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# Staging the Sex Wars:

## Contemporary American Playwrights through the Prism of Feminist Conflict

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Abstract of
*Staging the Sex Wars:*
*Contemporary American Playwrights through the Prism of Feminist Conflict*
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This thesis explores various aspects of contemporary American drama by women. The study is facilitated by examining one work by each of seven playwrights and two performance artists who have transcribed their work, namely, *Miriam's Flowers* by Migdalia Cruz, *Abundance* by Beth Henley, *Bitter Cane* by Genny Lim, *Traveler in the Dark* by Marsha Norman, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* by Suzan-Lori Parks, *spell #7* by Ntozake Shange, *The Sisters Rosensweig* by Wendy Wasserstein, *The Constant State of Desire* by Karen Finley, and *World Without End* by Holly Hughes. The works chosen, first performed between 1976 (*spell #7*) and 1992 (*The Sisters Rosensweig*), include an array of the vast variety of work being done in contemporary theatre. All of the writers are still living and actively working and were selected to provide a sampling of women from the various subcultures in the United States. Neither the works nor the writers are meant to be inclusive or representational of the diversity of American theatre.

The thesis briefly discusses each work and then considers several breaches within the American feminist movement and how the plays reflect the issues of each conflict. The areas of contention within the feminist movement that are considered are: the strengths and shortcomings of liberal feminism, the most visible face of contemporary American feminism; whether pornography or its censorship is ultimately more harmful to women; how a binary division of gender, which can be understood as fundamental to the concept of feminism, is simultaneously oppressive; should feminists as a whole and within various racial, religious, and sexual subgroups attempt to find common ground or embrace the diversity of difference; how does the contemporary political rhetoric of family fit into a feminist vision; can there be a feminist style or is the search for one inherently essentialist; and, finally, how to account for the failure of the movement evident in the success of women who appear to imitate the work of male writers.

The thesis concludes that feminist playwrights and their work, like the feminist movement itself must negotiate between efficacious unity and inclusive diversity. Similarly, plays that seek to alter the status quo must walk a fine line between transgression and commercial appeal. Each of the women considered navigates these paths differently, with diverse styles and goals.

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## Introduction

*The Relevance of Theatre*

Late this spring, a storm erupted in the New York City theatre world when the Manhattan Theatre Club, an off-Broadway theatre, cancelled its plans to present Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* due to violent threats from a person inspired by the protests of The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights who believed the play to be "insulting to Christians" (*New York Times* 28/5/98). The theatre's decision led to Athol Fugard withdrawing his latest play, scheduled for production at the theatre, in protest and to circulation of a petition calling for restoration of the McNally play, signed by Wendy Wasserstein, Marsha Norman, and other playwrights. While the situation presents the competing issues of freedom of speech and the right of religious persons to protect their beliefs from any perceived blasphemy, it also evokes two rather conflicting questions. First, is the state of theatre today so weak that the Manhattan Theatre Club is unable to withstand attacks from, as termed in the playwrights' petition, "right-wing extremists and religious zealots" (*New York Times* 28/5/98)? Second, is the influence of the theatre so strong that the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights actually has anything to fear from a production of the play even if, as they maintain, its "Jesus-like character has sex with the Twelve Apostles" (*New York Times* 27/5/98)?

The answer to the first question appears to be no. The American theatre, particularly in New York City, is stronger than it has been in years. On Broadway, for example, the 1997-1998 season set records for both attendance and gross box office receipts (*New York Times* 5/6/98). Additionally, Broadway demonstrated great breadth and depth during the year, with many successful and well regarded play productions as well as many popular musicals. The profusion of straight plays on Broadway, where a few years ago they were considered "an endangered species," led the executive director of the League of American Theaters and Producers, cosponsor of the Tony Award, to declare, "This season was the year of the play" (*New York Times* 5/6/98). Although Broadway represents "the largest capital investment in American theatre" (Mahone 1994: xvi), it is no longer the primary focus for many Americans working in theatre today. The United States now has a strong regional theatre system, which has allowed "good new American plays . . . [to] originate all over the country, often in small theatres that [do] not present them with a Broadway production in mind but rather as part of their own subscription seasons" (Bryer 1995: xii). The benefits of regional theatre are manifold. More people have access to well-performed live drama. A greater number of playwrights have

the opportunity to have their work produced. Most importantly, unusual and innovative work has a greater opportunity to flourish since plays are not staged with the taste of Broadway audiences in mind (Bryer 1995: xii). Most regional theatres rely heavily on subscription sales of their tickets, where at the beginning of the season patrons buy tickets to all the plays to be produced during the year. Thus, financially, the theatre does not have to stage crowd-pleasers for the entire season and can take more risks as long as the season as a whole satisfies enough people to keep subscriptions and donations at an acceptable level.

The relative strength of play production in American theatre today would seem to indicate that the Manhattan Theatre Club was hasty in its decision to cancel the potentially offensive play. However, many commentators, although condemning the theatre's decision, expressed sympathy with its situation based on the current political and financial situations for the arts. Playwright Tony Kushner points out, "This is a very conservative time for the arts. You have the dismantling of the National Endowment for the Arts, the defunding of arts organizations and the increasing timidity of corporate sponsors" (*New York Times* 4/6/98). It is the politically sensitive disposition of sponsors that is of utmost concern to many theatre groups. Ticket sales never cover the entire operating costs of nonprofit theatres such as the Manhattan Theatre Club and grants and donations are necessary to fund the shortfall. Unfortunately, as Jim Nicola, artistic director for the nonprofit New York Theater Workshop, observes, "There's very little fortitude among the funders for any scent of scandal or controversy" (*New York Times* 4/6/98). Most theatre veterans declare the current political environment no more daunting than the McCarthy era of the 1950s (*New York Times* 4/6/98) yet the fact that such comparisons are being made is very sobering.

Upon reconsideration and as a result of the ensuing uproar, the theatre did reinstate *Corpus Christi* in its production schedule. While to some this may indicate further weakness, in that the theatre was unable to withstand the protests of the Left, it is more likely that the Manhattan Theatre Club realised that it could safely weather charges of immorality and that the real threat to the continued vitality of any theatre comes from self-censorship.

The answer to the second question, "Is the influence of the theatre so strong that The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights actually has anything to fear from a production of the play?", involves exploration of two further questions. First, what is the impact of representation, whether in the arts, television, movies, or popular music, on actual behaviour? Second, who goes to the theatre anymore?

Clearly the relationship between what one observes and how one acts is not directly causal. Violent movies do not incite entire audiences to murder one another. Yet it appears intuitively true that what is seen, read, or heard has some impact on one's actions. Wendy Lesser, in her insightful article on the anti-Semitism in some of T.S. Eliot's poetry, works through some useful thoughts on this subject. She writes:

> In the age of Jesse Helms and Catharine MacKinnon, O.J. Simpson and 'Murder One,' we are especially interested in the connections between the realm of art and the realm of ordinary human action. We are concerned that the inflammatory content of poems or photographs or television shows might actually have a dangerous effect on us (or, if not on all of us, then on some suspect subset of us). And — a corollary of that concern — we want to know whether it's ever possible for good art to have evil meanings, or intentions, or results. (1996)

About the viewpoint that art should be judged beneficial, redemptive, or ethical if "it instructs us about good behavior in relatively clear terms," she points out, "the kind of art that transparently works at having a beneficial moral effect mostly isn't as good as the dodgier kind; Satan's always going to win this contest" (1996). As to the question of how art affects actions she decides:

> I think it's unlikely that any artwork has an effect like the card trick in *The Manchurian Candidate*, causing its audience to rush out and mindlessly commit mayhem. On the other hand, I don't want to grant that art has no effect. . . . To decide this is to relegate art to the level of a video game, something that passes the time and then disappears from one's consciousness. . . . So I'm left with a notion of art that is powerful enough to change us, but not powerful enough to legislate against. (1996)

While her belief that the lasting impact of video games is negligible is naive, Lesser's identification of a type of middle ground influence of artistic representation seems accurate. Peggy Phelan, in *Unmarked*, attempts to provide progressive thinkers with a similar understanding of the role of representation. She explains:

> The New Right continues to assert a causal relation between representation and real behavior. For example, Jesse Helms argued that a photograph of men in leather jackets kissing encourages viewers to become homosexual. . . . The Left must deny such crude readings of the relation between the real and the representational. Even as this causal reading is denied, however, the Left must confirm some link between representation and the real. . . . The Left must develop a way of talking about the way that representation and the real are related that does not lead to the simple logic of cause and effect. . . . (1993: 180)

So it would appear that there is broad agreement that representation has an impact on behaviour yet there is little consensus on what the impact is and how it occurs. Further, the effect of live theatre is considered by some to be even more profound than what one observes in television shows, movies, photographs, or books. Marvin Carlson writes:

> It [theatre] is a specific event with its liminoid nature foregrounded, almost invariably clearly separated from the rest of life, presented by performers and

> attended by audiences both of whom regard the experience as made up of material to be interpreted, to be reflected upon, to be engaged in — emotionally, mentally, and perhaps even physically. This particular sense of occasion and focus as well as the overarching social envelope combine with the physicality of theatrical performance to make it one of the most powerful and efficacious procedures that human society has developed for the endlessly fascinating process of cultural and personal self-reflexion and experimentation. (1996: 198-9)

Thus the specific nature of a live play production, perhaps due in large part to the ideas about performance brought by both performer and audience, may hold significant potential for influencing viewers. Thus perhaps The Catholic League does have something to fear from a production of *Corpus Christi*. The play would not of course generate a homosexual bacchanal in the audience. But the "process of cultural and personal self-reflexion and experimentation" which Carlson relishes is not something that would be deemed desirable by a conservative group. The presentation of a gay Christ-like figure may lead to a more accepting attitude toward homosexuality by some of the viewers, an undesirable occurrence for an organisation that considers homosexuality a sin, although very likely one of the intents of the playwright. This leads to the final line of inquiry: who are these viewers?

Presumably, the Catholic League is not much concerned with the effect of the play on those who are already comfortable with homosexuality. Rather the group's likely focus is the "protection" of children and insuring that those who are uncomfortable with homosexuality remain so. Children, however, while often seen at Broadway musicals, are seldom in the audiences of plays in New York City. Schools often organise field trips to the Wednesday matinee productions of the classics and some well regarded new productions. Few school officials, however, would be brave or foolhardy enough in today's political environment to sponsor the viewing of a show with even a whiff of controversy, much less one with overtly gay characters associated with religious figures. As for adults with negative attitudes toward homosexuals it is certainly possible that they may find themselves in the audience of *Corpus Christi*, although this is less likely now that some of the content of the play has been well publicised. The relative size of this audience, however, as compared with the audiences for television shows and movies, continues to decline. While play tickets can be prohibitively expensive, almost all Americans have access to a television. "[S]ince 1980, 98 percent of American homes have had TVs with well over 50 percent owning two or more sets" (Bryer 1995: xiv). There are also more television programs to watch than ever. For example, in 1953 there were only six television stations whose broadcasts reached homes in New York City, and none of them broadcast twenty-four hours a

day. By 1993, New Yorkers had access to fifteen commercial stations and twenty-four cable channels, many with twenty-four-hour-a-day broadcasts (Bryer 1995: xiv). Further, digital satellite technology has provided viewers with literally hundreds of stations, leaving many Americans with little reason ever to turn off the television. Similarly, while many critics bemoan the quality of recent releases, Americans are presented with an unprecedented number of movies from which to choose. Across the country, movie theatres with twenty or more screens have opened, while video rental is the weekend entertainment of choice for many families. Additionally, the cost of viewing movies is far less than the price of play tickets. A ticket to a first-run movie costs about nine dollars, while a ticket to a play produced at a regional theatre would be generally at least double this with a ticket for some Broadway shows priced at over one hundred dollars for one of the new VIP seats. The result is that many people in the lower economic brackets can not afford theatre tickets, while many in the middle-class perceive movies to be an economically more viable choice than plays. To further compound this situation, some people do not consider plays worthwhile at any price. Sydne Mahone identifies, "the unspoken perception in the black community that theatre — and perhaps art in general — is a frill" (1994: xxii). This unfortunately is a notion held by many people, not of course just African Americans, as demonstrated by the growing trend to cut art programs in public schools as a way to minimise costs. Thus most Americans do not turn to plays as their primary source of entertainment and objectionable movies and television shows would appear to be a more effective area of protest for groups such as The Catholic League. Social conservatives, of course, realise this as demonstrated by the boycott of Disney parks and products and the divestiture of Disney stock in response to certain films by its Miramax subsidiary and the openly gay eponymous Ellen on its ABC television subsidiary.

Yet it must be admitted that plays do have enough of an audience and their influence is perceptible enough that it is worthwhile to write and stage thought-provoking, mind-expanding work, while the mechanics of theatre's perhaps unique impact are difficult to articulate. As many theatre theorists have noted, plays consist of reference and representation. Through their dialogue and actions, the characters refer to situations, events, and ideas, while through their dialogue, actions, and, most importantly, presence, they represent people, archetypes, and stereotypes. Traditionally, studies of plays focused primarily on their referential properties, treating plays as texts with consideration of their representational properties and any actual performances as secondary. Carlson maintains, "Plays have been traditionally regarded as stable written

objects, their various manifestations in different productions a more or less accidental part of their history, not really essential to their understanding" (1996: 81). More recently, writers have focused on the representational aspects of plays, including consideration of the nature of performance and the interaction between the performers and the audience. A play's audience understands that what they are witnessing is not, in the most frequent use of the word, real, but rather representation. The actors of course are real people and sometimes the events staged are a recreation of actual events, yet the audience realises that what is seen is a performance. "Even if an action on stage is identical to one in real life, on stage it is considered 'performed' and off stage merely 'done'" (Carlson 1996: 4) and this difference sets the play's actions apart from everyday reality. As theorists have come to identify the performative aspects of people's daily lives, the distinction between performing and simply doing has become extremely shadowy. Likewise, postmodernism's identification of the subjective nature of perceptions of reality complicates any discussion of the real. Nevertheless, the consciousness of event that both actor and audience bring to a play leads to an understanding of that production as representation. Even in realistic theatre, "[c]orporeal bodies amid real objects" only succeed in "reproduc[ing] the effects of the real" (Phelan 1993: 126). It is only the effects — emotional, visual, cerebral — of the real, not the real itself that theatre, as well as other art forms such as photography or painting, is capable of achieving. Both audience and participants — actors, directors, playwrights — understand and accept, although generally without articulating it, this limitation. The shortfall between theatre and the real occurs because, "[t]he real inhabits the space that representation cannot reproduce — and in this failure theatre relies on repetition and mimesis to produce substitutes for the real" (Phelan 1993: 126). Actors imitate characters, repeating the words of the playwright, and, in the school of method acting, repeating their own past emotions. Because of this repetition, as well as the audience's awareness of it, "all performance involves a consciousness of doubleness, through which the actual execution of an action is placed in mental comparison with a potential, an ideal, or a remembered original model of that action" (Carlson 1996: 5). The audience's knowledge of the merely mimetic properties of theatre, however, does not prevent a production from being completely engrossing and emotionally moving. The imitative qualities of theatre, in fact, provide much of its power and allure. Phelan remarks, "Presence is theatre's promise as well as its doubt" (1993: 121). In other words, the world represented on stage holds out the promise of truth or reality yet all involved know that it is only a mirage. What is on stage is there yet not there simultaneously.

Bell hooks argues that "The arts remain one of the powerful, if not the most powerful, realms of cultural resistance, a space for awakening folks to critical consciousness and new vision" (1990: 39). Some believe that this potential within art is at its strongest in theatre. Carlson, for example, maintains that in the theatre, "[p]erformers and audience alike accept that a primary function of this activity is precisely cultural and social metacommentary, the exploration of self and other, of the world as experienced, and of alternative possibilities" (1996: 196). He believes that this quality of theatre "makes 'theatrical' performance, whether in the form of 'traditional' theatre or of performance art, a special, if not unique, laboratory for cultural negotiations, a function of paramount importance in the plurivocal and rapidly changing contemporary world" (1996: 197). If this is the case then it follows that, for those who are so inclined, protesting plays perceived to be offensive is also an effective tactic for achieving certain ends. Summarising the potentially destabilising impact of theatre, Thalia Field remarks:

> There is so much paranoia about artists; that we have enormous power to capture and persuade — or else that we're so seemingly useless that there must be something horribly wrong with us. Or perhaps that the more influence art and artists have, the weaker the system of social control. Perhaps it's all true. Perhaps time is on our side. Perhaps though we have no wings, our legs are adapted to jumping and clinging, our mouth parts modified for piercing and sucking. Progress in forms of art can liberate and excite the imagination of everyone, making us useless for all sorts of productive behavior. (1996: 93)

*The American Theatre and Female Playwrights*

Often acquaintances, when learning of my interest in contemporary American female playwrights, will respond that they know of none. Alternatively, someone will occasionally mention Lillian Hellman, who, since dead for almost fifteen years and actively writing plays only until the 1960s, does not meet my understanding of contemporary. The dismissive tone with which these comments are made seems to imply that women or a meaningful number of women are somehow incapable of being playwrights. Do women need to write themselves into full humanity as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. says about African Americans? Are novels, with their more populous history of female authors and readership, more easily dismissed as inherently potentially feminine and therefore less important? Writing a play implies, ultimately, the production of the play, requiring many others (producer, director, actors, dramaturg, and financial supporters) to share or at least support the playwright's vision. The theatre, however, has become a useful forum for many women's ideas, as well as a model through which many feminist theories can be and have been explored.

The theatre has been a very important part of second-wave feminism. Like women working in civil rights and Vietnam War protest groups, those in avant-garde and leftist theatre companies in the late 1960s and early 1970s discovered that even the most progressive groups did not consider feminist issues to be particularly important (Sullivan 1993: 14). Many of these women, influenced by the consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s, which sought to validate women's experiences, formed their own theatre companies designed to create productions by, for, and about women. The growth in these groups was so rapid that while the first was identified only in 1969, by the mid-1970s there were thirty in the United States (Sullivan 1993: 14). The feminist theatre companies of the 1970s sought to "tell women's untold and unheard stories" (Sullivan 1993: 15). Although the focus of many of these groups, largely influenced by the theories of cultural feminism, can be criticised as essentialist, they succeeded in presenting the situations of women as worthy of consideration.

On a separate front, the efforts of liberal feminists have resulted in more women working in all industries including the theatre. Women are now better represented in all aspects of play production, including producers, directors, and playwrights. Nevertheless, "[t]he American theatre is still, for the most part a white patriarchal institution" (Mahone 1994:xv). Of the plays currently running on Broadway, for example, only one, *Art*, was written by a woman. Acknowledging the sad state of affairs, Julie Taymor, when accepting her 1998 Tony award for best director of a musical (*The Lion King*) noted, tongue in cheek, that she was proud to join the "long line of female directors" winning Tony awards. That "long line" was comprised entirely of Garry Hynes who had accepted her award for best director of a play (*The Beauty Queen of Leenane*) only moments before. The hostility of the American theatre toward female playwrights, as well as toward playwrights of color, "has been expressed, not through malevolence, but more dangerously through avoidance and neglect" (Mahone 1994: xvi). The fact that plays by women are more rarely produced than those by men may stem from the commonly held belief that women write plays which would be of interest primarily to women while men write plays of "universal" interest. But as Janet Staiger points out, "Claims for universality are disguises for achieving uniformity, for suppressing through the power of canonic discourse optional value systems. Such a cultural 'consensus' fears an asserted 'barbarism' and a collapse into the grotesque and monstrous, because it recognizes the potential loss of its hegemony. It is a politics of power" (quoted in Dolan 1988: 34). Thus the desire for plays with "universal" appeal is a desire for plays which make

no attempt to undermine the status quo which privileges heterosexual males of European descent. The underside of this preference for universality is the potentially destabilising power of plays that do not support the current state of affairs. This is especially true with regard to gender relations for "[i]f plays constitute an important part of gender training, then a disruption of those plays [as well as production of plays which work against traditional ideas of gender] potentially gets to one primary source of gender information and challenges it" (Donkin & Clement 1993: 89). Liberal feminists working in theatre, in addition to increasing the number of women in influential positions, also strive to improve the way women are represented in plays. The thinking here is that if more women are shown in positions of power, then more women will seek these situations and both men and women will be more likely to accept them in these roles.

Women working in theatre and as theatre theorists who have been influenced by materialist feminist thinking reject both the essentialism of cultural feminists as well as the liberal humanist thinking of liberal feminists. The materialist feminists assert:

> that gender is not biologically determined but, rather, an effect of ideology that could be imposed and transparently 'naturalized' via representation apparati such as cinema and theater. This inquiry into gender as a construction result[s] in a distinction between women and 'Woman' — or the distinction between real, historical beings who are women and the fictional Woman who has been drawn in and by dominant ideology supposedly to represent them. (Sullivan 1993: 21)

Like cultural and liberal feminists, materialist feminists perceive the theatre to be an effective tool for changing the status quo. Materialist feminists, like Teresa de Lauretis, believe that women accept their submissive and unprivileged positions because of the "subtle and lasting effects of ideology, representation, and identification" (quoted in Sullivan 1993: 22). From this point of view, theatre can play an important role because "drama can expose the workings of ideology [and] theater can be used to reveal the oppression that results from traditionally fixed notions of gender" (Sullivan 1993: 25). As Elin Diamond believes, echoing Brecht, "theater's representation apparatus — with its curtains, trapdoors, perspectives, exits and entrances, its disciplined bodies, its illusorily coherent subjects, its lures to identification — might offer the best 'laboratory' for political disruption, for refunctioning the tools of class and gender oppression" (1996: 3).

*Performance Art and Theatre*

In 1998, John Leguizamo's one-man show, *Freak*, was nominated for the Tony award for best play, and he was nominated for best actor. His work, which blurs the lines between performance art, stand up

comedy, and traditional theatre, is not what one would generally consider a play, while his role in the production goes beyond that typically held by an actor. One cannot imagine the piece having an existence with anyone other than Leguizamo speaking the lines. He functions as performer, penitent, memoirist, analysand, and creator rolled into one. The nominations for these prestigious, mainstream awards are an indication of how intermingled traditional drama and performance art have become. Likewise, the parody of performance art performed by the character Maureen in the extremely popular Broadway musical *Rent*, as well as the knowing laughter with which this parody is met, demonstrates how aware of the elements of performance art the mainstream theatre going public has become. In 1990, the work of Finley and Hughes received significant media attention when, due to conservative political pressure, their work was denied National Endowment for the Arts funding. Prior to that time the majority of Americans were unfamiliar with the nature of their work and with performance art in general. Nevertheless, the style of performance art appears to have influenced the work of many playwrights, for example, Cruz, Parks, and Shange. Similarly, the work of performance artists is influenced by the traditions of spectacle and monologue found in more conventional theatre, indicating an apparently reciprocal relationship. As Diamond maintains, "if contemporary versions of performance make it the repressed of conventional theater, theater is also the repressed of performance" (1996: 4).

The term "performance art" was not used until the 1970s, but much of what then received this appellation was similar to and grew out of a variety of experimental art work being done in the 1960s, when strains from the art world met with, intermingled with, and were influenced by avant-garde theatre. Thus performance art ultimately evolved from the traditions of theatre and the plastic arts. Carlson explains, "[I]n the course of the 1960s, various strands from the visual arts (especially painting and sculpture), from experimental music and dance, from the traditions of avant-garde theatre, as well as from the evolving world of the media and modern technology, combined to offer an extremely varied mixture of artistic activity" (1996: 99). Although this early performance art developed from both art and theatre, its practitioners shunned much of what was found in those traditions. The new complex mix of forms found in early performance art, "stressed physical presence, events, and actions, constantly tested the boundaries of art and life, and rejected the unity and coherence of much traditional art as well as the narrativity, psychologism, and referentaility of traditional theatre" (Carlson 1996: 99). These elements of performance art type work in the 1960s had

evolved from the experimental art and theatre movements that had developed, grown, and influenced one another since the beginning of the century.

Futurism, dada, and surrealism as explored in the plastic arts had long influenced the avant-garde theatre movement. Dada and surrealism, for example, as manifested in the performing arts, "were interested in spontaneous creative activity" and, additionally, performances influenced by dada wished to "stimulate and incorporate audience reaction" (Carlson 1996: 91). This interest in spontaneity and in audience response in the avant-garde theatre anticipated similar interest in much of later performance art, while avant-garde theatre influenced by futurism was "often frankly and proudly confrontational, arousing public outrage" (Carlson 1996: 89), another feature of much of future performance art. The work of the futurists also helped bring the visual arts closer to experimental theatre. Carlson relates, "The interest of the futurists in movement and change drew them away from the static work of art and provided an important impetus for the general shift in modern artistic interest from product to process, turning even painters and sculptors into performance artists" (1996: 89), although, of course, the term would not be used until half a century later. In addition, the experiments of avant-garde theatre served to established "the rejection of the traditional concept of the performer as an interpreter of an already-existing literary text in favor of the performer as creator of an act or an action" (Carlson 1996: 92), a vital step toward the concept of performance art, where the performer is almost always the sole creator of the work. As those in theatre borrowed theory and inspiration from the visual art world and as the work of painters and sculptors came closer to the world of theatre, the middle of the twentieth century witnessed "the breaking down of traditional boundaries — between the plastic and performing arts, between the high arts of theatre, ballet, music, and painting, and popular forms such as circus, vaudeville, and variety, indeed even between art and life itself" (Carlson 1996: 93). This overflow and mixture of categories became an important part of performance art where "the only rule is that there are no rules" (Mahone 1994: xxviii), and experimentation, as well as continual pushing of limits, is a primary focus.

As the theatrical avant-garde and modern visual arts continually provided cross-fertilisation and increasing overlap, they eventually met in what can be seen as the direct precursor to performance art, the happening. Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, presented in 1959, at the Reuben Gallery, was the first of such happenings. Kaprow traces his inspiration for his happenings through modern painting, not theatre, and he chose the name "happening" because he wanted them to be regarded as spontaneous events. Yet the

pieces were carefully scripted and had a strong sense of the theatrical. As happenings began to be produced by more and more artists, their presentations contained an increasing amount of theatricality, which so distressed Kaprow that he attempted to develop a set of guidelines to prevent this. (Carlson 1996: 95-97)

Kaprow's desire to keep art and theatre separate was a sentiment held by many people involved with early performance art as it developed. Carlson explains, "As artists and critics struggled to define the emerging new genre of performance (and to draw boundaries through which individual artists, predictably, were always slipping), theatre was probably the most common 'other' against which the new art could be defined" (1996: 103-104). The motivation to keep performance art and much of the experimental theatre from which it evolved pure of the taint of traditional theatrical conventions was due to a view in which:

> . . . theater was charged with obeisance to the playwright's authority, with actors disciplined to the referential task of representing fictional entities. In this narrative, spectators are similarly disciplined, duped into identifying with the psychological problems of individual egos and ensnared in a unique temporal-spatial world whose suspense, reversals, and deferrals they can more or less comfortably decode. (Diamond 1996: 3)

Thus conventional theatre can be perceived as oppressive, both of actors and of audience, and therefore a tradition to be rejected. The desired distinction between performance art and theatre, however, proved impossible to maintain. "The very presence of an audience watching an action, however neutral or non-matrixed, and presented in whatever unconventional space, inevitably called up associations with theatre" (Carlson 1996: 104).

The happenings as they developed became very influenced by the theories of Artaud whose envisioned Theatre of Cruelty also rejected theatre as it then existed. He "maintained that only in the theatre [particularly as he wished to see it embodied] could we liberate ourselves from the recognizable forms in which we live our daily lives" (Brook 1968: 53). This desire to open people's eyes to their surroundings in order to facilitate different ways of thinking motivated the happenings. Writing at a time when the happenings were still very prevalent, Brooks explains that "the theory of Happenings is that a spectator can be jolted eventually into new sight, so that he wakes to the life around him" (1968: 55). Early performance art, especially the so-called body art also reflected some of Artaud's ideas. Body art, which, as the name indicates, focuses on the activities of the human body, often centred on simple daily activities such as eating, or, in the work of Sandra Orgel and Chris Rush, on ironing and other household chores of many housewives (Carlson 1996: 148). Carlson charts the connection between body art and Artaud, explaining:

> Artaud too sought an art complete within itself, in which both the passage of time and the split between observer and observed ceased to exist. Early performance, such as body art, conceived under the influence of minimalist theory, shared certain of Artaud's concerns, and came closer than most subsequent performance to addressing them. (1996: 126)

With its focus on the body and its suspicion of traditional theatre, early performance artists often rejected the use of language as they attempted to stage pure presence, a goal determined by the strong influence of minimalism and high modernism in the art world of the 1970s (Carlson 1996: 124-136). Since the early 1970s, however, performance artists have become more comfortable with both the use of narrative and the theatrical aspects of their art. Carlson notes two trends of the 1970s and 1980s, observable despite the diversity of performance art's manifestations. "First, the initial wide-spread opposition of performance to theatre has steadily eroded; and second, the initial emphasis on body and movement, with a general rejection of discursive language, has given way gradually to image-centered performance and a return of language" (1996: 116). This occurred due in part to the growing influence of Derrida and poststructuralist thought. As performers and theorists become acquainted with the theories of Derrida, who "argues that escape from repetition (and thus theatre) is impossible, that consciousness itself is always already involved in repetition" (Carlson 1996: 135), they could no longer regard the modernist ideal of purity in art as an achievable or desirable goal. They came to understand that, as Blau explains, the nature of theatre and performance "implies no first time, no origin, but only recurrence and reproduction" (quoted in Carlson 1996: 135). Another and not unrelated reason for recent performance artists' greater use of language is that "especially in the United States, . . . political and social concerns became one of the main themes of performance activity, especially in work involving individuals or groups with little or no voice or active role in the current system" (Carlson 1996: 117). Thus performance artists no longer attempted to cultivate a modernist stance of the artist untainted by worldly concerns.

Just as avant-garde theatre and modern art continually influenced, inspired, and helped define one another, performance art and more traditional plays operate in a cross-fertilising symbiosis. Forte notes, in fact, that performance art and the way it is critiqued has recently come much closer to traditional theatre in that there is now a strong emphasis on acting technique. She writes, "Instead of deconstructing theatrical convention, performers now seem to court it, encouraging judgement of the work on more technical grounds" (1990: 267). Of the playwrights presented here, it is the more experimental, namely Parks, Shange, and Cruz,

whose work demonstrates the most affinity with performance art. Conversely, of the two performance artists, it is the moderately more restrained Hughes whose work more closely resembles traditional drama.

*Scope*

This paper explores one work from each of seven contemporary female American playwrights plus two performance artists who have transcribed their pieces. The women considered are Migdalia Cruz, Karen Finley, Beth Henley, Holly Hughes, Genny Lim, Marsha Norman, Suzan-Lori Parks, Ntozake Shange, and Wendy Wasserstein. Of these women, Finley, Henley, Hughes, Norman, and Wasserstein are Caucasian while the last is also Jewish and Hughes is also overtly lesbian. Parks and Shange are African American, Cruz is Hispanic American, and Lim is Asian American. The selection of playwrights clearly does not represent the entire spectrum of American racial and cultural diversity, an impossible task in a country of immigrants such as the United States. Furthermore, in the postmodern society of the United States, the very idea of cultures is not unproblematic. As James Clifford believes, "Twentieth-century identities no longer presuppose continuous cultures or traditions. . . . 'culture' is not an object to be described, neither is it a unified corpus of symbols and meanings that can be definitively interpreted. Culture is contested, temporal, and emergent" (quoted in Diamond 1996: 6). While not considering any of these women as merely representative of their race, gender, or culture, this dissertation attempts to investigate various issues by exploring the similarities and differences between the plays studied in light of the admittedly "contested, temporal, and emergent" American culture and female sex uniting the playwrights; and the various races, subcultures, and conceptions of what it means to be female separating them. Specifically, the paper will explore the relevance of modern theatre to the American feminist movement and the various ideas about gender as raised in the texts. This will be facilitated by a brief discussion of each of the plays followed by a discussion of a variety of conflicts within the feminist movement as they are reflected through the works.

## Nine Works in Brief

America, often termed "the melting pot," can more accurately be seen as a stew with each ingredient taking on flavours of the others while still maintaining much of its original character. Although the selection of artists for this dissertation clearly fails to represent the entire breadth of racial and cultural backgrounds of Americans, the artists selected come from a variety of different subcultures and this diversity is reflected in their work. None of the plays can be adequately understood merely by knowing the playwright's race, religion, or sexual preference, yet these elements do influence, to varying degrees, the works. Primarily for organisational purposes, the brief discussions of each play presented in this section will be grouped according to the playwright's "subculture".

### *Finley, Henley, and Norman*

Karen Finley, Beth Henley, and Marsha Norman are all women of European descent. None of them addresses religion or sexual preference in her work and therefore they are presumably at least nominally Christian and heterosexual like the majority of Americans. These three are, therefore, members of the heterosexual WASP dominant group, often considered the norm by people in this group and generally presented as such in the popular media. Comprising the majority in the United States, whites, especially white males, are often the standard against which others are measured, as well as the subject for which different groups become other. Feminists in the past have made this mistake, assuming the experiences of white middle-class women encompassed the experiences of all women or were of sufficient worth to be able to stand for the experiences of all women. More recently, attempts to address the concerns of a broader array of women have been marred by a view that explores what it means to be a person of color without critiquing what it means to be white. Bell hooks explains:

> In far too much contemporary writing — though there are some outstanding exceptions — race is always an issue of Otherness that is not white: it is black, brown, yellow, red, purple even. Yet only a persistent, rigorous, and informed critique of whiteness could really determine what forces of denial, fear, and competition are responsible for creating fundamental gaps between professed political commitment to eradicating racism and the participation in the construction of a discourse on race that perpetuates racial domination. (1990: 54)

She quotes Coco Fusco, who states, "Racial identities are not only black, Latino, Asian, Native American, and so on; they are also white. To ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it. Without

specifically addressing white ethnicity, there can be no critical evaluation of the construction of the other" (1990: 171). Whites in the United States are, of course, comprised of people whose ancestors came from all the countries of Europe, countries with histories more of animosity toward than co-operation with one another. Some whites, most notably some Irish Americans and Italian Americans, retain a sense of their specific European heritage for many generations. For the most part, however, assimilation has been the goal for European immigrants, one that was usually achieved by the second generation. In this drive to assimilate, European immigrants have had an advantage over immigrants of color in that looking much the same as those whose ancestors immigrated in previous generations they are less easily identified as other by members of the dominant group.

The experience of growing up white can be seen in the works of Norman, Henley, and Finley, most obviously in the fact that they have the luxury not to confront directly issues of race or ethnicity in their work. The diversity of the works of the women in this small group of three demonstrates how erroneous it is to assume that a subset can substitute for the whole. The presence in this group of Finley, author of the most unusual and difficult work considered in the paper, demonstrates the falsity of considering any playwright as representative of others sharing the same skin color, religion, or sexual preference.

Karen Finley - *The Constant State of Desire*

Karen Finley was born in Chicago in 1950. She studied painting before turning to performance art. She moved from more traditional art forms to performance art in 1979, after her father's suicide because, "the charge she gets from performing balances the pain she feels about his death" (Carr 1993: 142). During her formal art training at the San Francisco Art Institute, she says, "I really started feeling the absence of women in the art world" (quoted in Champagne 1990: 57). In reaction to the male-dominated quality of galleries, Finley rejected the traditional art world with her performances taking place in nightclubs rather than art galleries. She found that the energy of the clubs suited the raw and untamed nature of her work (Champagne 1990: 57).

*The Constant State of Desire*, which was first performed in 1986 in New York City, has its roots in Finley's contemplation of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and explores the diverse, though entwined, ideas of sexuality, sexual exploitation, gender relations, and capitalism. The connection to Friedan's book is

most apparent in the first two acts of the piece. The *Baby Bird* section of act one, for example, begins with the description of a dream, a doctor's interpretation, and the dreamer's impressions, ". . . the problem really was in the way she projected her femininity. And if she wasn't passive, well she just didn't feel desirable. And if she wasn't desirable, she didn't feel female. And if she wasn't female, well, the whole world would cave in" (60). The mystique, as charted and critiqued by Friedan, maintains that passivity is an integral part of femininity and that western civilisation depends on women adhering to the cultural definition of femininity. At the end of act one the speaker explains, "And by now you can tell that I prefer talking about the fear of living as opposed to the fear of dying" (60). According to Friedan the feminine mystique capitalises on women's fear of living, of working hard, and of succeeding and keeps them tied to domestic chores which fail to utilise their potential. As Finley's piece progresses and she chronicles some of the horrors in the world as she sees it, it becomes apparent that there is a lot in life to fear.

Friedan's text was written in 1963 and the lives of Western women have changed in enough ways that some of the sexist issues raised in Finley's work which are most directly drawn from *The Feminine Mystique* seem obvious to readers who came of age in a world informed by Friedan's work. Finley, however, manages to complicate the issues. *Nothing Happened* in act two, for example, manages to connect concerns of 1963 America to the present day. "Feminine" and self-negating actions such as suicide, compulsive sex, dieting, and mainstream politics and art change nothing — "nothing happened." The contemporary political woman or person must, therefore, become more extreme, "So I petitioned, rioted, terrorized, and organized and something is going to happen" (61). For Finley, the commercialism of modern America oppresses and must be resisted. Friedan determined that business was the perpetuator of the mystique in that companies relied on homemakers to purchase their products in a never-ending quest to create a cleaner and more comfortable home. Similarly, Finley seems to imply that capitalism today is just as damaging. "Something is going to happen 'cause I'm not going to let you gang-rape me anymore . . . . You are the reason, Mr. Entrepreneur, why David's Cookie McDonald's is the symbol of my culture" (61). The American dream of economic success in Finley becomes the injuring pollutant of a patriarchal capitalism that unthinkingly consumes everything including art:

> I stick up your ass Cuisinarts, white wine, and racquetball, your cordless phone and Walkman up your ass. And you look up at me worried and ask 'but where's the graffiti art' and I say 'up your ass.' And you smile 'cause you work all day and you want some of the artistic experience, the artistic lifestyle for yourself after work

and on the weekends. (62)

Whereas Friedan's solution to the mystique was for women to get jobs and become wage earners rather than just consumers, Finley recognises that capitalism is capitalism no matter who is doing the earning and spending.

