardly seems to promise that Judy’s Hollywood future has anything better to offer her than New York did. In addition, as Judy strides out across the street, the camera

³⁸Spike Lee, Interview, *Manhattan File Magazine*, Feb 1996, 60-61.

pans up to reveal "Girl 6" on the marquee of Grummond's Chinese Movie Theater. Although this self-reflexive comment may be taken as both Lee's critique of white Hollywood, and his sense of himself as one of the few directors making films about black women, it also seems to boomerang back on Judy—as if the only place where she can be visible as a person, and not a fetishized object, will be in this film.

Several reviewers predicted that whatever else took place with this film, Teresa Randle started out a starlet and ended up a star. While Randle may have a satisfying career as a working actress, she has had no starring roles since *Girl 6*. Despite the lackluster financial returns on *Girl 6*, Lee's work did create a project through which Randle had an opportunity to gain mainstream visibility in the entertainment industry, but that chance was undermined in several ways. The film itself created little stir in the media. Stuart Klawans, reviewing for *The Nation*, writes that the film did not get a significant release by Fox Searchlight, the distributor of *Girl 6*; Lee's usual distributor, Universal, declined the film when Lee refused Universal's request to cast a star such as Halle Berry in the lead. Fox Searchlight spent little money on press and even restricted the film's press screenings, therefore guaranteeing the film would receive little attention. Klawans suggests that Fox Searchlight was anxious about the project partly because "they understood the meaning of *Girl 6*'s anonymity. . . . She takes an actress's pride in her malleability; she profits by it. She cooperates with a world that wants her to be a cipher, and relaxes into the pleasure of cooperating, and begins to go a little mad."³⁹ While Wallace found the film "darkly humorous," and states that "No woman was humiliated or

³⁹Stuart Klawans, "Candy-Colored Sadness," *Nation*, 29 April 1996, 35.

destroyed.” Girl 6 and Randle's journeys still seem bleak.⁴⁰

In fact, a rarely seen character, Girl 29, offers a far more transgressive characterization of black female subjectivity. Judy's presence in the film contrasts sharply with Girl 29, the single other black woman whose complete phone-sex monologue is presented as a scene. Girl 29's parodic monologue performs a resistance that neither Judy as Girl 6, nor the film, itself, pursues. Girl 29, a compelling Shari Freels, points to the possible eruption of what Homi K. Bhabha has called the menace behind a colonized figures excessive mimicry.⁴¹ Girl 29 takes her caller on his fantasy, of a young white girl on a public bus, but demands repeatedly and insistently “Don't I look pretty?” with such force that her contempt for him reads as far more empowering than any of Judy's performances ever did. The scene is shot from above, and Freels's non-naturalistic, broad acting strokes simultaneously estrange her speech and give her a theatrically intense presence. Freels is a dark skinned black woman whose short knotted hair, leather biker jacket, and nearly black lipstick set her out from every other female character in the movie. In mainstream entertainment industry terms, Freels is not pretty, and her character's vehement excess explodes that category even as she survives in the system which demands pretty as a product. By overfilling and over-energizing the stereotype her caller demands, Girl 29 simultaneously performs “pretty white girl” and mocks the role. While Girl 6 disappears into masquerades of women, Girl 29 seems to

⁴⁰Wallace, 12.

⁴³Homi K. Babha, “The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse” in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992).

maintain a resistant position outside the non-ironic realistic masquerade by consciously parodying a white prettiness. Fuss seems to describe Girl 29's performance perfectly in her discussion of how the performance of a role can resist the forces informing stereotypes (through excess and parody), even while continuing to perform them. As viewers, we can become Freer's fellow transgressors through our identification with her grotesque excessive performance. One can argue that, like a contained carnivalesque impulse, Freer's explosion has no effect upon the system in which she seems caught as a black performer. But, in fact, we witness Freer's subversive act, and her performance offers us an alternate model for resistant identity construction. I suggest that Girl 29's brief scene still serves to provide what Terry Eagleton saw in Bakhtin's carnivalesque, "utopian modelling."⁴² With the eruption of Girl 29's monologue, Freer's performance seems to contribute to what Stallybrass and White describe as the carnivalesque's "resource of actions, images and roles which may be invoked both to model and legitimate desire."⁴³

With *Venus* and *Girl 6* Parks explores the complex dialogue between black female subjects and their capitalist cultures. She maps the ebbs and flows of identification, desire, and power which speak back and forth through the bodies and identities of these women. By entering into the permeable places where culture constitutes the racialized and sexualized self, Park points out the importance of

⁴²Stallybrass and White, 18. They work with Terry Eagleton. *Walter Benjamin: Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), 149.

