# PLAYING THE WOMAN:
# GENDER PERFORMANCE
# ON THE CONTEMPORARY STAGE

by

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For my parents, Linda and Dieter Solga,
and for Jarret

whose love and support form the basis of all my work.

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## ABSTRACT

The theatre is arguably one of the most valued social institutions of Western culture. From the dramatists of ancient Greece, whose work continues to appear on stages and college course syllabi all over the world, through William Shakespeare, to avowed modern masters like Henrik Ibsen and Harold Pinter, it has produced some of our most admired artists. Unique in its complex artistry, it combines the skill and detail of written text with the transformative possibilities of live performance: the theatre is living literature, and more. As a medium of exploration, it investigates the human condition, holds the "mirror" up to nature, instructs and entertains.

Yet, for all its tremendous value, the theatre is not unproblematic. As an artistic medium predicated upon putting human beings on display, it has come under fire from feminist critics in recent years for the ways in which it has traditionally represented humanity, particularly women. These critics argue that this popular medium of exploration has historically amounted, for women, to a medium of exploitation. Based in a patriarchal tradition and supported largely by male playwrights and directors, conventional Western theatre does not represent women *per se*; it represents women as fictions of the male gaze, the imaginings of a male-centred theatrical universe. Given this dubious legacy, what does it mean to "play the woman" in the theatre today?

My investigation of the politics of representing women on the late twentieth century stage examines four basically uni-gendered plays - Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*, and Tomson Highway's companion plays, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing* - and seeks answers to such questions as: what does it mean, given the theatre's dubious legacy, for there to be *only women* in a play? How does feminist theatre trouble the ideological and dramatic conventions that have historically framed and contained women on stage? How can we transform the legacy of visual violence against women so prevalent in traditional stagings of the female body into a critical, ethical representation of that body? Is such a representation even possible?

My critical context for this investigation is feminist performance theory, including the work of José Féral, Elin Diamond, Barbara Freedman and many others. My primary critical text, however, is Judith Butler's landmark study of gender and identity, *Gender Trouble*, which posits that gender should be regarded not as a natural attribute of human beings, consistent with their sexual identities, but rather as a *performative act* that conceals its origins behind the fiction of naturalness. I propose that each of the texts under investigation engages in *gender performance* in ways that undermine gender's naturalized status, revealing its theatrical underpinnings and opening the door for alternative conceptions of gender and sexuality along less rigid, limiting and deterministic lines.

## ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS USED

Where deemed appropriate, I have abbreviated certain texts as follows:

*Top Girls* - *TG*

*Three Tall Women* - *TTW*

*The Rez Sisters* - *RS*

*Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* - *DL*

*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* - *GT*

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# Introduction.
## Setting The Stage:
## Gender Politics and Performance Theory

On December 8, 1660, the first professional actress took to the English stage in a production of *Othello* launched by Thomas Killigrew's King's Company (Howe 19). Her appearance changed the face of English theatre forever: no longer would female parts be played by young male actors; at last women themselves would be represented in what was fast becoming one of England's foremost social institutions. But the arrival of actresses, although signifying a giant step forward for English theatre, did not come without complications. Until 1660, "playing the woman" translated into young men portraying the *idea* of womanhood as it had been conceived by male playwrights working within a staunchly patriarchal theatre tradition. Despite the ever-growing presence of women on the stage after 1660, the majority of playwrights remained male; therefore, when women finally assumed the roles previously occupied by boy actors, they too were expected to portray "womanhood" as the imaginings of a male-centred theatrical universe, a fiction of femininity created by male playwrights and demanded by (primarily) male audiences.[1] Furthermore, the physical presence of women on stage allowed those fictions to become ever more sexually charged, as playwrights and producers exploited the erotic potential between actors and actresses that had hitherto been unavailable to them (Callow 79). Women, thus, did not simply appear on stage during the Restoration; they appeared

[1]There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. Aphra Behn is perhaps the most famous female playwright of the Restoration period; nevertheless, her own treatment of female characters has not gone unscrutinized, and there are those critics who would argue that she is as limited by patriarchal attitudes as are many of her male contemporaries.

on stage as sexual objects, as expressions of sexual fantasies. It was not enough, as Simon Callow remarks, "simply to be a woman ... the actress [had] to give an *exhibition* of being a woman" (83, emphasis in text).

Off stage, as on, England's first actresses were subject to the often cruelly exploitive characterizations of their employers and spectators. Any woman who would reject the quiet and demure propriety of a lady in favour of displaying her body openly on stage was thought to be a whore, and thus actresses were, to many, synonymous with prostitutes. As Elizabeth Howe explains, this characterization often became self-fulfilling because "whether or not she exploited it off stage, the actress's sexuality - her potential availability to men - became the central feature of her identity as a player" (34). The sexual attractiveness of their actresses was a major marketing feature for theatre companies, and male spectators were clandestinely - if not officially - encouraged to visit female players in their dressing rooms after a performance. As a result, many actresses became the unwilling victims of unregulated sexual harassment (Howe 34/5). The public assumption appeared to have been, as Lesley Ferris points out, that once one became an actress, one was forever an actress; women and their roles in the eighteenth century theatre were conflated on and off stage into one, large, fetishized female body, forever subject to the demands of portraying itself as the object of men's fantasies and sexual whims (Ferris 149).

Eventually, of course, acting became a legitimate as well as desirable profession for both women and men, but many women's roles in plays even today continue to

reflect a patriarchal urge to fashion female characters into objects of male sexual desire, and we need only look as far as contemporary television and film to see buff bodies openly on display. Feminist theatre groups have made immeasurable strides towards exposing and questioning the objectification of women and their bodies both within the theatre and beyond it, but the fact is that much feminist theatre remains alternative, part of a counter-discourse unlikely to reach mainstream audiences in large numbers. I have chosen, therefore, in the discussion which follows, to address the problem of a mainstream theatre that continues to rely upon "the fetishized spectacle of woman and the narrative of her domination and punishment" (Freedman 59) as a means of creating entertainment. The plays upon which I focus (Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*, Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*, and Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing*) can all be classified as examples of "mainstream theatre" - they are all commercial as well as critical successes - yet they resist the attempt to write women out of their own stories. Instead, they address directly the problem of how to represent women in a sphere that has traditionally sought to make over, cover up, and otherwise efface their complex subjectivity in order to perpetuate the fantasy of a "natural" (and sexually charged) femininity invented and exploited by the institutions of patriarchy. Their casts - with the exception of *Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing* - are all-female,[2] and while the all-female play is certainly not a recent development in the

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[2] Strictly speaking, this is not entirely the case. Essentially, these plays' main concern lies with their female characters, but in the case of *Three Tall Women* and *The Rez Sisters* these characters are not always alone on stage. In the former play, the main character's son appears in a non-speaking role in Act Two, and acts as a visual foil for the commentary and actions of the women on stage. In *The Rez Sisters*, Highway stipulates that the Trickster is to be played by a man, but this casting is complicated by the

theatre, these late twentieth century examples offer their audiences new insight into the significance of the uni-gendered play. These plays do not simply pose the obvious question of what it means for there to be no men on stage; they also invite audiences to consider what it means, given that women have long been written into drama as the incarnations of patriarchal doctrine and desire, for there to be *only women* on stage. How does this explode the ideological and dramatic conventions that have trapped, framed and contained women on stage? Once exploded, with what do we replace these conventions? Is a critical, ethical representation of the female body on stage even possible, given that performance space has now been forever charged with sexual tension and with the legacy of hundreds of years of symbolic (and occasionally very real) violence against women? These are only some of the questions which my discussion will address.

**Gender Politics: Judith Butler's Theories of Gender Performativity**

> Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time - an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*..."
>
> Judith Butler, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*

By far the convention (historically and currently) most limiting to women both on and off stage is the assumption that gender is a fact of nature. With this assumption as its base, our patriarchal culture has sought to restrict women's mobility by claiming that certain roles are appropriate to each gender, and, most importantly, that gender is not a continuum but an opposition of two binary forces, the line between them being

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Trickster's inherently multi-gendered status. I will discuss the Trickster more completely in chapter three.

impermeable. The belief that "femininity" is a natural attribute of women - and that femininity implicitly stands for a certain delicateness, a certain slightness, a certain sexual energy - has created exactly those theatrical fictions of womanhood of which I spoke above. The first step, therefore, towards tearing down those fictions and rewriting women's position in the theatre must be to expose gender as an act, not of nature, but of ideology.

In her 1990 book on feminism and identity, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler outlines a program for reading gender as an ideological creation subject to deconstruction and change. She examines gender as a construction of politics, history and patriarchy, one which conceals its origins behind the seamless presentation of the codes of masculinity and femininity which we as a culture have been conditioned to recognize as "natural" attributes of an essential gender identity. Gender, she argues, is performative; we perform the parts of "masculine" and "feminine" which we begin learning from birth, and our performance *constitutes* our gender identity. In other words, "acting feminine" does not express an interior feminine self, but creates the *illusion* of an interior feminine self that in turn perpetuates the illusion that femininity is a natural quality of the actor. Butler writes,

> ...because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions - and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction "compels" our belief in its necessity and naturalness. (*GT* 140)

But if gender, as Butler argues, is "only real to the extent that it is performed" (*Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* 278), then the fiction of its naturalness can be exposed by alternative performances. Butler, in *Gender Trouble* and her later article, "Critically Queer," suggests that there is a distinction to be drawn between the idea of "performativity" and that of "performance" when both pertain to gender. "Performativity," she argues, refers to the way we as a culture recreate our genders daily by acting out the parts we have been taught to play - and furthermore have been led to believe we play *naturally*. Gender *performance*, meanwhile, refers to the undermining of performativity, an interruption of the seamless show of masculinity and femininity that reveals their theatrical underpinnings, disrupts their naturalized status and opens the door for a reimagining of the patriarchal script of sex and gender along less rigid and opposing lines. Gender performance is the means by which feminist playtexts discredit the assumptions upon which traditional dramatic theatre's representations of womanhood are based, thereby denying legitimacy to those representations themselves. My critical thrust in the following chapters will be to examine each play under investigation for moments where gender performativity metamorphoses into performance, revealing gender's constructedness and making room for different interpretations of "feminine" identity on the stage.

**Performance Theory: Troubling Gender, Troubling Theatre**

> We keep to our usual stuff, more or less, only inside out. We do on stage the things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit as being an entrance somewhere else.
>
> Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (The Player King)

Butler's conception of gender and its subversion, with its references to role-playing and performance, bears many similarities, as Butler herself gladly admits, "to performative acts within theatrical contexts" (*Performative Acts* 272). In fact, Butler's theory reflects a growing trend in feminist theatre, one which challenges the conventions of traditional drama with subversive performances that disrupt the illusions upon which that drama's allure is based in order to question the assumptions upon which those illusions themselves are based, and which they in turn perpetuate. "Performance" has set itself up as the antagonist of this "Theatre," and promises to change the face of drama as we know it.[3]

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[3]My use of the terms "theatre" and "performance" in this context is highly specific and does not pretend in any way to convey the many meanings and nuances which these terms have accumulated throughout the rich history of Western drama. Obviously, these terms are not the sole property of the critics who have seen fit to appropriate them as tools of their trade; they are also two mainstays of basic theatrical terminology. The actual performance of plays is generally termed "theatre," and the word can also refer, among other things, to the specific buildings in which performances of many kinds, dramatic or otherwise, are routinely held. "Performance," as is clear from my previous sentence, refers to any production of a play, dance, piece of music or other show which an audience attends, and in its broadest sense need not refer at all to any kind of subversion of cultural or theatrical mores. Nevertheless, the rise of performance theory in the last twenty years has complicated these and other critical terms as a means of encouraging new ways of thinking about theatre. My use of the terms "theatre" and "performance" follows that of feminist performance theorists such as Féral and Diamond, and is meant only to add to the host of meanings already associated with these terms, not to erase or discount them.

Traditional dramatic theatre,[4] despite being maligned by recent feminist criticism as a last bastion of liberal humanism and conventionality (Freedman 58), has always already contained the potential for its own subversion. Tracy Davis argues that the theatre has always contained its own challenge to prescribed gender roles and stereotypes about women because the public's various constructions of actress's identities were often contradictory, and therefore revealed their own contingency: "by working in an inherently scandalizing realm (the theatre) actresses defied socioeconomic prescriptions about Good Women, yet by going home as respectable daughters, wives or mothers they denied ideological prescriptions about Bad Women" (71). Furthermore, whether writers, actors or spectators at the time realized it or not, pre-Restoration theatre was rife with exactly the kind of subversive gender performance for which Butler calls. The transvestite traditions of Renaissance theatre deftly exposed gender as a construction mapped onto the body rather than as an essential identity located within it: the performances of cross-dressed young men playing the parts of female characters were often so seamless that Samuel Pepys, for one, was wont to remark nostalgically what pretty women the boys *were* (see Howe, chapter two).

The goal of subversive performances, then, is not to destroy theatre, but merely to foreground that which theatre tends to deny. Generally speaking, traditional dramatic

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[4]My occasional use of the term "theatre," as well as my use of the terms "traditional theatre" and "traditional dramatic theatre" (or other combinations thereof) within and beyond this introduction refer to those plays which employ certain theatrical tricks (discussed later in this section) in order to suspend the disbelief of their audiences and convince those audiences of their semiotic authority. These dramas are generally not self-reflexive or self-critical, and invite passive enjoyment rather than active engagement from their audiences. They are what Brecht might term "culinary" (See *Brecht on Theatre*, "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre," 33-43), and can be drawn from any era or movement in the theatre's history.

theatre is a purveyor of illusions whose status as illusion is concealed behind the realistic appearance of the dramatic world on stage. We are meant to believe that the action taking place on stage is "real" action, that the actors are not actors but characters come to life, and anything that weakens the illusion of this reality also weakens the drama's semiotic authority. Naturally, of course, theatre-goers are not robots; on some level we recognize that we are watching actors in performance, and that the dramatic world in which they move is, strictly speaking, not "real." However, the success of a drama designed to suspend our disbelief is almost always measured by how seamlessly it carries its audience into the realm of the dramatic, how easily we forget about the actors, the other spectators, the script. Theatre's power, therefore, rests squarely upon its ability to create believable illusions.