Once again, in the section entitled *Freud*, Finley connects the obvious sexism to a somewhat more challenging critique. One voice is clearly a victim of the mystique as presented by Friedan. She enjoys her "women's studies' classes . . . . But if it ever got in the way of me being a proper hostess for Richard's business I'd give it up in a minute. I'd sacrifice anything for my family. To the point of being a boring and phobic person" (64). The voice, however, metamorphoses to one more politically informed and perhaps "more directly connected to that of Finley herself" (Geis 1993: 165). This character realises that real equality has not been achieved. She exclaims:

> I've never been treated equally my entire life. That I'm supposed to be excited that Mary Boone Gallery signed up two women. Wow. Yeah, big fucking deal. Like I'm supposed to be so thankful 'cause a chick is on the Supreme Court. You can read your fucking books. But nothing's changed. Nothing has changed. (64-65)

Finley here is declaring that token acceptance of a few women into positions of power and influence does not adequately improve the lives of most women.

The shifting of identity in *Freud* provides a further challenge to the audience in that a huge variety of characters is presented by Finley with little indication of where one persona ends and the next begins. Geis understands the section as "the competing voices of the questioner/analyst . . . . and the female respondent(s), all of which emerge from her speaking body as the performer" (1993: 165). The conflicting voices, however, despite the title of the section, seem more like the various characters at a women's discussion group with their differing views. Nevertheless, the movement between voices is arresting in that there is no fixed persona that the speaker assumes. "Finley refuses both dialogue and character in their conventional manifestations, enacting instead an extreme version of the Brechtian splitting between performer and character" (Geis 1993: 165). In fact, one of the most striking aspects of the entire performance is the rapidity and ease of flow from one character to another and from one gender to another. *Refrigerator* in act three, for example, begins with the voice of a five-year-old female incest victim being abused by her father and then glides into the voice of a grown man, dying of AIDS, rejected by his father for his "honesty of sexual preference" (68). Finley, who never attempts to look like a man, easily assumes a male identity. Act three, for example, begins with Finley

in her yellow dress and her hair in a chignon assuming the voice of a violently sexual male, raping "hot mamas with hot titties in hot laundromats" (66). "Because she appropriates the male perspective while maintaining the female gender, all sexuality appears to be about power, and about the body's capacity for expressing its base urges and desires" (Dolan 1988: 66). Further, her performance calls into question the meaning of gender itself.

Finley's work, in part due to her effortless flow between genders, pushes the boundaries of performance and, in turn, exposes the power system that validates certain representations while prohibiting or punishing others (Geis 1993: 160). The cultural regulation of expression is especially pernicious with regard to performances by women. Finley's *Fist Fuck*, for example, is all the more shocking to conventional sensibilities because she is female. Words (for example, "I was fucking you with pearls and diamonds. Just filling your hole with everything I got. I was fucking you with my talent. That's all I got left" (69)) that could pass for an Andrew Dyce Clay type of stand-up comedy if spoken by a male, become troubling social critique from the mouth of Finley. Women are not expected to be aggressive, rude, loud, or openly concerned with sex, but Finley is. Geis declares that "Finley defies every imaginable rule of how women are to conduct or display themselves in staged representation" (1993: 162). Additionally, by blurring the lines between fiction and autobiography and between drama and satire, she forces an interrogation of one's response to performance. The audience is made to "move uneasily between multiple responses" (Geis 1993: 164) and must question the normal relationship between performer and spectator. The audience at different times functions as analyst, judge, and guilty party.

Peggy Phelan writes, "Defined by its ephemeral nature, performance art cannot be documented (when it is, it turns into that document — a photograph, a stage design, a video tape — and ceases to be performance art)" (1993: 31). This view of performance art highlights the inevitable difficulty of attempting to write about performance pieces based on written texts that claim to represent them. Although *The Constant State of Desire* has been written down by Finley, just as *World Without End* has been put on paper by Hughes, the texts are not equivalent with their stage work. Unlike the other women considered here, these two are primarily performers not writers. While any play in performance is a different creation than the play as text, this difference is even more profound for performance art in which the physical presence of the performer is what creates the art. By transmitting the words of their performances to text, Finley and Hughes have each

created a distinct work. Unlike the plays considered here, one cannot imagine the performance pieces "acted" by anyone other than Finley and Hughes and their stage directions, therefore, seem somewhat tongue in cheek. For Finley's work, especially, her physical presence on stage is vital. Birringer, for example, in his discussion of her work, focuses almost exclusively on what he sees at her performance not what he hears. As demonstrated in this excerpt, he is so arrested by the visual aspects of her work that he gives scant regard to Finley's words that seem so inescapably shocking on the page:

> . . . her body is visible everywhere and exposed to the extent that her confrontational, frontal display — obscene, vulgar, threatening, scatological, pornographic, ironic, seeing and seen — accelerates and pushes the technical idea of "overexposure" (an error of the camera) toward the edge where we can experience the limit. Look, see, here it is — now you can see it. (1991: 226)

It may be that Birringer's focus on the sight of Finley's body on stage is a result of his sex, the "natural" reaction of a male confronted by a naked female. Diamond, however, describes Finley's speech as a "trancelike chanting of scenarios that are too shocking to remember fully" (1995: 164), suggesting that the verbal aspects of Finley's acts are so appalling that Birringer may concentrate on the visual as a defense. Certainly, Finley's text is so disturbing it is hard to imagine that her physical presence could have such an impact as to block consideration of her speech.

In many ways, Finley's performance can be connected with the carnivalesque. As Mary Russo explains:

> 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. (1995: 63)

Finley spews out what she has internalised and processed from modern culture. Her words are intimately influenced by society at large and therefore, although her work is highly troubling and confrontational, it, like carnival, is not "merely oppositional and reactive" (Russo 1995: 63). This positioning increases Finley's potential for initiating change because her work, once again like carnival, "can be seen, above all, as a site of insurgency, and not merely withdrawal" (Russo 1995: 63).

The violent images created by Finley's words make *The Constant State of Desire* a difficult and troubling piece. The speaker's personae are raping or being raped, injuring or being injured. Sex is not about love or mutual desire for Finley's characters, but rather a violent tool. Her work may be so disturbing because she identifies the evil she observes as something within all of us. Near the end of *Refrigerator*, she says, "it's

the father in all of us" (69). That she is talking about the father "in" all of us not the father "of" all of us is very important. It is much more comforting to identify the problems of the world as springing from the actions of another person, group, or country. Finley, however, makes it clear that the capacity for inhumanity is something we all share. The desire in the title of the work is an insatiable quest for possession of people as well as things. About her intentions in creating the piece, she says, "I wanted to show vignettes of capitalist, consumer society where people go far out, stretch the boundaries — but still they never can be satisfied. So they take things into themselves, and this is what incest or abuse are about" (quoted in Geis 1993: 163). Several theorists (Blau and Geis, for example) have made the connection between Finley and Brecht in that the shocking nature of Finley's work serves to alienate the viewer. It is impossible to feel comfortable reading Finley's pieces. For example, in the section entitled *First Sexual Experience, Laundromat*, her male character is in his mother's house while she smokes and watches an Oprah television show about incest:

> . . . . My mama! My mama, sweet mama. And I pull down her cotton Carters all pee stained. Elastic gone. Then I mount my own mama in the ass. That's right. I fuck my own mama in the ass. 'Cause I'd never fuck my own mama in her snatch. She's my mama.
>
> I cum real quick. Cuz I'm a quick working man. Work real fast. After I cum, I come outta my mama. She don't look at me. Just suckin' her Pall Mall. So I go down on my mama and suck my own cum outta my own mama's ass, outta her butthole. Her coconut Hershey juice. Suck it out. Suck it. Pucker. Pucker.
>
> When I got my mouthful of the stuff, after I felch her good, I move my hands to my mama's face. . . . And I gently take the cigarette out of my mama's mouth. 'Cause if I got it wet she'd BEAT THE HELL OUTTA ME. She'd beat the hell out of me. I press my lips to my mother's mouth. And from the corner I spit back my cum into her mouth. Like pearls from an oyster into the sea at last. She just swallows the cum quickly, just keeps on staring at that incest show. Takes a drag out of Pall Mall and says, 'Boy, you got lazy-ass cum. Your cum ain't salty. You can cum on my pancakes anytime.' (67)

This is a family hyperbolically beyond dysfunctional. One cannot theorise a comforting analysis of the situation, and it is just as difficult to erase the imagery from one's thoughts. There is no catharsis, only forced consideration of the ills and evils of society. As Herbert Blau remarks, "As we consider, however, the extremities of Finley's performance, we might also remember that the technique of Alienation, for all its famous rational distance, comes out of the history of aesthetic violence, only overmatched by the violence of the culture from which it was eventually distanced" (1990: 231). The horror of Finley's work springs from a world that she observes, digests, and then reproduces in her work. If there were nothing unbearable in modern American society, there would be nothing difficult in Finley's performance.

Beth Henley - *Abundance*

Beth Henley was born in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1952. Growing up she was very involved in theatre due to the influence of her mother who played in many of the productions of the Jackson Community Theatre. She received her undergraduate education at Southern Methodist University and did graduate work at the University of Illinois. (Bryer 1995: 102) When her first professionally produced play, a dark comedy called *Crimes of the Heart*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1981 she was the first woman to win the Pulitzer for drama in 23 years. (Dolan 1988: 25) *Abundance*, written in 1990, is set in the Wyoming Territory and spans twenty-five years of the second half of the nineteenth century. The realist plot focuses on Bess and Macon, two mail-order brides, and the hardships, successes and betrayals they encounter and the functions of power in their relationship. Although the play considers the role of men in their lives, the primary focus is on the interaction of the two women.

The play opens with the meeting of Bess and Macon at a stagecoach stop as they wait for the arrival of the men they have travelled west to meet and marry. From their first encounter, Macon has the upper hand. Bess is hungry and penniless, having sold even the buttons on her travelling suit to pay for her previous night's lodging. Macon, however, has a plate of biscuits that she freely offers Bess, declaring, "You'll never get anywhere watching every egg, nickel and biscuit. Ya gotta let it go! Let it go! Go! And I don't give a damn if ya never pay me back" (210). Bess is thereby thrust into the role of supplicant while Macon assumes the role of benefactor. Macon's generosity, innocent and friendly in this scene, becomes a tool in the workings of power between the two protagonists.

The dreams of the women are quickly made apparent. Bess's wishes are simple: "I'm just hoping my husband ain't gonna be real terrible ugly" (211), although perhaps impossibly idealistic and muddled: "I was hoping we'd be in love like people in them stories. The ones about princesses and chimney sweeps and dragon slayers" (211-212). Bess's fantasies, when extricated from the jumbled way in which she expresses them, are much like those discovered to be typical for female settlers by Annette Kolodny in her analysis of writings by women about their experiences during the American westward expansion. While men often saw the untamed wilderness as a virginal paradise, "women claimed the frontiers as a potential sanctuary for an idealized domesticity" (1984: xiii). Bess focuses on true love within marriage, with herself cast in a typically female

role. Macon, however, wants adventure and is willing to do whatever it takes to get what she wants, saying, "Honey, I'd rip the wings off an angel if I thought they'd help me fly!" (211). Her fantasies are perhaps more typically masculine, following the tradition of adventurers such as James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo and the real life yet mythologised Daniel Boone. The frontier, in the American popular imagination, like all exterior spaces, being "foreign, explorable, empty" (Russo 1995: 26), is perceived as feminine and therefore more appropriately available for male violation. Macon's yearning to follow in these heroes' footsteps, despite her seemingly unsuitable gender is understandable since, as Kolodny points out, in the national imagination, the American frontier, even as it moved ever westward, "forever remained the domain of the male hunter-adventurer" (1984: 67). Thus the action available in the frontier is reserved for those who can adopt the male style. Macon is clearly a strong and independent woman whose desires do not focus on men but rather on experiencing life. Bess, on the other hand, appears to be weak and simple. Despite their apparently significant differences, Macon instantly and prophetically declares, "You're like me" (209).

Jack Flan, "handsome, with an air of wild danger" (212), arrives and declares that his brother, Michael, who was to be Bess's husband, is dead and that he will marry her instead. When, in response to Bess's crying over the death of Michael, Jack knocks Bess to the ground, Macon goes after him with a knife, defending her new friend. By quickly acting to protect Bess, Macon demonstrates that she is equal to the demands of her heroic fantasies. Her reaction to the scuffle is interesting and somewhat puzzling. When she remarks, "That was something. I didn't mind that. That was something" (213), one is uncertain if her positive feelings spring from the adventure of the fight or the attractiveness of Jack.

The next several scenes take place over the course of four years. Macon's mail-order husband, Will, who has lost one eye in a mining accident, turns out to be steady and kind but Macon declares "I'm allergic to him physically" (218). The couple, however, becomes more and more financially successful, seemingly achieving the American dream of economic success through personal endeavour. Bess and Jack, meanwhile, become completely destitute, squandering what money they did have on a dry mine and relying on the charity of Macon and Will for their survival. Jack is cruel to Bess and burns down his cabin in a fit of rage, forcing the couple to live with Macon and Will for over two years. Also over this period there is a growing sexual tension between Macon and Jack, who insists on calling her May Ann despite her protests. Macon recognises Jack's many flaws, telling him, "You're mean and selfish and a liar and a snake; I spit on your grave, which

can't get dug up fast enough and deep enough to suit me just fine." (239), but it is clear that she is attracted to him. On the night of the couples' four year anniversary, Macon dances for the group while Bess and Will clap hands and Jack holds her hair combs. After being insulted by Jack about her singing, Bess walks out into the night and is captured by Indians.

The next scene takes place five years later. Macon, Will and Jack are still all living in the same cabin and it is obvious that Jack has emotionally and sexually usurped Will's place as Macon's husband. She no longer objects to Jack calling her May Ann. This change can be seen as symbolic of her abandonment of her dreams and her embracement of a stereotypically feminine life. The androgynous name Macon suits her original longing for adventure, a desire more frequently expressed by men than women. Her acceptance of the feminine name May Ann coincides with her newly assumed femme fatale behaviour. She has become the stereotypical evil woman, sexually voracious in an adulterous relationship while shrewishly browbeating her husband to become more economically successful. After Jack gives Macon a sapphire ring as an anniversary gift, Will produces a letter from the U. S. Army revealing that Bess has been ransomed away from a Chief Ottawa and will be returning home. When Bess reappears, it is clear that she has been changed by her experience. The stage directions explain her physical changes: "She is barefoot. Her skin is dark and burnt; her hair is thin and sun-bleached; her chin has been tattooed." (244) She seems dazed and has trouble conversing with the others, but reveals to Macon, who warns her never to tell Jack, that she was Chief Ottawa's bride, had two children by him, and believed him to be her "true one" (245). Both Bess's loving relationship with Ottawa and Macon's implicit prediction of Jack's likely objection to miscegenation have precedents in actual settler reactions to capture by American natives as related in captivity narratives. Kolodny, in her analysis of *The Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison*, published in 1824, points out that Jemison willingly married two Indian men and apparently loved her first husband very much. This occurred in spite of the fact that white society in general perceived in the Indians "only savagery and brutality" (1984: 89). Kolodny also reveals that often the public disavowed the potential for white women's affection for Native Americans because "to accept a white woman's intimacy with the Indian was, as well, to accept her intimacy with the forest spaces he inhabited" (1984: 70) and this wilderness was perceived to be potentially and threateningly masculinising. Thus Bess's connection with Ottawa can be connected to the strength she demonstrates in the following scenes. The change in Bess can be understood as masculinising in that she has

rejected her stereotypically feminine dreams of domestic happiness with Jack and her status as a victim in their marriage.

Bess catches Jack embracing Macon who swears to her, "You must believe me. I thought you were dead. They brought us your scalp. You were gone so long. So many years" (246). When Bess replies, "No. You. I saw. Combs. You gave him. He held them. I saw." (246), it becomes clear that her return to the cabin, not her time with Chief Ottawa, has traumatised Bess's mind. Over the next scenes, Bess seems to want to return to Chief Ottawa. She refuses to wear shoes and Macon fashions her a chain leg iron to keep her from running off. Macon and Will, during this time, begin to suffer financially due to a drought, with the bank repossessing goods they posted as security. Will reveals to Bess, "I understand why you wanna run away. I'd let you go, but she keeps the key. Me, I'm not sure why I stay. I don't know what I expect to get. She used to be nice to me sometimes for very short intervals of time. Not anymore. I don't know what I expect to get now. I mean, from now on" (248).

Professor Elmore Crome, who comes to talk to Bess about her experiences with Chief Ottawa, turns them into a book. As Bess narrates her adventures, much of what she says is stolen from Macon, from the dreams Macon revealed early in their relationship. It is here that Bess reveals her previously hidden strength, although that strength takes the unpleasant form of advancing herself at the expense of others. Suddenly, the power structure between Bess and Macon changes. Jack is no longer sexually interested in Macon. Bess becomes successful with book sales and lecture tours while Macon and Will lose everything. Their roles reversed, Macon asks Bess for money to keep the bank from repossessing their home:

> MACON. I know we don't like each other. We used to be friends. But somehow we drifted apart. Still you have to admit, you have to see, that you owe me something.
> BESS. What do I owe you?
> MACON. You — well, you owe me — fifty dollars. At least, fifty dollars. I gave you shoes when you had none and food and coffee and clothes and lodging. I even brought you blue ribbons and a blue dress. Whatever your heart desired, I gave to you.
> BESS. Maybe it never occurred t'you. Maybe you never realized the fact, but people don't like being beholding. They resent always needing and always owing. And pretty soon they come to resent whoever it is they been taking from.
> MACON. I do. I know that. You've resented me all along.
> BESS. Yeah, I believe I have and I don't want you resenting me. So why don't we just call it even.
> MACON. But I gotta have it. The fifty dollars. I need it to save my homestead. They're gonna throw me out on the dusty road. You can't do this to me.
> BESS. Honey, I'd rip the wings off an angel if I thought they'd help me fly. (258-259)

Using Macon's own words to refuse her request, Bess has changed the power dynamics between the two by taking what she wants from Macon, namely her words, not just what she is offered, food and shelter. Interestingly, it is by finding her voice that Bess attains power. Previously inarticulate, overshadowed by Macon's vivacious chatter and victim to Jack's verbal abuse, she becomes a storyteller and thereby achieves fame and fortune. By finding her voice and synthesising her story, Bess becomes the subject of a text that will bring her prosperity whereas previously she has been merely an object of Jack's wrath and of Macon's pity. Telling her tale to Professor Elmore, with embellishments stolen from Macon, is not the first time Bess has used her voice to her advantage. As she explains to the Professor:

> Every time the Oglalas raised scalps on a pole and threatened to slay me, I'd sing for them. They'd fall to their knees and listen to my song, entranced, like charmed wolves. Ottawa, the head man, gave me strings of beads; others gave me acorns, seeds, ground nuts, feathers. Any treasure they possessed so I would favor them with my singing. (251)

Given Bess's use of exaggeration this story is unlikely to be completely true. Knowing, however, that Bess does have a good singing voice (the Professor declares that she sings "Like an angel" (251)) and that she and Ottawa had a loving relationship, it is more than possible that she used her voice to gain his affection. Ironically, it is, of course, her singing and Jack's criticism of her singing which leads to her capture by Ottawa in the first place.

When Bess and Jack leave with Professor Elmore for the lecture tour, and with the bank ready to repossess the cabin, Will declares that he is going west and he doesn't want Macon with him. Macon is left alone and with nothing, her only friends being Jack and Bess and her only family being Will. That Macon and Will never have children, despite a nine year marriage in a time and place where birth control would be unavailable, can be seen as symbolic of the barrenness of their relationship. Alternatively, motherhood, a state achievable only by females, does not mesh with Macon's rather androgynous goals. Interestingly, the only children born in the course of the play are to Bess and Ottawa, indicating that perhaps during her time with him she achieved her dreams of domestic happiness.

The spitefulness with which Bess turns on those who have cared about her, namely Macon and Ottawa, is at first glance somewhat puzzling. Macon, although she does have an adulterous affair with Jack, controls her sexual attraction to him until she believes Bess to be dead. Additionally, she is always generous with Bess, sharing food, shelter, and clothing. So it is surprising that Bess denies Macon the fifty dollars

needed to save the farm. Similarly, Bess apparently loved Ottawa, her attempts to run away are presumably as much an effort to return to him as to get away from Jack, Macon, and Will. Yet when asked "to demand the immediate extermination of all Indian tribes" (259) while on her lecture tour, she declares, "I got no problem with that" (259). The reason for this viciousness is revealed when in her first conversation with the Professor, she says, "I know treachery. I could write a book. A big book. All about treachery" (250). Her behaviour, therefore, appears to be a reaction to an extreme sense of betrayal. She clearly believes Macon and Jack began their affair before her capture and therefore that Macon was never the friend she appeared to be. Similarly, it is likely that she thinks Ottawa did not love her as much as he seemed to. Upon her return to the cabin she tells Macon, "Sold me. Sold me cheap. Two horses, blanket, beads, bullets. Cheap." (245) although the letter from the U.S. Army maintained they "had to threaten the Chief, Ottawa, with a massacre 'fore he'd sell her back" (243). Thus Bess feels deceived by the only two characters who have shown her any affection and she responds bitterly.

The following scene takes place fifteen years later in a hotel suite in St. Louis. Professor Elmore is reading an unfavourable review of Bess's most recent and final lecture. Although she is outraged at the review, Bess appears resigned about the end of her lecture career. "God. I can't tell you what a relief it will be to never again to have to rhapsodize about writing with fish blood and being scantily-clad in a thin bark skirt." (260) Elmore mentions that he read Chief Ottawa had recently committed suicide after finally being captured. Bess's response is a simple "Oh" (261). Jack then enters, smoking a cigar he won in a local fair and mentions that he saw Macon there.

> You should see her. Disgusting. She's got some syphilitic disease. It's broken out all over her face. She was working at a little booth dispensing whiskey and tobacco and raisins. I bought some raisins from her. She didn't recognize me. I had to laugh when I saw she had newspaper stuck in her clothes to stay warm. I remember her always thinking she had it so good. (261-262)

For Jack, Macon has become grotesque and therefore no longer a woman but rather some third sex (Russo 1995: 40), of no use to him except as a contrast to her former attractive self.

Bess declares, in language reminiscent of that which Jack used to use toward her, that his cigar has made her sick and she is going out for air. After she leaves, Jack confides to Elmore, "Well, I'll say one thing, she'll never find anyone who'll treat her better than I do. She oughta know that by now. I'm her one true one." (262), marking a complete turning of the tables between Bess and Jack.

The final scene takes place a few hours later when Bess comes to see Macon in her tent. The earlier animosity between the two has disappeared. Bess confides, "Well, today I heard that Ottawa, the head man — my husband, was captured. He, ah, poisoned himself on a lantern of kerosene. I don't know why, but it's hard. I'd always thought I might — but now I won't — ever see him once more" (263). Both agree that they wish things could be different. With the following exchange, it is apparent that each woman has failed to achieve her dreams. Bess had adventures, but adventures were Macon's dream not hers.

> MACON: You know, when I was younger, I never knew who I was, what I wanted, where I was going or how to get there. Now that I'm older, I don't know none of that either.
> BESS. Well, one thing I wanted, one thing I know I wanted was, well, I don't know, I guess you'd call it true love. And when I got them three letters from that man, that man, Michael Flan, who wrote to me about the size of the sky, I thought it was all right there, all within my grasp and all I had t'do was come out west and there it'd be. (264)

Henley explains that Abundance "is about how insidiously people's dreams are taken away from them. You come out here with all this hope and energy and desire, and suddenly you sell yourself out for a warm cup of coffee without realizing you've done it" (quoted in Bryer 1995: 109). Although Bess has achieved the American dream of financial success, she's done so at the expense of her relationship with Macon, perhaps the only character, other than Ottawa, who treated her with love. The play thus functions as an interrogation of the myth, more prevalent during the time of the play's setting but still influential today, of America "as a place of exceptional potentiality, a land of unimagined progress and plenty" (Chaudhuri 1995: 18). The desires of each woman are completely frustrated and they are left with their friendship which, as presented in the play, is not necessarily an adequate substitute.

Marsha Norman - *Traveler in the Dark*

Marsha Norman, who grew up in Louisville, Kentucky, won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for her play *'night, Mother*. Her *Traveler in the Dark*, first staged in 1984, deals with difficult family dynamics. It focuses particularly on the relationships between fathers and sons and between husbands and wives. Interactions between women are not considered and the women in the play function primarily as impediments and aids to the personal growth of the main character, Sam. Sam is a well-respected surgeon whose failure to save the life of Mavis, his nurse and childhood friend, causes him to question and re-evaluate himself and his roles as son, father, and husband. He learns to forgive himself and those around him as well as accepting their forgiveness.

The healing potential of forgiveness is a major concern of the work. The play takes place the day and night of Mavis's funeral as Sam, his wife, Glory, and his son, Stephen, gather at the house of his father, Everett, a preacher. It is the first time the twelve-year-old Stephen has been at his grandfather's house, his father's childhood home. The action occurs in the garden of the house, in two acts, the first taking place before the funeral and the second after the funeral. All the wounds that are opened or exposed in the first act are healed in the second.

The garden itself, identified by Sam as "Mother's garden" (162), plays a significant role. The stage notes explain, "It is Sam's connection to the garden that is important, not ours" (162). The garden is overgrown, reflecting the many years since his mother's death, the passing of time since Sam has been in the garden, and Everett's lack of interest in this magical world his wife created, which is so special to his son. The characters and the audience, because of the constant presence of the garden, are never free of the memory of Sam's mother and, because of the overgrown nature of the garden, they are constantly reminded of her absence. The garden can thus be seen as reflecting both the strong love between mother and son and the pain of the loss of a loved one.

The play opens with Glory coming out to talk to Sam, who is reminiscing in the garden. Glory is worried that Stephen is not dealing well with Mavis's death. Norman communicates, with the couple's first lines, the tension and miscommunication between them. Glory fails to appreciate Sam's connection to the garden and is focused on her concern for their son. Sam, on the other hand, dismisses his wife's concerns and instead is lost in his thoughts of the past sparked by Mavis' death and his return to the garden of his childhood. In response to Glory's concerns, Sam insists that Stephen will be fine, "Nobody ever died on him before, that's all. He'll get the hang of it, you'll see" (163). During the course of the act, however, it becomes apparent that Sam, himself, is unable to understand Mavis's death, and further that he is still immensely troubled by the death of his mother when he was a child. She was a dreamer, reading nursery rhymes and fairy tales to the young Sam. Sam, in reaction to his mother's death and his feelings toward his father, has raised Stephen on facts and this visit to his grandfather's home marks Stephen's first contact with the fairy tales that most children hear when young. Stephen describes the room with the children's books, "Like a forest of books growing up out of the floor" (164), implying that although he has not yet read these books himself he instinctively recognises the magic and wonder they hold for children. His vision of a magical woods also

connects the books to the garden. Both are full of the presence and influence of Sam's mother. When Stephen brings out some of the old books, Sam's cynical interpretations of the stories shed light on his view of his own life. For example, explaining Humpty Dumpty he says, "She [Humpty Dumpty's mother] told him he was a man. See? She dressed him up in a little man's suit. He didn't know he could fall. He didn't know he could break. He didn't know he was an egg" (164-165). And about the Frog Prince:

> Magic had nothing to do with it. The frog believed that the beauty could turn him into a prince. One kiss from her and he would be handsome, and play tennis, and mix martinis, and tell jokes at parties, just like all her other boyfriends. But years later, the prince started to turn, slowly at first, but finally and irreversibly, back into the frog he always was. (166)

Glory, after Stephen returns to the house, translates Sam's attempts to subvert the tales into the tragedy that he sees as real life, saying "You, the frog, married me, the princess, and Humpty Dumpty was a hit-and-run" (166). Sam then declares that he wants a divorce and he wants to take Stephen with him. Stephen overhears the ensuing conversation. Thus, as in Cruz's play, discussed below, the family fails to be a source of comfort during a time of loss, but rather is the source of most of the conflict in the play. Unlike *Miriam's Flowers*, however, where the death of the young Puli is the primary reason for the characters' troubles, here the death of Mavis serves to exacerbate serious rifts already existing in the family. Cruz's family, the Nieves, although disadvantaged, appear to have been relatively content with one another prior to their loss. Here, however, financial success and an outwardly stable marriage hide angers and resentments that are pushed into the light by the loss of a loved one. Whereas Cruz utilises loss to demonstrate the fragility of her characters, Norman uses loss to propel the characters toward confrontation and, ultimately, healing of their differences.

When finally discussing Mavis's death with Stephen, Sam reveals, "It never occurred to me that she would die, Stephen. It just didn't seem like something she'd do. I'm sorry I didn't warn you, I should have known it, my mother died, didn't she? I guess I just forgot" (170). He also tells Stephen about his own mother and how he felt when she died. Revealing the shock and pain death can always hold, he explains that although his mother had been sick for a long time, "sick or not, everybody dies all of a sudden" (171). Just before this, he has been "[s]trangely affected by" (170) Stephen's questioning the likelihood of Sleeping Beauty's father forgetting to invite the thirteenth fairy to his daughter's party when he knows the terrible vengeance she is capable of inflicting. Sam maintains, "He forgot because he didn't want to remember! . . . The last person you want at that party is that thirteenth fairy" (170). Knowing, from his own mother's death, that loved ones die,

Sam put from his mind the possibility that Mavis could die. Like the thirteenth fairy, however, death arrived and Sam, like Sleeping Beauty's father, was helpless to do anything about it.

Shortly thereafter Everett arrives and the two men have what appears to be an old argument:

> SAM: I don't want you telling Stephen there's a heaven and a hell, because if you do, I'll have to tell him who it is who assigns the room.
> EVERETT: You do want him on the right waiting list, don't you?
> SAM: I don't want him thinking about it at all. Let's just say, if there is a hell, if Stephen does go to hell, I'd like for it to be a surprise.
> EVERETT: No grandson of mine is going to hell.
> SAM: No grandson of anybody's is going to hell. There is no hell. There is no heaven. Life is summer camp and death is lights out. It's all just over, Dad. Time's up. The end. You lose. (173)

Sam's rejection of all magic and mysticism, including religion appears due to the trauma of his mother's death and to the resentment he feels toward his father. Like Wasserstein's Sara, considered below, Sam creates an identity largely in reaction against his upbringing. Also, as with Sara, coming to terms with his past is an important part of Sam's growth during the play.

Glory enters the garden and it is clear that there is also a lot of tension between her and Everett, largely because he was very close to Mavis and had hoped that she would marry Sam. When, however, Everett learns from Stephen that Sam wants a divorce, he encourages him to try to work things out and he reminds his son how much in love with Glory he was as a youth. Act one ends with everyone departing for Mavis's funeral.

Act two, at night, opens with Stephen coming out to sit with Sam. He tells Sam that he wants to stay with his mother. During the course of their argument it becomes obvious that Stephen sees his parents' relationship very clearly and knows that Sam's work is all-consuming. Additionally, Stephen reveals the frustration and disillusionment he feels in the face of Mavis's death, saying, "You don't want to do anything but work and you can't even do that right. What kind of doctor are you if you can't save your own nurse?" (190). Then, just as Sam rejected magic and his father's religion after his mother's death, Stephen rejects science:

> SAM: Stephen, medicine doesn't always work.
> STEPHEN: Then it might as well be magic, Dad. (190)

Stephen leaves as Everett enters the garden and the conversation between Sam and his father reveals other parallels. Sam's mother was content to be second to Everett's work just as Glory is willing to let Sam put his work first. Everett explains, "But there was a power in me, like there's a power in you, and I couldn't let

anything get in its way . . . I was called to it, Sam. Same as you. And you know your Glory understands what your work means to you. Your mother was exactly that way for me" (191). Earlier in the play, Sam recited the following verse:

> There once was a woman called Nothing-At-All
> Who rejoiced in a dwelling exceedingly small.
> A man stretched his mouth to its utmost extent
> And down in a gulp both house and woman went. (169)

The woman in the rhyme can be understood as Glory, Mavis, or Sam's mother. Sam, consumed with guilt, believes he has devoured the lives of both Glory and Mavis and that his father did the same thing to his mother. Like Lim's character Wing, discussed below, Sam blames his father for failing his mother. For Wing, however, this disappointment brings as much shame as anger, whereas Sam feels mostly anger. Wing, in order to redeem his family's name starts down the same path as his father with hopes of a different outcome. His main objective is to bring honour back to his family. Sam, on the other hand, attempts to reject completely the path chosen by his father. Also like Wing, however, Sam is forced to see that he is very much like his father and this knowledge brings some understanding of and compassion toward his father. Sam has believed that by rejecting his father and bringing his son up in opposition to what he stands for, he can eradicate Everett's impact on his life. Wing knows all along, however, that his father, although dead, is a force that must be dealt with. This understanding can be tied to the Confucian belief in the ongoing importance of ancestors. Or, alternatively, Wing can be read as more perceptive of the realities of family dynamics, since Sam was, of course, never able to escape the influence of Everett. His reaction against his father was always filled with the presence of his father.

Glory comes into the garden and Everett goes back into the house. As Sam and Glory talk, he reveals that after the funeral he drove by Mavis's childhood home and imagined that he "had it all to do over again" (195). He realised that he would still have fallen in love with and married Glory. With Glory around he never could have loved Mavis and he pities her life spent as his nurse and family friend. Glory believes, however, that Mavis was content with the part of Sam's life she was able to share, just as she is satisfied with the portion of his life that she has. "You're a genius. People make exceptions. They settle." (196), she explains. Sam rants on, angry with himself for believing that he could save Mavis and angry with himself for failing. He believes he should have remembered the thirteenth fairy, that he failed to see Mavis's sickness in time because he didn't want to.

Stephen comes out into the garden. He finds a geode but doesn't know what it is. Everett comes out and remembers that Sam's mother collected them. "She must have loved those rocks, but I don't know what they are. I guess you can be a real big part of somebody else's world without ever understanding the first thing about it" (200). Sam, who has been silent for a long time, finally explains that it is a geode. Stephen wants to open it and see the crystal. Sam says no because his mother felt "it was better for it to be safe than for you to know what it was" (201). The geode serves as a symbol for the women in the play, in that each woman is firm and solid on the outside, while on the inside there is a mystery. This mystery holds the reasons they do what they do, why Mavis and Glory stayed with Sam and why Sam's mother stuck by Everett.

Stephen suddenly asks where Mavis went, meaning her essence or her soul, because the Mavis he saw in the coffin wasn't her. He asks, "In the operating room? Did you cut her open and it got out?" (202). When Sam admits "it" did get out, Stephen wants to know what "it" was like. Sam replies, marking the turning point in his understanding, "It was forgiveness" (202). This realisation, that Mavis forgave him everything, seems to allow Sam to forgive himself as well as the other characters in the play. The forgiveness in Mavis parallels the geode's crystal. To see the crystal, one must destroy the integrity of the geode and Sam was only able to experience Mavis's forgiveness in the moment of her death. He would have been better off if he had been able to accept her forgiveness before she died. Sam's tardy but life-altering acceptance of forgiveness proves contagious. Everett apologises to Glory, admitting, "I told Mavis your marriage wouldn't last. That your mother was stingy with her money and your looks wouldn't last forever. I told her if she'd just wait, she could have Sam all to herself" (203). Sam also apologises to Glory, declaring that he loves her and doesn't want to leave. Then Sam apologises to his father and asks if the family can stay for a few days. When Stephen asks, "Dad, what holds the stars up there? Why don't they fall?" (204), instead of giving a scientific response, Sam doesn't answer and the play ends with Sam and Everett reciting the second verse of *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*, marking Sam coming to terms with belief and magic, and a reconsideration of his feelings towards his father. Like Lim's *Bitter Cane*, although in a very different way, the play ends with the healing of a father/son relationship. Lim's ending emphasises the Confucian ideals of honour for one's parents and filial duty. Norman's ending, on the other hand, is influenced by the American concern with friendship between parents and children. Lim's character, Wing, accepts his duty, that of returning his father's bones to China, thereby demonstrating his acceptance of his father and of his role as son. Sam, by asking for his family to stay

a few days with his father and by making room in his life for things science can't explain, opens the door to a positive relationship with his father.

*Parks and Shange*

Largely due to the nation's ugly history of slavery and Jim Crow laws, discussions of racism in the United States are often cast in terms of black versus white. People of African descent currently make up the country's largest minority, comprising over twenty percent of the population (West 1994: 156). The presence of blacks in the United States is an integral part of the personal definitions of white Americans. As Cornel West points out, without African Americans, "European-Americans would not be 'white' — they would be only Irish, Italians, Poles, Welsh, and others engaged in class, ethnic, and gender struggles over resources and identity" (1994: 156). Until 1964, white Americans were able to see themselves as a relatively homogenous group because of the opposition between black and white, in that "black slavery and racial caste served as the floor upon which white class, ethnic, and gender struggles could be diffused and diverted" (West 1994: 156). The civil rights movement of the 1960s, although it resulted in the erasure of "*legal* barriers against black access to civil and voting rights" (West 1994: 157), did not end racism but contributed to a fracturing of white Americans' view of themselves. Suddenly, status as full Americans was open to blacks, and by extension other minority groups, thus calling into question any sense of the United States as a homogeneous country. This fracturing was subsequently furthered by the second wave of the feminist movement and by the post-Stonewall gay rights movement.

African American women must confront both racism and sexism, which translates into a life of hardship for many. Sydne Mahone details some grim statistics:

> The number one cause of death for [black women in America] is AIDS; fifty-two percent of the women with AIDS-related illness or diagnoses of HIV-positive are black. . . . one in four black children [are] born to teen mothers. Fifty percent of all black households are headed by single mothers, many of whom swell the ranks of the working poor. One-quarter of all black families are living below the poverty level; more than two-thirds of these families are headed by single mothers. Forty-three percent of the women incarcerated in federal prisons are African-American. [Black American women's] median income is still below that of black men, and of white women and men. (1994: xvi)

Adding insult to injury, on television, in movies and in plays, African American women, as a result of the intersection of racism and sexism, are portrayed in unrealistic, unflattering ways. In the theatre, for instance,

Mahone notes that "[h]istorically, male playwrights, both white and black, have molded the image of the black woman into the stereotypes of mammies, 'ho's,' bitches and loons" (1994: xvii-xviii). Playwrights such as Suzan-Lori Parks and Ntozake Shange, can work against this tradition and question the representations created by racism and sexism, for, as Mahone notes, "the real power in [the black female playwright's] exercise of artistic freedom is the casting of her own image by her own hand" (1994: xviii).