⁴³Stallybrass and White, 18.

recuperating the past, even with its tragic plotlines, in order to imagine new futures. Parks articulates the cost to Judy and Venus of the process of colonial subject formation as whites define themselves through the violence of (mis)identification, taking routes through the Other to create national identities. By taking what might be considered, in contemporary American progressive politics, a politically incorrect view of complex identity formations, Parks challenges the expectations of both mainstream white culture and certain Afrocentric movements. As Gina Dent suggests about the contributors to *Black Popular Culture*, and as Parks takes action through these two scripts:

The answer lies perhaps not in policing the areas over which our gaze may trespass, but, rather, in making it clear that what we reveal there are the effects of that gaze. . . rather than policing the borders of black culture. . . in airing our dirty laundry so to speak, they challenge the resurrection of communal privacy that relies on extending the paradigm of the bourgeois family to that of the 'race.'⁴⁴

Parks's willingness to expose her own complex identifications to the view of the theatre and film marketplaces may shift, ever so slightly, the ways in which black women see themselves and are seen by others. In her success at shaking loose the realistic strictures of both theatre and film, Parks's dramaturgy foregrounds the costs to black women of trying to live through the logic of commodities, trying to fashion a self out of and as product.

⁴⁴Gina Dent, "Introduction," in *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992),

CONCLUSION

DESCRYING THE PAST AND WRITING FOR THE FUTURE

In her introduction to *Plays for the End of the Century*, Bonnie Marranca comments on what she sees as American theater's responses to destabilizing forces like AIDS and global economics:

American drama has reacted to the state of affairs [increasing instability] by making identity, sex, race, and gender its chief subjects, with such single-mindedness that it seems as though this cultural soap opera is the only kind of drama being written today.¹

When Marranca critiques what she describes as soap operatic theatrical explorations of identity, I feel she is throwing the baby out with the bath water. Because Marranca conflates all dramatic examinations of sociocultural constructions (like race) with the traditional psychological focus of late twentieth century's mainstream narratives, she fails to recognize the achievements of writers like those discussed in this dissertation. Certainly, much of the commercially successful theater in 1980s and 1990s reified traditional character and identity structures but, at same time, avant-garde dramaturgies generated deconstructive (and productive) challenges to identity norms. If the arts were particularly responsive in this destabilized period, at least some of their creative experiments generated the productive chaos Vanden Heuvel describes.

Theatrical attention to identity constructions and constrictions during this period highlights an ongoing American concern with creating stage figures that might function as

¹*Plays for the End of the Century*, ed. with an Introduction by Bonnie Marranca (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 11.

rehearsals of the real-yet-to-come. The resilience of the subversive plays I have analyzed, particularly those surviving the vise of conservative fiscal pincers (legislation and funding cuts generated by politicians whose frequent response to an increasing sense of global complexity is to generate mythic nostalgic images), needs to be documented in order to complicate narratives of theatrical history and literature. In addition, critical work on artists, like Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks call such experimental work to the attention of future artists and critics.

Over the course of my analysis, I situated these four artists within their various career trajectories, and (in comparison to one another) located their plays and productions in the spectrum of American theatrical offerings. The slippery rule-breaking aesthetics of their plays have, for the most part, quarantined their work in smaller, artier, and even foreign theaters. As I have discussed, visibility within the American theatrical realm is intimately connected with dramaturgy. While these writers all, initially, came from an impoverished fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants tradition of experimental work, some of their recent works seemed poised to generate far more cultural attention. Where will their next plays come to life? And, if they change their dramaturgical elusiveness for more traditional and palatable play structures, will their productions lose their ability to offer radical cultural critiques?

I would like to touch upon the challenges facing these writers as each of them negotiates the aesthetics and economics of their latest and their yet-to-come venues. While the plays addressed in this study specifically spanned the spectrum of marginal to culturally central spaces, several of Shawn's works have most successfully infiltrated

certain mainstream New York spaces like Lincoln Center Theater, located, as it is, in the heart of the elite Upper West Side and sandwiched between the looming homes of the Metropolitan Opera House, the City Opera, and the New York City Ballet. Interestingly, however, Shawn's current workshop production of *The Designated Mourner* (May 2000) in a Wall Street area abandoned men's club returns, at least for this beginning "downtown event" phase of its presentation, to an earlier era of his career in which he successfully fetishized the marginality of his productions.² Not only is Shawn's workshop, directed by longtime collaborator Andre Gregory, important enough that the *New York Times* devoted a column and large photograph to covering *The Designated Mourner*, but the *Daily Variety* also had a column reporting that there were cryptic invitations circulating among the literati to come to a mysterious event somewhere downtown.³

Shawn's move to Wall Street locates his work geographically and aesthetically far from normative theatrical venues and productions. His show's position at the southern edge of Manhattan points to the longstanding American history of artists as dissenters, a tradition in which all four writers participate to some degree. Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks can all be viewed through the aesthetic lineage encompassing artistic approaches that use a "rejection of American culture" to forge new communities "in the name of

²As I described in my first chapter, and as I will discuss with regard to Mamet's production of *Oleanna*, Carlson's *Places of Performance* points to one of a marginal artist's frequent stratagems: to create an event whose highly limited visibility and availability generate wide interest.

³The *Daily Variety*'s piece appeared on 13 April 2000 and the *New York Times* printed their coverage 14 April 2000.