Performance, meanwhile, explores "the underside of theatre" (Féral 176), doing "on stage the things that are supposed to happen off." It seeks to trouble traditional theatre's authority by fracturing its illusions. Performance rejects the linearity of conventional narrative, plays with time and space, and challenges the audience to recognize both as theatrical constructs rather than as representations of an abiding temporal and spatial reality. Instead of allowing the audience to believe solely in the characters on stage, performance foregrounds the bodies of actors and actresses which lie *beneath* character, "demystifies the subject on stage" (Féral 178), and points directly to the melding of acting body and theatrical persona on which theatre's illusions depend.

Performance is the rejection of all things theatrical,[5] of "the symbolic organization dominating theatre" (Féral 177), and therefore also of the fictions of feminine identity perpetuated by traditional theatre's seamless, often unproblematic representations of women and the illusion of authority under which those representations labour.

"Performance" in this context thus provides feminist theatre criticism with exactly the tools it needs in order to dismantle the theatrical as well as ideological conventions that have resulted in the exploitation of women on stage. *Gender performance* in turn becomes not only the interruption and interrogation of our naturalized notion of gender identity, but also the interrogation of that identity as it is conventionally represented - and as the illusion of its naturalized status is perpetuated - in the theatre.

**The Cast**

As I noted earlier, each play included in my discussion is an unusual member of the mainstream theatre tradition: mainstream because commercially successful, unusual because critical of the conventions and assumptions of the very tradition from which they come. Each, in fact, engages in more "performance" than "theatre." In Chapter One, Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* challenges the binary construction of the sex/gender system and suggests that such a system, which conceives of gender as discrete and opposing categories, can never adequately represent the complex and multivalent subjectivity of

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[5]Obviously, this statement contains a few illusions of its own. As Barbara Freedman makes clear, theatre and performance - even as they are constructed as antagonists by feminist theatre critics - remain closely interconnected. As I have indicated, "performance" is not some wildly "other" entity that descends on the theatre and tears it apart; rather, performance must always be a subversion from within, both indebted to and moving beyond the mores of traditional theatre.

women. *Top Girls* calls for a new method of representing female identity; as we will see in Chapter Two, Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women* heeds the call by questioning the assumptions of cohesiveness, unity and singular subjectivity that lie behind traditional stagings of the female body. In place of these stagings, Albee presents a fragmented, decentred body that constantly eludes theatre's voyeuristic gaze. Chapter Three brings us full circle with a discussion of Tomson Highway's companion plays, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing*; in his presentation of the mythical and gender-bending Trickster figure, I will argue that Highway provides us with a vision of gender hybridity that can serve as a model for more fluid and intersubjective interpretations of gender identity, interpretations toward which feminist critics must strive if they are ever to debunk the myth of "the natural woman" altogether.

The playwrights with whom I am dealing come from extremely varied backgrounds, and therefore allow us to ask, as final food for thought before we begin, some questions about the origins of and conditions necessary for a feminist playtext. My survey includes one British playwright (Churchill), one American playwright (Albee) and one Canadian playwright (Highway). Churchill is the only female, but both Albee and Highway are openly homosexual; our gender dynamic therefore is not conventional, but already includes some of the complexities of identity which mainstream perceptions of sex and gender often choose to ignore. Churchill is the only playwright of the three with a specifically feminist background - many of her plays have been created in conjunction with feminist theatre troupes - while Albee, on the other end of the spectrum, has

recently come under attack for what some feminist critics consider to be elements of misogyny in his plays. Highway, meanwhile, views his plays' interrogation of gender identity within the larger context of Native cultural activism. Critical backgrounds are similarly diverse among these three: Churchill has been heavily influenced by the gestic theatre of Bertolt Brecht; Albee emerges from the rich tradition of twentieth century realism begun by Ibsen and continued and expanded in American theatre by O'Neill, Williams and Miller, but also claims the influence of such absurdist dramatists as Beckett and Pinter; Highway, classically trained in piano and educated in Canadian theatre tradition, counts the surrealist drama of James Reaney, as well as Michel Tremblay's immeasurable contribution to a nationalist theatre in Québec, among his most significant non-Native influences.

The differences in background, agenda and critical context between Churchill, Albee and Highway are hardly slight, but how much difference will they make as we attempt to chart each playwright's contribution to the body of feminist theatre? How relevant will national differences be? How relevant will cultural differences be? Certainly Highway's work, predicated upon Native cultural revival, will be unlike Churchill's and Albee's in significant ways, but will his plays truly be "other," or is that otherness simply a non-Native perception? Will Churchill's feminist status set her work apart as the "most feminist," or will the "feminist" label reveal itself to be no more than a construction, an artificial marker of difference between three genuinely powerful social critics? Will "feminist theatre," perhaps, become more a matter of the agenda of the critic

engaging it than a matter of any intrinsically "feminist" impetus within the work(s) themselves? If this is the case, then I must place the onus, as we begin, upon myself to approach each play critically but fairly, seeking out those moments in the text where the seamlessness of gender performativity is interrupted and social attitudes about gender are made visible, where conventional representations of femininity are shown to be inadequate and a revisioning of that representation takes place, and, finally, where the groundwork for a permanent change in the often oppressive conventions of mainstream theatre is laid.[6]

[6]I am indebted for this "agenda" in part to Elin Diamond, and her program for a "gestic feminist criticism" (Diamond, "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism").

# Chapter 1.

## Going to Extremes:

## Deconstructing Gender Opposition in Churchill's *Top Girls*

> Woman is shown to us as enticed by two models of alienation. Evidently to play at being a man will be for her a source of frustration; but to play at being a woman is also a delusion: to be a woman would mean to be the object, the *Other*...
>
> Simone de Beavoir, *The Second Sex*

> Active and engaged struggle with gender inscription (as it still limits us today in practice) must accompany the recognition that gender opposition is a false construct.
>
> Janelle Reinelt, *Feminist Theory and the Problem of Performance*

Playwright Caryl Churchill eludes labels. Her plays have been called socialist and feminist, political and historical, but no one label ever seems adequate to describe the full scope of her art. Churchill herself has commented that, while she does not equate socialism and feminism, she "would not be interested in a form of one that didn't include the other" (Interview with Betsko and Koenig, 1987). Her statement succinctly explains why critics may find it impossible, perhaps not even desirable, to pin her drama down. She is not interested in socialism, per se, or feminism, per se; rather, she is interested in the intersection of the two, and the complex web of historical, cultural and economic factors which enter into the politics of each. From the standpoint of a feminist gender critique, therefore, Churchill can be seen waging exactly the kind of struggle which Reinelt

describes above, as her plays literally stage the myriad social and cultural factors which enter into gender inscription "as it still limits us today."

All of Churchill's plays seek to expose the complex social construction of gender by staging the 'battle of the sexes' within larger economic, political and sociohistorical frames, rather than merely as a gender war waged in a vacuum and based on an irreconcilable biological difference. As Elin Diamond explains, "[n]arrative (and through it, history) invades [Churchill's stage], interrupting the dramatic present with intimations of the past, forcing the audience to understand female identity as a historical construction whose causes and consequences constitute the drama being enacted" (*Refusing Romanticism* 277). *Vinegar Tom*, an early play produced with the Monstrous Regiment feminist theatre troupe, explores seventeenth century witch hunts in England as an outgrowth of economic hardships and crippling class difference. The play presents witches as scapegoats *created* (rather than simply hunted out) by a lower class trapped by poverty and political impotence. As Churchill writes in the play's introduction,

> ...social upheavals, class changes, rising professionalism and great hardship among the poor were the context of the kind of witchhunt I wanted to write about...[O]ne of the things that struck me in my reading...was how petty and everyday the witches' offenses were, and how different the atmosphere of actual English witchhunts seemed to be from my received idea. I wanted to write a play about witches with no witches in it; a play not about evil, hysteria and possession by the devil but about poverty, humiliation and prejudice, and how the women accused of witchcraft saw themselves. (*Plays: One* 132)

Her comments are telling: popular media and folklore, which continue to perpetuate ancient stereotypes about witches that form many peoples' "received ideas" about them,

often conveniently ignore the social factors surrounding the persecution of witches by making the accused women appear to be mentally and biologically unstable. *Vinegar Tom* takes direct aim at the still all too prevalent assumption, based on the biblical fable of Adam and Eve, that women are always already fallen, that rooted in our biology is the seed of man's downfall, and that therefore women's status as "the weaker sex" follows naturally from these indisputable "facts." In place of these "facts," Churchill's play stages political acts as two hapless tenant farmers seek in the figure of a local "witch" an easy explanation for the blight that threatens their farm. The gendering of evil as feminine is shown to spring not from biology or even from the Bible, but from historically specific and *changeable* social factors.

After *Vinegar Tom*, Churchill's interest in the processes of gender construction remained keen. *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* locates the silencing of women within an historically and politically contingent time period: the English Revolution of the 1640s. Churchill's most mainstream success, *Cloud Nine*, explores sex and gender relations in colonial Africa during the Victorian period, and sets its second act in contemporary London in order to, among other things, demonstrate the ways in which Victorian attitudes toward women, the family, and heterosexuality were carried into the twentieth century as normative social ideals.

Churchill's plays, in making an issue out of the social contingency of gender relations, also demonstrate concretely the power differential which results from the gendering of men and women as binary opposites. In binary oppositions of any sort, a

dominant-subordinate relationship exists between the opposing terms; in bipolar gender systems conceived within patriarchal cultures, women are the disempowered.[7] By rendering gender's social makeup apparent, Churchill challenges the natural status not only of gender but of gender *opposition*, and thus questions not only women's place within the binary, but the binary's ability to represent women's experiences altogether.

In *Top Girls*, produced on the heels of *Cloud Nine* and like it a mainstream success in both London and New York, Churchill again takes as her subject matter the cultural and historical origins of two genders deemed to be naturally opposite. This time, however, a large part of her critique lies in her attack upon this "natural opposition," which the play demonstrates to be a constricting and inadequate position from which to launch feminist alternatives to traditional gender stereotypes. Marlene, the play's main character, is a self-styled feminist whose archaic attitudes towards women's liberation - as well as their source in her less-than-liberated upbringing - become evident over the course of the play, and list a critique of certain types of feminism, their origins, and their position within the patriarchal power structure, among the play's interests. In Marlene's estimation, women can only achieve liberation from conventional feminine gender roles by taking over men's place at the "top"; that is, by reversing the terms of binary gender opposition and occupying positions conventionally conveived of as "male." As a result, maintaining a bipolar gender division that grants power to only one of the two poles becomes necessary to Marlene's vision of women's success. As Joseph Marohl points

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[7]Throughout this chapter my references to bipolar, or binary, sex/gender systems will imply their location within patriarchal cultures.

out, "[a] concept of feminism like Marlene's, *which defines itself in the context of the polarity of the sexes*, cannot transcend the inherently ... phallocentric assumptions of the ruling power system" (315, my emphasis). Churchill's contention in *Top Girls*, I will argue, is that gender opposition, and not simply the position of women within that opposition, is the true barrier that stands in the way of women's empowerment. Marlene labels herself a "high-flying lady" (*TG* 137), the top girl at the Top Girls Employment agency which she manages, but does not realize that her own label constitutes not a license to fly but a grounding order. She will never be more than society's vision of her as a "lady" or a "girl," chained to these labels as long as she seeks to reinforce the gender hierarchy which continues to doom women at large to a subordinate role.

Marlene's feminism is at odds with that of prominent critics like Judith Butler, who advocate above all the need to assert feminism as a plural rather than a univocal construction. Butler argues that a basis for feminisms lies in a deconstruction of "women" as a "substantive and univocal signifier that disguises and precludes a gender experience internally varied and contradictory" (Butler, *Variations on Sex and Gender* 141).[8] Marlene, on the other hand, strives to reassert just such a "substantive and univocal signifier," viewing it as the only means to women's solidarity. Her appreciation of women's experiences is so limited to her own particular situation that she proves herself unable to empower anyone but herself, and even then her "power" is characterized

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[8]See also the opening chapter of Butler's book, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

as limited and oppressive. Marlene, for the purposes of the play, *is* a stereotypical male oppressor; the fact that she feels she must "play the man" if she is going to be a successful woman is the most ironic deconstruction of the limitations of artificial gender opposition in Churchill's canon.

Out of Marlene's blind devotion to the bipolar sex/gender system[9] comes Churchill's vision for undermining that system. She knows that feminisms do not seek simply to make it possible for women to play roles traditionally recognized as men's; if that were all it took to bring down the oppositional structure of gender, female executives, politicians and construction workers would not continue to face barbs of sexism resulting from what many perceive to be their usurpation mentality or "penis envy." Instead, feminisms must get to the root of the ideologies that seek to differentiate between men and women in such extreme ways, calling the whole notion of and basis for sex/gender difference into question. In order to effect this deconstruction of difference, Churchill employs Brechtian theatrical techniques updated for late twentieth century feminist theatre. Brecht believed that the modern, or "epic," theatre must "adopt attitudes" (*Brecht on Theatre* 39) that force the spectator into an active engagement with, rather than a passive enjoyment of, its subject matter. By alienating certain components of the drama that comprise its social critique, usually through a style of acting designed to

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[9]My use of the term "sex/gender system" comes from Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975). The composite "sex/gender" is not meant to refer to an easy equation of sex and gender, but to demonstrate that the two terms have come to be interchangeable within our culture, their synonymity based on the assumption that both are biologically verifiable facts. The slash separating the two in Rubin's term is meant to highlight the fallacy of this easy equation, while also stressing the importance placed upon it in Western culture.

discourage empathy and distance the audience from the actors or characters, Brecht would effectively require audience participation in that critique. Elin Diamond, in her article "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism," discusses the benefits of Brecht's epic theatre modes for a postmodern critique of gender opposition.[10] She argues that sex/gender difference can be deconstructed by reading "difference" as the Derridean "différance," a "possible reference to differences *within*" rather than differences between individuals designated to be of different sexes (85, my emphasis),[11] and furthermore reads *différance* within the context of what she terms Brecht's theory of the "not but," a version of his "alienated" style of acting which advocates that "each action on stage must contain the trace of the action it represses" (86). In other words, if the actions of women on stage always contain elements of *différance* - things that one would "normally" associate with men - they can work toward "destabilizing the bipolar opposition that constitutes gender identity"(85).

My contention throughout the rest of this chapter will be that, in *Top Girls*, Churchill stages the "not but." She presents a dialectic between the heterogenous "field of experience"[12] of her female characters and the homogenous way in which they contract

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[10]For Brecht's comparison of modern, or "epic," theatre with conventional "dramatic" theatre, see *Brecht on Theatre*, Trans. John Willett, 1964, p. 37.

