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Prism, Not Mirror: Women's Lives Center Stage

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Prism, Not Mirror: Women's Lives Center Stage

by

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A Dissertation

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

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Prism, Not Mirror: Women's Lives Center Stage

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As a younger woman, I was the embodiment of Kate's words from *Uncommon Women and others*, "I have a stake in all those Uncommon Women expectations. I know how to live up to them well" (56). Fifteen years later, I was given a copy of *The Vagina Monologues*. Those two experiences started my musing as to how and why women's drama had changed in the twenty-five years between the two works. And, what were other women dramatists doing? This question sent me to Barbara Traister, then the Director of the English Graduate Program at Lehigh. It took me quite a few years to act on her sage advice and I am grateful for her gentle patience and ongoing support. I thank Betsy Fifer specifically for encouraging me early on to deliver a conference paper on plays I hadn't read on a playwright of whom I had no knowledge. While I matured "dramatically" (literally and figuratively) with Wendy Wasserstein, my research for that Horton Foote Conference with Betsy made me realize Tina Howe is the playwright of my future. *Chasing Manet* inspires me to believe that the *QE II* will transport me back to Paris with my good friend, Beth Dolan, sitting on the adjacent lounge chair waiting for our pizza delivery. I am also grateful to Pam Pepper for her comments and bold choices for Lehigh's Department of Theatre.

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ABSTRACT

For the last fifty years feminist drama critics have had radical expectations for plays by and about women. Any commercial success a woman playwright has is immediately suspect and dismissed as pandering to hegemony. Using a postmodern theoretical viewpoint with feminist sensibilities and various sociological theories, I analyze plays from the last forty years as they examine specific aspects of a woman's life. Through studying how women playwrights dramatize women's roles and viewpoints on maturation, marriage, motherhood, and later life, there is proof of radical instances even if the entirety of the plays does not satisfy radical critics. Contemporary women playwrights continue to dramatize the facets of feminist sensibilities even if they overtly eschew the label of feminist. Rather than present idealized feminist roles for women, contemporary playwrights offer roles that present women who struggle with maintaining subjectivity as they attempt to fulfill their perceived quotidian roles. The image of a continuum of a woman's life, rather than a linear cause and effect, affords a plurality of experiences, allows for differences among women's understanding, and provides elements of satisfaction in seeing women's lives portrayed on stage.

Prism, Not Mirror: Women's Lives Center Stage

Introduction

Drama by American women has evolved because of and in spite of literary theorists, feminist theorists as well as theatre/dramatic theorists. The critics in these last forty years, Sue-Ellen Case, Jill Dolan, and Helene Keyssar among them, have created divisive litmus tests for which works could be considered feminist or further contributing to hegemony. Anything resembling a standard theatrical narrative, or set in a kitchen, or with a female character indecisive in her identity is to be immediately perceived as undermining women's liberation. They maintain that plays written by women like Wendy Wasserstein, Beth Henley, and Marsha Norman in the last forty years do not do *enough* to further liberating representations of women. They would announce that the playwright had succumbed to hegemony by using a more quotidian—domestic—setting or not showing more liberating facets of women. Critics, feminist theatrical ensembles, and various women's organizations have been so focused on their feminist mold that they ignored subtle feminist identities. Ultimately, the prescriptions they projected were as limiting as the social realism they censured.

In spite of the major feminist drama theorists finding fault with them, playwrights like Wendy Wasserstein, Beth Henley, and Marsha Norman persevere. Therefore, having a woman center stage muddling through her life much the way the audience muddles through their lives can be inspirational and need not, necessarily, be reductive. Even though the work might not represent women's *causes*, it does represent *women*. No longer can feminist drama critics expound on their belief based on an oversimplified essential expression. Aspects of the content, not necessarily the entirety, will remain feminist regardless of how it is shaped. Contemporary plays must be analyzed for what they do to foster feminism, rather than be critiqued for not being feminist enough. Most recent criticism observes that “[m]ore porous and less rigid theories are evolving as a finite system's ability to describe itself is by

definition limited” (Jenkins 329).¹ What if plays could be put through a prism to break them into multiple facets for examination? Contemporary critic Susan Bassnett-McGuire has observed that there is “a movement towards ‘a kind of breaking up things,’ a refusal to accept that life is linear” (462). These actions afford a plurality of ways, even if contradictory, to mine the plays for their feminist aspects, for the ways in which the works celebrate women’s lives in addition to encouraging future endeavors. What the feminist movement has proven is that a woman is more than the sum of her actions or roles; it is impossible to dramatize even the majority of those responsibilities simultaneously.

In *Prism, Not Mirror: Women’s Lives Center Stage*, the feminist aspects of contemporary plays prove that feminist drama is not as prevalent or as visible as it could be, but the current playwrights have not succumbed to political and academic pressures to conform to a feminist prescription, and have continued to foreground the multiple facets of a woman’s life. Current debates about feminist plays arise out of and contribute to larger conversations about feminism. Indeed, an historical overview of women playwrights in their feminist contexts and within feminist theory gives insight into how these women sought to engage and trouble the larger feminist movement. Today’s plays by women no longer need to impel action as much as they will force their audiences to question their ideological assumptions and postmodern theory will enable this. The plays addressed do not offer radical visions of liberated women, but instead call audiences to question their ideological assumptions.

Opening this introduction with a discussion of Linda Hutcheon’s postmodern theory foregrounds an intentional troubling, rather than a radical dismantling, of the hegemonic definition of womanhood and will underscore the necessity for “a reconsideration of both the context of historical narrative and the politics of representation and self-representation” (156). Then, I will turn to a brief history of the early feminist movement to illustrate the parallel between the feminist movement and burgeoning prescriptive feminist drama

criticism, which advocated abandoning realism and embracing avant-garde techniques. Subsequently, I illustrate the origins for the oftentimes contradictory assumptions about women's plays by examining the critical celebration of Carolee Schneeman's and Karen Finley's performance art, the biting critiques of Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles*, and the confusion generated by Tina Howe's *One Shoe Off*. Finally, I explore the evolution that has come with contemporary feminist dramatic criticism. It has taken seminal feminist drama critic Jill Dolan thirty years and editors Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins three editions of *Women in American Theatre* to accept and value Wendy Wasserstein's and her contemporaries' oeuvres.² As these critics have noted, Wasserstein and others' works perform an important feminist project by portraying that women wrestling with their ways in the world, wrestling with what others expect of them and, more importantly, wrestling with what they expect of themselves is feminist. As such, these playwrights' works are worthy of careful examination for what light they can shed on the past, present, and future lives of women. Creating new theoretical instruments, as well as challenging previous ones will demonstrate that, "female identity in fiction can no longer be studied in the context of traditional ego psychology that fails to take into account woman's fluid ego boundaries" (Hirsch 218). I, too, move into the first decade of the twenty-first century prepared to abandon a prescribed set of feminist ideals to show the myriad ways contemporary playwrights' works are able to address and portray the complex lives of women.

Destabilizing the Base: Postmodernism

Plays by American women in the last forty years have been created, produced, as well as rewarded in a capitalistic, hegemonic society that values rigid gender roles. Critic Catharine Stimpson questions societal inflexibility in between and among these roles, "Why do we insist on an integrated self that is the center of the world? What if we are fragmented, decentered? Can we not be postmodern enough to accept, even to enjoy, this?" (236). Hence, as the new millennium proceeds, feminist drama finds itself firmly grounded in both

postmodernism and feminism. The irony of characterizing postmodernism and feminism as being grounded does not escape me. Within both there is “recognition of the amazing maze of differences among women, of the endless diversity of women’s experience as historical agent and as signifier, [which] help[s] to undermine the idea of a single and singular femaleness” (Stimpson 229). Women’s lives are fragmented and decentered. Stimpson articulates the freedom and enjoyment that can be found in such plurality. However, the women playwrights of the twenty-first century are using the ideals of postmodernism—questioning sources of assumptions as culturally determined rather than natural absolutes—as the basis for their expressions, and most current playwrights would argue that their expressions should not have a critical label; they are creating plays that foreground women’s lives, in whatever way serves their expression.

Postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon goes to great lengths in her *Politics of Postmodernism* to differentiate between the postmodern and feminist schools of criticism:

there is a major difference of orientation between the two that cannot be ignored: we have seen that postmodernism is politically ambivalent for it is doubly coded—both complicitous with and contesting of the cultural dominants within which it operates; but on the other side, feminisms have distinct, unambiguous political agendas of resistance. Feminisms are not really either compatible with or even an example of postmodern thought, as a few critics have tried to argue: if anything, together they form the single most powerful force in change in the direction in which (male) postmodernism was heading but, I think no longer is. It radicalized the postmodern sense of difference and de-naturalized the traditional historiographic separation of the private and the public—and the personal and the political. (138-139)

Critics at the end of the last century wanted to focus solely on the feminist aspects of drama, while I believe a postmodernist examination with feminist sensibilities may better facilitate the exploration of a woman’s life. The postmodern advocates and acknowledges the

complicity with its critique. In other words, an articulation of the initially disagreeable premise immediately grants it credence merely because of acknowledging its existence. Early feminist theatre critics believe even acknowledging an oppressive starting point contributes to reinscription. Hutcheon argues, though, that:

Postmodernism aims to be accessible through its overt and self-conscious parodic, historical, and reflexive forms and thus to be an effective force in our culture. Its complicitous critique, then, situates the postmodern squarely within both economic capitalism and cultural humanism—two of the major dominants of much of the western world. (2)

Where Hutcheon believes postmodernism and feminism must not be conflated, twenty years later, I find connecting the two exceptionally useful. Previous feminist drama critics would argue that using postmodern tools necessitates reinscription of the norm by acknowledging it in order to question or parody it. I concur with Hutcheon that “[w]hile the postmodern has no effective theory of agency that enables a move into political *action*, it does work to turn its inevitable ideological grounding into a site of de-naturalizing critique” (3). With its refusal to comply with or represent anything previously thought to be hegemonically complicitous, the second wave feminist movement tried and failed in some aspects of political action.

“Complicity is perhaps necessary (or at least unavoidable) in deconstructive critique (you have to signal—thereby install—that which you want to subvert), though it also inevitably conditions both the radicality of the kind of critique it can offer and the possibility of suggesting change” (Hutcheon 148). Therefore, Hutcheon does agree that postmodern examinations can support eventual feminist agendas by fostering questions about what possible liberations from hegemony would resemble. My use of the plural there is deliberate; Hutcheon herself refers to feminisms. Postmodern theory encourages acknowledging the plurality of the successes and the failures.

I extend Linda Hutcheon's argument to include drama, for the variety of theoretical schools it requires for analysis: the semiotic, as well as social and literary. Sue-Ellen Case and Erica Stevens Abbitt have come to acknowledge "the feminist critique of performance serves as a lens through which the intersection of sociology, semiotics, body theory, film studies, cultural studies, literary analysis, and psychoanalysis" (926-927). My analysis also lies in this framework: interrogating individual dramatic works written by women for what they do to encourage feminist liberation—however fragmented and seemingly disparate those representations of liberation may be. Linda Hutcheon says, "Postmodern representational practices that refuse to stay neatly within accepted conventions and traditions and that deploy hybrid forms and seemingly mutually contradictory strategies frustrate critical attempts (including this one) to systematize them, to order them with an eye to control and mastery—that is, to totalize" (35). My goal is not to totalize. In the 1970s and 1980s, totalization of feminist viewpoints isolated too many women and disparaged too many plays. There are substantial feminist aspects in the plays I will examine. Are there enough aspects so the entire play could be labeled feminist? Answering that question is not *my* purpose. Subsequently, Hutcheon expands her interrogation of the reception of artistic commercial success to ask whether it inherently negates political (feminist) agendas and perpetuates patriarchal portrayals. Any play perceived as hegemonically complicitous is immediately censored, even if it eventually moves to subverting that assumed complicity to further a political cause. As a result of and in reaction to the second-wave feminists of the 1970s, postmodern thinking parses how contemporary American women playwrights embrace the theatre to demonstrate that women's personal and political lives intertwine:

Indeed, the feminist impulse, and I am sure there is more than one, has often emerged in the recognition that my pain or my silence or my anger or my perception is finally not mine alone, and that it delimits me in a shared cultural situation which in turn enables and empowers me in certain unanticipated ways. The personal is thus

implicitly political inasmuch as it is conditioned by shared social structures, but the personal has also been immunized against political challenge to the extent that public/private distinctions endure. (Case, *Performing Feminisms* 273-274)

However, given the disparate and convoluted radical feminist movement in the late 1960s and 1970s, feminist playwrights had to make their own decisions about the forms of their work, even if that meant disparagement by those who should have been supportive. In the twenty-first century, my work is to ask questions that will provide multiple answers in order to expand on and contribute to contemporary feminist dramatic criticism. To accomplish this, I will briefly examine early feminist theory thereby illustrating its undeniable influence on performance as well as drama theory.

Many problems, none with names: Feminist Theory

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan provided inspirational words and images to articulate the complexity of existence; women's lives are more than a singularity of linear cause and effect. Friedan's articles and books encourage women to consider their lives and realize "a woman at home, and unsatisfied with what society dictated as happiness-causing was told to rebel and move on to accomplish what she wanted, rather than what society dictated. The freedom to lead and plan your own life is frightening if you have never faced it before" (Friedan, *Mystique* 463). Friedan's book gives women a common language and diagnosis for the "problem that has no name," but gives them no cure.³ The initial stages of the feminist movement focused on similarities; only as the movement progressed did the similarities become secondary to the variety of ways women experienced their lives, to the eventual demise of any possibility of a cohesive women's movement. As Betty Friedan advises, "[t]here are no easy answers, in America today; it is difficult, painful, and takes perhaps a long time for each woman to find her own answer" (Friedan, *Mystique* 468). There are multiple roles women must play and questions they must ask in order to feel contributory and successful. Within such a variety of answers certainly come both similarities and

contrasts. Women find answers as the experiences and questions arise, certainly not in the same way nor in a linear fashion. As a result, women found each other and temporarily formed a critical mass before dissolving away into the difference—“the body, sexuality, age, race, class, ethnicity, tribalities, and nationalities”—that would once again divide them (Stimpson 225). Louis Menard concludes that “[t]he fundamental argument of ‘The Feminine Mystique,’ and of the second-wave of feminism to which it gave rise, is that there is no such thing as a woman’s essential nature” (75).

Adrienne Rich agrees that there is no such thing as essentialism. However, she believes that patriarchy, particularly its emphasis on heterosexuality, has tended to divide women rather than to connect them:

Women identification is a source of energy, a potential springhead of female power, violently curtailed and wasted under the institution of heterosexuality. The denial of reality and visibility to women’s passion for women, women’s choice of women as allies, life companions, and community: the forcing of such relationships into dissimulation and their disintegration under intense pressure have meant an incalculable loss to the power of all women *to change the social relations of the sexes, to liberate ourselves and each other.* (“Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” 657)

Rich advocates women connecting, not in search of essentialism, but to form relationships with each other. She believes the hegemonic insinuation of heterosexuality adulterates the relationships between and among women. Acknowledging the differences among women, Rich interrogates the binaries caused by essentialism and difference feminism, and concludes that women’s subjectivity is situated on a lesbian continuum—a potentially wider array of relationships between and among women. Also feeling isolated from the feminist movement by their Caucasian, middle-class foresters, current African-American theoretical commentary has only moderately expanded to expose readers to the personal concerns and

conflicts of women of color: "Black women are a prism through which the searing rays of race, class and sex are first focused, then refracted. The creative among us transform these rays into a spectrum of brilliant colors, a rainbow which illuminates the experience of all humankind" (Wilkerson xiii). Hence, women of color felt so marginalized by their white sisters, that they were willing to isolate and voice their particular grievances.

Much like her forefathers, Lisa Anderson's *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* interrogates the history of the subverted qualities specific to black women's drama. In her search for a black feminist aesthetic determined by "the context in which a work is situated, how its construction and production are shaped and how that shaping is informed by its politics," Anderson discovers that there are multiple characteristics for what comprises a black feminist aesthetic, admitting that,

[i]f there is a *core*, a commonality among these very different women, it is they all, in their own ways, construct and reconstruct history and identity. They incorporate histories into their works, ensuring that the histories they tell reveal an otherwise hidden history, a black feminist history that centers women's lives and experiences. They also fully embrace the questions of representation of black women and work to refine and reshape them...[d]espite the vast differences among them in subject form, and structure, and the iterations of their feminisms. (2; 115)

Anderson's conclusions about the multiplicity of interpretations will contribute to the analysis of other contemporary playwrights of other races well. Frida Scott Giles writes, "Womanist theatre is constructed around the major precepts of feminist, Afrocentric, and post-Afrocentric theatre theory, resulting in a reshaping of dramatic form and narrative. Like feminist theatre, womanist theatre subverts traditional Eurocentric dramatic structures to expose patriarchal misrepresentation, bias, and oppression" (Giles 28). Giles draws sympathetic parallels between feminism and womanism, emphasizing a common ground. However, Anderson chooses to focus solely on her forefathers in order to unearth womanist

historical, cultural, and dramatic roots. While stressing the similarities and not denying differences with her Caucasian counterparts, Anderson is “working toward a broad, rather than narrow, concept of a black feminist aesthetic. This aesthetic is grounded in the feminism of black women since the nineteenth century, but has broadened with the times” (13). Thus begins the third wave of feminism which has led to even more tensions among feminists; at least the ones who are still willing to self-identify as feminists. It is this lack of self-identification in the Third Wave without even trying to find a common ground that makes the foresters believe them ungrateful. Hence, assuming a universal oneness among all women oversimplifies the various experiences that make women unique. As subsequent critics interrogate contemporary drama, we now must proceed with multiple agendas and a far more postmodern base. We must start with the texts themselves and move forward to interrogate the presentation of the female characters for nascent feminist characteristics. Further analysis of early plays by women permits a re-examination of the works’ relevance in the new millennium. The most striking difference for current feminist drama theorists is that there exists even more material than existed a generation ago, both in the plays themselves and in the critical responses.

Dirty Dishes, a Reno Ranch, and an All-Girls School

Stepping back into some of the early commercial successes of the last century provides the representational foundation necessary for an exploration and a celebration of feminist portrayals long before a time of critical feminist prescription. The plays in my study all contain feminist images suggested by our foresters, not *because* they were suggested but because the images, theoretical underpinnings, and modes of production focus on women discovering for themselves what it means to be a feminist—onstage and off. As I show, there is a thin, through-line of women playwrights from Susan Glaspell to Lillian Hellman to Claire Booth Luce to the radical playwrights of the 1970s. To pay homage to our foresters

while identifying and celebrating the Glaspell kitchen from which they come, a brief historical overview and analysis is illuminating.

Historically, women playwrights have a long, if obscured, presence in the United States which Amelia Howe Kritzer describes as “present[ing] communities of women, old and young, signaling a concern with collective, as well as individual, pursuit of happiness—and thus with the question of women’s political power and status” (12). Women dramatists have been successful in putting a woman’s life on stage for almost a century; these early works need to be examined and celebrated for their feminist underpinnings, even if their playwrights could not have used that word to describe them. Ironically, while the sub-genre ‘domestic drama’ was once associated with drama written by and about women, it is in this same domestic sphere where early women exercised their power.

Once dismissed as a play with women as the primary focus, Susan Glaspell’s 1916 play, *Trifles*, delineates the power to be found in a woman’s kitchen, power which only other women will observe and comprehend. Glaspell shows how radically subversive knowledge in the domestic sphere can be to hegemony. Characterizing this play as only about a woman who has been in an abusive domestic relationship does a grave injustice to the work. While Glaspell was certainly radical for her time, she would ultimately fail divisive litmus tests and her play would be deemed to reinscribe hegemony with the male characters—Mr. Peters, Mr. Henderson, and Mr. Hale—dismissing Mrs. Wright’s untidy kitchen with “Dirty towels! [*Kicks his foot against the pans under the sink.*] Not much of a housekeeper, would you say, ladies?” (Glaspell 1353). The theme then unfolds as the two female characters discern the meaning of the disarray that indeed proves Mrs. Wright’s guilt in murdering her husband. So, while the men search the house for evidence, the women stumble upon the proof and choose to hide it, with Mrs. Hale exclaiming, “I might have known she needed help! I know how things can be—for women. I tell you, it’s queer, Mrs. Peters. We live close together and we live far apart. We all go through the same things—it’s all just a different kind of the

same thing” (Glaspell 1359). The women recognize spousal abuse and, knowing no one would believe them, remain silent, certain, and complicit about Mrs. Wright’s impetus for the murder. Playwright Marsha Norman admits almost a century later that “[t]he things that we as women know best have not been perceived to be of critical value to society” (Betsko and Koenig, *Interviews* 338). This early American play does evoke potentially feminist themes. However, because of its age and the dominance of its male characters, critics have not ascribed a feminist reading to it. Writing domestic dramas—narratives involving family or household circumstances with women and their lives at the center—has been belittled and disparaged, yet *Trifles*, almost a century old, exemplifies women as powerful and more knowledgeable than men. Contemporary women playwrights come from Glaspell’s kitchen, so to speak: all present the nuanced facets of a woman’s life and her responsibilities thereby illuminate far greater depth than previously encountered. While the recognition given women by regional, much less national, theatres has always been and remains far less than the recognition given to their male colleagues, the plays written by women have those “same things—it’s all just a different kind of the same thing” that Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters refuse to ignore (1359).

With Glaspell as a forerunner, Lillian Hellman and Claire Boothe Luce also focused on female characters and were able to move farther into a woman-centered plot. Their female characters interact rarely with men, if male characters are on stage at all. In the 1930’s, before there was even an adjective ‘feminist’ to describe a woman’s sensibilities, Luce and Hellman, among others, wrote plays that focused on women and their lives. Susan Sontag explains, “Although such playwrights as Lillian Hellman and Claire Boothe Luce have provided traditionally structured plays that corroborate images of women as being male dominated and frustrated, these images are examined through emphasis on the experiences of women characters” (Kimball 106). In a variety of respects, the playwrights give their women characters control over their own lives. Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* (1934) was

one of the first plays of the twentieth century to focus on women and girls' experiences. The girls are unflatteringly portrayed as spiteful, manipulative, and destructive in private and dutiful, diligent, and obsequious in public. Ultimately, they destroy the lives of the adult women who were to care for them. Hellman is constricted by her time frame as she portrays both the women and girls' behavior as binaries—dutiful and destructive. The sociohistorical influences on these characters dictate their eventual demise. While no politically oriented feminist agenda is likely on Hellman's part, she does portray on stage the continuum of a woman's life.

Finally, in 1936 the first all-women ensemble play, *The Women*, opened on Broadway.⁴ Clare Boothe Luce's exploration of marriage, divorce, and female friendship (some shallower than others) is predicated upon women having enough money to be able to make their own decisions about their lives. Mary Haines can sit at home waiting for her husband, as well as take him back after his affair. Her character exercises the options she has, including changing her mind. The dramatic arc of *The Women* certainly does not satisfy any feminist prescription: Mary takes back her husband and the play shows women in competition with each other for, of all things, a man.

In particular, *The Women* in its entirety could be interpreted as a re-inscription of the hegemonic order. But, to consider these women as individuals, to see Mary Haines wrestling with the decision to divorce Stephen, is to acknowledge feminist possibilities. To know there are ranches in Reno, Nevada where wealthy women could reside in order to await divorce decrees underscores how women have helped each other attain a modicum of freedom from male dominance in their lives. Even Crystal Allen's self-sufficiency in being a woman working outside the house, feeling empowered enough to have affairs with married men like Mary's husband for financial security, has feminist undertones. These are women who take the time and opportunity to explore the complexity of their futures, even if the domestic future involves a male presence. In a postmodern reading, there are certainly criticisms of

society and the fact the women have so *few* choices is disturbing, yet there is nothing about Luce's play that calls for an overhaul of a woman's role in the home or in society. The events of the play serve to expand the possible solutions to difficulties women face before, perhaps, reinstating the supposed harmonic hegemony. However, at the final curtains of *The Women* and *The Children's Hour*, the original perception about the subservient role of women has fissures in it. From the possibilities generated by those fissures, future playwrights' visions would grow, offering even answers for subsequent generations of women. These early fore-sisters began portraying the nuances of women on which contemporary women playwrights build enabling their current success. It would take two more decades before the subtle distinctions raised in those plays would be defined as feminist. Alas, those distinctions were then quantified such that the works were deemed deficient in their feminist attributes. I, however, will only briefly touch on plays that critic Jill Dolan and her contemporaries disparaged for not being feminist enough. My focus will be on plays of the last twenty years, primarily the last ten years, that deserve to be examined for what they do to expand insight into women's lives. I examine elements of Wendy Wasserstein's early work as a way to reclaim the power of her plays and then move that reclaimed power forward into contemporary plays.

Prescription: Take it or it won't improve

The evolution of feminist drama reception follows much the same trajectory as the feminist movement, often mirroring the ferocity of the arguments as well. Standing upon the shoulders of the earlier playwrighting fore-sisters Glaspell and Luce, the next generation of women playwrights would stretch boldly forward to attain more than consciousness-raising comfort—attempting to solve *the* problem, as if there were only one. Feminist drama critics have not celebrated and analyzed other women's art for the positive ways it fosters feminism. They seemed too ready to dissect the work for how it failed a feminist interpretation. Jill Dolan initially concurred that “the feminist press has been slow to develop a feminist critique

of performance. When they do cover theatre by women, feminist reviewers seem caught between applauding the woman's efforts and critiquing the work against a standard that is yet to be defined in the balance between ideology and art" (Dolan, *Spectator* 36). Women's creative work had been marginalized for so long by 1970, that the critics of the time period, like Dolan, were trying to develop a feminist dramatic criticism: including or excluding entire plays, and oeuvres, as they fit a feminist prescription they created as they wrote.

Plays written by women began to be collectively recognized in 1977 with the founding of the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, which remains the only award given "annually to women who deserve recognition for writing works of outstanding quality for the English-speaking theater" (Kilgore ix). However, winning a major prize often evoked critical scorn rather than credibility because the women playwrights were not deemed as feminist as their sisters of the theatre would wish. When three women—Beth Henley (1981), Marsha Norman (1983), and Wendy Wasserstein (1988)—were awarded Pulitzer Prizes in American drama, feminist critics dismissed their work as pandering to the audience, particularly the male audience, and the Broadway establishment, as well as not doing enough to further women's causes. Jonnie Guerra criticizes Beth Henley for

not re-vision[ing] the form in order to free herself to advance the kind of images of women as autonomous individuals that a female audience would like to identify with, to celebrate, or to become. That she accepts rather than reinvents the family-play structure predetermines her work to take as its central focus the nothingness of women's experience in their everyday lives. A corollary problem is Henley's adherence to a definition of realism so limiting that it compromises her ability to portray the multiple dimensions of women's awakening. (qtd. in Hart, *Spectacle* 120)

If the Pulitzer was awarded to a play written by a woman, then somehow the playwright must have reinscribed social realism, which immediately impeded feminist purpose.

In *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* Jill Dolan also disparages Norman's *night, Mother*: "[t]he premise alone defies feminist categorizing: If feminist plays are defined as those that show women in the painful, difficult process of becoming full human beings, how can a play in which suicide is assumed from the first moments be a thorough consideration of women?" (79).⁵ Dolan immediately dismisses any feminist elements in Norman's play, as if both Jessie and her mother's previous and current lives were insignificant. Helene Keyssar, who can be equally narrow in her definition of a feminist play, seemingly espouses a broader view of feminist criticism, "applaud[ing] the depths and breadths to which feminist theatre criticism has already gone and to encourage it to lead players and spectators alike to yet unknown ways of imagining, and of staging, lives worth living" (16-17). While she seems to be offering a hope for unity rather than the fragmentation caused by prescriptive labels, she also fosters the insidious notion that there are "yet unknown ways" that women playwrights must explore and utilize. Yet, when the playwrights implement an entire production of "unknown ways," they fall victim to "an inability to reach beyond its audience of like minds" (Carr xx). Keyssar advocates a radical shift in how to present women on stage, in spite of not having any particular suggestions on those presentations. While she applauds the supposed progress of feminist drama, she refuses to celebrate the work of the playwrights being analyzed. The *plays* need to be celebrated, not the critics' work. The depth to which drama criticism had gone at that time was only as far as to find fault with commercially successful women playwrights. As previously mentioned, Marsha Norman, Beth Henley, and Wendy Wasserstein did have their work celebrated by entertainment critics and the general public, in turn causing the academics to shun them for pandering to the hegemonic theatre industry. These playwrights need to be celebrated for the mere fact that they put women's lives on stage. Their plays need more balanced analysis—an examination of how they successfully portray a woman's life as well as suggestions for how they can and must include elements for further possibilities. Rather than a prescription for making the personal aspects of women's

lives political, criticism needs to offer nuanced ways to illuminate a variety of personal experiences. While the select few plays, *Night, Mother, The Heidi Chronicles, Crimes of the Heart*, were receiving superlative accolades from the mainstream, members of the feminist community were censuring them. In spite of Jessie, Heidi, and Lenny's autonomous decisions about their lives and futures and not having male partners in their lives, their choices were not deemed radical *enough* by their critical peers. As the critical expectations for drama in the 1970s and 1980s became more divisive than cohesive, the least realistic plays were those most lauded.

The more shocking the better: prescribing avant garde techniques

Drama theorist Sue-Ellen Case believes that the feminist playwrights and critics should “deconstruct the traditional systems of representation and perception of women and posit women in the position of subject” (*Feminism and Theatre* 115). If the techniques were guerilla (Lamb, Schneeman, Finley) then the works appealed to only a small section of the population. By presenting what looked like a well-made play in traditional form, the women playwrights might be honored by mainstream awards: Pulitzer, Tony, and Obie among them. If the plays looked too realistic however, feminist critics were not willing to consider them further or to ask what might make them feminist, instead of immediately dismissing them. Roberta Sklar argues that

[t]he themes and the forms to be explored by women from a woman-identified perspective have barely been let in. Women require new forms to bring forth that which has so long been silenced. If we create only in existing forms, we can say only what has been said before. The theatrical articulation of more than half of the world's population cannot possibly be carried out in a decade by a handful of under-funded women. (318).

Catharine Stimpson concurs in her article “Nancy Reagan Wears a Hat:” “Feminists had a way of judging the legitimacy, accuracy, and cogency of the representations of women. Did

they seem true to a woman's experience? Could a woman, would a woman, serve as a witness to their validity? If she could, the representation was acceptable; if not, not" (236). In the 1980s, drama critics disparaged any character's admission of a fragmented and compartmentalized self. The dawning awareness of a female character's multiple facets is still disparaged by modern critics as being insecure in one's feminism and thereby not feminist enough, or not feminist at all. Disappointingly, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*: the binaries and extremes of feminist criteria continue. These subdivisions of feminism into feminisms mandated negating all hegemonic influences. Subsequently, the comfort women found being together assumed a more radical connotation. No longer was coming to terms with one's place in society at one's own time enough. For some artists, only anger and vociferous vocalization of the perceived injustices that were inflicted on women would suffice.

The feminist playwrights of the 1970s certainly made their arguments visible when they began experimenting with and appropriating avant-garde, absurdist, as well as Brechtian techniques to represent their lives and make their personal experiences political.⁶ Sue-Ellen Case advocates Brechtian theory as the starting point for successful dramatic analysis:

Political theatre requires the ability to isolate and manifest certain ideas and relationships that make ideology visible, in contrast with the styles of realism and naturalism, wherein ideology is hidden or covert. Brecht's theorization of the social gest, epic structure, and alienation effect provides the means to reveal material relations as the basis of social reality, to foreground and examine ideologically-determined beliefs and unconscious habitual perceptions, and to make visible those signs inscribed on the body which distinguish social behavior in relation to class, gender, and history. For feminists, Brechtian techniques offer a way to examine the material conditions of gender behavior (how they are internalized, opposed, and

changed- and their interaction with other socio-political factors such as class.

(*Performing Feminisms* 150)

These techniques—non-linear, overtly political, and magnified—allowed the playwrights a way to highlight their agenda in putting a woman’s life on stage. Case argues specifically for these structures as a way to revolutionize the personal into the political. Theatre, for Case, is a personal means to a political end.

While, indeed, avant garde techniques can be useful as a mode of expression, so too can many more, including the more traditionally representative narrative structure.

Contemporary playwright Tina Howe explains her affinity for absurdism as she introduces Eugene Ionesco in 1986, “He is often referred to as an absurdist, but to me he is the supreme realist. He shows us the laxness of reality, and what a pathetic time we have going through the day. It is the kitchen sink drama and the formula comedies that are absurd because they present us with stereotypes, not the real world” (Lamont, *Women on the Verge* ix). While Case wants to radically present women’s issues in order to reveal political disparities, Howe’s concern is with presenting the daily routine of living, which seems to her to partake of the absurd. Where they both agree is the need for a dramatic interruption, a jarring if you will, to highlight for the audience that it needs to reconsider its solipsism. Even with Howe’s use of absurdist techniques, there still remains a familiar narrative structure in her work which rankles with the earlier feminist critics. Howe’s use of absurdist techniques is not to politicize. As I will demonstrate later, Howe’s purpose is to show the multiple perspectives and disjointed nature of a woman’s life that, prior to this, had been oversimplified on stage by her male colleagues. Therefore, Howe and her female contemporaries’ plays demonstrate *both* “male-gender oppression” and “female-gender strengths,” which lead to controversy in subsequent decades as Case and her colleagues, like Maya Roth and the Jane Chambers Contest, work to narrow, rather than expand, the definition of a feminist play (Case, *Feminism and Theatre* 64). Radical playwrights began using the monologue (ironically one

of the oldest dramatic techniques) to isolate themselves and their characters to be the sole focus—divorced from any outside hegemonic influence so they could narrate subjugation without having to physically acknowledge it.⁷ As Jeanie Forte argues, “[i]f feminism is a struggle against oppression, then is it really possible for feminist playwrights to communicate the workings of oppressive ideology within the realistic narrative from within? Is the structure so powerful and deeply ingrained that to allow virtually any realistic elements constitutes a capitulation to dominant ideology? If so, then realism must be abandoned altogether in search for a subversive practice” (“Realism” 24). If any woman playwright wants to write a truly feminist play then she must divorce herself from previous styles, whether they serve her purpose or not.

The playwrights in this early part of the 21st century make use of a variety of techniques within plays and across their oeuvres to embody a complex compositional continuum. Some use Brechtian technique of alienation; others use fantasy; some rescript myths; others present non-white-middle-class experiences in search of “*a* (emphasis mine) representational space” (Dolan, *Spectator* 101). As Julia Miles says, “[Women’s] concerns and the subjects of their plays do not differ substantially from men’s. Gender does not restrict subject, though it may influence style and point of view” (93). In this world of linear thinking, there can be, as Porter advocates, “a continuum from the least to the most feminist” (196).

Just how feminist or how political women’s drama is or ought to be has been variously interpreted. Beth Henley, for example, prefers to ‘write about people. The problems of just being here are more pressing and exciting to me than politics. Politics generally deal with the facades of our more desperate problems. I don’t really feel like changing the world, I want to look at the world.’ She talks of the ‘existential madness that we—everyone—are born into. There’s a sense of powerlessness in the world.’ Tina Howe, whose own concerns are more ‘aesthetic

than they are social or political,' suggests that 'in times of political chaos, many artists go inward because the outer landscape is so appalling,' and out of this 'move inwards...very exciting work is done as a result,'" (Chinoy, "Here are the American Playwrights." *Women in American Theatre, 2nd Edition* 351).

The traditional linear, dramatic arc where at the final curtain there is catharsis for the audience has morphed into, as Patti Gillespie says, "plays described with words like *circular, modular, contiguous* or with images like *patchwork, quilted, web-like, montage*" (338). These women playwrights want their audiences to question not only their reaction to the ending, but also to challenge the preconceptions that led to their reaction. In addition, playwrights select their modes of expression to enhance and support the words they are writing and the characters they are creating. "Current feminist theatre practice thus contains vigorous interaction with progressive aspects of theatrical traditions such as Brecht's, while simultaneously engaging in the process of discovering appropriate and effective contemporary methods" (Reinelt, *Performing Feminisms* 159). Critics acknowledged that "[t]here are playwrights who are creating alternative visions in which time and space are held open, collapsed, or suspended, and women characters experience liberation" (Hart, *Spectacle* 10). However, the same critics then judged to what degree those playwrights were successful and "have also responded negatively to the notion of feminine form. They feel it means that, if they work in traditional forms, they are not feminists (or feminine), and that their work is discounted because of their preference for those forms, rather than seen as marking an advance for women in the field by making their professional work visible" (Case, *Feminism and Theatre* 130).

The majority of women playwrights regard marking an advance for women in the field as a secondary benefit, not their primary purpose:

It is the interdisciplinary nature of theatre studies that challenges it to take this risk-filled route, to play with all the borderlines, frameworks, and rules set up until

today, whether they seem too strict and narrow or whether, on the contrary, they appear too misty, wide, and general. It is not a question of one or the other. It is only by playing theatre studies, by trying out and testing, forming new parties, looking for new allies and enemies, permanently regrouping, reformulating, and recreating that which has already been grouped, formulated, and created, that we will be in a position to find—even if only tentatively—intriguing answers to the questions at stake.

(Fischer-Lichte 65)

Nothing resembling a traditionally structured play in the 70s and 80s could have been considered feminist “[b]ecause popular American realism presents only a single and often superficial layer of human perception, it cannot represent the diversity of women’s experience. Thus, by intent or default, it upholds the masculine status quo” (Curb 303). Therefore, in order to justify plays’ feminist sensibilities, the prescriptive nature of 1970s drama theory required any technique *but* realism—performance art, one-woman show, or alienation techniques. Glaspell, Luce, and Hellman’s plays were dismissed because of how long ago they had been written. Meanwhile, the subtlety found in the realism of Marsha Norman, Beth Henley and Wendy Wasserstein did initiate multiple possibilities for late second and third wave feminist playwrights, Sarah Ruhl, Suzan-Lori Parks, Paula Vogel, and Kia Corthron among them.