American values.”⁴ But even with regard to this specifically marginal aesthetic, each of this study’s four playwrights deviates from this outsider-artist tradition. Interestingly, while it is informative to read their work through this lens, none of them fully participate in the Puritan dissenting tradition exemplified by the myth of the Emersonian individual nay-sayer. Wellman, for instance, rails against capitalism’s endless appetite and Shawn upbraids spectators for their complicity in the soul-selling bargains his characters make, but neither purports to offer certain answers, or certainty itself, as remedies to our cultural ills. Similarly, while Parks and Nagy critique the burdens within and without the African American and gay and lesbian subcultures, their texts eschew concrete solutions to racism and homophobia.

In order to further refine and gauge the status of Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks as outsider-artists, it is worth comparing these four writers to their far more famous colleague and traditional dissenter, David Mamet, and to a recently anointed and mainstreamed dissenter, Paula Vogel. This comparison clarifies what has been defined, and consumed, as acceptably marginal in the last two decades of American culture and, in addition, offers further clues about the obstacles facing Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks in terms of visibility and access to the mainstream.

The artists who have traditionally come under that rubric of dissenters, as it has been described by Sacvan Bercovitch, identify some set of beliefs they perceive as current.

⁴Michael Quinn, “Anti-Theatricality and American Ideology: Mamet’s Performative Realism,” in *Realism and the American Dramatic Tradition*, ed. William W. Demastes (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 236. All subsequent citations will appear in the text.

ruinous, and even anti-American.⁵ Mamet, as Michael Quinn notes, has targeted an array of bourgeois ideologies that “require[s] conformity to a way of doing business and administering justice that serves those in power, and ruins the life of the ordinary man” (237). Quinn goes on to describe how, in theatre history, “this kind of dissent usually finds its object in Broadway. The decadent commercial theatre is then indicted in a vituperative jeremiad . . . which also often outlines a visionary path to redemption through the restoration of neglected moral values: truth, authenticity, selfless commitment to art, reason, etc” (237). *Oleanna*, for instance, proffers spectators the Professor’s apparently justified physical violence as an heroic response to the lesbian feminist conspiracy that threatens his job, his home, and, his power, i.e., his unmarked white heterosexual privileges. Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive* is also a touchstone play resonating with gender issues of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and, like *Oleanna*, the play’s original production serves as a marker of how artistic dissent translated into commercial product in that period. I will describe several aspects of Vogel’s and Mamet’s productions that contributed to their widespread acclaim, an achievement that Shawn, Wellman, Nagy, and Parks may never acquire.

Mamet directed and produced the premiere of *Oleanna* at the Orpheum Theater (1992), a small space in the East Village area of New York. In his discussion of Mamet’s position in American culture, Quinn says that the playwright-author-director is a “self-proclaimed iconoclas[t], and . . . the ideologically effective aspects of [his] dramatic

⁵For further reading on the tradition of dissenters, see Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

construction[s] are often simply taken for something bold, hardheaded, and realistic, rather than as gestures in a standard romantic ritual of American intellectual culture” (235-6). I agree with Quinn and suggest that *Oleanna*, in particular, was positioned as if speaking for a dissenting voice of the oppressed, while the production actually played to a mainstream heterosexist paranoid view of gender roles. Mamet’s commercially successful production of *Oleanna* reveals some of the materialist complexity to “reading” theater productions in cultural terms. Framing the play in the small downtown Orpheum Theater may have endowed the production with a patina of the East Village’s radical sheen. I believe *Oleanna*’s success is due, in part, to a combination of a neo-conservative nostalgia and the press’s labeling of this production as marginal, a perception fostered by Mamet himself. I wonder if the production would have been as successful without the outsider-dissenter press image Mamet embraces. While both Wellman’s *Blow Jobs* and *Oleanna* might be read as relativized realities that foreground gender, Wellman’s work reveals the costs of normative masculinity’s demands, while Mamet’s seems to espouse them.

Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive* functions, in a subtle way, like *Oleanna*; while each play appears to offer a daring social critique, ultimately, both texts reaffirm certain conservative ideologies. Vogel notes that her play was, in fact, modeled to some degree upon *Oleanna*, a play that supposedly presented a conflict even-handedly.⁶ A brief discussion of the premiere production of *How I Learned to Drive* (1997) and of Vogel’s career, as a writer who has successfully crossed over to the mainstream, helps to further

⁶Christopher Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 318. He notes that Vogel often responds to other playwrights’ work, and in this case, *Oleanna* had made an impact upon her.

distinguish the ongoing marginalization of Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks.

Vogel is an openly lesbian playwright who, throughout the seventies and eighties, struggled to ignite a playwriting career along a trajectory which resembles Shawn's. Like him, even in her lean production years, Vogel had significant opportunities. One of her earlier plays, *Desdmona* (1979), for example was produced by Jon Jory for the New Plays Festival at Louisville. Vogel's work, nonetheless, had a limited circulation in New York City theater circles comparable, perhaps, to the degree of recognition that Parks's initial plays had. *The Baltimore Waltz* (1992) generated her first experience of national press attention, but it was not until *How I Learned to Drive* (1997) that Vogel's work moved onto the larger theatrical playing field.