Suzan-Lori Parks - *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*

*The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, by Parks, was first produced by the BACA Downtown, in Brooklyn, in the fall of 1990. Parks plays on various stereotypes, myths, and legends about blacks and explores the importance of creating and preserving a black history that is neither claimed nor corrupted by others. The characters, with such names as Black Man With Watermelon, Old Man River Jordan, and Voice On Thuh Tee V, speak primarily in a southern black vernacular as they expound their own particular concerns and sporadically interact with one another. The work is set in "[t]he present" (247) although it can be more accurately characterised as being timeless. There is no indication of the passage of time throughout the play, while characters seem to be from the distant past (Queen-then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut and Before Columbus), the more recent past (Black Woman With Fried Drumstick), as well as the present (Voice on Thuh Tee V).

The play is plotless and its structure consists of an overture, three scenes with Black Man With Watermelon and Black Woman With Fried Drumstick, interrupted by two choruses, and ending with a final chorus. Of her unconventional structure, Parks says, "I don't explode the form because I find traditional plays 'boring' — I don't really. It's just that those structures never could accommodate the figures which take up residence inside me" (1995: 8). She believes that the structure of the play is as important as, and works with, the content of the play. "Form should not be looked at askance and held suspect — form is not something that 'gets in the way of the story' but is an integral part of the story" (1995: 7).

In the scenes between Black Man With Watermelon and Black Woman With Fried Drumstick, it is revealed that he is dead, having been executed either in an electric chair or hanging from a tree, and has somehow come back. Black Woman With Fried Drumstick, who appears to be his wife, went crazy when he was killed and slaughtered all the hens in the neighbourhood. They both are trying to figure out their

situation. Although the two appear to be talking to one another, their lines are not exactly a dialogue in that rarely does either actually respond to the words of the other. Black Woman With Fried Drumstick, for example, in their first scene together is concerned with the amazing return of her husband and with offering him some chicken to eat. Black Man With Watermelon, on the other hand, is primarily interested in determining whether the watermelon he holds is his. Their "conversation" takes the following form:

> BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: Hen.
> BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: Aint eaten in years.
> BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: Hen?
> BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: Last meal I had was my last-mans-meal.
> BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: You got uhway. Knew you would.
> BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: This thing dont look like me!
> BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: It dont Do it. Should it? Hen: eat it. (254-255)

Although this is very unlike typical play dialogue, it is, perhaps, an accurate representation of many real life conversations where each speaker remains focused, at least in his/her inner thoughts, on his/her own primary concerns. For Parks, both characters are heroes: "heroism is being there and seeing it through. I guess I have a greater understanding of the small gesture, or the great act that is also very small — like *being present*. He is present and trying to figure out what's wrong with him; she's present and trying to figure out what's wrong with him and what's wrong with him and what's wrong with her" (1994: 245).

The fact that Black Man With Watermelon has been executed and lynched reflects the disproportionately large number of black men on death row in America and the disgraceful history of lynching in the South. That Black Man With Watermelon first describes his experience of execution and then his experience of lynching serves to conflate the two. This can be interpreted to indicate that the same racist fear of black men that allowed for virtually unpunished lynching is what also accounts for the large proportion of black men assigned the death penalty. When Black Man With Watermelon discusses his grave, requesting, "Make me uh space 6 feet by 6 feet by 6. Make it big and mark it so as I wont miss it. If you would please, sweetness, uh mass grave-site. Theres company comin soonish." (257), it is clear that his situation, at least with regard to his mode of death if not his survival, is not unique. His execution and lynching reflect the fate of many before and after him.

During the overture and the choruses, the other characters speak with Black Man With Watermelon and Black Women With Fried Drumstick, although here too the interaction of the voices cannot accurately be

termed dialogue. Each character speaks of his or her own concern and although they sometimes share concerns and lines occasionally seem to be in response to preceding lines, just as often each character seems to be carrying on a monologue punctuated by the monologues of the others. The result is that, although lines by individual characters are thought provoking, the interaction of their lines does not seem to make sense. This style can be tied to the tradition of jazz. As Ralph Ellison terms it, ". . . true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. . . . Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it" (quoted in Gates 1988: vii). Here each character speaks, asserts his or her self, only to become part of the whole as lines are exchanged, repeated, and modified. The inability to formulate a set meaning for this type of verbal interaction can be tied to the African American vernacular tradition. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explains, "The determinate meanings often sought in criticism run counter to the most fundamental values of the tradition as encased in myth. . . . Indeterminacy, then is accounted for by the vernacular tradition, as an unavoidable aspect of acts of interpretation" (1988: 22). This resistance to a single determinate meaning, of course, can be found in the work of other dramatists, such as Pinter, Beckett, and Ionesco to name a few. Una Chaudhuri sees the "resistance to stated and stat*able* meaning [as having] several sources, including a deep distrust of dogma . . . . [and a belief in] the mysteriousness of ordinary life, [i]n the lack of coherence and predictability in human experience" (1995: 99). Parks declares, "In *Last Black Man*, I allowed myself to go for sound over logical sense. Musicians do it all the time; they don't always follow the standard melody line" (1994: 241). For example, in the following lines:

> BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: Say he was waitin on thuh right time.
> AND BIGGER AND BIGGER AND BIGGER: Say he was waitin in thuh wrong line. (261)

the rhyme and rhythm of the lines is clear while their meaning is not. The exchange sounds more like the lines to a popular song than like dialogue.

These simultaneous monologues align the play with the experimentations of performance art. Geis believes that unlike dialogue, monologue is able "to transform stage and space into 'narrative' time and space" (1993: 1), much like a story told orally or in a novel. The work of many performance artist, of course, takes the form of story telling. The words of Parks's characters, however, do not form a narrative. The play instead frustrates facile interpretation and openly challenges the audience, much like the performance work of artists

such as Finley, which forces the audience to actively labour to determine meaning.

Throughout the play certain ideas are repeated over and over, for example: "You should write it down and you should hide it under a rock." (252); "Figuring out the truth put them in their place and they scurried out to put us in ours." (251); "Prunes and prisms prunes and prisms" (259); and, of course, "This is the death of the last black man in the whole entire world." (250). These lines can be seen as analogous to musical riffs. J.L. Dillard defines the type of riff found in jazz music as "a short phrase repeated over the length of a chorus" (quoted in Gates 1988: 105). With each reoccurrence of the phrase, the words are slightly different. As Parks explains, "it's not just repetition but repetition with *revision*. And in drama change, revision, is the thing. Characters refigure their words and through a refiguring of language show us that they are experiencing their situation anew" (1995: 9). Thus this changing repetition takes the place of a more traditional plot line. She sees her use of this technique as allied with music, specifically with jazz.

> 'Repetition and Revision' is a concept integral to the Jazz esthetic in which the composer or performer will write or play a musical phrase once and again and again; etc. — with each revisit the phrase is slightly revised. 'Rep & Rev' as I call it is a central element in my work; through its use I'm working to create a dramatic text that departs from the traditional linear narrative style to look and sound more like a musical score. (1995: 8-9)

Parks also believes "the idea of Repetition and Revision is an integral part of the African and African-American literary and oral traditions" (1995: 10). One can see her use of this technique in her manipulation of "You should write it down and you should hide it under a rock" (252), which occurs, in various forms, in ten different places in the play. Both the meaning of the words in the line and its constant reworking serve to demonstrate "that history, because it exists as language, is always subject to revision" (Chaudhuri 1995: 264). The lines are spoken by the character Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread, except for the fourth utterance which is performed by the entire chorus. The line becomes the most divergent on the fifth iteration, "Did you write it down? On uh little slip uh paper stick thuh slip in thuh river afore you slip in that way you keep your clothes dry, man" (260), and on the eighth it is reduced to simply, "Write that down" (270). It is the third and the final occurrences, however, which are the most interesting because they are more expanded and provide a better sense of what the idea means. In the third repetition, Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread explains that an event should be written down, "because if you don't write it down then they will come along and tell the future that we did not exist" (252). This declaration that people should have their own written history so that their existence and significance cannot be denied by others is given a sense of

hopelessness in the final sentence of this speech. Saying, "You should hide it all under a rock so that in the future when they come along they will say that the rock did not exist" (252), Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread conveys the power of dominant cultures to eradicate or at least minimise the achievements of other cultures. In the final iteration of this line, however, some hope is achieved. The idea becomes, "You will carve it all out of a rock so that in the future when they come along we will know that the rock did yes exist" (279). Thus the history becomes part of the rock, something permanent which cannot be evaded or denied. This reworking of a single line in which each iteration alters and sometimes contradicts the original or previous but at the same time carries with it the essence of all the versions that have come before is deeply tied to the tradition of jazz. With each repetition of the line, the audience's response is shaped both by the version of the moment and by a knowledge of the previous forms, just as when a jazz musician plays a piece, the listener's response is influenced by both the work being performed and the version that is being reworked. Thus the hope expressed in "You will carve it all out of a rock so that in the future when they come along we will know that the rock did yes exist" (279) is not unqualified, it is tainted by the longing and hopelessness expressed in previous iterations. Thus Parks uses "Rep & Rev" "to counter the desire for grand finales" (Chaudhuri 1995: 264), demonstrating that there can be no final word.

In many ways, Parks's work can be seen as following in the tradition of the theatrical avant-garde, although, as African American performance artist Keith Mason observes, "Blacks have always been excluded from the avant-garde" (quoted in Carlson 1996: 162). Parks's highly experimental work allies her with the avant-garde, as does her use of the qualities of jazz, for as Mason also notes "the history of the avant-garde is based on the jazz tradition" (quoted in Carlson 1996: 162). Parks's work can be seen as very postmodern. Geis explains:

> Postmodernism has theorized a fragmented and dislocated speaking subject that is more open to replication and dissemination — through a highly technologized culture — than it is to the dynamic of response inherent in dialogue. Whereas modernism highlighted the search for a responding other in the 'void,' thus turning toward a dialogue as a means for the psychological revelation of character (as in Henrik Ibsen's plays), postmodernism refuses this completion and coherence and opts for deconstructive explorations of its own resistance to pairing and linearity. (1993: 2)

The lines of Parks's characters are clearly more aligned with "replication and dissemination" than "response." In fact, the "Rep & Rev" which she assumes from the tradition of jazz can be seen as simulacra. No version of the repeated lines can be seen as the original of which the others are copies, rather they are all what

Baudrillard would term simulation proper. "Here are the models from which proceed all forms according to the modulation of their differences" (quoted in Auslander 1996: 205).

Parks also utilises many puns, one type of the African American verbal techniques which Gates terms Signifyin(g). Black Man With Watermelon, for example, when trying to recall which foods he enjoys, declares:

> Choice between peas and corns — my feets —. Choice: Peas. Choice between peas and greens choice: greens. Choice between greens and potatoes choice: potatoes. Yams. Boiled or mashed choice: mashed. Aaah. Mmm. My likenesses.
> . . .
> My likenesses! (273)

The phrase "My likenesses" carries with it two meanings. It is, as Gates would term it, "double-voiced" (1988: xxv). First, and most obviously, it means "my preferences," capping off the character's exposition of the food he likes. Second, it carries the standard English meaning of "my likeness." In his search for identity, the knowledge of what he likes and dislikes is part of who Black Man With Watermelon is, part of his likeness. Thus the play demonstrates the two traditions that Gates believes necessarily influence any African American text. He explains, "our canonical texts have complex double formal antecedents, the Western and the black" (1988: xxiv). The free play of meaning that permeates the text works on this duality of tradition, in what Gates sees as a distinctly African American way. "Whereas signification [in the white Western sense] depends for order and coherence on the exclusion of unconscious associations which any given word yields at any given time, Signification [of the African American tradition] luxuriates in the inclusion of the free play of these associative rhetorical and semantic relations" (1988: 49).

The play is also haunted by images of slavery and the slave trade. The character Before Columbus repeats and revises several times throughout the play that, "When they [presumably Europeans] thought thuh worl was flat. They stayed at home. . . . They figured out thuh truth and scurried out. Figurin out thuh truth kin put them in their place and they scurried out tuh put us in ours" (263). European exploration of Africa and the Americas led to the institution of slavery and to an over two-hundred-year debate as to whether Africans were fully human. Europeans and Americans of European descent struggled to define both "their place" and the place, in relation to both whites and apes, of the enslaved Africans, while white abolitionists and freed slaves worked to demonstrate that blacks deserved to be considered full members of the human family. This concern about whether and how blacks are related to whites connects to Ham's curious speech about descent,

which he calls "Ham's Begotten Tree" (269). After explaining how One, through descendants such as Yuh Fathuh and WhoDatDere, was the original ancestor of Him, he begins to intersperse his speech with "SOLD!" (272), clearly echoing the call of the auctioneer as slaves are sold.

Black Man With Watermelon's discussion of his attempts to escape the dogs chasing him also echoes the experience of slavery. Although dogs are often used to track escaped prisoners and Black Man With Watermelon, since he has been executed, can be seen as a convict, his experience can also be read as that of an escaped slave. He recounts:

> I left my scent behind in uh bundle of old clothing that was not thrown out. Left thuh scent in thuh clothin in thuh clothin on uh rooftop. Dogs surround my house and laugh. They are mockin thuh scent that I left behind. I jumped in thuh water without uh word. I jumped in thuh water without a smell. (260)

His desperate and ultimately futile efforts reflect those of escaped slaves as they attempted to make their way north to freedom. Black Man With Watermelon's experience is further connected to that of a slave in that he is not free until he is dead. He explains, "When I dieded they cut me down. Didnt have no need for me no more. They let me go" (267). Just as an owner would have no use for a dead slave, the lynchers lose interest in Black Man With Watermelon once he is dead. These echoes of slavery can be connected to Park's refusal to provide a fixed determinate meaning for her work. "What did / do black people signify in a society in which they were intentionally introduced as the subjugated, as the enslaved cipher?" (Gates 1988: 47) Thus the rejection of a Western idea of signification can be seen as a questioning of white mainstream culture and its poor history with regard to blacks.

In addition to Parks's use of "Rep & Rev," her language is unconventional in that most of her characters speak in a southern black vernacular. She believes that the words themselves have a physical effect on the actor's delivery. "Words are spells which an actor consumes and digests — and through digesting creates a performance on stage. Each word is configured to give the actor a clue to their physical life. Look at the difference between 'the' and 'thuh.' The 'uh' requires the actor to employ a different physical, emotional, vocal attack." (1995: 11-12) Another example is Queen-then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut's line, "They used it on uhlong uhgoh still works every time" (260). By saying the more guttural "uhlong uhgoh" instead of the more nasal "long ago," the actor is forced to say the line more slowly. The vernacular does not function simply to complete the stereotypical image of characters such as Black Man With Watermelon, rather it functions as a protest in and of itself. As John Wideman explains:

> The discrepancy between a word in black speech and the same word in standard English can function symbolically to stylize, personalize, to appropriate a word . . . to secure . . . identity in the black speech community, an identity that slips the yoke and turns [it into a] joke . . . . Black speech is not simply faulty English but a witness to a much deeper fault, a crack running below the surface, a fatal flaw in the forms and pretensions of so-called civilized language . . . . " (quoted in *Four Score and Seven Years Ago*)

Similarly, Gates explains, "the black vernacular has assumed the singular role as the black person's ultimate sign of difference, a blackness of the tongue. It is in the vernacular that, since slavery, the black person has encoded private yet communal cultural rituals" (1988: xix). Thus Parks's dialogue demonstrates her command of language in that she takes standard English as material to be moulded into the various patterns of speech of her characters. Her focus on language and the way the play forces the viewer to consider the function of language also puts the work firmly within the African American tradition. Gates explains:

> . . . the literary discourse that is most consistently "black," as read against our tradition's own theory of itself, is the most figurative, and . . . the modes of interpretation most in accord with the vernacular tradition's theory of criticism are those that direct attention to the manner in which language is used. (1988: xxvii)

The language of many of her characters marks them as black, simultaneously connecting them to the community of African Americans, distinguishing them from mainstream white American culture, while demonstrating the influence of that dominant tradition. Similarly, her use of stereotypical representations as characters implies a power over those images. Just as some young African American collectors are driving the market for commercial art depicting images such as Aunt Jemima in order to declare themselves as "now bigger than the object" (*The Wall Street Journal* 7/3/96), Parks has taken these caricatures and made them her own. It would be comforting to read Parks's apparently unflinching use of these characters as a reflection of a lack of prejudice in society, as a growth beyond the culture that created and proliferated these images. This, of course, is not true. The difference in treatment of stereotypical images between Parks and Shange, as discussed below, reflects not a change in society during the decade and a half between the pieces, but rather a difference in the styles and attitudes of the playwrights. The prevalence of stereotypes within the history of the representation of African Americans can be seen as having "effectively erased the possibility of truthful representations of Black experience" (Chaudhuri 1995: 121). Thus while utilising these images, Parks also interrogates them. Black Man With Watermelon, for example, declares, "This [the melon] does not belong tuh me. Somebody planted this on me. On me in my hands" (253). This line, and the character's entire quest to determine if the melon is his, can be seen as a questioning of stereotypes. He is declaring that the grinning

black man happily eating watermelon is not him, the image is not his and the entire conceit has been created by others and pressed onto him. So Parks, using caricatures as characters, makes it clear that they are constructs of the dominant white culture but still material for her to use to her own ends.

Ntozake Shange - *spell #7*

Shange, born in New Jersey in 1948, grew up in a middle-class environment in St. Louis, Missouri. At the age of eight she was one of the first black children integrated into St. Louis's public schools, an experience which exposed her directly to American racism (Richards 1992: 67). She was educated at Barnard, and at the University of Southern California (Bryer 1995: 203) and reached adulthood in a world permeated by the turbulence and excitement of the peace protests and the Black Power/ Black Arts and women's movements (Richards 1992: 67). She has published fiction and poetry as well as plays, which she often refers to as theatre pieces. Her first play, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1975), was critically and commercially successful, with a Broadway production in 1976. When produced it was controversial because it presented an "honest appraisal of black women's emotional vulnerability, at a time when only positive images were acceptable to the black media" (Tate 1983: 149). This piece evolved from a series of ever-changing poems read in coffee houses in San Francisco. Shange declares that she lost interest in *for colored girls* when it became static and conformed to the "formal conventions of theatre. . . . I was never interested in it; I just thought it was so horrible that they wanted me to do the same poems in the same order every night" (quoted in Bryer 1995: 207). Shange, because her work for the stage generally evolves from her poetry, considers herself "a poet in american theater" (1981: ix) rather than a playwright. *Spell #7*, written for and first performed at the New York Shakespeare Festival in 1979, demonstrates her unconventional style both in language and in structure.

Shange, like Parks, does not write in straight formal English. Rather her words contain the elisions that occur in everyday speech, for example, "because" becomes "cuz" and could becomes "cd." She explains, "the spellings reflect language as I hear it" (quoted in Tate 1983: 163). The effect is that her work, while carefully crafted, has a very natural feel. When reading Shange's work, one is struck by her use of all lower case letters and the substitution of the backslash for the comma. She explains this is for "visual stimulation" (Tate 1983: 163), demonstrating her work's roots in poetry which would be read, and therefore seen on the

page, as often as heard.

The play's structure is circular rather than linear, beginning and ending with "a huge black-face mask hanging from the ceiling of the theater" (7). This "misrepresentation of life" (7), calls to mind the racist presentation of blacks in the American entertainment industry, both historically, particularly in the minstrel shows, and, though less prevalently, today. The mask, present as the audience enters and leaves the performance space and during the intermission, pervades the entire piece. Shange's stage directions explain that the black-face (in this case on the actors when they first appear on the stage) "belies" the promise of spell #7. The spell, whose incantation by lou the magician bookends the play, promises:

> & i'm fixin you up good/ fixin you up good & colored
> & you gonna be colored all yr life
> & you gonna love it/ bein colored/ all yr life/ colored & love it
> love it/ bein colored. SPELL #7! (8)

Lou casts his spell in reaction to a situation once faced by his father, explaining:

> my daddy retired from magic & took
> up another trade cuz this friend a mine
> from the 3rd grade/ asked to be made white
> on the spot (7)

In a society that demonises blackness, lou's childhood friend, like Toni Morrison's Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, sees whiteness as the answer. Morrison recounts that hearing a friend say she would like blue eyes revolted her and eventually inspired her to write her first novel (1993: 209). Here, the obscenity in the innocence of a child wishing to change a part of himself many consider basic causes lou's father to give up magic. Lou, however, instead of turning his back on his family's history, "a family of retired sorcerers/ active houngans & pennyante fortune tellers/ wit 41 million spirits/ critturs & celestial bodies on our side" (8), turns his friend's request around, saying "this is black magic" (8). Rather than eradicating blackness, lou is promising to make being "colored" something to be loved and celebrated.

Other than lou, the characters of the play consist of eli, a bartender and poet, and seven performers who are either actors, singers, or dancers. Once the actors drop their minstrel masks, they are in eli's bar where they can be themselves. The bar can be seen as the stage or the theatre, where, within the frame created by lou's spell, the characters, primarily through monologue, present a series of vignettes which highlight some of the many historical and current hardships faced by blacks, demonstrating the impossibility of this spell #7 in modern American society.

The story telling of Shange's characters, within the frame of *spell #7*, resembles many individual

performance pieces. Quite significantly, of course, these stories are written by Shange, not by the actors relating them. Shange's first play, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, as mentioned, came to theatres through a performance process that very closely resembles performance art, evolving from a series of ever-changing poems which she read in coffee houses. The play considered here, *spell #7*, was written in the late 1970s, so it would be inaccurate to portray the work as influenced by the greater public awareness of performance art. Rather it may be more accurate to see Shange as a type of performance artist, although she does not use this designation, whose work also includes writing plays, poetry, and novels. The stories told by the performers in *spell #7* do not necessarily relate to their own lives, even within the world of the play. The character natalie, for example, becomes sue-jean, saying, "my name is sue-jean" (28) and proceeding, with input from lou, to tell sue-jean's story in the first person. In this way, the stories are like the performance work of such artists as Anna Deveare Smith who, for example in her *Fires in the Mirror*, assumes the voices of various people who have told her their stories. By assuming different roles, such artists, as well as Shange's characters, can be seen as exploring aspects of their own personalities, while delving as deeply as possible into the situations of others.

Eli declares "i am mantling an array of strength & beauty/ no one shall interfere with this/ the construction of myself/ my city my theater/ my bar come to my poems/ but understand we speak english carefully" (12). With this focus on the power and precision of his language, eli can be interpreted as representing the poet, the playwright, or Shange herself, especially when he later says:

> i shout & sigh/ i am a poet/ i write poems
> i make words cartwheel & somersault down pages
> . . . i am a poet/
> i am not a part-time poet/ i am not a amateur poet/
> i dont even know what that person cd be/ whoever that is
> authorizing poetry as an avocation is a fraud . . . (25)

Just as Shange, as playwright, has provided an arena for her characters to exist, eli furnishes a place where the performers can be themselves, not the projection of white society's image of proper roles for black performers, represented by the minstrel mask. This endeavour, however, is dependent on lou's magic, lou being, perhaps, the muse to eli's poet. Saying, "in this place where magic stays/ you can let yrself in or out/ but when you leave yrself at home/ burglars & daylight thieves/ pounce on you & sell yr skin/ at cut-rates on tenth avenue" (27), lou reiterates that in the real world the play's characters are wanted only to play stereotypical roles. Outside the bar, male roles consist of "playing the fool or the black buck pimp circus" (44), while the most

prevalent black female role is that of "whore" (45). Lou, however, makes the giant minstrel mask disappear at the beginning of each act, thereby magically allowing the actors to play roles that are more true to life, permitting them to be worth more than the street value of their "skin." Here, as in much of African American literature, the existence of magic or the impossible is presented as commonplace. Just as Morrison's Milkman flies in *Song of Solomon* and Gloria Naylor's eponymous Mama Day makes the barren Bernice fertile, lou can as naturally do the amazing and banish the stereotypes of society at large. This magic, although powerful, does have limits. Mama Day cannot bring the dead to life and lou cannot make the outside world as safe and nurturing as eli's bar.

In addition to interrogating the tendency of the American entertainment industry to present only certain black images, the piece considers the different values society places on blackness and whiteness. Lou remarks:

> the whole world knows/ european & non-european alike/ the whole world knows that nobody loves the black woman like they love farrah fawcett-majors. the whole world dont turn out for a dead black woman like they did for marilyn monroe. (36)

Such inequity causes natalie to decide, "today i'm gonna be a white girl" (47). Her impression of a day in the life of a white woman is scathing and is largely summarised when she says, "all the white women in the world dont wake up being glad they aint niggahs/ only some of them/ the ones who dont/ wake up thinking how can i survive another day of this culturally condoned incompetence" (49).

Shange, like Lim, integrates music into her plays, saying, "music functions as another character" (1981: x). In *spell #7*, where the characters are performers, it is natural that there would be singing and dancing. Shange's use of music, however, is similar to Lim's in that she sees it as a reflection of her culture. She explains, "the reason that so many plays written to silence & stasis fail/ is cuz most black people have some music & movement in our lives. we do sing & dance. this is a cultural reality" (1981: x). This cultural reality, however, also holds a painful truth in that the historical success of many African Americans in entertainment, as well as sports, has existed and still exists alongside a failure of economic and social equality for blacks in general. For example, the character alec explains how alienated he feels growing up in St. Louis, "this is chuck berry's town disavowin miscega-nation" (10). The people of the city accept black music on the jukebox but not black people on the streets after dark. Unlike the music used by Lim, however, the music in *spell #7* would be familiar to most members of a racially mixed audience and therefore would have a different

effect than Lim's Cantonese influenced music. While the music of *Bitter Cane* would evoke a sense of the exotic or alien to a non-Chinese audience, the songs of Smokey Robinson or Bob Marley sung by Shange's characters would feel very familiar to an American audience. The music thereby helps to coax the audience into feeling comfortable as the play simultaneously presents very disturbing situations, allowing Shange to bring the audience to "the depths of hell" as discussed below.

Shange's stage directions explain that eli's bar is "a safe haven for these 'minstrels' off from work. . . . it is safe because it is segregated & magic reigns" (13). The characters enact their vignettes here because "they are free to be themselves, to reveal secrets, fantasies, nightmares, or hope" (13). The various stories told by the performers do not mesh into a seamless unified vision of what it 'means' to be African American. Rather the audience is presented with an emotion-wrenching collage of images and ideas. Describing how she hopes to structure her plays in order to manipulate her audiences, Shange says:

> I'm still always moving toward 'We're going to start out very nice and you're going to feel very comfortable. The audience is going to trust me; they know they are going to have a really nice time because these are all such pretty things we're talking about and this is really nice.' They relax, and they relax a little more, and then once they're relaxed like that, then we can go into the depths of hell — and they can't get out because they're relaxed already! . . . I want to take them to a place where they know that they have survived their own vulnerability and somebody else's. (quoted in Bryer 1995: 214)

One can see this structure operating in *spell #7*. The play consists of two acts and each act consists of a series of thought-provoking stories and ends with an extremely disturbing story. Act one ends with the tale of sue-jean, "a ordinary colored girl with no claims to any thing/ or anyone/ i drink now/ bourbon/ in harder times/ beer/ but i always wanted to have a baby/ a lil boy/ named myself" (28). She becomes pregnant and is very happy, a changed person, "she waz someone she had never known/ she waz herself with child/ & she waz a wonderful bulbous thing" (30). After the baby, named 'myself,' is born, she is content until he wants to crawl, causing her to believe that she is losing her sense of self, a feeling she had only when myself was totally dependant on her. She then wants her pregnancy back, wants myself back inside her, so she slits the baby's wrists and "sucked the blood back into [her]self/ & waited/ myself shriveled up in his crib" (31). She feels herself to be pregnant again, feels the baby kicking inside her, "& waz heavy & full all her life/ with 'myself'" (32). The horror of a life so empty and lonely that such an act can be committed lingers. Sue-jean's need for a sense of self is so strong and pathological that she destroys what she should nurture, yet feels no pain or sorrow.

The final story of act two involves maxine who as a child believed, "it waz obvious that god had protected the colored folks from polio . . . if god had made colored people susceptible to polio/ then we wd be on the pictures & the television with the white children. i knew only white folks cd get that particular disease/ & i celebrated" (50). The invisibility of black polio victims in the media becomes an absence of them in reality for the young maxine. As a child she was also taught "only white people hurt little colored girls or grown colored women/ my mama told me only white people had social disease & molested children/ and my grandma told me only white people committed unnatural acts" (51). When she grows older, however, she learns that black people are capable of the same cruelty and inhumanity as whites and she:

> commenced to buying pieces of gold/ 14 carat/ 24 carat/ 18 carat gold/ every time some black person did something that was beneath him as a black person & more like a white person. i bought gold cuz it came from the earth/ & more than likely it came from south africa/ where the black people are humiliated & oppressed like in slavery. i wear all these things at once/ to remind the black people that it cost a lot for us to be here/ our value/ can be known instinctively/ but since so many black people are having a hard time not being like white folks/ i wear these gold pieces to protest their ignorance/ their disconnect from history. (51)

Unlike Lim's character Kam, discussed below, maxine does not unthinkingly blame one person for the misery she observes, but rather understands that it is part of a system which she hopes can be changed through awareness. Sandra Richards believes that the characters of sue-jean and maxine "arrest processes of self-discovery, opting instead to remain in a liminal state on the verge of creative action" (1992: 71). Sue-jean, for example, had intended that "myself waz gonna be safe from all that his mama/ waz prey to" (29), but instead he is a victim of those evils through her. She could have given her own life meaning, not by living for him or through him, but with him, helping to make sure he lead a better life than her own. She elects, however, to destroy her barely begun endeavour, reverting to a forever expectant state. Similarly, maxine fails to create anything more positive than a symbol. She is destroyed by the realisation that blacks can be as bad as whites, saying, "my entire life seems to be worthless" (51). Maxine seems to believe the symbol of the gold she wears is powerful enough to remind people of one another's humanity, yet she says, "i weep as i fix the chains round my neck/ my wrists/ my ankles" (51), giving her act a sense of hopelessness. Her actions, although not randomly violent, can be seen as self-destructive in that she must wear pounds and pounds of gold. She is in effect bearing the burden of the inhumane behaviour she observes. The tragedy of maxine's story is not simply racism but the cruelty of people to one another. As with Finley's "father in all of us," this is an evil that goes beyond color and gender and may lurk within everyone — a truly troubling thought.

Shange succeeds, with both sue-jean and maxine, in bringing the audience to the "depths of hell". Each of their narratives "are structured so that audiences are likely to be engaged by elements of the familiar and yet disturbed or repelled by the transgression of behavioral norms" (Richards 1992: 71). For example, with sue-jean, the somewhat comforting image of a fallen woman whose life is given meaning by motherhood is followed by her shocking violation of the expected role of nurturer. Maxine's narrative begins with a familiar, although not comforting, consideration of white racism which segues into a more disturbing discussion of humanity's inhumanity and the bizarre notion of a woman completely weighed down with gold that is more albatross than treasure.

Maxine's story is followed by the reappearance of lou who has the entire cast repeat over and over his promise, "colored & love it/ love it/ bein colored" (52). Maxine, however, "has introduced the suspicion that salvation will never come, that the victims of oppression will become as inhumane as their oppressors" (Richards 1992: 71). The effect is that the play ends with a battle for the audience's impression as they leave the performance to the chant of the cast in their ears and the memory of maxine, as well as the other narratives, in their minds. Despair, hope, or some combination depend on the nuances of production and the perception of each audience member. Shange herself accepts the more pessimistic view of the play's ending. She explains that after the "true visions & rigors [of the characters are] laid bare/ down from the ceiling comes the huge minstrel face/ laughing at all of us for having been so game/ we believed we cd escape his powers/ how naive cd we be" (1981: xiii).

*Cruz*

Hispanic Americans, expected soon to outpace African Americans as the country's largest minority, are actually composed of people from many different countries and cultures who find political expediency in defining themselves as a group. Migdalia Cruz is Puerto Rican, living and working in New York City, home of the largest concentration of Puerto Ricans in the mainland United States. Puerto Ricans in the city have coined the name Nuyorican to describe themselves, capturing their sense of New York City as home as well as their abiding identification with Puerto Rican culture.

Puerto Rico has been a commonwealth of the United States since 1898 when America defeated Spain in the Spanish-American war. Puerto Ricans are automatically United States citizens, yet if they remain on

the island, rather than moving to the mainland, they do not pay federal income tax and cannot vote for the United States President. Additionally, decisions of the Puerto Rican legislature can be overturned by the Congress of the United States. Thus the relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States is very much one of colonised and coloniser. (Velez 1997: xii-xiii) Puerto Ricans living in the United States must deal with the attitude of many Americans that they are second class citizens. Also, due to the "blending of Indian, black, and white bloodlines" (Santiago 1995: xviii), Puerto Ricans in the United States are also faced with racism. Many maintain that "race is not perceived as an issue on the island by Puerto Ricans of any pigmentation" (Rodriguez 1995: 84), perhaps because they "come in so many shades" (Torres 1995: 192). In America, however, Puerto Rican sensibilities are often influenced by the racist society. Roberto Santiago, having grown up in New York City, recounts:

> I would hear Puerto Rican mothers sigh with relief when the dark-skinned men their daughters brought home turned out to be Puerto Rican. Their sons might be sitting there with ebony-colored skin and the nappiest afro you ever saw — but he wasn't black (whew!). He was Puerto Rican! (1995: xxvi)

Puerto Ricans see themselves bound together by a distinct culture that is not dependent on race. This contrasts sharply with most Americans for whom "racial identification, to a large extent, determines cultural identification" (Rodriguez 1995: 83). Puerto Ricans therefore do not fit neatly within American racial rhetoric which focuses on black versus white and they "are not accepted by blacks or whites as a culturally distinct, racially integrated group, but are rather perceived and consequently treated as either black or white Puerto Ricans" (Rodriguez 1995: 86).

Like African American women who are victims of both racism and sexism, Puerto Rican women "have suffered under U.S. colonialism *together with* men, [and] they have also suffered *because of* the sexism of their men" (1997: Velez x). Much of this sexism results from the strong influence of the Catholic church in Puerto Rico, which, as in other Hispanic countries, "has placed taboos on female sexuality making the Hispanic woman ashamed of her own body and unable to openly discuss her sexual experience outside secret confines" (Feyder 1992: 5). This has resulted in "marianismo — that behavioral code which elevates women to a virgin's pedestal wherein they are immobilized" (Velez 1997: xi). For Puerto Rican women living on the island and in the United States, "virtue and modesty [are], by cultural equation, the same as family honor" (Cofer 1995:103), requiring women not only to be sexually virtuous but also to appear so. Because women are considered either Madonnas or whores "and one of the criteria for making this judgement is the way in

which a woman speaks" (Velez 1997: iii), and by extension writes, writing appears to be a powerful tool in the subversion of sexism. The language of women "should be gentle, non-threatening, even nurturing. . . . [and] should not refer to sexual things by their names" (Velez 1997: iii) taboos that are clearly broken by Cruz and her character Miriam.

Migdalia Cruz - *Miriam's Flowers*

Cruz's play, written in the late 1980s, centres on the Nieves, a Puerto Rican family living in the Bronx in the mid-1970s. The already tenuous family structure, consisting of Miriam, her half-brother, Puli, their mother, Delfina, and Nando, Delfina's lover and Puli's father, is further strained by Puli's death. He has been killed by a train while chasing a baseball and his senseless death causes enormous suffering for the rest of his family. The play focuses primarily on the agony of his mother and sister, relating it to Catholicism and the relationship between sex and suffering for Hispanic women. This is especially apparent in the self-mutilation and sexual debasement indulged in by sixteen-year-old Miriam, who sees these injuries, outward displays of her inner torture, as a reflection of the sufferings of Christ.

The play has an air of magical realism. The scenes of life in the South Bronx are grimly realistic, but the appearance of the dead Puli throughout the play lends an element of mysticism. The influence of Catholicism is also highlighted during the play. Cruz specifies that the set should contain three altars, one in the Nieves' apartment, a church altar, and a funeral home altar, and that the candles should burn during the entire course of the play. This creates an atmosphere saturated by religion and a sense of ritual. Cruz also specifies the music to be played during various scenes. The popular music, primarily by the Jackson Five, a favourite of Puli's, with young Michael Jackson singing the lead permeates the air with the sounds of a young boy. The twenty-year-old music serves to provide a nostalgic sense of time and, especially considering the changes to the Jackson family, an air of innocence lost.

The play is oddly circular, beginning with Delfina comforting Miriam who has awakened from a nightmare, screaming, and ending with Miriam comforting Delfina's dead body after her suicide. The agony of the women, although extremely different in its manifestation in each of them, is incredibly destructive for both and it is this devastation around which the play revolves. Similarly, Cruz specifies that Puli's white coffin "must appear in the same place" (53) as the bathtub in which Delfina drowns herself, ending her

suffering where it began, with Puli's death.

The audience learns, through conversation between mother and daughter in scene two, that Puli is dead although Delfina refuses to admit it. Puli, claiming, "I'm a ghost" (55), takes part in the next two scenes in what could be memories of the other characters, or, alternatively, an indication that the pain of the other characters is so strong they are unable to let Puli go. The feelings of Miriam and Delfina can be described as "duende," a Spanish word with no English equivalent, which the Spanish playwright Frederico Garcia Lorca described as "the black pain we cannot get rid of except by taking a knife and opening a deep buttonhole in our left side" (quoted in Jenness 1997: 3). Each woman feels her loss so deeply that self-destruction is the only available response. Cruz, by interspersing scenes containing Puli with scenes of the family after his death, highlights the enormous impact of his loss. The scenes with Puli are light and playful, with Nando and Puli playing catch or with Miriam and Puli teasing one another. The carefree nature of these scenes accentuates the horror of the other scenes of Miriam's self-mutilation and Delfina's slipping mental state. The scenes with Puli, occurring unexpectedly and unexplained, parallel the way in which thoughts of a loved one descend unbidden upon the bereaved.