Only Radical Permitted Beyond This Point

As Maya Roth explains in her article “Revealing and Renewing Feminist Theatrical Engagement: The Jane Chambers Contest for Women Playwrights,” the contest “understands feminist perspectives to refract across varied formations of race, class, sexuality, culture, dis/ability, and geography. This specific hailing of diversity aims to move beyond strands of second-wave feminism that critics from bell hooks to Cherríe Moraga understood to elide differences across women’s disparate-lived experiences” (160). In other words, the contest’s creators specifically look to recognize plays that highlight individual

differences among women, to revolt against the second-wave by sorting women into disparate categories and looking for a spokeswoman for what makes each individual. Roth, who pointedly defines herself as “a Georgetown University professor and director, whose work ranges from solo performance to specialization on the postcolonial plays of Timberlake Wertenbaker....white (and Jewish),” never defines specifically in which ways she uses these attributes to gain a ‘feminist perspective’ (162). In spite of Roth’s advocating for only one acceptable form of feminist theatre, she admits that her own identity is comprised of a wide range of characteristics. Roth argues that the language of feminism assumes a heterosexual construct and that the plays submitted to the contest she administrates must:

creat[e] alternative, specifically feminist circuits of reception as well as representation, the contest actively disrupts varied sites of chauvinism; its activism cultivates new networks of value, theatrical innovation, and cultural praxis that consciously open to difference. In addition to advocating for diversified theatrical expression to better speak to democratic impulses, the Jane Chambers Contest argues for the importance of specifically feminist variations to help transform, re-imagine, or at least interrupt chauvinist frameworks that propel theatre’s production and reception circuits. (159)

Roth returns to the radical nature of the late 1960s and early 1970s to shock the audiences into realizing the validity of a woman playwright’s expression. Roth is creating a prescription whereby only plays that meet specific criteria can be feminist. The old argument arises in a new form: can women’s drama receive mainstream awards and still be feminist; or must it “transform, re-imagine” in order to be considered feminist? Roth states the winning plays of the Jane Chambers Contest must “address a visible need in the higher-risk status of women in theatre, and that—in a moment of feminist dispersion—the contest provides a vital structure of fostering targeted feminist engagement and renewal” (165). This idea of a ‘targeted audience’ does not pay the bills. As Marsha Norman admits, “The theater never will pay the

rent; we know that now. But we had hoped it would” (Greene, *Blackburn* 6). The research Roth cites in her article finds “it is in a major theatre’s economic and artistic best-interest to produce more plays by women, for they are more profitable, draw larger audiences, and diversify representations to speak to theatre audiences, which include a majority of women” (158). If this research is valid, why does she contradict herself? Why must Roth fight for the marginalized plays where she admits “Faculty members have the relative freedom to push boundaries in the profession; shielded somewhat from the glare of the media and far less exposed to commercial imperatives, we can take more risks in our programming and syllabi—and in so doing, help to move both theatre and feminism forward” (166). Roth admits the Jane Chambers Contest aims for a targeted audience; her description implies the audience will be well-educated college students who will attend their local theatre and indulge their love of dramatic literature. That narrow categorization, much like the argument of postmodernism being only an academic vocabulary, is what divides scholars and audiences. Significantly parallel, the few surviving radical feminist collective theatres of the 1970s have remained marginalized. The Jane Chambers Contest sadly continues the fragmentation that discourages the very “encounters with feminist plays of talent [that] inspire us and invigorate our feminism and theatre” it purports to promote (162). Damning some contemporary playwrights with faint praise, Roth hyperbolizes the reception of recent work, “the incontrovertible success of playwrights such as Lynn Nottage, Sarah Ruhl, and Suzan-Lori Parks—who among them have landed three MacArthur Awards, two Pulitzer Prizes, and three Obie Awards in the last decade—can create the public misimpression that women playwrights enjoy equal access” (158). These awards are a small fraction of what have been awarded to their male colleagues; no member of any public could share the misguided notion that women enjoy the same access men have to theatrical outlets. No drama scholars, or general audience members, would believe “women playwrights enjoy equal access”; however Roth fails to acknowledge that awards like the Pulitzer and the Obie

do draw audiences to the theatre. Roth needs to look more broadly at all the plays before the public written by women. Those few who have received public accolades should not be dismissed because they are now considered part of a mainstream. Compared to the radical marginalized plays Roth celebrates through the Jane Chambers Award, perhaps these plays seem mainstream, rather than just a bit less marginalized than the others. Sarah Ruhl's play, *In the Next Room*, was the only play written by a woman to be nominated for the 2010 Tony Award. As well, hers was the play with the fewest producers: Lincoln Center Theater, André Bishop, and Bernard Gersten. If it takes the support of an established artistic director, executive producer, and their prestigious theatre in order to have even a limited run, then there can be no denying that women's plays are still sorely under produced.⁸ While Roth's work and the Jane Chambers prize should be lauded for extolling the work of women writers, there should not be a casual dismissal of other work for not being feminist or radical *enough*.

Curtain Up on Radical Theatre

Because of this critical prescription, truly feminist plays could have only women as main characters with men in supporting roles. If there were to be men on stage, they must be vilified, denigrated, and forced to recant all hegemonic thoughts and actions. "What Have You Done for Me Lately," from Myrna Lamb's 1969 collection *Scyklon Z: a group of pieces with a point*, shows just how far men should be punished before women can believe their point has been made. In this three-character play, Soldier metaphorically enacts the physical abuse a woman's body takes from men while remaining silent. He uses his gun to spread Girl's legs, points his gun at her head, as well as stands at attention and salutes in an ironic show of respect, never uttering a word. However, the focus of dialogue is between Girl and Man. Upon being punished for denying Girl's rights over her body, Man has an impregnated womb implanted in his body and is forced to face the uncomfortable realities of pregnancy. While he spouts essentialist reasoning for not being the one to bear the child, there are no more legal escape routes for him than there are for women at the time. He must carry the

child to term, suffer psychic stress, and endure a caesarian section if his body proves unable to deliver the baby. Girl forces him to admit to all the wrongdoings he and his gender have perpetrated on women:

You murdered. You destroyed the lives of young women who fell prey to illegal abortion or suicide or unattended birth. You killed the careers and useful productivity of others. You killed the spirit, the full realization of all potential of many women who were forced to live on in half-life. You killed their ability to produce children in ideal circumstances. You killed love and self-respect and the proud knowledge that one is the master of one's fate, one's physical body being the corporeal representation of it. (163-164)

Lamb does subtitle her play "Pure Polemic" and explains its origins as the anger caused by the powerlessness of women, particularly her daughter's, in an unwanted pregnancy. Once the restrictions are placed on Man, then and only then can he understand the pregnant woman's experiences. Lamb's and other radical woman-centered plays found receptive artists and audiences in woman-centered resident theatre companies. Women's theatre groups like New Feminist Reparatory Theatre, Split Britches and At the Foot of the Mountain began prescribing that women's theatres must conduct raw explorations of what it means to be a woman.⁹ Similar to Lamb's polemic, their collective compositions required a bold and brash creativity. The consciousness raising technique was performatively expanded to include the audience's as well as the actors' personal experiences.

Under those circumstances, Sondra Segal and Roberta Sklar's production of *Feast or Famine* developed for the Woman's Experimental Theatre (W.E.T), employed "a combination of consciousness-raising methods and research to express theatrically the issues being explored" in order to structure their productions (Hart, *Acting Out* 203). The first two parts of their trilogy, *Women's Body and Other Natural Resources*, *Food* and *Food Talk*, used woman's experiences of and with food to highlight the complex relationship created by

the media between women, body image, fitness, and food. Sklar and Segal improvised on the results of “women audience members shar[ing] feelings, earliest memories, and attitudes toward food” (Hart, *Acting Out* 211). The last part of the trilogy included a full-sized refrigerator that followed the main character throughout the piece emphasizing the inflation of power that has been ascribed to food. These women felt that in order to reclaim their voices, they must first denounce any possibility of further accepting a patriarchal voice and “focus much of their critical and practical work on identifying either male-gender oppression or female-gender strengths” (Case, *Feminism and Theatre* 64). The divisive use of the binary ‘or’ rather than the inclusive ‘and’ precludes celebrating foresisters’ accomplishments. Women playwrights since Glaspell have included both Case’s “male-gender oppression” and “female-gender strengths.” Their focus is on the combination rather than the binary. Glaspell’s characters in *Trifles* exemplify the composite. Mr. Wright oppresses his wife, but it takes Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters’ deductive powers to realize it. Luce’s character, Edith, in *The Women* articulates a similar strength of purpose and self-reliance when she accepts being ignored by her husband: “I don’t ask Phelps or any man to understand me. How could he? I’m a woman. And I don’t try to understand them. They’re just animals. Who am I to quarrel with the way God made them? I’ve got security. And I say: ‘What the hell?’ And let nature take its course—it’s going to, anyway” (85-86). The multiplicity of women’s experiences can still be highlighted and need not be cast aside even when there is a man on stage. Much the same way postmodern inquiry establishes and then subverts ideology, using the male character establishes a traditional norm, which slowly erodes as the woman becomes the focus.

Similar to the aforementioned radical gender juxtaposition in Myrna Lamb’s *Scylon Z*, Carolee Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll* and Karen Finley’s *We Keep Our Victims Ready* are the controversial results of women exploring the denigrated and oft-denied power of a woman’s body. They were both seen as radical and decidedly not mainstream. By co-opting

the power to be found in a woman's body, women could subvert the patriarchal majority. At the first of only two performances, Schneeman, stood nude on top of a table having highlighted her body with paint. She unfurled a scroll from her vagina on which had been written an excerpt of "Kitch's Last Meal," which, among other things, contrasts a hegemonic definition of artistic construction versus what Schneeman believes to be the way to create her art. Schneeman admits, "I didn't want to pull a scroll out of my vagina and read it in public, but the culture's terror of my making overt what it wished to suppress fueled the image; it was essential to demonstrate this lived action about 'vulvic space' against the abstraction of the female body and its loss of meanings" (32-33). As in Lamb's piece, Schneeman's use of a woman's vagina expresses anger and resentment about previous representations. Carolee Schneeman's piece evolved as a result of how she perceived the vagina in contrast to the public's construction of the vagina as "obscene"—meaning to be obscured or not seen: "I thought of the vagina in many ways—physically, conceptually; as a sculptural form, an architectural referent, the source of sacred knowledge, ecstasy, birth passage, transformation" (McPherson 234). Because Schneeman could envision the vagina in so many ways, she offered not only the shock of pulling the scroll from inside her body, but also afforded the audience multiple ways to interpret the performance. Of course in the reviews, the interpretations defaulted to the most obvious: a naked woman pulling paper from her body was deemed to be radical theatre.

Deviating from vaginas to a broader misogynistic vision, Karen Finley's performance of *We Keep Our Victims Ready* was based on a case of a sixteen year-old girl, Tawana Brawley, who had been found in a trash bag with feces smeared over her face. Finley's visceral reaction to the news story inspired her to portray how women, and young Tawana in particular, should have been protected rather than victimized. The daily hegemonic injustices inflicted on women and girls give way to misogyny. Finley attempted to shock audiences

into realizing that, while women might not be physically murdered, their souls and self-recognition can be destroyed. Finley explains,

To me, what had happened to Tawana Brawley seemed like some kind of biblical tale, but one where all the symbols and the means had been scrambled and confused. I decided to try to create a performance out of the chaos.

I knew I could never go emotionally where Brawley had been, and I could not actually put real feces on myself. Even if I could bring myself to do it, it would disgust the audience so much that they wouldn't be able to focus on anything else. So I decided to use chocolate. It looked like shit. And I like the idea of chocolate's history, its association with love.

In the piece that grew out of this, I smeared my body with chocolate, because, I said in the piece, I'm a woman, and women are usually treated like shit. Then I covered myself with red candy hearts—because, after a woman is treated like shit, she becomes more loveable. After the hearts, I covered myself with bean sprouts, which smelled like semen and looked like semen—because, after a woman is treated like shit, and loved for it, she is jacked off on. Then I spread tinsel all over my body, like a Cher dress—because no matter how badly a woman has been treated, she'll still get it together to dress for dinner. (84)

Finley's brilliance is in her combination of what is overtly expected of a woman with subversive elements considered taboo for open discussion by society.¹⁰ Alas Finley's and Schneeman's performances have been reduced to mere descriptions of how they used their bodies, rather than the exploration of why they were moved to do what they did. The radical actions have not translated into radical meaning or affected, disappointingly, any long-lasting change. That is not to mark these pieces as ineffectual. It is to say that finding a more moderate connection to one's audience can affect a more enduring, albeit perhaps less profound change. Karen Finley's work certainly shocks her audiences into contemplation of

the roles women play. In contrast to Finley's primarily one-woman shows and monologues, Tina Howe uses a cast of five actors in her play *One Shoe Off* to create postmodern questions about aging, humans' relationships with food, and identity. Howe's play is equally destabilizing, but disguises the questioning of identity through humor.

Tina Howe's *One Shoe Off* opens with the characters half-dressed, "Dinah's in her slip and Leonard's in his underwear and a shirt" (145). Both are deciding what role to play as they prepare for a dinner party with neighbors they don't know and a long-time friend. The five characters use Dinah's costumes to try on roles of the past, both personal and professional, never adopting one and easily shedding the role they play in the present. Playing dress-up allows them, exactly like the theatre, to take on various roles. Howe's absurdist point is that we play these different roles trying to compartmentalize our lives. In keeping the various roles separate, ultimately, all we are doing is playing dress up—or conducting a postmodern examination of our lives: contemplating who we think ourselves to be and consciously choosing to be something else. Consequently, Howe underscores Barbara Freedman's postmodern assertion that:

a theatrical model is thus ideally suited to the project of decentering and subverting fields of representation that face postmodern theory. This explains why theatre is the source not only of much of the vocabulary of postmodern theory (framing, staging, *mise en scène*, rehearsal and repetition, reenactment), but also of many of its key strategies. A refusal of the observer's stable position, a fascination with re-presenting presence, an ability to stage its own staging, to rethink, reframe, switch identifications, undo frames, see freshly, and yet at the same time see how one's look is always already purloined—these are the benefits of theatre for theory. (73)

Trying on roles and personalities is more comforting and far more realistic than making the reductive decision of who we are, especially for Dinah who screams in frustration, "I can't

dress myself. I don't know who I am" (Howe, *One Shoe* 149). Our personalities morph into what our set dictates, the costumes we wear, and the lines we speak. We must stay in the moment, constantly assessing where we are and what others and ourselves are doing, so we aren't left behind or, somehow, left out of the group. Rather than seeing a character as a unified self/entity, Howe finds it far more interesting and useful to examine the facets that comprise the play and its characters for what those facets do to afford glimpses of the events of life being part of a chaotic continuum rather than an orderly sequential series of experiences. The only realism in Howe's play is in the references to films, books, nursery rhymes, and children's games. The two female characters, Dinah and Clio, are more successful than their husbands. Yet, Dinah is still the person responsible for dinner and Tate, Clio's husband, repeatedly disparages her for having been away at Christmas. Must a play written by a woman demolish the hegemonic stronghold on theatre, or can it be acceptable to gradually loosen the hegemonic grip? This void of radical impetus does not satisfy some contemporary critics; indeed, it increases their ire so much that they begin to attack the plays based on that one issue.

To summarize, various radical groups (Cell 16, Redstockings) believed Betty Friedan's National Organization for Women was not forward enough in its pursuit of equality.¹¹ As consciousness-raising, protests, and public demonstrations marked the radical women's movement of the 1970s, these techniques also infiltrated the theatre, both the divisions as well as the unifying forces. Starting in the 1970's, playwrights like Maria Irene Fornes and Roberta Sklar used their ensemble plays to inspire political action and uprising, wanting to demonstrate the personal is political using Brecht, the absurdist, the avant garde and, yes even chocolate sauce to impel women into action to realize their marginalized positions and defend their valuable roles in society. However, there were also playwrights who wanted to tell their stories by exploring the facets of a woman's life, even if that exploration used more traditional methods for which they were censured. The feminists of

the 1970s and 1980s tried to capture that banding-together of women. Consciousness raising “was intended to counteract the divisive effect of the patriarchy and to bond women by demonstrating that their experiences were not individual and unrelated occurrences, but part of a larger pattern in the material oppression of women’s experience” (Canning 531). If that presentation and subsequent discussion were limited to a female audience, perhaps greater change could be affected. Did the novelty of publicly gathering with women to realize and express shared experiences engender the anger, or had the women been angry and found a safe place to vent that frustration? Carolee Schneeman, Karen Finley, and others channeled the anger and resentment against hegemony into intentionally shocking feminist performances to force a change in ideology.

A perceived lack of political impetus frustrated feminist dramatic critics at just the time women playwrights started receiving commercial accolades. The prescription was that a women’s group should take personal feelings and make them political. Playwright Wendy Wasserstein’s character Heidi uses her entire play to constantly assess where she, others, and the women’s movement are on that continuum. Heidi inherently knows the binary is wrong, that there must be something more nuanced than what she sees. Sue-Ellen Case argues for this variety of interpretations when she maintains that “[t]he feminist activist-theorist can employ any techniques, methods, theories or ways of social organizing [that] she wishes in confronting or creating the situations in which she operates” (*Feminism and Theatre* 131). While Case sanctions any form of organizing feminist expression, the one interpretation she avoids is realism, and her criticism claims Wasserstein’s work falls short based on its realism. As she has argued many times, Case believes that realism reinforces hegemony. While trying to find a way to express a woman’s life on stage, Wasserstein was often criticized for writing drama the critics saw as embedded in social realism. In spite of Wasserstein’s not fulfilling the critics’ prescription for a radical resolution to a consciousness-raising scene, the very next scene is Heidi’s public protest for including more

women in an art exhibition. Instead of a militant plan of action to announce their feelings of discrimination, these characters are in the initial stages of trying to decide how they should verbalize and act on the awareness of their subjugation.

Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* explores her titular character's growing feminist/womanist/humanist sensibilities, particularly during a consciousness-raising session on a snowy evening in Ann Arbor, when Heidi Holland accompanies her friend, Susan, to the Huron Street Ann Arbor Consciousness-raising Rap Group. Heidi prefers to isolate herself from the group initially to observe, rather than to participate. As is common in Wasserstein plays the women of the rap group represent various stereotypes of women: Jill, the all-caring mother; Fran, the militant, man-hating lesbian who challenges women who are trying to understand their feelings; Becky, the hope of the next generation if she can rid herself of the burdens of the present generation; Susan, Heidi's longtime friend who asserts she'll thwart hegemony from inside the system and become the kind of man her mother would want her to marry. Heidi, meanwhile, identifies herself as "just visiting" (177). She does not want to be reduced to a binary of "either you shave your legs or you don't" (180). When, Fran assigns a feminist label to Heidi's research, Heidi quickly negates by referring to it as "humanist." Heidi's mantra throughout the play is that "all people deserve to fulfill their potential" (181). Fran argues that women's needs should take priority over men's, but none of the women can articulate specifically what it is she needs and as a result they feel powerless to change their respective situations. All they can do is repeat trite phrases, express love for each other, and find comfort in singing Aretha Franklin's *Respect*. In spite of Fran's saying "'personal' has kept us apart for so many years," nothing arises that suggests these women will make these feelings political in any way (180). However, the women themselves must determine how they will cope with their situations. Each knows she must act, but she must decide in what manner. Because Wasserstein wrote Heidi to be insecure and uncertain, what could, and ultimately did, speak to audiences was the ambivalence of Heidi's feelings. While Dolan and

Case lauded Schneeman and Finlay, they accused Wasserstein of not doing enough to break hegemonic influences. Yet a postmodern analysis confirms that these characters are trying to discern a way to work through their insecurities. As *The Heidi Chronicles* suggest, women were trying to define their role in society and Heidi's personal journey is an attempt to subscribe, against her better judgment, to the divisive 'or' of feminist concerns—"you either shave your legs or you don't" (180). It is only at the end of the play she embraces the 'and': choosing to keep her job, remain single, and adopt an infant, all of which met with critical censure.

However, when a play like *The Heidi Chronicles*—with a non-linear frame structure, a non-traditional system of representation, and a titular character, Heidi, in the "position of subject"—contributes to the deconstruction Case seeks, it is not perceived to do *enough* to further the feminist agenda.¹² Helene Keyssar denigrates, "the world of *The Heidi Chronicles* [as] adamantly one of reaction, not revolution or change" (125). Why isn't 'reaction' enough? Why *can't* 'reaction' be acknowledged as a starting point for 'revolution' or 'change'? 'Revolution' and 'change' have yet to affect ticket sales, yield more productions, or afford wider audiences for women's plays. The critical requirements to make a play fit into 'revolutionary' or 'feminist' categories was an ever-moving target. Rather than looking to see how the work *could* fit the variety of criteria for being 'revolutionary' or 'feminist,' the critics were quick to dismiss work for not hitting their bulls-eye. They became even more disparaging when the playwrights admitted to having no desire to acknowledge the critics' parameters.

Women playwrights were not all pulling scrolls from their vaginas or trying to decide how they could best shock their audiences, but they were focusing on women and their lives as far more intricate, involved and chaotic than had been previously portrayed on stage. Focusing on women's lives "also reshaped attitudes toward women's private lives and especially toward previously unquestioned matters involving marriage, motherhood, and

sexuality” (Ciociola 23). In fact, the reshaping Ciociola identifies advances the postmodern interrogation of the ideological absolutes necessary to continue the dramatic exploration and portrayal of women’s lives. Critic Sheila Stowell defends realism as one choice among many and stresses,

the point is surely that while genres or styles—realism has been claimed as both—may not be politically neutral, they are capable of presenting a range of ideological positions; the issue is not so much formal as historical, contextual and phenomenological. To condemn writers simply because of the forms in which they work is to indulge in a system of analysis shaped by melodramatic assumptions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’—the possibility of silencing (women) writers because they do not ‘write right’ is a danger to which feminist critics should be particularly alert. (8)

It would take feminist drama critic Jill Dolan thirty years to appreciate the complexities and nuances of what made *Night, Mother, The Heidi Chronicles*, and *Crimes of the Heart* plays with feminist intent.

Broader Critical Viewpoints

While drama critics of the mid to late twentieth century have recouped the unrecognized and unrewarded foresters—Susan Glaspell, Clare Boothe Luce, and Alice Childress among them—what do contemporary critics do to continue to illuminate and inform the ultimately liberating/freeing gynocentric experience to be found on the present-day stage? Most recently, critic Jan Balakian asserts “rather than working from theoretical frameworks, I read from the inside out, taking my cues from the plays themselves...because everything begins and ends with the playwright’s words” (5). In contrast, Jill Dolan’s early criticism argues, “[t]heory enables me to describe the differences within me and around me without forcing me to rank my allegiances or my oppressions” (“Discourse” 65). Balakian starts with the playwright’s words, whereas Dolan focuses on her own thoughts and opinions. Given the disparity between the first generation of drama critics and the next, my initial

preference has always been aligned to Balakian's and it is through that lens that I begin my analyses in *Prism, not mirror*. However, I must admit that my postmodern theoretical framework liberates me in much the same way Dolan admits her materialist framework liberates her. Similar to Linda Hutcheon's argument about linking—not conflating—postmodern and feminist theory, Balakian and Dolan, in essence, are trying to bridge potentially divisive modes of analysis. Like Dolan, I anticipate rereading these plays in the years to come and finding other questions to ask: what if plays written by women with women at the center were not described by the term 'feminist'? Or, what if paradigms shift so that it is assumed and accepted that plays written by women can articulate the *human* condition? My belief is that exposing audiences to women's experiences is crucial in order to continue to make the personal political, and to acknowledge the significance of a continuum as a model for women's lives.

Jan Balakian's *Reading the Plays of Wendy Wasserstein* and Jill Dolan's article "Re-envisioning Wendy Wasserstein," in conjunction with her subsequent blog posts, provide posthumous insight into Wasserstein's oeuvre. Some of the plays in my study are too recent to have made their way onto desks, into papers, to conferences, and then to publishing houses. By using those most recent plays in particular, one of my goals is to model a more productive form of theatre criticism: one that supports the playwrights' intentions and examines their work for feminist nuance, which can be used to further an understanding of women and their daily lives. Whereas the earlier feminist factions excluded men or women who did not ascribe to all of their beliefs—"you either shave your legs or you don't"—Adrienne Rich's "Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Continuum" resonates and advocates for women's lives being shown from new perspectives (Wasserstein, *Heidi* 180). Rich defines the "*lesbian continuum*" to include a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to

embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support,” this “women-identified experience” becomes a variety of women’s roles, responsibilities, and relationships that take on further complexity when interrogated by class, race, and sexuality (Rich, “Heterosexuality” 649). Finally acknowledging that women’s varied life experiences cannot be simplified supports a postmodern analysis; as Hutcheon says, “We can not avoid representation. We *can* try to avoid fixing our notion of it and assuming it to be transhistorical and transcultural” (51). Much as Rich invokes the continuum of lesbian existence, Hutcheon agrees that a continuum, of sorts, can be applied to representation. Bassnett-McGuire concurs that “life is experienced as fragments which, put together, make up a whole—experiences of work, childbirth, menopause, the roles that with each new development women are forced to assume (e.g. the woman who marries ‘becomes’ a wife, then perhaps also a mother, with the huge set of cultural assumptions and evaluations of each state)—out of these fragmented parts comes the specifically female perception of life” (463). Plays by women not only present an opportunity for women to see themselves and their experiences but also the experiences of other women from which they draw comfort that they are not alone.

The playwrights in my study have written primarily during the last twenty years; their plays reflect “modes of thinking that can come to terms with the multiple, constantly shifting bases of oppression in relation to the multiple, interpenetrating axes of identity, and the creation of a coalition politics based on these understandings” (Heywood and Drake 3). Contemporary American women playwrights incorporate these “contradictory definitions of and differences within feminism” not so that there becomes a single discernable feminist aesthetic, but so that the many facets of feminism become visible to speak in as many ways as there are women to listen (Heywood and Drake 3). Feminist drama critic Laurin Porter says, “A play that foregrounds women’s experience, granting women subject status and

moving their narratives to center stage emerges from a feminist perspective. One that also exposes the patriarchy as a controlling force and the culture as defined, determined, and shaped by men, thus limiting women's development and range of life choices, makes the case more forcefully and moves toward more radical conclusions" (196). Porter has the plurality of possible conclusions correct, but the adjective—radical—wrong. Conclusions can make cracks rather than canyons—as Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* and Clare Booth Luce's *The Women* exemplify—and still contribute to a valuable and satisfying theatrical experience, as well as feminist insight. As a mode of public expression, theatre has the power to give us alternative ways to see and think about women.

Consequently, the closer playwrights and critics came to the new millennium, the more a postmodern influence served as a foundation for feminist dramatic inquiry. Certainly, as Hutcheon advocated, postmodern and feminist theories should not and cannot be subsumed into one. She writes, "postmodernism is politically ambivalent for it is doubly coded—both complicitious with and contesting of the cultural dominants within which it operates; but on the other side, feminisms have distinct, unambiguous political agendas of resistance" (138). The two schools of theory, however, both inform and expand each other, once again eliminating the binary and encouraging the plurality that best serves the current state of feminism and theatre. Schneeman and Finlay were lauded in the feminist—albeit, not mainstream—community for reclaiming women's bodies and the treatment thereof. The critics of the 1970s and 1980s would require the feminist play to refute hegemony in its entirety. As you will see in subsequent chapters, I am more interested in locating feminist elements that insert cracks in a patriarchal theatrical narrative. Contemporary women playwrights define for themselves what it means to be 'feminist.'

Much criticism has been written using the metaphor of the mirror: putting women characters on stage that reflect the audiences' experiences and thoughts. In *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Jill Dolan includes a subheading in her chapter on cultural feminism and

the feminist aesthetic, “Breaking the Female Mirror,” arguing that “cultural feminist theatres free images of women from the constraints of realism, but cannot detach them from the oppressions of the representational apparatus and its ideological encodings. Representation conspires to relate conventional means and to lay transcendent, universalizing traps despite experimental forms” (Dolan, *Spectator* 96). While the metaphor of a broken mirror allows for multiple meanings and viewpoints, the idea of ‘broken’ implies negativity. Mirrors reflect only what is put before them, “impl[ying] passivity and noninvolvement, an object used but never changed by the variety of people who hold it up and look into it” (Dolan, *Spectator* 16). If we change the metaphor to one of a prism we allow the plays to present the pluralities, complexities, and differences of women’s lived experiences—differences between and among women as well between women and the patriarchal narrative. “[T]heatre provides the tools—stages, the mirrors, or reflecting gazes—through which perspectives are fragmented, shattered, and set into play against one another” (Freedman 74).¹³ These playwrights use their work to fragment perspectives on maturation, marriage, motherhood, and aging. Instead of holding a mirror to events in a woman’s life, contemporary women playwrights use their plays as prisms—fracturing the composite into its individual and disparate components. While a human being’s life may seem linear, compact, and/or causal, the playwrights in my study reveal for their audiences the incongruent responsibilities women meld within a lifetime: “woman as mother, woman as wife, woman alone, girl waiting to become woman, grieving wife, women’s experiences are all there, varied and contradictory, but all serving the same purpose, to express woman, her life, her unconscious and her repressed self” (Féral 552). The prismatic metaphor continues to apply, to expand, and make relevant the most recent plays written by women. As much as the last thirty years of feminist thought have encouraged reconsideration of what it means to be a woman, the last thirty years of female playwrights have revolutionized staging the disparate nature of a woman’s life.¹⁴

Because mainstream women playwrights, like Henley and Wasserstein, were accepted by the theater establishment, the very critics who should have been supporting them denigrated the women's work. "In theatre, woman-identification demanded the creation of forms that would break from the historically male tradition...allowed them to end without the authority of narrative closure, and used direct address and a documentary style. They intended to subvert realism's relentless plotting toward the white, middle-class, male privilege the history of dramatic texts maintained" (Dolan, *Spectator* 85). In order to highlight how deeply entrenched perceptions of women are, Finley and her colleagues needed to present both the expected and the unexpected as well as the antithesis of anything expected of a woman. However, these radical playwrights did not expand the audiences for their work. In essence, by not reaching out to the traditional theatre audiences, the celebrated radical playwrights effectively shut themselves off from truly affecting lasting change with the theatre as its agent. "The paradox of the avant-garde was its hope to transform all of society coupled with an inability to reach beyond its audience of like minds" (Carr xx). Case, Dolan, and their colleagues remained adamant in their prescription for radical, subversive, consciousness-raising works, while theatre audiences and established commercial theatre critics began to laud plays by women that were slowly bubbling to the surface, the work of Wendy Wasserstein, for example.

Since the late 1990s the most notable feminist theatre critic, Jill Dolan, has come forth to ask if the strident feminist theatres and theatre companies of the 1970s remain a useful model to increase feminist visibility. Since the untimely death of Wendy Wasserstein in 2006, there has been a mitigating shift from radical expectations to acceptance of multiple feminist visions of women's work. While women playwrights remain under-produced, their work is ultimately feminist. "Wasserstein and other playwrights working in commercial, popular theatre advance conversations that matter about women's status and desires, their work and dreams. Their plays might be liberal, but surely, they're feminist too" (Dolan,

“Wasserstein” 457). Could this be a dawning awareness at the turn-of-the-millennium for a radical feminist drama critic? Dolan and many of her contemporaries have embraced the value of nuance, admitting that the violent shattering of a mirror is not the only way to portray the many facets of a woman’s life. Putting a collection of lived experiences by women through a prism will also separate them into multiple facets. Illustrating how contemporary American plays by women further the cause of feminism incrementally, subtly, even subversively rather than overtly, rebelliously, and radically embodies the answer to Josette Féral’s question, “What if they [woman’s articulated words and experiences] were to grow in the cracks between the old stones [the traditional/linear—read male—mode of expression] and loosen the cement slabs of discourse?” (561). Imposing definitions of feminism or feminist theatre has done nothing but isolate and divide women and artistic directors.

Unlike for the previous generation of playwriting foresters in the 1970s and 1980s, there is no longer a substantial body of theoretical criticism of today’s playwrights expressing dissatisfaction with the plays not attaining the goals of a feminist political wave.¹⁵ “Third-wave feminists might learn from second wavers that wanting equality for women doesn’t have to be an isolated, individual struggle” (Dolan, “Wasserstein” 456). What if “the struggle” is really more a sense of individual expression rather than conforming to a prescription? As Tina Howe said, “We like to band together and think we’re a sisterhood, but probably every feminist is basically alone” (Greene, *Women Who Write Plays* 242). Prescribing a form for feminist drama is as detrimental to creativity and acceptance as constructing a dramatic canon. Dolan has started to reexamine the works she initially found lacking. Her comments demonstrate how she continues to revise her own thinking about feminist theatre theory, which bodes well for a more supportive future of feminist drama criticism. Much lauded and groundbreaking, Jill Dolan’s revisioning of Wasserstein’s work will be useful. While plays like Marsha Norman’s *Night, Mother*, Sarah Ruhl’s *In the Next*

Room, and Pearl Cleage's *Hospice* may take place within the domestic realm, no longer is the central focus a woman's struggle with a male character; the focus is a woman's struggle with herself as she breaks free from her perceptions of hegemony. "A study of representation becomes, not a study of mimetic mirroring or subjective projecting, but an exploration of the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self, in the present and in the past" (Hutcheon 7). By so doing, the current generation of women playwrights presents a broader range of women's life experiences across a spectrum of plays rather than within individual plays. Similar to the responsibilities and roles women must assume, the audience's singular focus is slowly dispersed and fragmented.¹⁶

Conclusion

While the historical significance of earlier feminist dramatic criticism remains unquestioned, Sally Burke argues, "Rather than postulate divisive litmus tests, critics should examine the individual dramas. In this way the drift toward hegemony and the temptation of canon construction may be avoided. Surely the many feminisms now extant and the varieties of feminist audiences among them offer many ideological spaces" (193). Feminist playwrights like Paula Vogel, Suzan-Lori Parks, Cheryl West, Kia Corthron, and Sarah Ruhl refuse to work within Sue-Ellen Case's binary of "identifying either male-gender oppression or female-gender strengths" (Case, *Feminism and Theatre* 64). The women playwrights embrace the feminist tenet of the personal being political given the fragmented and disparate responsibilities of their lives. Their theatre, however, incorporates a variety of dramatic techniques. "Many female characters created by the women playwrights of today are stylized, surreal, metaphorical, or totally autobiographical figures who yield to the unknown. These writers are too honest to settle for an illusion of reality when reality is in the process of being discovered. These creations of new images of women through new forms are of the most important work being done in the theatre" (Kimball 108). The women playwrights

experiment and implement multiple performative techniques including monologues, consciousness-raising, and choreo-poems to make their personal political.

If the autonomous woman plays say ‘This is what we have in common’ by showing an individual woman, the choral plays say ‘There are many different kinds of women, each unique, but with much in common,’ by showing us the drama of a group of women. The autonomous woman plays give us women in isolation, women taken apart. The choral plays show us women together, women seeking integrations by attempting community, much as women did in consciousness-raising groups. Though plays about individual women are still being written, most of the autonomous woman plays were written in the early seventies, while the choral plays are more recent—as if experience of women’s groups had been their impulse” (Moore 175-176).

While the autonomous women’s plays continue, the plurality of female characters to whom audiences can relate, empathize with, and learn from evoke the plurality of women’s experiences.

The need for postmodern examination becomes crucial as “[t]hese writers are trying to speak, to express the uncentred nature of women; it is a policy favouring the fragment rather than the whole, the point rather than the line, dispersion rather than concentration, heterogeneity rather than homogeneity (heterogeneity in experience and discourse), in the conviction that this segmentation is more subversive in its principle than any effort at unification” (Féral 559-560). By highlighting a variety of social ills, gender discrimination among them, the plays of the last decade of the twentieth century could affect change in how women are acknowledged and validated by society—“actual women speaking their personal experience create dissonance with their representation, Woman, throwing that fictional category into relief and question. Shock waves are set up from within the signification process itself, resonating to provide an awareness of the phallogentricity of our signifying

systems and the culturally-determined otherness of women” (Forte, “Women’s Performance” 259). The French feminists of the 1980s, particularly Josette Féral and Hélène Cixous, have been consistent advocates of women playwrights using whatever ways they could to express the prismatic/fragmented concept of what it means to be a woman.¹⁷ These French theorists believe, however, that women have specific ways of understanding their lives. After having been subjugated by hegemonic models of expression for so long, these ways of understanding must finally be validated.

Women’s plays can now be celebrated for the questions they ask, rather than the answers they give. As Jill Dolan has come to acknowledge, “[m]y challenge as a materialist feminist performance theorist, then, is to reposition myself constantly, to keep changing my seat in the theatre, and to continually ask: how does it look from over here?” (“Discourse” 69). Multiple perspectives enable theorists to contemplate how the writers and their works advance the representation of women on stage in a way that meets the fluid nature of the adjective “feminist.” Laurin Porter declares, “[A]ny play which moves women to the center of the narrative, foregrounding women’s experience and concerns, can be considered feminist” (196). In most recent years, Jill Dolan has come to realize her “[w]orking in theory allows such fluidity, since the only productive position for the theorist is balancing precariously on the edge of the differences between, among, and within women, who are the site of conflicting discourses in which there is no immutable truth” (“Discourse” 70). Jill Dolan’s re-thinking of the disparate components of a woman’s life, affirming the differences among women and, most importantly, their portrayal on the stage bodes well for the future of feminist dramatic criticism. While Maya Roth and *The Jane Chambers Contest* may continue to argue for radical lesbian-leaning drama as the only true form of feminist expression, Dolan has come to understand the importance of reaching as many people as possible through dramatic exposure. While Dolan’s latest work focuses on Wasserstein’s oeuvre, the same postmodern viewpoint can be applied, indeed must be applied, to other women’s work.

“Experience was no longer cast as coherent and whole expression of the truth about women; instead it became a process that invoked a fragmented sense of self in the always shifting intersections of discourses. Teresa de Lauretis defined experience as ‘one’s personal subjective engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning, and affect) to the events of the world’” (Canning 534). This “personal subjective engagement” on the part of *both* the playwright and her audiences is what will allow each to portray, interpret, and most importantly, accept that “fragmented sense of self.”

If dramatic feminist content is distilled to being primarily woman-centered then, all of the plays in my study—regardless of form or portrayal—are feminist and are to be found lying within Adrienne Rich’s “Lesbian Continuum” as well as Laurin Porter’s feminist continuum where she situates plays “from the least to the most feminist” (196). As Jill Dolan has finally come to acknowledge, “progressive feminists can no longer afford to disparage one another’s work or split critical hairs about which forms, contexts, and contents do more radically activist work” (“Feminist Performance” 435). Each generation of foresters did what she could to show her version of a woman’s life on stage. The singular Susan Glaspell paved the way for the duo of Luce and Hellman who, in turn, paved the way for more women playwrights in the last half of the century.

For over forty years women have been writing plays in non-linear, non-traditional ways—their expression chosen because of its efficacy for their plays’ purposes. In addition to these, Laurin Porter articulates the evolving argument that as “[a] flexible and multi-faceted form, realism can be adapted to a wide range of purposes” (207). The form is merely a vehicle of the function; it served and continues to serve the playwrights’ expression.¹⁸ As Christopher Bigsby notes, “the real feminism lies not in the lives of the characters but the fact of the play” (338). When interviewed, some playwrights maintained that furthering the women’s cause was not their intention. Tina Howe admits her writing

comes from my own experience as a woman—a wife and mother. I’ve never studied feminism... whatever that is. I don’t know the rhetoric or literature. I’m completely out of it. ... I create my own little world, filled with children, lovers, art installations, beached whales, and houses that are sinking into the ground. I’m not part of the sisterhood. Maybe nobody’s part of the sisterhood. Maybe there isn’t even a sisterhood. Maybe that’s the real truth of the matter. We like to band together and think we’re a sisterhood, but probably every feminist is basically alone. (Greene, *Women Who* 242)

All Howe desires is to convey the chaos women like her experience on a daily basis. At the beginning of the quote, Howe claims no inclination toward feminism. However, by the end of her argument she uses both the first person plural and feminism, even if she underscores the singularity of its composition.. Similarly, Wendy Wasserstein says that she wrote *Uncommon Women and Others* “so that that she could see people like herself onstage” (qtd. in Dolan, “Wasserstein” 443). Telling a story with the main character as a woman was their only aim, whether or not it suited the critics’ preconceived notions. As Dolan argues,

[R]ealism also allowed Wasserstein to reach larger audiences, nimbly employing its accessibility and transparency, its ability to provoke identification and catharsis, to reel spectators into her stories and align them sympathetically with her female heroines. Realism fulfilled Wasserstein’s intentions as a playwright. While I, as well as feminist critics like Austin and Vorlicky, might cringe at the form’s facile resolutions, its inability to offer apt solutions to social problems, and its preservation of the status quo, Wasserstein did use it successfully to bring women’s lives into public view. (Dolan, “Wasserstein” 449)

The joy of my travails has been to examine, follow, and learn from foresisters, like Jill Dolan who never stops observing, “shifting her seat in the theatre” and reconsidering her earlier suppositions (“Discourse” 69).