Vogel's Pulitzer Prize, Obie, Drama Desk, Outer Critics and New York Drama Critics Circle award-winning play, *How I Learned to Drive*, represents one model of the marginal traveling to the center. The play, which had been developed at Perseverance Theatre, opened off-Broadway at the Vineyard Theatre (1997, New York City) with actors and a director who had commercial careers: Mark Brokaw is one of the most successful young American directors and the two leads, David Morse and Mary-Louise Parker, both bring name recognition generated by their television and film work. The Vineyard is known for producing interesting and sometimes edgy comedies by young writers like Nicky Silver. Located on the east side in the chic Grammercy Park area, this relatively small theater has become adept at producing works that move on to longer runs at other spaces. In this case, *How I Learned to Drive* went on to run for fifteen months at the Century Theatre, a larger and commercial Off-Broadway house. In the two years after

its New York City success, the play became the most presented play of 1998 with over fifty productions nationwide. I suggest that, like *Oleanna*, Vogel's play satisfies mainstream tastes and critics with its ostensibly depoliticized dramaturgy of even-handedness.⁷

Vogel's play tells the story of a woman in her forties looking back at the childhood and adolescent sexual relationship with her uncle that defined her identity. Christopher Bigsby describes the play as one "whose ostensible concern with child abuse and paedophilia can too easily distract from a subtle portrait of two people who bear the burden of their own nature and come to an understanding of themselves only by degrees"⁸ Bigsby's description aptly points out that, in the end, the play becomes the tragic love story between L'il Bit, the play's heroine, and her uncle Peck, her abuser and would-be lover. The dramaturgical development of *How I Learned to Drive* leads to the unquestioned "natural" status of Peck's tragedy and L'il Bit's redemption rather than to an exploration of identity constructs and their socioeconomic implications. The play's fraught sexual concerns become less significant than its character development, and, as Bigsby notes, it is this development which protected the play from a possible uproar over the content of the piece. One would think that Vogel's writing might have challenged

⁷*How I Learned to Drive* also incorporated some of the same elements that made Wasserstein's Pulitzer Prize winning play, *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988), such a huge success. Both works appear to offer a kind of radical view point. In *The Heidi Chronicles*, Wasserstein's eponymous heroine struggles with feminism and, finally makes a (then) daring and ostensibly anti-bourgeois decision to create a satisfying life with a baby but without a heterosexual romantic relationship. *How I Learned to Drive* similarly depicts a single woman's difficult journey to self-acceptance and empowerment.

⁸Bigsby, 318.

numerous bourgeois assumptions about sexuality, villains and heroes, and even the construction of white female sexuality, but *How I Learned to Drive* swept smoothly to national acclaim.

While Vogel's use of multiple theatrical styles, such as sketch comedy, realistic scenes, and ironic narration, disrupt traditional memory-play narrative styles, nonetheless, *How I Learned to Drive* ends up reinscribing the closed coherence of realism. Vogel employs a dramaturgical manipulation similar to that Shawn employs in *The Designated Mourner*, albeit to radically different ends. Like Shawn's efforts on behalf of his anti-hero, Jack, Vogel works hard to keep spectators sympathetically engaged with Peck, the traditional villain in these kind of sexual abuse narratives. Like Shawn, she withholds key information from the audience until after the climax of the play; in this case, Vogel has constructed the fragmented memory play in such a way that spectators do not know until the very end that an early uncomfortable scene, of Peck groping a young L'il Bit in his car, actually took place when she was an eleven year-old. As the role of L'il Bit is played throughout by a grown woman, spectators have no sense of her age when this first incident with Peck occurred. Shawn similarly hides much of the darkness we ultimately come to recognize about Jack, but the manipulations of *How I Learned to Drive*'s dramaturgy function to support a psychologically realistic portrait of Peck, while the machinations of *The Designated Mourner* all work to confront spectators with the dangerous political possibilities lurking beneath Jack's pop-psychological self-justifications. Rather than bringing the audience's attention to the ideological forces shaping Peck's conflicts over sexuality and gender, Vogel's non-realist dramaturgical tools

return spectators to what might, in Marranca's terms, be seen as a kind of "soap opera" theater.

I have argued that Jack's psychic journey offers spectators a chance to see how historic constructions of ethnicity, whiteness, and heterosexual masculinity are inextricably entwined, and I suggest that the journeys undertaken by Vogel's and Mamet's heroes' and heroines' return spectators to a realist re-containment of the past and simultaneous reification of the norms of the present. While the play's daring events and range of theatrical styles gives mainstream audiences a frisson of adventure, there is little challenge to normative white mainstream structures and beliefs.