The relatively stable family structure brings no comfort to the two women. Nando, although not Miriam's father, attempts to play a paternal role in her life. For example, he gets into a fight with men who have been discussing Miriam in a sexual way, perhaps due to her habit of exposing herself to strangers. He says:

> I fixed it for you. They don't say nothin' about what's mine. They look at girls and say bad things. Anybody looks at you, you tell me. You tell your papi, and I'll kill them. Nobody looks at my baby girl like that. I see them looking at little girls and touching themselves. I showed them my knife. They won't look at you no more . . . LOOK AT ME, MIRIAM! (79)

Defending a woman's sexual honour is a typical role for a Puerto Rican father or older brother, especially on the island of Puerto Rico where the main rule behind the machismo is "You may look at my sister, but if you touch her I will kill you" (Cofer 1995: 104). As evident from Nando's quote above, there is a certain amount of sexual tension between Miriam and Nando, which, especially from a Freudian understanding of family dynamics, in no way compromises his role as a father figure. He complains to Delfina that Miriam is always staring at him, but Delfina maintains, "You're the one who stares at her . . . I seen you do it." To which he replies, "It's just . . . I just don't know what to say to her." He then "enters her roughly from behind" (69).

Miriam, in turn, says hateful things to him and criticises him to Delfina. The fury with which she treats Nando is so intense it appears to be intimately involved with her grief at the death of Puli, as well as a manifestation of the sexual tension between the two. Nando also seems to feel some responsibility for Puli's death. While talking to his grave he says, "Women don't unnerstan'. They expect you to be there all the time, watching over everything. I can't be in two places at the same time, Puli. I know you know that. I'm no fockin' magician" (60). Scene twelve, which has no dialogue, consists of Nando playing catch with Puli who misses a catch and runs after it, ending this scene. It is not stated, but this is perhaps a memory of the scene of Puli's death, thereby explaining Nando's guilt and Miriam's furious hatred. Alternatively, this may be a memory of a happier time when Nando was able to be there with his son, while his death occurred when Nando was not there to protect him, a scenario that would also explain Nando's guilt.

Miriam calls Nando, "you fuckin' killer" (74), but apparently also blames Delfina who drunkenly says, "You're still blaming me, you bitch. And you're the one shoulda been there. You should always watch out for your baby brother" (78). Perhaps due to conflicting feelings of guilt and blame, Delfina is not comforted by the strong love Nando feels for her, telling him, "You love me too much" (57). While again talking to Puli's grave, Nando explains his feelings for Delfina, "She's like a stick for me that I don't ever wanna be without, like the ones people use when they're pulling themselves up mountains" (73). Thus Delfina's presence provides stability for Nando while his tenacious love for her is insufficient to stem her soul-destroying grief. Nando's failure to save Delfina becomes clear in scene twenty-three, which seems to be a turning point in the play. The scene begins with Nando describing to Puli's grave how the ice cream pop sticks he has used to make the birdcage he holds for Delfina will serve to bind the two of them together. The sticks make him think of her and having the birdcage, with its smell of chocolate from the ice cream pop sticks, will make her think of him. His speech is simple yet very erotically romantic. Miriam, however, in an intensely nasty rage destroys the birdcage before he can give it to Delfina. After this, Nando never appears in a scene with Delfina, except for one memory scene in which the whole family, including Puli, sings.

In addition to Nando's inability to console Delfina, the two women fail to comfort one another. Each is so consumed with her own grief that her efforts to reach out toward the other are not effective. Wanting to suffer physically in reaction to the emotional pain she feels, Miriam begins to carve flowers into her arms. She says she got the idea from a library book which "tells all about how when saints bleed, they smell like

violets" (62). She also tells her thirty-five-year-old, married boyfriend, Enrique, that she has been exposing herself to strange men and having sex with them. She explains, "Every time one of them slipped his dick inside me, I felt that train running over Puli's face — crushing him, beating him down into the dirt between the rails. I imagined my body was Puli's being smashed into the tracks, smearing the tracks wif his blood" (64). Even more disturbingly she reveals to Enrique, "I cut my pussy sometimes wif a nail clipper. I jus' clip off little parts and then I pump and pump until I come so there's blood on my pillow — so I know somefin' fuckin' happened" (64). The pain Miriam feels over Puli's death has so completely numbed her that she must inflict physical injury upon herself in order to feel anything at all. Interestingly, much of the self-destruction Miriam practices is sexual in nature. Clearly this is true of her sexual encounters with strangers, but also the mutilation of her own genitals is a prelude to masturbation. Even the flowers she carves into her arms have a sexual connection in that she must bribe Enrique with sex in order to obtain the type of razor blades she prefers. Thus the typical Catholic relationship with sex, namely sex followed by guilt and suffering, is perverted and sex becomes an integral part of suffering itself. In fact, for Miriam, sex is worthwhile solely as a way to achieve the pain she seeks. Her masochism can be seen as a strategy to survive the crisis which Puli's death has caused, if as Leo Bersani proposes, "masochism serves life" and through it "the human organism survives the gap between the period of shattering stimuli and the development of resistant or defensive ego structures" (1986:39). He notes that sexuality includes both "fore-pleasure and end-pleasure, the pleasure of tension and the satisfaction of discharge" (1986: 34). Although Bersani is speaking specifically of male sexuality, the release he terms discharge can be read as female orgasm as well as male, while "the pleasurable unpleasurable tension of sexual excitement occurs when the body's 'normal' range of sensation is exceeded, and when the organization of the self is momentarily disturbed by sensations or affective processes somehow 'beyond' those compatible with psychic organization" (1986: 38). Miriam's self-inflicted pain can be seen as causing such "sensations . . . 'beyond' those compatible with psychic organization." In Bersani's model and for Miriam, the goal of sexuality becomes as much an increase in this tension as a drive toward dissipation, while increasing this tension works to hold off dissipation. Death, the ultimate discharge, is held off by Miriam's masochistic activities. Unlike Delfina, for whom death provides release, Miriam seeks physical pain and degradation, acts which keep her connected with life.

Miriam's use of sex contrasts drastically with many of Finley's characters who, as discussed above,

use sex as a violent weapon with which to assert power and inflict pain on others. In both pieces, however, sex fails to operate as a coming together of people who love and desire, but instead is tied to injury and sorrow. Miriam's description of her anonymous sexual encounters resemble the voice of a Finley persona, both in her unpleasantly graphic language and in the hyperbolic details which make the situation seem somehow surreal. She says, "I smeared those mens. I shit when they fucked me. I shit outta my mouf. They pumped so hard I felt their dicks coming outta my mouf" (64). Miriam's description of her sexual encounters is so hyperbolic that it appears, at least in part to be a fabrication or a fantasy. Clearly, as witnessed by Nando's fight over her and by Delfina scolding Miriam saying, "You been showing it again, haven't you? . . . Your coco is gonna dry up, you keep it out in the air like that" (78), Miriam is exposing herself. Fantasising about anonymous sexual encounters may be a manifestation of both her grief about Puli and the unacknowledged sexual attraction she feels for Nando. Miriam, whether her anonymous sexual encounters are real or fantasy, is openly flouting the religious and cultural codes which in the Puerto Rican community, both on the island and in the United States, "classify all women as either 'good' women or whores" (Velez 1997: iii). This can be seen as a masochistic attempt to degrade herself and her family, while disregarding the rules of a world that has caused her pain.

That Miriam, emotionally young enough to still be afraid of the dark, is having or fantasising about sex with strangers as well as with Enrique, who is old enough to be her father, can be read as reflecting the dysfunctional inner-city environment in which she is being raised as well as the effects of her overwhelming grief. Cruz, however, uses the family's poverty merely as a backdrop for her exploration of the effects of loss and grief. Clearly the family's economic state does not make their situation easier, yet there is no indication that a lack of money is the cause of significant problems. The characters seem to take their poverty for granted, while it is the loss of Puli that pulls their lives apart. The poverty of the family, despite Nando's job at the post office, is apparent during Delfina's monologue about Puli's burial clothes. The shirt he wears is a cast-off from a woman at church; his sneakers were purchased with charity money Miriam begged from the church; and the socks he wears are Miriam's because all of his have holes in them. While this scene makes the Nieves' economic state seem dire, any distress it causes pales in comparison to the family's grief.

Miriam associates her own sufferings with those of Christ, particularly in two church scenes in front of a statue of Mary holding the crucified Jesus. She discusses her wounds with Jesus, saying, "I bet you bled a

lot more than I do. Look. I don' bleed hardly at all" (67). And, touching the wounds carved into the statue, she remarks, "They feel so fresh, Jesus. Like mine. I can smell the blood on them" (71). In these scenes, she also connects her self-inflicted injuries to her need to feel something, if only pain. Carving her arm and letting the blood drip onto Jesus, she asks, "See? You remember how it is, now? To be alive?" (67-68). She later explains to the statue that sometimes the flowers she carves into herself are "so pretty they make me cry, and I like that, 'cause it hurts so bad. Does that happen to you, too?" (71). By connecting her own agony to that of Christ, Miriam seems to be trying to bring some meaning to her own situation. The senseless death of the young, innocent Puli mystifies Miriam and Christ's sufferings are similarly senseless until put into the context of Christianity. Miriam is drawn to the sense of order that Catholicism appears to bring to the disarray and pain of her life.

Delfina's suffering is reflected in her mental breakdown. After first refusing to admit Puli is dead, she begins taking ritualistic long baths with Miriam washing her hair. These bathings are the only positive interaction between the two women. Other scenes between the two primarily involve arguments with Miriam criticising Nando, while Delfina attempts to persuade Miriam to give up exposing herself to strange men and cutting her arms. That these baths take place in a tub located at the same spot on stage as Puli's coffin in his funeral scene illustrates how, despite their difficulties and their failure to save one another, the women are deeply connected by Puli's death. In the last bath that Miriam gives Delfina, Delfina is clearly insane. She urinates on herself and refuses to take off her clothes. She finally allows Miriam to partially undress her, but gets into the tub still wearing her underwear. The attitude of the two women toward clothing demonstrates that each has internalised the Madonna/whore dichotomy of Puerto Rican culture which has been pressed upon them, with Delfina taking on the role of Madonna and Miriam the role of whore. Their use of clothing is a further manifestation of their suffering. Delfina, who suffers internally with little external display, is very reluctant to remove her clothes and display her body. Miriam says of her, "She is the only person I know who keeps her underwear on to the very last minute in case she dies in there [the bathroom], in case the police have to come and take her away — or the firemen" (72). Suffering, for Delfina, is, like her body, something to be hidden and denied. She attempts to show no pain, saying of Miriam, "She's not strong like me" (62). For Miriam, on the other hand, pain, which she works to make part of her physical body, is something to be shown. Displaying her body, in fact, is part of the injury she inflicts upon herself.

Delfina takes her final bath alone. She removes only her shoes, enters the tub crossing herself and holding her rosary. Interestingly, this is Delfina's only religious action in the entire play. She has an altar in her home yet it is only Miriam who is ever seen to use it. The end of this scene is ambiguous, but in the next scene we discover that Delfina has drowned. Miriam is singing to her mother and gently comforting her as she carves flowers into her arms. For Miriam, these flowers will both bind her mother to her and give Delfina the same connection to the saints that Miriam feels she has acquired. She says:

> You're gonna open your eyes and the first thing you're gonna see are these flowers climbing way up your arm and you're gonna be so happy. They gonna make you feel like spring inside. And they'll remind you of me. We'll always be the same now. We got so much together . . . . Now, they'll treat you like a saint. (83)

The play demonstrates an affinity with performance art through the many monologues of the characters. Each surviving member of the family has at least one monologue in which they either speak to Puli or about Puli. These are much like many performance pieces that explore personal or quasi-autobiographical aspects of the performer's life. Both Hughes and Finley, for example, at many times during their pieces appear to be drawing on details from their own lives. Forte sees this conversational quality of some performance art as primarily female, declaring, "This 'position of intimacy' is one of the most noteworthy characteristics of women's performance, and one of the primary appeals of the genre for women" (1990: 257). The work of performance artist Spalding Gray, a male, whose act draws on his own life and is presented as autobiography in a conversational style, however, is very much like the monologues of Cruz's characters. The presence of dead Puli as the audience for the characters' performances, within the frame of the stage, also mirrors the relationship between performance artist and audience. Performance artists often have a more personal relationship with an audience than do actors in traditional theatre, with the performance artist often attempting to provoke a response from, rather than just emotionally impact on or educate, the audience. Similarly, as they speak to Puli, Cruz's characters feel a very personal closeness to him, as they desperately but futilely seek a response.

Miriam also has two short monologues in church, talking to a statue of Mary holding the crucified body of Christ. During these monologues, she mutilates her arms and discusses the mutilation. This reflects the body-focused work of early performance artists such as Chris Burden, whose 1971 piece *Shoot* consisted of a friend shooting him in the arm with a rifle (Carlson 1996: 103). These scenes also uncannily reflect the more recent self-mutilation-as-art of Bob Flanagan who, before his death from cystic fibrosis, explored the

connections between sickness, pain, and sexuality as documented in the film *Sick*. An important distinction between such body art and Miriam's mutilations is that the bodies of the performance artists are often actually put through the rigors of what is represented, while the actor playing Miriam only pretends to carve her arms. Clearly, the character Miriam can be perceived as psychotic, while the actor behind the character is not, but merely portrays psychosis. In this way, however, the mutilations acted by the person playing Miriam can be connected to what Diamond calls Finley's "symbolic defilement (chocolate pudding = excrement, alfalfa sprouts = sperm)" (1995: 164). Finley does actually use her body, yet the defilement of that body is with pudding and sprouts, not excrement and sperm. Such is the impact of her performance, however, that she effectively reflects the psychotic nature of contemporary society, while the actor portraying Miriam demonstrates the insanity of an individual. The acted mutilation and the performed defilement are both disturbing, yet, with both, an audience would always understand, as Diamond says of Finley's pieces, that "this is true performance, not true psychosis" (1995: 165).

*Lim*

Asian Americans, the so-called model minority and "the nation's fastest growing ethnic group" (Dao 1988: B11), obviously consist of immigrants from all the countries in Asia and their descendants. The Chinese, the first Asians to immigrate to the United States in significant numbers, found prejudice and misunderstanding in the country they called Gold Mountain. The European-influenced culture of most of America is at odds with many Chinese beliefs and customs, resulting in each group viewing the other as rude and barbarous. For example, in the United States, direct eye contact is valued but in China looking someone directly in the eyes while they speak is considered to imply that one is looking for lies (Kingston 1976: 133). Therefore, Americans deemed Chinese immigrants to be "shifty-eyed" while the newly arrived Chinese felt Americans to be extremely impolite. Thus much Chinese American literature, such as Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, and Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*, deal with second-generation Chinese Americans caught between cultures. Alternatively, the most famous Chinese American playwright, David Henry Hwang, often writes about historical situations in China with a view informed by his American upbringing, for example in *M Butterfly* and his most recent *Golden Child*. *Bitter Cane* is more like a Hwang piece in topic in that it is set in the past and deals with Chinese characters who do not see themselves as

immigrants, but rather as temporary workers in Hawaii.

Genny Lim - *Bitter Cane*

Genny Lim was born in San Francisco in 1946, to first generation Chinese immigrants. She studied at San Francisco State University and Columbia University (Uno 1993: 12-13). She wrote her first play, *Paper Angels*, about life in a Chinese immigrant detention centre, in 1978, after examining poetry discovered on the walls of the Angel Island detention centre in San Francisco Bay (Houston 1993: 23). Lim, as an Asian American playwright is part of a relatively recent tradition, in that the first Asian American play was written only in 1928 by Gladys Li. Velina Hasu Houston explains that the prevalence of women writing Asian American dramatic literature as well as the fact that the first play was written by a woman echoes "the ancient historical patterns of culture and mythology in many native Asian societies" (1993: 21), in which women played a significant role.

*Bitter Cane* was written in 1989 and takes place on a Hawaiian plantation, during the mid-1800s, where Chinese labourers work cutting sugarcane. Sixteen-year-old Wing Chung Kuo has come to the plantation after the death of his mother who has begged, "Do not kill me with shame as did your father" (165). His father, Lau Hing Juo, came to the plantation, when Wing was a child, to earn money for his family but instead, according to Wing, "The money he should have sent home he squandered on himself" (179). Wing plans to redeem his family name, which he feels was stained by his father's behaviour, to work hard and achieve a better life in accordance with the myth of the American dream. Wing meets Kam Su, a cutter with only one year left on his contract, who uses opium and visits prostitutes, two vices that Wing believes he will never fall prey to. Kam shows him the ropes, explaining how to cut the cane and how to avoid being stung by wasps in the field. The character of Kam, in particular, drives home the oppression of the labourers brought to Hawaii to work on the plantation. They are forced to live apart from their families or must postpone the starting of a family, while their senses are dulled and they are lulled into accepting their situation by the opium provided by the plantation owners. Just before meeting Wing, Kam sings:

> Hawaii, Hawaii
> so far, far from home,
> Hawaii, Hawaii
> My bones ache and my heart breaks
> thinking about the ones I left behind.
> Hawaii, Hawaii

so far, far from home
For every cane I cut, there are a thousand more
With so many days to pay.
Hawaii, Hawaii
Don't let me die of misery.
Don't bury me under the cane fields.

which evokes the wretchedness of the labourers' life. Kam predicts, "I give you a month before you're as depraved as the rest of us" (171). Wing rejects Kam's description of how life on the plantation can change a person, "Not me. I'm going to make my village proud" (172).

Kam introduces Wing to Li-Tai, a prostitute, who had been Lau's lover. Kam does not realise Wing is Lau's son and Wing knows nothing about his father's experiences on the plantation. The ghost of Lau, which watches over the proceedings of the play, appears periodically to Li-Tai. She therefore, at first glance, mistakes Wing for his father, gasping, "You?" (177), when he appears at her door. She realises Wing is Lau's son when he tells her that his father died on the plantation and reveals his name. She, nevertheless, does not refuse his business, apparently because Wing's looks rekindle the love she felt for his father. Wing, after making love to Li-Tai, his first sexual experience, with the ghost of Lau watching as if reliving the experience, falls in love and decides he wants to marry her. He spends all his time with her, so much so that Kam must cover for him at work. When Wing tells Kam of his desire to marry Li-Tai, Kam attempts to dissuade him by telling him a story:

> I seen one fella waste himself over her. He was a top cutter too. The best on Kahuku. Worked like the devil to buy her off Fook Ming, but when she refused him, he went mad. He deserted one night, went to her cabin, but she just laughed at him. He couldn't take it. Went completely insane. Poor Lau Hing. (187)

Wing recognises the name of his father and realises that he "never went back to China because of her" (188). Kam, as much as Li-Tai, can be seen as a bridge between father and son. By introducing Wing to the ways of the plantation and then covering for him with the foreman, he has acted as a father figure. Further, Wing usurps him in Li-Tai's affections just as he seems to have done to his father. Finally, here Kam is clearly the means by which Wing begins to learn the truth about his father, a truth that will ultimately lead to reconciliation.

The next scene takes place three months later and opens with the ghost of Lau, to the music of a flute, pretending to catch cicadas for Li-Tai's cricket cage. About her use of music in the play, Lim says, "Even though I'm American born I come from a bilingual, bicultural context. The English language is limiting for me. To break out of that construct I integrate music, movement, voice, poetry and visual art which bring in

the Cantonese feeling" (quoted in Uno 1993: 14). Kam's earlier song created a sense of suffering perhaps more strongly than possible with dialogue alone. Here the music serves to make Lau's actions an almost magical dance, which contrasts sharply with the plantation workers, Kam and Wing, shown as the lights go up on their side of the stage. Due to his discovery, Wing has stopped seeing Li-Tai and has thrown himself savagely into his cane cutting. Fook, the foreman of the plantation and Li-Tai's pimp, notices Wing's hard work and promotes him to his second in command. While promoting him, however, Fook simultaneously degrades Wing by tossing a silver dollar at his feet, demonstrating that any minor financial gain made by the labourers is more than paid for with a loss of dignity.

After Kam tells him that Li-Tai is wasting away due to her opium addiction, Wing goes to confront her, saying, "You knew he was my father, but you didn't care. I told you who my father was and yet you made love to me. How could you? What kind of a woman are you?" (192). During the course of their argument, Li-Tai reveals to Wing that his father was actually half Hawaiian and therefore cheated out of his inheritance because he was not fully Chinese, because of traditional Chinese suspicion of foreigners stemming from the country's relatively isolated history (Parrinder 1971: 304) and prejudice against people of mixed race. Wing is shocked and decides that the best course of action is for the couple to escape to Honolulu, saying, "We'll change our names and our family histories. We'll start all over" (195). In spite of everything the couple admits to loving one another and Wing succeeds in persuading Li-Tai to run away with him.

On the night Wing and Li-Tai are to leave, Kam comes to Li-Tai to convince her to stop seeing Wing and accuses her of causing Lau's suicide. Kam's motive here appears to be a combination of jealousy and sincere concern that Wing does not meet the same fate as his father. Li-Tai admits she refused to run away with Lau because she was afraid of the menial life they would be forced to lead. She exclaims, "That day Lau insisted I run away with him to the mainland, I became terrified. The idea of freedom was as frightening as death" (198). As a Chinese woman, likely raised on Confucian ideals that assign women the lowest rung on the social ladder (Wong 1993: 28), Li-Tai accepts to a certain degree her subordination to men such as Fook. Traditional sayings like "Girls are maggots in the rice" (Kingston 1976: 43) and "Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds" (Kingston 1976: 46) could serve to make a lowly status seem natural to women such as Li-Tai. Her life as a prostitute, with its known and therefore accepted degradation, is less terrifying than the unknown she would have faced with Lau. She has been "so scarred by domestic and cultural oppression that she chose

sexual slavery over freedom because the uncertainties and risks of freedom were too frightening" (Houston 1993: 28). Li-Tai, when compared to Henley's Macon and Bess or to Wasserstein's sisters, discussed below, appears to be weak. Lim, however, sees her as strong and sees the insistence that strength leads to triumph, "as a Western interpretation and definition of feminism — that women should have to take on the patriarchal value system and . . . conquer in the same way that Western heroes conquer. My characters are strong but they don't function like Western heroes" (quoted in Uno 1993: 14). Lim is not alone among Asian American writers in her rejection of the Western conception of heroism. King-Kok Cheung observes "many [Asian American] women writers and scholars, building on existentialist and modernist insights, are reassessing the entire Western code of heroism . . . question[ing] such traditional values as competitive individualism and martial valor" (1990: 237). Chinese American literature, for example, contains many examples of women who are strong but do not necessarily triumph, for example the mothers in both Ng's *Bone* and Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. (Perhaps, in fact, young Maxine's attraction, as a second generation and therefore more Westernised Chinese American, to the myth of the Woman Warrior is that she triumphs in a Western heroic fashion.) In Chinese, one word for the female I is "slave" (Kingston 1976: 47), which may serve to internalise a sense of self-sacrifice for many woman and create a definition of 'female' necessitating selfless toil for others. Lim's version of female strength is anathema from a Western feminist point of view in that it appears to coincide with a patriarchal view of women as natural masochists. As Nancy Miller explains, critiquing aspects of Freudianism which equate suffering with the feminine, "To carry such a notion to its logical conclusion, abuse is not only good for woman but the very thing she craves" (1990: 117). This complex issue in large part hinges on the value of self-sacrifice. Is it ennobling or does acclaiming women's sacrifice buy into a patriarchal definition of femininity which is harmful to women?

Li-Tai goes on to explain that as a result of her rejection, Lau drowned himself, a fate with special resonance for the Chinese who particularly fear the ghosts of the drowned (Kingston 1976: 16). Kam, who clearly also loves Li-Tai, asks her to leave with him when his contract is up but she refuses. After Kam leaves, the ghost of Lau appears, gives Li-Tai a bundle, and asks her to come with him. She steps into the red robe he holds for her, symbolically agreeing to join him in death. Red, the color of good luck and rejoicing in Chinese culture, is used on wedding dresses (Wong 1993: 34), thus Li-Tai can be seen as agreeing to marry Lau and escape with him in death, the act she refused when they were both alive.

As Wing arrives to fetch Li-Tai, he is stopped by Fook who tries to kill him. Kam appears, saves Wing, and kills Fook. He admits he came to kill Wing and Li-Tai, "But when I saw Fook, everything came to a head. I had to put a stop to everything. I had to. You understand? It had to be done" (202-203). For Kam, Fook represents the oppression of the plantation system. As a Chinese man on a white-owned plantation, Fook is only marginally less oppressed than the labourers. As foreman he is one rung up the ladder from Kam and Wing, but he is still only a worker who hopes one day to have his own land to plant. Fook's Chinese nationality appears to make his condescending behaviour toward the labourers all the more intolerable to Kam. Their common nationality fails to create a bond between the two men for as Fook declares, "Once you leave China, it's every Chinaman for himself" (190). Kam's response to Fook's self-absorbed internalisation of white imperialist attitudes is a murder that ends Fook's life but does nothing to change the overlying situation. This presents an interesting contrast to Shange's character, maxine, who is also troubled by the failure of people to look out for their "own kind" but responds in a very different way.

When Wing arrives at Li-Tai's cabin she is dying. She gives him the bundle from Lau and tells him, "You must take this to Kwantung and bury it. They are the bones of your father. He gave them to me for safe burial. Lau died before he could fulfil his duty as a husband and father. Now you must complete his task. Now you are the keeper of his bones. Return home with them. Your father has waited a long time" (203). Honouring dead ancestors, especially the honouring of fathers by sons, is an important part of Confucian beliefs (Graham 1959: 383). Bones of ancestors have a special significance in that one's heavenly fate is traditionally thought to be determined by the weight of one's bones (Ng 1993: 153), while Chinese belief maintains that blood comes from one's mother and bones from one's father (Ng 1993: 104). Thus Wing must pay homage to his patrilineal heritage and return the bones to his village. Li-Tai dies and Wing picks up the bundle and exits with it to the sound of Kam singing the same mournful song he sang earlier in the play. Wing has made his peace with his father. Wing, like Norman's Sam, recognises the similarities between himself and his father, eventually accepts them and moves on.

Wing is presumably taking his father's bones home, but for Chinese men brought to Hawaii, as well as to the continental United States, as labourers, home is a complex idea. Due to exclusionary legislation (for example, strict limitations on the immigration of Chinese women and the prohibition of miscegenation), it was difficult for Chinese men to create homes in America. The contract labourers, on the other hand, never let go

of the idea of China as home, and toiled in Hawaii in order "to make money and return to the village [in China] . . . . and pick a wife" (171). But as the experiences of Kam and Lau demonstrate, the hardships of the plantation can be dream-destroying. Lau's posthumous return home is clearly an incomplete success.

*Hughes*

Homosexuals were determined by Kinsey to make up approximately ten percent of the population. Although subsequent studies have disputed his figures, homosexuals nevertheless are a significant force in America. Like women of color who must battle both sexism and racism, lesbians are faced with both sexism and homophobia. Lesbians, in fact, face more public scorn than women of color in that "59 percent of Americans say that homosexual behavior is morally wrong" (*New York Times* 2/8/98), implying that lesbians, as well as gay men, lack sufficient piety or will power to be heterosexual. Despite rampant racism in the United States, the population has been sufficiently enlightened that few would publicly declare anything "wrong" with being black, Hispanic, or Jewish. Lesbians, on the other hand, are believed by many to be responsible for their sexuality and by extension deserving of any discrimination they encounter. Yet many theorists see the lesbian position as best suited to destabilise the patriarchal order. Kate Davy, for example, maintains that in performance a lesbian can upset the traditional positions of desiring male spectator and woman as passive object "by implying a spectator that is not the generic, universal male, not in the cultural construction 'woman,' but lesbian — a subject . . . whose desire lies outside the fundamental model or underpinnings of sexual difference" (quoted in Carlson 1996: 179). Similarly, Dolan believes that because "[t]he lesbian is a refusor of culturally imposed gender ideology, who confounds representation based on sexual difference and on compulsory heterosexuality" (1988: 116), she "is in a position to denaturalize dominant codes by signifying an existence that belies the entire structure of heterosexual culture and its representations" (1988: 116). Even more significantly, in performance, lesbian desire is, according to Dolan, ideally suited to upset traditional notions of power, providing for the possibility of change. She explains:

> In the lesbian performance context, playing with fantasies of sexual and gender roles offers the potential for changing gender-coded structures of power. Power is not inherently male; a woman who assumes a dominant role is only male-like if the culture considers power as a solely male attribute. Creating a stage motivated by different kinds of desire allows experimentation with style, roles, costume, gender, and power, and offers alternative cultural meanings. (1988: 68)

Holly Hughes's lesbian identity is very important in her work. She declares, only partially tongue in cheek,

"My artistic motivations and process were evident early. My primary motive for doing what I do was and remains meeting girls" (1996: 16).

Holly Hughes - *World Without End*

Holly Hughes was born in Michigan in 1955. Like Finley, she studied painting before turning to performance art, receiving a B.A. in painting from Kalamazoo College, prior to moving to New York City in 1979 (Champagne 1990: 5). She became involved in theatre and performance art in the early 1980s when she volunteered at a lesbian/feminist performance club called the WOW cafe, where she began writing and performing in plays (Champagne 1990: 6). She later began to work at PS 122, which commissioned *World Without End*, and other more mainstream performance venues. About her move away from strictly lesbian theatre, Hughes writes:

> I wanted to work outside of WOW because I wanted to be taken seriously by people who never come to WOW. I didn't plan to change my work, but I wanted to see if I could wrest a few things I'd never be able to get working in the lesbian community, like reviews and maybe a grant. . . . According to lesbian theatre scholars, I'd fall victim to the male gaze, meaning my meanings would be perverted, or I'd disappear entirely. (1996: 19)

*World Without End* was first performed in 1989 and is dedicated to the memory of Hughes's mother who died in 1987. The piece utilises the speaker's memories of her mother and her mother's death to frame an exploration of mother/daughter relationships and female sexuality. The performance begins with a description of a bird that nested under the eaves of the speaker's childhood home. The presence of the bird makes her feel safe despite her father's drinking. Brilliantly, within the composed, almost nonchalant tone of adult reminiscences, Hughes evokes the fear of a child. Calmly relating, "There'd be the sounds of insults, breaking glass, you know. The usual family stuff, right?", she presents an adult trying to come to terms with her past. Next, describing how, as a child, she would open the window and look at the nest, she calls to mind a picture of childhood wonder and innocence, fascinated by nature. This juxtaposition makes the audience feel for the little girl within the woman, emphasising the lasting impact of childhood pain. Unable to remember the bird's name, she decides to ask her mother. She will be able to do so because "She's always calling me, Jesus! Can you believe it! I'm completely grown up and she's dead!" (10). The speaker is clearly haunted by her feelings about her mother. The nuclear family is both a place of conflict and of comfort in the piece. Tension between the mother and father has an obvious impact on the speaker and her sister. Describing a scene at a restaurant,

capturing exactly the partial understanding of a child, Hughes's persona wonders where her father is and why her mother is being so nice. She recounts how, as a porcupine crosses the parking lot, her mother leaves the restaurant, takes an axe out of the truck, chops the porcupine to death and brings the quills back into the restaurant for her daughters. The speaker recognises the uncontrollable emotions consuming her mother and remarks, "It could have been worse. It could have been worse. She put down the axe" (14). The family presented here, although not confronted with the same loss and pain as Cruz's Nieves family nor subject to the complete dysfunction of Finley's characters, and despite a semblance of normalcy, is not an Ozzie and Harriet type of sanctuary from the troubles of the outside world.

The centrepiece of the performance is what the speaker calls "my mother's French" (23). The discussion of her "mother's French" occurs near the midpoint of the piece but it infuses the entire work. This section begins, "All I really wanted from my mother was her French" (17), and one must decipher the meaning of the phrase. Her "mother's French" appears to be her mother's sexuality and more, perhaps her mother's way of viewing the world which she has managed to pass on to her daughter. She explains how, in the bathroom with her naked mother, she received the gift of her "mother's French":

> NAKED. Uh-HUH. NAKED. And glistening. Bigger than life, shining from the inside out . . . . And she's smelling of salt, and she's promising me grease, something to suck on, and she's asking me in, oh, she's asking me in . . . . Mama says: "Holly, if something's bothering you, and you want to know the answer to it, just remember the answer is inside you." And with that she reached inside herself and then she took her hand out and oh! I could see how wet she was! And that smell! Let me tell you about that smell! That smell made me want to do the mashed potato! Just me and my mother, my naked mother, dancing in the split-level. (19-20)

This celebration of female sexuality approaches cultural or radical feminism, which believes in and celebrates virtues thought to be unique to women. Although this type of feminism, "founded on a reification of sexual difference that valorises female biology, in which gender is an immutable, determining, and desirable category" (Dolan 1988: 6), is belied by much of *World Without End*, the discussion of her "mother's French" aligns with the tradition of cultural feminist theatre which privileges a specifically female body. As prescribed by Cixous's *Aller à la Mer*, this theatre attempts to "undermine the oppressions of male language through the [female] body and gesture" (Dolan 1988: 87). For Cixous, "water is the feminine element *par excellence*: the closure of the mythical world contains and reflects the comforting security of the mother's womb" (Moi 1985: 117), and Hughes plays on that water imagery in this scene, saying, "And my legs are trembling, just like a

diver's legs, because I'm high above that sweet pink ocean, that body of water that is a body, the body we call Mother, and I'm about to go in" (19-20). Her emphasis on her mother's talents as a gardener, resulting from the fact that "she liked to smell herself. She liked to see herself open to nothing but her own eyes" (20), also aligns with radical feminist idolisation of the female body due to its procreative, nurturing capabilities. Based on the over-the-top nature of this scene, one might suspect that Hughes is actually critiquing cultural feminism, which is often criticised by lesbian theorists for its monolithic presentation of women, through parody. Perhaps her mystical, reverential tone is meant to mock the privileging of mother/daughter relationships in radical feminist theatre. Considering, however, the near magical sense with which she presents her parents' final sexual encounter and her apparent dismissal of the opinions of "lesbian theatre scholars," it seems that Hughes is actually exploring what she considers to be an important relationship. Although she may not accept the entirety of cultural feminist thought, she appears to value and believe in a powerful feminine essence.

The scene between mother and daughter presents an interesting contrast to Finley's *Refrigerator* scene in which a daughter is sexually molested by her father under the guise of, "Showing me what it's like to be a mama. . . . Showing me what it's like to be a woman. To be loved" (68). While in Finley there is victimisation and fear, in Hughes there is loving education met with joy. Hughes recognised that her intentions in this section would be misinterpreted by some. Her stage directions state, "Her tone should be one of an initiate witnessing a sacred ritual, a mystery revealed. . . . But no matter what a girl does, there will be those nuevo puritans among us who see something dirty in this . . . . hell, even the *World Book* probably talks about 'Fertility Rites.' See it's all in the classics" (19). Unfortunately, she was right. *The Washington Times* claimed Hughes demonstrates how her mother revealed the "'Secret meaning of life' by displaying her body and placing her hand up her vagina" (quoted in de Grazia 1992: 663), conflating Hughes's words with her actions and representing her piece as pornographic. Conservative objection to her work appears to be as much a reaction to her sexuality as to the work itself. To certain people, Hughes's overt and unapologetic homosexuality is offensive. In the conservative political atmosphere of the late 1980s, any work or lifestyle involving sex beyond the confines of conjugal heterosexuality was deemed by some to be obscene. As Hughes puts it, "I could just walk down the street and I'd be considered a pornographer" (quoted in de Grazia, 1992: 662).

Although Hughes's earlier work was lesbian in focus and target audience, *World Without End* is, by Hughes's description, "not very homoerotic" (quoted in Davy 1993: 55). The speaker is bisexual rather than lesbian, and the sexuality explored involves male as well as female objects of desire. The speaker's mother, for example, is "flirting on her death bed" (15) with the paramedic taking her to the hospital. "That's how she went out of the house the last time, in the arms of the ambulance man, talking dirty to him in her emphysemic wheeze" (15). This lively spirit of unbridled sexuality also infuses Hughes's persona. "I was the fire she fanned" (15), she declares. The final passage of the piece, marking an epiphany for the speaker and a healing between her mother and father, involves heterosexual desire. As he nurses her while she is dying, the mother pulls the father on top of her. The speaker recounts, "And now I see my mother touch my father. I see him shimmy. I see him change. I see him, oh I see him. He is an apple in her hands" (32). For Hughes, apples, in an inversion of the Genesis story where they hold deadly knowledge, appear to represent a life-nourishing possibility for change. Seeing the final passion between her parents, she declares, "Oh. I get. After she's gone we'll still have pie" (32), meaning that her mother's death does not end her influence, as demonstrated by the performance itself. Unlike Finley's work in which sex is shown to be a violent weapon of pain and power, Hughes presents sex, especially in this final passage, as healing. Sex here is a coming together of two people who have had their difficulties but still love.

Unlike many feminist theorists who view language as inherently masculine, Hughes sees language as heterosexual, saying, "Lesbian desire is a country without a language of its own" (1996: 17). She attempts, in her work, to overcome the limitations of language by bending it to suit her purposes. She explains:

> Women at WOW started making a lesbian theatrical language the same way everyone made all the other things we needed for our shows — sets and costumes. Nobody at WOW could afford anything new. . . . The success of your shows depended on your ability to read a pile of garbage and imagine trash translated into theater. Certainly lesbians deserve our own language, not to mention our own wigs. But I continue to look for images in the dumpster of American culture. . . . I like taking something someone has thrown away and using it for a purpose for which it was never intended. If a broken kitchen chair could be transformed into a castle, then why not use secondhand language the same way: take it apart, paint it, glue it, pervert its meanings. (1996: 18)

Thus from language which is inadequate to express lesbian experience, Hughes attempts to create a new language. The following lines, which come shortly after her declaration that she is "a man-hater," demonstrate Hughes play with language:

> Oh men are killing me. I know they're in pain, oh their pain is famous. But their

> pain is going to be the death of me. . . .
> About my words, when I say that I hate men, you have to understand that hate is the dark side of love.
> Don't just take my word for it. Ask Mr. Freud. (27)

With "oh their pain is famous," she calls to mind claims of male suffering due to such inequities as Title IX legislation (which requires equal spending for boys and girls sports in schools which receive federal funding and which has been blamed for depriving boys of some sports programs which have been eliminated in order to fund previously lacking programs for girls) and equal opportunity hiring laws (criticised, together with career-focused women, for taking jobs away from men). Here she also uses Freud, who believed homosexuals to be developmentally stunted and for whom women were a dark continent, to lend credence to her seemingly impossible loving hatred for men. Although Hughes inverts and perverts conventional meaning, surprising the reader with unexpected turns of phrase, she still must utilise language which generally expresses heterosexual experience and therefore runs the risk, especially with a piece such as *World Without End*, geared toward a more conventional audience, that those who do not share her world view will fail to experience the work as subversive.