House Seats for the Future

This project is organized by both biologically and socially-determined demarcations of a woman's life: maturation, marriage (or not), motherhood, and (post-)menopause. Yet, when fully examined, these divisions will be viewed in a much wider context than the categories suggest. While I work with a comparatively small cross-section of the most recent drama written by women, there are many more beautiful plays available that can speak to and about women. My dilemma with this project was where to force myself to stop, as Sarah Ruhl, Kia Corthron, and Karen Finley, concurrently to my writing, put women's lives on stage in interesting ways which continue to evoke feminist delight. The plays may not be plentiful, but they certainly are substantive.

To begin, chapter one, "Growing Up Woman" explores how women playwrights present their female characters moving from adolescence to early adulthood. Cultures differ in their interpretations of when a girl has matured: the onset of menstruation, Quinziñera, Bat Mitzvah, graduating from college, living on one's own, or even the first sexual experience. While all of these milestones are socially defined, Tina Howe in *Painting Churches*, Paula Vogel in *How I Learned to Drive*, Eve Ensler in *The Good Body*, and Kia Corthron in *Breath, Boom* dramatize aspects of a woman's life that refract the various perceptions of maturation. These plays validate women's choices and subsequently defend them when challenged by hegemonic society, theatre critics, and by each other. These and other female playwrights no longer allow others to define them, their characters, and their work. They force their audiences to consider possibilities that have not been presented on the American stage. The characters' ages, situations, and resolutions speak to each other and to their audiences about what it means for a woman to no longer be a girl.

Chapter two of my study "I do, don't I?" analyzes three plays to focus on how women playwrights dramatize the decision to marry or not.¹⁹ While society has evolved from expecting a woman to marry as soon as she is deemed eligible, there are still latent

expectations that require the refracting lens of a prism to expose. How do the playwrights speak to each other as each represents marriage? What does a woman gain and give up in the decision to marry? First, Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* highlights the dangerous reality of a woman's world. Her monologue, *Hair*, explores the length women will go to fulfill others' ideals of marriage. Using the image of pubic hair, Ensler deconstructs what a woman is asked to sacrifice for the sake of marriage. This monologue underscores the multiple ways the concept of marriage between a man and woman can be defined by others in confusing and negating ways. In the next play, Suzan-Lori Parks juxtaposes the happiness captured in wedding photographs with the contentment and strife created by the routine of marriage. The final play of the section, *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* by Jane Chambers explores committed relationships that resemble conventional marriage, but legally cannot be. As a collective, these plays highlight marriage, not as a monolith, but as an institution to which society both consciously and unconsciously subscribes. These plays, when used as a prism, refract—not reflect—the concept of marriage.

“Playing Mother”, chapter three, argues that motherhood, particularly when portrayed by a woman playwright, continues to be problematic. When the ideal of motherhood is put through the prism, various, often conflicting, aspects of the physical and emotional tolls of the reality of motherhood are exposed.²⁰ Contemporary playwrights risk, as well as fall victim to, critical censure with their dramatizations of mothers and mothering. The word ‘mother’ changes depending upon what part of speech it is. First, Charlayne Woodard examines her relationship with the verb “mother” in her autobiographical monologue, *The Night Watcher*. Woodard deconstructs the idea of ‘mother.’ While she is Godmother to her friends’ children, she feels slighted by those friends when the children come to her for comfort and advice. As Woodard reflects on her relationship with children she questions if her choice to not bear children somehow compromises her ability to mother other women’s children and undermines the other women’s maternal authority. Second, Tina Howe’s play,

Birth and Afterbirth, uses her absurdist influences to highlight another maternal conundrum. Her character, Sandy, cannot have any more children, has lost her sense of self, and is, literally in Howe's production, going to pieces. In spite of that, Sandy continues to insist that her visiting friend, Mia, is lacking a crucial life experience by not having given birth. The play raises a controversial question: is having a child worth sacrificing one's autonomy? Tina Howe admits, "Every self-respecting theatre in the country turned it [*Birth and Afterbirth*] down. The Absurdist can shake up our pre-conceptions about power and identity, but for a woman to take on the sanctity of motherhood...Even my agent dismissed me" (Lamont ix-x). Woodard and Howe juxtapose deliberately childless women with women who physically cannot reproduce—the barren woman. Finally, while many women playwrights portray motherhood as an emotional connection, Eve Ensler's monologue *I was in the room* reminds her audience of the wonder of the woman's body physically giving birth. Ensler says, "[w]e forget the vagina, all of us/what else would explain/our lack of awe, our lack of wonder" (123). An intimate look inside a woman's body differs from a portrayal of a woman's mind and emotions. The reminder of a vagina's biological purpose refracts the possibilities of both the beauty and the violence to which it is subjected. By portraying the disparate elements of motherhood, what results is more chaos rather than less. Once motherhood has been put through the prism, it can no longer be considered a unified ideal.

Finally, the fourth chapter, "Post[modern] Menopause" examines how playwrights portray the aging process and the later years of women's lives.²¹ As Tina Howe writes, "When men age, they just get older, but women become very powerful...As time passes, the membranes between what we *should* do and what we *want* to do get thinner and thinner. There's no rage like old lady rage, just as there's no tenderness like old lady tenderness" (*Prides Crossing* viii). How have other women playwrights staged Howe's sense of power as women age? The first play, Paula Vogel's *The Oldest Profession* enacts how women in their seventies choose to use their bodies in prostitution. These septuagenarians buck

multiple societal taboos: sexuality, prostitution, and caring for each other and their equally aging clients. Secondly, in her dramatization of why older women have a right to be angry in *Chasing Manet*, Tina Howe challenges the notion that death is the only means to escape from life in a the nursing home. Catherine Sergeant and Rennie Waltzer have the mental faculties to take charge of their lives, even while their physical powers are failing. While a farce about escaping from a nursing home yields laughter, the play also suggests how women live the last part of their lives relying on each other to continue to fulfill their dreams. Dreams and desires do not desist despite aging.

It is possible, then, at this turn of the twenty-first century, to reunite women of and with drama, examining dramatic work and criticism, as the search for self and connections continue. In using the definition of feminism that means woman-focused I want to move criticism into the current decade expanding on how the current wave of women playwrights' work builds on their foresters in ways that remain meaningful, poignant, and identifiable: "playwrights working in commercial, popular theatre advance conversations that matter about women's status and desires, their work and dreams" (Dolan, "Wasserstein" 457). One of the things that has always made women successful, as Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters remind us in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, is that what to men appears insignificant to women is particularly telling. Women playwrights can make a continuum of connections that help us to witness, to acknowledge, and to celebrate the similar and differing facets of our lives, onstage and off.

Notes
Introduction

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all references to *Women in American Theatre* are to the Third Edition.

² Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins' *Women in American Theatre, third edition* (New York: TCG, 2006) provides a marvelous introduction to the playwrights, the critics, as well as all those associated with the theatre's crucial back stage. I found it particularly helpful, while waiting two years for the promised publication of this edition, to read the second and subsequently compare the differences almost a decade had wrought. Judith Olauson's *The American Woman Playwright: A View of Criticism and Characterization* provides an oversimplified application of feminist analysis to early American plays by women.

³ For a particularly interesting application of Friedan to contemporary performance see Dorothy Chansky's "Usable Performance Feminism for Our Time: Reconsidering Betty Friedan."

⁴ Subsequently, *The Women* has had two cinematic releases: 1939 and 2008. These three productions reinforce for their audiences that women banding together for support is relevant even in the twenty-first century.

⁵ For a variety of responses to the concern about what constitutes a woman-centered play see "The 'Woman' Playwright Issue," *Performing Arts Journal* 7:3 (1983): 87-102 and Susan E. Bassnett-McGuire's "Towards a Theory of Women's Theatre," *Semiotics of Drama and Theatre: new perspectives in the theory of drama and theory* 10 (1984): 445-466.

⁶ See Elin Diamond's "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism," *The Drama Review* 32:1 (Spring 1988): 82-94. Julia Kristeva's "Modern Theater Does Not Take (A) Place," *SubStance* 6:18/19 (1 December 1977): 131-134 argues for the continued exploration of an inherently female theatrical discourse.

⁷ For an argument of how the avant-garde can drive audiences to want a narrative structure see Peggy Phelan's "Feminist Theory, Poststructuralism, and Performance," *The Drama Review* 32:1 (Spring 1988): 107-127.

⁸ For an interesting examination of theatre as part of a tourist destination see Susan Bennett's "Theatre/Tourism," *Theatre Journal* 57 (2005): 407-428. Anna Deavere Smith and Lani Guinier discuss the merits of consciously limiting audience size in "Rethinking Power, Rethinking Theater: A conversation between Lani Guinier and Anna Deavere Smith," *Theater* 31: 3 (2001): 31-45. Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn's *Literature after 9/11* (London: Routledge, 2008) provides an interesting perspective on aspects of American culture (literature, theatre and the arts among them) after the terroristic attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City in 2001.

⁹ See Robert Collins' "A Feminist Theatre in Transition: Its multi-cultural ideals intact, At the Foot of the Mountain confronts some difficult changes," *American Theatre* 4:4 (1988): 32-34.

¹⁰ Deborah Geis presents interesting postmodern theatrical analysis of Finley and others in her work, *Postmodern Theatric(k)s: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama*. (MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1993).

¹¹ For a detailed history of the radical women's movement see Alice Echols, *Daring to Be BAD: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: Univ. of MN Press, 1989) and Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement & the New Left* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

¹² See also Rosemary K. Curb's "Re/cognition, Re/presentation, Re/creation in Woman-Conscious Drama: The Seer, the Seen, the Scene, the Obscene," *Theatre Journal* 37: 3 (1985): 302-316.

¹³ Freedman's essay has been published in a number of anthologies. While I quote from Sue-Ellen Case, the essay also appears in Helene Keyssar's *Feminist Theatre and Theory* (1996).

¹⁴ Alisa Solomon expresses her dissatisfaction with the inability of contemporary women playwrights to break from "bourgeois precincts" such that the theater becomes a site of "social reform or political progress" in "Irony and Deeper Significance: Where are the Plays?" *Theater* 31.3 (Fall 2001): 2-11.

¹⁵ For a discussion of what the future of feminist dramatic criticism may hold see Sue-Ellen Case and Erica Stevens Abbitt's "Disidentifications, Diaspora, and Desire: Questions on the Future of the Feminist Critique of Performance," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29:3 (2004): 925-938.

¹⁶ For an early examination of theatrical gender performance see Janelle Reinelt's "Feminist Theory and the Problem of Performance." *Modern Drama* 32 (1989) 48-57.

¹⁷ Ann Rosalind Jones offers a concise explanation of modes of expression contained in French feminist thought in her article "Writing the Body: Toward An Understanding of *l'écriture féminine*," *Feminist Studies* 7:2 (Summer 1981): 247-263.

¹⁸ Jason Grote, Caridad Svich, and Anne Washburn, moderated by Ken Urban, conduct an interesting conversation concerning naturalism, realism, and the avant-garde in which Urban asserts the most effective avant-garde work contains a "pretense of naturalism" (13): "Contemporary American Playwrighting: The Issue of Legacy," *PAJ* 84:28, 3 (September 2006): 11-18.

¹⁹ Many more plays can be examined through their representation of marriage: Sarah Ruhl's use of magical realism in *Eurydice* both entices and repels the audiences, forcing an emotional detachment that also does not allow for catharsis and has the audience question the decision and result of marrying. The hegemonic view of marriage can be seen as the woman going from the protection of her father to that of her husband. In *Late: A Cowboy's Song*, Ruhl also explores how a woman living in a heterosexual marriage finds comfort and passion with another woman. While the two women cannot marry, Mary's relationship with Red differs from her marriage to Crick, and ultimately she finds the relationship more fulfilling than the marriage. Tina Howe's play, *Pride's Crossing*, explores multiple generations of marriage. While marriage is socially treated as a monolithic absolute, when put through the prism of Howe's play, a greater understanding emerges about the role of marriage in a woman's life. Cherrie Moraga's play *Giving Up the Ghost* addresses a growing awareness among her female characters that a heterosexual marriage may not be as satisfying a relationship as one with another woman.

²⁰ Wendy Wasserstein's play, *Isn't It Romantic*, uses secondary characters to highlight stereotypes of mothering and to underscore that, while both mothers want what is

best for their daughters, their individual life choices affect their daughters in ways other than society expects. Pearl Cleage's play, *Hospice*, involves only two characters, a mother and adult daughter, trying to understand each other. While the theme overlaps with Tina Howe's play, *Painting Churches*, Cleage's play foregrounds specifically the gendered mother-daughter relationship between Alice and Jenny rather than that of the more generic parent-child. In Sarah Ruhl's play, *In the Next Room (or the vibrator play)*, the playwright examines a multitude of relationships among women: those of patient-doctor, those of a woman and her body, those between women, as well as those between women and their babies. While framed in a Victorian setting, Ruhl's play raises many interesting questions for which contemporary women are still in search of the answers: questions about breastfeeding, friendships, articulating sexual and emotional desires, satisfying others' expectations of them. Catherine attempts to reconcile the disparate elements of womanhood: to be a mother who can personally care for her child, be sexually attractive to her husband, and establish meaningful relationships with other women.

²¹ There is a remarkable collection of plays that examine older women. With four generations of Black women in one room, Cheryl L. West's *Jar the Floor* examines what it means to be a woman, in different time periods, with different opportunities but still part of the same family. In Eve Ensler's monologue, *The Flood*, the main character embarks upon uncomfortable memories, and reluctantly peels back the years of detachment from her own body caused by a boy's calling her a 'stinky weird girl' (27). For women raised in earlier generations, the need for self-expression eventually overcomes shame generated by that time period. Wendy Wasserstein's *The Sisters Rosenweig* continues the exploration of aging identity as the three sisters challenge not only society's expectations of them but also their expectations of themselves. The familial and, in this case, sororital pressures of aging cause the characters to recognize the tensions that have informed many of their life decisions. Mrs. Gottlieb, in Sarah Ruhl's play *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, tries to ascertain how an older woman lives in a young person's world. Instead, Mrs. Gottlieb is connected to a total stranger through her son's cell phone in a way she had never connected to her son.

Chapter 1

Growing Up Woman

A quick glance at current magazines and television targeted at maturing girls shows everything from teens being celebrated on *Gossip Girl* for being mean, to finding the definitive answer in *Seventeen Magazine* for twelve to nineteen-year olds to the question “Am I A Good Kisser?” Unfortunately, girls fight for subjectivity under these and even more repressive forces. Maturity for girls has been defined in many ways, among them: menstruation, entering high school, sexual contact, and eventually marriage and motherhood. Media outlets target the maturing girl as one who probably needs to lose weight, make her closest male friend like her in a romantic sense, and intimidate others not to speak ill of her. Through all of these incongruities, girls attempt to “make sense of their social existence in the course of everyday experience.... Since, however, this everyday world is itself problematic culture must perforce take complex and heterogeneous forms, not at all free from contradictions” (qtd. in Driscoll 173). These seemingly benevolent media outlets offer constructive advice about what girls should do to be perceived by others as mature. However, what cultural critics have examined is how to transform the insidious external validation into an empowering internal validation.

Society seems to attach a numerical age or a specific physical milestone to the representation of maturity. Under constant construction as well as assault by society, women’s maturation is part of a continuum of acquiring adult subjectivity. The plays analyzed in this chapter—Eve Ensler’s *Bernice* from *The Good Body*, Paula Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive*, Kia Corthron’s *Breath, Boom*, and Tina Howe’s *Painting Churches*—dramatize this stage of a woman’s life as adolescents struggle for subjectivity. Their

characters' ages, situations, and various degrees of adult subjectivity speak to each other and to their audiences about what is meant for a woman to no longer be a girl.

Arguing against passively ascribed qualities, cultural theorist Catherine Driscoll uses the term “becoming-woman” to define the active nature of coming to subjectivity, which “produces an identity that is not an outcome of a process but is that process itself” (194). Driscoll deconstructs maturation in her work, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory*, and she argues that the move from girl to woman is an active continuum that involves an incremental, non-linear acquisition of subjectivity: “adolescence is not a clear denotation of any age, body, behavior, or identity, because it has always meant the process of developing a self (although that has meant very different things in different socio historical contexts) rather than any definition of that self” (6). In particular, she explains why this period of development is so difficult to define, and I would argue even more difficult to present on the stage. For example, the most publically visible mark of maturation could be considered the visibility of the growing breasts. As soon as those bumps emerge under t-shirts, it is assumed that a girl is becoming a woman. However, this leads to erroneous assumptions as large-breasted fourteen year-old girls are viewed as more psychologically and sexually advanced than they really are—hence, the hegemonic issue of determining the maturity levels of girls and women by the gaze alone: “In fact, the lack of fit between puberty and adolescence grounds much of the difficulty attributed to feminine adolescence, because dominant models of physical maturity do not in fact provide a foundation for any claim to social maturity” (Driscoll 102). Theorist Iris Marion Young refers to lived experiences as “the idea of the lived body recogniz[ing] that a person’s subjectivity is conditioned by sociocultural facts and the behavior and expectations of others in ways that she has not chosen. At the same time the theory of the lived body says that each person takes up and acts in relation to these unchosen facts in her own way” (18). In other words, the media emphasizes the “idea” of maturation to convince their demographic that

they have personally chosen the collective way to proceed to the destination. In reality, feminist theorists, playwrights, and women themselves actually embody Young's theory because there is no destination, only the chaos of lived experience.

The plays I address support Young's theory as the characters differ widely in age and circumstance. Within each play there is further refraction of ages. As a collective all serve to highlight a fragmented continuum, certainly not a definitive end. Therefore, each play deconstructs accepted definitions of maturation, although deeply-held patriarchal beliefs often persist. However, witnessing the aspects of the process exposes audiences to other possible solutions. Driscoll advocates that "adolescence [also] functions as an explanation of the indispensable difficulty of becoming a subject, agent, or independent or self-aware person, as well as a periodization that constructs both childhood and adulthood as relative stabilities" (6). In other words, there is no one construct or a stable definition of childhood or adulthood, which is why Driscoll qualifies them both as being relative. Driscoll's work focuses on the fluidity of this period of a woman's life, particularly acknowledging the irony that neither the perceived origin nor destination—childhood and adulthood—is stable or linear. In this chapter, I examine representative plays to see how they further feminist causes, refuse a singular narrative, and offer multiple possibilities for addressing the complications of maturation.

Instead of creating narratives that call for an ideal feminist subject who succeeds in building a radical self, these playwrights focus on women entrenched in systems of oppression. Because women are embedded in different historical circumstances, these playwrights show the various subtleties necessary in negotiating with power. Given the ways women negotiate with patriarchal power, the playwrights affirm the plurality of possibilities determined by class and race also. As a result, the female characters in contemporary plays present the cultural conflict and violence of sexism as females continue to explore how they might reposition themselves within their world.

Consequently, these plays are ultimately feminist portrayals of maturation as they celebrate “becoming-woman” as a multi-stage journey, not as a destination. There also are elements in these plays that reinscribe the constrictive society in which women navigate. Still, the plays focus on women wrestling to make their voices heard above the hegemonic din in their lives. In other words, the plays offer possible answers to Josette Féral’s question, “What if they [woman’s articulated words and experiences] were to grow in the cracks between the old stones [the traditional/linear—read male—mode of expression] and loosen the cement slabs of discourse?” (561). Therefore, I celebrate the facets these works expose: the reminder of the multiplicity of experiences, problems, and solutions as women characters struggle with cultural ideals of adult womanhood. In addition, contemporary women playwrights compose their plays to express a previously underexplored, even unexplored, aspect of human life—that of women as physical and emotional subjects. As a group, the playwrights in this chapter create images of adolescence that expose the cognitive dissidence of growing to womanhood and most importantly underscore multiple ways of resisting a singular narrative.

Only in the Moonlight

American society and the media perpetuate a variety of versions of physical beauty with one organizing principal, bodily thinness. Bernice, an African-American teenage camper in Eve Ensler’s *The Good Body*, is under no illusions about where she is spending her summer vacation, “This is fat camp” (19). One component of subjectivity is achieving self-acceptance; Ensler’s monologue shows conflicting messages sent to young women every day—by society, the media, and even their own families—about simultaneously needing to have the perfect body and accepting its lack.

Ensler opens her monologue with Bernice’s candor directed at her: “Call it what it is, Eve, this ain’t no spa” (19). The monologue format with the direct address to Ensler by Bernice creates dramatic tension—that the audience is eavesdropping on a conversation,

rather than being directly addressed. This affords a distancing that can alternately entrance and alienate the audience. By “merely” eavesdropping, the audience is not forced to confront their own body image concerns. Weight and body image know no age boundaries. The monologue never shares if Ensler is present merely to interview Bernice or if she is there as an older camper. This monologic structure discloses the various facets of Bernice’s experiences. Some of these rely on cultural norms, yet others, far less numerous, celebrate Bernice’s and other girls’ individual bodies. Not only is the body objectified by society because of cultural norms, but a woman also tries to distance herself from her body so she can feel herself an impartial observer in order to critique and, more rarely, compliment her body. As Driscoll suggests,

An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever-present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject’s intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention. The source of this objectified bodily existence is in the attitude of others regarding her, but the woman herself often actively takes up her body as a mere thing. She gazes at it in the mirror, worries about how it looks to others, prunes it, shapes it, molds and decorates it. (44)

Ensler’s monologue deconstructs the causes, effects, and the contradictory messages surrounding being an overweight teenage girl. The monologue refracts being overweight into multiple facets showing the complicated ways in which women perceive their bodies.

At Fat Camp, Bernice encounters the belief that overweight people lack self-control. Bernice asserts, “I don’t know why I’m fat, Eve. I just am. I am fat, I like food. The way it tastes. The way it goes down. I eat for happiness” (21-22). Conversely by going to “fat camp” and being instructed in self-control, Bernice will conquer the problems of being overweight and learn to enjoy and be satisfied by a “spoonful of nonfat yogurt and a half a

nut” for lunch (21). The media-driven ideal contributes to contention between and among women. However, the contention is just as bitter within the woman as she seeks validation. Bernice questions, “Oh, look, does this make me look fat? Focus. Focus. Right here. Please look, be honest” (20). Even as a teenager, Bernice realizes she is segregated by her body size, recognizing the retail messages sent to overweight people. She explains, “when I’m shopping in the regular stores they always keep the plus sizes in the back like porn. I feel like a ho trying things on and the PLUS SIZE sign is always so huge” (20). There is no thought to include the bigger sizes on the same racks with the smaller ones so the sizes are perceived as a continuum rather than two disparate groups needing separation.

Another cultural assumption explored in the monologue is that being overweight and being healthy are polarities. Through Bernice, Ensler highlights the politics of being fat as it pertains to “blowing up from obesity. I think this government should be worried about blowing up from all these bombs” (22). Bernice does not interpret government intervention as beneficial and discerns the political discrimination that comes with being fat. Her comments underscore how the government discriminates against her rather than taking care of more global discrimination that includes war. So, while Bernice’s rant against the government might seem hyperbolic and ultimately futile, Ensler uses Bernice to refract the point, as Driscoll states, that “health cultures involve a complex interpenetration of self, body, and culture and present the performance of healthy body image as directly reflecting a healthy self” (255). The hypocritical mixed messages are highlighted by Ensler’s monologue: meeting all health guidelines set by the medical community is one thing, but being overweight while statistically healthy still implies there’s something wrong.

Bernice feels the most profound sense of betrayal from her mother and her family. For example, she states, “We eat at home. Oh, we eat. I never missed my mom so much. I don’t look fat when I’m with my mom. My family, we are big people, I do not know why they’re trying to get me to act small” (22). Ensler’s use of “act small” implies the futility in

trying to “be” small. Bernice has internalized her family’s concern with her weight as a preoccupation with her physical appearance. The comparison to her mother raises interesting interpretive questions. Is her mother even larger than Bernice or, given her mother’s unconditional love, does Bernice feel acceptance and not focus on a societal perspective? The nuanced situations in Bernice’s life give cause for thought and concern about the subtlety of weight discrimination.

Ensler exposes the normative sub-text of skinny-dipping: an implication that anything less than skinny should not be allowed to swim naked and enjoy the feel of the water. Bernice expresses satisfaction at transgressing the societal norm. She chooses to “skinny-dip” despite societal censure of her “fat” body:

You know, Eve, last night, after the counselors went to sleep, some of us fat girls, we had a wicked night. We stripped off our bathing suits and we went chunky-dunking in the pool. We jumped off the high diving board and made huge waves. Some of the beach chairs just floated away. It felt so good. We did some fat-girl water ballet. Some Swan Ass Lake. We were pointing our chubby toes and kicking our legs. We look so much better naked than in those made-for-skinny-bitches bathing suits. I have to tell you, in the moonlight we were all round and moundy. We looked beautiful. (21)

Just as Bernice embraces good feelings and accepts herself, a fissure erupts in her resolve at the end of the monologue, “Fat girls are good people. Aren’t we, Eve? We deserve to be skinny bitches” (22). Ensler waits until the last line of this monologue for the resolution, dashing hopes of “fat girls” everywhere—Bernice’s decision will not allow her to be the fat-girl role model. Even if her body looked beautiful, Bernice still refers to its ideal as looking like “skinny bitches.” Bernice is striving for subjectivity through elements of self-doubt, and even more disturbingly, through self-loathing. Thus, her joy in “chunky-dunking” and her belief that “round and moundy” women are beautiful are countered by the cultural ideals of

thinness that surrounds her. Iris Marion Young describes this conflict: “However alienated male-dominated culture makes us from our bodies, however much it gives us instruments of self-hatred and oppression, still our bodies are ourselves” (80). Ensler holds societal pressure up to a prism and refracts the various facets. Bernice has other, more desirable options than to be a “skinny bitch” but being a “skinny bitch” is ultimately the option that she desires. Reconciling body image involves a myriad of sociocultural and psychological constructs. While it is possible to intellectually discount society’s image of the perfect body, Ensler shows the insidious hegemonic messages that can undermine dawning feminism and the conscious decisions about oneself while “becoming-woman.”

Yellow Light: Proceed With Caution

In contrast to learning how to love one’s body, learning how to drive seems trite and mundane, at least until examined through the prism of Paula Vogel’s play *How I Learned to Drive*. With adolescence being marked by multiple aspects of acquiring subjectivity, perhaps the most marked first move away from family is learning to drive, which brings with it a sense of maturity, responsibility and many lessons to learn about oneself, others, and two-ton steel machines. Learning to drive teaches about far more than moving from place to place. In Paula Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive*, Li’l Bit’s driving instructions become uncomfortable, yet empowering life lessons. Vogel’s title foreshadows far more than merely driving a car. The final curtain of the play falls on a variety of objects L’il Bit has learned to drive on her quest for subjectivity. Driving is used as a metaphor for rites of passage and responsibility, and the disjointed, non-linear portrayal of Li’il Bit’s age underscores the conceptual continuum of subjectivity, rather than maturity, as a delimited destination. The lack of a traditional narrative arc in the play mirrors how life itself moves through various phases. The play reflects the plurality generated by the maturation process: learning to drive; learning about sexual power over others; learning to use sexual power for personal gain; learning to take hurtful comments from the people who are supposed to love you the most—your family.

Li'l Bit learns life lessons from and in spite of her family, particularly her Uncle Peck. Over time, these experiences enable her to begin constructing adult subjectivity. L'il Bit's family can give advice and teach lessons. However, when it comes to implementation, only L'il Bit can decide which instructions to internalize.

A seemingly innocent question about sex brings many latent fears, hostilities, and insecurities to the surface. What should be a frank discussion, perhaps even encouraging bonding and sharing experiences about sex among Li'l Bit, her mother, and grandmother dissolves into a shouting match about how children's questions should be answered. When Li'l Bit asks "When a...when a girl does it for the first time—with a man—does it hurt?" her mother and grandmother leap to respond in a fashion that highlights the possible multiple answers to a single question. Li'l Bit's mother chooses to answer the question, "Well, just a little bit. Like a pinch. And there's a little blood" but the grandmother argues her daughter does not go far enough to deter Li'l Bit from having sex (30). What ensues is a generational argument about the appropriate way to discuss sex, with the mother saying, "Mama! I'm going to tell her the truth! Unlike you, you left me and Mary completely in the dark with fairy tales and told us to go to the priest! What does an eighty-year-old priest know about lovemaking with little girls!" (29-30). A simple question exposes many complex answers and resentments. In the end, only Li'l Bit can define for herself what sex is, with whom she will have it, and how it feels.

Within the play, counter to familial stereotypes of support and love, L'il Bit's family objectifies L'il Bit's body in ways that make her uncomfortable. During a family dinner, much to Li'l Bit's dismay, Li'l Bit's mother openly comments on her seventeen-year old daughter's breast size, "Look, Grandma. Li'l Bit's getting to be as big in the bust as you are." The grandmother offers practical advice "Well, I hope you are buying her some decent bras" (13). Li'l Bit's family discusses her chest as if she is not there and certainly does not heed her pleas to cease: "I'd like some privacy that's all" (13). There is no privacy or

escaping the gaze on stage and “breasts are the most visible sign of a woman’s femininity, the signal of her sexuality,” so privacy is something Li’l Bit must learn to forgo (Young 78). Her breasts will continue to mark her as more sexually mature than she, indeed, is. Instead of giving helpful advice on a maturing body, the subsequent discussion digresses with her grandfather making the most pejorative jokes reminiscent of adolescent boys. For example, he says, “If Li’l Bit gets any bigger, we’re gonna haveta buy her a wheelbarrow to carry in front of her... Well, she’d better stop being so sensitive. ‘Cause five minutes before Li’l Bit turns the corner, her tits turn first—“ (13-14).

Ironically, Uncle Peck is sent to the rescue because he “is the only one she’ll listen to when she gets like this” (15). The man who has been reverently fondling Li’l Bit’s breasts is ultimately the one who must mitigate the family commentary. Yet, to suit Uncle Peck’s subversive sexual purposes, Li’l Bit must accept her physical maturation, even if she does not realize the extrinsic value of her breasts. She expresses her ignorance by repeating a joke she has heard: “You haven’t heard the Mary Jane jokes? Okay. ‘Little Mary Jane is walking through the woods, when all of a sudden this man who was hiding behind a tree *jumps* out, *rips* open Mary Jane’s blouse, and *plunges* his hands on her breasts. And Little Mary Jane just laughed and laughed because she knew her money was in her shoes” (37). Uncle Peck is a seemingly gentler than other family members. Still, audience members, know he as akin to the man in the joke. The Mary Jane joke underscores the dichotomy of how Li’l Bit thinks of her breasts. Theorist Iris Marion Young says, “mov[ing] from the male gaze in which woman is the Other, the object, solid and definite, to imagine the women’s point of view, the breasted body becomes blurry, mushy, indefinite, multiple, and without clear identity” (80). To an innocent girl, only money is seen as a valuable commodity, whereas adult society knows that a woman’s body can be crudely valued for the pleasure it can bring to others. In L’il Bit’s case, her breasts are so much the objects of everyone’s gaze that she feels

dispossessed of her body. For this reason, she also begins to objectify her breasts because Peck's touching them stops his drinking.

In acknowledging that power, however dispassionately, at age thirteen and taking on the responsibility to help her uncle to stop drinking, Li'l Bit agrees to meet with Uncle Peck to discuss things that are bothering them. Agreeing to her uncle's touch, she states, "I don't think I want Mom to know. Or Aunt Mary. I wouldn't want them to think—... We could meet once a week. But only in public. You've got to let me—draw the line. And once it's drawn, you mustn't cross it" (47). Li'l Bit assumes subjectivity as she sees the positive influence she, and her breasts, can have on Uncle Peck. Li'l Bit knows the subtle power of her body and asserts control over how it will be used as a way to set boundaries. These meetings, while public, evolve into the driving lessons where she discovers she can stop Peck's drinking by allowing him to feel her breasts:

Peck. Do I get a reward? For not drinking?

Li'l Bit. A small one. It's getting late.

Peck. Just let me undo you. I'll do you back up.

Li'l Bit. All right. But be quick about it. (*Peck pantomimes undoing Li'l Bit's brassiere with one hand.*) (11)

As Li'l Bit expresses discomfort at being with Peck, he reasonably asserts, "Have I forced you to do anything?... We are just enjoying each other's company. I've told you, nothing is going to happen between us until you want it to" (23). As the play progresses, Peck is a concerned, caring father-figure, in addition to wanting to be sexually involved with his niece who is twenty years his junior. To Peck's credit, he waits for Li'l Bit to acquiesce to his sexual request. Unlike her mother and grandparents, Peck teaches Li'l Bit literal and figurative driving lessons: making decisions for herself and defending those decisions. With the literal driving lessons not beginning until the last third of the play, it seems that Li'l Bit

learns how to navigate the world and her body's place in it before the literal driving of a car. Peck, as the adult, is being depended on to watch Li'l Bit as well as to teach her how to drive.

(...A Voice insinuates itself in the pause:)

Before you drive.

Always check under your car for obstructions—broken bottles, fallen tree branches, and the bodies of small children. Each year hundreds of children are crushed beneath the wheels of unwary drivers in their own driveways. Children depend on *you* to watch them. (32)

Because of the non-linear structure of the play, the results of how he has watched her and how the audience has watched their relationship are juxtaposed with how seriously he takes his driver's education responsibility. The playwright's instructions are such that they force a distancing from the audience. While the dialogue implies touching, Peck only pantomimes touching Li'l Bit, which mitigates the audience's reaction to their relationship. In spite of the breast touching of the early scenes, and the celebration of Li'l Bit's receiving her license, the driving instruction is something very important to Peck:

I want you to lift your hands for a second and look at them... Those are your two hands. When you are driving, your life is in your own two hands. Understand?

I don't have any sons. You're the nearest to a son I'll ever have—and I want to give you something. Something that really matters to me.

There's something about driving—when you're in control of the car, just you and the machine and the road—that nobody can take from you. A power. I feel more myself in my car than anywhere else. And that's what I want to give to you.

There's a lot of assholes out there. Crazy men, arrogant idiots, drunks, angry kids, geezers who are blind—and you have to be ready for them... You're going to learn to think what the other guy is going to do before he does it... So if you're going to drive with me, I want you to take this very seriously. (34-35)

Uncle Peck and Li'l Bit are clear about how they expect the other to honor their wishes. In spite of the pedophilia, Li'l Bit does feel empowered to set limits. While the feminist intent is to set these limits, the fact the limits have to be set to prevent further child molestation is troubling. L'il Bit, like so many women, has facets of both subjectivity and objectivity exposed concurrently. Vogel's play demonstrates many facets of growing subjectivity. The nuances involved in L'il Bit and Uncle Peck's relationship do not allow for a binary interpretation. Yes, Uncle Peck's behavior is reprehensible. However, the behavior does teach L'il Bit some valuable lessons in subjectivity. Peck objectifies her in a reverential fashion whereas the rest of her family makes off-color jokes. Vogel deliberately demonstrates the possible rationalization for these characters' behavior. As Peck says, "nothing is going to happen between us until you want it to" (23). Li'l Bit puts forth stipulations in allowing her body to be the object of a photography session. Before the session begins, Li'l Bit has once again "drawn the line"; this time, "no frontal nudity" in any of the pictures Uncle Peck will take (41). Li'l Bit interprets Uncle Peck's casual reference to submitting her pictures to *Playboy* magazine as a betrayal, "But, this is something—that I'm only doing for you. This is something—that you said was just between us" (43). Uncle Peck tries to convince Li'l Bit "[t]here's nothing wrong in what we're doing. I'm very proud of you. I think you have a wonderful body and an even more wonderful mind. And of course I want other people to *appreciate* it. It's not anything shameful" (43). Oddly and discomfortingly enough, Peck is correct: appreciating a body is not shameful. Again both the audience and L'il Bit must wrestle with the nuance and cognitive dissidence of Peck's justifications. In spite of her stipulation that there be no "frontal nudity," she learns a lesson that once a gift is given, the giver no longer has any rights over it. The gift can be manipulated any way the receiver chooses. The same is true for the lessons or gifts Uncle Peck gives Li'l Bit. Vogel presents the disturbing nuances of humanity. In an interview for a 2012 production of the play, Vogel says, "What I really hope is that we enjoy and laugh and

get closer to being uncomfortable together” (“Get a Closer Look”). However, refracting these nuances and encouraging discomfort affords the opportunity for the audience to question their own reactions.

As Li'l Bit's eighteenth birthday looms, she recognizes Uncle Peck's ulterior motive for the calls, gifts, and notes counting down to her birthday. L'il Bit anticipates his arrival to celebrate her birthday knowing that, “statutory rape is not in effect when a young woman turns eighteen. And you and I both know it...I know what you want to do five steps ahead of you doing it. Defensive Driving 101” (49-50). Li'l Bit uses the driving lessons, both literal and figurative, to deny Peck the sexual consummation of their relationship. Li'l Bit has ultimately used the teacher's lessons against him and thereby assumes subjectivity. While she has set limits in their relationship all along, Li'l Bit does not demonize her uncle as she has taken his lessons and manipulated them to benefit her own maturation. The final lessons Li'l Bit affirms are trusting ideals like “family and forgiveness” (58). Li'l Bit can now admit that what Uncle Peck did to her was wrong; yet she learned lessons from the relationship and now she will make the decision to go forward as she chooses. The final action of the play is entirely her own: after she goes through her pre-driving check, she “floor[s] it” (59). Vogel's play is fraught with nuance rather than declaration. Much like L'il Bit gives Uncle Peck her body to photograph and he wants to share it with others, he has given her the gift of driving with which she can now do as she chooses—she can, with acquired experiences, use all of the nuanced lessons to comprise her subjectivity.

Wait for it

In contrast to Vogel's play, Kia Corthron's *Breath, Boom* begins with the main character, Prix, already in full control of her life, more as a matter of immediate survival than as an aspect of maturation. As Prix's life unfolds from the age of sixteen to thirty, both in and out of jail, Corthron presents the enticements, comforts, and necessities of being part of a gang. While the events in Prix's life are presented in chronological order, they are episodic

with many long time lapses between them. The episodes are not the culminating moments that would benchmark linear movement toward maturity. If anything, they represent the mundane, daily existence of women trying to muddle through life. What mainstream society deems criminal is the only method of survival for these girls. Corthron presents how finding subjectivity differs when running or being part of a street gang. Taking control of one's subjectivity at a very early age in certain instances is a necessity, not only to control life but also in Prix's experience to remain alive. Subjectivity, in Kia Corthron's play *Breath, Boom*, is defined in legal terms, given how much jail time the women in the play can be given for their crimes. For so many young people, eighteen is an age of consent. While Peck knows Li'l Bit's turning eighteen will lift a legal restriction, Prix and her gang members know, when in trouble with the law, eighteen is also the age at which life in jail and the death penalty become possible verdicts. Maturing and acquiring subjectivity in the mid-teen years for these girls is fluid and relative. On Corthron's New York City streets, these characters do most of their growing up before they reach age eighteen. Corthron's *Breath, Boom* breaks maturation into its previously unconsidered and unexpected aspects. She thereby reveals the characters' responses to societal challenges and forces the audience to wonder if the financial security that results from breaking the law is ultimately more beneficial than struggling to survive within the law.