Just like many of the plays discussed already in this dissertation, *How I Learned to Drive* enacts its drama through the stage matrix, the body. In this case, the primary corpus in question is the heroine as child. As Vogel indicates in her stage directions, the actor who speaks the eleven year old L'il Bit's lines should be of "'legal age', that is, twenty-one to twenty-five years old who can look as close to eleven as possible. . . . If the actor is too young, the audience may feel uncomfortable."⁹ Vogel's play appears to question stereotypical assumptions about child molesters as villains and the children they abuse, suggesting that there are positive possibilities engendered by what are traditionally defined as damaging sexual contacts. I suggest, however, that *How I Learned to Drive* plays into traditional heteronormativity by fabricating an (unseen) eleven year-old Lolita who assumes complicity with Uncle Peck even into adulthood, at least as presented in this

⁹Paula Vogel, *How I Learned to Drive in The Mammary Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1998), 4.

production. What if the play had presented a pre-adolescent girl playing a scene with Peck? No doubt the production's impact and commercial viability would have been utterly transformed.

Marginal and resistant art often cannot control the mainstreaming and commodifying of its once confrontational and provocative heresy. Whatever subversive qualities, for example, *Rent* possessed in its initial downtown production at the small and adventurous New York Theater Workshop, on East 4th Street just past La Mama, it was defanged by its move to Broadway (1995). *Rent* serves as an extreme example of a piece with unusual dramaturgy and an unfamiliar dramatic subject (the toll of AIDS on a non-traditional youthful population) that moved so far to the center that Bloomingdales created a style section for clothes modeled after those of the *Rent* characters. The commercial appetite for the seemingly avant-garde is a powerful force fueling this kind of mainstreaming.

It is evident, from the careers of the four writers selected for this study, that there are aesthetic forms so imbricated with ideological critiques that they remain largely unpalatable to mainstream culture. Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks engage in experiments with those sorts of dramaturgy. Their differing careers reveal how difficult it may be for outsider-artists, who have *not* been picked up by commercial circles, to gain entrance to the economic and cultural power of the mainstream. For instance, despite Wellman's desire for larger and better funded productions, the long-delayed production of *Infrared* took place for a brief run only at the Flea Theater (January 2000), a ninety-nine seat equity waiver theater below Canal Street. Rather than the epic scale, to which Travis

Preston's large and technically complex New York University workshop of *Infrared* aspired, this version was a small and less complex presentation created and self-produced by several actresses interested in Wellman's material.

Wellman's longevity as a marginal artist is due in large part to his openness at how, and with whom, his plays come to life. He was delighted with their production and, as he often does, he embraced the opportunity to have young and eager artists present his plays. Wellman continues to exert considerable influence on younger playwrights through his numerous affiliations and teaching. His desire to expend figurative speech in his ongoing effort to create resacralized spaces within capitalism's endless cycle of consumption (at \$12 a ticket) seems greater than his want (and, perhaps, ability) to move uptown. Has Wellman placed the freedom of his work over the value of a greater cultural presence?

In the avant-garde world, Wellman's thirty year career has given him an a senior position within certain circles of artists, and Carey Perloff, Artistic Director of the American Conservatory Theatre is among these fans. Perloff arranged a residency for Wellman at her theater, and initiated a dialogue with composer David Lang, Wellman, and herself about possible projects (1992-4). Lang is one of the most successful rising new music composers in America, and he is one of the Co-Artistic Director of Bang on a Can. Wellman and Lang collaborated on an opera entitled *The Difficulty Crossing a Field*, based on the one page short story of the same title by nineteenth century journalist and fiction writer, Ambrose Bierce. As with so many of the works discussed in this study, the opera explores a disappearance; one day in Selma, Alabama, a farmer vanishes while

walking from one end of his field to the other. This American mysterium explores what Perloff calls the unmasking of “the respectable edifices of language that mask all kinds of horrors and lies,” around American racial history and, in this case, “the earth opens up and swallows a big lie” forcing characters and spectators alike to engage with the absences in our sense of the past.¹⁰

While Perloff speaks passionately about the project in the special section of *Theater* magazine devoted to Wellman, *Difficulty Crossing a Field* continues to languish. Lang’s career as a composer is flourishing, but he does not yet have the prominence to bring together the resources required to produce a new opera on his own. Perhaps a director of international prominence, such as Peter Sellars, will become interested in the project and make it happen. It seems ironic that, in larger cultural circles, Wellman lacks the visibility to marshal the resources required to present this unusual new work on moments of absence in American history.

Despite the evidently limited scope of possibilities for Wellman’s plays, he shows no signs of abandoning either his playwriting voice, or the realm of productions that have served him for the last three decades. Wellman is the only figure among the four writers to continue working within the same small production scale and for the same niche audience. Unlike Vogel and Mamet’s narrative satisfactions, Wellman’s work, even at its most entertaining, opts for riddles rather than resolutions.