Hughes's piece seems more gentle, although perhaps no less angry, than Finley's due largely to her use of humour. In the "men just kill me" section of her piece, for example, she uses humour to explore the sad attitude of the public toward rape:

> Oh men are killing me. And they want me to like them. You know, men can laugh at rape, but if you say you hate them, you're crazy. I'm very sorry, I don't like them. You see, I'm a man-hater.
> Oh yes.
> Of course, I don't hate men half as much as a straight woman would but I'm still a man-hater. (26)

And later in the same section:

> Why was it, after the rape, you said: "Holly, you're lucky he came. If they don't come they like to kill."
> Is that so?
> Don't you know I slept with fifty men by the time I was eighteen, I didn't come with one of them, but I never thought about killing them.
> But that could all change tonight. I could set a new policy! Get it right the first time or pay the big price, boyfriend! (27)

The still prevalent attitude that a victim is somehow responsible for her rape and the bizarre double standard of patriarchal attitudes toward sex are highlighted with her humour. This use of humour differs from Wasserstein's, discussed below, in that Hughes's is more ironic and overtly political, although both women use laughter to drive home their points. Whereas Wasserstein's humour consists largely of making her characters,

most notably Gorgeous, comic, Hughes's work functions to reveal the ridiculous within commonly accepted conditions. Seeing the humour in a situation implies the recognition of a possibility for change (Barreca 1991: 19). Hughes's tongue-in-cheek style is particularly appropriate for the mixed-gender audience for which this piece was created. Humour manipulates power structures and causing someone to laugh involves exerting a certain degree of control over them. For the audience members with patriarchal attitudes toward rape and sexuality, Hughes's humour forces them to focus on their opinions in a new and critical way.

*Wasserstein*

The United States is a country "that has always emphasized its Christian roots and values" (Grossman 1997: 99). The pilgrims, as every school child learns, settled in what is now Massachusetts in order to avoid religious persecution in England and Holland, but also to establish their own rather intolerant Christian society, which became the first successful European settlement in the continent. Ninety-five percent of Americans identify themselves as Christian, and although America has a larger Jewish population than most countries, Jews constitute only 2.5 percent of the population (Brody 1997: 11). Jews are no longer openly discriminated against in terms of hiring, home sales, or university admissions, yet many Americans are extremely anti-Semitic. Leslie Brody notes that "negative stereotypes about Jews abound; the idea of a Jewish American president is still unthinkable; Jews are still excluded from certain private clubs; and the Jewish American Princess actively haunts and demeans Jewish women" (1997: 17). Therefore, hiding one's Jewish identity and passing as Christian, "and the conflicted feelings that accompany such processes, are still going on, despite an American multicultural 'revolution' in which ethnic minority groups are encouraged to celebrate their 'otherness.' Jews have become, or perhaps always were, the 'silent' minority in the multicultural revolution" (Brody 1997: 14). Despite the hostility and the strong impetus toward assimilation, many American Jews proudly maintain their Jewish identity. They value what many, both Jews and non-Jews, consider to be Jewish values, namely, "an emphasis on education, intellectual achievement and curiosity, family closeness, social activism, and tolerance for others" (Brody 1997: 13). They also take pride in Jewish accomplishment, for, as Max Dimont notes, "Jews are heard of totally out of proportion to their small numbers. No less than 12 percent of all Nobel prizes in physics, chemistry, and medicine have gone to Jews. The Jewish contribution to the world's list of great names in religion, science, literature, music, finance, and

philosophy is staggering" (quoted in Brody 1997: 11).

Wendy Wasserstein believes that her Jewish identity and cultural upbringing inform her plays "in terms of humor . . . and in terms of a pathos" (quoted in Bryer 1995: 271). Yet, in most of her work, Judaism, whether understood as "a cultural, religious, ethnic, or spiritual identity, a set of values, a particular stance toward life, or all of the above" (Brody 1997: 210), does not play an overt role in the lives of her characters. In fact, the characters in most of her plays are not Jewish. The play considered here, however, is very different in that, as Wasserstein declares, it "is very much about being Jewish" (quoted in Bryer 1995: 272).

Wendy Wasserstein - *The Sisters Rosensweig*

Wasserstein's The *Sisters Rosensweig* is the most commercially successful play considered here. In March 1993, five months after opening at the Lincoln Center, the play moved to Broadway where it had a two-year run. The play centres on three Jewish sisters from Brooklyn who meet in London to celebrate the fifty-fourth birthday of the eldest. The relationships between the sisters are explored during the course of the play, and, although some of the men in the sisters' lives are considered, like Henley and unlike Norman, it is the interaction between women that is highlighted. A major focus of the play is each sister's attempt to discover and mould her own identity. Wasserstein, like the Rosensweigs, was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1950. She is a graduate of Mount Holyoke College and the Yale School of Drama. (Bryer 1995: 257)

*The Sisters Rosensweig* is realist in style and has a classically structured story line. Although the play has many humorous lines and situations, Wasserstein herself does not define the play as a comedy, but rather hopes that it is both a serious and comedic play (1993: x). Certainly the plot of the play, as described below, presents very serious dramatic situations which Wasserstein introduces to the audience through laughter. Like Hughes, Wasserstein uses humour to open up the audience to her point of view. She declares, "comedy allows you to see either side of the issue, and it also makes it more pleasant to be in the theatre. . . . I think that you can go deeper being funny" (quoted in Bryer 1995: 258). While Hughes' humour is generally quite dark and ironic, Wasserstein obtains laughs largely from the ditzy speeches of the middle sister and the sarcasm of the oldest.

The three sisters, Sara, Pfeni, and Gorgeous gather in the autumn of 1991 for the birthday of Sara, a successful international banker, in her Queen Anne's Gate home. The action takes place in Sara's sitting room

over the course of a weekend. Each of the sisters is in some way struggling to find her identity, largely as a reaction against their beginnings. As Wasserstein states, "There's a reason why these three sisters are from Brooklyn and the play takes place in Queen Anne's Gate, London" (1993: xi). She believes that the play's focus on self-identity has been given insufficient attention by those writing about her work. Themes the writer, herself, sees in the play are "the serious issues of identity, self-loathing, and the possibility for intimacy and love when it seems no longer possible or, sadder yet, no longer necessary" (1993: x). In addition, the conflict and potential loving support stemming from families appears to be a central concern of the play.

Sara lives with her daughter, Tess, who longs to go to Lithuania with her boyfriend, Tom. Sara is dating Nicholas Pym, whom Tess describes as "socially acceptable, racist, sexist, and more than likely anti-Semitic" (10). Pfeni, the youngest, a forty-year-old travelling journalist, who recently has written travel columns instead of her earlier more in-depth books, is the first to arrive and the audience is made aware of the intense love between Sara, Tess, and Pfeni but also of the tension between the sisters and between mother and daughter. One begins to perceive the sisters' various searches for meaning and self-identity. Much of this is revealed through the words of Tess. To Pfeni she discloses that Sara "says you compulsively travel because you have a fear of commitment, and when you do stay in one place, you become emotional and defensive" (7), an accusation which Pfeni does not dispute. Tess then worries, "My mother's in desperate need of hope and rebirth. I think she's perfectly content to relive her life through me" (7). A potential root of the sisters' quests for identity is revealed in this exchange:

> SARA: She's [Tess] determined to make her life the opposite of mine.
> PFENI: That's exactly what we set out to do because of our mother.
> SARA: Yes, but we were right.
> PFENI: So, maybe, is Tessie. (11)

Thus, the rejection of the previous generation is presented as inevitable while simultaneously functioning as a stumbling block in the characters' quests for self-discovery. Similarly, in this scene the audience gets its first glimpse of Sara's efforts to distance herself from her Jewish Brooklyn past, an attempt that is intimately aligned with her search for herself. This rejection of her roots is, of course, indicative of Sara's conflict with her family. As the play progresses it is revealed that the majority of this contention is with her mother. Sara has been largely successful in rejecting her origins although this has not brought her happiness. Speaking about Tess's school project, she confesses to Pfeni, "her thesis is to prove that my early years have no bearing on my present life. Frankly, I can hardly remember my early years" (13).

Pfeni's bisexual lover, Geoffrey, stops at the house and it is apparent that, although he declares, "My darling, I am committed. I've signed exclusively with you." (18), Pfeni worries about his feelings for her and his attraction to men. By placing Pfeni in a three-year relationship with a man whose feelings towards her must necessarily be ambiguous, Wasserstein demonstrates that for Pfeni fulfilment is not possible in this relationship. It may be, as Sara believes, that she fears commitment, perhaps in a bid to avoid the traditional marriage of her parents. Alternatively, Pfeni's relationship with Geoffrey may serve to make it unavoidable that she ultimately turns to her work for a sense of identity and completion. Either way, it is clear that she is not content with the current state of her life, declaring, "Oh my God, my life is stuck" (17).

Merv Kant, "the world leader in synthetic animal protective covering" (25), arrives to meet Geoffrey who must rush out, as do Pfeni and Tess. Merv's dialogue, infused with words like "kvelling" and "mazeltov," instantly identifies him as part of the New York Jewish world that Sara has worked to leave behind. Oddly, Merv stays and it soon becomes clear that he is completely infatuated with Sara. She in turn, apparently because he is overtly Jewish and from New York, strongly resists his friendly, likeable nature and rather rudely encourages him to leave. He doesn't and is there to greet the most seemingly comic character, Gorgeous, who, in addition to visiting her sister, is also leading women from the Temple Beth El on a tour of London. She instantly describes to Merv her meteoric rise to local stardom as an advice giver on a Boston radio station. It is also through Gorgeous that the audience learns the sisters' mother has recently died and, around the same time, Sara had a hysterectomy, which prevented her from attending her mother's funeral. Both these facts seem to have a strong impact on the proceedings of the play. The image of their mother seems to haunt the sisters as they attempt to find themselves while simultaneously coming to terms with her expectations for them. Sara's loss of her reproductive organs seems partially responsible for her becoming, as Gorgeous declares, "a hard woman" (38), as she has sublimated ideas of femininity which would connect female reproductive organs with womanhood. In response to Gorgeous's declaration that their mother missed seeing her before she died, Sara asserts, "Mother and I had a Female Trouble conflict." (36), sarcastically using Gorgeous's term for Sara's medical condition to reveal the truth of her relationship with her mother. The struggles of the mother-daughter relationship, with efforts to assert independence while maintaining a loving bond, can be seen as a near universal type of Female Trouble.

When Merv, having managed to obtain an invitation to dinner, goes upstairs to change his shirt,

Gorgeous reveals to Sara that the wealthy women on her tour group make her feel inferior because she is unable to afford real designer clothes. She wonders:

> GORGEOUS: Sara, you're my brilliant big sister, when we were growing up, why didn't Daddy tell us about money?
> SARA: Because girls weren't supposed to know about money.
> GORGEOUS: But you became a banker.
> SARA: That's because no one ever called me Gorgeous.

This telling exchange reveals that the women's early family life still affects them deeply. Sara has rejected her Jewish American roots, has kept the gentile name, Goode, of one of her ex-husbands, and cultivates an English accent. Gorgeous, on the other hand, has apparently followed the path her parents laid out for her. She married a Jewish lawyer, moved to the suburbs, and is active in her local synagogue. The conflict between these two life choices is apparent when Gorgeous suddenly remembers that it is Sabbath sundown and rushes to light candles and pray. Sara mocks her and loudly interrupts her prayers as Tess, Tom and Pfeni arrive. Sara's rejection of Judaism represents a rejection of her roots and of her parents, but also a denial of part of herself. Sara can be seen as evading her "otherness" in terms of both her gender and her inherited religion. She is on top in a male-dominated profession, and as Tess declares, "Hermia Cox-Jones's father says you have the biggest balls at the Hong Kong / Shanghai Bank worldwide" (8). In order to be successful in a sexist environment which equates strength with male genitalia, Sara may have concealed her more stereotypically feminine traits and become "a hard woman" (34) as Gorgeous claims. Additionally, Sara ignores the Jewishness that also makes her "other." As Vivian Patraka explains, Jewishness is not analogous to gender, race, or class, but "it *is* a category created by oppression in which a grotesque, anti-semitic totalizing construction of 'Jewishness' creates an awareness forced upon Jews by historical experience in opposition to the actual diversity of people within this category" (1990: 166). In reaction to a world that attempts to essentialise women and Jews, Sara chooses to assert her own distinct identity. Less optimistically, Sara's rejection of her Jewish roots can be understood as a somewhat destructive reaction to the anti-Semitism of society. Some "Jewish women defend against anti-Semitic stereotypes by avoiding women whom they perceive to personify 'JAPpiness' [for example, Gorgeous], by rejecting their Jewish backgrounds, or by overtly distancing from the image of themselves as 'Jewish mothers'" (Brody 1997: 21). Additionally, as Brody explains, for American Jews born in the 1940s and 1950s, such as Sara, Gorgeous, and Pfeni, the horror of the Holocaust was "insidiously formative for [one's] sense of self" (1997: 10). Brody further explains that

as children, Jews, whose families were often too horrified to discuss the atrocities, gleaned information from the media and from peers and "[t]hese early experiences resemble a 'vicarious victimization' experience in that we so closely identified with the victims of abuse ('this could have happened to me') that we experienced feelings of terror that recur and continue to pervade our relationships with others" (1997: 10). Thus, perhaps expecting "to see anti-Semitism everywhere" (Brody 1997: 5), Sara conceals her Jewish identity as many have historically done as "a way of gaining social status and avoiding hatred, discrimination and even murder" (Brody 1997: 14).

In the next scene, Nick Pym has arrived and everyone is gathering for drinks. Pym is an unpleasant character who seems to function primarily to demonstrate to what lengths Sara has gone in an effort to reject her past and transform herself. His conversation with Tess and Tom serves to illustrate that Tess is also searching to find herself. When Pym asks Tess why she is so interested in Lithuania, Tom answers that his family is Lithuanian, indicating that Tess has only rejected her mother's world to adopt the cause of her boyfriend. She has not yet found a calling or a way of life that speaks directly to what is inside her. Pym, who "can trace his lineage back to the Duke of Marlborough" (34), is pompous and seemingly unaware of his own anti-semitism. Merv discusses historical and current anti-semitism in Europe, remarking, "In Britain, of course, it's all handled a little more politely" (42). Pym unwittingly betrays his own prejudice by protesting, "That's bloody nonsense. Jews have been at the financial core of England for generations" (42). Sara resists Merv's attempts to draw her into the discussion, further indicating her refusal to be identified primarily as a Jew.

After dinner, Pfeni and Geoffrey leave to meet some people for drinks, Gorgeous goes upstairs to bed, and Pym leaves, saying he must meet his niece early the next day. When he leaves, Tess reveals, "he's dating the best friend of a girl in my class" (51). Tess and Tom then exit to organise a "candlelight vigil tomorrow in Hyde Park" (52) and Sara and Merv are left alone. In the course of their conversation, Merv admits that after his wife's death he learned "that more than anything I wanted to be in love again" (57). Sara declares, "I could never love you, Merv. And I'm old enough now and kind enough not to let you love me" (58). The first act ends, however, with the couple going upstairs to sleep together. Sara has accepted Merv physically yet rejected him emotionally. Her need for physical intimacy, especially in light of her relationship with the rather cold Pym, can be read as a need for romantic love, belied by her refusal of affection from

Merv. This ambivalence provides for both the hope and the expectation that Sara will ultimately accept Merv on an emotional level.

The next morning everyone, save Sara and Merv, gather in the sitting room where Tess and Tom disclose that they saw Sara and Merv go upstairs together the night before. They are all very happy for Sara until she comes downstairs and, to Gorgeous's prodding, responds, "I am not going to drive off into the sunset with a man I've had dinner with once" (74). In the ensuing argument, Gorgeous, exposing much of the tension between the sisters, declares:

> Well, you can speak with your la-di-dah British accent, and Pfeni can send my children postcards from every ca-ca-mamie capital in the world, but I know that deep inside both of you wish you were me! Dr. Gorgeous Teitelbaum, a middle-aged West Newton housewife who wears imitation Farragamo shoes and is very soon to have her own cable call-in show! (75)

When Sara and Pfeni are left alone they each admit that in some way Gorgeous may be right, neither sister is completely happy with her own life. In their search for individual identity, they have rejected their past yet are not entirely satisfied with what they have put in its place.

Merv comes down and, after Pfeni exits, Sara continues to push him away. When Sara tells Merv that he would be happy with a woman like Gorgeous it is apparent that it is largely his overt New York Jewishness that makes her uncomfortable. As Merv sees it, he and Gorgeous are "both a little too lively and a little too Jewish " (80-81) for Sara's taste. Sara succeeds in rejecting Merv and he leaves the house.

In the next scene, Geoffrey, returning from giving a talk to Gorgeous's tour group, tells Pfeni that he misses men. Their break-up, foreshadowed at the beginning of the play, leaves Pfeni rudderless, despite Geoffrey's insufficiency as a rudder in the first place. Pfeni is forced to confront who she is, who she wants to be, and what she wants to do with her life. Her relationship with Geoffrey can no longer be used as a flimsy substitute for her personal identity. Sara, who enters as Geoffrey leaves, is comforting Pfeni when Gorgeous arrives wearing only one shoe. She explains that after finally treating herself to a pair of genuine designer shoes she decided to take a tube instead of a taxi and "the shapely goddamned heel gets caught and rips the hell out of my four-hundred-dollar shoe" (91-92). Sara, in response to her tears, reaches to telephone Henry, Gorgeous's husband, to ask him to buy her another pair of shoes. Gorgeous stops her, confessing that Henry hasn't worked in two years, because his law firm was dissolved, and instead he writes mysteries in the basement:

> He says he could have been Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett if only he hadn't been brought up in Scarsdale. So now every night at ten he dresses in a trench coat and goes out to prowl around the bars of South End. He comes home at five in the morning and begins typing in the basement until he falls asleep at noon. We pass each other in the hall and he tells me how much it means to him that I am still here. (93)

Thus the perfect life of the West Newton housewife is revealed to be merely a façade and Gorgeous is exposed as no more happy with her life than her sisters. At the same time, however, Gorgeous's true strength is revealed. She is no longer a flighty fashion-obsessed woman who magically landed a radio call-in show; rather, she is a woman single-handedly holding together and economically supporting her family. Thus Gorgeous, like Lim's Li-Tai, is heroic in her ability to make the best of adversity. Just as Li-Tai is following an Asian tradition emphasising female sacrifice, Gorgeous can be seen as following in her family's tradition of maternal sacrifice. Joan Peters relates the following fable of good motherhood from the Eastern European Jewish heritage:

> A young man had fallen in love with a woman who refused to marry him. "I'll do anything," he begged her. And she relented. "If you love me as much as you say, then kill your mother and bring me her heart." Immediately, he returned home through the woods and killed his mother. However, as he ran back along the forest path with his mother's heart in his hands, he tripped. "Be careful," said the heart, "don't hurt yourself." (1997: 10)

While clearly Gorgeous's sacrifice is not as extreme as the one cited in this myth, her unquestioning efforts to do the best for her family do follow in the tradition, so often stereotypically presented, of Jewish motherhood. Her sisters, in contrast, especially Sara, are, like Henley's Bess and Macon, strong in the Western sense, which emphasises independence and career success. Despite their differences, the three sisters open a bottle of wine and comfort and joke with one another. Here family is presented as a source of solace and love, despite the conflicts between the sisters.

Connected to Wasserstein's presentation of the function of family and belonging in the sister's lives is the use of the idea of home in the play. The image of the "home as house (and, behind it, the home as homeland) is the site of a claim to affiliation whose incontestability has been established by a thick web of economic, juridical, and scientific discourses — which also construct the meaning of exile" (Chaudhuri 1995: 12). All the action of the play takes place in Sara's home in which she appears to be very comfortable. Although she has exiled herself from her childhood home, she seems to have successfully created a new home for herself. This home is missing a satisfying romantic relationship, but it has a loving family of mother and daughter. Sara's self-imposed separation from her childhood home reflects the dual nature of exile, namely,

"on the one hand, exile is branded by the negative of loss and separation; on the other, it is distinguished by distance, detachment, perspective" (Chaudhuri 1995:12). Sara clearly suffers from some lack connected to her rejection of her roots. At the same time, however, her distance (both in terms of miles and of outlook) from her familial home has allowed her to fashion a new type of life that is perhaps more personally fulfilling than one which followed in her family tradition. Pfeni has no home, or at least no house. She can be seen variously as having a home in her sister's house, a home with the people she writes about, or a home that she carries about with her in her shopping bags. It is this last that connects her most to her childhood home. She declares that her mother "told me that only crazy people travel with shopping bags. So I've made it my personal signature ever since" (7). Thus the home she carries with her holds a powerful image both of the home her mother made and of her rejection of it. The exile of the two sisters connects the play to the mainstream of twentieth-century literature which Chaudhuri, following George Steiner, sees as "expressing the universal experience of exile and refugeehood" (1995: 14). Exile in general and the sisters' exile in particular can be seen "as a symbol for modern culture itself" (Chaudhuri 1995: 14). Finally, Gorgeous's home appears to exemplify the bourgeois ideal of the perfect place for family although it actually contains pain, mystery, and confusion. Importantly, Gorgeous does not leave this home, which can be seen as a continuation of her childhood home.

Coming to Sara's home may also be understood as a sort of homecoming for Gorgeous and Pfeni. Sara, as the eldest, can be perceived on a certain level as taking the place of her mother, despite the unresolved conflicts she has with her mother and with her mother's expectations for her. By gathering at Sara's home, the sisters return to unresolved family conflicts. The tensions and disagreements between them are not new, rather they appear to have been argued many times over. Thus the return of Gorgeous and Pfeni to their familial home as embodied by Sara's house connects the play to "later modern drama" in which homecoming is used "not to recuperate identity but rather to stage the difficulties, even impossibility, of such recuperation" (Chaudhuri 1995: 92). Additionally, the play's focus on home and family and their interconnection with issues of personal identity further align it with the tradition of twentieth-century realist drama. Chaudhuri explains, "The figure of home lends itself to one of the basic impulses of realism — the attempt to locate a space of personal experimentation: experimentation with the definition of persons, and with selfhood" (1995: 8).

The final scene is one in which each of the sisters begins to find her way. Each of the sisters, "like a

properly developmental protagonist of realist drama" (Chaudhuri 1995:165), has changed during the course of the play. Pfeni decides to stop writing travel columns and to go back and finish her book on the women of Tajikistan, because, "if you only write 'Bombay by Night' and you make sure to fall in love with men who can never really love you back, one morning you wake up at forty in you big sister's house, and where you should be seems sort of clear" (100-101). Gorgeous receives a complete Chanel outfit as a gift from her tour group and decides to return it to pay for her daughters' tuition. Sara has called Merv and when he arrives she tells him she would like to see him again. The play ends with Tess, who has decided against going to Lithuania, interviewing Sara for a school project. By rejecting the false path of identity offered by Tom's Lithuanian cause and returning to her mother's story, Tess appears to be starting down a road that will lead to a true sense of herself. Similarly, Sara connects with her roots and seemingly rejects some of the incomplete self she has created by declaring, "My name is Sara Rosensweig. I am the daughter of Rita and Maury Rosensweig. I was born in Brooklyn, New York, August 23, 1937" (107).

## Feminist Conflicts Reflected

Feminists in the United States are as culturally and racially diverse a group as the population of Americans as a whole. Understanding and appreciating this diversity is important because, although much political change has been and can be accomplished by women acting as a group, the needs and goals of women differ drastically according to their situation. The popular media generally present feminism as a monolithic set of beliefs. Phrases such as "feminists protest" or "feminists angered" rather than "some feminists protest" or "many feminists angered" belie the complexity and variety of the views held by women who call themselves feminists. One unfortunate result of such reductive representation is that feminists often appear intolerant and unyielding in much of the popular imagination due to the single face of feminism's portrayal in the press. Part of the blame for this simplistic perception lies with the political strategies of some of the women's movement. The endeavour to create a unified category of women as the subject of feminism has often been seen as politically expedient by feminists. Having a large, seemingly coherent group would appear to be a good way of obtaining political visibility, something sorely lacking for women at the beginning of the second wave of feminism in the 1970s. The 1980s, however, was "a decade of intense mutual criticism and internal divisiveness; a decade in which the feminist illusion of 'sisterhood' and the 'dream of a common language' gave way to the realities of fractured discourses" (Hirsch and Keller 1990: 1). Divisiveness, however, is a facet of diversity. The previously hallowed unified sisterhood was an illusion. The key, of course, is to understand the variety of ideas held by women as a strength, not a weakness. The canvas of contemporary American feminist thought, after all, is so vast that it can accommodate thinkers as divergent in their views as Mary Daly, Camille Paglia, bell hooks, and Naomi Wolfe all under the umbrella of feminism.

Many theorists have tried to align the conflicts within feminist thought into categories. Toril Moi, Jill Dolan, and others, for example, see feminists as divisible into liberal feminists, cultural or radical feminists, and material feminists. Similarly, Christine Di Stefano identifies feminist rationalism, feminine anti-rationalism and feminist post-rationalism as the three meaningful divisions in feminist thought (Di Stefano 1990: 66-73). On the other hand, feminists of color, who understand that the oppressions of gender cannot be considered apart from racial and class discriminations, and other feminists, who feel mainstream feminisms have not addressed their situations, do not fit comfortably into any of these categories. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller suggest thinking:

> of both [feminist] 'theory' and 'feminism' more in the sense of ongoing movement [they call to mind bell hooks' use of the phrase 'feminist movement,' rather than movements, to imply an ongoing active process] than as specific forms, products among which one is necessarily obliged to choose. In particular, we think of 'theory' as a vector, deriving from many different possible origins, needs, and pressures, and aiming at the fulfillment of many different kinds of ambitions and desires. (1990: 2)

Although each of these methods is a useful way to think about feminism in order to gain a richer understanding of its nuances, they appear inadequate to capture the thoughts of individual women with all their complexity. Refining categorisations in order to account for all differences may simply be counter-productive, for as Susan Bordo asks, "[J]ust how many axes can one include and still preserve analytical focus or argument?" (1990: 139). Perhaps, therefore, it is more enlightening to focus specifically on the areas in which feminists are in conflict. Each playwright's response to these sites of difference can be seen as situated on a plane near one or another of the categories suggested by Moi, Dolan, or other theorists, although none of these women can be strictly assigned a label which adequately acknowledges all of her ideas about feminism. Wasserstein and Henley, for example, can be grouped near liberal feminism, while Cruz and Lim seem closer to cultural feminism in much of their thought. The work of Finley clearly rejects the dichotomy between masculine and feminine, while the work of Parks, Shange and Hughes can be seen as close to materialist feminism. Additionally, the work of Lim and Shange also appear to reflect the ideas of theorists such as bell hooks. Norman, on the other hand, as represented by the play considered here, can be considered anti-feminist. How these women negotiate the areas of disagreement within feminist thought, however, provides additional illumination of their work.

Rather than attempting to assign each of the playwrights strictly to a particular type of feminism described by one or more theorists, therefore, a more productive line of inquiry is to explore the plays in light of various areas of contention within the women's movement. In doing so, however, I will utilise the terms liberal feminist, cultural or radical feminist, and materialist feminist, in order to identify indications of these dominant strains of feminist thought, not as a way of categorising the playwrights. Examining the plays from the points of stress or breaches within the women's movement should simultaneously create a broader understanding both of the works and of the multidimensional nature of feminism.

Wasserstein, Henley and heroes of liberal feminism

Liberal feminism is the name commonly used for the most visible face of American feminism. Historically, this was the first type of feminist movement in the United States as women fought to gain equal access to the fruits of capitalist America through the right to vote, to occupy certain jobs, and to receive equal pay. Individually, many American women are drawn initially to the politics of liberal feminism, "asserting [their] claim to the equal rights and freedoms guaranteed to each individual in democratic society" (Nye 1988: 5). Some women later evolve in their thinking to different forms of feminism, such as cultural feminism, material feminism, or a personal hybrid.

Liberal feminists seek to improve the status of women within the existing structure of society, basing their beliefs on the principles of liberal humanism and democratic theory. Women are seen as equal to men and dismantling biased laws and attitudes is believed to be adequate to create an equitable world. As Andrea Nye explains, this understanding dates back to the work of John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor in the early nineteenth century. By studying the philosophies of Rousseau and Burke, these two demonstrated that through an extension of suffrage to women, a just community would develop through the operation of self-interest (1988: 13-14). Their work provided "the agenda for the next 200 years of liberal feminism" (Nye 1988: 13), as equality between the sexes has been sought through reforms which give women access to the vote, public office, professions, and education. All of the changes, however, are to be achieved within the existing democratic, capitalist society. As Dolan explains, "Rather than proposing radical structural change, it [liberal feminism] suggests that working within existing social and political organisations will eventually secure women social, political and economic parity with men. . . . it relies on values claimed to be universally human" (1988: 3).

The effect of liberal feminism on American theatre is primarily the existence of more women working as directors, actors, dramaturgs, and, of course, playwrights. Dolan, who is critical of liberal feminist thought in general, is also critical of liberal feminist playwrights. She claims, "Their desire to become part of the system that has historically excluded them forces some liberal feminists in theatre to acquiesce to their erasure as women. Little changes, even as stronger women characters are written into their plays, because the universal to which they write is still based on the male model" (1988: 5). In fact, these new strong women characters in works by liberal feminists can be seen as connecting the plays to male tradition. Elaine Aston sees the use of strong female characters as a liberal feminist (which she terms "bourgeois feminist") technique

for appearing to stage feminist concerns while actually presenting male values. The resulting plays demonstrate what she terms the "bourgeois-feminist dynamic: the success of women is measured on male (hero) terms" (1995: 66).

Because the aim of liberal feminism is for women to be accepted into the male-defined mainstream, it leaves no room for the development of "the possibilities of a 'feminine' or feminist aesthetic" (Aston 1995: 65). Since the theatrical mainstream consists of works that are linear in structure and realist in style, liberal feminist plays can be expected to conform to this framework. Other feminists reject this style as inherently co-opted by the dominant, sexist culture. Dolan explains, "Realism is prescriptive in that it reifies the dominant culture's inscription of traditional power relations between genders and classes" (1988: 84). Liberal feminists, on the other hand, believe a realist play with positive female role models can alter the status quo with regard to gender stereotypes. Additionally, for liberal feminists, educated in the humanist tradition, a linear plot may seem the most clear and natural way to tell their tales, while others perceive inherently regressive tendencies in that, "[t]he crisis that propels the realist plot is resolved when the elements that create the textual disturbance are reinstated within a culturally defined system of order at the narrative's end" (Dolan 1988: 84). The impact of realism on the various plays, although strongly associated with liberal feminism, will be analysed in a following section.

An additional result of liberal feminism's impulse toward mainstream acceptance, combined with its relative success and its predominance within the women's movement, is that in the 1990s there has been "a cultural and political disarticulation of feminism from the strange, the risky, the minoritarian, the excessive, the outlawed, and the alien" (Russo 1995: vii). Liberal feminism's drive to be relevant to the mainstream and to be acceptable to average women has resulted both in this desired acceptance and, unfortunately, a pushing of other women, with less typical ideas, to the fringes. The women's movement, or at least its most visible portion, deprives itself of the everyday experience of certain women who could be considered ordinary if perhaps not normal. Russo explains, "An ordinary feminism (as opposed to the standard or normal variety) would be heterogeneous, strange, polychromatic, ragged, conflictual, incomplete, in motion, and at risk" (1995: vii).

The work of Wasserstein and Henley has been influenced to varying degrees by liberal feminist thought. Although it is inadequate to view the feminism in their work as one-dimensionally that of liberal

feminism, exploring the liberal feminist traits in each of the works is constructive.

Wasserstein, although most easily associated with liberal feminism, demonstrates the complexity of any individual woman's thoughts on feminism, and the futility of assigning strict labels to a person's thought processes. For example, when she says, "I think that, being a writer who has come of age as a woman, you have had a different language, you have had a different experience. My plays are generally about women talking to each other. The sense of action is perhaps different than if I had come of age as a male playwright. Women are very good talkers" (quoted in Bryer 1995: 264), there are echoes of cultural feminist thought. Wasserstein, herself, appears to recognise the inherent complexity of feminism as demonstrated in the following exchange:

> TESS: My English teacher at Westminster assigned Aunt Pfeni's book for next semester.
> SARA: Really? Which one?
> TESS: Life in the Afghan Village. It's for our women's segment. She says when Aunt Pfeni began using her expertise to write travel columns, she became counterrevolutionary.
> PFENI: Did she tell you who my dentist is?
> SARA: Pfeni's books are super. Brilliant. Having a separate category for women's writing is counterrevolutionary. (6)

This short passage touches on many questions: Do the benefits of women-focused studies outweigh their potentially ghettoising and essentialising tendencies? Must a feminist always be overtly working for the betterment of women in order not to be "part of the problem"? Does questioning the strategies of other feminists' work to weaken or to improve the movement?

Her feminism, however it is categorised, is something of which Wasserstein is proud. She explains, "It's interesting when you deal with younger women and they say, 'Oh, are you the *f* word, feminist?' and it's a bad thing to be. I'll go to panels and say that I am, that I can't imagine not being; how could you say, 'Oh, I don't believe in the rights of women'?" (quoted in Bryer 1995: 266). Of course, in addition to demonstrating her confident affiliation with feminism, this quote, with its discussion of "rights" does align Wasserstein with liberal feminism.

The influence of liberal feminist thought on Wasserstein's *The Sisters Rosensweig* can be demonstrated in four areas. First, the focus of the play is on women, namely on women older than those typically considered in works written by men. Wasserstein purposely set out to write a play with parts for more mature women. She explains, "I have known many actresses whose career opportunities diminished

because they made the grievous error of growing older. Therefore I deliberately set out to write smart and funny parts for women over forty" (1993: x). As a result, the play focuses on sisters rather than brothers as they face middle age and search for their identity. Instead of analysing the relationship between father and son, the mainstay of drama in the male tradition, the play considers Sara's interaction with her daughter, Tess, and the three sisters' still unresolved relationships with their dead mother. Wasserstein, however, has done more than simply change the sex of the players. Instead of complete settlement of issues, conflicts are left somewhat unresolved. In place of a son coming to terms with or triumphing over a father, the daughters of Rita Rosensweig never completely reject or accept the lingering influence of their mother. Sara, although agreeing to see Merv again and beginning to reconnect with her New York Jewish heritage, shows no interest in turning her back on life as an independent business woman. Similarly, Pfeni recommits herself to her work in Tajikistan, not to the type of life her mother is said to have wanted for her. Gorgeous, who appears to have always had a close, non-rebellious relationship with her mother, demonstrates that all is not what it seems. Her image as the content West Newton housewife, the role her mother is said to have wanted for her, is only maintained by extremely hard work and concealment of the truth.

Second, the female characters in Wasserstein's work are each very strong. They are all successful in areas that could be considered part of the "man's world." They can, at least in their professional lives, be considered positive role models for women from a liberal feminist point of view. Most obviously, Sara is a prosperous international banker who, according to Wasserstein's stage directions, "exudes dignity and authority" (6) even while wearing a bathrobe. Tess's revelation that, "Hermia Cox-Jones's father says you have the biggest balls at the Hong Kong/Shanghai Bank worldwide" (8) clearly identifies Sara as the equal of any man in the male dominated arena of high finance, in which power is equated with male genitalia. Similarly, Pfeni is successful in the worlds of journalism and travel writing. Although much of her work focuses on the women in the areas to which she travels, her apparent ability to get what she writes published demonstrates that she too is a hero of liberal feminism. Gorgeous, although outwardly flighty and superficial, is perhaps the strongest of the sisters. Not only has she achieved regional fame as a radio talk show personality, she is single-handedly holding her family together while her husband pursues a seemingly ludicrous and all-consuming quest to write detective fiction. Despite her stereotypically feminine trappings, namely a bubbly personality and an excessive concern with fashion, Gorgeous is arguably the most heroic

character in the play. In addition to her success in the male-dominated world of mass media, she is the sole financial support for her nuclear family, a traditionally male symbol of success. Her decision to return her Chanel suit because "somebody's got to pay for tuition this fall" (103), demonstrates her willingness to provide for her family and her rejection of the feminine (albeit merely stereotypically feminine) concerns of fashion in favour of the logical and reasonable business of family finances typically seen as male. Significantly, the strength of the sisters is never suggested as a reason for their difficulties. Their strong personalities and successful careers appear almost as incidental, natural parts of their existence with little bearing on their search for love and self-identity.

Third, aligned with the sisters' achievements in the capitalist world is the fact that the play makes no call to change the underlying structure of society. The sisters work to find happiness and a sense of identity within the current status quo. Additionally, there is nothing within the play that indicates that they should or could work to enact fundamental changes in the way the world operates. Similarly, except for some references by Pfeni to the suffering of Afghan women and Kurdish refugees, there is very little in the play that indicates there is much in the world which requires changing and certainly there is no indication that the inequities of life require a wholesale restructuring of society. In this way, Wasserstein is vulnerable to the criticism levelled at liberal feminist playwrights by critics such as Dolan and Aston. If one accepts that capitalist society is a male construct, then the successes of the sisters can be seen as based on this male model without providing any criticism or questioning. Wasserstein's emphasis, however, on the importance of love and of finding one's complete identity, giving adequate space for all spheres of life whether considered male or female, tempers this criticism.

Finally, as will be discussed below, the structure of *The Sisters Rosensweig* aligns the play with liberal feminism, which follows closely in the footsteps of liberal humanism, privileging linear thinking, and buying into the belief that reality can be accurately represented.