[11]Although Diamond uses the anglophone "difference" to refer to what she means by "différance" throughout her discussion, I will be using the term "différance" itself to avoid confusion.

[12]Reinelt, commenting on Judith Butler's conception of gender as inclusive rather than exclusive, states that "gender must be conceived of as a *field of experience*, socially constructed, constantly changing, not a pair of bipolar opposites inevitably fixing the subject in relation to an either/or cultural practice" (51, first emphasis mine).

that field of experience in order to fit the frame of a uniform gender identity. Rather than celebrating their *différance*, they repress it in order to conform to femininity as it is limitedly constructed by a patriarchal sexual economy. Within this gap between life experience and an artificially imposed representation of that experience Churchill renders the limitations of a bipolar representation of gender visible; in Butler's terms, "the multiplicity and discontinuity of the referent mocks and rebels against the univocity of the sign" (*Performative Acts* 280). Churchill's challenging play thus invites its audience to conceive of alternatives to rigid gender division which would allow for a more accurate representation of women's experience on stage. I will end with a brief discussion of some of those alternatives, which Churchill presents more directly in *Cloud Nine* and *A Mouthful of Birds*.

**Split Into Two: Some Background on Bipolar Sex/Gender Division**

Before I launch into a discussion of *Top Girls*' attack on gender division, I feel it necessary to locate Churchill, her characters and ourselves within the sex/gender system as it currently exists, perpetuates itself and conceals its origins. As Elin Diamond points out, "men and women are certainly different, but gender coercively translates the nuanced differences within sexuality into a structure of oppositions" (*Brechtian Theory* 86). Before we can re-translate difference into *différance*, we need to understand the terms of the project.

Child psychologists regard the division into polar gender opposites as one of the

main themes of early childhood socialization[13]:

> Between two and four years of age, children construct their sex-role concepts and stereotypes. Aiding and abetting the process of stereotyping in the young child is the binary nature of sex; one is either a boy or a girl, and hardly ever something in between. Moreover, younger children are likely to stereotype in the service of figuring out regular - not exceptional - rules about the nature of sex differences; *this is an integral part of core gender identity*. (Herzog et al. 429, my emphasis)

According then to the psychological study conducted by Herzog and her colleagues, identifying one's gender is based not only upon identifying what are supposed to be gender-specific characteristics within oneself, but more significantly upon identifying oneself *within an oppositional structure* in which one is a girl because one recognizes that one is not a boy. It is thus the bipolar sex/gender system that makes gender identification itself possible.

As Debra Silverman points out, in order to be granted an identity in a culture supported by sex/gender bipolarity,[14] one must be readily able to label oneself as either a boy or a girl, particularly when identifying oneself to children. This, of course, paradoxically and inadvertently perpetuates the system, for children, in demanding that those around them fit into the neat gender categories which they have been taught to expect, will continue to have their expectations met by those who do not wish to confuse

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[13]Judith Butler, in her 1993 article "Critically Queer," points out that the division into two takes place even before birth, at the moment of interpellation of a child into the world as either a boy or a girl. In that sense, every human being is always already gendered within the oppositional sex/gender structure.

[14]Not all cultures construct gender as bipolar; in chapter three we will examine one such group of cultures - that of Native North American Indians - and discuss the benefits of their alternative gender concepts for a critique of Western patriarchal gender structures.

them with the complications and inconsistencies resulting from an artificial division into two.[15]

Patriarchal cultures have worked hard to equate sex and gender, because such an equation allows gender's constituting social factors to conceal themselves behind the (supposedly) biologically determined "sex."[16] Both sex and gender appear as essential facts of nature rather than as performative cultural acts which perpetuate their own disguise by continuously recreating "normal" gender appearances.[17] As Ruth Hubbard explains, the erroneous equation of sex and gender has produced the norms of the masculine male and the feminine female in order to "enforce conformity by creating a third class: the deviant":

> By mixing and matching the sex/gender dichotomies, society generates the 'feminine man' and the 'masculine woman,' which makes it possible to label as deviants men and women who behave inappropriately even when there is no overt excuse to call their maleness or femaleness into question. (Hubbard 129)

Within this paradigm, the subversive potential of a gender critique based on *différance* is obvious: if the differences within all individuals - not just a 'deviant' few - are

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[15]By the same token, a particularly "un-boy-like" individual identifying himself as male to a child may have the beneficial effect of expanding the child's notion of typical gender appearances. Silverman makes some interesting comments about these issues in the footnotes to her article, "Making a Spectacle, or Is There Female Drag?"

[16]Many feminist and queer theorists reject the notion of biological sex just as readily as they reject the notion of natural gender. For Monique Wittig, for example, the "biological" division into male and female is based upon a culturally normative interpretation of the body which focusses upon genitalia in order to inscribe difference, and which does not recognize body parts which are similar in both males and females, such as hands and lips, as sexually determinate zones.

[17]Butler's theory of gender performativity, which reads gender as a "stylized repetition of acts" based upon received notions of gender appearances, is laid out in *Gender Trouble*.

emphasized, the category of "deviant" loses all meaning along with the outmoded bipolar sex/gender system that is the source of its identity.

As Butler argues, sex difference allows for more than just an unhealthy and artificial division into restrictive gender categories; it also perpetuates heterosexuality as the only acceptable form of sexuality:

> Because the category of sex only makes sense in terms of a binary discourse on sex in which 'men' and 'women' exhaust the possibility of sex, and relate to each other as complementary opposites, the category of sex is always subsumed under the discourse of heterosexuality. (*Variations on Sex and Gender* 136)

Since we are socialized to recognize our gender via the gender which we are not, the idea of inadequacy or "lack" follows from and supports binary sex/gender opposition. In order to become legitimate we must acquire the missing piece of the puzzle, and thus we are conditioned into a discourse of heterosexuality from childhood. As Butler explains in "Critically Queer," at the moment of interpellation into gender - when the proverbial doctor announces 'it's a boy' or 'it's a girl' - the assumption is made that 'girl' will grow up to marry 'boy'; in other words, no one expects a lesbian. The homosexual is the ultimate example of the deviant, for, within the system, he or she can never become legitimate, can never recover that which is lacking by linking up with the "opposite" gender. Given this standard of deviancy, perhaps the ultimate challenge to the sex/gender system will come from the portrayal of homosexual relationships as more fulfilling and more inclusive than their corresponding heterosexual relationships. Churchill launches just such a challenge in both *Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls*, one which I will explore later in

this chapter.

Finally, because there is no meaningful way, within Western culture, to speak about sex and gender outside of the structure which divides us into two, our experiences and descriptions of the world are shaped, maintained and also limited by gender opposition. As Churchill herself commented when discussing the origins of *Top Girls*, "my whole concept of what plays might be is from plays written by men. I don't have to put on a wig, speak in a special voice [like the female barristers who inspired the play], but how far do I assume things that have been defined by men?" (Interview with Betsko and Koenig). Since any discussion of the subversion of the sex/gender system as we know it must be accompanied by an (at least initial) subscription to that system, I realize that my discussion of sex and gender in binary terms (as it manifests itself in *Top Girls*) risks reinforcing division even as I attempt to describe Churchill's subversion of it.

**Making Gender Opposition Visible: *Top Girls'* All-Female Cast**

*Top Girls*, like the other plays to be considered here, has a same-sex cast playing a host of same-sex characters. While some critics argue that the play's uni-gendered nature shifts its focus from issues of gender to issues of class and politics (see Marohl, for example), I would argue that *Top Girls*' all-female cast actually foregrounds gender, making it not only an issue, but almost another character in the drama. Rather than inviting a "superficial identification with a male/female opposition" (Neumeier 197),[18]

[18]Neumeier believes that "the presence of an all-female cast avoids ... superficial identification with a male/female opposition" (197).

one to be taken for granted because it appears "realistic" to the audience, Churchill's un-gendered cast invites a critique of that opposition by rendering the binary structure of gender visible. As Diamond remarks, "when gender is alienated or foregrounded, the spectator is enabled *to see a sign system as a sign system*" (*Brechtian Theory* 85, my emphasis). There are no men on the stage, so the gender configuration appears "unnatural;" since gender as we know it exists only in oppositional terms, something (at first glance) clearly seems to be missing from *Top Girls*. As the first act proceeds, however, and the guests at Marlene's dinner party begin to tell their life stories,[19] we realize that the "opposite gender," which at first glance appeared to be conspicuously absent, is actually forcefully present, practically at the table with the women on stage. The Law of the Father provides a running commentary throughout the act, as Lady Nijo, Isabella Bird and Patient Griselda all explain their dedication to (and, in the cases of Nijo and Isabella, their guilt over having failed) their fathers; meanwhile, Pope Joan finds herself unable to profess anything other than the Law of God the Father, effacing the legitimacy of her own gender in her description of her life as an essentially male Pope.[20] Gender opposition becomes in Churchill's hands not a fact of nature but an act of

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[19]In the first act, Marlene is celebrating her promotion to managing director of the Top Girls employment agency by hosting a dinner party whose guests include five historical personages: Isabella Bird, a nineteenth century Scottish world traveller; Lady Nijo, a thirteenth century Japanese Emperor's courtesan and later Buddhist nun; Pope Joan, believed to have disguised herself as a man and reigned as Pope in the ninth century; Patient Griselda from Chaucer's Clerk's Tale, and Dull Gret, subject of a Brueghel painting depicting a charge of armoured women into hell.

[20]Joan's blind devotion to the church parallels that of another famous stage Joan - George Bernard Shaw's Saint Joan from the play of the same name. Churchill may be echoing Shaw in more ways than one; Marlene's dinner party, inflected as it is with the insight of historical personages, may have its roots in *Saint Joan*'s anachronistic epilogue.

ideology: the women do not require the physical presence of men in order to construct themselves in opposition to them; they have internalized a need for gender opposition, and hence it is present to them at all times, regardless of the "biological" makeup of their company.

The guests at Marlene's dinner party - women from a myriad of historical and cultural backgrounds who all, in their time and place, crossed the border between what was considered acceptable masculine and feminine behaviour - may in fact constitute the greatest absence in the first act. Despite their achievements in complicating the division between genders, they downplay the subversive value of their actions and choose instead to define themselves in terms of *either* masculinity *or* femininity. Although Joan was Pope, Gret was a warrior and Nijo and Isabella travelled widely, inhabiting a sphere of liberation traditionally reserved for men, all of them re-essentialize their experiences as proof of an essential and univocal gender identity. Recognizing that, within an oppositional sex/gender system one cannot occupy both positions and remain legitimate, they view their complicating actions *as transgressions* with a mixture of guilt and denial. For these women, gender identity is created by the suppression of that *différance* which is permanently embedded in their experiences. Isabella rigorously asserts her femininity, stating that she "always travelled as a lady" (*TG* 62), and feels the need to repudiate her years of "selfish" travelling by translating her experiences into lectures and committee activities in a reclamation of the traditionally feminine role of nurturer which she feels tremendous guilt for having abandoned. Nijo insists that her wanderings were simply an

obeisance of her father's dying wish to enter orders (57), and therefore proof of her devotion as a good daughter. Further, she claims that any time spent away from the Emperor is for her a kind of absence from living, because her womanhood is contingent upon his legitimizing gaze: "there was *nothing* in my life, *nothing*, without the Emperor's favour" (66, my emphasis). Like Nijo, Patient Griselda considers herself to be the property of the men against whom she defines herself. As far as she is concerned, she was first her father's, then her husband Walter's, "to do with what he liked" (77). Gret, meanwhile, sees herself only in opposition to men: "I hate the bastards" (81).[21]

Nijo's comment that Walter "was [Griselda's] life" (77) drives home the fact that these women's identities are not only constituted in opposition to men, but are actually constituted *as* men, as symbols of patriarchal power and pawns of patriarchal control. Joan sees herself, for all intents and purposes, as male, failing to recognize her female body even when pregnant. She forces her body to conform to the male-gendered role of Pope which she occupies, rather than demanding that the role expand its gendered limits to allow for the presence of her body. She even goes so far as to blame her death at the hands of the church not upon its restrictive interpretation of gender roles, but upon her having been the wrong gender for the job (69)! This theme of the absent female carries

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[21]Churchill deliberately characterizes her Gret as a bit of a boor, voracious about physical appetite while disinterested in conversation, and the irony of this reductive characterization, in its comment upon our stereotypes of "masculine" women, provides a humourous counterpoint to the excessive talkativeness (itself a satiric attack on the "chatty cathy" stereotype) of the other women throughout the dinner party scene. Churchill, in her often *apparently* stereotypical characterizations of the historical women in this scene, may be demanding subtly that her audience search themselves for alternative representations of these individuals. For another look at Gret, see Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*; Brecht once wrote that any actress portraying Grusha in that play "needs to study the beauty of Brueghel's 'Dulle Griet'" (Bertolt Brecht, "Notes to *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*," 299).

over into the "real time" second act, with Marlene and her colleagues gauging their success by male-defined standards. As Rubik comments, "neither the modern 'top girls' nor their historical counterparts manage to speak in an authentic female voice but remain entangled in patriarchal ideology as far as their aspirations, their standards, indeed their very self-images are concerned" (177). Despite the problems of locating "an authentic female voice," which might serve to reify rather than demystify the notion of natural gender opposition, Rubik's point is well taken. Within the rigidly divisive sex/gender system, these women have no way to represent the heterogeneity of their experiences and still remain legitimate in the eyes of their ruling patriarchies. By the dinner's end Marlene and her guests are miserable, their melancholy summed up perhaps best by Isabella's comment: "I cannot and will not live the life of a lady...why should I?"(80/1). Sadly, Isabella cannot *not* be a lady, because to be feminine is to be a lady and she cannot conceive of herself outside of the binary gender system's limited prescription of femininity. In order to fit into gender (either gender), there are simply certain aspects of themselves which these women must deny. Churchill thus makes the inadequacy of an oppositional gender structure explicit: gender becomes a construct, not only of cultural and historical factors, but of repression.