Shawn, Nagy, and Parks, on the other hand, have each moderated their approaches

¹⁰Carey Perloff, “Seven Avenues Towards the Heart of a Mystery,” *Theater* 27 (Spring 1997): 62.

as they venture into larger cultural ponds. Yet each of the plays in this cross-over category of their work, to varying degrees, still relies upon unique deformations of traditional realism; their most recent plays such as *Never Land*, *The Designated Mourner*, and *In the Blood* all open Bakhtinian loopholes in identity constructions, particularly white Europe-American heterosexual norms. Whiteness, like realism, is most empowered when it remains unmarked, as if natural. As these writers bring Bakhtinian eruptions into play with traditionally consistent theatrical “laws” (around character, time, place, genre), their works become unfinalisable. The productive chaos, engendered in the fractal worlds they create, reveals how much freedom may be found in theater, and how many different ways stage visions can reach spectators.

As I noted in my readings throughout this study, the carnivalesque disruptions incorporated by all four of these writers function to foreground and deconstruct what they perceive as constraining definitions of racial, gender, and sexual identification. Bakhtin’s ideas of the carnivalesque are finally about the same kind of freedom Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks endow upon the renegade identities in their plays. Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist describe Bakhtin’s investment in freedom and his concern with “the courage needed to establish it, the cunning required to maintain it, and—above all—the horrific ease with which it can be lost.”¹¹ Clark and Holquist also remind us of Bakhtin’s struggles with the heavy hand of Stalinist-dictated Social Realism. While the restraints that he suffered were greater than any these four contemporary American

¹¹Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *M. M. Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 206.

writers have ever experienced, they all share the desire for more liberty and greater possibilities, artistically and culturally.

I suggested earlier in the dissertation that it is important to debunk illusory myths of dramatic literary canonical merit (and the linear progress narratives of the history of dramatic literature that explain such canonical development). The smoother that dramatic literary history, the fewer cracks there are in the received stories of a naturalized theatrical condition (especially with regard to the constraints of gender norms and racial stereotypes). the harder it is to explore new forms and their implicit new choices. Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks's dramaturgical constructions, articulated in this study, work against that smoothing over process. From *The Designated Mourner* to *The Strip*, *The Hyacinth Macaw*, and to *Venus*, these writers make visible the workings of realism and whiteness by catching these constructions in the act of effacing just that exertion required to appear natural. As newspapers like the *Village Voice* and the *New York Times* continue their trend towards less and less theater coverage, artists like the foursome selected for this study may find themselves faced with a sense of all or nothing with regard to cultural visibility.

While Nagy, Parks, and Shawn have all experimented with more linear, narrative, and less fragmentary in their recent scripts, it remains to be seen whether any of them can make the leap to larger theaters and more popular audiences. Shawn's unique advantage, as both a popular performer and highly connected literary figure, give him additional tools to use in that process. As I mentioned, Shawn is working on a New York City presentation of *The Designated Mourner* and will star in the production as Jack. By

performing in the show, Shawn can shine some of his acting career fame onto this obscure coterie event. Thus far, by dint of the free *New York Times* coverage and word of mouth, the entire ten week run (30 seats a night) of \$25 tickets has sold out. Will this show for those very much in the know lead to a larger production in New York? It remains to be seen. The economics of selling only thirty tickets an evening means that this venture will run at a loss. Can a producer take the best of this intimate experience and place it in a financially viable space without sacrificing the play's ability to engage and implicate its spectators? Shawn has always indicated that acting allows him the money to continue expressing his concerns in writing; he and Gregory are both in fiscal positions to patronize their own work to an unusual degree. Without the financial cushion to support an economic loss, and without the leverage of his famous voice, face, and collaborator, *The Designated Mourner* might have sunk into obscurity without a ripple. These practical factors may help Shawn avoid the same fate as Nagy, who has not yet managed to infiltrate the American theater scene to any degree of success.

The production history of *Never Land* (1998) points to Nagy's difficulty in negotiating a compromise between her previous free-wheeling dramaturgy and a structure that supports realistically consistent psychological characterizations. While *Never Land* was originally written as a commission for Hampstead Theatre, Nagy disagreed with the company over the revisions they requested and abandoned that production possibility. Subsequently, the play was turned down by the Royal Court. It was only after The Foundry, a women's theater run by the actress, offered to fund a joint production with the Royal Court that *Never Land* found a home.

In a clear move away from the highly theatrical sexual energy of Nagy's earlier lesbian and gay-focused plays, *Never Land*'s heterosexual characters struggle unsuccessfully to transform the outward signs of their national identities but find that the external world's rules of geography, socioeconomics, and family, trump all individual efforts. The play tells the darkly comic story of the Joubert family, an impoverished and eccentric French family in the South of France. The father, Henri, is a failed Horatio Alger whom one reviewer aptly describes as "an all day anxiety attack."¹² The Jouberts desperately strive to make their dreams of security (economic, social, and identity) come true. The beautiful, seductive, and alcoholic Anne is the passionate love of Henri's life. She and their unhappy daughter, Elisabeth, are trapped on the sinking family ship of dreams. Henri has spent the last three decades scheming to move his family to England, the land of his never quite articulated vision of a white middle-class utopia. The English, as the Caton-Smiths make clear, are whiter than other Europeans. Heather Caton-Smith, who is later revealed to have met her husband when she was a chambermaid at a hotel he stayed in, shares her disgust with Anne about how disgusting foreigners—foreign to England—can be. They have poor hygiene, she complains, and smell disgusting: "Italian women rarely bathe and the French. Good lord, they really ought to invest in some— (38)." So, while the Jouberts speak, as Nagy indicates, in perfect English, they nonetheless may find themselves betrayed by their origins and identities. Their very bodies contribute to the forces keeping them from becoming, truly, British, i.e., white.