Henley, like Wasserstein, considers herself a feminist and, once again like Wasserstein, appears surprised that some would question her choice. She explains:

> People say, 'Are you a feminist?' like I'm saying I'm a liberal or something; so I looked it up in a dictionary and it says that you believe women should have equal rights with men. No, I believe they should have less rights than men? Absolutely I'm a feminist, absolutely vehemently so. (quoted in Bryer 1995: 120)

As with Wasserstein, her focus on rights aligns Henley with liberal feminism. Unlike Wasserstein, however,

she does not consider her plays to be feminist or women-focused. Although *Abundance* appears to contradict her assertion, Henley claims, "I just think they [her plays] are about people. I don't necessarily think I'm going to write a women's play or a feminist play. I just think of a story I would like to tell, and whoever ends up being in the story, I'm grateful" (quoted in Bryer 1995: 120).

Henley's *Abundance*, much like Wasserstein's work can be connected to the thinking of liberal feminism. Its realist, linear plot, as explained in a following section, reflects an aspect of liberal feminist ideology. Most clearly, the play focuses on the relationship between two women, Bess and Macon. The men in the story are peripheral and function primarily to facilitate the rise and fall of the women and as status symbols indicating the relative position of the women. Jack, for example, with his awful behaviour toward Bess, in the middle of the play, serves to highlight how difficult her life is, especially in comparison to Macon, married to the agreeable and complacent Will. Further, it is Jack's rejection of Macon and his new -found attentiveness to Bess that marks the reversal of the women's fortunes. Jack's character is never fully developed. He functions merely as a token and a type. No indication is given of the reasons for his cruel treatment of Bess, for his self-destructive laziness, for his attraction to Macon, nor for his grovelling acceptance of Bess's later unpleasant treatment. The audience, additionally, is not led to wonder about these missing motivations. Jack is simply a Bad Man, a stock character utilised to elaborate the story of the two women. Similarly, Will is merely a Good Man. Although late in the play he briefly wonders why he stays with Macon, the story focuses much more on the impetus to Bess's and Macon's behaviour and interaction. Will functions to facilitate Macon's initial good fortune. His land and his hardworking sensible nature prove the base for the temporary financial security of the couple, contrasting markedly with the destitute state of Bess and Jack. Additionally, his eventual dropping of Macon marks her fall in the world and further differentiates her condition from that of Bess, accompanied by the newly interested Jack.

Unfortunately, the presentation of Jack and Will is not sufficiently ironic to call into question the common use of female characters as the one-dimensional good or bad woman. There is nothing in the text to specifically condemn this type of objectification. It appears that Henley has created and used these flat male props merely to facilitate exploration of what really interests her, namely the relationship between her female characters. This, of course, mirrors the frequent use of flat female characters as instruments in the development of male relationships in traditional male drama, without, however, shining a questioning light on

this practice. Although it would be possible to stage a performance of *Abundance* which would challenge the use of people, male or female, as mere types, the text itself only reverses the genders of a familiar dramatic practice.

Bess and Macon, although less successful than the Rosensweig sisters, are both strong women with multidimensional characters. While initially very submissive to the abuses of Jack, Bess eventually finds the power to achieve financial security and to injure those she believes have betrayed her. Her survival of Indian captivity also clearly demonstrates a heroic strength. As Kolodny points out, a common theme of the Indian captivity narratives is the physical difficulty for white women adapting to Indian life. "The cruelty of their captors and the hardships of their journey. . . echoing, like a refrain, features that could be traced back to the earliest Puritan narratives" (1984: 73). By adapting to Indian life and surviving five years of their difficult existence, Bess demonstrates, with heroic reflections of Daniel Boone, the strength previously hidden within her.

Macon, although she ends her days destitute and alone, telling Bess she expects to die soon simply in order to have "Someone to tell" (264), is a survivor. While married to Will, despite her callous treatment of him, she is an equal partner in the physical labour and planning necessary to run their farm. She ploughs the fields, discusses what crops to plant, negotiates with the bank, and fires the death shot into their ailing ox. Even at the end of the play when she has fallen on very hard times she manages to make her way in the world without complaint. Countering Jack's vivid description of her abysmal state, in response to Bess's inquiry, Macon declares she is "Great. Just great" (263).

Because the end of the play finds the two women together again with each contemplating her failure to achieve her dreams, Henley defies Aston's criticism of bourgeois or liberal feminism. Although Bess has achieved financial security it is clear that this has not brought her happiness. The women's success is not "measured on male (hero) terms" (Aston 1995: 66). Rather their final achievement is that they are able to come together as friends in spite of their past difficulties and the passage of so many years.

The pornography of Finley, Cruz, and Hughes

The United States Congress, in late 1990, passed legislation which, among other things, declared, "Obscenity is without artistic merit" (de Grazia 1992: 681), an incredibly problematic statement. First, while

it may appear self-evident to some that a physical embrace depicted in a *Hustler* magazine is obscene and that depicted by Rodin's sculpture *The Kiss* is not, different people see the issue differently. With regard to *Hustler*, no obscenity charges against the magazine have ever been successfully upheld in court (de Grazia 1992: 58), indicating that some judges and juries do not find the content of the publication obscene. At the other end of the spectrum, *The Kiss*, one of the most famous works by "the father of modern sculpture and one of the most eminent artistic personalities of the western world" (Taillandier 1967: 7) is considered too sexually explicit for public display by the Brigham Young University Museum of Art which pulled the sculpture and three others from its presentation of a travelling exhibition of the artist's work (*The New York Times* 28/10/97). Second, even if there is universal agreement on what constitutes obscenity, it does not necessarily follow, governmental proclamations notwithstanding, that such work is without artistic merit. Perhaps the value of art lies not in its ability to comfort but in its capacity to cause discomfort and questioning. The works of Cruz, Hughes, and Finley, for example, appear to be worthwhile artistically, yet each is disquieting, in part because of aspects of the work that some may see as obscene or pornographic.

Finley and Hughes sprang to national mainstream attention when in 1990 they were two of four performance artists denied funding by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), a government agency. The NEA defunding of the four performance artists occurred in the wake of congressional anger at NEA financial support of artwork considered by some to be pornographic or offensive, namely Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* and some of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs. The resulting and long-lasting furor over the appropriateness of the NEA action raises two fundamental questions. First, is it good for society and for art itself to have a government agency subsidising artists and making the judgement calls necessary to decide what work is worthy of financial support? This complex issue, with proponents and opponents of government funding, each found in both the liberal and conservative camps, still debating as the NEA limps to its likely demise, is beyond the scope of this paper. Second, does the perception by some of obscenity within a work mean that the work is dangerous and should be suppressed or at least denied support? The dangers of pornography are as contested within the women's movement as they are by society at large.

After the performance artists were denied funding, the resulting media focus was fraught with misinformation. The conservative newspaper *The Washington Times*, for example, claimed, "Miss Finley also coats make-believe 'testicles' with excrement and sells it as candy" (quoted in de Grazia 1992: 663). Finley

does not, of course, sell excrement as candy. Instead, and perhaps more troubling to those who object to her work, one of her voices says that she takes real testicles cut off men working on Wall Street and:

> After I boil the balls I roll them in my own dung, my manure. 'Cause I'm the Queen of the Dung Dynasty. Then I roll the Dung eggs in melted Hershey's Kisses. Then I roll the scrotum, manure, chocolate-coated balls into fancy foiled papers from found Eurotrash cigarette boxes. Now I've got gourmet Easter egg candy to sell. I sell these Easter eggs to gourmet chocolate shops. And I love to see nine-year-old boys who only communicate with their computers eat their daddies' balls. (62-63)

The conflation, by *The Washington Times*, of Finley's words with her actions demonstrates the discomfort her work creates and the threat felt by certain segments of society in the face of the issues she raises. The confusion of words with actions also makes Cruz's work troubling and potentially pornographic. The sexual encounters and genital mutilation described by Miriam are disturbing and if presented visually rather than orally would certainly be considered by some to be obscene. Even in their spoken form, Miriam's representations describe a sexuality and sexual behaviour open to the charge of pornography. Similarly, Hughes's work is often considered pornographic because her discussion of sexuality and her own sexual orientation make some uncomfortable. She explains:

> Our work *is* controversial, but it seems like at different times there are different targets, and at the time that these grants were turned down the buzzwords were 'pornography' and 'obscenity' and this whole equation; and, you know, just being gay makes you 'obscene.' By the very definition. I could just walk down the street and I'd be considered a pornographer; Jesse Helms [Republican senator from North Carolina leading the drive to stop NEA funding of controversial work] is denying my very existence. (quoted in de Grazia 1992: 662)

In addition to being subjected to conservative criticism due to their supposedly pornographic work, the three artists risk censure from some women as part of the feminist debate about pornography. Jill Dolan explains the two sides of the controversy, which are more likely two ends on the spectrum of feminist thought with regard to pornography:

> One position is represented by feminists who are prosex and who support the cultural production of sexual fantasies — for some groups, often in the form of lesbian pornography and the creation of performance-like, sadomasochistic rituals. The opposing view is articulated by antipornography feminists who argue for legislation against pornographic images of women, contending that pornography effuses sexual violence against women in the society at large. (1988: 59)

Two main reasons for opposition to pornography by many feminists are, one, that pornographic works support a sexist culture which objectifies and commodifies women, and two, that pornography, especially that which depicts violence against women, contributes to acts of rape and sexual assault and to society's acceptance of

these acts. By presenting images of women, freely available for purchase for the price of a magazine, movie ticket, or video rental, to be looked at as objects for male pleasure, pornography can be seen as supporting the belief that all women are commodities to be consumed by men. A woman in male-produced pornography is not an active agent, is not the subject of her own passions, but rather is a passive object of male desire. Dolan explains that in typical representations of sexuality in performance, "objectification implies an active male spectator who is invited to identify with the narrative's hero in his search for the fulfillment of his desire" (1988: 66). There is no place for the female spectator's desires and her only choice for identification is with that of the objectified and often victimised female.

The connection between pornography, particularly that depicting violence against women, and actual incidents of assault, rape, or murder, although difficult to prove definitively, is very compelling for many feminists. Women who do not find more mainstream pornography offensive or who tolerate it in the name of freedom of expression, can be troubled by sadomasochistic depictions or by so-called "snuff" movies. Antiporn feminists see the danger to women from pornography depicting women subjected to violence in three forms:

> . . . harms may be committed in the very production of pornography against the women used in the production; harms may be committed by viewers influenced to commit acts of sexual violence after continued exposure to eroticized violence; and harms may arise when both men and women absorb attitudes degrading to women. (Minow 1990: 156)

It is well known, for example, that Linda Lovelace, the star of *Deep Throat*, claims to have been violently coerced into performing the acts depicted in that film and in her other work. Knowing that such performances do not necessarily result from the free will of all those involved leads one to question the merits of claims for freedom of expression by defenders of pornography. Similarly, the belief that consumption of images depicting violence against women can lead some men to commit physically and sexually violent acts or to more easily accept such acts committed by others makes many consider some level of censorship of pornography to be socially beneficial. Antiporn feminists argue that suppression of material that objectifies women and represents them as subjected to violent male desire is necessary to protect women and to alter a society inclined to see women as natural and willing victims or sexual objects.

Of the three artists, Finley is the most easily criticised from an antiporn feminist perspective, largely because she appears nude and she assumes masculine voices at times during her performances. Finley, at the

beginning of Act Two of *The Constant State of Desire*, removes her clothing and covers her body with smashed eggs, glitter, and confetti. She remains naked, save for the strange and colorful mess she has applied to herself, for all of Scene I of this act. Although, as discussed below, Finley does thwart male desire, on a certain level an undressed women is a naked 'babe' no matter what bizarre mixture is coated on her body or spewing from her lips. "[T]he facticity of the actor's biological sex always reinscribes the performer with the cultural codes associated with his or her gender" (Geis 1993: 117), especially, it would seem, if the performer is naked.

In this work, Finley assumes the voice of male sexual violence, most notably in *First Sexual Experience, Laundromat*. Here the persona rapes a woman in a laundromat and then sodomises his mother. The presentation of these assaults is so distasteful it is very difficult to believe anyone could find it erotic. But, of course, depictions of extreme sexual violence do find a market. Additionally, the over-the-top nature of Finley's account may work to desensitise viewers to less intense representations of sexual violence, including descriptions of actual assaults.

Hughes's work, although considered obscene by many conservatives, is far less vulnerable to antiporn feminist critique. Ironically, what appears most threatening to conservatives about Hughes's work, namely her lesbian and bisexual subject matter, shields her from the condemnation of antiporn feminists who are more opposed to images designed to feed male heterosexual desire, especially depictions of violent heterosexuality. Additionally, she does not perform nude and therefore is not available for sexual consumption. Despite the fact that Hughes's lesbian-oriented work is not easily criticised from an antiporn perspective, lesbian theorists in general perceive a threat from the antiporn standpoint. Dolan explains:

> Lesbians have a lot at stake in the antipornography debate, because despite feminist efforts to reduce it to female friendship, or to diffuse it across a lesbian continuum, lesbianism is still defined by a choice of sexuality. The antisex morality of the antiporn movement threatens to render lesbians not only marginal to feminism, but totally invisible. (1988: 60)

Additionally, Kate Davy sees the NEA funding furor as stemming initially from "a very specific desire to suppress any depiction of homoeroticism in art production" (1993: 55). Because lesbianism, defined as a female's sexual propensity for other females, is unavoidably related to sexuality, representation of lesbian experience requires sexual depiction. Nevertheless, some antiporn feminists find sexually explicit presentations of lesbianism, especially more marginal types of lesbianism, threatening and therefore advocate

suppression. "Because s/m [sadomasochistic] lesbians traffic in power roles, which are assumed to be gender marked, antiporn feminists assume their sexuality is male or male-identified. This assumption conflates sexuality with gender." (Dolan 1988: 77)

Expressing her own views with regard to antiporn feminists, Hughes declares, "A lot of feminist theatre critics and academics feel that female sexuality can never be represented onstage without it becoming a peep show. I really disagree. You have to take the risk" (quoted in Champagne 1990: 6). Although *World Without End* is less lesbian-oriented than her previous performances, Hughes does not conceal her sexuality nor does she attempt to make her work more palatable to conservatives or antiporn feminists. Discussing the plays she has been involved in at WOW, she explains, "a lot of the characters have been stolen from heterosexual nightmares: lesbians as hypersexual, as unrepentant outlaws, as vampires, shameless deviants, and perverts" (1996: 18). Nevertheless, the sexuality in *World Without End*, despite criticism from social conservatives, seems unlikely to draw the condemnation of antiporn feminists.

Although many of the sexual encounters in Cruz's work are described and not displayed, the portrayal of sex is such that it can be criticised from an antiporn feminist viewpoint. In 1984, the Indianapolis City Council passed antipornography legislation that, although subsequently declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, is important because it, like similar legislative efforts in other cities, was the work of an unlikely alliance of antiporn feminists and members of the Moral Majority (de Grazia 1992: 613-614). The language of the Indianapolis ordinance, drafted by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, two of the most influential antiporn feminists, "defined pornography as the 'graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or in words,' if it showed them (among other things) enjoying 'pain or humiliation' or in 'positions of servility or submission or display'" (de Grazia 1992: 614). Whether one interprets Miriam's descriptions of sexual mutilation and debasement as accounts of her experiences or of her fantasies, they would certainly meet this definition of pornography.

Miriam, if her motivation stemming from her unbearable grief is not fully explored, can be seen as a masochist and a willing sexual victim. The genital mutilation she describes, "I cut my pussy sometimes wif a nail clipper" (64), can, from an antiporn viewpoint, be criticised as demonstrating that women desire sexual pain. The anonymous sexual encounters she claims to have had also support an image of women as sexually voracious and insatiable. If antiporn feminists are correct, these aspects of Miriam's behaviour encourage

sexual violence against all women on the grounds that this is what women desire. Similarly, Miriam's relationship with the much older, married Enrique, although clearly another manifestation of her grief, can be condemned from an antiporn perspective. Miriam initiates their sexual relationship, largely in order to obtain the razor blades she uses to carve flowers into her skin. This representation can be seen as confirming a view of women as sexually predatory prostitutes. If a sixteen-year-old girl willingly sells herself for razor blades then, by extrapolation, all women must be purchasable.

Perhaps the most compelling argument of so-called prosex feminists, who oppose, in the name of freedom of expression, attempts to censor pornography, is that the ideas of the less empowered are most likely to be suppressed anytime censorship is applied. The sexual desires of women, particularly bisexual and lesbian women, therefore, are more likely to be censored than those of heterosexual men. Minow puts it most succinctly:

> If particular depictions of sexuality were to be judged harmful, whose depictions would be likely candidates for suppression? For those who prize the element of the women's movement that advocated sexual liberation for women, the pornography ordinance [in Minneapolis, also drafted by Dworkin and MacKinnon] seemed a new guise for the repression of women's sexual expression. (1990: 157)

It appears unlikely that any antipornography legislation, no matter how thoughtfully composed, could circumvent all potential for suppressing the views of society's least empowered members.

Prosex feminists, in addition to supporting depictions of female sexual desire, see a potential in sexual representation, including those that some would deem pornographic, for actually altering the status quo in a positive way. As Angela Carter states, "A moral pornographer might use pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes" (1979: 19). This criticism can be achieved either by demonstrating beneficial sexual relationships in which women are not exploited or by presenting violent heterosexuality in a way that exposes the horror contained within much of current relations between people. The potentially pornographic aspects of Hughes's work seem to fall into the category of the former, depicting positive visions of female sexuality and even of sexual relations between men and women. Finley's performance, on the other hand, appears geared toward utilising the latter strategy, while Cruz's play can be seen as working in both veins.

The portion of *World Without End* most clearly troubling to conservatives is when the speaker describes her mother undressing and putting her hand inside herself, in a sort of "sacred ritual" (19). Rather

than a right-wing interpretation as an incestuous encounter, this scene can be read as the development of the protagonist's appreciation for her mother's sexuality that she sees as intimately associated with her life force. This understanding of her mother results in an appreciation of her own sexuality and the recounting of the experience can be seen as a celebration of female sexuality in general. This becomes clear when, shortly after the ritual scene, she describes retelling her story to a friend, Jo-deen *Windy* Thompson, who, predictably, is a bit shocked, "Like seeing my mother's pussy is some sort of crime. And so I have to tell her that's not the way I saw it. To me it was a gift. It was the best thing she ever did for me. It was my inheritance" (20-21). The description of this sexually charged encounter between mother and daughter becomes a passing on of tradition, of a certain way of viewing the world. It also becomes clear that the speaker's understanding of female sexuality is valuable knowledge, although seen as dangerous by others. She declares, with clear reference to the Genesis story, "I would rather know what a snake knows than grow up to be Jo-deen *Windy* Thompson, doomed to drown in her own body, doomed to wear her body like it's somebody else's clothes, doomed to die never realizing her mother's got anything other than Astroturf between her legs, miniature golf, hole in one" (21). Thus understanding her mother leads to an appreciation of female sexuality, which in turn allows the protagonist to know herself, to be at home in her female body.

The work contains, in addition to the exploration of the strength of female sexuality, two instances in which the healing potential of heterosexual relationships is explored. First, Hughes describes her efforts to comfort her childhood friend Richard when they were ten years old. Richard is frequently beaten so Hughes's persona decides "to go to bed with him" (22) despite having no sexual interest in him. She compares him to a racehorse who needs another horse in the barn to keep him calm. "I get right on top of him, I try to iron the tears out of that scrawny bag of bones" (22), she explains. Her mother interrupts them, but the possibility for healing through heterosexual contact remains available.

The final encounter in the piece occurs between the speaker's parents on her mother's deathbed. The sexual action commences in response to her mother's request of "Help me" (32). Sex does not prove physically healing for the mother, of course, who dies the following day. Rather sexual intimacy appears to bring the couple, whose difficulties have been alluded to at various times during the work, closer together emotionally. The encounter also affects the speaker's father in a positive, although undefined, way. "And now I see my mother touch my father. I see him shimmy. I see him change" (32). Change, growth through

heterosexual intimacy, is the potential promise held by human interaction. That Hughes ends her work with this positive image, rather than her analysis of less encouraging encounters such as rape, demonstrates her belief in the renewing possibilities of sexuality.

Although Finley's work is very sexually oriented, most critics agree that she frustrates the typical operation of male desire within a performative environment. The common presentation of a woman on stage, in film, or in photographs relegates her to the status of an object available for consumption by the desiring male spectator. Finley refuses to play this role:

> Finley does not offer herself as a passive object. She forces men to be passive in the face of her rage, and she desecrates herself as the object of their desire, thereby mocking their sexuality. Her refusal to play the game leaves the male spectator nowhere to place himself in relation to her performance. He can no longer maintain the position of the sexual subject who views the performer as a sexual object. (Dolan 1988: 66-67)

Instead of the typical presentation of sexuality, which leaves no room for identification by the female observer, Finley puts all spectators into an uncomfortable, questioning position.

Part of Finley's strategy in thwarting male desire can be seen as based on what has been historically most frightening about the feminine, that is the mysterious hidden nature of female sexual organs. Traditionally connected with the visceral, women's bodies are often seen as the site of "Blood, tears, vomit, excrement — all the detritus of the body that is separated out and placed with terror and revulsion (predominantly, though not exclusively) on the side of the feminine — are down there in that cave of abjection" (Russo 1995: 2), identified with the womb. Finley uses this latent fear of female sexuality and upends the typical presentation of women in performance. "In defying the rules of representation and displaying her body as biodegradable or disposable flesh, an already consumed object . . . she thwart[s] the male spectator who wants in the system of reproduction a passive womb of desire" (Blau 1990: 231). The unpleasant, sexually graphic nature of Finley's monologue confounds expectations of female behaviour. "Just as obscenity coming from a man asserts a tough manliness, in a woman's mouth it signals a threatening femininity, a banshee" (Carr 1993: 144). Thus, even undressed, Finley does not appear as a vulnerable sexual object available for use. In fact, "What remains of the body and sexuality has already been digested, processed, and regurgitated as splintered, violent images and incoherent words, to be meaningfully reassembled only by spectators with stomachs strong enough for such consumption" (Dolan 1988: 66). Despite the fact that her assumption of sexually violent male voices subjects Finley's work to the criticisms of

antiporn feminism, the over-the-top nature of her appropriation of the "technique of phallic aggression" (Blau 1990: 231) serves as a critique of certain aspects of male sexuality. Her depictions of sexuality are so unpleasant and off-putting that they call into question society's acceptance of all sexual aggression and violence.

Cruz can be understood as using both positive and negative images of heterosexuality in order to critique intersexual relations. Nando's feelings for Delfina demonstrate the potential, which remains unfulfilled in the play, for a positive sexual relationship between a man and a woman. His attraction to her is clearly very sexual. The work first introduces Nando while he "is going down on Delfina. His head is under her skirt" (57). In addition to this sexual desire, much of Nando's dialogue makes it obvious that he loves her deeply. His romantic gesture of making for Delfina a birdcage from chocolate ice cream sticks displays his combined feelings of love and sexual attraction. When he says, "She really likes chocolate — and with my spit all over it, it's gonna make her think of me. I'm gonna be inside her all the time now" (74), the phrase "inside her" seems to refer both to being in her thoughts and being in her sexually. Delfina, however, frustrates this potential for a loving, healthy, heterosexual relationship, apparently due to both her own attitude toward sex and to her increasing inability to cope with her grief.

Miriam's sexual relationship with Enrique and the anonymous encounters she describes with other men present the unpleasant side of male-female relations and allow the viewer to question current conditions between the sexes. Enrique, because of his age and marital status, is clearly an inappropriate boyfriend for Miriam. The sexual rather than loving nature of their relationship is clear. Although he is troubled by her self-mutilation, he does nothing to help her, continuing to supply the razor blades so she will still have sex with him. Their sexual interaction reminds the audience that the majority of children born to teen-age mothers in the United States are sired by men over the age of twenty. Miriam's relationship with Enrique can be understood as not operating from her own desires, rather it is a manifestation of her grief over Puli's death and an attempt to combat her loneliness. Similarly, her anonymous sexual encounters, whether fantasy or real, reflect her sadness and isolation. They thereby call into question many real-life sexual relationships. Perhaps what people are often reaching out for is human contact, not sex.

Rejecting the dichotomy, Hughes and Finley

Sexism and most of feminist work against sexism relies on the binary opposition of male and female. If women are not somehow different from men, and are not in fact defined primarily as simply not men, then sexism has no reason to exist as there is no basis upon which to determine whom to discriminate against. Similarly, without a concept of women as a definable group, distinct from men, much of feminism has difficulty articulating a reason for being. To counter the similarity with sexist views regarding this binary, many feminists distinguish between sex, seen as biologically determined and providing the natural constituency of women, and gender, seen as culturally produced. Other women, however, such as Judith Butler, criticise the general feminist differentiation between gender and sex, refusing to see sex as a biological given. Butler believes that by retaining a binary concept of gender, one "implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it" (1990: 6). Also, she considers to be false the idea that sex is not culturally induced. Rather, she sees sex "as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by gender" (1990: 7). There is nothing existing beyond or before power's creation of sex. Ironically, the feminist distinction between sex and gender implies a potential rupture in the sought-after unified subject of women because gender is not seen to flow directly from sex and, therefore, even with only a binary gender system, women may be either masculine or feminine.

The commonly accepted binary division of masculine and feminine in gender is not a natural phenomenon according to Butler. Rather it has been created by power, obtaining a semblance of naturalness only due to repetition. Butler appears to adopt much of the philosophy of Monique Wittig, whom she describes as perceiving the binary division of bodies into male and female as existing only to support the "economic need of heterosexuality" (1990: 112). Wittig feels that the restriction of genders to only two is both unnecessary and artificial while at the same time she, like Butler, disputes any distinction between sex and gender. The binary divisions in both gender and sex appear to be natural due to "the repeated practice of naming sexual difference" (1990: 15). Butler says, "The binary regulation of sexuality suppresses the subversive multiplicity of a sexuality that disrupts heterosexual, reproductive, and medicojuridical hegemonies" (1990:19). In other words, without the general acceptance of a binary distinction in gender, the dominance of reproductive-based heterosexuality would be more easily dislodged. Because heterosexuality can be perceived as "the pattern of linking oppositional gender classes into sexual partnership" (Dolan 1988: 63), many lesbian theorists believe representations of lesbian desire have the potential to destabilise the

dichotomy of gender. Lesbianism, as well as male homosexuality, runs counter to the binary in which the female desires, is desired by, and defined in opposition to, the male. Lesbianism can be understood as altering the way a woman is female in that, "shifting a woman's desire from men to other women — also affects how she sees herself as a woman. The choice of lesbian sexuality is in some ways a rejection of the female, as that gender class has been culturally constructed" (Dolan 1988: 63). Hughes, with her overtly lesbian public persona can be seen as positioned to confound the dichotomy. When, in *World Without End*, the speaker asks, "Do you have any idea at all who you are porking? I'm the preeminent lesbian performance artist from southern Michigan" (31), Hughes brings this public image directly into her work. The portrayal of a lesbian engaged in and apparently enjoying sex with a man shuts down a variety of expectations about gender and sexuality. Davy explains, "The lesbian's distance from the symbolic order is so great, her status as empty signifier so decisive, that she is effectively erased in the psychosocial register of the visible. This is both her oppression and her promise as a destabilizing force" (1993: 56-57). By replacing the expected feminine in this encounter with the "empty signifier" of a lesbian, Hughes manages to disrupt the assumption of gender within heterosexuality. If she is not the feminine defined by the oppositional binary of gender, perhaps other women and men, no matter their sexual orientation, cannot be contained within the dichotomy.

Beyond seeing a binary distinction in gender as arbitrarily restrictive, Butler believes that gender itself is artificial, that it is merely a "project which has cultural [particularly heterosexual culture] survival as its end" (1990: 139). Gender is nothing more than actions and behaviours that falsely claim to be signs of something substantive that lies beneath. "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (1990: 25). It is only repetition that gives gender its appearance of naturalness. Gender is merely performative. Once again, lesbianism is in a position to demonstrate the artificiality of gender. "In the lesbian context, where the heterosexual assumption has been discarded, gender as representation gets detached from 'the real.' Gender becomes a social *gestus*, a gesture that represents ideology circulating in social relations" (Dolan 1988: 116). Some critics, however, do not see *World Without End* as sufficiently lesbian to impart any sort of destabilisation. The heterosexual encounters in the work are seen by some as supporting the oppositional binary of gender. Davy, for example, believes the piece to be "permeated with tropes of heterosexuality that remain largely undisturbed" (1993: 55-6).

Finley, on the other hand, unquestionably demonstrates the performative nature of gender. Her constant shifting of gendered voices works to disrupt a perception of masculine and feminine as binary opposites. Rather, she demonstrates that the masculine and the feminine can be projected by the same individual. She assumes either gender, as well as non-specifically gendered positions, simply through performing. Because the binary gender division has achieved its appearance of naturalness through repetition, repetition of subversive presentations of gender, like Finley's, can function to destroy the illusion of reality. According to Butler, women, lesbians, and gay men must "preempt the position of the speaking subject and its invocation of the universal point of view" (1990: 119), and repeatedly use language to parody and subvert the gender binary created by power. Finley's effortless shifting from speaker to speaker and gender to gender demonstrates that there can be no universal point of view, especially with regard to gender.

Butler follows Foucault in seeing power as operating in a huge variety of ways in different institutions and at different levels of society in order to maintain the binary of gender. Finley, with her style of assuming, among others, the voice of power, is perfectly positioned to question the naturalness of the gender dichotomy. Although Finley's view of power may lack some of the subtlety of Butler's analysis, she clearly sees the operation of power as stemming from a broad variety of sources, not merely the government, and the power she opposes is situated neither within a male nor female subject position. Significantly, she declares, "it's the father in all of us" (69) responsible for the problems she exposes. Although father, of course, is a term generally associated with men, Finley lets no one off the hook. Hers is not a cultural feminist outlook valorising femininity and vilifying masculinity, rather she sees everyone as culpable. This vision is intimately associated with her transitions between feminine, masculine, and ungendered subject positions.

Since subversive language does not operate separately from the language of power, rather "it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible" (Butler, 1990: 145), only by assuming the language of power can Finley subvert it. When one of Finley's personae states:

> And after I fist-fucked you with my handful of sapphires, emeralds, garnets, and opals. Aquamarines, gold, silver, and platinum. I was fucking you with my will, my property, my esteem, and my values. I was fucking you with pearls and diamonds. Just filling your hole with everything I got. (69)

she can be seen as speaking from the multifaceted voice of power. Although the sexually violent and aggressive nature of the words may lead one to perceive the speaker as male, this voice is actually ungendered. By refusing to provide the violator with a gender, Finley denies easy answers. She subverts a

world view that would see male and female as mutually oppositional and clearly definable states. Once again, it is not possible to get to a gender or to a sexuality beyond power, because "power can be neither redrawn nor refused, but only redeployed" (Butler 1990: 124). We exist and our sexuality has developed within the network of power, therefore, there is no choice whether to "enter into the repetitive practices of this terrain of signification " (Butler 1990: 148) or not. Finley appears to understand this, utilising her gendered voices in what can be seen as an immersion into the horrors of power. Her work can be seen as "the subversive and parodic redeployment of power rather than . . . the impossible fantasy of its full-scale transcendence (Butler 1990: 124). Butler states, "The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself" (1990: 148). Finley's personae are nothing if not "a radical proliferation of gender." Her performance, with its rapid and seamless transition between genders undermines a view of the dichotomy as stable or authentic.

Common ground or "a dynamic of difference": group identity in Cruz, Lim, Hughes, Parks, Shange, and Wasserstein

A divergence from the white, gentile, heterosexual, middle-class majority most commonly considered by literary works and by many feminists is an integral part of some of the plays considered here. The characters treated by Cruz, Lim, Parks and Shange are people of color, while Lim and Wasserstein write about characters who are Confucian and Jewish, respectively, and Hughes's persona speaks from a lesbian or bisexual standpoint. Additionally, poverty plays a large role in the actions of the characters in the work of Cruz, Lim, and Parks. The theatre is a common ground for these women, but as August Wilson declares:

> We can meet on the common ground of theatre as a field of work and endeavor.
> But we cannot meet on the common ground of experience.
> Where is the common ground in the horrifics of lynching? Where is the common ground in the maim of a policeman's bullet? Where is the common ground in the hull or the deck of a slave ship with its refreshments of air and expanse?
> We can meet on the common ground of the American theatre.
> We cannot share a single value system if that value system consists of the values of white Americans based on their European ancestors. We reject that as Cultural Imperialism. We need a value system that includes our contributions as Africans in America. (1996: 71)

Although all of these plays are, of course, by women, their analysis highlights the differences in the lives and goals of women. These variations occur because women fall into different racial and socio-economic groups and, just as importantly, because people are always different from one another. Just as attempts to create a

monolithic feminism are doomed to fail or at least to be significantly internally conflicted, the idea that Jews, lesbians, or blacks each comprise a homogenous group is severely flawed, despite the political influence that a group identity can wield. The works considered here highlight difference, both difference from the majority and difference within groups often treated as homogenous, such as blacks, Latinos, and lesbians.

The politics of difference can be a minefield for a socially committed artist, who may be criticised as exclusionary when her work focuses on a particular group or, alternatively, as betraying her group (whether that group be defined based on ethnicity, class, or sexual orientation) when she seeks greater exposure for her art. Hughes, for example, in an attempt to bring her work to a wider audience has broadened her focus beyond lesbianism, particularly in *World Without End.* In doing so she has been denounced by critics such as Kate Davy who believes the piece fails to interrogate the "hetero-socio-sexual world order" (1993: 76), complaining, "bisexuality is all about heterosexuality in *World*" (1993: 77).

Some feminists, particularly those of color and lesbians, have begun the task of critiquing the American feminist movement which has often suppressed differences between women in hopes of presenting a unified, and therefore presumably more politically successful, public front. The feminist effort to speak for the unified category 'woman' is self-defeating for several reasons. Drawing on Foucault's belief that "juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent" (Butler 1990: 2), Butler points out that the category 'woman' is "discursively constituted" (1990: 2) by the feminism that is attempting to liberate it. She maintains that feminism, feminist politics, and the law, "the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought" (1990: 2), both produce and restrain the subject 'woman.' By seeking to create a unified front, some feminists buy into the same structures that oppress women in the first place. The limitation of the definition of feminism's subject is not merely accidental, but rather a reaction to the tactics of those opposed to equality for women who have historically attacked each wave of feminism, not without success, as the domain of women who are unattractive, unnatural, and essentially unlovable. As Russo explains:

> At least in the United States, considerable effort [by feminists] has been put into reassurances that feminists are 'normal women' and that our political aspirations are 'mainstream.' . . . this normalizing strategy cannot conceal its class bias and attachment to an 'upward mobility' which depends upon leaving others behind. Furthermore, it concedes much to the misogyny which permeates the fear of 'losing one's femininity,' 'making a spectacle of oneself,' 'alienating men' (meaning powerful men) or otherwise making 'errors.' Most importantly it leaves uninterrogated the very terms and processes of normalcy. (1995: 12)

By insisting on a coherent category of women, the feminist movement "has effectively refused the multiplicity of cultural, social and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' are constructed" (Butler 1990: 14). For example, the life experiences, goals, and priorities of white upper-middle-class American women may differ vastly from those of African American women of all economic levels and again from those women in developing countries. Additionally, there is no reason to assume that so seemingly homogeneous a group as all white upper-middle-class straight American women will share the same point of view. An attempt to create a unified subject for feminism therefore seems condemned to failure or to an unproductive exclusionary nature.

Butler sees feminism's drive for an integrated subject as reflecting "the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy" (1990: 13). Attempting to create or define a totalising category as the subject of feminism may make it impossible for feminism to be politically representational. Butler asks, "What sense does it make to extend representation to subjects who are constructed through the exclusion of those who fail to conform to unspoken normative requirements of the subject?" (1990: 5-6) A unified concept of the term 'woman' tends to be exclusionary because it fails to consider that race, class, sexuality, and other cultural factors also play a role in the development of an individual's identity. This failure is largely a result of an exclusive focus on the difference between men and women which pushes to the background a myriad of other differences, including race and class. Joan Scott observes, "the generalized opposition male/female serves to obscure the differences among women in behaviour, character, desire, subjectivity, sexuality, gender identification, and historical experience" (1990: 142). The attempt to define "a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women" (Butler 1990: 4), necessarily results in the rejection of the category by many who should be the subject of feminism's efforts. Proof of this problem is the rejection of the feminist label as well as the opposition to some of feminism's goals by "'women' whom feminism claims to represent" (Butler 1990: 4), often young women who are necessary to the continued strength of any future feminist action. Instead of an all-encompassing coherent definition of the subject of feminism, Butler advocates what she calls an "open coalition" (1990: 16) or an "antifoundationalist approach to coalitional politics" (1990: 15) which would operate without the goal of achieving unity. The open coalition would accept both the coming together and the divergence of opinions without any drive to achieve a conclusion. Instead of denying the differences inherent in a grouping together of women, an open coalition would

"acknowledge its contradictions and take action with those contradictions intact" (1990: 14). Such a formulation is clearly at odds with drives to create a unified consensus in order to achieve political goals. Although perhaps not uniquely American, this conflict between unity and inclusion, reflects an inconsistency in the definition of America that is at the root of many ideological conflicts. Americans see their country as welcoming "huddled masses," thus supporting multi-cultural education and affirmative action, and alternatively yet simultaneously as "one nation, under God," thus opposing bilingual education and preferential treatment for minorities. As Chaudhuri explains, "the themes of religious tolerance, racial harmony, and ethnic diversity are sounded repeatedly in the official self-characterization of the nation, becoming most insistent when that other superprinciple of American culture, homogeneity, is challenged by racial and ethnic conflict" (1995: 213). Each of the works negotiates this unity versus inclusion conflict in different ways. What is most immediately apparent in the works of Shange, Parks, and Wasserstein is how the plays identify their characters as distinct and different from the white or Christian majority of the United States.