In gang life, the definition of children and adults is fluid and at times contrary to the social definition. *Breath, Boom* opens with a discussion of age as the sixteen year old gang leader, Prix, summons Comet, as she puts it, to “[h]op my ass down to work cuz I’m called *my birthday, my eighteenth birthday, leave my friends cuz I got a few, desert my friends to meet my sisters and now my sisters givin’ me a look like why I got attitude*” (5). Comet is celebrating her eighteenth birthday, when she is legally permitted to make decisions for herself. In the first two scenes of the play maturation is defined and redefined by milestones: eighteenth birthday, friendships versus gang sisterhood, and losing one's virginity at age five.

Comet's character, in many ways, serves as a guide for Prix. In spite of feeling required to thrash Comet, Prix admits, "I be eighteen myself two years and liar if I say it ain't crost my own mind, ain't a dumb idea. Mouthin' off about it was" (10). Yet, Comet's gang sisters continue to control her despite her age and then send her to the hospital by physically punishing her for verbalizing negativity. After her injuries heal, Comet seeks her sisters out for the next assignment. Angel and Malika sit on Prix's bed doing their hair and talking about boys like average teenage girls. Prix awaits the telephone call about the next night's drive by killing to relay the instructions to the girls. Angel justifies the assignment by dismissing it as, "nothin' personal anyway, just a drive-by, not like we shootin' anybody face-to-face" (8). When Comet arrives to learn more about the job, she also wants to hone her razor-blade-twisting-in-the-mouth skills. It appears she is learning this skill because it is fun and dangerous. Corthron presents new facets of fun—certainly doing hair and learning new activities, but Corthron reveals that what for one girl is amusement, for another is survival. At the end of the scene Prix uses this skill to stop being sexually molested by her mother's boyfriend, Jerome, who "*(touches Prix sensually. At the first contact, Prix slams him against the closet door, surprising him, hurting him; takes a razor blade from her mouth and holds it against his throat)*"(12). Prix responds, "I ain't five no more" (12). Prix is more knowledgeable than her biological years would suggest, as she knows when to voice her thoughts or remain silent, and this knowledge keeps her alive. These teenagers hope to survive dangerous lives before the legal age of adulthood. They do so with the hope of living by more socially accepted norms after eighteen years old. They think pursuing illegal activities now will free them to lead purely legal lives later.

Breath, Boom's characters are raised not to anticipate or control happiness in their lives. They plan their own funerals as their moment of public appearance, as the time when they will be the focus of attention; just as in mainstream culture, girls plan their weddings. As Catherine Driscoll explains, "Becoming a bride—or its equivalent image in debutantes,

dates, and graduations—is constructed as the moment of the girl’s public appearance” (177). Prix admits to having planned her suicide in fifth grade and one of her cellmates, Cat, shares funeral plans that include knowing who “my special guest stars be, I figure they come, like this poor unfortunate fifteen-year-old girl died, ain’t the city violent and sad?” (25). The only way these girls feel they have value is by dying. The maturation process brings valuable, multi-faceted lessons to these girls far sooner than most would like to acknowledge. These gang members know one thing for sure; they will die—the only variable is when and by whose hand. With subjectivity as a continuum, these characters acquire more graphic understanding of their life experiences.

Corthron also shows the value of Prix’s knowing how to play the game of the dominant race and culture. She can assume the accepted posture of penance and be seen as a poverty-stricken, unfortunate youth with no family and little way out of her ghetto and gang. Indeed, Prix composes a speech to surreptitiously mock society’s expectations, in spite of seeming succumb to them:

Six months ago a sense of personal injustice would have had me reaching for the trigger. Today I find my greatest defense is in open dialogue. It is the accepting, nonjudgmental atmosphere of my counseling group that has allowed me to reevaluate the choices I’ve made. Your support has opened me to revisit my mistakes and has helped me to see the errors as attributable to social and economic circumstances of my upbringing as well as to personal choice. My home was violent, my teachers suspicious, potential employers uninterested. Sometimes I think if I had been shown one kindness in my life, perhaps things could have been different. While I am naturally apprehensive about the consequential changes our group will undergo, I celebrate the release of three of you over the next several days, and welcome those newcomers who will be filling your seats. On this last day that we are one, my sisters, I joyously thank you for replenishing my soul and touching my heart. (16)

Even at age sixteen, Prix is mature enough to know how to parody what the people in power want from her so that they leave her alone to conduct her life as she chooses. She knows what those in authority, those in the majority, expect of her. And, to suit her own ulterior motives, she acquiesces to them. However, Prix's ironic use of "my sisters" reminds the audience that if these women cross Prix on the outside, she will not hesitate to treat them in the manner of the street.

Grudgingly visiting her mother in jail, Prix encounters her fellow-gang member, Angel, who, while waiting to visit her boyfriend and sister, completes a scrapbook memorializing dead elementary and middle school friends, as well as her older brother, all of whom have been part of a gang or killed by gang hits. Again, Corthron juxtaposes stereotypical teenage activities, demonstrated earlier in the play by the girls doing each other's hair and talking about boys, with making a scrapbook of dead friends and relatives. The only way the people involved in gangs will be noticed is if they are memorialized posthumously. Prix remains unmoved, reminding Angel they have a hit scheduled for the next day to which Angel replies, "Who the hell workin' tomorrow? Everybody want the day off" (15). Prix knows her work will not allow her to take the day off and she tells Angel, "[t]oldja I got a job to do. Somebody got to" (15). She is the leader in the gang, after all, and believes in leading by example—even if it means committing murder on Christmas Day. Her subjectivity shows her being responsible for her commitments, even if she is committed to kill. Prix has taken control of her life in every way she can, including ignoring holidays while reducing everything and every day to the same level of emotional depravity.

Corthron's characters underscore and invert the common conceptions of teenage crime. In addition to planning her own funeral, Prix's cellmate, Cat, wants to be a gangbanger. However, she finds juvenile detention to be the "[l]ap a luxury. Three meals. Street clothes" (17). As a runaway she anxiously awaits the three years until she turns eighteen so she can leave the dangerous, uncertain foster homes in which she has been

abused. Cat has sought the protection of gang membership and has failed to even make it to the violent initiation. The only place Cat can find protection is in jail. Corthron's play ruptures the social underpinnings that make gangs necessary for these characters to survive. Normative society is ineffectual, but deviant society allows them to provide for themselves and others.

As juveniles, these women realize emotional, not physical, scars are the ones to avoid. The physical scars of retribution fade far faster than the emotional ties of survival. Even for Comet, the physical scars of her sisters' beating have faded. As much as she tries, and is punished in the first scene of the play, to leave gang life behind, she realizes, "Welfare sure don't cut it. I gotta gangbang supplemental income for the luxuries: food. Diapers" (30). When Prix is faced with the physical results of her earlier crimes, the psychological ramifications begin to erode her resolve to deny the harm she has perpetrated. Prix's confrontation with one of her victims, Jo, forces her to acknowledge latent feelings needing resolution. Jo's paralysis embodies the psychological trauma that Prix has yet to acknowledge: "I don't remember her! It ain't s'posed to be like this! It ain't...if we had differences, gone! Gone, you ever see the Fourth, East River? *Everybody's* happy, everybody, no anger! No anger!" (43). If the anger is truly gone, then there are other people she needs to confront, including herself. Prix has put aside, perhaps even come to deny, the physical nature of the crimes she has committed during an earlier time period of her gang leadership. After facing the physical ramifications of her previous life, Prix must move forward with healing the psychological wounds. Prix realizes she can be strong enough to face her past and move into the future with the same sense of uncertainty as setting off fireworks. Prix knows to be wary of the "[b]lack shell. Send it up and somethin' go wrong; it don't explode. And in the blacka night, you can't see where it's fallin'. You know that live explosive's on the way back down, right down to ya. You just can't see where it's comin' from" (34). While the fireworks are the initial representation of her anger, she channels the

anger into intricate designs and scientific chemical combinations to yield the colors she wants in the order she wants. Not only has she repressed the crimes she committed as part of her teenage affiliation, Prix has also repressed the constructive hopes and dreams she once carried with her.

Her friends, Angel and Comet, force Prix to confront the abandonment of her long-time dream to design and execute firework displays: “Comet gives Angel a look. Prix, suddenly feeling surrounded and terrified, gives an unconscious cry, backing up. Comet and Angel pull out from behind their backs several of Prix’ colored pen lights and form fireworks for Prix” (44). To Prix, the fireworks represent their origin as a “Chinese invention, they find a purpose: beautiful. Spiritual. Not ‘til a English monk put his two cents in do white people decide gunpowder for killin’ (28). Prix is reminded that she has used the gunpowder in both ways, too. She channels her anger and the gunpowder into something beautiful that she can control. She agrees to resurrect the dream of fireworks responding to her mother’s final plea, “that was your one thing, one thing hope you ain’t lost interest” (46). Prix has tried to divorce herself from everything to do with her earlier life, including her love of fireworks, and now realizes she can keep the fireworks without keeping the anger and bitterness toward the gang life and her mother. The fireworks also serve as a metaphor for Prix’s becoming-woman as her childlike fascination turns into a genuine interest that morphs into a realization of the danger in what can go wrong in igniting fireworks. Prix has come to embrace various complexities in her subjectivity. Similar to Comet’s economic reasons, Prix cannot divorce herself totally from criminal activity. While working the breakfast shift at Burger King is accepted, Prix continues to make “a little supplemental income. Don’t flip I ain’t in it no more just here and there: sell a few food stamps, bitta herb. Don’t freak. Retired. Thirty pretty old to still bang in the gangs” (45). Finally, she is able to move on with her life, accepting her past, her mother, and herself for what they are and as her mother observes, “seems you different all growed up, seems you ain’t s’mad no more” (45). What Prix realizes

at the end of the play is that having given up the anger, she can still keep the beauty and the control of the fireworks—one shell can still yield many colors. While her mother calls it being “all growed up,” Prix’s subjectivity is far more profound. By the time she is thirty, Prix understands and embraces her multi-faceted nature; as a daughter, a friend (no longer a sister), a small-time criminal and an employee, she can meld the disparate pieces that continue to comprise her life. Prix’s fireworks begin as a deceptively monochromatic shell exploding into many different colors. Kia Corthron’s play juxtaposes normative expectations of subjectivity with a maturation that seems to come earlier and more violently for her characters.

The Art in Maturing

The continuum of subjectivity becomes even more difficult when familial relationships do not support it, or worse, negate it. Much like Lil Bit’s family making fun of her breast size, Mags, in Tina Howe’s play *Painting Churches*, experiences her parents’ disdain toward her choices. In order for Mags to reconcile her subjectivity with that of being Gardner and Fanny’s daughter, she must stop thinking of herself as their daughter and view them as aging individuals, with their foibles and diminished financial resources. Much like Prix at the end of *Breath, Boom*, Mags is described as “in her early 30s.” Mags’ journey explores what it means to separate from, care for, and reconcile memories of her childhood with her aging parents. Iris Marion Young describes the hierarchy of human interaction by arguing that, “the way a person is positioned in structures is as much a function of how other people treat him or her within various institutional settings as of the attitude a person takes to him or herself. Any individual occupies multiple positions in structures, and these positionings become differently salient depending on the institutional setting and the position of others there” (21). Mags feels herself positioned in her family by the treatment she receives from her parents who identify her as the ill-conforming, disobedient child. *Painting Churches* opens with Mags being late, which foregrounds her feelings of insecurity about her

position in the family. While Mags also feels she is a successful painter, returning to her childhood home elicits adolescent habits. As successful as a woman may be, she never stops being a daughter. With the play as the instrument, Mags and the Churches' parent-child relationship reveals its complexities. Mags is a daughter, wounded child, professional painter, *and* caretaker. Her subjectivity struggle is the result of the incongruence between her current adult reality and the previous childhood perceptions of her relationship with her parents.

Upon Mags' arrival home, she explains the ordeal of the train trip to justify her late return. Apologizing for her tardiness, she exclaims, "I'm sorry...I'm sorry I'm so late...Everything went wrong! A passenger had a heart attack outside of New London and we had to stop...It was terrifying!" (136). Instead of validating her experience and realizing the trials she has endured to return home, her father responds, "You had poor Mum scared to death" (136). Mags' trip has been exhausting and traumatic, and Gardner can't sympathize; he only continues to criticize her. As excited as her mother is to have her home, Fanny's first comment upon seeing Mags is, "GOOD LORD, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO YOUR HAIR?!" (137). Neither parent validates Mags' experiences; they merely react and criticize what they see. Mags tries to explain how "it's been crazy all week. Monday I forgot to keep an appointment I'd made with a new model...Tuesday, I overslept and stood up my advanced painting students...Wednesday, the day of my meeting with Max Zoll, I forgot to put on my underpants..." (137). However, Fanny and Gardner struggle with the zipper on Fanny's dress, ignore the angst of their daughter's week, which culminates in having to help her parents pack up their home. The Churches are so immersed in their own thoughts and actions, exemplified by the intense focus on the zipper, that those of their daughter are inconsequential. As Mags asks for an explanation for her parents' desire to move, she is culpable in failing to recognize her aging parents. Mags returns home wanting everything to remain the same and lapses into childlike self-centeredness, "You can't move. I won't let

you!...I love this house...the room...the light” (138). Yet, according to Fanny, she has not visited in over a year. In spite of the arduous trip and the lack of recognition for and from her aging parents, Mags has not returned home for altruistic reasons but has been promised a portrait sitting. She quotes her mother as saying, “No, you said, ‘You can paint us, you can dip us in concrete, you can do anything you want with us just so long as you help us get out of here!’” (139). Fanny admits to needing help and Mags capitalizes on it. Their relationship is fraught with tension and with little empathy on either side. Fanny and Gardner absent-mindedly confirm the praises Mags has received for her work. She shares the reviews of her one woman show, “[t]hey said I was this weird blend of Pierre Bonnard, Mary Cassatt and David Hockney...” (140). However, as if to further dilute the alleged compliment, Mags proceeds with self-deprecating humor, “[a]lso, no one’s doing portraits these days. They’re considered passé. I’m so out of it, I’m in” (140). Neither parent addresses her comments directly. Gardner validates her work, “Well, you’re loaded with talent and always have been” (140). However, Fanny launches into how she’s merely the result of the family artistic lineage, with one caveat: “Of course no woman of breeding could be a professional artist in her day. It simply wasn’t done” (140). Fanny’s passive aggressive undermining exacerbates Mags’ insecurities about her career, possible husband, and even hair color. Fanny, as mother, can erode Mags’ confidence. In spite of Mags’ success as an artist and teacher, Fanny belittles her success by degrading her daughter’s work:

Mags: It’s called Pratt! The Pratt Institute.

Fanny: Pratt, Splatt, whatever...

Mags: And I don’t serve tea to my students, I teach them how to paint.

Fanny: Well, I’m sure none of them has ever seen a sugar bowl as handsome as this before. (142)

Does Fanny intentionally belittle Mags or is it a manifestation of stress from caring for her husband, dealing with the realities of his illness, and realizing the dwindling finances?

Instead of sharing monetary concerns and seeking help to shoulder the burden, Fanny assumes Mags is uncaring. For example, she states, “Things are getting very tight around here, in case you haven’t noticed. Daddy’s last Pulitzer didn’t even cover our real estate tax, and now that he’s too dodderly to give readings anymore, that income is gone...Mags, *do* take this sugar bowl” (142). In spite of Fanny sharing these cursory financial realities with Mags, she subjugates any sense of needing further help by returning quickly to the familiar, superficial territory of the upper class as personified by the sugar bowl.

Perhaps it is only by painting her parents’ portrait that Mags can exorcise her insecurity about being the Churches’ daughter. By taking control of how she sees them, she will paint what *she* sees, thereby reconciling multiple facets and acquiring another aspect of subjectivity. Mags wants to escape from Boston tradition and denies being part of it in order to facilitate the escape. After defending her hair choices at the beginning of the play, she begins to fall under her mother’s disparaging view when she says, “I don’t think my hair’s so bad, not that it’s terrific or anything...” (155). Her mother is drawing her back into the old patterns from which Mags has been trying to escape. As Mags notes, “The only hope for us... ‘Boston girls’ is to get as far away from our kind as possible....It’s not so much how creepy they all are, as how much they remind me of myself!” (157). Mags wallows in self-loathing as it pertains to her family. She is quick to remember the injury she has suffered at not being able to live up to what she believes is expected of her. “I mean...look at me!...Awkward...plain...I don’t know how to dress, I don’t know how to talk. When people find out Daddy’s my father, they’re always amazed....Sometimes I don’t even tell them. I pretend I grew up in the Midwest somewhere...farming people...we work with our hands” (157-158). Mags wrestles with individuating from her parents. She admits to denying her upbringing, but there is evidence of wrestling with her pride at being Gardner Church’s daughter in her use of the word ‘tell,’ which implies a voluntary admission rather than a requested response. Why does she feel compelled to admit their relationship? She struggles

to find ways to reconcile her artistic identity and her filial one. She also struggles to live up to her father's Pulitzer Prizes for poetry.

Similarly, Mags also struggles with how to perceive her parents when she does acknowledge them. Acknowledging their existence requires far less emotional involvement than embracing their individual attributes. As she describes how excited she is to be painting their portrait, she exclaims, "I want to do you both. Side by side. In this room. Something really classy. You look so great. Mum with her crazy hats and everything and you with that face" (140-141). While she sees her parents as 'classy', she also acknowledges that there is an endearing aspect to her mother that involves 'crazy hats.' Mags wants her parents to reciprocate the affection she is demonstrating by painting their portrait. Unfortunately, Fanny is unable to accept Mags' idiosyncrasies. Both women continue to focus on how they want the other to be, rather than accepting the nuances and flaws. Mags has not acknowledged the continuum that will allow her distance from her mother. For instance, to exorcise psychological trauma, Mags must acknowledge that her mother as well as her father neglected her childhood needs. This inability for the two women to concede fully to each other reappears as Fanny confides to Mags how Gardner's mind is failing: "He's as mad as a hatter and getting worse every day! It's this damned new book of his. He works on it around the clock. I've read some of it, and it doesn't make one word of sense, it's all at sixes and sevens....Ever since this dry spell with his poetry, he's been frantic, absolutely...frantic!" (141). Fanny's accuracy is not yet known, specifically because Mags challenges her mother by stating, "I hate it when you do this." The 'this' is never explained, although the nature of the word implies an antecedent and a sense of repetition. Is 'this' the perceived derision of Gardner's physical abilities or his mental state? Fanny exclaims that she is merely "trying to get you [Mags] to face the facts around here" (141). Perhaps Mags does not want to face the fact that her parents are elderly and not capable of living up to her memories of them. For example, she shouts, "There's nothing wrong with him! He's just as sane as the next man.

Even saner, if you ask me” (141). Offended, Mags defends her father against Fanny’s insinuations of aging. Yet, as the play progresses, Mags does come to see and acknowledge the signs of her father’s aging evidenced by his absent-mindedness and lack of bladder control.

Even at thirty Mags has not matured to the point that she can accept her parents as people unto themselves, with all their good and bad qualities. Gardner seems to have been more accepting and supportive of Mags’ choices and as a result, she allies with him. She is more willing to accept the good qualities of her father and the bad qualities of her mother. The censure of her tardy arrival is short-lived as Gardner expresses his happiness at having Mags home:

Gardner: Gee, it’s good to have you back.

Mags: It’s good to be back.

Gardner: And I like that new red hair of yours. It’s very becoming.

Mags: But I told you, I hardly touched it...

Gardner: Well, something’s different. You’ve got a glow. So, how do you want us to pose for this grand portrait of yours...? (143-144)

Unlike Fanny, Gardner validates Mags’ profession, compliments her looks, and more importantly realizes there is something inside Mags that contributes to an inner radiance. The tension eases as Mags enjoys her parents’ childlike playfulness when they practice posing for the portrait. She joins their laughter and says, “You two are impossible...completely impossible! I was crazy to think I could ever pull this off! Look at you...just...look at you!” (144). Mags will incorporate and immortalize her parents and their relationship. Only when she becomes the dispassionate portrait artist can she recognize the intricacy of their lives, in spite of their still not being able to acknowledge the same about hers.

Buried in her psyche for years has been the pivotal personal and artistic moment for Mags. Two decades previously, which Fanny and Gardner barely remember, her “first masterpiece” was caused by being “afraid of making a mess....[Y]ou were awfully strict about table manners” (159; 160). After being banished from the dinner table, Mags finds her own way to make her talents visible by creating “a monument of my castoff dinners, only I hadn’t built it with food....I found my own materials. I was languishing with hunger, but oh, dear Mother...I FOUND MY OWN MATERIALS...!” (162). Her parents still will not validate her feelings and accomplishments so she pushes them when she asks, “what did you know about my abilities?...You see, I had...I mean, I *have* abilities....I have abilities. I have...strong abilities. I have...very strong abilities. They are very strong...very, very strong...” (163). Mags must emphasize her abilities with words because her parents do not recognize them in her work. Mags divorces herself from her parents’ comments, asserts herself, and strives to realize that regardless of what her parents have tried to destroy, her mother deliberately and her father unconsciously, she can continue to see and perceive and to build and rebuild, while slowly realizing that the external validation she seeks will not be coming. It is through this knowledge that Mags will realize that her becoming-woman is not an absolute but an “assemblage of transitions, many of which are repeatable or reversible and all of which are culturally specific, subject to interpretation and regimes of power” (Driscoll 58). Mags’ realization of the nuanced fluidity of subjectivity is the impetus to paint that portrait; she wants to paint Fanny and Gardner’s portrait, “to see if I’m up to it. It’s quite a risk” (158). Yet, she falters again just before the unveiling of it as she qualifies its merits: “Oh, God, you’re going to hate it! You’re going to hate it! How did I ever get into this?...Listen, you don’t really want to see it...it’s nothing...just a few dabs here and there...It was awfully late when I finished it. The light was really impossible and my eyes hurt like crazy...” (181).

However, as is the case with the ending of scenes in the first act, neither Fanny nor Gardner react to her revelations. Even if they would apologize or validate Mags' feelings, Howe does not allow for this catharsis. In the first act, each scene ends with Mags' tirades about something her parents have done and a curtain; there is no parental response to the tirade. Howe crafts the play so that Mags voices her injuries as if to deaf people. Fanny and Gardner are never shown to react, thereby implying they do not hear nor respond to their daughter's accusations. The lack of response creates an alienation effect that distances the audience; there will be no confrontation that could lead to a satisfying catharsis for Mags or the audience. As Mags prepares for the portrait, she is as oblivious to her parents' lives as they are to hers. While Fanny and Gardner compare their friends' illnesses, Mags remains absorbed with the tablecloth that will serve as the backdrop for the painting. She faults her parents for not being cognizant of her world, yet she is not interested in theirs.

The second act collectively demonstrates Mags' childlike selfishness as well as the other grudges she holds against her parents. In the two scenes of the final act, Mags does not have the last word. The last act is structured to focus on Fanny and Gardner. As her parents continue to adopt poses from famous paintings, Mags rails that they don't take her seriously. Rather than enjoying her parents' playfulness, Mags takes their foolishness personally:

Mags: And I wonder why it's taken me all these years to get you to pose for me. You just don't take me seriously! Poor old Mags and her ridiculous portraits...

Fanny: Oh, darling, your portraits aren't *ridiculous*! They may not be all that one *hopes* for, but they're certainly not—

Mags: Remember how you behaved at my first group show in Soho?...Oh, come on, you remember. It was a real circus! Think back...Daddy had just been awarded some presidential medal of achievement and you insisted he wear it around his neck on a bright red ribbon, and you wore this...*huge* feathered hat to match! I'll

never forget it! It was the size of a giant pizza with twenty-inch red turkey feathers shooting straight up into the air... (150).

Mags self-inflicts invisibility in painting their portrait:

The great thing about being a portrait painter, you see, is it's the *other* guy that's exposed; you're safely hidden behind the canvas and easel. You can be as plain as a pitchfork, as inarticulate as mud, but it doesn't matter because you're completely concealed: your body, your face, your intentions. Just as you make your most intimate move, throw open your soul...they stretch and yawn, remembering the dog has to be let out at five....To be so invisible while so enthralled...it takes your breath away! (158)

Mags has spent her entire life and this time with her parents trying to be visible, yet she admits the favorite aspect of her profession is how she remains invisible. This paradox speaks to the inherent battle in feminine adolescence of being “defined less by age or by body than by socialized characteristics” (Driscoll 130). Mags expects validation from her parents of her subjectivity in spite of not receiving it. However, with the subjects of her work, she expects to be forgotten, indeed never to have been thought of at all. In her confrontation with Fanny, Mags is the one forced to see her parents as the aging adults they are:

Fanny: And to you who see him once a year, if that...what is he to *you*?...I mean, what do you give him from yourself that costs you something?...
HMMMMMM?... ‘Oh, hi Daddy, it’s great to see you again. How have you been?...Gee, I love your hair. It’s gotten so...*white!*’ ...What color do you expect it to get when he’s this age?...I mean, if you care so much how he looks, why don’t you come and see him once in a while?...But oh, no...you have your paintings to do and your shows to put on. You just come and see us when the whim strikes. “Hey, you know what would be really great?...To do a portrait of you! I’ve always wanted to

paint you, you're such great subjects!"...*Paint* us?!...What about opening your eyes and really *seeing* us?...Noticing what's going on around here for a change! It's all over for Daddy and me. This is it! "Finita la comedia!"...All I'm trying to do is exit with a little flourish; have some fun...What's so terrible about that? It can get pretty grim around here, in case you haven't noticed...Daddy, tap-tap-tapping out his nonsense all day; me traipsing around to the thrift shops trying to amuse myself...He never keeps me company anymore; never takes me out anywhere...I'd put a bullet through my head in a minute, but then who'd look after him?...What do you think we're moving to the cottage for?...So I can watch him like a hawk and make sure he doesn't get lost. Do you think that's anything to look forward to?...Being Daddy's nursemaid out in the middle of nowhere? I'd much rather stay here in Boston with the few friends I have left, but you can't always do what you want in this world!

"L'homme propose, Dieu dispose!"...If you want to paint us so badly, you ought to paint us as we really are. There's your picture! (176-177)

Even Fanny has been, literally, screaming for subjectivity. She, too, wants acknowledgment of what she is accomplishing, by melding conflicting criticisms. Howe's play highlights the ubiquity of subjectivity. The last scene reinforces the individualized nature of perception—how seeing is in the eye of the beholder. All Mags can do is watch and listen to Fanny's initial horror at her image in their portrait, "[s]ince when do I have purple skin and bright orange hair?!" (182). Mags tries to remove the painting from sight, but Gardner forces her to leave it and Fanny continues, "at least my dress is presentable. I've always loved that dress" (182). Mags has painted what *she* sees. Interpreting their subsequent positive reactions, she repeats, "[t]hey like it" for reassurance. Gardner appreciates the abstract qualities and Fanny compares herself to a Renoir subject. Ironically, Mags comes to believe they do like their portrait, to which neither is paying attention. Fanny and Gardiner retreat to a bygone world not acknowledging Mags, her painting, or anyone but each other as they enact the Renoir.

While the ending of the play seems sweet as two old people dance into their twilight years, Mags realizes her invisibility has nothing to do with her lacking something. In spite of a lifetime of asking to be visible and recognized by her parents as an individual, their reaction to her portrait of them is enough and she watches them finally enjoy what she has created. Given the abstract nature of the parents' portrait, Tina Howe and her character, Mags, capture and reflect the fluid, chaotic, and prismatic relationships between parents and child as well the equally tumultuous continuum of becoming-woman.

Specifically, Ensler, Vogel, Corthron, and Howe offer multiple alternatives to victimization narratives and the reinscription of societal norms that mark the assumed resolution of maturation. Bernice's monologue, in Ensler's collection *The Good Body*, shows flashes of feminist self-acceptance in the face of societal disparagement. Bernice recognizes the subtle, as well as the more overt, ways society discriminates against her body type, yet her recognition only fuels her desire to ultimately be a "skinny bitch." Paula Vogel weaves the responsibility of learning to drive into a complex metaphor for maturation in her play, *How I Learned to Drive*. Her character, Li'l Bit, melds driving lessons with her burgeoning sexuality, both overseen by the same man, her Uncle Peck. Kia Corthron's play *Breath, Boom* dramatizes the world of girl gangs among young African-American adolescents and provides an interesting juxtaposition of how maturity is legally defined. Before age eighteen, criminals are not held as responsible for their actions because they are still considered minors. Corthron uses a specific setting of shootings, street life, and prison that still manages to connect to audiences who have not lived experiences like Corthron's characters. She allows her characters to dream of a future where they could live with less violence and more legally earned money; yet they must keep breaking the law to accomplish the goal. Iris Marion Young's version of adolescence, determined by the cultural elements of the girl's life, is further grounded as the audience sees Prix fighting (literally) for the subjectivity determined by her culture and denounced by society at large. Mags, Tina

Howe's character in *Painting Churches*, uses her professional medium, portraiture, ironically. In order to attain her own subjectivity, Mags must literally make her parents the objects of her work. By expressing the many-faceted ways in which she sees them, Mags reaches a sense of acceptance both of them and herself. Even at thirty, Mags must negotiate her professional career and her desire for her parents' approval of it and her.

Playwrights that I address present the lived experiences of their characters in such a way that the audience will be open to an experience. Yet possibilities for the portrayal of adolescence have only been minimally studied, and more rarely separated by gender. While surrendering to societal body image, career pathways, or sexual power might not seem initially feminist, the dramatic discussion of these topics and the characters' reactions to them can inspire their audiences to think differently in the future. In fact, the groundbreaking subject matter of a woman coming to aspects of subjectivity is liable to meet with more resistance than approval from the audience. The dominant dramatic portrayal of a woman enacts her role as counterpart to a man more than as an individual with her own development. Because so few plays contain lead women characters, seeing a woman who stands center stage as the subject has been extremely difficult. However, in the last thirty years, the dramatization of women in select plays demonstrates that, while the lives and decisions of adolescent women are often dismissed as insignificant or not feminist enough, they do contain particular feminist elements, without the entirety of the play necessarily subscribing to a feminist prescription. These contemporary plays act as a prism to refract female subjectivity showing both liberation from as well as subjugation to hegemony.

From *L'il Bit* at eleven to *Fanny* in her sixties, each woman in these plays strives to be acknowledged for the contributions she makes around her. While none of the characters or the plays destroys hegemonic idealized norms of womanhood, each establishes "the cracks between the old stones" that have the potential to undermine hegemony and dislodge the preconceived notions of theatre audiences (Féral 561). Certainly all of the plays have women

as a focus, which could be a simple and simplistic definition of feminism. Eve Ensler's *Bernice*, Kia Corthron's *Prix*, Paula Vogel's *Li'l Bit*, and Tina Howe's *Mags* all come to realize the necessity of differentiating themselves from external messages, whether from well-meaning adults or peers. In fact, Liz Schwaiger asserts that "[s]ubversion is attempted by destabilizing culturally normative meanings" (111). Consequently, all four playwrights redefine the concept of maturity in terms of the cultural and familial circumstances of their characters. Adolescent women are not merely on a linear path between childhood and womanhood. The characters proceed through their continuum of experiences, with no simple cause and effect that yields subjectivity. Being mature for each of these female characters is embracing contradictions in order to feel in control of her reactions to life. More than monolithic coming of age stories, each play and its characters examine and embody the multiple changes required to make the transition from girl to woman. From *Bernice's* body image to *Mags's* relationship with her parents and her childhood, these women do not take a radical feminist stand, but they do propel themselves through life trying to understand themselves in a world that rarely takes the time to understand them.

Chapter 2

I do, don't I?

The lovely young woman in the long white dress on her father's arm glides down an aisle strewn with rose petals. At her destination stands a tuxedo-clad man with his gaze full of love, marveling how this bride is the most beautiful woman that he has ever seen. This must be the happiest day of their lives. "Becoming a bride—or its equivalent image in debutantes, dates, and graduations—is constructed as the moment of the girl's public appearance" (Driscoll 177). The people present admit they have never seen a more beautiful bride and are honored to be witnessing the profound exchange of marriage vows. As soon as the woman's father puts his daughter's hand in the man's, the transaction is complete.

For the stage, there is negligible drama criticism on the portrayal of marriage. To radically dissect the institution of marriage risks alienating many audience members, in spite of pleasing radical critics like Jill Dolan and Maya Roth. In order to analyze portrayals of marriage in contemporary plays by women, I turn to sociologists who analyze aspects of romance, marriage, and intimacy. In her article "Stalemate: Rethinking the Politics of Marriage," Heather Brook suggests, "attending to the corporeal, performative and governmental relations of marriage provides a flexible framework in which the various effects of marriage on different people in different situations can be compared" (62). In other words, Brook advocates a postmodern destabilizing of my opening marital image. Late twentieth and early twenty-first century cultural critics—like Heather Brook, Suzanne Leonard, as well as Jaclyn Geller—highlight the more subtle hegemonic reinscriptions of wedding rituals. As Brook explains, "[i]t is clear, then, that although marriage organizes social relationships in various fundamental ways, it is neither regulated nor experienced in any necessarily uniform fashion" (55). To even portray marriage on stage was assumed to

reify subjugation of women, unequal financial footing, isolating women from each other and society. Even a play about lesbian relationships is accused of not being divorced enough from the “heterosexual contract that founds representation” (Dolan, *Feminist Spectator* 110). It is the nuanced, purportedly less radical interpretations that deconstruct the institution of marriage. In contrast to Dolan, I argue that portraying marriage on stage allows audiences to question the formation of its foundations.

Historically, exterior forces that deemed women to be property have shaped marriage. With the women came money and a womb for the propagation of the male heir. Only as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries waned did the idea of romance and love enter the marital equation. Nevertheless, a balanced equation it is not as Suzanne Leonard explains, “Many relationships do continue to be plagued with inequities—often as they relate to economics or domestic labor—hierarchies that have not abated, nor been ameliorated by the zeitgeist of individualism in which we now live” (53). However, politics and economics remain the pragmatic aspects of marriage.

Contemporary marriage theory continues to critique the romantic myth of meeting *the* one right person whose mere presence can induce happiness and a fluttering heart. The image has been perpetuated and magnified such that once the fluttering subsides, couples become convinced that something must be wrong with *them*, rather than critique the idealized cultural myths of marriage or marital bliss. When the champagne goes flat and the red roses die, the relationship can end because of the diminishment of romance. Or, as the critics highlight, couples are told that is time when the work of intimacy begins. To further complicate matters, studying relationships has been subdivided recently into ‘romance’ and ‘intimacy’. Romance lays the groundwork for intimacy, a concerted effort to recapture the original sexual infatuation. In his work, David Shumway explains, “Like the discourse of romance, intimacy discourse naturalizes the connection between love and marriage even though it depicts both of these in quite different terms” (152). Critic Jaclyn Geller does not

choose to marry, yet feels isolated in a culture that sees marriage, literally and figuratively, as a most desirable commodity. Much of the aforementioned cultural critics' work stems from the heterosexual center and troubles many aspects of marriage. Shumway and drama critic Jill Dolan both want radical alternatives to heterosexual marriage, and Shumway even goes so far as to posit that "marriage is no longer required" (244). Heather Brook agrees with more recent Third Wave feminists scholars who believe marriage is an individual choice.

Subsequently, Brook argues, "That marriage can be problematized without condemning wives" (47). Her claim is controversial for some critics because they believe that representing marriages reifies the institution. Brook openly discourages blaming women for choosing to be involved in marriage. She does, however, concede that "despite its apparent dangers, oppressive history and legacies, marriage is unlikely to wither away due to any lack of interest" (49). There is no other socially acceptable form of commitment. "The problem is that while marriage no longer is required, alternatives to it barely exist" (Shumway 244). With few alternatives to marriage, contemporary women playwrights explore possibilities within its current framework. Suzan-Lori Parks' *Betting on the Dust Commander*, Eve Ensler's monologue "Hair" from *The Vagina Monologues*, and Jane Chambers' *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* dramatize women and couples negotiating the lived marital experience. Analysis of the three plays will illustrate that even within heteronormative definitions, many contemporary plays contain elements of feminist rebellion against marriage that, while not radically deconstructing the institution, do trouble common assumptions about it.¹

Admittedly all of these plays have elements of hegemonic reinscription. Most importantly, however, the plays destabilize and trouble marital absolutes. These three plays trouble a feminist agenda, for none of these playwrights distances herself from the ideology of marriage. All exemplify women negotiating power created by and within the religiously and governmentally sanctioned commitment between two people. These playwrights use their work to destabilize conceptions of marriage ingrained over years. At the same time,

they demonstrate the day-to-day trials of committing to another person and break the ideal of marriage into its myriad components so that even when reassembled, it is impossible to perceive it as a one-dimensional ideal.

Far more subtly, contemporary women playwrights, Parks, Chambers, and Ensler, expose the conflicts of the inner workings of marriage from a woman's point of view. They do invoke the trappings of traditional heterosexual marital relationships. At the same time that they undermine that tradition, they also show there are ways to destabilize patriarchal practices. The playwrights use their characters to embody the negotiation of power at multiple levels: personally, as a couple, and socially. More importantly, these plays dramatize the conflicts among the various representations of marriage, despite of remaining within the heteronormative definition. To radical feminists like Jill Dolan and Maya Roth representations of heteronormative marital relationships are disappointing. However, using postmodern theory allows for glimpses of possible alternative critical readings of plays that explore characters' experiences within marriage.

For example, Adrienne Rich explains that “we begin to observe behavior, both in history and in individual biography, that has hitherto been invisible or misnamed; behavior which often constitutes, given the limits of the counterforce exerted in a given time and place, radical rebellion” (“Compulsory” 652). Drama is influenced in the same way. The main characters in these plays are women in relationships, each exploring her own definition of what it means to be in a monogamous relationship—some legally sanctified, others not. The characters are written to show women doing their best to make meaning of and create an identity for themselves in their relationships, while confronting the daily reality of being in a relationship. Laura Kipnis questions in her polemic *Against Love*, “[w]hy not confront rather than ignore the reality of disappointment and the deadening routinization that pervades married households? Maybe confronting the flaws in married life would be a route to reforming a flawed society?” (179). To that end, Parks, Ensler and Chambers answer Kipnis’

call. They acknowledge the routinization of marriage, but do not succumb to despair. While they do not stage radical solutions, they also do not reify the institution. Each offers the women on stage and off the opportunity to perceive and decide how she will negotiate the constraints found in her own life and marriage. In other words, while none of the following plays offers radical solutions to the flaws of marriage, all offer opportunities to question the societal absolutes of the institution.

While established marriages are often satirically portrayed as repetitive, monotonous, and stagnant, the first play to be discussed, Suzan-Lori Park's *Betting on the Dust Commander* offers an objective, literal repetition within the play. Instead of the repetition causing stagnation, Parks finds progress in examining Luki and Mare's marriage through it. Much like the horses running the same oval at Churchill Downs, Luki wears the same clothes, bets the same amount, and watches the same daily race. However, there is an element of time's passing and progress even within the structural repetition of the play—marriage in its institutional largess is juxtaposed with its minute, daily conversations. Focusing on the mundane implies familiarity, not a lack of intimacy.

Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* asks the audience to continually move among various women's experiences. Specifically, her monologue, "Hair", spotlights the dangerous reality of a woman's world, exploring the length a woman will go to fulfill others' ideals of marriage. Marriage is perceived as a final safe haven for women and Ensler's monologue destabilizes that notion. Using pubic hair, Ensler deconstructs the abuse that can be perpetrated under the guise of keeping a marriage happy and a spouse content. The monologue refracts how marriage can be used to separate a woman's own instinct from what others tell her is in the best interest of her marriage and underscores the multiple and contradictory ways a marriage between a man and woman can be defined and distorted.

The final play in this chapter, Jane Chambers' *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, incorporates a variety of marital issues faced by lesbians. The various relationships in the

play mirror heterosexual marriages and yet, by so doing, expose and challenge the hegemonic view of marriage. None of the characters is permitted to legally marry in her home country (or even her home continent), however conventionally married they seem. Chambers' play reveals similarities in relationships regardless of the genders that comprise them. Framing the play in a homosexual environment with the heterosexual influence only implied, never enacted on stage, allows the relationships to be the focus, leaving hegemonic interpretations of marriage to be supplied by the audience. Nevertheless, the play reinscribes the marital tropes thereby, "exacerbating an already pervasive cultural tendency to uncritically celebrate marriage and domestic partnerships, thus promoting the assumption that commitment remains every woman's deepest desire" (Leonard 54). The relationships in *Bluefish Cove* fit accepted societal roles, even if the genders of the couples do not: one couple proposes marrying in Holland; another woman assumes she will receive half of everything in her divorce settlement; yet another warns her that the law still protects the male breadwinner; finally, a wealthy older woman is dating someone whom she knows is interested only in her money. Contemporary radical critics might read this work as a piece that succumbs to societal expectations by taking heteronormative tropes and giving them a lesbian frame. Chambers' play works within those heteronormative tropes to provide a potential plurality of possibilities rather than a single stereotype.

Suzan-Lori Parks, Eve Ensler, and Jane Chambers tackle interesting facets of marriage, including the medical and legal interference in marital roles to that same interference that forces those roles to be enacted but not recognized. None of these three plays offer a radical, earth-shattering alternative to marriage. They all, however, do dramatize the various ways women understand, negotiate, and explore possibilities in marriage. The fact that these playwrights dramatize something as loaded as women's roles in marriage should be considered radical *enough* and fulfill Kipnis' wish to "confront the flaws in married life [as a route] to reforming a flawed society" (179).

The Long Shot from the Backstretch

In an exploration of repetition and ritual, *Betting on the Dust Commander* addresses Kipnis' concern with marital routine. In contrast to Kipnis' hypothesis, however, the routine destabilizes the potential monotony. A Gertrude Stein epigram opens Suzan-Lori Parks' *Betting on the Dust Commander* foreshadowing the repetitive components of a long-term relationship:

Repeating then is in every one, in every one their being and their
feeling and their way of realizing everything and every one comes out
of them in repeating...

Slowly every one in continuous repeating, to their minutest variation,
comes to be clearer to some one. (75)

While the monotony of marriage implies that partners no longer care about each other, the very opposite is the case with Luki and Mare. Parks opens her play with pictures of her two characters in their wedding clothes—highlighting performative elements used to express commitment as “the wedding day and the events leading up to it share the distinction of being organized around securing an audience for the bride’s appearance as a public body who has successfully arrived at the culmination of her romantic narrative” (Leonard 47). Following the projected images—literally, in the case of Parks’ play—of the wedding comes the marriage. While everyone can exclaim over the performative event and subsequent documentation captured in the pictures, it is the day-to-day events that definitively shape the marital relationship and remain invisible to spectators. To begin, Parks’ play demonstrates that ritual—the wedding as the big event—does not make a marriage; instead, it is the seemingly insignificant repetition of experiences that give opportunities to show care and concern and, in society’s views, can be so easily reduced to monotony. Infusing repetition in Luki and Mare’s relationship allows Parks to intimate that changes in their marriage are incremental and barely noticeable. As Stein’s thoughts imply, through repetition events can

be more closely scrutinized. The three elements of this play that destabilize marriage begin with projections of wedding pictures: those nanoseconds caught on film; disembodied voices discussing artificial flowers, and then the literal repetition of one section of the play.

The pictures represent the documentation of the ideal, yet the narration destabilizes the ideal because the audience learns the flowers in the photographs are fake. There could be other falsehoods perpetuated by those pictures. Mare explains to Luki how she has accommodated his allergies by replacing their wedding flowers with “expensive plastics got the real look to em, Lucius. Expensive plastics got uh smell. Expensive plastics will last a lifetime but nobodyll know, Lucius. Nobody knows” (75). Mare’s switching of the flowers from real to fake is indicative of how people outside a marriage do not and should not necessarily know what goes on inside the relationship. Critic Jaclyn Geller describes the implications of fresh flowers writing:

[F]lowers are decorative and are used to create a nature scene, transforming a pedestrian space into something magically bucolic that expresses the bride’s sensibility....Their symbolism is twofold. They are meant to suggest the ‘natural’ quality of each couple’s relationship, diverting guests’ attention from the institutional aspects of the wedding by suggesting that each pair exists in a pastoral utopia, that each bride and groom’s love has been as spontaneous, organic, and perfect as the earth’s seasonal bounty. They also demonstrate the financial ability of the bride’s parents; Flowers are expensive, impractical, and temporary, typically lasting about a week before perishing. They are therefore the ultimate symbols of conspicuous consumption in an extravaganza of brazen ostentatious spending. (299-300)

Even in the opening scene, questions are raised about the illusions created in life, particularly those illusions perpetuated by the convention of marriage. The performative aspects of the wedding ceremony itself—the flowers, the clothing, the superstitions, the public declarations—mask, or artificially decorate the relationship itself. In Parks’ play, Mare

recognizes the waste of money on the flowers when she states, “They went spent money on them bouquets and arrangements—flower-girls had baskets full of rose petals. Was gonna strew em” (75). It is when the guests leave and the flowers die that the marriage begins. The opening narration of *Dust Commander* exposes the performative nature of the ceremonial aspects of a wedding. The happy photographs seem incongruent with the dialogue about the artificial flowers.

The fake flowers are emblematic of the wedding ritual—they look like they are supposed to but they are not really what people think they are. Hence, both the flowers and the wedding pictures capture the illusion created by the performative: the bride and groom who “occupy center stage in a way that they will at no other time in their lives. They are the leads in the drama of heterosexual couplehood, actors in an extravaganza that is both generic and personal” (Geller 255). What the opening scene highlights is a layer of fantasy intertwined in lived marital experience. Performing implies embodying a fictional representation. The initial performative aspects of the wedding ceremony contribute to the equally fictional illusion of the happily ever after. Indeed, the accepted artifice of the play highlights the unconsciously accepted artifice of the wedding ceremony. These rituals require the suspension of disbelief.

The happy pictures with which the play opens do not presage the repetition of action of the characters. The ritual of Luki and Mare’s marriage is visible: the clothing, the flowers. Suzanne Leonard refers to the ceremony as “the performative potential” (47). Parks juxtaposes the performative within the performative—the actual performance of the play contrasts the public perceptions of marriage with its private reality. In spite of the opening of the play, its subsequent structure highlights the lessons Luki and Mare learn from Stein’s “minutest variation.” *Betting on the Dust Commander* is divided into two sections. The A Section is the opening scene; the B Section repeats itself within the play in a Godot-like fashion. The repetition does not result in hopelessness or resignation. The refracted nuance

of repetition in *Betting on the Dust Commander* illuminates the differences between repetition and monotony. The text itself is repetitive, but there is also progress implied in their dialogue. For Luki and Mare this sense of witnessing and evoking change is what constructively grounds their relationship, rather than mires it in monotony, harkening back to Stein's words, "slowly every one in continuous repeating, to their minutest variation,/comes to be clearer to some one" (75). Parks structures *Betting on the Dust Commander* to separate repetition from monotony. The immediate duplication of the play in the second section reinforces the repetition but also distances the audience as it ponders whether Luki and Mare are indeed having the exact same conversation. Parks cleverly undermines the expectation of marital monotony by embedding a sense of time's passing within the play's conversations. The characters refer to how they met and how Mare looks for sales in the papers as well as how they will spend their afternoon. In this case, Parks uses the wedding pictures to show how the performative nature of a wedding has very little to do with the procession of the relationship. Mare and Luki do not, as Leonard suggests many couples do, "compulsively return to their wedding photos" for the rest of the play for they no longer have the need to capture what was, for them, the fictitious romantic trappings (47).

If the opening photographs and dialogue distort the ideal of marriage, the remainder of the play focuses on the repetition of conversations and actions within marriage. However, distorting the ideal does not mean disparaging marriage. Suzan-Lori Parks underscores how comfort, knowledge, and frustration can emanate from marriage, but that the sentiments coexist. As Luki says, the attention to "each little bits a little bit" yields something greater and more profound than a monotonous existence (80). Luki knows a variety of "little bits" can comprise a bigger, more profound existence: his winning bets on the horse, Dust Commander, "[g]ived us thuh downpayment money for our home" (81). Every day, Luki goes to "the 3:10 race at The Churchill" wearing the same clothes he describes as "in hat and Bermudas," and betting the same amount of money, thirty-five cents (77). His mentioning

the monetary rewards at the track indicates that in spite of what the audience sees, they hear about other aspects of Mare and Luki's relationship. Therefore, the audience hears repetition, yet with attention to dialogue, realizes the depth of nuance in Mare and Luki's marriage. There is forward movement in spite of the repetitive and circular structure of the play.

Parks shatters a notion of linear time as manifested by wedding anniversaries. The characters' references to time passing and passed seem at odds with the circularity of the play. Parks establishes an unfamiliar, absurdist construct reminiscent of *Waiting for Godot*, as she further distances the audience by forcing a questioning of time and duration. Given the predisposition of married couples to reflect on their wedding day via the pictures, Parks uses the intervening years to demonstrate how far the couple has progressed, as well as to show that, in some cases, there can be little perceived progress but that repetition teaches, comforts and informs the marriage as well. In contrast to the public nature of weddings—invitations, newspaper announcements—and the photographic documentation thereof, the play negotiates the mundane realistic ways people care about each other. For marriage, like dust, is composed of a variety factors. When the assemblage is broken into its individual pieces to explore its original composition, it can never be reassembled in quite the way it started.

In Parks' play, dust becomes an effective metaphor for describing the complexity of marriage. Dust is comprised of microscopic dirt and skin particles, as Luki describes it, “[d]ust is little bits of dirt, Mare. Little bits of dirt. Separate dirties that—that—fuzzicate themselves together n make dusts. Each little bits a little bit” (79-80). Dust is composed of a variety of factors, much the same way marriage is composed of a variety of experiences. Thinking about marriage as a single entity documented by photographs glosses over the day-to-day details of which it is comprised. In Parks' play, the dust grows and “fuzzicates” indicating change. All the quotidian aspects of the relationship are revealed that indicate

change, but have nothing to do with the romance, nor the performative nature of the opening wedding photos.

The two characters need each other in what seem to be inconsequential ways. Mare needs Luki to teach her how to blow her nose. He encourages her not to “sniff, Mare. Blowings best” (77). In turn, Luki needs Mare to keep the house dust-free because “any lurking dust puppy could set it off” (79). Marriage is as much about the little physical, non-sexual, at times banal, ways to need a partner as the big emotional ones. Even the sneezing implies Mare cares for Luki’s health as he cares for her in trying to convince her to blow her nose instead of sniff. Marriage can manifest caring, tenderness, as well as repetition. So, while the wedding picture represents a static record of the performative, the cyclical nature of the play demonstrates the movement of the relationship. Parks’ play dispels the romantic image of two half people coming together to form a whole. While the wedding pictures imply romance, Parks does not portray romance as anything more than a picture caught in time. Parks contrasts the assumptions about marriage to the reality of a relationship. Mare and Luki’s marriage is mundane, banal, and caring all at the same time.

In conclusion, Parks’ play juxtaposes the performative view of marriage with the reality of the relationship. While it destabilizes both, the juxtaposition does not radically deconstruct the institution of marriage—it does not present an alternative. Mare and Luki’s relationship is not a typical romance narrative ending in happily ever after. It is certainly not a discontented marriage demonstrating strife and disagreement, which are typically presented as the two accepted binaries. Parks negotiates assumptions about marriage. Weddings and the documentations thereof in no way presage the success or failure of the ensuing relationship. Without binaries, the audience must negotiate and construct the characters’ relationship. There is no harmony or discord in Mare and Luki’s marriage. It, like so many marriages, amalgamates caring, routine, and progress, all within a circular structure that affords the audience a closer examination of marriage. While Luki and Mare manifest

satisfaction in a seemingly platonic relationship, Eve Ensler's monologue, "Hair," articulates what happens when outsiders are permitted, encouraged, even expected to become intimately involved in others' relationship. Ensler's monologue examines what Geller calls "institutionalized eroticism:" sex encouraged because it is assumed to be waning as marriage proceeds to fulfill the "fear of the inevitable—the waning sexual partnership, which over the years, becomes, increasingly, a platonic relationship" (358).

Don't Muss The Hair

Eve Ensler's collection *The Vagina Monologues* presents ways in which women have thought about their vaginas. She demonstrates how women's viewpoints are influenced by society's puritanical views on all things sexual. Interestingly, sex outside marriage is the focus because of the accepted belief that sex as part of marriage belongs to the couple involved and only at their request should anyone interfere. Why a couple should even feel compelled to solicit advice showcases the insidious psychological invasion into women's sexual lives, even under the security blanket of marital respectability. Within Ensler's collection, the monologue "Hair" explores the tension caused by something as private as pubic hair as it plays out in a marriage. The monologue demonstrates that under an all-loving marital commitment lies the latent intimation that a woman still needs to make herself sexually attractive to her husband and that "wedlock is assumed to be the center of a woman's universe and sexual contact a barometer of every marriage's health" (Geller 358).

The husband in Ensler's monologue wants his wife to shave her pubic hair for his personal satisfaction. The wife explains, "My first and only husband hated hair. He said it was cluttered and dirty. He made me shave my vagina" (9). When the wife acquiesces, because she somehow feels she should, she discovers both pleasure and pain from her shaved pubis. The wife explains, "[w]hen he made love to me, my vagina felt the way a beard must feel. It felt good to rub it, and painful. Like scratching a mosquito bite" (9). This reflection on the concurrently existing sensations brings a double bind. In spite of how uncomfortable

the shaving feels, scratching it brings a sense of pleasure, which immediately brings a sense of confusion and guilt. Even equating the sensation to something as mundane as scratching a mosquito bite normalizes that which should never be accepted as common. If a woman admits to this kind of satisfaction, then accepting the discomfort is also assumed to be her choice. By suppressing her unease, this character becomes an example of how women are conditioned to deny their thoughts in order to indulge others' feelings. Initially, the wife is willing to acquiesce because she thinks that the pubic hair is superfluous and pleasing her husband is important. While women negotiate the lived existence of the privacy of their own thoughts, intuitions and feelings, people who think they know the answers perpetuate prescribed norms. Women must negotiate the extremes between their thoughts and society's expectations because life is lived in the middle—the nature of Ensler's play shows a woman negotiating her lived experience even without a radical solution. When the wife takes a stand because of her own pain and "refused to shave it again" the next thing her husband does is have "an affair" because she "wouldn't please him sexually" (10). As a result, Ensler's monologue captures a disproportionate degree of power in the husband's role, further exacerbated by societal expectations. According to sociologist Heather Brook, "Along with the performative utterance of wedding vows, sex in marriage is corporeally performative; it accomplishes something according to social convention or governmental regulation, it has legal-political *effects*" (60). The husband's affair is justifiable to himself and his therapist because his wife does not choose to please him in the manner he wants. In addition to asserting acceptable ways to seek help to fulfill those mores, the implication is, "an empty conjugal bed is tantamount to a meaningless life" (Geller 359). Society and medicine are empowered with the right to assert that certain mores are followed by a sexually-active married couple. Ensler's characters participate in therapy to fulfill the mores and avoid the stigma of a meaningless marriage and life.

Negotiating between her disparate feelings, the wife subjects herself to ridicule both societally by assuming she is at fault and then, personally, by participating in marital counseling with the therapist who convinces her that she *is* at fault. As the couple tries to salvage their marriage with counseling, even a female therapist condemns the wife by asking “why I didn’t want to please my husband” (10). The assumption continues to be that the man is to be pleased, even (especially?) at the woman’s expense. The woman explains herself when she states, “I thought it was weird. I felt little when my hair was gone down there, and I couldn’t help talking in a baby voice, and the skin got irritated and even calamine lotion wouldn’t help it” (10). The therapist responds by negating her feelings when she asserts, “marriage was a compromise” (10). While any relationship involves compromise, the solipsism in this instance is disconcerting. The wife explains her point of view and no one listens. In spite of being female herself, the therapist proclaims the patriarchal view of both medicine and marriage. Through the entire session, the wife is assumed to be culpable for the rift in her marriage. Ensler’s monologue highlights the physical and emotional dangers of acquiescing to someone’s wishes. The therapist expects the wife to capitulate, but not the husband. Ensler highlights the futility of seeking opinions, especially about such an intimate nature. Additionally, the unsympathetic environment is exacerbated when the therapist betrays the wife by subscribing to hegemony. However, the wife launches an attack of her own by interrogating the therapist and asking her, “if shaving my vagina would stop him from screwing around. I asked her if she’d had many cases like this before. She said that questions diluted the process” (10). While the wife begins to realize the futility of challenging hegemonic assumptions, she still feels incapable of denying them and acquiesces to her husband and their therapist’s wishes: “when we got home, he got to shave my vagina. It was like a therapy bonus prize” (10). She tries to negotiate and compromise in order to satisfy all viewpoints, except her own.

Ensler uses this monologue as a representation of a woman's knowing/feeling/sensing a great wrong is being perpetuated, but rather than trust herself, she allows public interference to trump her instinct. There must be something wrong with her, and according to her husband and therapist, it is her pubic hair. She still wants sexual relations with her husband, but with her pubic hair, her entire self, intact. Like so many women and their dramatic representations, the struggle to remain intact while negotiating omni-present pitfalls forces them to question and become more insecure about their personal instinctive reactions. Ensler demonstrates how this woman attempts to negotiate and compromise with hegemonic expectations and how her compromises are rejected; only abject capitulation is enough. Ensler, like her character, negotiates the lived gynocentric experience, which rarely allows a satisfying and radical conclusion—the triumphal trope of a woman defending herself and her body. There is no tidy dénouement. “Hair” does not offer a definitive solution to the wife's or any other woman's predicament. Without a cathartic resolution audiences must construct their own or remain disturbed by the lack of closure. The wife in “Hair” has asked unpopular questions and has been forced to accept others' answers, but the audience hasn't. Thus, the hope remains that other women can make different choices in their own best interests, rather than for their husband's pleasure.

Ensler's monologue shows how many external influences are permitted, indeed sometimes expected to be involved in a marriage, even on intimate subjects. The husband is given control of his wife's body but not her mind. He is the conquering victor. She “could feel his spiky sharpness sticking into me, my naked puffy vagina” (11). During the final sexual act of the monologue, the wife realizes that she has control over her body, marriage or not, “hair is there for a reason—it's the leaf around the flower, the lawn around the house” (11). The wife knows even after voicing her concerns to him and the therapist that her spouse is at fault. She admits, “my husband never stopped screwing around,” but cannot break with prescribed norms (11). Ensler's monologue underscores societal and medical

assumptions about marriage and shows how women must be empowered to trust their instincts. Decades of protest allowed women to vote, to use birth control, and to control their bodies; but Ensler refracts current reality to demonstrate that battles continue and to defend these rights requires awareness and attention.

The Vagina Monologues is radical only in the way that it presents the unacknowledged realities of women's relationships with their bodies, specifically their vaginas. However, no radical solutions are offered, and no new ways of presenting resistance are proposed. Ensler's monologues answer Kipnis' call to show the inequities so the fissures can allow the rupture to begin. These playwrights present situations in which women negotiate the reality of their lives within the given society. No specific resolutions can even be offered because one solution will not suffice for all women. By bringing multiple women's experiences into the open, Ensler allows her audience members to acknowledge and negotiate for themselves, to take what they will and make of it what they will, ultimately never satisfying the critics who want overpowering, radical solutions. The fact that the wife of "Hair" follows the therapist's advice implies a reinscription of hegemonic norms of intimacy. There is very little liberation from or radical solution to the subjugation caused by marriage in this monologue. Yet, the work encourages audience members to contemplate otherwise unacceptable outside influences in their own relationships. Perhaps doing so will pave the way for future changes.

Only in Amsterdam

Jane Chambers' play *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* explores committed relationships, but within a lesbian framework. For millennia, heterosexual marriage has been the only acceptable legal coupling, and Chambers negotiates among the cultural and feminist critics by introducing radical content within a familiar context. She examines facets of marriage by juxtaposing heteronormative expectations with homosexual realities. The setting—a long time lesbian summer colony—and all female cast can be considered radical.

In his introduction to *Out Plays: Landmark Gay and Lesbian Plays of the Twentieth Century*, Ben Hodges lauds Chambers' play as "exploring ground breaking relationships" (xxiv). The conflicts and relationships can be perceived in less radical ways: lesbian relationships are no different than straight ones. Chambers subscribes to heteronormative tropes by default, as Jill Dolan asserts, "In content and form, *Bluefish Cove* never breaks loose from the heterosexual contract that founds representation" (*Feminist Spectator* 110). I argue that representing a lesbian community on stage destabilizes portrayals of heteronormative relationships. When women playwrights present their characters navigating Adrienne Rich's Lesbian Continuum, they advance the possibilities for difference in their audience's lives.

To extend Rich's argument, sociologist Heather Brook asks, "If men could marry men, and if women could marry women, would the hegemonically heterosexist institution of marriage be blown down like a discursive house of cards, or would it mortar historically heterosexist norms in gay and lesbian relationships?" (61). Brook and other radical feminists, like Dolan, would hope that the institution of marriage would be entirely dismantled. The diametric opposition created by 'or' does not allow for the complex nature of human existence. Chambers negotiates Brook's extremes. In *Bluefish Cove*, lesbians experience committed relationships like those of the predominantly heterosexual audience. This suggests that heterosexuals can find personal connections and accept the characters' relationships as being similar to theirs. However, that interpretation means assuming a heteronormative foundation. An acknowledgement of the variety of human experiences should trump selfish solipsism. Adrienne Rich asks, "Are we then to condemn all heterosexual relationships, including those which are the least oppressive? I believe this question, though often heartfelt, is the wrong question here" ("Compulsory" 659). As an example, in arguing for a more nuanced analysis, Jane Chambers considers herself a "playwright who speaks for the cause of women in general and lesbians in particular" (Klein). Like *The Vagina Monologues*,

Last Summer at Bluefish Cove is radically satisfying only as it presents previously unexamined relationships. The final curtain falls on trite heteronormative tropes, but fosters a difference in thinking that could ultimately affect change.

A study of *Bluefish Cove* yields insight into relationships denied by society's legal marital sanctification. Thus, commitment exemplified by a man and woman's marrying is juxtaposed against similar relationships found between lesbian couples unable to partake of the formal legalities. The play refracts marriage into facets that underscore the multiplicity of identities and definitions. In *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, Chambers does not try to imagine an entirely new expression. Instead, she attempts to use the common language she has, albeit intrinsically heterosexual, to express what she knows. Chambers portrays how various communities between and among women have existed. The women's long-term relationships have been framed as impersonal—maiden women own land, but live together for financial reasons—in spite of being tacitly recognized as an emotional partnership. In a *New York Times* interview, Chambers admits, "Lesbians have been ignored...People turn their heads the other way as if to say, 'we know you exist, but we don't want to have to deal with this, so let's all keep our mouths shut and we'll all pretend it's not there'" (Klein). Chambers' play ensures that, at least for its duration, the audience cannot ignore lesbians' existence. Adrienne Rich explores the psychic pain between and among lesbians when she argues that what has been kept from lesbians' "knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage, and community; as well as guilt, self-betrayal, and pain" ("Compulsory" 649). If the sense of joy and community has been kept from the lesbians themselves, then it has certainly been kept from heterosexuals. The revelation fulfills *both* Dolan and Hodges' premises. A community of gay women, to enjoy each other's company, must negotiate the straits of hegemony, finding a secluded cove as "more than just a lesbian beach colony" (358). At Bluefish Cove, the women can relax and live their lives according to Adrienne Rich's wish for "access to women *only* on women's terms" (Rich, "Compulsory" 643).

Finding her gender far more stereotyped than her sexuality, Chambers alters the gender assumptions in such a way that the heterosexual woman is assumed to be gay. Chambers admits to Klein in *The New York Times* interview that she believes “judgments are based on seeing; one of the things about being gay that doesn’t get in the way is that, most of the time, you can’t see it, but being a woman is something you have to deal with every minute.” Chambers’ character, Eva, flees from her heterosexual marriage arriving unknowingly at a summer retreat for gay women. In this case, given the context, there is a judgment made that Eva is gay: “walks like a duck, talks like a duck, hangs out with ducks, must be a duck” (357). Chambers creates a situation where the recognition of being female is superseded by the assumption of Eva’s sexuality. Instead of Eva’s feeling discriminated against, she is pleased that the desk clerk and the realtor believe her to be an independent woman. In fact, they take her to be a gay woman. She is even flattered when Lil encourages her initial overture of conversation, where Lil assumes she’s gay. Eva finishes the beat by quietly exclaiming, “It is possible for grown women to be friends” (356). Judging is about context and when that context changes, so do the assumptions being made. Because Eva is at Bluefish Cove, Lil assumes she is gay. And because everyone else at the Cove is coupled, Eva assumes she will be uncomfortable as her newly single-status will be exacerbated.

These varying definitions establish the initial dramatic irony of the play. Eva struggles to understand that there are more relationship options than being legally married or single. In her first conversation with Lil, she questions “[t]he other cabins are all rented to couples?...You and I are the only singles?” (354). Their exchange begins refracting the definitions of marriage. When Eva asks Lil, “Were you ever married?” Lil responds, “Oh, sure. Lots of times” (355). The confusion continues when Eva admits her only marriage has recently ended after twelve years and further questions Lil about “how many times were you really married?” When Lil responds “Oh, God, I don’t know—a dozen? Who counts?” and goes on to say that her friends “Annie and Rae will approve of you. They’ve been together

nine” (355). Even within lesbian communities, there is a sanctioning of being part of a couple rather than being single. However, Adrienne Rich’s *Lesbian Continuum* offers freedom from the binary of being single or part of a couple:

[a]s we deepen and broaden the range of what we define as lesbian existence, as we delineate a lesbian continuum, we begin to discover the erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself, as an energy not only diffuse but, as Audre Lorde has described it, omnipresent in ‘the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic,’ and in the sharing of work; as the empowering joy which ‘makes us less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial. (“Compulsory” 650)

Just as Rich’s *Lesbian Continuum* negotiates or moves through the range of female relationships, so does *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*. As Chambers explains, “‘We are bonding together to gain a kind of strength that will enable us to move out into society and be who we are, so everyone knows, and there’ll be no problem. As we become more comfortable with ourselves, the rest of the world will become comfortable with us. We’ve got a big battle to face in a way that no other minority group does,’ she concluded, adding in considered afterthought, ‘except women’” (Klein). As long as the women at the Cove remain there, they can bond for strength; indeed, the long-time friends are there to do just that before Lil succumbs to cancer. Eva’s arrival creates changes among the friends which further solidifies the relationships among the characters.

In fact, the community’s strength and bonding encourages the progression of Eva and Lil’s emotional relationship. As marital sociologist Leonard Shumway notes, “Romance offers adventure, intense emotion, and the possibility of finding the perfect mate. Intimacy promises deep communication, friendship, and sharing that will last beyond the passion of new love” (42). Framing a grandiose declaration of love with heteronormative tropes

facilitates audience identification, yet it also perpetuates the hyperbole of romance theory, to which even a potentially radical play can capitulate. Chambers allows Lil to lapse into a heteronormative trope because the only words available are those from that tradition. Lil's declaration of love to Eva is framed in a heterosexual context: "I love you more than I have ever loved anyone. For the first time in my life, I understand why knights rode miles to slay a dragon for their lady's hand...And all those songs with 'moon' and 'June' and 'croon,' I thought they were pretty silly. Now, I'm whistling those tunes in the shower. Remember that song, 'You're My Everything'? I used to hear that and say to myself, now what the hell does that mean, 'You're my everything'? Nobody's anybody's everything. I was wrong" (387). In other words, if Lil is truly in love with Eva, the only words she has to express it are those written for straight couples. Furthermore Chambers has Lil equate heterosexuality with being ordinary.

Lil: ...Let's go to Amsterdam. We can get married in Amsterdam.

Eva: Really?

Lil: Yep, we're nice and legal there, just like ordinary folks. Want to marry me?

Eva: Ah, you say that to all your girls.

Lil: I never said it before in my whole life. (386)

So there is no singular decision in this play defining the meaning of commitment. All that can be inferred is that commitment is a conscious choice on a daily basis because there is no outside entity—no legal bind—mandating a couple remains together. Heteronormative or groundbreaking, all the characters in the play believe being together is a commitment. While Dolan argues that this exchange reinscribes heterosexism, what other choices do Chambers and her characters have? Caught in a triple bind, they can continue being: a) unrecognized and invalidated by people outside the Cove; b) integrated normatively worried that their sexuality will somehow be exposed; or c) married in Amsterdam only to return to the stagnant American environment that will still not recognize the marriage as legal.

Chambers explores these dimensions in her characters to embody, similar to Rich's continuum, the various relationships among them. Critic Suzanne Leonard believes people want to marry because, like Rich, compulsory heterosexuality is a way to be part of the accepted norm. Hence, deliberate whitewashing of the daily obligations of marriage perpetuates the fantasy of a blissful union: "the root of marriage envy is a deliberate misunderstanding, or misreading, of what marriage really is. Thus, one way to combat marriage envy, paradoxically, would be to talk *more* about marriage, but to do so in an everyday sense, calling attention to its psychological and sociological dimensions" (Leonard 59). Having been friends since college and, more importantly, having vowed never to be lovers, Lil and Annie's conversation adds multiple dimensions of intimacy to be found among the women.

Annie: I've known you for a long time, Lil, and I don't think I've ever seen you in love before. Not like this.

Lil: It's never been like this. I didn't know it could be like this. Is it like this for you and Rae?

Annie: Well, probably not exactly—well, yes, I guess so. I mean, we're kind of passed (sic.) that stage where we can't keep our hands off each other, thank goodness. You mellow out after a while, you know.

Lil: You mean the honeymoon ends.

Annie: Yeah—but that's when the good stuff starts. (388-389)

This is not posturing, but an honest exchange in which Lil tries to earn validation from someone she loves and respects, which fulfills Rich's wish that "women may, indeed must, be one another's allies, mentors, and comforters in the female struggle for survival, there is quite extraneous delight in each other's company and attraction to each others' minds and character, which proceeds from a recognition of each others' strengths" ("Compulsory" 658-659).

Ignorant of the repercussions of leaving her husband, Eva believes she will receive half of the marital assets and is shocked when Rae tells her that because Eva left George she is not entitled to a thing. In conversing with Rae she learns neither institution works in her favor:

Eva: Well, I'm glad I married George—I spent twelve years with him. If I'd just lived with him, if I didn't have a marriage contract, I wouldn't get a thing.

Rae: You may not get a thing. I didn't. Not one red cent. I put him through school, raised two kids, kept his house—now if he'd left me, I'd have had him by the short hairs. But I left him, see, and I left him for a woman. The only way he'd agree to let me keep the kids was if I forfeited my suit for child support. Annie's putting my kids through college.

Eva: But George and I bought that house together, we furnished it together, he made investments in the market for both of us.

Rae: In your name?

Eva: I don't know. George took can: (sic.) of those things.

Rae: Did he beat you up?

Eva: No!

Rae: Have a mistress?

Eva: Not that I know of—maybe.

Rae: Unless you can prove abuse or adultery, you're probably out of luck, sweetheart. At least in this state. You left him. And for heaven's sake, don't ever let him know you left him for a woman. Zilch. You'll get zilch. (390-391)

There is no perfect solution to marriage to a man or woman because absolutes do not exist. As Lil tries to eject Eva from her life, Eva realizes commitment does not require a marriage ritual: “as long as you're winning, Lil, you're just fine. But when things get difficult, you leap out the motel window. We love each other, Lil. That's a commitment” (403). Eva has

flashes of insight when she uses the indefinite pronoun, 'a'. As a woman who has been trapped in the heteronormative definition of commitment, Eva's differentiation can be seen as growth.

So, Eva's stay at Bluefish Cove could ultimately be liberating. She resumes being in a committed relationship. She realizes the hegemonic judicial system has no sympathy for her, her gender, or her sexuality. Most importantly, she enjoys the friendships women offer her. Rich explains, "it is the women who make life endurable for each other, give physical affection without causing pain, share, advise, and stick by each other" because there is no static middle, only fluid movement through various relationships ("Compulsory" 656). Lil tries to teach Eva about the continuum, not only in the context of their relationship, but also as it will pertain to the rest of Eva's life:

You're alone getting born, giving birth, dying. Oh, people may be standing around you, watching you, but you do the thing alone. You fall in love alone. Yes, you do. It's not like dancing the tango, two people don't fall in love in lockstep. One falls first, one falls later and maybe one never falls at all. You say Kitty's book changed your life—it didn't. It might have given you some courage but you're the one who changed your life, Eva. You rented the cabin, you spoke to me on the beach, you asked me to be your friend—you're not nearly so dependent as you think you are, Eva. (374-375)

Unfortunately, Lil's death eradicates that potential liberation of choosing to be committed and Eva chooses to assert, "I can make it by myself" (405). While self-affirming, Eva's decision to reject the help and support she has and could continue to have with these women effectively means she has chosen the opposite extreme, to remain alone. Like Ensler's monologue, "Hair," there is nothing radical in the resolution of this play: the gay women help the straight woman to some sort of self-discovery, and in the seemingly laudable spirit of American individualism, Eva then turns her back on them and closes the blinds. The

resolution of *Last Summer of Bluefish Cove* shows heteronormative alternatives, even if the play's resolution seems to refuse them. Adrienne Rich advocates for these alternative possibilities when she declares, "We begin to perceive a history of female resistance which has never fully understood itself because it has been so fragmented, mis-called, erased," and I would add polarized; the *grand éclat* for which both Hodges and Dolan lobby is, in reality, a slow burn promising future flares ("Compulsory" 659-660). This play may not foster Hodge's proposed "ground-breaking relationships," but it certainly exposes the nuances of romance, intimacy, and divorce. The nuanced alternative Chambers presents asserts that monogamy is a choice made by the people involved, not by a law that only disparages women and puts them at a disadvantage.

This small sample of plays highlights marriage as an institution to which society both consciously and unconsciously subscribes. In addition, the plays deconstruct "the web of fantasy, consumption, competition, and false promise that inflect popular definitions of marriage" (Leonard 45). These plays, used as postmodern prisms refract the ideology of marriage. Suzanne Leonard argues, "feminists have historically been one of the most vocal constituencies devoted to pointing out how the marital institution naturalizes gender inequity" but chastises them for not making a radical enough foundation on which the next feminist wave can build to "trouble uncritical celebrations of marriage, even when those attitudes have very real social consequences" (55). Instead of lauding what is available, once again a critic returns to the cry that not enough has been accomplished to the point where she believes, "[w]e then risk returning to a world that unthinkingly endorses idealized visions of domestic harmony" (Leonard 55). Nothing in the plays I discuss, nor in the others I footnote, can be said to endorse marital harmony. The plays and their characters trouble aspects of a woman's life—in this case focusing on marriage, to support Adrienne Rich's assertion that "a feminism of action, often, though not always, without theory, has constantly reemerged in every culture and in every period" ("Compulsory" 652). Their audiences are left to question

parts of the institution, perhaps eventually, as Kipnis and others suggest, undermining the entirety. In other words, a postmodernist thought process applied to the dramatic portrayal of marriage offers a destabilization. Suzan-Lori Parks' *Betting on the Dust Commander*, Eve Ensler's "Hair," and Jane Chambers' *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* support Adrienne Rich's argument as they examine how marriage works, or not, in the characters' lives and in women's lives in particular. None presents the dreamy happily-ever-after expected at the end of a tension-filled production. Ironically, the most euphemistically hopeful among them, *Betting on the Dust Commander*, offers its resolution more as a continuity of circularity than as a finalizing of a relationship. The incremental changes witnessed over a long period of time negate the societal expectation that all must be well all of the time, and spousal agreement must be immediate on every issue. While marriage is presented as an institutional framework, the plays themselves do the feminist work of splintering the marital monolith.

Note, Chapter 2
I do, don't I?

¹ While I analyze only three plays, many more can be explored from this perspective, for example: Tina Howe's *Prides Crossing*, with three generations of marriages; Sarah Ruhl's *Late: a cowboy's song* where the main character leaves her husband for another woman; the relationship between Catherine and Michael Givings in Sarah Ruhl's *In the Next Room (or the vibrator play)*; Wendy Wasserstein's *Isn't it Romantic* in which Janie and Harriet learn about marriage from their mothers' examples.

Chapter 3

Playing Mother

Pamela Redmond Satran in her 1998 *Parenting Magazine* article offers, for the price of the magazine, a deceptively simple answer for which women are searching, to the question: “Are You a Good Mother?”¹. In general the public permits themselves to be pacified with an over-simplified, reductive conclusion: either yes or no. Just asking the question on the cover validates for society that such an entity exists. A good mother puts her children first and above all else, “is completely responsive to her child, yet she enforces a routine and discipline” (Satran 90). National headlines that read, “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All?” and opinion pieces entitled, “In Defense of Single Motherhood” underscore considerable (and profitable) nuance about how women themselves and society perceive motherhood: the sanctity thereof and the craziness therein (Slaughter; Roiphe). If a woman with children takes leisure time for herself (meeting with friends, spending time alone) that conflicts with spending time with her children, then she is cheating her children out of the time required for her to raise them properly: hence the assumption that without a physical maternal presence, children are being neglected. Thus, all of the repercussions inherently lie at the mother’s feet. If she pursues activities while her children are otherwise occupied (pursuing PhD studies between the hours of 3:00 and 5:00 AM while they sleep), then she may not be held *as* accountable in neglecting her children. In reality, this magazine and others like it seem to be encouraging women to sacrifice their subjectivity in the pursuit of strengthening their children’s—all for the sole purpose of external validation. In spite of tantalizing titular promise, the women who read the articles are no further enlightened than they were before, because a simplified answer does not resolve the complexities of women who mother: “The standard for the good mother today is so high what we have no chance of

reaching it” (Satran 90). Women have always birthed, cared-for, and raised offspring—not only their own, but other women’s as well. Yet, an “idealized composite . . . has the power to cloud all our happiest feelings about our mothering with momentary self-doubt” (Satran 90). Satran acknowledges superlatively happy maternal feelings as well as the accompanying self-doubt. In addition, by suggesting that women measure themselves against an *imagined* ideal, she also implies that women practice self-defeating behavior—all in the name of attempting to find subjectivity while mothering:

If I were more perfect, not only would I earn more money, but I’d earn it in less time, wake up earlier, go to bed later, have more sex with my husband, think about sex with my husband less when I’m supposed to be reading bedtime stories, read more adult bedtime stories, join a reading group, a parenting group, a playgroup, join fewer groups and spend more time home with the kids, take the kids out more. . . .
(Satran 95)

Satran’s article sympathetically articulates the chaos of mothering, and has difficulty moving towards ways to reconcile the contradictory feelings that come from mothering.