¹²Paul Taylor, "French Fantasies in *Never Land*," *Independent* (London), 15 January 1998.

With *Never Land*, Nagy changes her dramaturgical approach, embracing more of realism's attributes: this shift enables her to explore external forces in concrete rather than symbolic terms as she did earlier through the use of storms, floods, earthquakes and the like. *Never Land*'s subtlety depicts the dangers of introjected social constructions of class and race as they eat away at Henri, Anne, and Elisabeth. In fact, Nagy's sense of the deadliness of social forces takes its fully-blown shape in the play's shocking finale. The family faces their crushed fantasies of negotiating their dreams with life. And so, on a strangely positive note, Henri takes the actions that will bring them all peace: with their consent, he shoots his daughter, then his wife, and, presumably after the curtain, himself.

Charles Spencer describes some of the work required to watch *Never Land*'s unpredictable progress: "No one else writes for the theatre quite like Phyllis Nagy. Though she is talented, this is a relief. Indeed, Nagy is hovering on the threshold of the select pantheon of writers whom I always approach with dread. One more play like *Never Land* and she'll be right in there, alongside Edward Bond and Howard Barker."¹³ The play's uncomfortable mixture of realistic characterizations, melodramatic plot finales, and broadly drawn comic scenes, evidently demanded more than most reviewers and spectators could manage. Nicholas de Jongh, for instance, complained that "what begins as a farce of comedy of manners, when English and French meet, is uneasily edged in to the cul-de-sac of family tragedy."¹⁴ Yet, Nagy's dramaturgy in *Never Land* seems logical

¹³Charles Spencer, "Angst, Misery, Bad Poetry," *Daily Telegraph* (London), 15 January 1998.

¹⁴Nicholas de Jongh, *Evening Standard*, 14 January 1998.

within her concerns about how static “classical” forms, like realism and class stereotypes, can foreclose mobile and transgressive movement. If Henri can not free himself from the signs that mark and lock him into place as a former poor working-class Frenchman with no prospects, it is unlikely that any subcultural and marginal identities can find space for themselves.

In addition to the disappointing notices for her recent work, Nagy and her manager and lover, Mel Kenyon, have been frustrated by the masculine-leaning London theater scene for several years. In a jeremiad entitled “Provocations: Season of Lad Tidings” (1995), Nagy and Kenyon critique the new machismo found in British productions of plays like Mamet’s *Oleanna*. They write that:

The recent spate of laddism displayed in the arts and typified by works as disparate as David Mamet’s play *Oleanna* and Irvine Welsh’s novel *Trainspotting* is only one of the symptoms of . . . the fact that violent misogyny is alive, kicking and applauded throughout England. . . .¹⁵

Even Nagy’s well-supported career in England does not shield her from laddism.

Nagy’s sense of the masculine nature of the London theater scene is supported by Simon Fanshawe, whose piece in the *Times of London*, “Women Will Not Be Written Off,” points out some of the statistical realities facing female theater artists in England.

He notes that,

of the 240 productions reviewed in *The Sunday Times* last year, only 28 were of plays written by women: . . . of the seven original productions at the Traverse in Edinburgh, one of the most impressively risk-taking and forward-looking theaters, none were written by women; of the 13 Olivier Awards open to both men and

¹⁵Phyllis Nagy and Mel Kenyon, “Season of Lad Tidings,” *Guardian*, 4 December 1995.

women in 1994 and 1995, only 19 out of 103 nominations were to women.¹⁶

The difficulties Nagy faced in finding a producer for *Never Land* and its mixed notices have evidently given serious pause about the future of her playwriting career. While Nagy successfully flaunted her disruptive visions for nearly a decade, one might consider her frustration sour grapes, but, however one labels her recent reaction, the theater certainly looks less and less appealing to Nagy who has a desk full of lucrative film and television commissions. Like Shawn, Nagy's output may slow considerably as she focuses, if only temporarily, on other areas of being in the entertainment business.