In *spell #7*, the stories told by Shange's characters assert their identity as African Americans as different from and opposed to white Americans, highlighting the white focus of much of America, including the American feminist movement. Natalie decides to spend her day as a "white girl," a day which involves much hair flinging and avoidance of "niggahs," "navaho women," and "puerto rican people" (47). Speaking directly to members of the feminist movement, especially as it was constituted in 1979 when the play was written, natalie declares:

> i think i havent been fair to the sisterhood/ women's movement faction of white girls/ although/ they always ask what do you people really want. as if the colored woman of the world were a strange sort of neutered workhorse. which isnt too far from reality/ since i'm still waiting for my cleaning lady & the lady who takes care of my children & the lady who caters my parties & the lady who accepts quarters at the bathroom in sardi's. (48-49)

This damning critique of white feminists who seek to end oppression of women but unthinkingly fail to consider the situations of less privileged women while actively participating in the oppression of these women, illustrates much of feminism's inability to consider sexism within the context of racism and classism. Mary Childers and bell hooks believe that "we still do not have the language paradigms for white women to be able to express, 'this is how I am privileged' and yet 'this is how I am exploited'" (1990: 62-3). In America's political environment, which permits the existence of very little grey space, it is difficult for white women to

explore how the current system operates to their advantage for fear that this will then be interpreted as indicating that sexism for white women does not exist or at least does not do white women any harm. Alternatively, black women are caught on the short end of both racism and sexism, a situation often ignored by white feminists and by black men. Valerie Smith explains:

> Male-authored Afro-Americanist criticism assumed a conception of blackness that concealed its masculinist presuppositions; Anglo- or Euro-centered feminism relied upon a notion of gender that concealed its presumption of whiteness. It has fallen to feminists whose work explicitly addresses issues of race, class, sexual preference, and nationality to confront the implications of difference within these modes of oppositional discourse. (1990: 271)

Out of necessity, therefore, "black feminism presumes the 'intersectionality' of race and gender in the lives of black women, thereby rendering inapplicable to the lives of black women any 'single-axis' theory about racism or sexism" (Smith 1990: 272). Although racism is Shange's primary concern, she does not avoid consideration of conflicts between black men and women. In the dialogue between ross and natalie, she complains that he wants her to go on the road only so he "can fuck all these aspiring actresses" (44). He, on the other hand, seems to consider this a natural part of his make up and an unavoidable aspect of their relationship, saying "if you dont go on the road i'll still be fuckin em/ but you & me/ we'll be in trouble/ you understand?" (44). In another conflict alec refuses to take acting parts which he considers to be beneath him, while bettina declares, "i'm tired of having to take any & every old job to support us/ & you get to have artistic integrity & refuse parts that are beneath you" (44). Both these dialogues allude to the sexism found in much of the African American liberation struggle. In *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, bell hooks explains:

> Sexism has always been a political stance mediating racial domination, enabling white men and black men to share a common sensibility about sex roles and the importance of male domination. Clearly both groups have equated freedom with manhood, and manhood with the right of men to have indiscriminate access to the bodies of women. (1990: 59)

Thus ross's masculinity must be maintained by his freedom to "fuck . . . aspiring actresses" while alec's fight against racist stereotyped roles is supported through the oppression of bettina.

Like *spell #7*, *Death of the Last Black Man* is largely concerned with racism. When the work was first produced, it was with a racially mixed cast, because, as Parks explains, "I didn't have any feeling at that time that it needed to be an all-black cast. I didn't want people to jump to some easy political point about the play and sum it up in some quick statement" (1994: 245-6). In the play's second production, at The Yale

Repertory Theatre, the director, Liz Diamond, suggested an all-black cast. Parks agreed because, "The play had received its first airing, so I thought that we should take another look at it from another point of view" (1994: 246). The all-black cast, according to Parks, makes a large difference. "Just putting eleven black people onstage is in its own way moving and pushing the form of theatre" (1994: 246). Although, with an all-black cast, there are no whites on stage with whom the other characters are in conflict, the spectre of racism permeates the work. The execution or lynching of Black Man With Watermelon, around which much of the play revolves, as discussed earlier, evokes the large number of African Americans on death row as well as the dark history of lynching in the southern United States.

In a way similar to the effects of race on Shange and Parks, Wasserstein feels put apart and separated by her religion. About her very successful play, *The Heidi Chronicles*, which won the Pulitzer Prize and the Tony Award and which was made into a television movie, she says:

> There is a part of me that thinks *The Heidi Chronicles* was taken more seriously because it was about a Gentile girl from Chicago. It wasn't about Wendy with the hips from New York, even if Wendy with the hips from New York had the same emotional life. It's a cynical point of view, but I partially believe that to be true. (quoted in Bryer 1995: 272)

She believes that *The Sisters Rosensweig* "is very much about being Jewish" (quoted in Bryer 1995: 272). Clearly, for the characters Gorgeous, Sara, and Merv, negotiating the role of Judaism in their lives is an important part of their make-up. Gorgeous and Merv embrace their Jewishness, both as a religion and as an ethnicity and this leads to much of their conflict with Sara.

Just as the designation American or woman is inadequate to describe a person, definitions based on race, religion, or sexual preference will clearly fail to be completely useful. Although group adhesion can be politically beneficial, such groupings run the same risks as an all-encompassing definition of woman. The potential dangers of an unnuanced understanding of difference are explained by Dean MacCannell:

> The concept of difference is supposed to be critical theory's 'affirmative action' program. . . . If the result is human difference without essentialism we can perhaps believe that some gains have been made. But if it is difference without class, gender or ethnic specificity, the gains have been taken back. The result is a kind of 'United Colors of Benneton' philosophy. (quoted in Chauduri 1995: 285)

For example, if difference means simply not white, then the multiple racial and ethnic distinctions between people in the United States are obscured, and people within any group are treated as homogeneous. In this vein, Childers and hooks remark, "At times it seems the category 'women of color' works to erase class and other differences among us, so that to have any woman of color at a conference means that certain experiences

are taken care of when, in fact they are avoided or merged with others" (1990: 78).

The differences within groups are important, to varying degrees, in the works discussed here. Part of this is, of course, dramatic necessity in that there would not be much interest in an interaction between, for example, three Jewish sisters in which they all were the same. Wasserstein, in fact, rather than seeing religion as a homogenising attribute, lays the differences in each sister's relationship to her Judaism at the centre of her play. Sara and Gorgeous, at odds over the importance of Jewish observances, are both in some ways defined by their Judaism yet they are totally different women. Gorgeous clearly has made room in her life for her religion and accepts her family background. Sara, for much of the play, defines herself in reaction to her New York Jewish upbringing, while Pfeni seems to balance between her two sisters. In a very tense scene between the sisters, Sara is hostile to Gorgeous's attempts to "remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy" (37). Sara mocks Gorgeous's Sabbath sundown prayers as "an ancient tribal ritual" (38). The ferocity with which Sara attacks her sister's beliefs seems to indicate how conflicted Sara is about her rejection of her background. Unlike her sisters, Pfeni appears to neither embrace nor reject her Jewish heritage. She does not pray with Gorgeous yet she protests when Sara asks her to blow out the candles Gorgeous lights for the Sabbath. By presenting three sisters who negotiate their relationship to their ethnic and religious heritage in different ways, Wasserstein presents a picture that is dramatically more interesting as well as more true to life.

Similarly, the various ways in which Wing, Kam, and Fook deal with their lives as imported Chinese workers highlights the differences in these men, rather than a commonalty springing from their heritage. Wing, except when lost in his passion for Li-Tai, works very hard to bring honour and prosperity to his family. Kam, more cynical, attempts merely to ride out the remaining time on his contract, while Fook actively exploits his fellow Chinese. The end of the play highlights the distinctions between the three. Fook is dead and Kam is a fugitive as a result of the deep conflict between the two, when Kam's unrealistic hopes of aiding his fellow workers collide with Fook's desire to continue exploiting Li-Tai. Wing, alternatively, turns his back on the plantation, intending to return with his father's bones to China, reconciling father and son with their homeland. In *Bitter Cane* Lim thereby makes it clear that the distinctions between Chinese people can be more important than their similarities.

Hughes, in a similar vein, presents her sexual orientation as an important aspect of her life yet at the same time not sufficient to define her. She says, "I don't like the term 'gay playwright,' I really prefer 'queer.'

Gay is a word invented to make straight people like us. I am anti-assimilation. I say go out there and be as weird as you are" (quoted in Davy 1993: 76). Her persona in *World Without End* declares herself "the preeminent lesbian performance artist from southern Michigan" (31), yet, after her mother's death, she has sex with "this guy at work" because "[t]his idiot this dumbo I had yelled at fifty times a day to get out of my face was crying all over the copier about my mother" (28). Additionally, the speaker is inspired by the heterosexual desire her mother displays while she is dying. Although, as mentioned above, to some critics such as Davy this demonstrates a failure to question the dominance of heterosexuality, Hughes can also be seen as refusing to be defined. Davy concedes that, "For Hughes queer signifies the we-are-*not*-just-like-everybody-else stance" (1993: 76), while she is disappointed that Hughes also declines to be defined as "just-like" other lesbians. Hughes, happily and overtly lesbian yet willing to move beyond lesbian-focused material and venues, refuses assimilation into both mainstream culture and the limited roles defined as appropriate by some lesbian theorists.

Shange says, "I feel that as an artist my job is to appreciate the differences among my women characters" (quoted in Tate 1983: 153), yet the primary focus of *spell #7* is racial conflict between black and white. Shange, of course, does not maintain that blacks are all the same. For example, maxine's story dramatises the fact that blacks can be very different from one another. In explaining her gold-wearing obsession, maxine says, "the pain i succumbed to each time a colored person did something that i believed only white people did waz staggering" (51), pointing out that all people are capable of inhumanity. Nevertheless, Shange's work largely revolves around the racism faced by blacks. As important as the injustices visited upon African Americans by white Americans are, fixating on this binary is far more limiting than the more radical approach taken by Parks. Talking about The Yale Repertory Theatre production of *Death of the Last Black Man*, she remarks, "eleven black people onstage whose conflict is something other than their conflict with white people is *very* avant-garde" (1994: 246). Although racism is an integral part of daily life for African Americans, the reality of black life includes far more of worth and interest than the non-white designation implied by the limiting binary of black versus white. One can see this operating in some of the most interesting of African American literature. In Morrison's *Paradise*, for example, the citizens of Ruby focus their anxiety on the women living at the Convent because they are outsiders and self-sufficient women not because of their race. Morrison in fact purposely keeps the ethnicity of the convent women vague to

forestall easy conclusions about the novel, allowing her to explore the town elders' xenophobia and sexism. She demonstrates that the intersection of these prejudices with white racism is a more interesting and challenging topic than racism alone. Similarly, in Park's play, white racism is merely subtext to the more intriguing dialogue of the characters. The "strange fruit" of lynching in the southern United States reverberates as Black Man With Watermelon and Black Woman With Fried Drumstick discuss his death and return, yet the characters' primary concern is trying to figure out what is going on in their here and now.

Similarly, in *Miriam's Flowers*, Cruz does not focus on the problems her characters face as members of a disenfranchised ethnic group. There is, in fact, no statement in the play that the characters are Puerto Rican, although their names and dialects do identify them as Hispanic. The conflicts the characters encounter are with one another and with life. Although over 29% of America's poor are Hispanic (*New York Times Magazine* 7/6/98), the Nieves' poverty is presented as a given and not attributed to their ethnicity. Poverty, of course, can assail anyone. Similarly, the pain from the death of a loved one knows no ethnic boundaries and Puli's death and the dramatically different ways in which it affects each of the characters demonstrates a nuanced understanding of difference. The characters' pain is something anyone who has experienced loss can identify with. Miriam's mutilations, Delfina's suicide, and Nando's quiet desperation illustrate that people are all individuals despite common experience, gender, class, or race.

The ubiquitous family

More than any other issue discussed in this dissertation, the state and role of the American family is a topic of contention in modern United States society. Politicians promise a return to family values while many people ask whose family? and whose values? Has the decline of the traditional nuclear family made poverty an intractable state of affairs for much of society? Or, on the other hand, have poverty and the vagaries of the welfare system contributed to the decline of this oft-revered family structure? Has the increase in the number of working mothers contributed to juvenile delinquency? Is the conventional family structure inherently oppressive of women? Is feminism a threat to the traditional family?

Whatever one's opinion on these issues, almost all lives are greatly influenced by family, whether family is defined as a traditional nuclear family, as a single-parent family, as siblings, or as the presence of a significant other. Even in the unusual case of a siblingless orphan who grows to maturity without forming at

least an informal family, his or her life would be largely defined by this lack, by the missing family. The Western canon of drama, from *Oedipus Rex* through *Death of a Salesman*, has considered the intricacies of family worthy of exploration. Particularly in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries family has become the focus of much theatrical output. "The privileged setting of modern drama is the family home" (Chaudhuri 1995: 6). As Dolan points out, however, the critical reception facing a play concerning family can be very different when the playwright is a woman. She writes, "In the change from male writer to female and father/son focus to mother/daughter, domestic drama is reduced to kitchen drama, which is considered specific rather than universal, and melodramatic rather than tragic" (1988: 33). The term "universal" is a loaded one, often used to privilege the experiences of groups in power, generally white, male, and middle-class, at the expense of other people. Dolan continues, "Domesticity and family assume different meanings when received in the context of plays by women. While [Arthur] Miller can write about the family [particularly in *Death of a Salesman*] and be canonized, Norman's attempt to tackle similar issues [in her Pulitzer Prize winning *'night Mother*] is seen as evidence of the preoccupations of her gender class" (1988: 33). Thus while a male playwright's interest in the dynamics of a father/son relationship is perceived as reflecting his noble concern with issues of universal import, a female playwright's exploration of a mother/daughter relationship is perceived as indicative of her feminine focus on domestic issues, thought to be of interest only to other women. In actuality, however, family in its various forms is very nearly a true universal and, therefore, a natural subject for drama. Accordingly, all the plays considered here reflect the inescapable repercussions, both positive and negative, of family. Each work involves family at least on some level. Family, as a source of comfort and of crisis, seems most important, however, in the plays by Cruz, Hughes, Finley, Lim, Norman, and Wasserstein.

The plays, to varying degrees, critique conservative rhetoric privileging the nuclear family as the best source of strength and comfort. The plays, in fact, identify the family as either the site or the source of conflicts that are ultimately resolved in only a few of the works. *Miriam's Flowers*, for example, explores a family's failure to support one another in time of crisis. Although Delfina and Nando are not married and Nando is not Miriam's father, his presence in the women's lives appears stable enough that he can be seen to function as a husband and father figure. Despite this imitation of the traditional family, Delfina and Miriam, each lost in her own pain, fail to weather the crisis of loss. The death of Puli serves to explode the relatively

stable family unit. Instead of coming together to comfort one another, loss pushes them away, each left to her own suffering. Very realistically, Delfina and Nando, despite Nando's best efforts, are also driven apart by the death of their son. The idea that adversity forges strength is a myth and "[t]he painful fact that parents discover is that losing a child can isolate them from their partner just when they need each other the most" (Rosof 1994: 91). Nando's affection is simply not enough to prevent Delfina from literally drowning in her despair. Cruz thus simultaneously presents both the strength and weakness of family bonds. As discussed, the love between Miriam and Delfina and between Delfina and Nando is insufficient to avert tragedy. Yet the love of sister for brother and, particularly, of mother for son are bonds presented as so strong that when they are severed the pain is unassuageable.

The commentary made by the characters' situation, with regard to traditional families, is ambiguous and would depend largely on the play's presentation in production as well as the point of view of individual spectators. One can read the failure of the Nieves family as a condemnation of single parenthood and non-traditional families by highlighting the fact that Delfina and Nando are not married and that Nando is not Miriam's father. The play can alternatively be assessed as representing the failure of a rather traditional family if focus is placed on Nando's attempt to protect Miriam, which demonstrates him to be protectively paternal, and on Nando's steadfast affection for Delfina, which indicates that he is a stable part of the other characters' lives.

The impact of inner-city poverty on families, although in the background, is an ever-present part of Cruz's presentation of the Nieves family. Once again this can be read in different ways based on nuances of production and the original opinions of audience members. Does poverty cause many of the problems faced by the Nieves? Or, is their non-traditional family structure responsible for their poverty and their difficulty in coping? One particularly ambivalent situation involves the disposition of the money the family receives as a settlement for Puli's death. Miriam explains to Enrique that with the eight thousand dollars, "We got a big color T. V. and a big antenna. And I got new coats for me and mami" (64). Rather than utilising the money to facilitate a permanent change in their situation, the family has frittered it away on nondurable goods. Is this decision a sign of Delfina's irresponsibility, the same irresponsibility that led her to have children out of wedlock, which in turn compounds or even causes the family's poverty? Or, alternatively, does poverty lead to poor education and cycles of poor decision making? This latter reading and a concurrent condemnation of

the callousness of much of society toward the plight of the less fortunate appear supported by other dialogue. In the same conversation with Enrique, Miriam declares, "We got eight thousand dollars for Puli. That's how much the judge figures he's worth. Who can fight wif a judge?" (64). No matter how significant a windfall eight thousand dollars is to a poor family in the 1970s, the idea of a judge, emblem of authority and of the establishment, determining the worth in dollars of a beloved family member (an amount no doubt less than what the judge, with his higher earning capacity, would consider himself worth) is extremely distasteful.

The loss through death of a family member spurs the recollections of Hughes's *World Without End*, and despite the apparent healing at the end of the work, the relationships presented are full of conflict. As she escorts the audience on a verbal journey through her past, many of the "important landmarks" (12) she describes involve her family. The dark potential of the nuclear family and perhaps of all close relationships is presented when the speaker's mother brutally axes a porcupine to a pulp. Her motivation is murky but clearly involves her husband since moments before the speaker wonders "Where was my father? My mother was being so nice to me I didn't recognize her" (14). In this scene one is faced with the emotional dangers of marriage as well as the physical threat parents can be to their children. The vulnerability of the speaker and her sister is clear when "mother came back into the restaurant, her hands were full of bloody flesh and quills. 'Here you are, girls. Something for your class. Science!' It could have been worse. It could have been a lot worse. She put down the axe" (14).

Hughes's vision of family, however, is largely positive, containing several scenes of loving family interaction. Most importantly, of course, is the transmission of the secret of her "mother's French" in their suburban bathroom. This scene, although it celebrates mother/daughter relationships, is far from the family values glorified by social conservatives. The final scene of the work also confounds social conservative family values but presents the positive potential of conjugal relations as it depict love between the persona's parents. As the mother lays on her deathbed she transforms her husband by pulling him on top of her and "His hand goes between her legs. On the last night of my mother's life my father's hand is red. Red! Red from the light of apples falling" (32). Using apples as a symbol of the astonishing possibilities of change, Hughes suggests the rebirth of her father through loving interaction with his wife. With its sexual focus, however, the scene presents a relationship unlikely to be cited as exemplary by those who see the family as the solution to society's ills. Hughes's piece as a whole leaves the impression that the bonds of a nuclear family may be

extremely dangerous but the love that forms the basis of many families is ultimately healing.

In *Travelers in the Dark*, the death of a loved one, although not a family member, throws a family into turmoil, exposing the deep fissures already existing in the relationships. Although Norman's happy ending, which sees the family returning to a contented state of togetherness, in many ways affirms a conservative belief in the rightness of the nuclear family, the conflicts in the play and apparently the primary conflicts in the characters' lives are the result of this very traditional family. For example, Sam, like fathers in many two-parent American families spends much of his time at work, admitting, "I know I've been gone too much and never taken any time off, but I want to change all that" (190). On the whole, however, the piece is very conservative in that resolution is achieved through the restoration of the nuclear family, despite its flaws.

Both Norman and Lim make unusual use of the Oedipal myth. Norman plays with this ultimate theme of male-oriented drama, in various ways. Clearly, by attempting to eradicate any belief in religion in Stephen, Sam is attempting to murder the influence of his father, whom he believes to have been unworthy of his mother's love. Sam's loss of his own religious beliefs, following his mother's death, is also an attack on his father. His rage at his father is so intense and, given the apparent association of that anger with his mother's death, it seems he, however irrationally, blames his father for that loss. Her death is the ultimate removal of her love and thereby the father has effectively denied her as an object for Sam's affection. In an additional twist to the Oedipal myth, conquering the power of the father leads not to his death but to a rapprochement between father and son. Sam only becomes free of the influence of his feelings for his father, manifest in his emphatic rejection of his father's beliefs, when he learns to forgive his father.

In Lim, on the other hand, the father truly dies only when he is accepted and honoured by the son. The ghost of Lau occupies the stage until Wing takes on his filial duty and agrees to return his father's bones to China, allowing him to rest in peace. In effect, Wing is able to kill Lau only by truly becoming his son and demonstrating the respect due to a father. Also, as in the Freudian Oedipal struggle, the son gives up his initial love object, in this case Li-Tai as a mother figure, recognising her as the domain of the father. Li-Tai becomes Lau's bride in death and Wing accepts his role as son, no longer his father's rival.

Father/son conflict in a more general sense is also a driving force of the plot in *Bitter Cane*. Wing travels to Hawaii to redeem his family name, which he believes was corrupted by his father's behaviour. Wing comes to understand his father and the situation in which he found himself. This family healing brings plot

resolution and Wing is able to return to China with his pride in his father restored. Lim's work is also a commentary on the havoc that economic hardship can inflict on families, in a less ambiguous way than Cruz's piece. Prior to the action of the play, Lau was faced with a choice between staying with his family and enduring crushing poverty or working in Hawaii in order to earn money to send home. It is his failure to provide the money to support his family that shames his wife and creates the family disgrace that Wing feels he must overcome. Similarly, Kam is working to obtain enough money to return to China and start a family. Opium and prostitutes, however, provide expensive comforts in the bleak life of the contract labourer, and make it very difficult to amass adequate funds. The play clearly illustrates that it is not broken families that create poverty, but rather poverty that can destroy families.

The view of family presented in *Constant State of Desire* is all conflict, pain, and exploitation. Finley's portrayals of family relations mock conservative championing of family values as the cure for society's ills. In the *Cut Off Balls* section she denounces a view that privileges the family as the nurturing location of love and growth and instead presents family as an arena for repetitive cycles of pain and indifference. The speaker explains, "Father when I said good-bye to you before I went off to war, you were too busy with your head in the toilet to reply, I just wanted that fatherly hug to a son turning to a man" (63). As revenge "every man, child, and woman I killed was my father's face in that toilet. And I prayed I'd die at war so my father would learn guilt" (63). Yet the speaker hopes to improve the father/son relationship in the subsequent generation, an impossibility in Finley's distopian world. "I told myself it would be different when I had children. We'd share our experiences and feelings together. We'd be so close. But I'm just like my father, a drunken slob. And the only feelings I share are no feelings at all." (63-4). For Finley, the pain found in families is doomed to continue generation after generation.

The motto of early second-stage feminism, "the personal is the political," rings true in Finley's work. The family in this piece is a microcosm of society at large with the greed and sadism that pollutes contemporary America finding its reflection in the violence family members visit upon one another. With her declaration, at the end of the disturbing *Refrigerator* section, that "it's the father in all of us" who is "the punisher, the provider, the money man" (69), Finley blames patriarchy, but a patriarchy which is not the realm of men only, for society's ills. By alternating between "father" and "Father" she draws a parallel between the nuclear family headed by a father and the vision of America overseen by the "Father in the Sky" (69). Finley

also implicates the secular head of the United States, saying, in the *Vomit Belly* section, "I saw Mr. Reagan on the TV. There is a TV camera up his butthole looking up his asshole for polyps, for his colon cancer. He is so obsessed with what not to put up the butthole. . . . Boy, I call your disease a metaphor" (70). She thereby connects the President to the uncompassionate father of whom a speaker has previously complained, "when I told you I had the disease that mostly afflicts homosexuals, women, and children too, I know you no longer considered me you son" (68). As in *Cut Off Balls*, the callous disregard repeats and repeats. After watching the colonoscopy of the metaphoric patriarch of the country, the persona describes taking a walk during which

> I walked right over your baked body in the cement. My heel caught the needle in your arm, and tore your flesh with my walk. I knew you once. I knew you when you were to do great things for us. But now you are worthless. 'Cause I know it's every man for himself in this town, it's such a small city. Such a busy busy town. Just keep on walking, keep you head high. Just walk right over 'em. (70)

Cruelty trickles down from on high and infiltrates every member of the American family. The traditional nuclear family cannot be the salvation of American society, for in Finley's vision it reflects and repeats all the evil, pain, and horror of the world.

Wasserstein's work, especially *The Sisters Rosensweig*, is very family-focused, yet she feels the "family values" focus of politics leaves her out. She remarks:

> It's interesting to me as an artist and a single woman, that there was so much during the [1996 Presidential] conventions about what matters in life is family and children. It's almost as if there was an exclusionary aspect. There was this America being defined — actually, I thought, from the right and the left — that I wasn't really a part of. (quoted in *The New York Times* 6/10/96)

The political family-values rhetoric is clearly exclusionary in that it centres on the traditional nuclear family, while Wasserstein's characters have familial relationships in a variety of structures. Sara and Tess, for example, form a single-parent family, while Pfeni and Geoffrey are part-time cohabitators. Perhaps most significantly, the three sisters embody the good and bad of family with intercontinental bonds that none of them can do without. They are the products of a nuclear family, but their relationship has clearly grown beyond the family generally envisioned by politicians. The sisters disagree with and disapprove of one another throughout the play. Ultimately, however, they are a source of comfort and support for one another. Their affection for one another, however, does not necessarily function as an affirmation of the nuclear family, because, although the sisters are the products of such a family they have failed to reproduce this structure in their own lives.

A determining influence on the sisters' lives has been their relationship with their mother. Although

the audience never meets Rita Rosensweig (she has recently died), her imprint can be felt as the sisters attempt to define themselves in reaction to her. Sara and Pfeni have largely attempted to create themselves as purposely different from their mother. Sara, the epitome of the strong independent woman, has perhaps, given her successful career and her two unsuccessful marriages, placed a higher priority on work than family. This can be seen as a rejection both of the typical roles pressed on women and of her family's Jewish values. Brody explains, "Although these sexist values [believing women should have husbands and children rather than careers] were imposed on all women in the 1950s and 1960s [when Sara would have been in her teens and twenties], not just on Jews, the Jewish emphasis on the importance of family, especially for women, made the issues personally burdensome" (1997: 29). Thus as arduous as disregarding societal values would be for any woman, this may have been even more difficult for Sara. Gorgeous tells her, "Rabbi Pearlstein says you're very troubled because you never grew up to be the woman our mother expected us to be" (75), and her unhappy state would appear to indict working women if it were not for two factors. First, her daughter, Tess, appears intelligent, well adjusted, and relatively happy for a teenager. Thus Wasserstein gives little indication that Sara's career has had any negative impact on her daughter. Second, the end of the play provides Sara the opportunity for romantic happiness with Merv without requiring her to sacrifice her independent life. Sara comes to accept her Jewish heritage and upbringing without rejecting her identity as a working woman.

Pfeni, with her tendency to only "fall in love with men who can never really love [her] back" (100), has successfully avoided conventional family life. It is apparent that her unusual lifestyle is related to her feelings about her mother when, after she defends her relationship with Geoffrey, Gorgeous scolds, "Sweetsie, don't waste your time rebelling against mother anymore. She's not even here to enjoy it. Its just us now" (72). Work, particularly her more serious writing, brings her satisfaction. She turns to her work on the women of Tajikistan, as well as the comforting arms of her sisters, to heal her heart after Geoffrey breaks it. Wasserstein gives no indication that working on her book will fail to provide Pfeni with complete satisfaction.

Gorgeous, unlike her sisters, appears to be following a life path of which her mother approved. She has married and stood by the father of her children, worships at her local synagogue, and is an active part of her Jewish community. The reality of her life, however, shows what an empty shell this revered nuclear family can be. Being a wife and mother has not brought Gorgeous happiness. She is as independent and self-sufficient as her sisters but since she places a higher value on traditional female roles her career is the result of

necessity rather than choice. Therefore, although she is proud of her advice show success, it is her family's secret failure to be picture perfect that looms large in her sense of self. Thus, overall, while the play demonstrates the extreme importance of familial relations, it does not privilege the conventional nuclear family so favoured in political rhetoric.

Realism versus *l'écriture feminine*: the search for a feminist theatre

Different plays negotiate the gap between reality and theatre in various ways. Some plays attempt to approximate the real to varying degrees, allowing the audience to "lose themselves" in the drama and make believe that what is seen is empirically real. These naturalistic plays can be seen as tacit understandings between audience and creators that, although clearly simulation, the events presented should be accepted as reality at least for the duration of the production. *The Sisters Rosensweig*, for example, with its believable situations, its very human characters, and, in its Broadway production, the detailed representation of Sara's home, encourages the audience to pretend to be watching actual events in the lives of real people over the course of a weekend.

Other, less naturalistic, plays highlight the inherently artificial nature of theatre. *Miriam's Flowers*, for example, presents believable events and emotions yet simultaneously subverts attempts to consider the world of the play as part of reality. The scenes with Puli, for instance, reflecting the strong memories of the other characters as well as a fluidity of time, could not occur in reality. These scenes can be understood as representing the psychological reality of the grieving characters, but not an empirical reality. Although the memories of a lost loved one may be incredibly vivid, they are never so lifelike as to be visible to others, while time remains stubbornly linear and forward moving. Additionally, the minimal, almost surreal set forces the audience to encounter the theatricality of what is being witnessed. The altar candles, which Cruz specifies should remain lit for the entire performance, add a sense of ritual to the production, as do the three altars themselves by suggesting the pervasive presence of the rites of Roman Catholicism. The undertone of religion, in which what is "real," for example the blood and body of Christ, is not seen but only represented, by communion wine and wafer, reflects the illusion that is theatre.

Twentieth-century experimental playwrights and theatre groups rejected the naturalistic and realistic traditions of earlier theatre. They found the conventional narrative form limiting and searched for theatrical

expressions that would enliven their art sufficiently to actually change society. As previously mentioned, women working within avant-garde and leftist theatre groups in the late 1960s and early 1970s frequently found their feminist concerns ignored and left to form their own companies. Like their male counterparts, these groups, as well as later female playwrights and theorists, were influenced by such male practitioners as Brecht, Artaud, and, to a lesser extent, Peter Brook, Augusto Boal, and Jerzy Grotowski (Birringer 1991:29). The result of this influence was, among other things, frequently "radical insistence on the physical presence of the actors" (Birringer 1991:44) (through Artaud and Grotowski) as well as a suspicion of traditional narrative structure and realism.

Johannes Birringer, in his *Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism*, believes that in the current postmodern society the relative realism of a play makes no difference because "[t]he suspension of disbelief is becoming irrelevant" (1991: 79). In the culture of late capitalism, with its "mass market of overproduced images and ubiquitous information circuitries" (1991: 79) there is very little place for the imaginary "since reality seems already always replaced by its simulations" (1991: 79). Yet it seems that there is indeed something at stake in various attempts to stage the real. Traditionally, theatre and other visual arts are based on a system of representation that locks women out of the position of subject and presents women only as objects, as Carlson explains:

> Lacan, following Freud and indeed the traditional Western system of representation, places the male in the subject position. This subject enters self-consciousness and language with a sense of separation and incompleteness, an ongoing 'desire' for an objectified 'other' that both threatens and promises a lost unity. Traditional theatre and visual art are based on this system, assuming a male spectator and offering the female as 'other,' the object of the male's desiring gaze. (1996: 168)

As Phelan notes, "White women . . . have been encouraged to mistake performance for ontology — to believe that the role is real, and thus sufficient to constitute an identity, a sense of purpose, a reason for being" (1993: 105). Characters that one sees in plays, movies, and television shows help women create a sense of what society expects them to be. Women often assume these roles and accept such role-playing in others as real. For both men and women, images influence how race, class, and sexuality, as well as gender, are experienced and interpreted. As bell hooks explains, "Attention to the politics of representation has been crucial for colonized groups globally in the struggle for self-determination. The political power of representations cannot be ignored" (1990: 72). From this point of view, plays that openly demonstrate their falseness can be seen as

more subversive than plays which appear to stage reality. For example, Norman's character Glory in *Traveler in the Dark* is presented as a typical woman, prettier than most, but happily embracing her life as the wife of a successful doctor. The play provides no indications that women like Glory (and, according to some theorists, all women) are merely playing a role. Alternatively, a work that emphasises the theatricality of its characters, *spell #7* for example, reveals the falsity of many faces presented for public consumption. Shange's characters, not merely the people playing the characters, are performers. They come to eli's bar in order to shed the roles they are forced to play in mainstream productions. While in the bar they assume other roles in the form of the stories they tell about various African American lives. By highlighting performance and masks, Shange discourages the viewer from pretending her play is empirically real. Rather she encourages viewers to search for the truth behind all roles and to question the reality of various types of masks. Dolan explains, alluding to materialist feminist adaptation of Brechtian techniques, discussed further below, "Estranging the spectator from the conditions of life outlined by the representation denaturalizes the dominant ideology that benefits from such 'natural' social relations" (1988: 107). She is speaking here of not only plays such as Shange's which inherently frustrate attempts to equate performance and reality, but also of potential productions of more realist works. Of course any play, including the realist works of Wasserstein, Henley, or even Norman, can be staged in a Brechtian manner, alienating the observer and calling into focus the performativity of the characters presented, and similarly, the performative nature of all gender, racial, and class roles. Dolan considers this a particularly powerful strategy for change, remarking, "Brechtian technique in feminist hands can fragment the realist drama into component parts and expose its gender assumptions for critical inspection" (1988: 111).

Realism has come under attack from many feminists, particularly those whose thinking is in line with cultural feminism or with materialist feminism, because it "imposes a conservative sense of order by delivering its ideology as normative. . . . Realism naturalizes social relations imposed by dominant ideology and mystifies its own authorship" (Dolan 1988: 106). In Wasserstein's *The Sisters Rosensweig*, for example, plot resolution restores the sisters to contentment without suggesting any need for wholesale changes to gender relationships or economic systems. While the play succeeds in many ways as a liberal feminist work, in a conventional production it would give no indication that women like Sara, Pfeni, and Gorgeous are playing roles determined for them by society. Gorgeous's secret life holds a glimmer of this idea. When her

façade of carefree working wife and mother is stripped away, however, all that is revealed is a self-sacrificing, burdened, bread-winner, standing by her man in yet another role presented as the truth. The naturalist style of the play also conceals the presence of Wasserstein as creator. "In naturalistic plays the playwright contrives the dialogue in such a way that while seeming natural it shows what he wants to be seen." (Brook 1968: 53) The audience, therefore, is able to slip into accepting the action on stage as actual occurrences in the lives of three existing sisters rather than confronting the fact that the events are an imaginative creation. Thus when the status quo is restored and the sisters achieve satisfaction without significant alterations to their lives, it appears natural, and in contemporary America what is natural is often deemed to be right, desirable, and pre-ordained.

Most of the plays considered here, *The Sisters Rosensweig*, *Abundance*, *Traveler in the Dark*, and, to a lesser extent, *Miriam's Flowers* and *Bitter Cane*, can be considered realist, largely based on the structure of their story line. Dolan explains, "The crisis that propels the realist plot is resolved when the elements that create the textual disturbance are reinstated within a culturally defined system of order at the narrative's end" (1988: 84). Realism is thus closely aligned with a certain form of narrative that puts forth the notion that stories have a natural beginning and end. In much of realist drama this 'natural' ending coincides with a return to established order.

Traditional narrative and dramatic structure appears to be based on the male sexual experience. Influential feminist playwright Caryl Churchill remarks, "I remember . . . thinking of the 'maleness' of the traditional structure of plays, with conflict and building in a certain way to a climax" (quoted in Aston 1995: 41). In school, one learns that the proper way to write a story is to have the action build to a climax which is followed by a denouement. One learns that "a well-built tragedy" (Holman 1980: 142) follows "[t]he fundamental dramatic structure [which] seems timeless and impervious to basic change" (1980: 144), consisting of "introduction, rising action, climax . . . , falling action, and catastrophe" (1980: 142). This form is very linear with the action continually driving forward to an eventual conclusion. Describing their frustration, as women involved in theatre, with this narrative structure, Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement write:

> We wonder if traditional dramatic structure doesn't routinely impose certain distortions on women's lives and women's experience. There has been a lot of speculation about climaxes and male sexuality as they are inscribed in Aristotelian dramatic action, but perhaps the real issue is control, the impulse to shape human

> action into something predictable and manageable, and to name oneself as the author of that shapeliness. This is exactly the kind of male narrative that has systematically excluded women from the beginning of recorded literature. (1993: 151)

As opposed to a linearly structured work, some French feminists, influencing cultural feminists in America, envision a feminine writing that involves flow rather than force, a process often termed *l'écriture feminine*. It is possible to identify the style they propose with the female anatomy, with its monthly cycles coinciding with the phases of the moon and the stages of the tide, as well as with female sexuality, with a potential for multiple, perhaps endless, orgasm. Hélène Cixous explains, "Being of a body with the river all the way to the rapids rather than with the boat, exposing yourself to this danger — this is a feminine pleasure" (1991: 57). By this she means that the control and the desire to shape action which Donkin and Clement object to above is not a feminine trait. Rather for Cixous feminine writing is "[a] practice of the greatest passivity. . . . You don't seek to master. To demonstrate, explain, grasp. And then to lock away in a strongbox. To pocket a part of the riches of the world. But rather to transmit: to make things loved by making them known" (1991: 57). In writing, Cixous believes that she merely makes manifest the text that is already within her, declaring, "I don't write. Life becomes text starting out from my body. I am already text" (1991: 52). Just as the female body is the source of feminine writing, the female body on stage for Cixous is capable of creating a feminine theatre. In *Aller à la Mer* she describes how this theatre can overcome the restrictions of traditional drama. She envisions a "stage/scene without event. No need for plot or action; a single gesture is enough but one that can transform the world" (quoted in Dolan 1988: 87). Dolan explains, "Cixous' intent is to undermine the oppressions of male language through the body and gesture" (1988: 87). This emphasis on the female body, however, risks reinforcing age-old patriarchal notions about women because it "replicates the equating of women with the body – as if men did not have bodies also!" (Flax 1990: 53)

Like Cixous, Luce Irigaray associates the language of women with water, saying, "it is continuous, compressible, dilatable, viscous, conductible, diffusable" (1985: 111). Irigaray also sees women as inevitably involved in doubling and mimesis, an idea suggested once again by women's physical bodies. She writes, "Woman 'touches herself' all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, within herself, she is already two — but not divisible into one(s) — that caress each other" (1985: 24). It is also women's sexual organs that lead Irigaray to connect women with mimesis. As crystallised by Freud, to male eyes, female sexual organs are merely an absence of

a penis. She observes that for Freud, "The 'feminine' is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex" (1991: 119). She, therefore, determines that, like other Western thinkers, "Freud does not see two sexes" (1991: 119), but rather one, the male, with the female being merely a reflection of the male. Thus, "Western philosophical discourse is incapable of representing femininity/woman other than as the negative of its own reflection" (Moi 1985: 132). As absences, women are outside representation, and, according to Irigaray, if they choose to speak, produce "works that only signify their aphasia, or the mimetic underside of your [male] desire" (1985: 112), that is, either insane jabbering or mere imitation of male discourse. This situation holds both women's oppression and their potential liberation in that, by actively assuming the role of mimic, women can begin to subvert patriarchy. Irigaray suggests a woman should "play with mimesis [and thereby] try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it" (1985: 76). Further, she "must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it'" (1985: 76). One difficulty with the potential of mimesis is, as both Moi and Carlson point out, the fine line between miming patriarchal discourse (a possibly disruptive activity) and "speaking like a man" (Moi 1985: 143) (an activity which merely supports the established order). Writings or performances which attempt to engage in mimesis "always run the danger that Derrida cited in any deconstructive operation, which seeks to turn established structures back on themselves — that this process may also, especially for a conventional audience, simply reinscribe or reinforce those structures" (Carlson 1996: 176). Irigaray's theories, however, also suggest a way beyond mimesis in the theatre by, as with Cixous, emphasising the female body, particularly as it relates to the birth experience. She declares, "It is also necessary for us to discover and assert that we are always mothers once we are women" (1991: 43). Dolan explains, "Since cultural feminist ideology [as influenced by French feminists such as Cixous and Irigaray] is based on female biology, giving birth is posed as the common ritual and as a metaphor for women's creativity" (1988: 90). Although all women are potential mothers, many do not choose or are unable to assume this role. Treating motherhood as the pinnacle of female achievement can be limiting for many women, including those who do become mothers. Even more problematic is the essentialist nature of privileging motherhood, in that, "glorification of motherhood also implies that a woman's self-fulfillment can best be attained by fulfilling her biological capabilities. The birth ritual, and the ritual of the performance text, requires common beliefs,

common faith, common ways of seeing" (Dolan 1988: 90).