*Top Girls* thus asserts, on one level at least, what Julia Kristeva has called the "unrepresentability" of women. This is a point which Churchill makes much less subtly in *Cloud Nine*. In that play, Betty, the demure and all-too-conventional Victorian wife, is played by a man and professes herself to be "a man's creation" (*CN* 151). As Elin

Diamond explains, "the point is not that the male is feminized, but that the female is absent. What remains is a dress, a palpitation, a scream, all encoded female behaviours adding up to ... absence" (*Refusing Romanticism* 278). Like Nijo, Betty is nothing without her patriarch; like Griselda, she "lives" for her husband, not for herself (*CN* 151). Like Joan, her body has been disciplined by the discourse of patriarchy to the extent that it is no longer recognizable as female. These women's parts have been scripted by patriarchal law, and what they present is the performance of received gender codes. While gender performance is visually explicit in *Cloud Nine*, it is perhaps more powerfully conveyed, because more subtly and "realistically" conveyed, by the women-playing-absent-women in *Top Girls*.

**From Natural Fact to Performative Act: Gender Performance in *Top Girls***

> when you're so framed, caught in the act, the (f) stop of act, fact - what recourse? step inside the picture and open it up.
>
> Daphne Marlatt, *Ana Historic*

Margarete Rubik calls the historical 'top girls' of the first act "silent," insisting that, because they simply repeat and do not challenge received discourses they have no voice at all. While it is certainly true that Isabella, Nijo, Joan, Gret and Griselda are all trapped within their various ideologies and are thus limited in their understanding of their own situations, they are not, I would argue, silent. Churchill gives these women a voice by removing them from the cultural and historical frames within which their stories were originally enacted and placing them in a group dialectic which manifests not conformity to

one law, but rather a discourse of different laws. She thereby makes room for a comparison of gender codes rather than merely the rote re-enactment of them, a comparison which reveals gender to be, rather than an unchanging "natural" fact, a series of varied acts contingent upon specific historical moments and cultural practices.[22] Univocality is exchanged for a chorus of female voices, a chorus of femininities, deconstructing the discrete gender signifiers upon which gender opposition depends.

Within a traditional dramatic frame-up, Isabella, Nijo, Gret, Joan and Griselda would have been surrounded by the acceptance and *expectation* of certain actions, such as total devotion to father or husband and the surrendering of children to patriarchal will (which Nijo, Griselda and Joan all experience), and thus these actions would have been presented as the "natural" duties of women. By importing the historical women into an almost a-historical space, Churchill fractures theatre's ability to create the illusions that disguise the social origins of gender. Gender becomes performance insofar as performance is the acting out of the ideological framework behind theatrical illusion (see Féral).[23] Out

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[22]Think of the difference as, perhaps, one between seeing a performance of *A Doll's House* and participating in a round table discussion with Nora Helmer about her role as Torvald's wife.

[23]*Top Girls*' Act One dialectic is an example of Brecht's *verfremdunseffekt* (often called "A" or "Alienation" effect), which was designed to "denaturalize and defamiliarize what ideology makes seem normal, acceptable, inescapable" (Diamond, *Brechtian Theory* 85). Elin Diamond, in her article on the application of Brechtian theory to feminist practice, explains that, although Brecht himself never conceived of the A-effect as a means to deconstruct gender politics, the A-effect is frequently used by feminist dramatists to that very purpose. Churchill herself uses the technique successfully in *Vinegar Tom* and *Cloud Nine*, to name but two plays. In the former, songs performed by actors in modern dress (and thus used to distance the audience from the play's otherwise consistently seventeenth-century setting) comment upon the action within the historical frame, literally singing out the ideology that is implied in the actions and motives of the characters in the drama itself. In *Cloud Nine*, the cross-gender casting of Betty and Edward in the first act, and Cathy in the second, results in the "foregrounding [of] gender as a fiction of the male gaze" (Case 181), and plays on the arbitrary equation of sex and gender within the system of binary gender opposition. In *Top Girls*, the fracturing of historical narrative in act one, the use of an all-female cast to foreground gender, and the multiple-casting of roles are examples of Churchill's use of the A-effect.

of time, place and frame, the codes of their cultures, classes and ideologies become literally written on the women's bodies - in the form of historical costume, speech and body language - as evidence of the processes which produced the seamless performances of their genders within their own narrative frames.[24] As Marohl comments, "apart from its definition in the context of a specific culture, male or female gender does not exist" (314).[25]

The party resembles a kind of after-theatre discussion of the ever-changing role of woman throughout history, one which deconstructs the univocality of patriarchy as well as of gender identity. These women, as their horror over each other's stories reveals, are not constituted or oppressed by the same universal patriarch; on the contrary, patriarchy is as culturally and historically varied as the gender constructions it enforces.[26] Nijo sympathizes with Griselda's need to obey her master in all things (they are both thirteenth-century women), but cannot manage to understand Isabella's more liberal

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[24]As far as Lady Nijo is concerned, in fact, clothes *are* her identity. She is not only nothing without the Emperor, but also without her layers of fine silk that were the sign of her place as a Lady in the court. When she pines for the death of the Emperor, she looks for a reaffirmation of her status as a Lady by asking "would I have been allowed to wear full mourning?" (*TG* 80) Griselda's status as a lady is likewise determined, for Nijo, by the fact that she was arrayed in expensive clothes upon becoming the wife of a marquis. In this fashion (pun intended), Nijo dramatizes the popular feminist conception of gender as a kind of garment which is put on as a sign of encoded femininity and worn as a sign of legitimacy within the sex/gender system.

[25] He also notes that the period costume of the dinner guests renders Marlene's modern dress a kind of period costume of its own, foregrounding the historical and cultural specificity of her own gender performance.

[26]In this sense, Act One provides an implicit critique of the all-too-common feminist fallacy - to which Marlene subscribes - that patriarchy should be spelled with a capital P, and that all women's oppression can thus be read - and solved - in the same way. (See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, chapter one)

interpretation of her role as a woman. Marlene and Isabella are horrified by Walter's treatment of Griselda, and her passive acceptance of it. The physical abuse Nijo suffered at the hands of the Emperor leaves Marlene aghast, but Nijo insists it was merely "normal"(80) and in the process exposes the cultural and historical contingency of the term. "Facts" of women's history - and history in general - are revealed as merely the accepted mores of a particular time and place; the fallacy of an essential truth of any kind is inadvertently exploded by Joan when she comments "I did know the truth. Because whatever the Pope says, that's true" (68).

Pope Joan's gender performance is exceptional for the way in which it deconstructs the biological basis not just of gender but of also of sex. Like Betty in *Cloud Nine*, Joan is a woman in a man's body; the conditions of their transvestism, however, are quite different. Unlike Betty's, Joan's role is not cross-cast; rather, Joan is a man insofar as she has long perceived her body to be male. She dressed as a boy in her youth in order to be allowed to study (an activity sanctioned only for men in her world), and, as she explains, after impersonating a boy for a while she got "used to it" and thus decided to "stay a man" (*TG* 65) in order to devote herself to learning. Over the course of her transvestism, she gradually lost any sense of her femaleness to the point where she finally mistook her pregnant body for a body simply "getting fatter" (70). The means by which Joan makes this "mistake" deftly demonstrates the method by which we daily translate sexual *différance* into difference and arrive at an arbitrary division between sexes and genders: she reads her body as both a biological entity and a socially inscribed space,

and she *interprets* that body according to the accepted social mores of the world surrounding her. Surely she is not female, she reasons, because she is Pope; therefore, instead of viewing her abdomen as a womb, she views it as a stomach - a man's stomach, a Pope's stomach - and it *becomes for her* part of a male body. As Butler explains, gender and (to a degree) sexuality are constituted by the "stylized repetition of acts" which, over time, appear natural (*Performative Acts* 270); Joan's "acts" were the acts of conventional masculinity, and so she became - in her eyes and the eyes of those around her - a man, anatomy and all. Her disruptive interpretation of her sexuality undermines our assumption of a purely "biological" basis for sexual bipolarity, and also calls into question biology's status as a "pure" science based in objective observation alone. Biology, Joan demonstrates, is always already dependent upon the subjective interpretation of its data - the way in which it is perceived and accorded meaning by those who study it - and that data are therefore subject to the dictates not just of nature, but also of ideology.

Churchill further shatters theatrical illusion - and the illusion of a uniform gender experience - with her use of multiple casting. In *Top Girls*, seven women play 16 characters, an arrangement resulting in three actresses playing three roles each and three actresses playing two roles each.[27] The effect of double and triple casting is to disrupt the notion of a fixed and singular female identity; identity itself becomes a role within which, as Quigley points out, "not just double, but multiple, options are available" (39).

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[27]The actress playing Marlene is not doubled. Churchill has long been fond of multiple casting; *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* is her most adventurous foray into it.

The audience is forced to consider not simply the characters on stage, but the actresses themselves who inhabit those characters, and thus recognize the mechanisms of theatrical illusion as they seduce us into effacing actors' and actresses' bodies in our reading of character. Because the actresses are constantly reappearing as different individuals, the sacred, uniform nature of identity is re-written on stage as an "ideological construct" (Marohl 308). Instead of the actresses' bodies being "subsumed by the 'sign of a character'"(Diamond, *(In)Visible Bodies* 190), their bodies become a signifier without specific referent, pointing to a "polymorphous thinking body" (Diamond 190) which in turn points to the impossibility of pinning "woman" down as a stable, uniformly gendered sign.

**Marlene: Managing Director of a Pre-Scripted Gender Show**

While the conversation of the historical women in Act One lays bare the various religious, cultural and temporal markers of their widely disparate female identities, Marlene, as the director who convened the show, seems a little too eager to gloss over the differences between her guests in an effort to retrieve "woman" as a univocal signifier which could stand up against a patriarchal hegemony which she falsely reads as universally oppressive. In this sense, she paradoxically begins to play the patriarch even before she is divested of her overtly feminist trappings. While Isabella, Joan and Nijo argue over religious pursuits, Marlene comments, "I don't think religious beliefs are something we have in common. Activity, yes" (*TG* 61), in a desperate bid to regain

common ground on which to build her fiction of women's solidarity. When she proposes a toast to the "extraordinary achievements" of the women around the table, they all return the toast "To Marlene" (67), not to themselves or each other, refusing solidarity in the face of what they rightly perceive to be experiences too diverse to lump under one category. Despite Marlene's insistence that "we don't all have to believe the same" (60) to be united in our stance against patriarchal oppression, she misses the point of what women are standing up against. It is, after all, hundreds of years of being forced to suppress heterogenous gender experiences that these women have in common as the source of their oppression; a reification of uniformity will hardly present a viable challenge to such a system. As Butler has pointed out, feminists often seek to combat "the invisibility of women" with "a universal presupposition of cultural experience" (*Performative Acts* 274), but, as Brown notes, in the case of *Top Girls* the result is "almost a parody of feminist glorifications of women's community" (127).

While the dinner party seemingly reclaims history's lost women by allowing them the freedom to represent themselves, Churchill complicates this reclamation by demonstrating the impossibility of uncontaminated representation. Our reading of these women's stories, like our reading of any kind of history, is filtered through third-party interpretation, be it the presence of an overt narrator, or the all-too-covert ideological filter which is as much a part of the way we read these women's experiences as it is a part of the way they present them. Marlene is the dinner party's overt narrator. Like the historians of old, she is eager to see the history of the women around her table as a

linear progression towards something, in this case freedom from patriarchal oppression. She listens to the tales her guests tell (although listening itself is parodied by the dialogue style, in which the women all speak over and drown out one another) and then, smoothing out the gaps between what is said and what she wants to hear, she subsumes their experiences under the uniform conclusion, "we've all come a long way" (*TG* 67). Rather than disrupt narrative, pointing to the fallacy of its uniformity, she allows it to further mould women's experiences into a limited space. Here Marlene is clearly at odds with Churchill, for *Top Girls* itself stages the disruption of narrative: the first act, while supposedly taking place on the Saturday before the second act, is actually taking place out of time, and the third act takes place a year before the second act. The play itself is thus regress, (and not progress as Marlene would like to read it), a kind of parody of the methods and assumptions of history.

Yet Marlene's role in the play's ahistorical first act is not quite as easily read or understood as I have just suggested. Except for the few jarring moments I have highlighted - and which an audience, ironically, would likely gloss over at first glance - Marlene actually appears quite sympathetic, looking after each of her guests with the panache of a born hostess, and listening and responding with great distress to their often painful stories. It is only in the second act, when a much more ruthless Marlene is presented to the audience, that the significance of her Act One comments begins to sink in. The dinner party hangs over the second act as another kind of filter through which we observe and deconstruct Marlene's performance. But Churchill is careful, despite the

illusion of Marlene as a totalitarian patriarch which the play ultimately creates, to present her identity as complex and multifaceted, a composite of factors which are only explained in the final few moments of the third act. We as spectators are thus fooled into judging Marlene before we have even really met her; our assumptions about women - particularly hard-nosed women like Marlene - and about the process of identity construction, are laid bare.

Parody surrounds Churchill's portrayal of Marlene in Act Two. As Managing *Director* of the Top Girls agency, Marlene mistakenly assumes that she has graduated from being a mere performer to directing the "gender show" that informs daily happenings at the agency. What she fails to recognize, however, is that one of the qualities of a good director is his or her ability to challenge the script's limits, altering it to accommodate the varied talents and experiences of each new set of actors.[28] Marlene, failing to do anything but enforce the gender script as handed down to her, remains subsumed by it. In a parody of sex-role stereotyping (which ironizes society's tendency to label women in the workplace as "masculine") she "plays the man" in an over-the-top performance of the stereotypical male oppressor.[29] As Kritzer observes, she is thus "merely the most up-to-date example of what [Betty] acknowledges herself to be: a

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[28]Churchill herself has never directed her own plays, but frequently works with theatre troupes to create a script in a workshop environment. This is just the type of communal script of which Marlene cannot conceive.

[29] It might be worth remembering here the study which Herzog and company conducted into the construction of gender as oppositional; Marlene's "masculine" performance will inevitably be informed by the stereotypes of men which she has formed over time. It is thus not surprising that her interpretation of the opposing role is a string of gender clichés.

man's creation" (145/6).