Contemporary women playwrights, particularly Charlayne Woodard, Eve Ensler, and Tina Howe, portray women who mother and refract the simplistic ideological construction of motherhood so that they present and also refuse to resolve the mothering conundrum. These women’s plays brilliantly dissect the pandemonium of mothering by having women at center stage negotiating the complexities of mothering according to their own and society’s ideals. Theorists Bonnie Miller-McLemore says, “no one really wants to admit that there are no easy answers. Indeed, some of the most powerful lies have been told about mothering, whether the lie of the happy stay-at-home mother of the 1950s or the lie about the ease of breast-feeding while returning to paid work of the 1990s” (281-282). Yet popular culture still implies there *could* be one easy answer. Tina Howe is the first playwright to openly admit that “tak[ing] on the sanctity of motherhood” caused problems for her career (*Zanzibar* ix).

Only recently have other playwrights started tackling the issue; so recently, in fact, few theorists and even fewer drama critics have yet found the courage to examine them.² There are, evidently, as many reasons for mothering as there are “opinions and judgments” about mothers.

Feminist theorists have also argued for validating the complexity of mothering. Like their playwriting counterparts, they have analyzed the reality rather than merely accepting the stereotypes. The work of Adrienne Rich, Patrice DiQuinzio, and Shari Thurer underscores and theorizes the complexity of mothering. These women move beyond asking for women to be recognized for their contributions to the household and society. Like the playwrights to be analyzed in this chapter, these theorists dissect motherhood and acknowledge its cognitive dissonance: the unstable and radical nature that comes from being expected to be the primary caregiver of children. In 1976, Adrienne Rich’s ground-breaking *Of Women Born* tackled the taboo and attempted to dispel the trite concept of “good mom”: acknowledging the complex emotions mothering evokes that belie the unconditional love a mother is assumed to lavish exclusively upon her child. A mother becomes the object of everyone’s censure, including her own as she “begins to understand the full weight and burden of maternal guilt....The institution of motherhood finds all mothers more or less guilty of having failed their children” (223). Mothers are assumed to fail their children, according to Rich, if the love of a mother for her child is not seen to be self-sacrificing and all consuming. Almost thirty years after Rich, theorist Patrice DiQuinzio asserts that “[t]he impossibility of motherhood means that all attempts to theorize mothering inevitably encounter and must negotiate the dilemma of difference” (xv). DiQuinzio acknowledges and expands on the varieties found among women and their modes of mothering. By acknowledging differences at the outset, she avoids disagreements similar to those created in the feminist movement when women’s experiences were initially reduced to one majority representation. The three

plays analyzed in this chapter embody DiQuinzio's dilemma of difference as well as individually explore Rich's conflicts about mothering.

While theorists write eloquently about the cognitive dissonance of mothering, women playwrights face a far more difficult challenge: to dramatize that cognitive dissonance yet entertain as well. In an examination of the subjectivity of mothers in drama, the implications of the word mother change when its part of speech is altered. "Until just twenty years ago, no one spoke with a maternal voice. No one wrote about the experience of mothering. We have a literary tradition in which a mother existed only in relation to her children—she was trivialized or idealized or disparaged—and was never allotted a point of view. Mothers didn't star in their own dramas" (Thurer xx). Thurer was certainly writing metaphorically about drama, but her metaphor is exactly my premise. I specifically choose the gerund 'mothering' for its fluidity of meaning. These playwrights, Howe, Ensler, Woodard, and their characters start from very different places yet with the same organizing premise: dramatizing the diverse, disparate, and usually conflicting aspects of mothering, which in novel ways allows the mothers in their plays and, perhaps, those in the audience some time in the spotlight. These plays and theorists no longer argue for recognition, but more deeply interrogate the expectations of mothering as being unrealistic and certainly not uniform. My work in this chapter is to examine each play for the chaotic portrayal of motherhood that is offered. Playwrights Eve Ensler, Tina Howe, and Charlayne Woodard put conflicting emotions on stage to answer critic Shari Thurer's call "to restore to mother her own presence, to understand that she is a person, not merely an object for her child, to recognize her subjectivity" so that women will recognize themselves in those tensions (Thurer, xii). The events in these plays bring with them opinions and judgments, on the part of the characters and audiences, about what the resolutions *should* be within the definitions of mothering. Fortunately, the plays make clear that there are only complicated ways to incorporate children into one's life, physically and emotionally.

These playwrights embody for their audience images of mothering rarely articulated, much less dramatized. The cognitive dissonance of mothering comes from believing in sentimental portrayals and simplistic solutions to the maternal conundrum, while living a polar opposite reality. No one play can accomplish all of this and keep its audience through intermission. While women wrestle with the cognitive dissonance of subjugating themselves to their children, the plays to be discussed in this chapter, Woodard's *The Night Watcher*, Ensler's "I was there in that room" from *The Vagina Monologues*, as well as Howe's *Birth and After Birth*, openly reject portraying "subjectivity that is both coherent, unified, and stable and capable in principle of occupying any subject position" (DiQuinzio 239-240). These plays offer audiences opportunities to engage with alternatives that bear far more resemblance to mothering reality—a reality that deserves the adjective "radical" in describing its portrayal.

To begin, Eve Ensler's short poetic monologue "I was there in the room" focuses on the graphic physical and emotional nature of giving birth. The reflection on her granddaughter's birth serves as the final monologue in her collection *The Vagina Monologues*. In it she expresses her awe at the process of birth, and how her daughter-in-law's body seems naturally capable of delivering a baby. However, as poetic and lyrical as her ruminations are, she also conveys jarring glimpses of the medical personnel in the delivery room. Ensler's juxtaposition of the clinical and the poetic in this monologue realistically captures the plethora of emotions during childbirth.

Next, *The Night Watcher* explores the tensions mothering evokes and establishes the premise of Woodard's work with "being given a role...to play mother" (10). There are no absolutes that come with the role of mother. Woodard presents the chaos that children bring into a woman's life, either biologically or by socially implied expectations. Much like Ensler chronicles childbirth, Woodard charts unexamined territory as she examines a woman's, hers specifically, roles with children. She highlights the construct of mother as a laudable role

one adopts. However, she also presents the criticism a woman faces if she chooses not to mother. *The Night Watcher* is groundbreaking because no playwright before her has focused solely on a relationship with children, much less other people's children, that encourages such ambiguity. Throughout the piece Woodard explores the variety of maternal roles she has played and the controversy found in each. Finally, Woodard argues with a patriarchal figure as she justifies how she incorporates children in her life.

Howe's *Birth and After Birth*, the last play to be analyzed in this chapter is also the oldest. It explores the loss of subjectivity found in mothering and the social bias involved in bearing children. Her play is radical in its divergence from maternal expectations, and comes the closest to the chaotic lived reality of mothering. Howe's *Birth and After Birth* explores the complexities of motherhood and the tenuous relationship, rather than an ironclad bond, between mother and child. Alexis Greene insists that successful plays by women must "convey our inner lives in ways that are exciting to watch. We must find and tell stories that *show* who we are" (*Women Writing Plays* 6). Howe depicts most accurately the frenetic pace and environs of the inner life of motherhood. She admits, however, "[e]very self-respecting theatre in the country turned it [*Birth and After Birth*] down. The Absurdists can shake up our pre-conceptions about power and identity, but for a woman to take on the sanctity of motherhood...Even my agent dismissed me" (*Zanzibar* ix-x). First, Howe exposes the messiness of motherhood: the swings of emotion, the sense of responsibility, and the loss of self-recognition. Howe's character, Sandy, is so embroiled in quotidian details that she even convinces herself that she lives in an idyllic norm. Subsequently, tragedy invades the humor as Sandy tries to maintain a prescribed sense of normalcy, even when the reality of the actions contradicts the words emanating from her mouth. Finally, in spite of experiencing the upheaval children cause, Howe's characters force the birth process on another couple.

Portraying women's lives—"challenging the perfect sanctity of motherhood" to which Howe refers—inspires these women playwrights. Dispelling the notion of coherence,

much less stability, the work of these playwrights' highlights mothering as a disparate composite: everything from the physical act of giving birth to choosing to mother another's children rather than having one's own. The playwrights script the chaos of having children in one's life: the bizarre reality between the seemingly stable binaries of ever-loving mother and woman without children. While there are tender moments in the plays, their creators refuse to cross into sentimentality. By so doing, they underscore the absurdity of subscribing to the idealized version of mothering sold by various media. And, as in Glaspell's kitchen, these plays could be among the few times women actually see a mirror of their mothering reality: the insecurities and impossibilities that lurk behind the decision to incorporate children into one's life.

Bursting hearts and bursting blood vessels

After multiple monologues about how women's vaginas have been subjected to shame, ignorance, or violence, Ensler ends her *Vagina Monologues* with a self-admitted after-thought about the birth process: focusing on the biological purpose of this much-maligned organ. Ensler gives her daughter-in-law, particularly her vagina, the subjectivity traditionally lacking in childbirth.³ The public exposure of the birth process is an even more radical portrayal than chanting "cunt" or emitting a variety of orgasmic moans. It serves as a vivid reminder that sexualized representations of a woman's vagina obscures its biological purpose, even on Ensler herself as she considers her entire collection: "It suddenly occurred to me that there were no pieces about birth. It was a bizarre omission. Although when I told a journalist this recently, he asked me, 'What's the connection?'" (119). As radical as Eve Ensler has been purported to be by producing an entire theatrical evening based on vaginas, her monologue, "I Was There In The Room," takes a new tack. Both she and the male journalist had become subsumed within the patriarchal uses of the vagina: pleasure and men's punishing women by degradation and rape. Ensler's rage had caused her own solipsism which then contributed to a disappointment with herself: she had been so busy

showing how patriarchy, as well as women themselves, have negated the vagina, that she had overlooked its biological function. In her conversation with the reporter, she becomes aware of her own bias, but others remain who still do not understand the severity of the omission. Ensler identifies and addresses the omission of childbirth before many realize its absence.

In “I was there in the room” Eve Ensler explores the physical aspect of what it means to be a mother as she attends her grandchild’s birth. Ensler’s poetic monologue is far more sentimental than others in her collection, but she does not wallow in sentiment. To begin, she marvels at the human body, its abilities to nurture and give birth by contemplating the multiple meanings and purposes of the vagina.⁴ Yet Ensler’s monologue expresses wonder and awe at the female body. While acknowledging the idealism of giving birth, delivering a baby is also a grisly task. Ensler simultaneously captures its poetic beauty and its grim reality. She intermingles radical and reinscriptive because childbirth, like a woman’s life, does not reside at one end of a binary or the other.

Ensler vividly captures the colors of childbirth beginning with “bruised broken blue” and ending with “the shit, the clots pushing out all the holes” (121). What is rarely highlighted during a recounting of childbirth is that the baby is not the only emission from a woman’s body. Eve Ensler remains in the moment, enthralled to witness the entire birthing event, not merely biding her time until the baby appears. She literally delves deeper into how the colors and fluids are also present, yet typically neglected. She graphically portrays the reality of childbirth: “the bruised broken blue/the blistering tomato red/the gray pink, the dark;/saw the blood like perspiration along the edges/saw the yellow, white liquid, the shit, the clots/pushing out all the holes”(122). She refuses to mitigate the details by romanticizing the birth. Perhaps she had been unaware of the more grotesque aspects of childbirth and was experiencing them for the first time. She captures many aspects of the birthing process with both honesty and wonder.

Subsequently, Ensler underscores how the supposed beauty of childbirth is as violent as any other treatment of the vagina. People barely tell women how painful childbirth is, much less just how exposed a woman is during a traditional hospital birth with feet in stirrups. Multiple medical personnel enter and exit the room (not to mention her vagina). Both the mother and baby are hooked to machines and heart monitors. She expels what remains in her bowels with the first push of the baby and she can bleed for up to six weeks after giving birth. No one tells her those details, not even her closest friends, and she is so delirious with overwhelming sensations—including, but not limited to pain, nausea, and fear when people tell her she should be feeling beautiful, liberated and joyful—that she has very little idea what is going on around her. Or, as Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore says, “[m]ore accurately, mothers lie about the pain of childbirth or the complexities of parenting to protect themselves and others or out of fear that we have not lived up to the incessant stream of images of the perfect mother” (281-282). So, how do women playwrights dramatize and reconcile the realities with the myths of childbirth? By expressing her wonder at the abilities of this solitary organ, Eve Ensler instills recognition in both men and women alike of the powerful woman’s body—which is either desecrated by force or allowed to prosper naturally. She does not, however, allow her audience to forget that with one last push and perhaps some help from “Alice in Wonderland spoons,” a baby is expelled and a woman is expected to mother, ready or not.

Ensler poetically incorporates her awe of the biological process with the dehumanizing aspects of childbirth wrought by medical environments. The traditional collective presence of the woman’s family, with the modern addition of her husband, becomes “the nurse from the Ukraine with her/whole hand/up there in her vagina feeling and turning with/her rubber/glove” (121). While Ensler’s monologue celebrates the biological reality of childbirth, it also destabilizes the romantic images perpetrated by patriarchy: total strangers with hands up the woman’s vagina; medical instruments inserted to “force” an

otherwise natural process; broken blood vessels, the ripping, the tearing. The monologue opens with this very juxtaposition. The awe of being “there when her vagina opened” morphs as the stanza proceeds into the clinical dispassion of the nurse, whose hand is in the vagina “like she was turning on a loaded faucet” (121). These images force the realization that multiple feelings and attendants are present during the birth of a baby. While the family awaits the next generation, the medical personnel clinically go about their jobs in order to deliver a healthy child. Their impersonal yet professional attention mitigates the profound feelings of the family. Subsequent stanzas also have idealistic elements but the monologic poem crescendos in the middle to focus more pointedly on the realism of the birth process.

While elements of the joyful and sentimental permeate the stanzas, Ensler avoids crossing over into the sentimental by having the medical personnel clinically going about their jobs with no sentimentality as the nurse “kept turning and/turning/her slippery hand” (125). Even after the baby is born, Ensler refocuses on her daughter-in-law’s vagina, “I stood and let myself see/her all spread, completely exposed” (124). While the profundity of what she has just witnessed washes over her, Ensler also notices the doctor continue his work with the vagina that is “mutilated, swollen and torn,/bleeding all over the doctor’s hands/who was calmly sewing her there” (124). Her juxtapositions of the emotional with the clinical keep her audience in a state of limbo. Ensler refuses to separate the two as binaries, but blends them to be equal elements in childbirth.

Ensler does not reside or resolve at a binary—at one or the other end of a spectrum—but presents many of the facets so the audience can wrestle with the chaotic continuum of life as women and Ensler herself have. A portrayal of mothering and childbirth becomes fluid, messy, and contradictory, which more accurately reflects the true mayhem of birth and afterbirth. Shari Thurer’s work, *The Myths of Motherhood*, traces the sociological implications that have grown around the state of mothering, showing that only the “birthed” part has to be female specific. “For thousands of years, because of her awesome ability to

spew forth a child, mother has been feared and revered. She has been the subject of taboos and witchhunts, mandatory pregnancy and confinement in separate sphere. She has endured appalling insults and perpetual marginalization. She has also been the subject of glorious painting, chivalry, and idealization. Through it all, she has rarely been consulted. She is an object, not a subject” (299). Making a woman the subject of the birth process is uncommon because the baby is typically the focus and the successful end result thereof.

However, after the stark reality of the baby’s birth process, the monologue ultimately descends to more quixotic language. She writes, “[t]he heart is able to forgive and repair./It can change its shape to let us in./It can expand to let us out./So can the vagina” (124-125). With careful analysis, this metaphor of the heart and the vagina tempers radical potential. As with all poetry, the line breaks are as telling as the word and image choice. The longer lines express the traditionally romantic elements of childbirth. They are interspersed, however, with shorter lines that demonstrate the detached medical reality of the situation, ending with the dehumanization of the mother to the point of being regarded “like...a loaded faucet” (121). Ensler juxtaposes the romantic and the realistic to force her audience’s consciousness on multiple elements of the birth process, all without actually having a woman on stage giving birth. Interestingly, Ensler resolves the monologue with poetic, romantic ideology. She contrasts the essential purpose of the vagina—that of delivering a baby—with the business of childbirth—that of delivering a baby. Ensler is filled with emotion, awe, and wonder at what a woman’s body has the biological possibility to do and also acknowledges the medical intervention that attempts to facilitate it.

By deliberately interspersing her emotional reaction with the dispassionate clinical reaction, Ensler blends the romantic and the realistic. If the two aspects are separately presented, it presents a false dichotomy: birth is either triumphant or painful. By insisting on and dramatizing the intersection of these complex realities, she proceeds to present a postmodern view of childbirth: examining an entity, in this case a baby emerging from her

daughter-in-law's vagina, and framing it from multiple perspectives. The same event evokes very different observations and reactions: one awed at new life emerging, the other a matter of medical routine. Ensler emphasizes her point that the vagina is a source of both life and pain often concurrently. While Miller-McLemore claims that women "lie without meaning to because the realities of mothering seem impossible to depict within the limits of modern language and the confines of a still incumbent patriarchy," Ensler incorporates the grotesque beauty of childbirth and the poetic façade often imposed with the objectification of the vagina which allows this monologue to succeed in ways that earlier radical plays (Lamb, Finlay, Schneeman) did not (281-282). *I was there in the room* becomes the final punctuation mark—the end stop—of how the most primal action, birth, can remain awe-inspiring even when aided by human intervention.

Watch and learn

The concept of watching a birth, as Ensler did her granddaughter's birth, is echoed by Charlayne Woodard's autobiographical 2012 play *The Night Watcher* where she becomes the being who keeps watch over children to save them from harm. Being a watcher of children instead of a bearer of children allows Woodard to explore the deeply engrained solipsism that comes from child-less-ness and allows her to negotiate between the aspersions cast on and the lived realities of mothering. In spite of millennia of extended family and friends contributing to child raising and Hillary Clinton's 1996 book, *It takes a Village to Raise a Child*, there are still parents who are threatened by the perceived usurping of their parental rights. Charlayne Woodard openly involves her friends' children in her life, affectionately calling them 'her kids.' For society, however, this is not enough and Woodard's experiences expose the subtle discriminations. Some parents trust other people, indeed deliberately seek them out, to become godparents and guardians. In spite of having been asked to support the raising of the children, Woodard's ideas and solutions are often disparaged by the very people who ask for them. She claims a vital role in the life of "her kids" who are not her

biological offspring, but instead children she guides as role model, counselor, and friend. She is well aware that she is not the children's mother and she proceeds to, much like their biological mothers, undertake making decisions in their best interests, even if it means openly reproving biological parents. *The Night Watcher* investigates how society subtly disparages women who choose not to physically bear children regardless of their equal capability at mothering as anyone else. The play argues for positive and supportive recognition of choosing not to bear children and dramatizes the myriad reasons for, as well as the societal repercussions in, that choice.

In arguing that women's choices to mother exist along a continuum, Woodard begins to articulate DiQuinzio's difference feminism in mothering. *The Night Watcher* raises these issues by showing how defensive and threatened otherwise-secure women feel when challenged by the decisions they make about the children in their lives. The underlying theme of the monologues is that at some point every woman is insecure about her role in a young person's life—biologically determined or not. Even as Woodard spends time with and attempts to positively influence the children for whom she has been asked to care, she reveals that insecurity pervades each decision. Portraying insecurity could evoke the wrath of feminist critics as well as allow a plurality of representations for the maternal conundrum and continuum. Seeing these disparate images encourages a postmodern examination: regardless of their mothering choices, there are various reasons women second-guess themselves. An analysis of Woodard's play engages us for the questions it raises and the contradictory perspectives it offers, not for the answers it provides.

The play opens with a total stranger calling Woodard and her husband about an adoptable baby who is mixed race. According to the caller, its African-American biological mother and Jewish father being students at Stanford makes it a "perfect" match according to the caller for Woodard and her husband. The caller encrusts this spur-of-the-moment adoption with a marvelous food metaphor, "[h]ot out of the oven" (10). This bakery image

of something to be consumed entirely overlooks the fact that babies do the consuming and a woman's body is not an oven. Woodard relays this incident to remind her audience how easy it is to subscribe to the romantic fantasy and the euphemisms of the birth process. She exposes the societal materialistic trap, similar to that of marriage, by which all, including herself, can be ensnared: "Oh! I have to go shopping! Maybe Gay will give me a shower. What an adventure!" (10). This is another instance of women reaching for the poetic and the metaphorical in an attempt explain the complexity of having children. The commerce of having a baby obfuscates the reality of child rearing where "children make demands, often in tiresome, annoying or enraging ways, and the work of keeping them clean, fed, clothed, healthy, and developing properly is usually quite concrete and mundane" (DiQuinzio 123). Woodard honestly and ironically dramatizes herself falling for the commercial romanticized hype that surrounds having a baby. She realizes the complications engendered by the fantasy of having a child and, by dramatizing her own experiences, she shows how easy it is to succumb.

The Night Watcher begins with the romantic notion of mothering, which subsequently rises and falls (like a loaf of bread?) throughout the play. If Woodard and her husband were to adopt the baby, her extended family would participate in the initial celebration, but then the couple would be alone on the "adventure." In the excitement of the possibilities, the complex realities are overlooked. She immediately assigns her husband the responsibility of taking care of the baby for the first months, while she rehearses a play, and then she will "bond with him *after* the run" (10). This philosophy highlights just how unrealistic potential and new parents can be about the change a baby will bring to their lives. To contrast Eve Ensler's complex description of the birth process, Woodard focuses simply on the romantic elements in trying to convince her husband to dash to the hospital to adopt the baby, "signing papers, meeting sweaty, panting mom, holding her hand, encouraging her to push, witnessing the birth of a baby! They cut the cord, wrap him up and hand him to me!" (10). Woodard

dramatizes this situation to show the power of the hegemonic insinuations that all women should want to mother and, worse, how easy it can be to be subsumed by that ethos. To disguise the complexity of the birth experience, women give parties and give gifts of adorable baby items: cute, tiny, and barely useful. In the ensuing discussion, Woodard subscribes to a laudable feminist goal: her husband will be able to care for the baby just as well as she could: “Harris...*you* can take care of the baby for the first eight weeks. *I’ll* bond with him after the run” (10). Superficially, Woodard’s concern to keep working seems self-centered. She seems oblivious to the repercussions of sharing her excitement about having adopted a new baby while she is away from him for eight weeks. It is her husband who honestly admits, “I have never taken care of a baby a day in my life” (10). He also goes on to be the voice of reason that articulates the paradox of adopting the baby, “[i]f we choose to go get that baby, that might be the last choice we ever make. I know us. That little boy will determine all of our choices...for decades” (10). The implication could be that a man, however seemingly sensitive and understanding, is excused from knowing how to care for a newborn because of his sex, and as such is justified in his insecurity. The use of the male voice and the plural pronoun mitigates the stark honesty of having a child. Particularly in contrast to Woodard’s zeal, Harris is seen as rational and logical.

Subsequently, his words resonate with Woodard as she rethinks the initial excitement and responds with a hard truth: “If I *have* a baby...I can’t *be* the baby,” the one on whom the attention focuses (11). While feminists might resent Woodward’s self-infantilization, she does acknowledge the controversial thought that a woman must share, indeed defer, attention to her children as sociologist Patrice DiQuinzio suggests, “[i]ndividualism and essential motherhood operate together to determine that women can be subjects of agency and entitlement only to the extent that they are not mothers, and that mothers as such cannot be subjects of individualist agency and entitlement” (13). Any caring or concern should be directed toward the all-consuming effort expected in caring for the child; women must

sacrifice their subjectivity in order to give the child subjectivity. In reality, Woodard and DiQuinzio are correct, and Woodard's advantage is she allows the potential loss of agency to inhibit her. And, she openly admits to the inhibition. Woodard's piece highlights a society insidiously circumscribed by its perceptions of motherhood, even as Woodard herself both subscribes to and frees herself from those perceptions in ways mothers who are legally responsible for children cannot.

Without children, Woodard can remain outside the maternal binary and its accompanying criticism; she cannot be a good or bad mother. She does not acquiesce to either aspect—the child hater/resenter or the self-sacrificing saint. Ironically, in escaping that binary, she opens herself to an even more profound judgment of being a good or bad *woman* based on her childbearing decision. However, in acknowledging that subjectivity and bearing children are perceived to be mutually exclusive—“if [she had] a baby then [she couldn't] be the baby”—she elects to take periodic temporary responsibility for others' children (11). Throughout the ten monologues, Woodard strives for validation of both her subjectivity and her mothering competence. Woodard enacts her relationships with various children in her life after being asked to be a godmother or take temporary responsibility for a child. She makes opportunities to combine subjectivity for herself and foster subjectivity in children in ways most women who mother feel they cannot. She is asked by close friends and family to assume honorary maternal duties like godmother and Auntie. She genuinely wants to contribute to the herculean accomplishment of mothering a child, just not full-time. DiQuinzio's admission of the tedium involved in caring for children supports Woodard's reservations and highlights the maternal conundrum. Because of her unwillingness to participate in the physical act of giving birth and its subsequent full-time nurturing, Woodard is the victim of aspersions that always cast her as other, highlighting the varied, and often negative, images of women without children.⁵

When Woodard is able to assume responsibility, she is belittled for doing so by being accused of undermining parental authority. In the monologue where her god-daughter Indira confides to Auntie Charlayne she is pregnant, Woodard takes it upon herself to construct a solution: “Now I know a couple back east, they’re looking for a baby” (16). She broaches the subject to Indira and then brings it up to Indira’s parents. Indira’s mother, Gay, takes Woodard’s interference personally and yells, “Charlayne, when you have a baby and raise that child, then, and only then, can you give me lessons on how to raise mine! Until then, leave my kid alone, and stay out of my business!” (16). Gay immediately assumes Woodard is disparaging her parenting skills, because Woodard has devised a solution on her own for Indira’s pregnancy. The women ultimately articulate long-held resentments of each other’s circumstances. Ironically, Woodard expresses resentment toward “parents who put their work first and their children second!” which is exactly what she had been planning to do when the play opened. Woodard’s stage directions are what convey to the reader, and manifest to the audience, her own insecurity. She retreats from the family after she “*starts to join them, then stops herself, realizing that this family is complete...without her*” (17). She rescinds her connection to the family implying that, at some level, she subscribes to the idea that because she is not biologically related, she is somehow less relevant. Woodard’s relationship with her kids is fortuitously one-on-one...during breaks in *her* schedule. She plans the time she will spend with them—often a lunch or “The Best Week of their Life.” Woodard knows the privileged position from which she writes and speaks. She *knows* she fits her kids into her schedule.

After her friend Beatrice dies, Woodard visits Beatrice’s daughter, Africa, whenever she is in New York City. During one such visit, Woodard attempts to inculcate a valuable lesson. As Africa dashes into the car, she immediately puts on ear phones in order to listen to music. Woodward reacts in two ways: internally, she thinks, “that’s rude,” but proceeds to ask Africa to share the rap music and subsequently asks her, “Africa...what would you say is

the *theme* of that song?” (32). The further conversation and questioning about the violence against women perpetuated by the song seems to resonate with Africa because Woodward receives instant gratification for how she has handled the situation, “You know what, Auntie, I never really thought about this...until this conversation. Honest. I never thought about it at all” (33). Chalk one up to good mothering—the teenager is amenable to advice. The monologue continues with Woodward articulating her goals for Africa’s future: “I wanted to open up her world. I wanted her to know that there was more to life than boys and malls and filthy music. I decided to turn her on to great literature” (34). Thinking that books are the solution to the way Africa views her world is laudable, albeit simplistic. In her simplicity, however, Woodward does not realize that Africa is illiterate and cannot read the books she assigns. After chastising Africa’s father, Omrie, for not doing enough to realize this, “parenting is about a whole lot more than new clothes and the latest videos,” Woodward is pleased and satisfied when he allows her to take charge and to enroll Africa “in Sylvan Learning Center,” which will, after all, fill a very important void in Africa’s life (35). After a year with Sylvan, Omrie acquiesces to Africa’s request to visit with other friends, Auntie Kelly, Uncle Mike and their three young children. Woodward does not believe interrupting the Sylvan studies is a good idea so, in order to maintain her own constructive presence in Africa’s life, Woodward mandates a weekly Sunday literary discussion over the telephone. In one of the calls with Africa, Woodward learns that acquiring reading skills is not enough to protect Africa from other perils of living: violence or sex. While on the telephone talking to Woodward and overheard by her other Auntie, Africa admits an intimate relationship has formed between her and her Uncle Mike. “Mike loves me. We go everywhere together. Auntie Kelly just likes to stay home with the babies. He’s really very lonely, Auntie, and I’m all he has—“ (36). After being overheard on the phone admitting to the affair with her uncle, Africa is subjected to her aunt’s brutal beating causing forty facial stitches. Upon news of Africa’s injuries, her father flies down immediately. Yet, Woodward admits, “I was working

so it took me a few days, but I flew into LaGuardia Airport” (36). She flies in, helps make things better, but isn’t there for the day-to-day realism and, by writing this play, *she admits* it. She steps into what she determines is a gap, equally fraught with multiple interpretations: doing the best she can as well as thinking she can do it better.

Therefore, Woodard is partially dispensated from society’s disparagement for not having put others’ children before her work. If the children are “yours,” then they must come first. However, if you’re *just* their Auntie, you are only responsible for them when you want and are able to be. Woodard knows she exists in this privileged situation. She is *not* adopting a superior air to dismiss the day-to-day challenges of mothering, even if essentialist feminists might interpret it so. By the end of the scene, Woodard’s advice has become significantly less specific and certainly less literary: “if you have your next breath, Africa, you have everything you need” (37). At some points she does think parenting is as easy as it looks and, hence, thinks weekly book-oriented telephone calls will have a profound affect on Africa. The fact she must resort to offering breathing as a comfort underscores Woodard’s own metacognitive growth. Mothering might look like the most profound ideas are the most successful when, in fact, the simplicity of breathing is enough. Just like every other woman, she is doing the best she can with the choices she makes, which remove her from a mothering binary. This series of experiences with Africa highlights the precarious and perilous nature of parenting. Woodard tries to affect whatever change she feels she can as well as step in to right what she believes is a parental wrong. As much as Charlayne Woodard has tried to instruct Africa and solve her problems, she still cannot alleviate all the pain in Africa’s life. Woodard was so pleased that Africa had learned the vices of rap music and the need for literacy that she thought all would be well. Lessons and advice from parents are rarely once and done, but are of an ongoing, repetitive, even tedious, nature. As patterns manifest throughout the play, many highlight Woodard’s own over-simplistic expectations of her myopic good intentions.

In a pointedly surreal comparison, Woodard highlights the current societal conflation of babies and puppies. She pairs two monologues: the first highlighting a young girl's need for love and security, the other showing how love and security is lavished on animals. Without a child, at least women prove that they can nurture and care for a dog, especially financially. Woodard jolts the audience into questioning this logic when, upon the death of Woodard's dog, she dramatizes one of her kids, Kya, asking, "Auntie Charlayne....Can I be your doggie now" (28). The thought of equating the affection one feels for a child to that which one feels for a puppy is disturbing, as Woodard's mother chastises, "Adopt a child—not another dog. This world is full of kids who need some real attention and you up at the doggie boutique" (30). Even more disturbing is how quickly a four-year-old girl envies the affection shown to a dog. Woodard is obviously conflicted about her own choices. She may have been shaped by family and society, but the pressure in this instance is generated from within her character. She has the dog on which to lavish attention. Woodard is expected to prove her maternal abilities in order to be labeled a good woman, so without a child, a puppy is the next best thing.

While taking pity on the women in Woodard's life who have implied she is somehow lacking, at the end of the monologues she rages at patriarchy in the persona of an African man. She shows that men and women are equally culpable of accepting and perpetuating the false dichotomies of mothering. In spite of enjoying the initial satisfaction of her Starbucks coffee while on a subway ride to have her hair done and having a casual conversation with a fellow traveller, Woodard's subverted ire generated by her insecurity is directed at this same stranger. After Woodard admits she does not have children, the man mutters, "What a waste!" which immediately touches Woodard's Achilles heel (47). In spite of the previous confidence in her decisions, she feels compelled to defend herself to a stranger:

But the world doesn't need more kids, mister...as much as it needs more people to step into the gap and help the kids who are already here. I try...I try to step

into that gap. And no, I will never be called Mother, Mamma, Ma, Mommy. But my kids...my kids...they call me Auntie. And that, to me, is gold. I am not ashamed! I am not a waste!’ (48)

Woodward publically acknowledges her “worth” after years of suppression. She, too, has been riddled with insecurity caused by society’s prescription—the necessity of a woman to bear a child. Woodard can protest her contentment with her childless state, yet there remains insecurity about her missing out on some, assumed, intrinsic part of being a woman (38). The titular being *The Night Watcher* protects children, which at its basis is what mothering is and, hence, really can be accomplished by anyone who cares. If only society would remove the pressure from women and acknowledge that sharing the burden is far more beneficial for all involved. However, Woodard chooses to take and give up these responsibilities in ways impossible for a woman who is legally responsible for a child’s welfare. Woodard’s monologues brilliantly capture the indecision, flux, and constant insecurity that come with being a mere mortal assuming responsibility for another’s life.

In contrast to the involved and concerned women in *The Night Watcher*, the biological fathers of Woodard’s kids are portrayed as removed and uninvolved in their families’ lives. Earlier in the play, when Woodard calls to see if Indira can join her for dinner, the father, Daniel, replies, “Uuuh...Indira...I don’t really know what she has planned tonight Charlayne....Let me connect you to her private line” (14). The gulf between father and daughter seems so wide that Woodward becomes frustrated and demands that he “walk to the other side of the house, knock on your daughter’s door and [you] tell her for me” (14). Indira contacts her Auntie Charlayne about her pregnancy instead of approaching her father, which implies a lack of an intimate relationship with her father. It seems Indira is no more likely to walk across the house to talk with her father than he is to talk with her.

Ultimately Woodard encodes *The Night Watcher* in multiple ways affording a postmodern continuum rather than a binary. She wrestles with playing a maternal role and,

at the same time, validates how chaotic it is for biological parents, too. Those who physically or legally bear children have no more nor less knowledge than anyone else of how to do so. Parents all want to solve children's problems—to heal the wounds and disappointments of life as quickly as possible. Women do the best they can, fraught with insecurity, to nurture the young people in their lives. Woodard never self-importantly assumes she has the lone correct answer to “her children's” dilemmas, however assured she might seem. While she ultimately will not have to exist with the repercussions of what she advises, her suggestions sincerely manifest concern for the well being of the child. Emerging throughout Woodard's piece are equal parts desire for mothering validation and validation for making the decision not to have children. Woodard's fluctuations between disparaging parents, thinking *she* has the necessary answer at any given time, and eventually learning that there is no answer, point to the need for a continuum. Only in a romantic idealization of motherhood does one decision on behalf of a child always lead to another in an organized fashion. The reality, as Woodard demonstrates, is a chaotic continuum far more often than it is an orderly cause and effect.

Woodard does not want to be dismissed because she has deliberately chosen not to have children, nor should she be. Her contributions to the children in her life are valuable. In her various struggles, she adamantly reiterates that biological mothers also struggle: “And motherhood...is for life. ...To tell you the truth...I don't know if I can live up to what it takes to be a good mother. And as long as I'm unsure...I can't take it on. It wouldn't be fair...to the baby” (27). Good mothering is not an absolute. The fact women think it is contributes to mothers' insecurity (and sells millions of dollars of magazines).

Woodard articulates all the things that parents/mothers would like to say and they would say, if they didn't have the day-to-day dilemmas that come with parenting. DiQuinzio states: “children make demands, often in tiresome, annoying or enraging ways, and the work of keeping them clean, fed, clothed, healthy, and developing properly is usually quite

concrete and mundane” (123). Woodard’s purpose is to argue that childless women are marginalized because the only biologically acceptable thing is for a woman to desire to bear children. However, within that context, she also argues how difficult it is for a woman to get it right as a parent. Woodard can articulate these emotions with impunity because she can be considered an outsider who is not inherently expected to have the responsibility of those specific tasks and cannot be accused of being a bad mother for articulating and defending women’s concerns.

Birth and afterbirth

If Charlayne Woodard’s persona can be considered an outsider to mothering, Tina Howe’s character, Sandy in *Birth and After Birth* is the ultimate insider. Tina Howe captures how the expectations of mothering differ from the reality. Written in 1973, published in 1977 and first produced in 1995, *Birth and After Birth* is known primarily on the page. Laurin Porter explains that:

This play comes the closest of any in her canon to examining what might be construed as feminist issues: the difficulties of being left at home with a small child, the pressures on women to produce children as a badge of worth. But its intent is not so much to reveal oppressive patriarchal structures, as it is to expose the limitations of both professional mother and careerism. (209)

To escape the binary Porter identifies, this most interesting and radical portrayal of mothering has been couched under the moniker of Absurdism. The playwright says she finds her dramatic inspiration in the Absurdist because “they shake up our perceptions so we can see life through fresh eyes,” particularly those parts of life that are perceived to be a whole for sanity’s sake, but are much more complex than anyone can grasp at one time (*Approaching Zanzibar* ix). Tina Howe’s play is extraordinary given the nuance and chaos she captures. While Howe eschews a feminist label, explaining she was writing what she knew, her play is ultimately a feminist portrayal of maternal chaos, for what Howe knows is

the reality of a woman's world. Her play has been underappreciated because a play about family relationships with a woman at its center was before its time.

Because of that underlying seriousness, *Birth and After Birth* contains a rich feminism exemplifying that “women dramatists have often been prepared to take unfashionably daring, formalistic risks in order to uncover uncomfortable truths hitherto untold” (Greene, *Women Writing Plays* 171-172). At a time in women's drama when only radical destruction of hegemony was given the label ‘feminist,’ *Birth and After Birth* was eschewed because it seemed too much of a farce:

It's one thing for male playwrights to show women overwrought with passion and self-loathing—when women do it, the rhythms and details are different.

Ambiguity rushes in and therein lies the threat. We tend to see conflicting aspects of a situation at the same time, blending the tragic, comic, noble and absurd. It's something women poets and novelists have been doing for years. Women playwrights have to walk a finer line. We can entertain, but the minute we step into deeper water, beware.... (*Approaching Zanzibar* x)

Alas, classifying *Birth and After Birth* as a farce or an absurdist comedy belies the seriousness of its subject matter. Highlighting the reality of being a mother and juxtaposing that reality with Sandy's words, which voice the contented, patriarchal ideal, *Birth and After Birth* is (mis)interpreted as a comedy, but “[g]ood comedy...comes from a place of perspective—it's cool-headed, it's not weeping with despair, it's looking around and saying, ‘Wow, look how the world really is—it's insane. You see it?’” (Greene, *Women Writing Plays* 139). Howe flaunts rather than veils the complexity of those maternal ties. There is nothing orderly about being a mother, especially in the Apple family. Sandy Apple's responsibilities—wrapping, cleaning, preparing for guests, keeping her son's behavior within socially prescribed norms, being sympathetic to her husband's troubles—preclude her being

able to focus on any one aspect of her responsibilities; she only faintheartedly includes care for herself among those responsibilities.