Although Julia Kristeva declares that "there is nothing in either past or recent publications by women that permits us to claim that a specifically female writing exists" (1987: 111), some theorists have found her work inspirational in leading to thoughts on a feminine theatre. "Physical performance has been seen as offering a possibility for women to escape what Kristeva has called the 'symbolic' logical and discursive language of the father for the 'semiotic' poetic and physical language of the mother" (Carlson 1996: 169).

Inspired by the ideas of Cixous, Irigaray, and Kristeva, American cultural feminist theorists have further developed thoughts of a feminine writing and a feminine theatre. Many cultural feminist theatre groups believe "Female doubleness is a recuperation of the Other positioned in male theory as she who lacks. In this rewriting of the female body, the Other becomes an image of Woman's self, we who can always find the Other in each other, as a mirror image peering back and offering the gift of self-definition" (Dolan 1988: 90). Seeing other women's experiences as reflections of one's own, building upon much of the ideas behind consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s, leads to productions valorising the ostensibly unique experience of being female. Rosemary K. Curb, for example, advocates a "theatrical language capable of communicating female perceptions which have been erased by the fathers and thus appear non-existent to the dominant culture" (quoted in Carlson 1996: 145). Other feminist theatre theorists influenced by French feminist thought advocate a form of women's theatre different from that of men, emphasising the female body, such as Linda Walsh Jenkins who "called for an 'authentically female' performance, 'replete with female signs' and based on a 'biogrammer' derived from 'experiences the body has known on the basis of gender'" (Carlson 1996: 145). Such cultural feminism, however, accepts femininity as a given, while, as de Lauretis observes:

> This femininity is purely a representation, a positionality within the phallic model of desire and signification; it is not a quality or property of women. Which all amounts to saying that woman, as subject of desire or of signification is unrepresentable; or better, that in the phallic order of patriarchal culture and its theory, woman is unrepresentable except as representation. (quoted in Dolan 1988: 99-100)

As discussed in the previous section, Henley's *Abundance* and Wasserstein's *The Sisters Rosensweig* can be associated with the theories of liberal feminism. Since this form of feminism takes its cues from liberal humanism, seeing all people as equal, it would be contradictory under this scheme to believe in the existence of a writing or a theatre that is specifically feminine, even if this type of creation were not, as discussed below, necessarily the sole province of women. In keeping with the ideals of liberal humanism, liberal feminist

playwrights "find nothing to fault in the traditional well-made play and the psychological acting practices that give it voice" (Dolan 1988: 84). In fact, for playwrights whose education has been based on the tenets of liberal humanism, traditional narrative structure may be the most simple and comfortable way for them to organise the information they wish to relate. Dolan believes that for a liberal feminist playwright:

> Her responsibility becomes imaging her female characters in a positive way within the traditional dramatic structure. Since the realist narrative pattern is deemed appropriate to women's expression, liberal feminists see the genesis of gender inequities in theatre — both onstage and backstage — in the lack of positive female role models. (1988: 84-85)

This, however, is a rather simplistic and patronising depiction of drama influenced by liberal feminism. *Abundance*, for example, is about more than positive female role models. Neither Bess nor Macon, in fact, is a character one would wish to model oneself after, but instead each appears to be a very human composite of good and bad. The work emphasises the importance of female friendships, without naively insisting that women are necessarily always virtuous people. On the other hand, however, the work is vulnerable to Dolan's criticism that, "Liberal feminist texts . . . present their characters as individuals struggling alone to attain the freedom capitalism and liberal humanism posit as universally available" (1988: 113). In large part, the relative success of Bess and Macon throughout the play is determined by their economic prosperity. Although the men in the play facilitate and, with their affection, mark the status of the pair, each of the women rises or falls due mainly to her own efforts.

Norman's *Traveler in the Dark*, on the other hand, as discussed in the following section, is not a feminist work in any case and thus a discussion of the relative feminism of the style is rather moot. Nevertheless, it is clear that the play's style is very linear. Like *The Sisters Rosensweig*, its conflicts are resolved by a return to the pre-established order — the healing and validation of the nuclear family. Time is also dealt with very straightforwardly in that the action occurs in real time with the large jump in hours, to accommodate Mavis's funeral, taking place between the two acts. The past is only recalled through the characters' discussion of their memories, a very naturalist tactic.

*Miriam's Flowers* and *Bitter Cane* at first glance have rather traditional dramatic structures. For example, the action in *Miriam's Flowers* rises until the climatic scene in which Miriam destroys the birdhouse Nando has made for Delfina. Then the action falls leading to the catastrophe of Delfina's death. Likewise, in *Bitter Cane*, the drama reaches climax when Wing discovers his father's affair with Li-Tai and ends with the

denouement of Li-Tai's death. This traditional narrative structure with its phallic drive toward climax followed by dissipation, however, is somewhat thwarted in each of these plays by the more circular components of their plots. In *Miriam's Flowers*, for example, the scenes with Puli suggest a sense of time that is fluid rather than linear. At the end of scene thirty-four with Puli, Cruz specifies that "Delfina pulls herself out of the memory and enters Scene Thirty-five" (81-81). This implies something more than a flashback, actually giving the impression of memory with substance, with a physical presence, and time as nonlinear. The play presents the past and present as existing in states which one can enter and exit at will, rather than forever travelling forward, which is in conflict with conventional plotting with a set beginning, middle, and end. The circular elements of the plot, namely starting with Delfina comforting Miriam and ending with Miriam comforting Delfina's corpse, as well as Delfina dying at the same spot on the stage where Puli's coffin was, also frustrate the drama's linearity. Beginnings and endings begin to blur, creating a sense of looping and reiteration. These repetitions can also be related to Irigaray's ideas of doubleness and reflection as female traits. In the play, endings reflect their beginnings, while one death becomes two. In this way, the play can be seen as embodying a cultural feminist version of feminine dramatic structure. Similarly, in *Bitter Cane*, the manner in which Wing repeats the actions of his father and eventually completes his father's journey can be viewed as demonstrating a circularity of time, full of repetitions, rather than forward driving. When Lau watches over the mating of Wing and Li-Tai "as if reliving it," the past for Lau does not stay in the past, but becomes immediate. Likewise, the way in which the relationship of Lau and Li-Tai is almost completely replayed by Wing and Li-Tai gives an impression of time as ever repeating and looping back on itself. The return by the son of the father's bones to China, which can be seen as time finally coming out of its loop and moving forward, simultaneously also provides a feeling of time having stood still, waiting for the next generation to complete the work of the previous. Further, Lim's desire to emphasise a type of success for her characters that is not in line with Western patriarchal ideas of heroism, can also be aligned with cultural feminism's drive to valorise supposedly female virtues.

Finley and Hughes have both structured their pieces largely as stream-of-consciousness narratives. As performance pieces, both are ever changing, never performed exactly the same way twice. By transmitting their acts to the page, the women have imposed a somewhat artificial structure on their rather free-form work. Finley's work is broken into acts and scenes, some of which are marked in performance by costume changes.

Her section titles, for example *Cut Off Balls* and *Ankles*, serve to provide a structure to the written document which would not be apparent in performance. Even the structure Finley has imposed on her written work, however, does not serve to reduce the piece to conventional dramatic narrative. Rather the work remains chaotic, barely contained by the page and certainly not ordered by her imposition of acts, scenes, and sections.

Hughes, on the other hand, in transferring her work from performance to text, has not imposed structural supports, such as acts and scenes, although the written work, simply because it is written, is more static than the work in performance. Hughes ends her piece with the seemingly important last interaction between her parents. Yet the apparent significance of the scene may stem from the reader's expectation to find something of import at the end of a work and therefore, in the reading, to analyse more deeply the final action. The most consequential scene in the work is the transmission of her "mother's French" in the suburban bathroom. This however can not be considered a climax in a traditional sense, in that the prior action does not lead up to this scene in any discernible way, nor does the momentum dissipate after the scene. Rather the work appears to revolve around this mother/daughter interaction, while the idea of her "mother's French" suffuses the entire work. In the mother/daughter bathroom scene, for the daughter, like Cixous, "water is the feminine element par excellence: the closure of the mythical world contains and reflects the comforting security of the mother's womb" (Moi 1985: 117). When Hughes's persona says, "And my legs are trembling, just like a diver's legs, because I'm high above that sweet pink ocean, that body of water that is a body, the body we call Mother, and I'm about to go in. Oh, I'm about to go in" (19-20), it is hauntingly reminiscent of Cixous in *The Laugh of the Medusa* when she writes:

> We are ourselves sea, sand, coral, sea-weed, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves. . . . Heterogeneous, yes. For her joyous benefits she is erogeneous; she is the erotogeneity of the heterogeneous: airborne swimmer, in flight she does not cling to herself; she is dispersible, prodigious, stunning, desirous and capable of others, of the other woman that she will be, of the other woman she isn't, of him, of you. (quoted in Moi 1985: 116-117)

The stream-of-consciousness style of both Finley's and Hughes's performance pieces reflects Cixous's idea of writing as simply reading a text that already exists within a woman's body. Of the process of writing Cixous says:

> This reading is performed here, by the being-who-wants-to-be-born, by an urge, something that wants at all costs to come out, to be exhaled, a music in my throat that wants to resound, a need of the flesh then, that seizes my trachea, a force that contracts the muscles of my womb and stretches my diaphragm as if I were going to give birth through my throat, or come. (1991: 52)

Finley, in particular, exemplifies this sense of words springing forth unbidden. Carr reveals that Finley "performs in a trance and has never rehearsed a piece" (1993: 147). This cultural feminist emphasis on the body rather than text, as manipulated by Finley, can also be tied to the writings of Artaud who felt "that the traditional theatre had lost contact with the deeper and more significant realms of human life by its emphasis on plot, language, and intellectual and psychological concerns" (Carlson 1996: 91). Artaud, in *The Theater and Its Double*, advocates a theatre where:

> [T]hese symbolical gestures, masks, and attitudes, these individual or group movements whose innumerable meanings constitute an important part of the concrete language of the theater, evocative gestures, emotive or arbitrary attitudes, excited pounding out of rhythms and sounds, will be doubled, will be multiplied by reflections, as it were, of the gestures and attitudes consisting of the mass of all the impulsive gestures, all the abortive attitudes, all the lapses of mind and tongue, by which are revealed what might be called the impotences of speech . . . (1958: 94-95)

Finley's work, using her body to communicate directly and abrasively to her audience's emotions, has a powerful impact on spectators, reflecting Artaud's vision and simultaneously connecting her work to the tradition of cultural feminism. Diamond, calling Finley an "Artaudian harpy" (1995: 164), believes her work is close to the idea of the true-real which "refers to the psychotic's foreclosure of the Law that Kristeva hears in the words of modernist poets like Artaud" (1995: 165). As discussed below, however, her performances can also be aligned, due to aspects that can be identified as a Brechtian form of alienation, with materialist feminism.

Finley also reflects Irigaray's idea that a woman can best enter male discourse by imitation. Irigaray, with regard to her own status as a woman utilising language which she views as inherently male, writes, "Only those who are still in a state of verbal automatism or who mimic already existing meaning can maintain such a scission or split between she who is a woman and she who writes" (1993: 53). From this point of view, Finley's aforementioned trance-like state during performance, rather than signalling an uncontrolled reading of the "authentic" feminine voice within her, can alternatively be seen as a robot-like simulation of male discourse. The ease with which Finley assumes the male voice (as opposed to just using language deemed by many to be inherently male) compounds the sense of Finley's speech as mimicry. Finley, in this way, can be understood as not just wearing the mask of the male, but playing the mimic in all her characters whether male, female, or unspecifically gendered.

The structures of both *spell #7* and *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* are

completely at odds with traditional dramatic form. With *spell #7*, for example, there is no plot, rather the work consists of stories told by the performers as they relax in the haven provided by eli's bar. Shange creates the impression that these stories exist independently of the audience's presence in the theatre. In other words, one senses that before the audience enters and after it leaves, the actors continue to tell the tales of African American experience in contemporary America. The audience has merely been allowed a glimpse inside the bar where these stories can be safely revealed. Shange's characters, demonstrating the "[c]ontinuity, abundance, drift" which Cixous sees as "specifically feminine" (1991: 57), relate the tales in no apparent order, providing the sense that they could overfill many, many plays.

*Death of the Last Black Man* also demonstrates several aspects of *l'écriture feminine*. Parks has structured the work more like a piece of music than like traditional drama. The end of the play marks no resolution, and there is no climax. Black Man with Watermelon never determines why he is there nor does he become like a conventional dead person. The work frustrates attempts to discover or explain "what's happened."

Of the works considered here, that of Parks, Shange, and Finley can be most closely associated with the theories of a cultural feminist theatre emanating from the notion of *l'écriture feminine*. These works, however, are also at odds with this tradition, primarily because none of them present the female or feminine experience as universal, but rather explore some of the various situations of people. It is interesting to note that many of the aspects of the work of Shange and Parks which can be identified as feminine from a cultural feminist point of view can also be seen as deriving from African influences. Mahone identifies the following "African-engendered elements: signifiyin', ancestral invocation, the incorporation of music and movement, use of the circle of time, the word as magic and storytelling as healing" (1994: xxxii). In Parks's work, for example, all the speakers of the chorus, which she refers to as "spirit people" can be interpreted as manifestations of ancestral invocation, rather than cultural feminist mysticism, while the repetitive phrasing with its slight revisions substituting for traditional narrative plot development can be understood as demonstrating the use of words as magic.

Cultural feminism and the idea of *l'écriture feminine* have come under sharp criticism as many feminist theorists, particularly lesbians and women of color, have called for a recognition of the dissimilar experiences faced by different women. The essentialising pitfalls of *l'écriture feminine* are critiqued by Ann

Jones who asks:

> If we define female subjectivity through universal biological/libidinal givens, what happens to the project of changing the world in feminist directions? Further, is women's sexuality so monolithic that a notion of shared, typical femininity does justice to it? What about variations in class, in race, and in culture among women? How can one libidinal voice speak for all women? (quoted in Dolan 1988: 8)

In a similar vein, Dolan complains, "In their formulation of Woman as a transcendent, universal subject position, cultural feminism and *l'écriture feminine* erect a new monolith from which it becomes difficult to diverge" (1988: 9). Not surprisingly she has comparable objections to theatre influenced by *l'écriture feminine*, because "while [in cultural feminist theatre] her [the female spectator's] sexual difference from men is reified, her differences from other women are largely ignored" (1988: 9). Cixous, however, maintains that *l'écriture feminine* need not necessarily be the creation of a biological female. She believes that "when a similar wave of writing surges forth from the body of a man, it's because in him femininity is not forbidden" (1991:57). This notion would seem to mitigate charges of essentialism. Even if, however, there is nothing to prevent a male from producing *l'écriture feminine*, the idea that there is a specifically feminine style of writing can still be criticised as essentialist. As Butler explains, if gender is conceived as a binary in which masculine is opposed to feminine there is nothing to distinguish this from a reflection of the male and female sexes. Gender collapses into sex — gender merely reflects sex. Belief, therefore, in any masculine/feminine binary is necessarily limiting and essentialising. Even assuming the existence of an authentic female experience, as theorists have come to appreciate the inescapability of ideology, it has become more difficult to believe that cultural feminist performance can ever stage this true female experience. As Carlson writes, "The idea that in such performance 'real women, real presence, and real time' could be separated from their 'representations' could not easily be reconciled with the growing feeling that so-called 'reality' was itself experienced only through representations" (1996: 174).

For viewers used to the traditional narrative style of realism, both the lack of familiar structure and the lack of readily discernible meaning often found in cultural feminist influenced theatre can be very off-putting. Many theorists see this alienation of the viewer as full of positive potential. Materialist feminists in particular, while in different ways and for different reasons than cultural feminists, actively seek to make the audience aware of the theatricality of what is being witnessed and do not want members of the audience to comfortably lose themselves in the drama. Materialist feminists believe that class, race, and gender structures

are maintained by the ideology of the established order, which can best be changed by making people aware of its existence. Theatre plays an important role in this process because "[p]art of the materialist critical project is to denaturalize the psychological identification processes implicit in representation. When the representational apparatus is foregrounded, its once mystified ideology becomes clear" (Dolan 1988: 14). Materialist feminist theatre practitioners have been drawn to Brecht's alienation techniques, which provide ample potential for adaptation to various uses. In 1968, Brooks foreshadowed, without ever dreaming of, feminist uses, declaring, "alienation has endless possibilities. It aims continually at pricking the balloons of rhetorical playing" (73). Brecht believed that conventional theatre "used emotional lures to avert our eyes and minds from the social dialectic informing every gesture, every word" (Diamond 1995: 160). Dolan explains the materialist feminist attraction to and adaptation of Brechtian theories as follows:

> His alienation effect, his theory of the social gestus, and his description of an acting technique that asks a performer to quote, rather than psychologically become, a character, are formulated to provoke a political critique that will lead to a profitable change in class-based social relations. Diverging from Brecht's theory, materialist feminist performance criticism is not strictly Marxian, as it focuses its analysis on material conditions of gender positioning, rather than privileging economic determinism. (Dolan 1988: 14)

The practice of requesting "a performer to quote, rather than psychologically become, a character" seems closely aligned with Irigaray's concept of feminine mimesis, an association which materialist feminists would dismiss. The significant difference appears to rest in the aims of materialist feminist performance, which "has generally sought to utilize the postmodern decentering of the subject, not to reverse Lacan and to create a new 'subject' position for women [a goal associated with cultural feminism], but to encourage both performers and spectators to think critically about the whole traditional apparatus of representation, including in particular the subject / object relationship" (Carlson 1996: 170).

While Parks and Shange both utilise free-flowing form and a sense of ritual that are identified with cultural feminism, the studied performativity of their work seems more in line with a Brechtian influenced materialist feminist theatre. In *Death of the Last Black Man*, for example, the characters are such that the audience is consistently presented with the fact that the actor is speaking. No one would confuse Prunes and Prisms with an actual person and since nothing actually happens to her, one cannot pretend to be watching real events — there are no events. Even the more fully developed characters Black Man with Watermelon and Black Woman With Fried Drumstick have no depth. The audience is continually faced with the surface of

performance. Similarly, as several critics have noted, Finley's work combines Brechtian techniques of "'alienating' the actor from the text, acknowledging the performance moment . . ., making the familiar strange and vice versa, and avoiding catharsis" (Geis 1993: 161) with Artaudian elements through "the violent assaults upon the spectators' senses, the denial of romantic textualization . . . and . . . the breaking of taboos in the movement into a redefinition of the stageable" (1993: 162). The combination of these two traditions has a very strong effect on some viewers. Unfortunately, however, her work is not powerful enough to obstruct the forces of the society in which it is inscribed. Jeanie Forte explains that when Finley's reputation grew as a result of the NEA defunding uproar, she began to work in more conventional venues and to attract more traditional crowds, who failed to react to the radical aspects of her work in the same way as those who already questioned the status quo. According to Forte, "Her work became re-inscribed in the fetishistic process associated with strip-tease or live sex, and not at all the feminist or subversive strategy that theory might endorse" (1990: 268). This suggests a very frustrating state of affairs, in that Finley seems to push all the envelopes yet her strategy potentially fails.

The materialist feminist approach to theatrical representation is not completely unproblematic. First, as exemplified by Finley's reception noted above, for an audience that does not share the performer's agenda, the use of Brechtian alienation may not be experienced as resistant or subversive. For as Jon Erikson explains, "the more sophisticated these strategies become in their use of irony, for instance, the more likely the opposite meaning will be assumed and reinforced, not undermined" (quoted in Carlson 1996: 140). If, however, alienation techniques in the hands of materialist feminists do succeed in "cutting, interrupting, holding something up to the light, making us look again" (Brooks 1968: 72), what then? As Esther Beth Sullivan laments, "If ideology is assumed to be everywhere and always pervasive and its powers absolute, the best that any of us can hope for is consciousness" (1993: 26), a position which leaves little optimism or opportunity for change. Or, as Rebecca Schneider observes, "to discover gender performativity does not in and of itself alter the show" (1996: 156). Feminism, which by its very nature recognises that the status quo should be changed, seems at odds with a pessimistic acceptance of the insurmountable essence of ideology. "For feminists who continue to ground their theory/practice in the affirmative stance that action can be taken to change circumstances, the belief in an unalterable and omnipotent ideology is untenable" (Sullivan 1993: 26). This has lead to what Sue-Ellen Case has termed "a crucial stall" in that "on the one hand, praxis is unavailable to

the materialist poststructuralist critique and, on the other, that essentialist praxis is based on an exclusionary critique" (1990: 7-8). This impasse creates "tension . . . between the desire to provide a grounding for effective political action by affirming a specific identity and subject position, and the desire to undermine the essentialist assumptions of all cultural constructions" (Carlson 1996: 182). How can one hope to take any efficacious subversive action when "the acting self comes into being only through pre-existing and oppressive cultural constructions" (Carlson 1996: 182). Theorists and theatre practitioners are currently exploring two potential paths out of this impasse. First, some theatre groups are re-evaluating marginality, seeing its potential rather than its limitations. Sullivan explains:

> Without ignoring the force of ideological conditioning some feminists are now beginning to assert the existence of margins in which women, in particular, are both inside ideology, being objectified according to the construction of Woman, and outside ideology, noting that they are not the Woman of dominant discourse. It is in these marginal spaces that some feminists are placing the possibility for affirmative theory/practice and for disruption of the more centrally dominating forces of ideology. (1993: 26)

Bell hooks also sees the potential of marginality, a potential that coexists with marginality's repressive aspects. She sees the margin as "more than a site of deprivation . . . it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance . . . a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives" (1990: 149). The WOW Cafe, where Hughes first began working in theatre, is an example of the margin's possibilities, providing a space where women, especially lesbian women, can work with more freedom than in a heterosexually oriented and male-dominated theatre. It is important that this is a margin that has been chosen by the women working at WOW, not necessarily a periphery to which they have been relegated by society at large. Choice in this situation, of course, is a fuzzy concept since lesbian women are often marginalised by society whether they choose to be or not. Nevertheless, by "[a]sserting feminism and lesbianism as 'givens' rather than 'issues,' the WOW Cafe has provided a margin within which women's work can be realized, affirmed, and analyzed" (Sullivan 1993: 29). While the allure of a space where feminism, homosexuality, multiculturalism, and other often-contested ways of being are accepted without comment appears powerful, the fringe will not satisfy all artists. Hughes, for example, eventually began working outside WOW because she wanted what the mainstream rarely offers the margin, "to be taken seriously" (1996: 19). Thus this new marginality cannot provide the ultimate solution for questions of women's representation in theatre.

The second potential path out of the impasse can be termed "strategic essentialism" and it involves accepting some of the potentially essentialising risks of defining a group position yet doing so with the insights provided by materialist feminist theory. Elin Diamond recommends "assuming a subject position, however provisional, and making truth claims, however flexible, concerning one's own representations" (quoted in Carlson 1996: 182-3). In order to be politically effective, one must engage with "the dominant symbolic systems — linguistic, theatrical, political, psychological, performative" (Carlson 1996: 182) and this seems to require an at least temporary subject position.

> Most modern politically oriented performance is flexible very much in the manner that Diamond suggests, slipping back and forth between claiming an identity position and ironically questioning the cultural assumptions that legitimise it. The goal is not to deny identity, but on the contrary to provide through performance alternative possibilities for identity positions outside those authenticated by conventional performance and representation. (Carlson 1996: 183)

Thus one is left with a need for adaptability in any theatre performance which hopes to be effectively politically oriented. By assuming a provisional identity, but simultaneously questioning the composition of that identity, one may hope to engage in performance that may enact change. As part of this "strategic essentialism", the best of what cultural feminism and *l'écriture feminine* have to offer may be explored. Although, as discussed, theories of specifically feminine writing can be criticised in many ways, it seems that the plays analysed here benefit from styles that diverge from traditional dramatic structure. By encouraging new ways of seeing, whether or not one defines these ways as female or feminine, the plays allow for new ways of thinking.

Norman aping the male

At their broadest, some of the goals of feminism can be considered fairly modest, for as Rebecca West wrote over ninety years ago, "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat" (quoted in Faludi 1991: xxiii). Yet surprisingly a significant number of women reject the feminist appellation altogether. Some of these women hold conservative beliefs about the proper roles for women. Many others, however, hold ideas about a woman's place in the world that fall within the ideology of liberal feminism. Often these women believe, despite news reports announcing only slender advances in pay equity (American women now make seventy-six cents for every dollar earned by men), that all the significant battles of

feminism have been won. Occasionally these women hold positions that were opened to women only due to the vigilant efforts of feminists in the past, yet they fail to notice that many others have yet to achieve equality of opportunity, a goal of liberal feminism. Dolan accuses Norman of being just such a woman, like "[m]any working women playwrights [who] vehemently resist the feminist appellation, because to survive economically their plays must be produce widely in commercial venues" (1988: 4).

It is difficult to appreciate Norman's play from a feminist point of view. Other than being written by a woman, operating in a male-dominated — though not male-monopolised — field, the play cannot really be considered feminist. The women presented in *Traveler in the Dark* have very limited roles, existing primarily to support the males in their lives. Glory and Mavis have each devoted their lives to Sam, with Glory in the role of perfect wife and Mavis in the role of perfect work mate. It is not the fact that Glory, Mavis, or Sam's mother are in unpleasant circumstances that makes the play seem antifeminist, it is the way in which the women apparently embrace their suffering. Glory, for example, has clearly been discontent in her marriage, agreeing when Sam remarks, "We've both had affairs. Haven't we" (176). She continues, however, in a marriage in which she seems to function solely as an attractive satellite revolving around Sam's sun. Near the end of the play she admits that in order to have plastic surgery she borrowed money from Mavis who happily provided it saying the two women "had to preserve [Sam's] illusions" (202). That Sam did not notice any change in Glory compounds the image of Glory and Mavis scurrying around to ensure the lovely and smooth operation of Sam's world because he is "important, so somebody should do all the things that allow [him] to work" (168). Additionally, Mavis, who, "was as smart as they come" (194), assumes the more traditionally female role of nurse while Sam becomes a doctor, achieving fame and fortune.

Norman does not present a liberal feminist standpoint in the play, since women are not shown to be the professional equals of men. Nor does Norman appear to buy into a radical feminism that privileges the fertile, nurturing, maternal capacities of women. Glory, with apparently no career of her own would seem to be in the ideal position to bring her son up as she sees fit. Norman, however, rather implausibly maintains that Stephen has been brought up primarily under Sam's influence. Sam, although a busy surgeon, who doesn't "want to do anything but work" (190), has been able to insure that his wife never read nursery rhymes or fairy tales to their son. Glory either shares Sam's disgust at the magical, nonsensical world of those stories (although she gives no indication of this during the play) or she has sacrificed her son to her husband's beliefs

in an attempt to make Sam's world easier. Norman's stage notes claim that Glory "takes her responsibilities as a wife and mother quite seriously" (161), yet she has abdicated the shaping of her son's mind, an important part of parenthood, totally to her husband.

Perhaps because she is presented primarily through Sam's reminiscences, his own mother's maternal role is more fully developed. She is remembered fondly yet her influence on Sam, in the form of his rejection of all she taught him, is the strongest after her death. The love of magical stories she attempted to instil in Sam is quickly abandoned as he wills himself to live as completely as possible in the world of science. Sam's anger is at his father yet he rejects the fairy tales and nursery rhymes of his mother as vehemently as the religion of his father. Motherhood is not a particularly valued role in the play. Rather fatherhood and the father/son relationship, the staples of drama in the Western male canon, are privileged. While appreciating and exploring the function of fathers is certainly not incompatible with feminism, one of the achievements of the women's movement has been to demonstrate that the experiences of women, as mothers and in other roles, are worthy of serious consideration. This play, which focuses almost exclusively on the interaction between fathers and sons and which ends with the reinstatement of Everett and Sam as the patriarchs of their happy families, is clearly not progressive.

## Concluding Remarks

Gates, as mentioned earlier, believes that works by African Americans are necessarily "double-voiced," in that they are rooted in both the black American and the Western traditions. Thus the plays of Parks and Shange can be read as influenced both by the playwrights' African American heritage and their immersion in mainstream America. The same argument could be made for plays by Lim, Cruz, Wasserstein, and Hughes, with the playwrights' respective Asian, Puerto Rican, Jewish, and lesbian background working with and against the effect of the white, Christian, heterosexual dominant culture. By the same thinking, of course, the writing of women could be said to be "double-voiced," in that it is influenced both by the experience of being female, however variant that experience may be, as well as by patriarchal America. Yet to avoid essentialism and to bring the argument to its logical conclusion, it must be admitted that all writing is the product of both the particular experiences of the author and the general culture of American society, an idea that is both self-evident and not particularly helpful. As Susan Bordo points out:

> If generalization is only permitted in the *absence* of multiple inflections or interpretive possibilities, the cultural generalizations of *any* sort – about race, about class, about historical eras – are ruled out. What remains is a universe composed entirely of counter examples, in which the way men and women see the world is purely as *particular* individuals, shaped by the unique configurations that form that particularity. (1990:151)

The danger of avoiding all generalisation in order to account for all differences is that it becomes difficult to articulate thoughts on what it means to be a member of a group traditionally deemed other, be that female, non-white, homosexual, working or non-working class, or non-Christian. Bordo, invoking Foucault, sees feminist questioning of the notion of commonality of experience as potentially "operating in the service of the reproduction of white, male knowledge/power?" (1990:151). Therefore, suffice it to say that the nine works considered here are all multi-voiced, influenced by the background of the writer, in a very American combination. David Henry Hwang sees the interaction between dominant and immigrant culture as an inescapable part of American theatre. He says:

> American literature has always had a degree of regional or ethnic content. To me, it's not an either-or issue; it's what the American experiment has always been about. Asian America is not Asia. White America is not Europe. Black America is not Africa. Of course, assimilation will change me. But the fact is, I will also change the culture. And while culture is an important factor in our identities, it's not inherent; it's circumstantial. . . . There's no such thing as an authentic Asian-American. Identity is fluid. It changes. (quoted in *The New York Times* 23/2/97)

None of these works is explicitly autobiographical, although each reflects the unique yet connected experience

of being a woman of the playwrights' race, religion, class, and sexual persuasion. Because the plays are by women, one looks to the ramifications of the playwrights' sex. Some, like Norman, defy this attempt and, perhaps deliberately, write a play that speaks to patriarchy's call for the universal, revolving around the plight of the male and a variety of Oedipal entanglements. Others, like Wasserstein, write proudly as women, about women, hoping to provide acting jobs for women. Still others, like Shange, explore issues of race, in a style that some would identify as feminine.

Diversity versus unity is a very American issue. The United States is a relatively young country and most of its citizens are either immigrants or the descendants of people who immigrated within the last three hundred years. Although earlier immigrants came primarily from Europe or, in the case of the involuntary immigration of slaves, from western Africa, America is now filled with people from all over the world. The country is, therefore, by its very nature, diverse. On the other hand, however, a certain unity of feeling seems necessary for cohesion. If citizens do not feel that they are bound by some commonalty, even if this commonalty consists merely of being American, then the stability of the country will certainly be threatened. Different people, of course, have differing opinions on the amount of unifying attributes necessary to maintain the country's cohesion. Therefore, some support bilingual education, while others, for example in Palisades Park, New Jersey with its large Korean population, work to pass ordinances requiring that all signs in foreign languages also have English translations.

Similarly, the feminist movement in the United States must walk the line between diversity and unity. Feminists, by definition, believe that certain elements of society must change. Linda Gordon, for example, defines feminism as "a critique of male supremacy, formed and offered in the light of a will to change it, which in turn assumes a conviction that it is changeable" (quoted in Dolan 1988: 3). Feminists, therefore, are in general more progressive than Americans as a whole and as a result relatively open to the idea of including all sorts of women. Yet, as discussed above, there is a tendency to gloss over differences in order to present a unified front in hopes of greater political efficacy. Certainly, in a movement that hopes to include as many women as possible under the umbrella of feminism, differences of opinion, style, and philosophy are inevitable.

Clearly homogeneity cannot realistically be achieved, nor is it truly desirable, for as Homi K. Bhabha points out, "The hideous extremity of Serbian nationalism proves that the very idea of a pure, 'ethnically

cleansed' national identity can only be achieved through the death, literal and figurative, of the complex interweavings of history, and the culturally contingent borderlines of modern nationhood" (1994: 5). This is especially true of a group such as American feminists who are necessarily a culturally and ethnically diverse group, with a still unfolding and often contentious history. To accommodate such diversity feminist theory must be ever growing and adapting. Teresa de Lauretis sees an ideal feminist theory as:

> . . . a developing theory of the female-sexed or female-embodied social subject, whose constitution and whose modes of social and subjective existence include most obviously sex and gender, but also race, class, and any other significant sociocultural divisions and representation; a developing theory of the female-embodied social subject that is based on its specific, emergent and conflictual history. (1990: 267)

The plays considered here reflect some of the variety of thinking that can be encompassed as feminist thought. The influence of liberal feminism results in *Abundance*'s and *The Sisters Rosensweig's* focus on women, as well as the multidimensional development of these female characters. On the other hand, the not insignificant successes of the women's movement, particularly with regard to liberal feminist goals, has provided playwrights like Norman more opportunity to have her work produced. At the same time, however, the movement's shortcomings result in plays, such as her *Traveler in the Dark*, which appear to mimic the concerns and output of male playwrights, due, presumably, to a desire to conform to the "universal" interests of the male oriented canon. The plays cover much of the broad range of opinions encompassed by feminism(s).

Blau declares "There is much talk about transgression in theory, but one sees very little of it in performance, either with actors or with ideas" (1992 435). Many of the works considered here appear to hold the potential for subversion, but is this potential achieved? Is the hold of patriarchal ideology so strong that fundamental change is impossible?

Birringer maintains that "Neither in America nor in Europe did experimental theatre have any impact on the cultural formations of postmodernism" (1991:44). If one accepts this as true, and by extension the idea that feminist innovations in theatre are unlikely to significantly alter American culture, then perhaps one must evaluate the success of a theatrical production solely in commercial terms. In many ways, theatre is simply an industry, perhaps fundamentally no different from the television and film industries, where success is most accurately measured by seats filled. From this point of view, however, it is difficult to determine the motivation of playwrights such as Parks, whose work does not actively court commercial success in the way

that the work of other playwrights such as Norman or Wasserstein does. Clearly the potential for societal change through their work is a motivating factor for Parks and for most, if not all, of the authors considered here.

It is clear that work which most profoundly challenges the status quo is generally less commercially successful than more traditional dramas, in part due, of course, to the fact that what is often challenged is the very stage upon which commercial success is determined. With regard to the destabilising capability of broadly popular art, Forte asks some relevant questions:

> . . . just how much does the work retain any potentially subversive impact once it has achieved commercial viability? To what extent do those commercial endorsements render any radical politics impossible? Yet, if performance artist [or experimental playwrights] are doomed to relative obscurity, playing only to audiences of "the converted," how will societal consciousness be raised (or abrased) on a larger scale? Should this even be a conscious goal? (1990: 268)

All the playwrights considered here negotiate the line between commercial viability and change-oriented work in different ways. Wasserstein, for example, creates plays which are enjoyable, easy to watch, and readily understandable, presenting her liberal feminist agenda only very gently. Parks, on the other hand, writes work which is entertaining yet initially baffling, requiring her audience to work very hard to find meaning. Finally, Finley presents pieces which are difficult to watch, hitting her audience over the head with many of her issues, yet simultaneously requiring the audience to ponder what they have witnessed in order to fully absorb and understand what they have seen and heard. Which of these women has produced the most change through her work? Wasserstein's work reaches more people yet Finley's may have more of an impact on the people who are exposed to it. Park's plays are probably seen by fewer people than Wasserstein's but more people than Finley's, while the effect of her work on an audience also falls somewhere between the effect of the work of the others. Perhaps this multi-pronged approach is most effective, with change approached simultaneously at different levels by the different playwrights. Many patrons coming to see a play by Wasserstein would leave the theatre if confronted with the work of Finley. Thus Wasserstein's approach is best suited to her audience as is Finley's for hers, although neither is capable of bringing about wholesale change.

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