Marlene exhibits typically male-like behaviour according to Linda Jenkins, who argues that the dichotomy between men and women is entrenched by an ideological division between the domestic as women's sphere, and the public as men's sphere. Marlene shuns all domesticity, as her encounter with her sister Joyce in Act Three demonstrates. As Jenkins says, "the language of the public sphere begins by assuming strangers are speaking across the waterhole; possibly strangers who have no need to trust each other" (13). When Marlene first arrives at work in Act Two, she is met "across" the office coffee maker by Nell and Win who, we learn, are rather jealous of Marlene's promotion. Their conversation is one smacking of distrust and cynicism. Marlene's business at the employment agency consists of the trafficking of women from (primarily) male employer to male employer, an activity which Gayle Rubin has pointed to as a means of solidifying bonds between men in traditional kinship relationships. We hear Marlene quip that she's "putting [herself] on the line" when she sends potential 'top girls' out to meet prospective employers (*TG* 87); her version of the "traffic in women" thus seems not all that far removed from the one which Rubin observes. Marlene is not seeking to better the working conditions of the women who come to her; she is using them to solidify her own relationship with her (primarily male) clients. Furthermore, in an effort to make her "girls" seem more "appropriate" for the jobs to which she sends them, she directs them to conceal those elements of their identities which will hinder a good sell (marriage and children should not be mentioned; talking too much is frowned

upon). Marlene proves herself to be no better than the patriarchs whom she rabidly denounced at the dinner party - and no more progressive than the women with whom she dined - as she insists on repression rather than celebration of *différance* as a means of gaining the status of "top *girl*."

In Lacanian terms, Marlene covets the phallus. She is granted that bastion of male power by Nell and Win, who exclaim that she has "far more balls than Howard" (100), a male co-worker whom Marlene surpassed to become Managing Director. Marlene's symbolic possession of the phallus presents an implicit challenge to Lacanian theory, which asserts that women will always lack authority because of perpetual phallic lack. This challenge is pre-empted, however, because Marlene uses the phallus as a means of authority *over* others, women as well as men, and therefore women, generally speaking within the context of the play, remain lacking. In possession of the symbolic phallus, Marlene becomes the symbolic father. She carries that role into Act Three, when she appears at the home of Joyce and Angie, the daughter whom she abandoned to Joyce to raise. Far from creating a woman's space in their home, the injection of Marlene creates a gendered dynamic in which she "plays" the absent father while Joyce plays the martyred mother. Although the fact that both roles are assumed by women lays the groundwork for a subversive performance of same-sex parentage, this performance is once again preempted, as Kritzer observes, by the ideology it re-entrenches: "Patterned on the patriarchal opposition between masculine and feminine, these roles [Marlene and Joyce play] offer no new choices to contemporary women" (148). We learn that Joyce may

have been unable to bear children and therefore may have taken Angie in as a method of legitimating her womanhood; Marlene, like a typical patriarch, points out Joyce's "lack" (*TG* 133). Interestingly enough, Marlene and Joyce fight over class differences and political ideologies as they perform the opposing gender roles which those differences and ideologies helped entrench: Marlene argues for the capitalist position which entrenched the public sphere as male domain, while Joyce takes a socialist, anti-upper class approach which is the rallying cry of many lower class women trapped in low paying, slave-labour jobs. As in the first act, Churchill again points to the cultural and temporal contingency of the oppositional sex/gender system.

Since Marlene wants to be a high-flying *lady*, it is perhaps no surprise that she seeks to perform her identity - despite all appearances to the contrary - as untroublingly uniform and *essentially* feminine. She is the only character played throughout by a single actress who takes no other role, and thus appears unnaturally stable in a theatrical space in which the norm is plurality.[30] While she works hard to maintain the appearance of a stable, uniform identity at work, in the domestic space of the third act that stability deconstructs, as we learn that she has had two abortions and that her identity is actually the product of a fractured family life that pitted her parents against one another and children against parents in a stereotypical display of the battle of the sexes (Marlene still

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[30]Amelia Kritzer observes, "while Marlene controls the action, she does not participate in the theatrical transformations that signal possibility beyond the realm of represented action. In the context of the role displacements going on all around her, Marlene as stable player/role dyad, seems...*limited* by her traditional powerful quality of immutability. She has gained power but must use all her energy to defend it; she has not empowered herself to participate in a shared, diffuse and expanding access to possibility" (142, my emphasis).

blames only her father for her mother's miserable life (139)). Marlene's fractured identity renders the uniform subjectivity she both performs and enforces an illusion, a performative construct that conceals its own origins behind the most tenuous of appearances.

**Unconscious Drag?**

Like Isabella, who cannot bear to think of herself perceived as "other than feminine," Marlene seeks to reassert her femininity by wearing only skirts to the office (62).[31] As a result, however, she appears as a combination of typically masculine speech acts and feminine body language, a walking encapsulation of *différance* which she displays even as she tries to conceal it. She thus performs an unconscious sort of drag which, far from having the desired effect of re-creating a feminine ideal, troubles the very gender structure which necessitates oppositional "ideals."[32] Marlene is the "not but"; that is, she contains difference: both extremes of the gender binary inhabit her body. In terms which Debra Silverman applies to a Joan Crawford performance, Marlene

> ...straddles the saddle between two sorts of drag, overt femininity [dress] and aggressive masculinity [speech, acts] ... her performance always challenges gender if it does not fully subvert it. Both positions transgress gender identification by the incongruity of the roles [she] occupies simultaneously. (80)

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[31]Silverman points out that often the performance of overt femininity by those who practice typically masculine actions is an indication of guilt over having usurped the phallus. At any rate, in Marlene's case this performance is certainly born of the fear that her identity is being lost in her masculinization, since she cannot conceive of her identity as other than gendered in the feminine.

[32]According to Debra Silverman, "drag does not necessarily involve either cross-dressing or dressing as a hyperstylized version of one's own gender...Rather, by throwing into flux the very grounds of identification, theoretical drag makes any articulation of a specific gender assignment difficult" (71).

Appropriately, Marlene is labelled "not natural" (113) by Mrs. Kidd; she is not, indeed, "natural," for she has inadvertently debunked the fallacy of both uniform gender identity and natural gender difference. Marlene is a "threat to the social scene precisely because she transgresses traditional limits of feminine vision, control and authority" (Silverman 75), and so Mrs. Kidd, if she is to legitimize her own identity, must label Marlene in opposition to herself.

But Marlene, too, seeks legitimacy. Like her historical counterparts, she downplays the subversive value of her performance in an attempt to make herself conventionally identifiable within a system for whom the masculine woman is a deviant. Since in Marlene's estimation one can only get to the top by playing the subordinate role effectively, her vision of her own gender performance presupposes a need to fit into a power heirarchy that is always phallic. She recognizes the need to role-play gender (hence the skirt), but only as a form of succeeding within (and hence reinforcing), rather than troubling, the power heirarchy. Thus, her 'drag' performance contains the potential for subversion, but Marlene remains blind to that potential: it is we as spectators who are charged with the task of reading it.

But dressing for success is only half of Marlene's 'gender trouble;' her emprisonment within the sex/gender heirarchy manifests itself most explicity after work ends. She may be the "balls" of the operation at the agency, but in sexual relations she perceives a need to be the feminine ideal which men expect. She has little luck dating because, as she says, "There's fellas who like to be seen with a high-flying lady. Shows

they've got something good in their pants. But they can't take the day to day..."(*TG* 137). For the men she dates, her show of masculine power is titillating, no more than a sexual rush within the heterosexual economy that finds role-playing a source of stimulus - just as long as it isn't "real." She expects her boyfriends are "waiting for [her] to turn into the little woman" (137) - a prospect to which she cannot reconcile herself. She cannot play the woman in the way they expect her to play it - adhering to the sex-role stereotypes which they feel constitute normalcy - and this inability constitutes for her a lack: she remarks that she feels illegitimate and "horrible" (137).[33] Heterosexual relationships demand that opposites attract, and as long as Marlene locates herself within the heterosexual economy of the play she will either be forced into an unnaturally restrictive interpretation of her femininity, or risk being labelled as deviant.[34] She articulates her options with characteristic cynicism: "Who needs [men]? Well I do. But I need adventures more..."(137). Marlene must choose between men and adventures; between *either* a "deviant" performance and career satisfaction, *or* a typically "feminine" performance and a man. She cannot have both. Marlene, like her dinner guests, is a victim of the sex/gender system she perpetuates: in refusing to challenge its exclusive binary structure she excludes herself. Her final misery, like theirs, comes from her recognition that she is trapped in a system which will allow her to be legitimate only if

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[33]As Margarete Rubik observes, tension exists "between masculine performance and [Marlene's] sense of failure as a woman" (178).

[34]This is not to generalize about all heterosexual relationships; merely to say that, by its very nature, the term demands opposites of one form or another. Within the *Top Girls* heterosexual economy, as I will discuss in the next section, these opposites are always extreme.

unproblematically gendered.

**The Homosexual Challenge**

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, homosexuality is the ultimate expression of deviancy within bipolar sex/gender systems because it challenges the purpose of the system's binary structure: it doesn't necessitate opposites. In *Top Girls*, however, heterosexuality, not homosexuality, constitutes disfunction. No heterosexual relationships in *Top Girls* work; they are all portrayed as selfish endeavours wherein each party uses the other for personal gain. Marlene "needs" (137) men to accord legitimacy to her claim to femininity; her boyfriends need her to prove their manhood (something high-flying in their pants). Joyce's husband left her for another woman, we learn in Act Three; Win's boyfriend is already married. As for the historical 'top girls,' their sexual relationships are a catalogue of disfunction: Nijo is the Emperor's love slave, Griselda is a pawn in Walter's power-driven mind games, and even Isabella marries out of duty to her sister's memory. Sexual relationships are about naked power in this play; they are about seeking legitimacy in the eyes of a system based on the arbitrary division into two.

Churchill undermines this division as she undermines compulsory heterosexuality, by proposing homosocial and latently homosexual relationships as the only viable ones in *Top Girls*. This kind of sexual troubling is not new to Churchill: *Cloud Nine*'s main project is the deconstruction of normative heterosexuality. In one of the play's many parodic moments, Harry, a homosexual man, and Ellen, a lesbian female, are married for

the good of the Empire in a climactic send-up of Imperial sexual purity. In the second act, homosexual relationships replace heterosexual relationships as the norm, and though they are not without their troubles, the most positive relationship in the play occurs between two women - one bisexual, one lesbian - and a gay man. As Clum explains, "patriarchal marriage is eliminated as the ideal...as a result, gender definitions which supported marriage seem more fluid" (106). Troubling the compulsory heterosexual superstructure results in the opening up of new gender configurations.

While *Cloud Nine*'s homosexual alternatives are overt, those in *Top Girls* are all covert. None are sanctioned, none come to fruition, as is perhaps fitting given the play's ultimately bleak ending. Nevertheless, they constitute a glimmer of possibility, an alternative for the audience to recognize and incorporate into the overall message taken away. Isabella Bird cannot stop talking about her sister; she makes it obvious that Hennie is the person dearest to her heart (Isabella lists Hennie before her husband in her catalogue of "the loves of [her] life"(*TG* 65)). Hennie is Isabella's self-professed other half (137), undermining the expectation that a husband naturally "completes" a woman. Isabella even goes so far as to marry the doctor that nursed Hennie at her death because he, like Isabella, was devoted to Hennie and "had the same sweet character" (65) as she. Isabella's husband therefore becomes, rather than the completion of her gender puzzle, a supplement for the person who had already satisfied any need Isabella may have had for completion.

Amelia Howe Kritzer has called Angie and Kit's friendship "the closest

relationship in the play" and one that "suggests an alternative to traditional patterns of relating" (149). She does not go so far as to call their relationship latently homosexual, but I do not think it much of a stretch to do so. Their backyard junk shack is the only real woman's space in the play, and within it they "cuddle" (*TG* 95) and profess affection, albeit in a juvenile manner befitting their young ages. Their relationship's doom, however, can be read in the metaphor of the shack that is their preferred space for relating: it is temporary, it is a threat to the appearances of a neat, normal house. Joyce can sense something peculiar about Angie and Kit's relationship, and seeks to neutralize it by telling everyone, herself included, that the older Angie has always been "kind to little children" (97). Joyce constantly constructs Angie within the heterosexual economy; her fear is that Angie will not marry and will therefore become "one of those girls might [sic] never leave home" (97). The option of an alternatively gendered relationship does not occur to Joyce; she makes it clear that the only option for Angie, if she wishes to attain social legitimacy, is a marriage that, like Isabella's, will provide a supplement for that which she already had.

**The Challenge of the Female Body**

If the bipolar sex/gender system virtually effaces women within its male-validating heirarchy, as critics such as Kristeva and Luce Irigaray contend, then an effective way to subvert that system is to make it forcefully aware of that which it denies. In his essay, "Female Landscapes," Stanton Garner Jr. argues that "traditional stagings of the female

body...both derealize it as subjective presence and rematerialize it as sexualized object" (188). In other words, as Sue Ellen Case implies in her discussion of *Cloud Nine*, the female body as it exists within the bipolar sex/gender system is a construct of the male gaze that recognizes "female" as the "natural" object of male desire. For those women who internalize the patriarchal script of compulsory heterosexuality, the desire to discipline the body into the object of the male gaze comes to appear "natural" as well. Many feminist critics have contended that the traditional interpretation of the undisciplined female body within patriarchal cultures is one characterized by fear of the body's dark, dirty orifices. Thus, in order for women to exist within the legitimizing heterosexual dichotomy, their bodies must first be tamed, effaced, and replaced with an "image or fiction" of the bodily ideal (Garner 187).

Marlene and many of the other 'top girls' participate in the systematic derealization of their own bodies. Pope Joan is perhaps the most excessive example, denying her body altogether in order to fit into a prescribed gender role. Nijo's body only exists to her when clothed in the fine silks representative of her culture's interpretation of a "Lady," and Griselda understands her body in terms of either pride or shame, depending upon her husband's whim.[35] Marlene's discomfort with her body is apparent during her conversation with Joyce in Act Three. She has internalized many patriarchal fears of the female body: she "doesn't like messy talk about blood," and doesn't want "to talk about

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[35]When Walter turns Griselda out of his house, he strips her of the clothes which granted her status as a noblewoman and his wife. He insists she keep a slip, however, "so *he* wouldn't be shamed" (78, my emphasis).

gynaecology" (135). We learn that Marlene reads babies as a similar kind of female abjection: she has had two abortions (135) and was clearly not interested in raising Angie when she had her. Iris Young has argued that pregnancy, while often regarded as a sign of women's extreme difference from men, can be re-interpreted as a metaphor for the complex and multivalent nature of female identity, as it "reveals a bodily experience in which the transparent unity of self dissolves..." (Garner 216). She contends that the fetus blurs the distinction between inner and outer, self and other, and becomes a physical manifestation of decentred subjectivity. Within this paradigm, Marlene's rejection of her pregnant body (much like Joan's) can be viewed as another example of her blatant refusal to come to terms with the plurality of her own identity.