Analyzing the play more carefully yields the faceted spectrum that proves Sandy's experiences in the play contribute to her confidence and despair, often simultaneously. Tina Howe underscores that "All good art is subversive, either in form or content. And the best art is subversive in form *and* content" (qtd. in Greene, *Women Writing Plays* 172). She proceeds to subvert the form and content of motherhood in her play by melding rooms and ages and qualities of the absurd to impose a cognitive dissonance on her audience in order to highlight her point that the responsibilities thrust upon women who mother are unrealistically demanding. The underlying, never-to-be-spoken-much-less-dramatized reality is that being a mother can be sporadically emotionally de-stabilizing. Expressing insecurity is perceived to be weakness, and expressing one's own priorities is being selfish. Because the patriarchal model is so engrained, women have denied their personal experiences in order to subscribe to it; as Shari Thurer explains: "[t]he current standards for good mothering are so formidable, self-denying, elusive, changeable, and contradictory that they are unattainable. Our contemporary myth heaps upon the mother so many duties and expectations that to take it seriously would be hazardous to her mental health" (Thurer xvi). Sandy, in *Birth and After Birth*, takes this contemporary myth so literally she perpetuates it by trying to fulfill it as Howe cleverly dramatizes the process of her losing her subjectivity. In the end, Howe captures the cognitive dissonance of mothering as Sandy tries to convince other characters to have a child.

Howe's *Birth and After Birth* opens before dawn with Sandy preparing for her son's birthday party and wailing to her husband, Bill, "[w]e'll never finish!"; all while he plays with their son's gifts (81). As a mother, Sandy takes responsibility for the party and for her son's behavior: "Nicky, you're not supposed to open presents now. Presents after cards, you know that's the way we do it!" (82). While the father, Bill, and Nicky begin playing with the

gifts, it is Sandy who worries about the aftermath of the unwrapping: “Nicky, how is Mommy going to clean all this up? Do you want to have your party inside a great big mess?” (83). Howe establishes immediately how Sandy subjugates her wishes to those of her husband and son where she feels, “I’m a mess. I haven’t even brushed my teeth yet” (83). In order to ensure that Nicky has a perfect birthday experience, she focuses on his needs and postpones her own. Whereas her husband Bill focuses only on “making one hell of a video” of his son’s birthday (83). Instead of merely documenting Nicky’s morning, Bill orders his son to perform for the camera and becomes frustrated when Nicky does not do as he commands. Bill is oblivious to his child’s and his wife’s responses. As Sandy expresses her dismay, he ignores her and continues to issue commands about how Nicky should act for the camera and with what toys he should play.

Sandy subjugates the pain her child contributes to her life and proceeds with daily details of their lives as a coping mechanism, making Nicky’s birthday as special as possible to validate her maternal success: “I stay up all night decorating the room, wrapping the presents, blowing up the balloons, making a really nice party and what does he do? Just tears into everything. Rips it all up! Ruins everything!” (84). Selflessly completing the party preparation in and of itself is what should bring a sense of satisfaction. Perhaps even the child will express love and gratitude for her labors. Of course, as soon as a mother wishes to be thanked, she is immediately selfish: “And not one thank you. I never heard one thank you for anything” (84). Nicky’s actions and Sandy’s reactions highlight the inconsistencies between the conditional, what *should* be, and the reality, what *is*.

As the play shows, only in theory do parents have control over their children’s behaviors. Sandy and Bill quote parenting adages at each other which do, indeed, seem to apply to their son Nicky, “Children need guidelines!” and “If a child isn’t given boundaries, he’ll be emotionally crippled for life!” and “Children learn from observation!” Much like the *Are you a good mother* article I discussed at the beginning of the chapter, ‘experts’ tell

parents what they should do, but never tell them in realistic detail how to accomplish the herculean tasks. While all of these initial adages are asserted as valid, neither parent sets those boundaries nor monitors his or her own behavior. With that failure, the adages become more absurd and less applicable to the Apple family as they proceed. While the Apples regurgitate the sanity-inducing adages, Howe is dramatizing for her audiences how quickly Sandy, Bill, and parents in general, are captivated by facile advice.

Neither character takes responsibility for actually disciplining Nicky; they both only threaten a punishment:

Sandy: I have a good mind to take you back up to your room!

Bill: If you ask me, he should be sent up to his room!

Sandy: Do you want Daddy to take you up to your room?

Bill: You'd better watch it, young man, or it's up to your room!

Sandy: How would you like to be sent up to your room on your birthday?

Sandy initiates the punishment and then exhorts Bill, "Come on, Bill, take him on up" (85). She fights to have her husband take responsibility for their son. Bill always seems one step behind Sandy when it comes to disciplining Nicky. The deferral to the mother as the 'expert' allows the father to defer to her expertise, which affords him absolution from implementing discipline that could ultimately backfire on him. Inevitably and literally, the umbilical cord between mother and child must be severed, with the birth coach (often the child's father) being the one to cut the umbilical cord and thereby sever the baby's physical dependence. Yet, the physical connection of ten months in the womb, is perpetuated figuratively for many more years to come. This figurative symbiotic relationship between mother and child has become interwoven into mothering responsibilities.

While Sandy starts Nicky's birth-tale euphemistically, it evolves from a fantasy into the reality of a malfunctioning liver, which immediately must be euphemized again by being compared to a precious metal. The description Sandy uses as she reflects on Nicky's birth

begins with what birth and babies are supposed to look like, but proceeds to how the reality of Nicky's birth did not resemble the ideal:

Sandy: Do you know what baby Nicky looked like when he was born, hummmm? A shiny blue fish! Mommy's little blue trout!

Nicky: I was blue?

Sandy: Of course you were blue. All babies are blue when they're inside their mommies' tummies. It's because there's no air inside the plastic bag they live in.

Nicky: I want to be blue again. I want to be blue again!

Sandy: Once the baby pops out of the plastic bag, he breathes air for the first time. And do you know what happens to him then?...He turns bright pink! As pink as a seashell!...Actually, you were a little jaundiced at birth, so your skin was more gold than pink. Mommy's *goldfish!*

Nicky: I was gold?

Sandy: Fourteen-karat gold! (90-91)

By deliberately using binary language contrasting the complexities of Sandy's lived experiences, "all babies are blue" and "your skin was more gold than pink", Howe portrays a greater range of "the extent to which women's experiences of mothering include suffering, sorrow, frustration, restriction, fear, doubt, sacrifice, anger, failure, and violence, as well as joy, love, satisfaction, and accomplishment" (DiQuinzio 208). Howe acknowledges the absolutes of maternal success and failure in order to prove there is no such thing as either one, only the chaos of lived existence. In spite of so-called experts declaring how easy it should be to maintain one's equanimity, *Birth and After Birth* shows that successfully ignoring the opinions and judgments of others is the challenge. To support this, DiQuinzio concludes that "to recognize, theorize, and negotiate these contradictions, feminist theory will have to abandon the goal of developing a unitary and totalizing account of motherhood"

(243). If a woman describes the raw reality of labor and delivery, she is somehow seeking pity, or worse, not joyfully acknowledging bringing a new life into the world. The birth process must always be perfect, and even when it is not, the description must be amended immediately, thereby understating the reality.

The irony of the play's primary plot is that in spite of the upheaval Nicky brings, Sandy sees herself as a failure both because she has lost her sense of self and she can't have any more children. Nicky seems all-absorbing and adding more children, to the audience, seems inadvisable. Sandy quietly goes to pieces, which Howe suggests by noting parts of her body falling apart with no one paying attention or caring: "It's the weirdest thing, it doesn't look like dandruff or eczema, but more like...I don't know, like my head is drying up and leaking..." (86). After witnessing Sandy's relationship with Nicky and her husband, the audience sympathizes with her and begins to question why she would desire another child. The demands of motherhood are so taxing that she is physically and metaphorically disappearing. Is she disintegrating because, with an essentialist argument, she is no longer biologically useful? "When I looked in the mirror this morning, I saw an old woman. Not *old* old, just used up" (100). Given everything she has accomplished with no external validation, Sandy is exhausted, literally and figuratively, with no hope in the near future of being able to rejuvenate herself. Given this situation, what can a woman do? Give up, further immerse herself in the delusion, or even better, convince others to join the delusion.

From the maternal chaos of Sandy's life comes the second part of the plot line, Sandy and Bill's anthropologist cousins study children of primitive cultures but do not have their own. Fortuitously, the cousins are between research trips and have time to join Nicky's birthday celebration. Sandy's preoccupation with her son and with her inability to conceive another child is in direct contrast to her friend Mia, who has no inclination to have children. Why do women think others should have children? Are they looking for validation in the other women? Or are they looking to tame the other women who appear to have a more

exciting and less-restricted lifestyle? Sandy, in spite of her own experiences, continues to lie to herself by not addressing the ambiguities of mothering. Sandy is dismayed that “neither of them wants children” and plans to change their minds by showing them “how happy we all are” (99). Sandy’s comments beautifully illustrate the contradiction between the words she utters and the actions on the stage. The audience has seen little happiness in the preceding act. The implication is that women must be coerced by envy of imagined parental bliss to have children. To this point, nothing in Sandy’s life resembles perfection, yet to maintain some sort of hope, to validate her own choices, she must delude herself and others, perpetuating absurd, yet often repeated, reasons to have a child. For example, she states, “[i]f she waits much longer, it will be too late” (107). Sandy begins her argument by exclaiming, “they may have exciting careers now, but what about when they’re retired and all alone in the world” (107). Sandy desperately clings to the totalizing trope of motherhood, and even more, wants her friend Mia to join her, both in the joy and misery. Mia can be an expert on indigenous children, but not having one of her own directly undermines her expertise and affords Sandy multiple opportunities to cast aspersions: “How she and Jeffrey can call themselves authorities on children when they’ve never had one of their own” (108). Sandy asks the same question about Mia that Charlayne Woodard answers in *The Night Watcher*. Can a woman without children still have valid knowledge of them? The first part of *Birth and After Birth* has already demonstrated the antithesis of parental expertise and has made a mockery of perceived parental perfection. Sandy has a child, and certainly does not appear more knowledgeable than anyone else. She also does not have the positive experiences which might convince another woman bear a child.

While Sandy argues the loss of not having children, Bill goes to great lengths to defend the Freeds’ decision to remain childless. He cites their demanding careers and asserts that their research in suffering, starving, and dying children could be a good enough and responsible enough decision not to procreate. He implies their decision is a noble gesture.

Interestingly, Bill also hastily admits, “just because I can articulate their reasons for not wanting children doesn’t mean I agree with them!” (100). In a humorous moment at the climax of the debate, which is interspersed with interruptions from Nicky, Sandy lashes out: “*Shit, Nicky, can’t you let Mommy and Daddy have a conversation?!*” (100). The audience immediately recognizes the interruption as a drawback to having a child that neither Sandy nor Bill acknowledges.

Not only Bill, but Sandy too, can articulate how Nicky’s existence has curbed her activities. As Bill attempts to explain the process of childbirth to Nicky in rudimentary language, Sandy soliloquizes about the advantages Mia and Jeffrey have because they have no biological children: “We don’t get to travel like they do, we don’t have their kind of freedom...and we don’t speak all the languages they do...They get out more than we do...Of course Mia looks younger than me...” (108-109). While she admits “there are sacrifices,” she cannot permit herself to wallow there. She must be jolted from that maternal negativity by a bell indicating the Freeds’ arrival as well as marking the beginning of her charade.

In the climactic scene, Mia’s most recent experiences with a primitive woman giving birth is superimposed upon an imaginary manifestation of Sandy’s desire for her to experience childbirth. Mia’s most recent research with the Whan See tribe is the primitive version of Nicky’s earlier-narrated birth story—reliving the moment of birth as many times as possible. With the Whan See, the attendees at the birth reinsert the newborn into the mother’s womb: “through fetal insertion, you see, the primitive mother could experience her moment of motherhood again and again and again” (127). Mia was the last person to repeatedly insert the baby and it died in her arms. The entire time Mia is narrating the process of the primitive birth, the Apple family pantomimes Mia giving birth with Sandy triumphantly shouting, “I told Bill you’d change your mind, that you’d want your own” (130). Like the primitive people who had “gathered around to watch, since they had no

awareness of modesty or privacy,” Sandy, Bill, and even Nicky take an active role in coaching Mia through the imaginary birth sequence. The parallels between the Whan See narration and the pantomime are disconcerting—among them is concern for the mother as secondary with the only focus being on the baby. At the same time, while oblivious to the scene’s unfolding, Mia’s husband acknowledges some similarities in the birth process, albeit not the ones the audience is witnessing: “When a civilized woman has a baby, she too is possessive, only in more subtle ways. She’s possessive of her birth experience and delights in retelling it. She’s possessive of her baby and tries to keep him helpless for as long as possible” (127). Just at the time Mia delivers her “baby,” she goes unconscious. The end of this very birth ritual kills many things: the Whan See infant itself, a woman’s delusion that birth is a beautiful experience, and her belief she has control over the outcome and the destiny of her child. While the Whan See woman follows her infant son to death, Sandy banally responds to all of these possibilities with “Well, I guess some women just... can’t have children” (132). Mia goes unconscious during the mimed delivery and Sandy can no longer conceive. Is Sandy’s comment the result of identifying with Mia, or proving her superiority? So, Sandy’s superiority could come from her already having Nicky, for what that’s worth given what the audience witnesses throughout the play.

Critic Alexis Greene supports the feminist nuances of Howe’s play when she writes that Howe “was interested in the isolation of mothers and in the cultural silence about what she calls the ‘savagery’ of being a mother.... The play’s starkest image is the isolation the mother, Sandy, experiences. Her husband cannot hear her expressions of anguish, for he is too wrapped up in his problems at work. She is sometimes loving, sometimes hostile to her child, because she cannot balance the demands of being a mother and being her own woman” (*Women Writing Plays* 26). Greene’s last assertion about balance undermines her argument, for she never considers how much Sandy tries to accomplish. She is overwhelmed by which task should take precedence: the minute details that ensure her son has a happy birthday,

making herself presentable by brushing her teeth and dressing, making sure her house is clean and tidy, or trying to convince her cousin to have a baby. The word ‘balance’ implies that Sandy’s lack thereof is her own fault and she is thereby responsible for her own disintegration, because as Johnston said “a good mother is a happy mother; an unhappy mother is a failed mother” (23). Instead of admitting the responsibilities (real and supposed) are unreasonable, Greene perpetuates the stereotype that mothering would go more smoothly if women like Sandy could just balance better. The fact Greene expects her to balance only two objects, demands of mothering and subjectivity, reinscribes a binary. There is no balance—nor assurance—on any given day at any given minute just which emotions will be invoked, which makes it entirely realistic that Sandy would be *both* hostile and loving: the perceived binaries of paternal emotions.

In the end, Sandy succumbs to the euphemistic representation of motherhood. Her last line, “Four years ago today you made us the happiest family in the world!” demonstrates how she blocks out disappointments and focuses on the deluded satisfaction of having a child (141). The final words emanating from the Sandy’s mouth are incongruent with Sandy’s interactions with the characters on stage such that the audience understands why she might be falling apart. The entire play has certainly not manifested the audience’s definition of happiness. *Birth and After Birth* accentuates the psychosis of parenting. With the responsibility and expectations placed on women as mothers, Sandy succumbs to societal ideology at the end of the play, caving into the blissful delusion that “Four years ago today, you made us the happiest family in the world” (141). Trying to mother Nicky causes Sandy to question her own identities, but she resorts to “[t]he maternal bliss myth—that motherhood is the joyful fruition of every woman’s aspirations”: the societally-driven dictum that from the moment of conception everything about being a mother is wonderful, when the reality is far less idyllic (Johnston 23).

Sandy complacently moves on with her life, permitting the audience to move on with theirs, even while a disturbingly honest representation of motherhood has been portrayed. In one play, Howe encapsulates the stigmas raised by Charlayne Woodard's *The Night Watcher* and the tenuous parallels between the violence and joy of childbirth raised by Eve Ensler in "I was there in the room". This play detailing the burden of children's demands has been couched under the term "absurdist" for forty years. Yet, when reexamined against more modern plays, *Birth and After Birth* portrayed the challenges involved with mothering before anyone was listening to it, much less validating it.

Women are not given (nor do they give themselves) dispensation to find mothering in itself frustrating, tiresome, and unfulfilling. Balancing or juggling—both a myth—working outside the home for money as well as working inside the home to keep everyone in it happy are, however, acceptable loci for discontent, because men can also be frustrated by the public realm. Dealing with the outside world is permitted to be frustrating, but if dealing with one's offspring is disagreeable then the woman must be to blame. Breaking that composite of a woman's life into facets, and focusing solely on the facet of children, shows that women are assumed to be responsible for the behavior, raising, and the eventual success of their offspring.⁶ *Of Woman Born* and other works speak to the anger and frustration that can accompany the more publically pontificated pride and joy of raising children: "Our society simply refuses to know about a mother's experience....To confess to being in conflict about mothering is tantamount to being a bad person; it violates a taboo; and, worse, it feels like a betrayal of one's child. In an age that regards mothers' negative feelings, even subconscious ones, as potentially toxic to their children, it has become mandatory to enjoy mothering" (Thurer xiv). Thurer's admission is validation and vindication that supports the women playwrights who put the act of mothering center stage.

A postmodern theoretical viewpoint aids in envisioning Patrice DiQuinzio's argument against a unifying, thereby reductive, vision of mothering.

To represent the interests of women, feminism appeals to individualism to insist on women's equal subjectivity, entitlement, and agency, thereby emphasizing those interests that women tend to have in common whether or not they are mothers. But to represent mothers, feminism appeals to difference to represent the specificity of mothers' situations, experiences, and interests. Representing women in terms of individualism, however, may misrepresent mothering and disavow the complex significance of mothering in women's lives, including the significance of essential motherhood as an ideological formation in all women's lives. But representing mothers in terms of difference jeopardizes feminism's claim to women's equal subjectivity, entitlement, and agency, thereby risking the recuperation of major elements of sexism and male dominance. (26)

Even with her articulate psychoanalytic attempt at theorizing motherhood and her desire to move forward to something other than the binaries of essentialism and individualism, DiQuinzio still remains distanced from a possible mode of questioning that would destabilize the assumptions undergirding mothering, not to radically denigrate anything to do with children, but to allow multiple perspectives, which in no way contribute to a sole solution. Linda Hutcheon advocates that the postmodernist's and feminist's "reply to binary oppositions as unresolved as this one is to problematize, to acknowledge contradiction and difference, and to theorize and actualize the site of their representation" (20). There will never be one solution to the quandaries of feminism, marriage, sexuality, mothering—among a myriad of others, which is why, once again, drama is so effective as a prism. In keeping with Hutcheon's concern that postmodernism does not have the same political agency as feminism, Tina Howe's *Birth and After Birth*, Charlayne Woodard's *The Night Watcher*, and Eve Ensler's "I was there in that room" do not have a call to action or any specific summation of mothering to offer. The plays collectively and individually split the entity of mothering into a myriad of parts. DiQuinzio argues for a postmodern-like sensibility:

[U]nderstanding embodied subjectivity in terms of the concept of subject positioning is a promising alternative to individualism for feminist theory. This approach to theorizing embodied subjectivity posits the reciprocal permeability of embodiment and subjectivity, the partiality and instability of subjectivity, the overlapping quality of subject positions, and the significance of reciprocity and mutuality in social relations including social relations in which subjects acquire knowledge and exercise agency. I have suggested that an understanding of embodied subjectivity along these lines can better account for the fragmented, divided, contradictory, and sometimes even incoherent subjectivity that persons experience as a result of the contradictory ideological over determination of subjectivity, experience and knowledge that occurs in liberal democratic capitalist material and social contexts. (DiQuinzio 245)

Because of the individual nature of subjectivity, it is impossible and irrelevant to hold these plays to a sole feminist definition. The goals of a contemporary critic must be to ask questions of and find multiple answers to the complexities found in mothering. All of these playwrights' characters desire clear-cut binaries, as does the audience. However, these playwrights are too complex for such a reductive interpretation. They know that speaking their truths will help further a postmodern agenda of complexity and multiplicity rather than perpetuate hegemonic stereotypes.

Notes, Chapter 3
Playing Mother

¹ While there are a plethora of articles continuing to be published on this topic, I specifically refer to this one because I had kept it in a drawer even though it was published when my oldest child was ten months old. I really believed I would fall short on this mothering scale and that *Parenting* would give me useful suggestions to improve. I've since realized I'm with Hillary Rodham Clinton (noted in this same article as the number one most-admired mom) and am more interested in pursuing my own interests than caring about others' opinions about my baking.

² More women playwrights are exploring various interpretations and nuances involved with mothering. Lisa Loomer's *Living Out* explores how relationships are affected when a woman works as a nanny (particularly given the 13 July 2012 *New York Times Magazine* article, "The Other Mothers of Manhattan") and cannot be with her own son; Sarah Ruhl's *In the Next Room*, which among many other complex relationships, examines a late-nineteenth century woman's inability to breastfeed her own daughter; Kia Corthron's *Splash Hatch on the E Going Down* looks at teenage pregnancy, maternal responsibility, and the health hazards of public housing; Pearl Cleage's *Hospice* uses three women (one unborn) to examine generational differences and conflicts between feelings of maternal abandonment and the need to be personally fulfilled. From the perspective of a single mother, Laura Mark's wonderful play *Bethany*, produced by the Women's Theatre Project in 2013, explores the foreclosure and financial crisis of the preceding decade, as well as how society assumes homeless women fail to provide properly for their children. Wendy Wasserstein's play *Isn't it Romantic* uses maternal characters as foils for their daughters' choices and contains my personal favorite line (and subsequent mantra): "I had a promising career, a child, and a husband; and, believe me, if you have all three, and you're very conscientious, you still have to choose your priorities.... So the first thing that had to go was pleasing my husband, because he was a grown-up and could take care of himself" (134).

³ The potential patriarchal reinscription of Ensler's monologue is that she also objectifies the vagina in an exceptionally complicated way that contributes far more to difference within feminism than to unification thereof. The monologues encourage women to embrace their vaginas as part of their own subjectivity. However, her daughter-in-law's vagina is isolated in this monologue, rather than integrated with the woman herself. I feel that Ensler's tribute to her granddaughter's birth could unwittingly return the vagina to its object status. I merely present the latter argument as a postmodern attempt at presenting multiple facets of arguments on the same play corresponding to Jill Dolan's desire to observe plays from multiple seats in the house and acknowledge what contributes to a greater understanding of the work and its context.

⁴ I completed my analysis on this monologue before listening to it on audio recording. Hearing Ensler's words figuratively and literally in her voice highlights the contrast in her imagery.

⁵ The 17 September 2012 issue of *The New Yorker* contains a marvelous polemic by Jenny Allen entitled, "I'm a Mom" that opens with "Are you a mom? No? Then you don't need to read one more word" (41). The piece proceeds to deliberately and pointedly

marginalize women who choose not to mother and encourages a postmodern examination of nomenclature: mom, mommy, mother, etc.

⁶ All around us is the implication that women are responsible for the children, even if it means self-sacrifice. A *Dr. Phil* television show commercial includes a sound bite where he chastises the mother for not spending enough time with her daughter to prevent her drug addiction: “I don’t care about your demanding job. My concern is for your daughter.” He implies the entire blame lies at the mother’s feet.

Chapter 4

Post (modern) Menopause

With anti-aging serums and moisturizers that reverse the signs of aging, what does it mean for a woman to “look good for her age”? Betty Freidan noticed that “products that promised to stop aging all underlined the message that age was acceptable *only if it passed for or emulated youth*” (43). Judith Houck traces the origin of this attitude to “the era [1970s] of intense valorization of youth, the characterization of menopause as the beginning of old age and the cause of diminishing physical appeal” (211). More philosophically, Germaine Greer asserts, “one’s age is always the center from which one looks forward and back, and one has no realization of the objective fact of one’s age” (369). Our foresisters have never given up trying to express themselves and their experiences. Whether it is objectification of women’s bodies, unequal treatment in the workforce, an emotional malaise or their perception of even further marginalization because of their age, the foresisters never stop making the personal political. They continue to highlight injustices to women as they proceed through the continuum of their lives: “[a]lthough neither the second-wave feminists of the 1960s and 1970s nor the third-wave feminists of the 1990s engage much with the experience of female aging, by the 1990s second-wave feminists who had experienced getting older for themselves were ready to apply their insights to that subject” (King 144). As women such as Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, and Adrienne Rich move through the continuum of relationships with women as well as age, they continue their feminist work: “Many reject the idea that it is the journey towards an inevitable end that gives a life its meaning, offering other narrative structures, circling and backtracking, which create different kinds of meaning” (King 114). These narratives and their structures continue to examine women’s places in the world, society, and families.

Where can aging women find role models? According to Poole and Feldman, “Today’s women have few role models for a graceful old age” (102). I would argue that Poole and Feldman’s use of the word ‘graceful’ implies a quality that primes women for failure—again. Only as a stereotypical whole is anything graceful. Living one’s life while attending to its minutiae is not graceful. Newly defined trails into gerontology and social work are being forged by prominent second-wave feminists who are writing about aging because they themselves are experiencing it. Aging is, however, certainly an active component of the nuanced continuum of women’s lives. What do women’s role models resemble? Working within a binary, the two extremes are “sharp-tongued old witch or gentle, white-haired grandmother; thin and whiskery or plump and soft; opinionated and caustic or loving and caring” (Poole and Feldman 102). Binaries continue to be fallacious and misleading; we must overcome “the difficulty of finding language and metaphor for talking about aging outside such binary oppositions as loss/gain, death/life” (Poole and Feldman 79). A woman elder can be any or all of these descriptions any or all of the time.

A far more useful paradigm comes from Jeannette King who asserts, “[t]he idea of simultaneity, of past and present being coexistent, feeds into the idea of identity being multiple but continuous” (120). However, the terminology and labels attributed to aging conjure very few, if any, positive images, especially of women. Hence, for the purpose of my work, I switch two words and their parts of speech: elderly women become women elders. The term organically evolves from the perspective of the second and third wave feminist debate: all women should learn not ignore women elders’ life experiences.

In her 1980 address at Amherst College entitled *Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference*, Audre Lorde said, “If the younger members of a community view the older members as contemptible or suspect or excess, they will never be able to join hands and examine the living memories of the community, nor ask the all important question: ‘Why?’” The reoccurring postmodernist theory in my work proves that neither predetermined

suppositions nor seemingly pat answers should be dismissed outright, but should be meticulously examined for what insights they can offer and “allow for at least the *potential* for radical critical possibilities” (Hutcheon 67). A postmodern examination of the facets that comprise being a woman elder will encourage a “[f]eminist age theory [which] can help us to rediscover older women’s voices, and to deconstruct the mythical images of older women presented in the professional literature and the popular media” (Browne 96). The connotation of elders means that these women have much to share and teach us. Paula Vogel and Tina Howe’s portrayals of women elders on stage challenges stereotypes of women elders and suggests why presenting older women characters is both uncommon and enlightening.

In a continued search through that seminal and multi-revised work, there are no articles on aging in *Women in American Theatre*, which strikes me as an interesting omission given the publishing arc of the three editions of this work over an eighteen-year span. At the time of the third edition’s publication, one of its editors, Helen Krich Chinoy, had entered her ninth decade of life. Perhaps Chinoy and Jenkins were so focused on documenting and promoting the role of women in the theatre that they had not yet arrived at a time when older women, like themselves, were to be acknowledged. Feminists are just beginning to make their personal aging political; hence those politics have barely infiltrated the theatre. As Betty Friedan said, “[c]learly, the image of age has become so terrifying to Americans that they do not want to see any reminder of their own aging” (*Fountain* 41). To avoid this response, Vogel and Howe must couch their explorations as comedies.

Finding language and metaphor outside the hegemonic leads us back to *écriture feminine*. As difficult as it is to examine women’s lives and include women’s voices and experiences, such examinations will create windows into a woman’s life that will be as valuable to others as they are to women themselves. As Colette Browne asserts, “[t]he task for women, then, is to actively participate in conceptualizing reality from the lives they live” (73). As there is no pure language to discuss or depict a woman elder’s experience, we must

create a vocabulary to meet women's needs. We must not deny the generalities in fear of alienating individuals, but continue to search for multiple ways, facets if you will, to depict a woman's full life. Once again, a postmodern analysis is useful to muse on the origins of, changes in, and future of attending to women elders.

In the ongoing arguments of postmodernism, the subsequent feminist movement, and in theatre criticism, the examination of viewpoints or approaches is subjective, yet must be inclusive for all the possibilities it offers. "What postmodern and multicultural feminists have to offer is a conceptual place that underscores the absence of universal truths. The challenge among women, then, is to create unity without denying specificity" (Browne 95-96). One must be cognizant of one's perspective and question assumptions even while attempting to draw conclusions. Women of color in second wave feminism challenged the reasons for which they felt excluded; because of a double-marginalization, their gender *and* their race, they rightfully disaggregated themselves from the majority. In much the same way Patrice DiQuinzio argued that "all attempts to theorize mothering inevitably encounter and must negotiate the dilemma of difference," and drama critic Jill Dolan says she "must reposition myself constantly, to keep changing my seat in the theatre, and to continually ask: how does it look from over here?," Sally Gadow incorporates a postmodern examination of aging when she reasons, "an ageless, timeless self must be posited beside (outside, inside) the old one in order to preserve subjective reality against the force of external meaning" (DiQuinzio xv; "Discourse" 69; 134). Studying women elders yields insight into specific qualities that allow them to age successfully. Paula Vogel introduces elderly characters who continue to contemplate their sexual lives and critically analyze the political times in which they live. Tina Howe creates characters who are not comforted by nor comfortable to remain in a nursing home. Both plays fulfill Cole and Gadow's wish that "[t]he solution offered by literature is not to quiet the imagination when confronted with events seemingly intractable to sense, but to create still more elaborate interpretations, wide enough to encompass

contradiction yet complex enough to preserve ambiguity” (136). With the serums, creams, surgeries, medicalization of aging and the binaries of sweet old lady versus crone, the women Paula Vogel and Tina Howe create for the stage bear far more resemblance to the complex women we see and are within a life continuum than they do to stereotypes of the crone or doddering old woman.

Similar to Judith Butler and others’ postmodern queries into the construction of gender roles, Greer, Friedan, and others query both the visible and invisible construction of aging, specifically the construction of aging women. Greer postulates “[t]hough one cannot be anything else, one cannot consciously be one’s age” (369). Because people are individuals and age in genetic as well as socially-induced ways, ascribing absolute characteristics to a number (the objective, numerical chronological classification of life), is futile. Far more helpful is Houck’s suggestion that, “[r]ather than helping women look and feel young, we need a movement that values aging women as they are or choose to be” (253). Once again in women’s lives, there is a cognitive dissonance between being and appearing. As Linda Hutcheon explains, “a study of representation becomes, not a study of mimetic mirroring or subjective projecting, but an exploration of the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self, in the present and in the past” (7). The physical appearance of youth is deemed by society as desirable, however attention must be paid to the experiences and knowledge that are acquired as one ages.

For the purposes of my analysis, I admittedly continue to parse a woman’s life by contrived categories, even while fully concurring with Colette Browne when she says, “the inexorable logic of total categories, like the power of total institutions, obliterates the individual’s freedom of self-definition, negating thereby the essential difference between persons and objects” (134). Women’s lives are filled with multiple changes, so why is menopause, merely the end of the childbearing years, defined as the change of life? Because

of the preponderance of women elders, clinicians have been forced to begin research on the physical qualities and life experiences which support women's longevity and the implications thereof. Most importantly, a growing gerontological sub-specialty in the last twenty-five years now includes female gerontology. After medical science's merely documenting the life-span differential, feminist gerontology specifically inquires into the specific reasons, both social and biological, for women living longer than men.

If the "attractive" periods in a woman's life have barely been dramatized, what do we do on stage with elderly women? While "old" is an ambiguous term, the two plays to be discussed in this chapter, *Chasing Manet* and *The Oldest Profession*, are cast with leading players between "60s and 70s" and 72-83. This creates interesting theatrical issues: does the production team cast actors whose personal ages fit the roles, or do they use younger actresses and make them up to look older and count on the audience's ability to suspend disbelief? While the former has been the most prominent, the plays emphasize the dearth of women elders as both characters and actors on stage and "[b]oth multicultural feminism, with its view of marginalized people, and postmodern feminism, with its focus on subjugated knowledge and suspicion of categories and universal truths, help to question society's fictive portrayal of older women, society's treatment of all women but specifically aged women, and women's treatment of each other" (Browne 96). None of the drama critics on whom I have relied earlier help me with theorizing aging on the stage. Pearl Cleage in Chinoy and Jenkins' *Women in American Theatre* writes, "the primary energy that fuels my work is a determination to be part of the ongoing worldwide struggle against racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia" (380). Interestingly, the one -ism Cleage overlooks is ageism, perhaps because at the time of the interview, she had yet to feel its influence either personally or professionally.

Paula Vogel's *The Oldest Profession* and Tina Howe's *Chasing Manet* are extraordinary examinations of the power and pain women experience as they age. Their

characters still want to live, they still care, they want to help and be helped by other people. They want to be respected for what they can do rather than dismissed for what they can't. Like their younger counterparts, they do not want to be restrained. All of their characters are breaking taboos—being hookers or escaping from a seemingly lovely, caring, and benevolent nursing home—and the audience sees the characters' discomfort, happiness and perseverance. The characters in the two plays “question the processes by which we represent our selves and our world to ourselves and . . . become aware of the means by which we *make* sense of and *construct* order out of experience in our particular culture” (Hutcheon 51). In order for the characters to press on, they must use a variety of skills and lessons acquired through their continuum of life experiences: moving, travels, and shifting familial relationships and friendships. As Cecelia Hurwich states “having adapted to other situations in life enables a woman to deal with age as another adaptive response” (1). There are no binaries for these characters—only the natural disarray of survival and satisfaction. Most importantly both plays show the force of a female friendship—how bonding together as women (men are not necessary) is beneficial and, dare I say it, the way it should be all along. As Browne states, “[i]n truth, when the intelligence and contributions of older women are ignored or negated, the opportunity is lost to see their strengths, patterns of resistance, and ageism as a site of injustice” (96).

Tina Howe's *Chasing Manet* highlights multiple qualities of aging, including Catherine Sargeant's desire to be recognized as an individual for her personal accomplishments—being the nude in the center of the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* canvas, rather than tossed aside or on the margins, much less in the background as part of the landscape. For Catherine, who is legally blind, and Rennie, who experiences episodes of dementia, their need for each other, some might even say Catherine's manipulation of Rennie, allows them to continue experiencing life rather than simply allowing time to pass. Howe's play uses the older characters' anticipation to underscore that they have had and continue to have purposes

to fulfill, much like their younger Mount Airy Nursing Home caretakers. “In the main, older women cope well with the aging process despite the physical, psychological and emotional changes associated with it. Older women are pooling their experiences and creativity to challenge negative images that affect the quality of their lives” (Poole and Feldman 12).

The septuagenarian prostitutes in Vogel’s *The Oldest Profession* demonstrate the nuance and multi-faceted aspects of being settled with one’s friends and one’s clients, embodying the best qualities of Alice Day’s work on successful aging: community, neighborhood, ableness, purpose, and a sense of well-being (1991). The fact that the characters are seventy-year old hookers adds to the cognitive dissidence of the play. It is far easier to laugh at the characters and assume they “talk too fancy” than it is to suspend disbelief and take their plight seriously. *New York Magazine* critic, John Simon critiqued a 2004 production asserting, “I am reasonably sure that these ladies of the night and day (clients round the clock even in retirement age) would not be discussing *Once a Catholic*...the AARP...a déclassé twat...the whole Keynesian economy claptrap” (11 October 2004). Given Vogel puts the words in her characters’ mouths, then his trivializing them is another example of theatrical and critical hegemony. Simon dismisses both the characters and their discussion as implausible and irrelevant. The male critic assumes that the women, whom he marginalizes because of their profession and their age, would not be discussing the topics that are relevant to their lives. The fact that Vogel *does* have them discussing topics relevant to their lives immediately undermines his review and, hopefully, encourages his readership to ponder his bias.

Another point to consider is that Vogel’s characters in *The Oldest Profession* also reminisce about their younger days, their need for professional relocation, as well as biting critique the rising generation. While they reminisce about their lives, they do not wallow in sentimentality. These women take pride in their work, take care of their clients, and take responsibility for themselves and each other. Much like Howe’s characters, Vogel’s women

learn to rely on and care for each other. To live for seventy or more years requires substantial resilience, so to dismiss Howe and Vogel's plays as farcical is to overlook the resilience these characters, and women on whom they are modeled, demonstrate. As Marilyn Pearsall says, "[s]omewhere the art has to connect to social reality," even with a reluctant audience (225).

Artistic Escapism

The reality of growing older often does incorporate decreased physical ability, lessened mental acuity and, as a result, the increased necessity for dependence on others for daily existence. But, defining older women as inherently declining is to dismiss them and ignore their continuing abilities, and even more importantly, to discount and overlook their extraordinary coping skills. As Hurwich notes in her analysis of Friedan, "women's roles continually change over time as opposed to a male trajectory, and may well result in women developing skills and strengths for coping and adapting to loss and change" as they leave their homes, friends, and ways of life (Hurwich 36). The two primary characters of Tina Howe's *Chasing Manet* indeed exemplify these qualities of coping. At the beginning of the play, Catherine and Rennie find ways to overcome perceived handicaps as well as use them to their advantage in order to attain their desired goal: to continue experiencing the vicissitudes of life. Subsequently, Howe explores the desire of these women elders to reclaim the focal point of the painted canvas that depicts their lives in spite of all those around them who try to remand them to the background. Finally, Howe gives Catherine and Rennie the independence and subjectivity they crave.

Unlike hospitals or rehabilitation facilities, a nursing home rarely discharges its residents. Tina Howe's characters, Catherine Sargent and Rennie Waltzer, are initially presented as falling into stereotypical old lady patterns—irascible Catherine and demented Rennie. Barbara Macdonald accuses younger people of ignorance: "Thus you who are younger see us as either submissive and childlike or as possessing some unidentified vague

wisdom. As having more soul than you or being over-emotional or slightly crazy. As weak and helpless or as a pillar of strength. As ‘cute’ and funny or as boring. As sickly sweet or dominating and difficult. You pity us, or you ignore us—until you are made aware of your ageism, and then you want to honor us...None of these images has anything to do with who we are—they are the projections of the oppressor” (Macdonald 24). Howe’s characters and other women elders desire more than to be recognized only in a binary framework. As Thomas Cole maintains in his introduction to *What Does It Mean to Grow Old?*, “Aging, like illness and death, reveals the most fundamental conflict of the human condition: the tension between infinite ambitions, dreams, and desires on the one hand, and the vulnerable, limited, decaying physical existence on the other—between self and body. This paradox cannot be eradicated by the wonders of modern medicine or by positive attitudes toward growing old” (5). Howe’s powerful play embodies Cole’s fundamental conflict “between self and body” as the audience watches Catherine Sargent realize her dream of again being regarded as an individual, as well as influence the younger characters to embrace their own agency.