As with Nagy's experiment with aesthetics on *Never Land*, Parks's latest efforts with *In the Blood* also represent a dramaturgical experimentation made on behalf of creating more accessible work. Parks's efforts to mainstream *In the Blood* succeeded to a significant degree, garnering excellent notices from the *New York Times* and *Village Voice*. It is important to note, however, that her most popularly structured play is an adaptation of an American classic text, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and that serendipity generously assisted Parks with the *New York Times* theater review: It is interesting to note that Margo Jefferson's rave review in the *New York Times* dictated the public perception of this work. In New York, the *Times* is the make-it or break-it paper in terms of theater reviews. This is not so in many other cultural cities: London, for instance, has numerous papers each with their own readership. In New York, however, it is with rare exceptions that shows can be successful (in terms of months playing or

¹⁶Simon Fanshawe, "Woman Will Not Be Written Off." (London) *Times*, 14 January 1996.

moving to larger theaters) without the approval of the *New York Times*. Margo Jefferson is an African American writer who usually contributes articles to the features section of the *New York Times*. In this case, rather than giving the reviewing opportunity to their two regular critics, Ben Brantley or Peter Marks, Jefferson was selected. It is highly likely, given the track records of their tastes, that neither of the two white male reviewers would have given Parks the same kind of boost.

In the Blood is significantly more narrative and linear than any of Parks's previous work, and the text tells the story of Hester, a single African American welfare mother of five illegitimate children. The play reveals how her sexuality is used and exploited by every other figure in her life: her African American case-worker, her doctor, Amiga Gringa (her white friend), and her ex-lovers. Each abuses what appears to be an essentially compliant, highly erotic, part of Hester's giving nature. At its best, *In the Blood* creates a Mother Courage-like trap, foregrounding all of the institutional powers raised against Hester's ability to exercise her own desires and choices.

Yet, in Parks's exploration of a more realistic mainstream form, she loses much of what made her earlier work so powerful. The play's dialogue is largely functional and lacks her usual musicality. *In the Blood* in no way measures up to the historically resonant language of *Venus* and *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*. Ham's Begotten Tree speech, picking up in *medias res* of the history of the race, for instance, with its cadences of the auction block, juvenile jokes, and biblical texture, has the amplitude of an aria and the energy of good comic business.

In addition, *In the Blood's* narrative seems rather predictable. Hester's children,

for instance, who are played by the same actors representing all of the other adult characters (Welfare Case-Worker, Doctor, and so on), do not quite function as compelling individuals, but neither do they create the kind of choric energy generated in *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*. It is Hester herself, given an intense and disturbing portrayal by the experienced actress, Charleyne Woodard, who sustains the forward motion of the play through sheer inner tension.

I suggest that Parks's experiment with a more mainstream dramaturgy points to the challenges facing her: how can she stay true to her own instincts while, at the same time, increasing her plays' visibility? She has written a very compact (single-set) play for six performers. *In the Blood's* economic viability, as well as its accessibility, may induce the regional theaters to produce it in their 2000-2001 seasons. While *In the Blood* reveals Parks's struggles with the techniques and compromises necessary to mainstream her work, her next play may succeed on all counts. As Parks meets the challenges of this stage of her career, it will be very interesting to see how she can locate her complex critiques of America in new dramaturgical forms.

On that note, I want to offer some material that I will be including in future work on Parks. This story revolves, as *Venus* did, around black women's bodies. An independent film entitled *Naked* was brought to my attention by an actress friend. After viewing the film at a fund-raising matinee show, I was struck by the many similarities I saw between *Naked* and *Girl 6*. During the discussion period afterwards I spoke to Bridget Davis, *Naked's* screenwriter and director, about this connection. Davis explained that her film had been edited and completed before *Girl 6* was even released. Davis also

told me that Spike Lee had, as part of an African American film-maker's screening event, come to see her movie early on. Several tropes, such as the numerous physical transformations the heroine undergoes actually came from *Naked*. It struck me that this kind of complex situation underlines the importance of production histories. Without this material complexity pointing to the work behind the work, it may appear only natural that some artistic products become a part of history and some simply vanish. This is not, of course, to say that Lee is untalented or does not deserve success, but that, like realism, cultural objects can seem natural and autonomous unless examined within their cultural frames.

It seems clear, on the basis of these four case-studies, that moving marginalized identities closer to the center of an American theatrical and cultural mainstream requires great imagination, ingenuity, and a good deal of perseverance on the part of the artists. The challenges facing these four artists come in the form of American consumer society, rather than the fascist dictates of the Stalinist regime, nonetheless, I suggest that Shawn, Nagy, Wellman, and Parks confront significant and wearing struggles to make their voices heard. Each one makes her or his own way through aesthetic and commercial thickets. Can they continue to negotiate the demands of the very consumer system they critique? I hope that they can. For, as Helene Keyssar suggests, the questioning rebellious spirit of carnival appears strongest when a culture is caught in "a historical moment when a society is in the process of transforming itself, when human beings are

caught between two or more different ways of seeing the world.”¹⁷ If this is the case, the theatrical explorations and adventures created by Shawn. Nagy, Wellman, and Parks forge and foretell a time of possibilities.

¹⁷Helene Keyssar, “Drama and the Dialogic Imagination: *The Heidi Chronicles* and *Fefu and her Friends*,” in *Feminist Theatre and Theory*, ed. Helene Keyssar (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 116.

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