Feminist playwrights, as Garner explains, have recently challenged this enforced disembodiment of the female with physical re-embodiment, making the "other" female body present on stage and forcing the gaze of the audience to contend with it. *Top Girls* stages only one such bodily transgression, and it is promptly sanitized. Angie is the transgressor: overweight, dumpy and somewhat slow,[36] she is termed "a big lump" by her mother (*TG* 121) and is disregarded by Marlene ("She's not going to make it" (120)) on the basis of her physical and mental unrepresentability within the phallic economy that rules at Top Girls. Unlike Marlene, Angie celebrates her body's "unmentionables": she licks Kit's finger covered in menstrual blood (90), and does not seem bothered by her

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[36]Reviewers of both the original 1982 London production and the subsequent one in New York concur that Angie was played as such; the fact that most of these reviewers were men may, however, complicate this interpretation.

physical appearance. Marlene is unable to accommodate Angie's body within her limited view of female subjectivity, and hence attempts to clothe her in the costume of accepted femininity by presenting her with a dress as a gift in Act Three. When the audience first sees the dress in Act Two, however, Angie has put it on "to kill [her] mother" (98) in what might have been, had it actually been carried through, a violent reaction against the forces that have attempted to shape and delimit her identity. The dress's ill-fitting state only serves to display openly on Angie's body the representational limits of gender ideals.

Despite her denial of her own body, Marlene inadvertently hints at a possible means of re-embodying the female in the workplace, that very locale where she cannot seem to imagine a transgressive body "making it." Arguing with Joyce about her own suitability for motherhood, Marlene mentions a managing director whom she admires, "who's got two kids [and] breast feeds in the boardroom" (134). Marlene, who counsels her 'top girls' to keep possible pregnancies to themselves, cannot for her delusions of power recognize the subversive potential of a pregnant or maternal body in the boardroom. By breast feeding in a space traditionally reserved as the locus of masculine power, the managing director introduces the domestic into the public sphere, challenges the gendering of the workplace, and expands the limits of what is considered legitimate "work" to be done there or elsewhere.[37] Her body is made present to the boardroom not as an object of male heterosexual fantasy, but as the subject of another economy

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[37]In "Beyond Brecht: Britain's New Feminist Drama" Janelle Reinelt discusses the struggle of socialist feminism to have domestic work acknowledged as a necessary part of the sphere of production.

altogether. In this sense she is simultaneously "in" and "out" of the heterosexual market, foiling because never completely satisfying the male gaze.[38]

**Beyond the Binary: Other Churchill Plays**

Despite the stark contrast between the field of their experiences and the confines of their oppositionally-structured gender identities, all of the women in *Top Girls* remain chained to the sex/gender hierarchy which limits their mobility and disciplines their subjectivity. Churchill's purpose in this play is deconstructive rather than reconstructive, demonstrating the limits of the system rather than presenting alternatives to it. Elsewhere in her repertoire, however, viable alternatives to the oppositional configurations of sex and gender do exist.

In *Cloud Nine*, as I have mentioned, the most positive relationship depicted in the play exists between two women and one man of varying sexual orientations. The man in question is Edward who, as a young boy in Act One, is played by a woman both to highlight his homosexuality and to ironize traditional stereotyping of homosexuals as effeminate. In the second act, Edward has trouble overcoming the effeminate role that has been ascribed to him as he seeks to play the wife to his male lover. When he is rejected by this lover, he joins his sister and her lover in a grouping which includes a child, and which challenges traditional configurations of the family by appearing far more nurturing than any heterosexual relationship in the play. Edward moves from identifying himself

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[38]Debra Silverman gives a thorough account of the subversive potential of self-consciously displaying the body in "Is There Female Drag?"

within traditional sex-role stereotypes to exploding those stereotypes by labelling himself "a lesbian"(*CN* 307). Anne Herrman calls this moment "the most transgressive" in the play (313), and certainly Edward's proclamation complicates his relationship with his sister and her lover tremendously, for no longer can we confidently call it either heterosexual or homosexual. In proclaiming himself a lesbian, Edward calls into question our assumptions about the biological basis of homosexuality and the unproblematic fashion in which we equate gender and sexuality, and totally undermines our expectation that every relationship between a man and a woman must be an affirmation of normative heterosexuality and binary gender difference. The terms "heterosexuality" and "homosexuality" themselves are rendered permanently suspect.

In *A Mouthful of Birds*, her 1986 collaboration with David Lan, Churchill "extends the body's representational limits more definitely than ever before" (Diamond, *(In)Visible Bodies* 202). Among its stories, the play tells that of Herculine/Abel Barbin, the nineteenth century hermaphrodite whose transgressive dual sexuality was rigorously disciplined into the fiction of a male body by medical and religious professionals. Churchill and Lan re-embody Herculine/Abel by pairing her/him with the homosexual character Derek. In the moment their bodies physically unite, the result "resembles a two-headed hermaphroditic body" (Diamond 203) which is the physical manifestation of sexual *différance*. Derek, no longer forced to repress his plurality for the sake of fitting a cultural norm, expresses comfort with his body for the first time. His is the Churchillian identity that at last fully subverts the bipolar sex/gender system:

> This body ruins representation. It undermines a patriarchy that disciplines the body into gender opposition; it dismantles the phallomorphic economy that denies visibility to the female (except as opposition or complement to the male). (Diamond, *(In)Visible Bodies* 203)

While *Top Girls* does not quite "ruin" bipolar gender representation, it does complicate it thoroughly, dramatizing its limits and its inadequacies. In the next chapter, Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women* takes this complication a step further, making the multivalent female subject physically present on stage and challenging our most basic assumptions about theatrical representation.

# Chapter 2.

## Bodies in Performance:

## Staging Female Identity in Albee's *Three Tall Women*

> If I go to the theatre now, it must be a political gesture, with a view to changing, with the help of other women, its means of production and expression. It is high time that women gave back to the theatre its fortunate position, its *raison d'être* ... the fact that there it is possible to get across the living, breathing, speaking body ... All it requires is one woman who strays beyond the bounds of prohibition, experiencing herself as many, the totality of those she has been, could have been or wants to be..."
>
> -- Hélène Cixous, *Aller à la Mer*

> I am ... noticeable, but almost never identified.
>
> -- Miss Alice, *Tiny Alice* I, iii

Chances are Hélène Cixous would not have thought much of Edward Albee's early theatre. His female characters (critics say) are bitches, as his plays continually recreate the "emasculation of the American male and American society by the American bitch mother" (Julier 34).[39] In fact, the most common term critics use to describe Albee's 'women' is "emasculating," as though their very existence is predicated on the desire to disable or steal the phallus, reinforcing the Lacanian female fantasy and proving the old-school psychoanalysts right about the "nature" of women living under patriarchal rule. Not a very feminist playwright? Not a very feminist critique, either.

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[39]Laura Julier critiques Albee's plays from a feminist perspective, and does so with great care and sensitivity. This statement is her summary of the trend in Albee criticism to date, not necessarily a statement of her own beliefs.

In recent years, feminist critiques of the work of male writers have become tremendously popular, and Albee has had his share. Some, like Mickey Pearlman, cannot condone what they consider to be misogynistic tendencies in Albee's body of work, which Pearlman blatantly calls "anti-female" (183). He takes particular issue with *The Zoo Story*, Albee's first play, which he says "agonizes over the predicaments of men by further diminishing the emotional, sexual and spiritual needs of women" (187). For Pearlman, Albee amounts to little more than an "angry young man" (190) who blames women for America's woes and dramatizes his misogyny as a viable explanation for the decline of modern life. While Pearlman's analysis of Albee's work makes a valuable contribution to feminist criticism insofar as it points to moments in his texts where female characters are perhaps unfairly treated, I would argue that he does not make a clear enough distinction between the attitudes of Albee's characters, and the attitudes of Albee himself. At first glance, the superficial "Mommy" character (*The American Dream*, *The Sandbox*), the violent and raging Martha (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*), the "angular" Julia (*A Delicate Balance*) and the terminally absent Alice (*Tiny Alice*) all seem to be mere stereotypes of the most malicious kind, characterizations which show little interest in women's concerns or in the source of their seemingly atrocious behaviour. But is the first glance - that which theatre audiences often get (and are content to keep) as their one and only impression of a play - enough to praise or condemn a piece of work that strives beyond superficial reading? Albee is known as a playwright whose social criticism is biting, and who aims to put the audience to work in the process of that criticism:

> The problem ... is getting people to listen to the words. They will listen only to what they want to hear and then translate it into something they can live with. I don't like to let them off the hook, which is one of the reasons I get criticized for not having the catharsis in the body of the play. I don't think that's where the catharsis should be anymore. I think it should take place in the mind of the spectator some time afterwards. (Interview with Irving Wardle: 1969)

Albee's plays - and particularly the female characters within them - need to be considered in light of this theatrical *modis operandi*; his work struggles to engage audiences critically, to force them to abandon their traditionally passive position and recognize themselves as a necessary component of the drama, of the social criticism taking place on the stage. Our responses to his plays, the attitudes with which we approach them, form part of the critical context out of which Albee's work is created and performed.

Albee has always maintained that his female characters are misunderstood. He claims that they are "stronger and more able to deal with life" than the male characters he creates, and that those who accuse him of misogyny are simply unable to accept women as "strong and vital and vocal people" (Interview with Jeanne Wolf: 1975). Despite the problems with this generalizing accusation, it nevertheless points to one possible answer to the nagging question of how a playwright can intend, believe and perceive one thing about his drama while many critics and theatre goers may perceive another. The nature of perception itself is under scrutiny here; the way we *choose* to read or see Albee's women, the generosity with which we approach their actions and the information given us about them, makes the difference as to whether or not they will be labelled evidence of misogyny on the part of the playwright, or on the part of the society which the

playwright is critiquing. Bonnie Blumenthal Finkelstein, in her feminist re-visioning of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, argues that female characters in Albee plays do conform to "stereotypical notions of women's place" (52), but as such become Albee's means of critiquing the normative notion of "women's place" by which their identities are stifled, rather than evidence of his lack of ability (or desire) to create "realistic" female characters. If Albee's goal is to unseat, even to "terrify" his audiences (Interview with Patricia de la Fuente: 1980), then perhaps his female characters have always stood as a challenge to spectators to look beyond looking, beyond the immediate desire enforced by the passive nature of spectatorship to dismiss difficult characters as "difficult," and instead investigate the sources of that difficulty.

Out of this complicated and often contradictory critical context comes *Three Tall Women*, the play which Edward Albee had been preparing his entire lifetime to write. By this I do not simply mean that Albee had wanted to write *Three Tall Women* for many years, although that certainly seems true,[40] but rather that *Three Tall Women* serves as the culmination of his *oeuvre*'s critical thrust over the past thirty years.[41] It provides at

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[40]In the introduction to *Three Tall Women*, Albee pinpoints the moment he began "writing" the play as the moment of his "first awareness of consciousness," also his earliest memory of his adopted mother, on whose life the play is based. It is no mean stretch to call *Three Tall Women* the most autobiographical of Albee's plays, and in interviews since its release he has called its writing "a kind of exorcism" (*New York Times*, April 13, 1994, C15+).

[41]One of Albee's earliest plays, *The Sandbox*, was written as a response to the death of his grandmother, whom he felt had been poorly treated by his stepmother (reflected in the vicious "Mommy" character in the play). *Three Tall Women*, composed as a response to the death of this stepmother almost thirty years later, rewrites *The Sandbox* in many ways: as we will see, it represents a much less cynical and more sophisticated view of the aging process, the relationship between generations of women, and the progression toward death which we all face.

last a forceful solution to the problem which we have seen plaguing him, that of how to represent women in the context of a social criticism which takes aim at a society that for many years has limited women's mobility - a criticism which plays itself out on the stage, a traditional locus of women's objectification and effacement - without further diminishing women's concerns and essentializing their identities. Taking as its subject matter the life story of a woman on the verge of dying, *Three Tall Women* stands atop the Albee *oeuvre* as the antithesis of and response to *The Zoo Story*, the all-male play notable for its main character's overtly misogynistic generalizations about women. While in *The Zoo Story* the women being condemned are conspicuously absent, denied the right to represent themselves, *Three Tall Women* restores - or rather complicates - that right. Instead of two men on a park bench we get three women in a bedroom,[42] or rather three actresses who come to represent one woman: while the first act of the play presents a "realistic" encounter between three women of disparate ages, in its second act *Three Tall Women* stages its "main character" at three different moments in her lifetime simultaneously - ages twenty six, fifty two and ninety something (her final age is never fixed) - a physical representation of multivalent female identity.[43] Rather than restricting

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[42]There is a male figure in *Three Tall Women*, the son of the dying main character, but he has no lines. He appears at the moment of interpellation by his mother(s), and seems to be a figment of her imagination. His appearance is problematic, however, in that it comes at a moment in the play when the barriers between reality and the imaginary are being challenged on stage. Ultimately, his character begs to be interpreted as part of that challenge, as neither completely of one world or another.

[43]In the play's first act, the action centres around an elderly woman, "A," her nurse, the middle aged "B," and a young woman, "C," a lawyer's clerk who has come to discuss matters pertaining to the elderly woman's estate. In Act Two, all three characters reappear - and are referred to by the same "names" - as manifestations of Act One's "A" during her youth, her middle and old ages; they reflect critically upon the events of "A"'s life, often echoing and dissecting matters she had already described in Act One. The most important- and confusing - thing to remember about the difference between characterization in Acts

women's representation to the realm of the imaginary - be it our imaginations, in the absence of female characters, or traditional theatre's imagining of the female body as an incarnation of male angst or desire - this play, in its multiple incarnations of an 'individual' identity, challenges the relationship between the imaginary and the real by *staging* the impossibility of ever fully representing the female subject on stage, in "real time." As Act Two's "three women"[44] argue over the social, familial, and economic forces that have shaped and sought to repress them, they do what no other Albee play does: they deconstruct the "emasculating bitch mother" figure, foregrounding her identity *as such* as a social construct, and rendering infinitely problematic the hegemonic and all-encompassing labels which have come too easily from the mouths of critics - and Albee characters - over the years.

Albee's plays have always had a prevailing interest in the performative nature of identity. Rather than presenting identity as an essential, autonomous entity, something located in the body rather than mapped onto it,[45] I would argue that Albee's plays have always sought to debunk the myth of essential identity, challenging us to think of

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One and Two is that, while in Act One "A" is a discrete individual, in Two the character labelled "A" is only one manifestation of "A"'s identity. Although their names are the same, their roles are not directly translatable.