Chasing Manet opens with the realistic business of the nursing home industry. Catherine Sargent’s roommate has died, the body has just been removed and the staff is preparing for the next resident by changing the bed sheets while eulogizing the recently deceased—all as Catherine remains in her bed facing the wall. Howe incorporates a myriad of stereotypes of nursing home life. Death is a common occurrence. The crazy old people are unaware of their surroundings and have forgotten the acceptable societal mores. The sympathetic, albeit underpaid, seemingly invisible employees treat the residents as children who need monosyllabic instructions on how to behave. Visiting families genuinely believe they have their elders’ best interests in mind when they put them in the nursing home. When Catherine’s son, Royal, arrives, he is accosted by Iris, one of the residents, whose mercurial temperament goes from temptress to viper. When Royal awkwardly tries to reason with her,

“Excuse me, but I believe you’ve mistaken me for someone else,” Iris turns irate (10). The nurse Esperanza exclaims, “Where’s my sweet Iris-cita, humm? Where did my little girl go?” (10). As Royal engages his mother in conversation by kidding her that “What do you do to your roommates, anyway? None of them lasts more than a few months with you,” Catherine’s initial responses are to shout that she wants “O.U.T. Out!” (11). Royal is fascinated by death, for which he has many years to wait, and enquires about the details of her roommate’s death as if a tabloid reporter, “Did the poor thing die *here*? I mean right under your nose?” (12). The audience begins to question if Catherine, too, is losing her mental faculties. Yet Howe does not allow us to wonder nor fall into the pit of the binary. Catherine’s subsequent exasperated conversation with her son demonstrates her displeasure at her current residence, “*Nursing homes* are where you’re taken to die, in case you’ve forgotten!” (12). Catherine is not a simpering, dotty old lady and she is angry that she has been removed from her Boston home to live in a residence in Riverdale, New York. The wishes of the elder are disregarded in favor of convenience for the one making the decision. Her son has moved her closer, ostensibly so that he can visit her more conveniently, thus beginning the discussion of the benevolent child intending to keep his parent safe while still making it convenient to his schedule.

While Catherine’s arguments are cogent and lucid, the frailty that requires her confinement is her poor eyesight to which she refuses to succumb. Royal reminds her of it, in spite of her claim that her, “eyesight’s fine! Just a bit blurry on some edges” (13). Then Royal serves up the rest of her deterioration: “what about your heart condition, migraines, and depression?” (14). These conditions, other than the decline in eyesight, are not old age specific and could certainly be brought on by the disappointing event of the last year—Royal’s bringing her to live at Mount Airy. Alice Day observes, “the markers of oppressive aging include depression, dependency, deterioration of functional capacity, and loss of autonomy” (252). As marvelous and upscale as the Mount Airy Nursing Home is, Catherine

becomes depressed being in a nursing home. In an emotional moment Royal admits, “I’m really sorry. You weren’t supposed to end up like this” (14). On seeing Royal’s vulnerability, Catherine pounces, demanding, “Then get me out of here!” (14). Oddly, Royal continues in this vulnerable manner admitting “I wish I could, but my hands are tied” (14). By uttering these words, he admits that while he took responsibility to commit her to Mount Airy, he will not take responsibility for acquiescing to his mother’s wishes to sign her out. Royal cannot dedicate the time and energy to the care required for his elderly parent, but he also cannot ignore the guilt caused by not taking charge of Catherine.

Just as Royal changes the subject, Catherine’s new roommate, Rennie, arrives with her daughter, Rita, and brother, Maurice. Rennie has dementia and repeatedly comments on how lovely the hotel is. Rennie’s family seems to be fostering her fantasies of the new residence. They converse about views from the windows and “going to the front desk” because Rennie does not have a single room (15). Unlike a hotel with a nightly turnover, the only way Rennie will have a single room is when one of the nursing home’s current occupants dies. Instead of being able to complain and have one’s rooming needs immediately addressed, a Mount Airy Nursing Home resident must hope to outlive other residents in order to have her desire fulfilled. The reality of nursing home living is far more limited and limiting than most believe. Howe offers these limits in an uncharacteristically subtle fashion. The amusement of the hotel farce becomes grotesque to contemplate. There is only one check out time for the Mount Airy Nursing Home.

These regulations and Mount Airy’s prescribed norms could and do assume a farcical mantle. However, they also underscore the patronizing albeit well intentioned tone with which the staff addresses the residents. Upon his entering the scene one employee, Charles, addresses the five residents with “Good morning, boys and girls. How are we doing today?” (19). Howe mitigates the possible insult by creating wonderfully eccentric characters, who go on to derail his patronizing language. Each establishes a specific stereotype: the elderly

lecher, the gentleman crying for help but not able to articulate the reason, and the two women in varying stages of dementia. It isn't until Catherine fittingly arrives on the scene as a blind Oedipus, that the physical therapy class can begin. It is also when the audience realizes that the employee, Charles, was a jack-of-all-trades before arriving at Mount Airy, as he admits, "I was a professional actor" (20). Howe angles for some dramatic irony, too. While these people interact on a daily basis, it is evident that none truly knows much about anyone else. The staff and the residents coexist, but make no attempt to delve below superficial recognition. It is Catherine who takes control of the "game" Charles has planned to "loosen up those stiff joints" (20). A game of "Morning Toss" with an inflated beach ball in the common room is what is supposed to keep them physically fit. Like a group of elementary school students, they are to toss the ball to a fellow resident as quickly as if "it's actually a piece of molten lava" (20). The elders all seem to enjoy playing the game from which they can reap physical benefits. Catherine asserts that playing the elementary game of *Hot Potato* "is demeaning. I refuse to play" (21-22). Following this comment, she promptly deflates the beach ball. Catherine wants to be seen as an individual, even if it means using her near-blindness to draw attention to herself. Unlike Oedipus whose blindness was self-inflicted, Catherine highlights that blindness can be ailment that can be adapted to and need not necessarily render her helpless. However, in spite of the blindness, she still has the intellectual capability for the literary allusion. Even without being able to see the valve on the beach ball, Catherine can certainly feel for it and use her experience to pull the plug and deflate it. By so doing, Catherine also metaphorically "assert[s] a continued involvement in life that is denied by the compassionate 'problem of age' mystique" (qtd. in Friedan, *Fountain* 67). This is Catherine's assertion of control: she may not be able to or even want to end her own life, but she can exert power to disrupt other people's.

While the interactions with the staff highlight the dispassion with which the residents are treated, the family interactions, between Royal and Catherine as well as between Rennie

and her many family members, point to the inconsistencies in how families regard the nursing home residents. Catherine's side of the room remains bare save for Manet's *le déjeuner sur l'herbe* above her bed. On the other side, Rennie's family has decorated "as if a boudoir out of *House Beautiful* has been air-lifted into the room" (23). Whereas Royal only visits Catherine twice during the play, Rennie's family repeatedly gathers in her room for favorite family foods and folklore.

At one of these afternoon festivities Rennie's family becomes interested in Catherine's earlier life. The recognition and direct questioning of her as an individual encourages her to reveal some of her family history as well. While Rennie's family has sketchy knowledge of 19th century pictorial art, their misperceptions and misinformation are what allow the insight into Catherine's background. While admitting not knowing the differences between Monet and Manet, Rennie's family is aware of the "great portrait painter, John Singer Sargent" and when Catherine admits to being his cousin, she is perceived somewhat to be a person in her own right—or at least someone who has a famous cousin (26). She finally has a context that affords her an identity. Catherine's subsequent art history lecture on the differences between Monet and Manet is what raises curiosity about the kind of work she did, particularly as she describes the nude woman in the painting and Manet's intentions and justifications. Rennie then wants to know about Catherine's painting and its subject matter, particularly the more scandalous aspects which allows Catherine to discuss her personal purposes for painting. She states, "I was a Modernist. . . . Manet started the ball rolling by putting a female nude in a public place, the next step was to paint the woman *inside* the nude" (27). While Rennie, in adolescent fashion, wants to know about the naked male body parts Catherine has painted, Catherine herself is more interested in the inside of the woman, "her terrors and desires," much the way Alexis Greene asserts women playwrights "must convey our inner lives in ways that are exciting to watch," rather than only their superficial exteriors (Howe 27; Greene, *Woman who write plays* 6).

The titular reference to Edouard Manet is embodied by a copy of his 1863 painting *le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* in which a nude woman sits in the center of the canvas boldly staring at the viewer of the canvas from amid the remains of a picnic with two fully-clothed men and a diaphanously clothed woman in the background. This prominently displayed painting raises many questions as the play opens that are subtly answered as the play unfolds. Each character, regardless of age, chases the ability to be the focus of a tableau, have the power to shock amid utter complacency, and be aware of one's environment while maintaining an enigmatic outward appearance.

Rita's observations of the park parallel the painting above Catherine's bed. To continue the charade and deny the reality of the nursing home, she looks at the view from her mother's window and exclaims, "Look at that lovely park down there, Ma. It's perfect for picnics. Once it gets warm we'll bring wine and cheese and have a high old time" (16). The park, picnics, and food represent freedom to all of the women, especially the nude in Manet's painting. To Catherine, the painting represents aspects of her younger life and to Rennie, the painting represents an event to anticipate. The residents of Mount Airy are still "free" to enjoy their surroundings as they have in the past, but now there are exterior regulations to which they must subscribe, including when they may have a single room.

Particularly poignant is the scene in a painting class where everyone else paints the landscape of the park, but Catherine, the professional artist, paints a resident, Iris, in a Modernist fashion, with her wheelchair coming out her head. Catherine's painting is particularly poignant because it makes the wheelchair rely on Iris for movement rather than vice versa. The Modernists painted to analyze all the facets of their subjects. Without her sight, Catherine paints from her mind's eye. While the representation defies convention, Catherine includes all the necessary components that define Iris, but changes the focus of the primary object. If, as the art teacher suggests, "Art celebrates your point of view, what you see and feel, so make it personal" then her expression of "quelle horreur!" at Catherine's

work continues the hypocrisy of Mount Airy (54). Just like the exercise class, the residents are not acknowledged for their personal gifts and identities and indeed are reminded to “remember where you are” as if to express the staff’s superiority while reminding the residents of their dependent status (55). Caring physically for these elderly residents is their remunerated work. Seeing and acknowledging them as individuals with talents and experiences is really not part of their job descriptions.

Alas, just as Catherine has expressed an integral part of who she is, the conversation drifts to tangential aspects relating to Rennie’s family; the *segué* shifts the focus from Catherine’s accomplishments and negates the confidences she has just shared. She is once again reduced to her refrain, “Out! Out! I want out!” (29). Catherine’s chant draws Maurice’s attention. He concurrently expresses sympathy and disparages the residents of Mount Airy, including his sister, when he says to Catherine, “I can’t imagine it’s very pleasant here for someone as intelligent as you (29). Instead of acknowledging dementia as a neurological disorder for which there are many ways of coping, Maurice sadly dismisses his sister as not intelligent. These elders are dismissed by their families as well as by Mount Airy’s staff as being disabled rather than differently abled.

Furthermore, this dismissal is exacerbated by Rennie’s daughter and son-in-law subsequently agreeing to commit suicide when they are as old as Rennie and Catherine. However, they do feel uncomfortable enough at their suicide suggestion to not know whether to laugh or not as Rennie joins Catherine’s chant of “out!” (30). The younger couple’s desire to end their lives is parallel to the chant of their elders with the difference being that the women just want to leave the nursing home, not end their lives. Upon closer inspection, the end of this scene yields a disconnection between the two perceptions. Rita and Gabe think there would be no purpose in living as long as Catherine and Rennie, given their current physical states. On the contrary, the two women want to leave the nursing home in order to

continue living their lives. They intrinsically believe there is still a productive and pleasing life available to them outside of Mount Airy's walls.

Not only do the family members dismiss these women elders, so do the employees. The audience sees another employee, Esperanza, express frustration laced with a hint of resentment at her job. Her use of medication facilitates her shift change: "I gotta go—my own little chicks are waiting for me at home. I'm giving you something to help you get back to sleep. Here, take this, it will calm you down" (33). Amid the 'sweethearts,' 'my darlings,' and 'precious' is her final statement, "Now I don't want to hear another peep out of either of you, do you hear? Life would be so much easier if you tried to get along" (34). The question is, for whom would it be easier? The Mount Airy nursing home certainly eases the guilty consciences of the families. It also allows the staff to treat individuals as a collective, which minimizes their workload. So how does a nursing home make life easier for its residents? Rennie and Catherine do not find solace in its care or activities. Rennie believes, and is further encouraged to maintain her delusion by Esperanza, that "it's whatever *you* want it to be. Hotel, B&B, spa" (32). To the non-nursing home resident, life inside Mount Airy seems quite luxurious: a park with a pond, exercise, caring staff, attention to the details so that the residents no longer have to care for themselves—all this in an exclusive suburb where one can shed all the mundane cares of day-to-day living, even if the resident does not personally desire to shed them.

Subsequently, this scene with Esperanza becomes the catalyst for Catherine to incorporate Rennie in her plan to escape Mount Airy. Catherine has saved money from her days as an artist and she now plans to use the funds to return to Paris. As Rennie laments her leaving, Catherine realizes, "[a]ctually, it would be a big help to have you along. You'd be my seeing eye dog, so to speak. You could bark out directions as I push you around the deck" (35). Rennie slips back into her dementia as the sleeping pill that Esperanza gives her begins to take effect. She drowsily admits to having "thousands" of passports, having been

on the QE2 “a million times,” and is pacified when Catherine allows Rennie’s dead husband, Herschel, to join them. Inviting Rennie to partake of the adventure is Catherine’s admission that she would not be able to accomplish her plan without help. While Catherine appears to be self-sufficient and does not want to interact with anyone else, she relents in order to accomplish her escapade to France. As Germaine Greer maintains in *The Change: Women, Aging, and the Menopause*, “despite all the challenges of later life, friendships, along with liberty and spirituality, provide women with some of the peculiar satisfactions of being older” (qtd. in Browne 39). The closer Catherine comes to achieving the goal of once again seeing herself as an individual, the less introspective and isolated she becomes.

As the play progresses, Catherine becomes a fuller character to both the other characters in the play as well as the audience. The escapade has given her impetus to maintain a grandiosity she hasn’t adopted in a long time. As she spreads “out on Rennie’s chaise, wearing one of her shawls, her hair pulled up in an elegant Gibson knot,” she books a ten thousand dollar suite on the Queen Elizabeth II—paid for by a secret savings account—amid the noise and chaos of the nursing home (37). When Royal arrives with a requested garment bag, Catherine is suddenly attentive to the others in Mount Airy. She admits that Rennie’s husband was in the furniture business and that the employee, Charles, has a variety of talents. Her playfulness and approachable persona encourages Royal to ask further questions about his mother: “there’s something I’ve always wanted to ask. Did you really shed your clothes in public places like her (*pointing at the Manet*) when you left us and ran off to Paris?” (39). Catherine has become for the audience a woman with a very interesting past, and if living in a nursing home was depressing her before, the audience has a better idea of what she has sacrificed to reside in Mount Airy. Alas, Royal still wants to regard his mother in a binary fashion: “I’ve never known if you were actually a loose woman or just *played* one to enhance your image. You know the brilliant American tease kicking up her heels abroad” (40). Catherine is angered by his assumptions, “[t]hat’s quite a choice you’ve

given me—slut or imposter” (40). Royal’s assumptions represent most of society’s views about women—it must be one way or the other and, even as a woman elder has lived a full and productive life, Catherine is still pigeonholed into a binary, even by her own son. The audience is forced to acknowledge that Catherine continues to manifest multiple facets as the play progresses: she has been recognized as an accomplished artist in her own right; she has come to accept and even acknowledge Rennie’s usefulness; and, she shows a more agreeable personality. She even expresses a sentimental longing for her son, “I miss you, Royal, I really do! In the beginning you used to stop by almost every day, and now I see you once a month, if that! You only live 10 minutes away! I thought that’s why you snatched me away from my few friends in Boston and plunked me down here. So you could be close by” (41). Unfortunately, instead of understanding her honest emotional expression, Royal believes it to be another complaint about his lack of filial responsibility. Like Mount Airy’s staff, Royal has difficulty seeing his mother as a person in her own right.

The pending voyage brings a change to both Rennie and Catherine’s energy levels, and thus raises Royal’s suspicions that Catherine is “up to something” and make Rennie’s daughter, Rita, repeatedly remark that the women are acting like “a couple of four year olds” (43; 49). As Cecelia Hurwich argues, “feeling useful has to do with being active in their professional lives, for others it is the leading of a wonderful creative life, for yet others it is participation or involvement in social political or environmental issues” (155). The scene finishes with a juvenile blood pact at Rennie’s insistence. However, instead of swearing to life-long secrets, Rennie swears she won’t forget her passport. The childhood game can evolve in ways that serve its older players.

Only by discussing their dreams as well as their life experiences are Catherine and Rennie recognized and recognizable for being individuals. The final part of this scene, again while superficially farcical, expresses the characters’ and many of the audience members’ desire to escape the mundane with a choral chant of “Out! Out! We want out!” (55). In

order to cover up Rennie's admission that "Catherine and I are making a break for it," Catherine starts the chant in which even Charles joins admitting, "I, for one, would rather be flying my little plane over those misty Hawaiian islands" (56). This leads to Henry, who has spent the entire play yelling for help, to admit that he dreams "of returning to the fertile crescent, the cradle of Western civilization as we know it," which is a revelation to the residents and staff in the room (56). Drawing a cluster of brass bells from his pocket, Henry explains that when he originally uncovered them, they had magical powers to call singing pterodactyls in a foreign language, which drew a feeling of "peace, acceptance, surrender" from him (56). Henry shares a memory with the residents that absorbs them all. Whether that memory is factual or an experience filtered through years of life is certainly negotiable. However, its origin is really of no consequence as it allows the residents an opportunity to focus on Henry and the potential magic of the bells. Once these residents have a wider focus that includes other people and their lives, their lucidity returns to realize the bells can not conjure the same powers they supposedly once did. Henry poignantly explains this as "once they were taken from their homeland, they lost their power" to which Catherine replies "not unlike some other ancient relics I know." and encourages both the employees and the residents to muse on what they would do if they were able to escape literally and figuratively from Mount Airy (57). The dreams continue, but the surreal instance of lucidity for everyone, except Catherine, ends with a crash of thunder and a blackout. When the curtain next rises, the residents are back in their original states of mind. While this instance could affirm binary thinking, the audience is now aware of the residents' past realities and can have a more empathetic view of them. The scene allows the audience to begin thinking of these characters as human beings rather than old, batty people who have been shut away because they can no longer care for themselves.

Chasing Manet affords further disruption of binary thinking by using pharmaceuticals. In a variety of ways, Howe highlights the medicalization of the elderly as

there are multiple scenes where the staff uses medication to “settle” the residents. In the most farcical scene of the play, Rennie and Catherine are packing to leave and are choosing by sound which of their medications to bring. Because of her blindness, Catherine can’t read the prescription bottles and Rennie can’t pronounce the medicines’ names. Ironically, neither knows for what conditions they are even taking the medication. In spite of their empowerment and sense of purpose in leaving Mount Airy, the episode also demonstrates how vulnerable the elderly are, even to those who are paid to care for them. The seemingly uncaring Catherine remembers a brief comment by Rita that Rennie takes nitroglycerin. Catherine says, “I’m so afraid I might miss something important. Like your heart medicine. You do take heart medicine, don’t you?” (61). Within the fracas of the pill play, there is a concern and a further bonding between the two women as they both agree that forgetting their stool softener would be “forgetting the most important thing of all!” (61). As much as Catherine despises everything about Mount Airy, she will acknowledge the necessity for stool softener. Portraying women elders who are gleeful, empowered, and hopeful, even with a farcical façade is a rare vision of older women that even the characters’ children do not understand. Most importantly, the two women have a purpose that binds them in a way that just co-existing at Mount Airy never could have provided.

While Rennie goes in and out of lucidity, Catherine has unusual patience with her and resolutely reinforces their plans so Rennie can comprehend and implement them. While Catherine is off-stage changing her clothes, Rennie’s memory is temporarily restored and she realizes she is escaping from a nursing home rather than a hotel: “Why is everyone calling for a nurse? This isn’t a hospital, it’s hotel (sic)! The Four Star Mount Airy Hotel! Hotels don’t have nurses, but everyone keeps yelling for them as if they’re all over the place. So maybe it is a hospital and not a hotel! But it can’t be a hospital because it’s too noisy for a hospital and doesn’t smell like one. In fact it smells worse. But nothing smells worse than a hospital except for a...except for a...(pause) Oh no...It couldn’t be a...couldn’t be a...be

a...A nursing home, could it! Nursing homes are where old people are taken to die” (62-63). In spite of Rennie’s otherwise enjoyable time at Mount Airy, the fact she realizes it to be a nursing home incites anger as well as hyperbolic bravado. Rennie does not think of herself as old. While her dementia facilitates not dwelling on her physical infirmities, by believing her husband is still alive and enjoying their previous life together, she embodies the postmodern parsing of aging: the perspectives on aging change according to the individual’s perspective and that perspective can change in ways out of her control.

Rennie’s perspective changes when she asserts that the small fire they will set to create a diversion will “*burn the fucking place down to the ground!*” (63). Sweet, loony Rennie’s lucidity is the final piece required for the escape. Likewise, Catherine evolves at the end of the play and decides to be partially honest with Charles, rather than continue the yarn of meeting Rennie’s sister at the New York Botanical Gardens. She uses his previous admission of his dreams to encourage his support, “Remember how you said everyone in their right mind wants out of here? ... Remember how you said anyone who jumps over the fence is a hero in your book?” (66). Catherine has learned the art of connecting with people, even if she uses it for her own purposes. She uses her potential freedom as an inspiration to the younger generation when she states, “As the wise man said: Leap, and the net will appear” (66). It is Charles’ soliloquy that summarizes the plight of elders in general and Rennie and Catherine in particular: “It’s like you’re being punished for something, but you didn’t do nothing’ ‘cept get old. It ain’t your fault! You were just minding your own business getting on with your life—celebrating birthdays and anniversaries, playing with the grandkids, then blam...! You have a couple of strokes and it’s, ‘Welcome to Mount Airy! Have a nice day!’” (67). Perhaps he also remembers his own set-backs and his own arrival as an employee at Mount Airy Nursing Home.

Ironically, the last scene on the deck of the *QE 2* resembles the previous scenes at Mount Airy. Both women are sitting on chairs and are being attended to by people offering

blankets and beef bouillon. Yet, while they welcome the attention on the *QE2*, the attention of planned activities of Mount Airy drew only ire. The obvious difference is that on the luxury liner the service is at their request, not forced on them, however benevolently. Further validating Catherine's reason to leave, the Captain of the *QE2* notices her name on the passenger manifest and deliberately seeks her out to declare himself her biggest fan while hypothesizing that she is returning to her "old stamping grounds" in Paris (69). Catherine delights in the attention. She wants to be valued and validated as an individual. This captain's recognition of her means more to Catherine than his gushing about her work. He is praising her as the agent of the work, not merely the work itself. The difference is subtle, but meaningful to Catherine none-the-less. Meanwhile, Rennie has reverted to her memory-challenged state, believing herself to be in Atlantic City and going to an amusement park with a "roller floater" (70). Catherine must, at some level, realize Rennie needs validation, too. In her own joy, Catherine doesn't correct her, but joins Rennie in ending the play with her arms in the air, anticipating the excitement of what is to come as the *Queen Elizabeth II* pulls out of port with horns bellowing.

Howe also figuratively sounds the horns in the portrayal of women elders in *Chasing Manet*. While critics continue to categorize her work as absurdist, comic, and farcical, all of those adjectives require a more nuanced examination to fully elucidate and appreciate Howe's work. Many women, playwrights, critics, postmodernists have found comfort in the Absurdist playwrights because of the disruption of the binary representations of women. By presenting Catherine and Rennie with their physical weaknesses, their familial situations, and their desires for a future they can control, Howe explores multiple facets that comprise something interpreted by a single entity—being old. Even within their diminished capacity, the women elders manufacture happiness for themselves and give themselves purpose. Rennie and Catherine want to continue living their lives in productive ways. As Hurwicz discovered in her study, multiple criteria go into successful aging. While not all of them are

present concurrently, the women elders' ability to summon them are what allow them to persevere.

Five Women Elders Sitting on a Bench...

Vogel's play contains similar themes to Howe's as she explores women who want to maintain connections, their independence, and recognition for their contributions. If *Chasing Manet* is the serendipitous solidarity of two women with only their residence in common, Paula Vogel's *The Oldest Profession* is a marvelous "Full-Length Play in Six Blackouts" that highlights long-term relationships among women who have lived, worked, and cared for each other for almost fifty years. The significance of octogenarian prostitutes examining and reporting the current world as they see it affords multiple insights into women elders. Vogel warns, though, of the controversy that comes with these insights: "Women and writers of color are still seen as threats because in essence, when a woman or a writer of color is defining a play world, there's another definition of what our society is, and that's very threatening" (Linden 257). In this case, Vogel is defining a world that is not overtly permitted to exist as it consists of a triple-marginalization of prostitution, of being women, and of being old. The comedic tone of *The Oldest Profession*, like Howe's play, potentially mitigates the serious conditions in which women elders exist. *New York Magazine's* John Simon critiques a production of *The Oldest Profession* writing it off as "a bit outré" without any acknowledgement of its underlying seriousness. Both he and the production designers overlooked the serious nature of these characters' lives exactly because the portrayal of the world in which these women elders live is potentially uncomfortable. In the production Simon reviews, the characters' can-can costumes and musical numbers highlight the humor in the play. However, these staging decisions mask the life stories these characters narrate in the play.

The five women in Vogel's play exemplify the bonds as well as the annoyances that come from forty-five years of living and working together. Vogel's women are bright,

aware, and actively attentive to their world. Vogel juxtaposes the stereotype of prostitutes being young, loud, and crude, with sweet little old ladies sitting on a bench enjoying the sun. Lest one believe this story is merely of five simpering old ladies, these sharp-tongued and sharp-minded women elders take on the politics, religion, and sexuality that are intimately intertwined in their personal and professional lives. In Hurwicz's study "attitude was the single most important factor for these women's well-being: an optimistic perspective as demonstrated by a sense of aliveness and adaptability to external events and situations" (qtd. in Browne 37). The women in Vogel's play embody Hurwicz's findings. *The Oldest Profession* presents a world so different from anything anyone imagines about the lives of prostitutes, octogenarians or, for that matter, women elders. By using prostitution as her fulcrum, Vogel accomplishes a variety of things. She explores sex by highlighting the productive and nuanced lives that have allowed these women to use their bodies for their livelihood. She also reveals her characters' awareness of financial and societal impacts that further marginalize them, but to which they do not succumb. Finally, the characters have interest in the world around them, including their customers' lives and their customers' families, various meals as well as politics. They are not, in any way, merely waiting for their lives' ends. Like feminism, "[a]ging may be societally influenced and defined, but it is still a personal experience that one must come to terms with via individual freedoms and interpretations" (Browne 62). The beauty of Vogel's play is the purpose with which these women address their day-to-day living. They exhibit facets of feminism as well as qualities that support Hurwicz's theory of successful aging. Even with each of the six blackouts bringing a death, their deaths come unexpectedly as they are going about their lives and responsibilities. Like the women in Howe's play, they demonstrate coping skills, autonomy, self-reliance, and an optimism about the future.

The opening scene demonstrates the humorous repartée that comes with people knowing each other for a very long time. When Vera prattles on about her dinner, having

eaten fish on Friday as a good Catholic, the less-tolerant Ursula reminds her curtly that with or without her teeth, “[f]or the past ten years, you don’t have to eat fish on Friday”(131). The humor and absurdism result from the fact that a life-long prostitute worries about the Pope’s rules, which is then further exaggerated by the reference to false teeth. Vogel beautifully blends Vera’s culinary indulgences with the reality of her dentures, as well as how she also annoys Ursula. Among the jeers about their ages, hormones, and make-up habits, there is evidence also of caring. Living and working together for decades affords these women an intimacy that allows for jeers and gibes, and in which nothing is off limits. When Vera is upset by Ursula’s brash comment, even her best friend Edna pokes fun at Vera’s age by saying her emotional response “can’t be [the] change of life” because all of them are long past the age of menopause (132). When women act in ways others do not understand, they are often dismissed because of the hormonal fluctuations that accompany menopause. These five women have established their relationship, their desire to help as well as annoy their friends. And to that end, they are also well aware of the tenuous hold they have over the younger, rising generation of prostitutes, who are depicted by the elders as women who “don’t know the meaning of work” (133).

As the most senior among them, Mae laments “the new generation of prostitutes [works] right on the street—gypsies, all of them—on their own with no group, no house to call their own, no amenities for customers, no tradition or...or finesse...where’s the pride in the name of prostitute? It’s all gone downhill since the government poked their noses in our business and booted decent self-respecting businesswomen out of Storeyville” (139). Starting in New Orleans, Mae has been the Madam caring for the women for over forty-five years and believes she has done what she can to care properly for her employees: “When we were closed down in Storeyville, I paid your bail; all of you got your train tickets North and a place to live....There’s always been money for the doctor when any of you girls are sick, and food on your table” (142). She takes her responsibilities and obligations to the women

seriously. Vogel highlights Mae's leadership style as she sticks up for and supports her girls and her business. For example, Mae explains "Earned income for each of us is forty-seven dollars and sixty cents per week. I pay each of you sixty dollars a week which means we are depleting our savings account to the tune of fifty dollars per month" (148). While she is protective, the audience questions her business acumen as they are actually losing money for their services. Mae's solution for the monthly net loss is two-fold. She asks the women to increase their visits to their customers, "if it's not hazardous to their health," and then proceeds to validate their work ethic as she tells them how many compliments she receives about their service (148). She certainly uses praise and encouragement to ask more of her girls. It is ironic, however, that she is concerned about the clients' health, but not her employees' who are the same age. Mae is willing to ask the women to work more frequently, but to only raise the prices from seven dollars per session to ten dollars per session with new customers.

Vogel illustrates the differences between these women elders who are proud and stately and the dissolute younger prostitutes in "their" area. They openly shun one interloper in particular because her pants are "so tight on her, she's practically parading her wazoo on Broadway" (133). Even though they have been part of the oldest profession for their entire lives, this fact does not mitigate their dismay at the improper comportment of the new "permissive generation [who] are going to put us all out of business," nor does it allow them immediately to resort to crude anatomical descriptions (134). These women see themselves as the last generation with a genuine concern for their clients and they see the future of prostitution as "cheap amateur whores [who] don't know how to act like ladies" (138). Mae's subsequent diatribe belies her assumption that she and her "girls" act like ladies as she screams that the younger woman's "plastic twat is gonna fall out in the road five years from now!" (137). The women elders disparage the younger women for not banding together as a supportive community. Much like the discord between the second and third waves of

feminism, the younger women proceed as they see fit and refuse to recognize the valuable knowledge these women elders could contribute. This episode is incredibly amusing, and also representative of how a select group of women learn to manage growing older and defend what they see as their hard-earned rights. The women elders feel marginalized because of their age and the lack of validation of their life experiences.

Mae tells the women to be prepared for change, even if her forté is working within the immediate future, not the long term. This lack of forethought frustrates Ursula who is preoccupied with the long-term and feels that her colleagues do not pay enough attention to it. She states, “trust in the future...alternative energies, junk bonds, cable TV, strip mining’s going to come back in a big way” (161). Ursula, as the apprentice Madam, has big plans for ameliorating their situation. She has ideas to advertise, especially to younger customers in local newspapers. She also disparages the role of government in their declining years when she calls Medicare and Social Security “subsidized begging (135). Her friend, Lillian, however, wistfully expresses that she “wouldn’t mind being eligible for a government subsidy each month in recognition of all my years of public service,” which results in a recurring argument about fiscal policy and inflated prices given stagnant wages (135). Vogel incorporates so many quotidian details that the audience must recognize elements of truth in the play, in spite of Betty Freidan’s comment that “[c]learly, the image of age has become too terrifying to Americans that they do not want to see any reminder of their own aging” (41). Having five spry octogenarian prostitutes discussing oral sex and cuddling will certainly induce laughter, perhaps even mitigating the unease with the aging process.

Ursula, the frugally living conservative, insists in investing in “securities” rather than depositing her money “into the bank so’s the feds can profit” (136). After Lillian and Mae’s deaths, Ursula finally asserts control and adopts the position of big business. She states, “Times are changing; the overhead on this business is growing by leaps and bounds,” and threatens the remaining women by asserting that she “could break in and train any eighty-

year-old grandmother with better results” (158; 163). These comments remind the audience that these women are as much subject to the market for their business as any other. It also depicts their dependence on whoever the current Madam is. Whereas Mae’s honesty and encouragement inspire the women, Ursula’s badgering instigates a strike: the remaining women, Vera and Edna, refuse to leave the sunny bench on which they sit. As the scene ends, they begin to dream about what they can do with their new-found free time: Edna contemplates something as simple as going to the movies, while Vera plans “to go to the hospital early. Give Mr. Francis a surprise” (166). While their plans might seem mundane, Vera is planning on volunteering to care for her client who, like herself, “gets such pleasure from small things” (166). The plans of these women elders do not need to be grand, like a trans-Atlantic voyage on the *Queen Elizabeth II* or investing in securities, in order to be satisfying. Ursula’s attitude forces, or liberates, them to think as individuals and not as a collective.

The first blackout of the play reveals Lillian’s passing away, which precipitates a discussion of death, with Vera expressing a desire to “go like Lillian did—all of a sudden, with all of my faculties. Just talking one moment, and gone the next” (154). This prompts Mae to exclaim, “No more talk of...passing away. They pay us to escape all of that, not to hear it analyzed in our arms” (154). They have watched their gentlemen friends die over the years. Lillian’s death demonstrates that her friends do not want to contemplate their own deaths any more than the audience does. While they realize the inevitability of death, their job is to delude their customers into forgetting about their own physical demise, even if they cannot delude themselves.

By the time the lights rise after this third blackout, the audience is now conditioned to wonder which woman has died. Edna opens the subsequent scene by stating, “I thought she’d never die” (167). This comment elicits a laugh from the audience and horror from Vera who agrees that “she was cranky; but after forty-five years, you kind of get attached even to that”

(167). Even with Ursula's abrasive personality and business policies, Vera accepts her as she was. This does not, however, preclude a posthumous dissection and disparagement of Ursula's investment strategies. Edna is appalled that Ursula's securities are contained in over two and a half tons of sugar, all in five-pound bags. In spite of Ursula's protest about fiscal responsibility, her investment in the securities is far more of a hindrance than a help to those whom she has left behind (136). As ludicrous as the tons of sugar are, their very presence manifests Ursula's concern with aging successfully, however misguided it might seem. These women actively seek to maintain their lives and continue living. With each death, the survivors have new ideas of how to improve the business. The irony and amusement of older hookers dying masks the resilience of not just the group as a whole, but the individual women that comprise it. Ursula's death has, however, left Edna and Vera the freedom to decide their own future business plans about their customers. With their freedom to "just keep the ones we fancy" has also come Edna's sense of responsibility to Vera, and maintaining the business, as well as her responsibility to the greater good (168).

Edna takes the responsibility for Vera so seriously it becomes detrimental to her health. Vogel does not establish this characteristic to emphasize any kind of dementia on Edna's part; the final scene establishes that these women remain caring about each other and the world around them for their entire lives. When Vera tries coaxing Edna to eat "a BLT on toasted rye," Edna becomes overwhelmed, acknowledging all the laborers that would have contributed to the sandwich and realizes how workers and consumers take production for granted: "it's all automatic. They don't care" (171). She recognizes she is, literally, a dying breed; her lifetime of caring for others and her customers, while not for naught, has a limited influence and does not seem relevant for the future. Vera's offer to make their childhood treat of New Orleans red beans and rice revives her briefly as she contemplates the care and attention that red beans and rice would require, as well as happy moments in her youth when she had consumed them. Ultimately, however, Edna leaves Vera "sitting alone in the middle

of the bench” before the blackout that ends the play (172). Granted, Vera was the youngest of the women, but to have her as the sole remaining prostitute adds an interesting dimension to these women. Vera has been the one throughout the play who has been attentive to the sensual aspects of life: soft gray chest hair, the warmth of the sun, the lemon sole in the opening conversation, and the treat of chocolate turtles. Although none of the women discuss ill health, this sensitivity and awareness to the nuances and the necessity for making pleasure for oneself out of seeming banalities keeps Vera alive the longest. All of these women have multiple facets that include caring for each other and their customers, worrying about the current economic and political climate, and exhibiting affection for the people around them, customers and long-time friends alike. As marginalized as society wants to make them, these octogenarian prostitutes have much to contribute to the profession, their customers and each other right up until their respective blackouts.

In summary, the entertaining nature of both *The Oldest Profession* and *Chasing Manet* belies the serious nature of a woman’s life, particularly in her later years. It is remarkable that these two plays, written many years apart, both focus on essential facets of women’s lives, rarely discussed much less dramatized. Both works incorporate the sociological elements of successful aging as researched by Alice Day and Cecelia Hurwich. Howe, as with all her plays, writes from her own experiences. In Manet’s painting, *le Déjeuner sur l’herbe*, the central figure is certainly the object of the gaze. However, she boldly stares out of the canvas making eye contact with the viewer so that she does not passively succumb to being the object. She challenges, indeed violates, presuppositions and social mores. In addition, her presence forces the viewer to examine the physical body and the intimated actions, which creates a cognitive dissonance, not able to be resolved by binary thinking. Through *Chasing Manet* Howe offers hope that life can continue to be successfully lived as long as women elders stay interested in the people and events that surround them and have something to look forward to. When the plays and characters are subjected to a

postmodern parsing, the issues of women elders are brought to light—in their full spectral array. As playwright Paula Vogel asserts, “[a]ging does not necessarily mean solidifying or becoming more rigid. Aging could also mean, ‘Well, what the fuck. I don’t give a damn anymore’” (Savran 345). So, while the women elders may be perceived as not “giv[ing] a damn anymore,” the real issue is that they have selectively chosen to care about what matters to them. They have focused their energies on what matters to them, rather than being subsumed by what others deem worthy of concern. Women of all ages would do well to contemplate both the seriousness and the humor of these two plays as they portray what could possibly be their future, too. As Cole and Gadow remind us,

Historical, legal, and economic interpretations mark aging as an objective phenomenon, open to general, cultural understanding. But aging is only in part a public phenomenon. It is at heart subjective. It has, like all experience, an objective overlay of social meaning, including scientific theory, economic policy, and political/religious ideology. Beyond these, however—in keeping with them, in spite of them, or indifferent to them—the central meaning of aging is individual, subjective. (131)

As both Vogel and Howe have done, the slowly growing field of feminist gerontology will validate the subjectivity of women elders who have been marginalized by modern society. That validation will only elucidate the nuanced aspects of these women’s lives: their past, present, and their future.

Going forward in the lived experiences of maturity, marriage, motherhood, and menopause, women must choose what is subjectively imperative to *them* and share it. While this subjectivity has been decried as interfering in affecting permanent feminist change, by so doing they will reflect and reinforce Glaspell’s words, “[w]e all go through the same things—it’s all just a different kind of the same thing” (Glaspell 1359). In the theatre, Vogel, Howe, Corthron, Ensler, Parks, Woodard and many other women playwrights portray issues

that are important to them, which end up representing aspects of women we do not often see on stage. The plays do not try to fulfill radical prescriptions or favor one method of presentation over others. The task is to choose aspects of women's lives that give the playwrights and their female characters voices to articulate women's lived experiences. As Cate Blanchett said in her acceptance speech for Best Actress at the 2014 Oscar awards, "[F]emale films with women at the center unleash experiences...[A]udiences want to see them and, in fact, they [the films] earn money." While film is a more populist medium than theatre, Blanchett articulates both what women playwrights have accomplished and expresses hope for the future of women's lives on center stage.

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