It has been suggested to me, and is worth noting, that *Three Tall Women* may have been in part inspired by Michel Tremblay's *Albertine in Five Times* which examines one character at five different moments in her lifetime.

[44]As one can well imagine, finding a term to describe the main character of *Three Tall Women* as she appears in Act Two is a challenge which I'm sure Albee intended as part of his critique of female representation in this play. The terms which I use to describe this character are not uniform, but always try to reflect a sense of the plural which is inherent in her identity.

[45]These terms are Jane Desmond's, from her illuminating article, "Mapping Identity Onto The Body."

ourselves as composed of a series of roles - be they racial, cultural, gender, age or other-related - rather than as a central essence defining who we are. In *A Delicate Balance* (1967), Edna and Harry appear on the doorstep of Agnes and Tobias, their best friends, "frightened" (*DB* 31). Of what are they frightened? The play seems to suggest they fear not knowing who they are, for an identity is what they have come seeking. They proceed to move in and "take over" the house, performing tasks that have, until now, classified Agnes and Tobias as its "rightful" owners. 'Agnes' and 'Tobias,' the play suggests, are really just an accumulation of social roles disguised as autonomous identities; all it takes to usurp them in this context is a better performance. Later, *The Lady From Dubuque* (1980) centres upon the appearance of the mysterious Elizabeth, claiming to be the mother of Jo, who is dying of cancer. Jo's husband Sam refuses to believe Elizabeth's claim, but finds himself unable to prove otherwise: Elizabeth *is* Jo's mother insofar as she performs the role perfectly. Identity, Elizabeth puts forth, is really just "semantics" (*LD* 152), a matter of what we say and do. Sam is forced to admit that he no longer knows who she, or, for that matter, *he*, really is, and at that very moment the character Oscar descends the stairs wearing Sam's clothes and 'playing' Sam (152). Because the progress of the play reveals 'Sam,' like 'Agnes' and 'Tobias', to be a no more than a conglomeration of words and actions disguised as an essential identity, Oscar's performance merely foregrounds and exposes the illusion of essential identity upon which theatre's existence - and its power - is predicated. Is it not in the theatre, after all, that we are asked to believe that the characters on stage are unique individuals, while in fact all

the time they are being played by other, supposedly unique, individuals?[46] Theatre itself is based on the performance of identity; it works to conceal that f(act), but Albee chooses to reveal it.

If Albee's plays ultimately assert identity as performative, a series of non-exclusive social roles mapped onto rather than located inside the body, then *Three Tall Women* is the physical manifestation of this facet of Albee's critical vision. Blumenthal has argued that the biggest problem facing Albee's female characters is a "lack of identity" (52); I would argue instead that the problem has not so much been a lack of identity as of a viable method of representing it. By "splitting" the play's main character into three roles, Albee foregrounds her identity as performative and intersubjective, undermining and exposing the unified female subject, as she is normally represented in the theatre, as a false and dangerous construct born of an artistic medium determined to contain and objectify women and their bodies. No one "woman" on stage in this play can stand alone; she always already necessitates - and is necessary to - the presence of the other two. *Three Tall Women*'s threefold body thus proposes for feminist theatre a viable method of representing women on the stage, insofar as it *challenges* representation, pushing at its margins rather than accepting its usual modes and tenets. This body constantly eludes full representation, refusing to be fixed, refusing to be objectified, refusing to be effaced. It cannot be summed up in a sound bite; instead, it makes the

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[46]This, of course, is exactly what Brecht argues in his performance theories, although I know of no evidence that Albee has been consciously or directly influenced by those theories, except perhaps as they manifest themselves in work by other modern and postmodern playwrights.

inadequacy of the sound bite palpably present to its bearer.

In the discussion which follows, I will consider *Three Tall Women's* vision of female representation both as a means of re-thinking Hélène Cixous' theory of "body presence," and as a means of deconstructing the traditional dramatic structures which have often resulted in the creation of problematic stereotypes like that of the "emasculating bitch mother," and against which Cixous' theory struggled. I will then go on to consider *Three Tall Women*'s threefold body as a means of displacing and returning theatre's objectifying gaze, the most entrenched and perhaps also most dangerous of these structures. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the politics of aging, and Albee's use of age as a complicating factor in sociological constructions of gender identity.

## Bodies In Performance: *Three Tall Women* Revisions Cixous' Phenomenology of Theatre

In her landmark essay on feminism and theatre, *Aller à la Mer*[47], Hélène Cixous asks the question which had long been troubling, and continues to trouble, feminist theatre critics: "How, as women, can we go to the theatre without lending our complicity to the sadism directed against women, or being asked to assume, in the patriarchal family structure that the theatre reproduces *ad infinitum*, the position of victim?" (546). Marc Silverstein calls this dilemma "*the choice that is not a choice* between masochistic

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[47]The term *mer* in this context is generally translated as both "the sea" and "the mother."

identification with the women in the performance frame ... and sadistic identification with the male protagonist..." (Silverstein 507, my emphasis). Given Silverstein's terms of identification, which are split along gender lines, one might be tempted to argue that the solution to the problem both he and Cixous articulate - that of a patriarchal theatre which "disembodies" the female on stage and replaces her with an incarnation of male fantasy (Garner 187) - lies in the all-female play, which, in its elimination of the male protagonist, ostensibly also eliminates his fantasies, and therefore one's ability to identify with them. As we have seen in *Top Girls*, however, merely replacing male protagonists with female protagonists does not automatically disrupt or eliminate the "patriarchal family structure;" on the contrary, it can subtly and disturbingly reinforce that structure by demonstrating the ways in which it has been internalized by women. Uni-gendered plays are a point of departure for a critical feminist theatre, but as a method of subversion they cannot stand alone.

The question of how to represent women in theatre without objectifying or fictionalizing their presence is a complicated one, because the theatre demands an objectifying representation of everything on the stage in order to maintain the voyeur-exhibitionist dichotomy between spectator and spectacle on which the illusions of theatre depend. As Elin Diamond explains, the problem therefore is one of the nature of theatrical representation itself:

> The body, in particular the female body, by virtue of entering stage space, enters representation - it is not just there, alive, an unmediated presence, but rather 1) a signifying element in a dramatic fiction; 2) a part of a theatrical sign system whose conventions of gesturing, voicing and

> impersonating are referents for both performer and audience; and 3) a sign in a system ... usually owned and operated by men for the pleasure of a viewing public whose major wage earners are male.
>
> (*Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory* 89)

But can we ever escape representation? Cixous seems to think it possible, and necessary, if we are to have a true feminist theatre: "If the stage is Woman ... it will mean ridding this space of theatricality. *She will want to be a body presence*; it will therefore be necessary to work at exploding everything that makes for staginess..." (*Aller* 547, my emphasis). Not surprisingly, Cixous' notion of "body presence" has come under fire from other critics (see Silverstein) because it assumes that women can appear on stage - Western culture's most revered locus of "representation" - as "an unmediated presence," but does not complicate that assumption as Diamond does above; that is, it does not recognize that the female body - like the male body, or any other body - is always already within representation when on stage, is always already a sign in a complicated system of signifiers and referents. As Silverstein observes, " '*Aller à la Mer*' echoes a persistent desire within performance theory ... the desire for a theatre in which the closure of representation yields the plenitude of the real..." (Silverstein 508). In these terms, the problem with Cixous' theory becomes obvious: it is, after all, that very "plenitude of the real" - the fiction of the "real woman" and the representation of unproblematic female bodies in the theatre - that feminist theatre criticism is trying to undermine.

Critics of Cixous, however harshly they disagree with her belief in a phenomenological solution to the problem of women's objectification on stage, also tend to agree that the main trouble with Cixous is not her critical thrust, but rather her

conclusion. If we re-examine the theory included in her explanation of "body presence" above, we discover that Cixous' conclusion does not necessarily follow from her own discussion: "ridding ... space of theatricality" and "exploding everything that makes for staginess" sounds very much like a good way to *undermine* traditional modes of representation, rather than as a way to escape them.[48] I propose that what is called for as a means of re-imagining women's place in theatre is a revisioning - not a wholesale rejection - of Cixous' notion of "body presence" within her own theoretical terms. I further propose that *Three Tall Women* effects that revisioning by defining "body presence" *as a challenge to received ideas of bodily presence*, rather than as a mere inverse reification of them. Instead of proposing that women must truly be "seen" on the stage, outside the bounds of representation, the play's threefold body disrupts the theatre's assumption that a woman's body - as a singular, autonomous unit - can be seen at all. Instead of "the closure of representation yield(ing) the plenitude of the real," closed representation yields multiple representations which undermine accepted assumptions about the "realism" of the uniform dramatic body. In Simone Benmussa's terms, the stage must become "the visual centre ... of *unattainable* essence" (Silverstein 515, emphasis in original), the locus of a decentred body which rejects completely the

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[48]Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, argues extensively against the belief, held by many poststructuralist critics, that the possibility exists for an escape from the Symbolic order as it dominates Western cultural life today. She observes that what many critics consider to be an escape from representation is really an undermining of that very representation on a large scale; she cites Foucault's interpretation of the memoirs of Herculine Barbin as an example. Whereas Foucault believed that Barbin's hermaphroditic body escaped the bounds of traditional sexuality, leaving him/her free of the constraints placed upon sexuality by a bipolar system, Butler argues that, were escape ever possible, Barbin's troubles would have been over. She offers instead that Barbin's body troubled accepted modes of sexual being to such an extent that s/he was disciplined into an artificially coherent sexuality and thus driven to suicide. (See *Gender Trouble* chapter three)

theatrical notion of a central presence. "Body presence" is resurrected in *Three Tall Women* as *bodies in performance*, bodies simultaneously "within representation while refusing its fixity" (Diamond, *Brechtian Theory* 89).

Performance, in José Féral's terms, is intricately tied to representations of the body. Insofar as "performance" is that spectacle which rejects theatrical illusion (note the parallels to Cixous) and reveals the hidden processes of staginess, while the crux of theatrical illusion lies in its ability to convince its audience that the bodies on stage belong not to actors, but to characters whose representation is meant to efface the actors' bodies in their every appearance, then a successful performance would appear to hinge on the breakdown of the unitary subject on stage. Féral comments: "The body (in performance) is made conspicuous: a body in pieces, fragmented and yet one..."(171). This description seems tailor-made for *Three Tall Women*; as the uniform subject that is the character of "A" in Act One fragments into three characters in Act Two, her body literally goes to pieces.[49] The actresses playing "B" and "C" assume new roles, abandoning the postures of nurse and legal assistant respectively to become incarnations of "A" at different ages. The actress who plays "A" in Act One meanwhile also changes roles; rather than embodying the frail woman who suffers a stroke at the end of that act, she reappears after intermission on her feet, speaking and moving freely, another incarnation of "A." This multiple role-playing heightens the sense of fragmentation; just as in *Top Girls*, it renders

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[49]These bodies could be considered what Elin Diamond refers to as "Brechtian bodies": the technique of fragmenting "A" into three bodies for the second act seems to be a textbook example of the alienation effect as it is designed to foreground the illusion of subject-unity on stage.

the actresses' bodies conspicuous beneath the guise of character. As the audience discovers that no single one of the splintered incarnations of "A" can ever fully embody her identity, the play renders that identity a site "of struggle and change," one which parodies and problematizes traditional theatre's insistence upon a one-to-one correlation between actor and character. The struggle is further complicated by a fourth body on stage in Act Two, that body which is no/body, and which represents "A" as she ended Act One: lying in the bed at *centre stage* is a plastic dummy wearing an oxygen mask. She is the symbolic incarnation of the lifeless, *objecti*fied female body typically portrayed on the traditional stage. Remaining onstage throughout the second act, she "ruffles the smooth edges of representation" (Diamond 89), mocking the theatre's attempts to create a fixed, female presence.

*Three Tall Women* puts quite a spin on the "one-woman show." Not only does Albee populate the play with three women instead of one, but he populates it with three women without names. Choosing to call the characters "A", "B" and "C" seems at first glance reductive, as though the playwright imagines his characters to be no more significant than the letters representing them. Yet this first glance (like all first glances in Albee works) leaves much to be considered: Albee's "reductive" choice is actually ideally suited to his critical purpose, for the letter names "demystif[y] the subject on stage" (Féral 178), and further decenter the "main character." They also signal Albee's understanding - and critique - of the function of naming in our society. Names are an identification with the father, with patrilineage; one's name is not one's choice - it is the

enforced denial, at the moment of interpellation into culture, of selfhood in favour of another's mark of identity. For women, surnames ('sir'names) are also an enforced identification with the husband, linguistic proof of a wife's traditionally subordinate role. Not to name under such semiotic circumstances is to ironize our need for recognizable labels - something which signals identification with the already-legitimized - in order to accord an individual legitimacy within the terms of culture. But Albee's use of the alphabet is ultimately more than just a further destabilization of unified identity or a parody of the social function of naming; it is an inclusionary rather than exclusionary practice, one which embodies the intersubjective nature of identity which proper names purposefully conceal.[50] Names represent a closed circuit of familial identity: to be Albee is to be not O'Neill. They are markers of possessive individuality, and present the illusion that Albee and O'Neill are completely separate individuals, when of course we recognize the significant influence which the latter playwright has had on both Albee's work and life. We are always alarmed to find someone in our classroom, office or neighbourhood who shares our name; we feel as though our individuality has been compromised. All that has been compromised, however, is the illusion of individuality, of closed inner essence. Names disguise our intersubjectivity the way theatre disguises multivalent identity, but "A," "B" and "C," in their very nature as letters in a sequence, are interdependent and immediately recall the rest of the alphabet, inviting the possibility

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[50]In Judith Butler's terms, "the source of personal and political agency comes not from within the individual, but in and through the complex cultural exchanges among bodies in which identity is ever-shifting ... is constructed, disintegrated and recirculated only within the context of a dynamic field of cultural relationships" (*Gender Trouble* 127).

of infinite (or at least 23) other representations of the play's main character. The three women on stage defy closed representation not only by virtue of their plural performance, but also by virtue of the many possible incarnations of "A" to which they point, and which remain un-staged. They are truly "within representation while refusing its fixity," "naming" female subjectivity as inclusive rather than exclusive - an open performance.

**Three Women Unframed: Albee Undoes the Traditional Dramatic Text**

Albee's revisioning of traditional modes of female representation extends beyond the bodies of his "character" to the dramatic frame itself. What at first curtain-rise appears to be a typical Albee drama unfolding takes a sharp turn into the surreal at the midway point, defying audience expectation and demanding our active critical reflection.[51] Just as *Top Girls*' opening dinner party acts as a critical filter through which we are meant to read the actions and attitudes of the women in the rest of the play, Act Two of *Three Tall Women* demands a complete re-examination of the attitudes and ideas with which we as an audience approached Act One. The play opens with three separate individuals on stage: a frail, babbling old woman ("A"); a middle-aged woman, abrupt in speech and manner ("B"); and a young woman, somewhat conservative, uptight and argumentative ("C"). Laura Julier, in her article "Faces To The Dawn: Female Characters in Albee's Plays," argues that the main tension in Albee's drama lies not between the

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[51]Demanding audiences' critical reflection is hardly a new thing with Albee, but, as I will argue in a later section, in *Three Tall Women* this demand takes a highly unusual and subversive form.

sexes but between the generations. She classifies his female characters into three representative groups: the whiny daughter figure, the cynical mother figure, and the aged, often helpless but nonetheless vividly sexual, grandmother figure. Some or all of these figures reappear, Julier argues, in virtually every Albee play.[52] *Three Tall Women* seems to be no exception: "A" could easily fit the grandmother 'type', "B" the mother role and "C" that of the daughter. The characteristic "tension" between the generations which Julier cites is also present: the women move from moments of seeming solidarity to outbursts of defensive rage. "C" 'plays the daughter' perfectly as she criticizes and contradicts "A" from the moment the play begins, continually antagonizing the gap in age and experience between them for fear of acknowledging the inevitability of old age whose approach she denies and rejects: "It must be awful...To begin to lose it, I mean - the control, the loss of dignity..." (*TTW* 13). "B" retorts with characteristic "mother figure" cynicism: "Oh, stop it! It's downhill from sixteen on! For all of us!" (13) "A" meanwhile exudes physical helplessness - she is unable to go to the bathroom or move around the stage at all without the aid of at least one of the other women - but at the same time demonstrates the verve and sexuality characteristic of her aging Albee shadow, the famous "Grandma" from *The American Dream*. She is quick to try to foil "B" - breaking a glass in the bathroom in order to get her attention - and speaks candidly about her sexual history: "I didn't like sex much, but I had an affair" (25) she remarks at one point, and

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[52]For example, *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox* dramatize the tension between mother and grandmother figures, while *A Delicate Balance*, *All Over* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (in the interaction between Honey and Martha) present the mother-daughter dynamic (these examples are primarily Julier's).

later excites her companions with the raunchy story of how her husband once presented her with a diamond bracelet by dangling it from his erect penis (54-6). To all 'knowledgable' eyes, this is a story we have seen before, full of Albee character types resurrected from the archives. As "A" recounts her life story, full of the gaps and contradictions that point to approaching senility, the audience is invited to identify with "C," who, like us, has been plunged into an environment alien to her. "A" meanwhile emerges as the least viable audience surrogate on stage at the end of the first act, for while we sympathize with her disabilities, she nevertheless embodies a moment in time with which no one in the theatre wishes to identify.[53] Like "C", we are lulled into viewing "A"'s recollections as the disjointed, albeit often amusing, ramblings of a senile old woman, and our distance from her is aggravated by her mental confusion, which is palpable; she even appears to have forgotten her age![54] As the act ends, "A" suffers a stroke; "B" and "C" run for help, and the curtain falls.

At this point Albee abandons his dramatic frame of choice, and catches the audience, rather than his characters, in the frame-up. As we file out for intermission, expectations for Act Two are uncertain. Albee has chosen to end the first act in a peculiar manner; one generally expects a play to end with the death or near-death of a

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[53]I will be discussing *Three Tall Women's* deconstruction of society's taboo against aging more completely in a later part of this chapter.

[54]The question of "A"'s age runs like an undercurrent throughout this act, and in fact is never answered. By the end of Act Two, it becomes clear that this lack of resolution is intentional; refusing to pin down her age becomes a means by which Albee problematizes the gap between young and old and throws into relief society's devaluation of the aging woman.

character, but we are now faced with a full hour or so of playing time in which, theoretically, anything could happen. Of course, as we gather in the theatre lobby to chat about what will transpire in Act Two, that "anything" becomes somewhat constricted. We assume that we will return to some variation of the usual: an old woman dying, silent, perhaps even physically absent. She might recover and continue her life story, now enhanced by a visit into the unknown, or be replaced by doctors and family gathering around to discuss her condition, her past life, and form our final impressions of who she "really" was. Whatever we imagine will transpire, however, the one thing we do not expect is the reincarnation of "A" as a threefold entity.

Why not? Above all, we expect that the theatrical conventions governing Act Two will be the same as those which governed Act One. In other words, we expect things to continue in a "realistic" mode, as a linear progression toward an eventual solution, after which the play will be over and we will be free to go home. Albee instead disrupts our expectations by changing the rules of the game; he exchanges the deterministic sequence of events begun in Act One - which would allow the audience to reach an end, come to a conclusion, form a simple judgement of character and action - for an ever expanding field of theatrical possibility. Churchill, as we have seen, abandons narrative convention in the first act of *Top Girls* and continues to problematize the very idea of progress throughout that play; like her, in *Three Tall Women* Albee recognizes the dramatic conventions of progress and resolution as among those strategies which can govern, label and trap female characters in the theatre. By fracturing "A"'s being into

three and refusing to continue the narrative thread of Act One, Albee explores the possibility of a different way of concluding.

Of course, the limitations of our own expectations as audience are not necessarily the consequence of a lack of imagination. There are plenty of theatrical precedents governing what we consider to be within the realm of the imaginable, all of which adhere to what Cixous calls the *Vieux Jeu* ("old game") of the bourgeois theatre, a game characterized by "playing the role, maintaining the *ancien régime* of mirror-gazing ... encourag(ing) the double perversion of voyeurism and exhibitionism..."(*Aller* 547). In other words, there is a structure at work in the "old game," one which locates and traps the female body as object, and one which encourages its silence:

> With even more violence than fiction, theatre, which is built according to the dictates of male fantasy, repeats and intensifies the horror of the murder scene which is at the origin of all cultural productions. It is always necessary for the woman to die in order for the play to begin. Only when she has disappeared can the curtain go up; she is relegated to repression, to the grave, the asylum, oblivion and silence. When she does make an appearance, she is doomed, ostracized, or in a waiting room. She is loved only when absent or abused ... Outside and also beside herself. (*Aller* 546)

But Albee, as he himself has commented, is not one to let audiences off the hook and ease them into the comfort of passive spectatorship. Instead of complying with the rules of the "old game," *Three Tall Women* sends them up, puts them on show, performs the tricks of their trade; rather than bowing to convention, Act Two interrupts, interrogates and makes visible the theatrical manoeuvres of that narrative which have enforced the "silence" of women in drama. Albee mocks the dramatic 'prerequisites' which Cixous

laments above: rather than dying or disappearing, the dummy body on stage in Act II is always on the verge of dying, but refuses to disappear. Meanwhile, in order for the act to begin, the main character must not only not disappear, but must reappear threefold: effacement is foiled, exchanged for a body that refuses to be erased by refusing to "stand still." "A," "B" and "C" are always already "outside and also beside" themselves, mocking their role as objects to be gazed upon by "looking at being looked at" (Diamond, *Brechtian Theory* 89), acting as each other's spectators. By drawing attention to alternative stage constructions of themselves, these women point to their identities as *always already* theatrical constructs, shattering the illusion through which we read those identities in Act One as "real" and unalterable.

**Deconstructing the Bitch-Mother Stereotype and the Origins of the Feminine Act**

The great value of *Top Girls*' dinner part scene, as I noted in chapter one, is that it rejects traditional narrative for critical dialogue, allowing its characters to examine the cultural contingency of gender codes and thereby debunk the myth of gender as natural or pre-social. Like Churchill, and to the same ends, Albee exchanges traditional narrative for an interrogative dialectic between acts in *Three Tall Women*. Shortly after the play was first performed, Albee commented to the *New York Times* that its second act allows the main character "to do something not afforded the rest of us - to talk with herself at three different stages of her life and explore her evolution" (*Edward Albee and the Road Not Taken*, June 16, 1991, B1+). Rather than simply re-enacting their roles as incarnations of

the main character, the three women in Act Two reflect upon the experiences and concerns of their life in an atmosphere of critical self-reflection. Most significantly, they deconstruct what Daphne Marlatt has called the "feminine act," that 'gender show' passed down from mother to daughter which encourages, from a young age, a seamless performance of femininity meant to conceal its didactic origins behind the myth of the "natural woman."[55] Act Two, composed largely of monologues and critical exchanges between the women, challenges us as audience to "lessen our dependency on the visual and [stress] the auditory" (*Aller* 547), paying attention to the moments in the main character's life when she is forced to construct herself as a stereotypical, conniving woman for the sake of legitimacy and survival in a world where women are judged and valued on the basis of how well they conform to the mother of all absences, that elusive "feminine ideal."[56]

"C," as the incarnation of the main character at age twenty six, is at the height of her belief in and adherence to that ideal. She classifies herself as a "good girl" (*TTW* 70), raised to be so by a "strict but fair" mother.[57] Her mention of her mother is significant, pointing to that woman's role in moulding a "good girl," and foregrounding "good girls" as

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[55]Marlatt's critical examination of the "feminine act" takes the form of a creative inquiry; see her novel *Ana Historic* (Toronto: Coach House, 1988).

[56]Butler, in her article "Critically Queer" (*Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*, 1993), discusses the "feminine ideal" as a construction of patriarchal culture designed to reinforce normative heterosexuality. She argues that this ideal is by its very nature unattainable, but that in the hunt for it normative notions of gender and sexuality are repeatedly reinforced.

[57]The phrase is an ironic echo to Act One, where "C" cynically comments on "A"'s "strict but fair" parents (45).

a creation more of maternal will and desire than of either God or nature. For "C," being a good girl means acting like a proper lady, keeping her "eye out" for the man of her dreams (70), and idealizing marriage with her one true love: in other words, it means "doing her gender right" (see Butler, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*), conforming to the feminine stereotype, flirting, practicing little lies and illusions as a means of capturing the "right one" (*TTW* 70). She is by trade a purveyor of the "feminine act": she works in a clothing shop as a mannequin. She reprises her role as mannequin on stage, complete with flirty movements directed towards the audience, but, with textbook precision, she does not wish to appear self-aware. In fact, she goes out of her way to make her "act" appear natural. It is only when "A" steps in that the illusion is broken and its methodology foregrounded: "I remember it differently, little one" she comments, "I remember more ... design, I remember a little calculation" (72). "C" is aghast, refusing to abandon the illusion she has created. "A" and "B" mock her refusal, and direct her to continue. When her "show" does go on, however, it is more hesitant, reflecting the damage done to her bag of tricks: "I am a ... good ...girl" she stammers. (73). As though recognizing the need to switch tactics, she trades in her show of femininity for something more closely resembling gender *performance*: she deconstructs her own acting methods, revealing her illusions like a magician foiled in a last-ditch bid for attention:

> I *know* how to attract *men*. I'm *tall*, I'm striking. *I* know how to do it. Sis slouches and caves her front in; I stand tall, breasts out, chin up, hands ... just so. (73, emphasis in original)

Her vocabulary reveals all: she "knows" how to attract men; she has been taught by the

women who came before her, learned well how to stand and how to move, and, most importantly, how to conceal her lessons behind graceful movements meant to appear natural to spectators. Her sister is a lousy gender actress (although a decent gender performer) by contrast; she fails the acid test because her lack of enthusiasm for the ideal she is paid to portray shows through. Like an actress getting into character, "C" embodies the ideal as though it has been laminated onto her person, has become her person, effacing any possible alternative identities.

Deconstructing the "feminine ideal" is more than just a matter of revealing the tricks of the trade, however. Act Two goes further in its investigation, probing the myths of an idyllic existence promised to those "good girls" who play the role perfectly by following the feminine (heterosexual) script and seeking the man of their dreams.[58] "B" deconstructs "C"'s idyllic dreams by naming the ideal as lie, as a fiction constructed in order to perpetuate the feminine act and keep women in the subordinate position:

> Twenty-six to fifty-two? Double it? Double your pleasure, double your fun? Try *this*. Try *this* on for size. They *lie* to you. You're growing up and they go out of their way to hedge, to qualify, to ... to evade; to avoid, to *lie*. Never tell how it is - how it's going to be ... Never give the alternatives to the "pleasing prospects" ... that Prince Charming has the morals of a sewer rat, that you're supposed to *live* with that ... *and* like it, or give the ap*pear*ance of liking it. (94, all emphasis except second and third ellipses in original)

"B" does more than simply expose the lies told to girls, however; she makes it clear that marriage is not a fantasy but a business, the only truly legitimate business in which a

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[58]There is evidence in the text to suggest that this "heterosexual script" is itself placed in question by the main character's sister, who does not much like men and was forced into marriage in order to meet her family's, and society's, approval (45).

woman could participate in 1928.[59] The man of "C"'s dreams turns out to be stocky, "like a penguin" (82), and has only one eye - the inverse of the ideal which she has been brought up to expect, and a man who, in his ocular impairment, forms a grotesque parody of the good girl who "keeps her eye out" for the perfect man. "C" is crushed to learn that marriage doesn't always happen for love, but, as "B" remarks, "there is the future to look out for" (84). "A" makes the "ulterior" motive clear: "Our father *dies*" (85, emphasis in original). Without the support of her father, the main character must find another legitimate source of income - and identity - in order to maintain the position in society to which she has been brought up to adhere; the penguin "*is* rich, or is going to be" (85, emphasis in original). Limited in her options, she assumes the role of matriarch, resenting her husband's unfaithfulness and his family's condemnation of her, and finds herself seeking comfort and solace elsewhere. "No wonder" she says,

> one day we come back from riding, the horse all slathered ... he helps us dismount, the groom does, his hand touching the back of our thigh, and we notice, and he notices we notice ... and no wonder he leads us into a further stall - into the fucking *hay* for God's sake! - and down we go, and it's revenge and self-pity we're doing it for until we notice it turning into pleasure for its own sake, for *our* own sake ... (94)

That pleasure for her own sake, however, cannot last if the main character is to survive within the social circle she inhabits; after a month, she has the groom fired, "because it's dangerous not to, because it's a good deal [she's] got with the penguin, a long-term deal in

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[59]Albee's play gives no dates, but accurate guesses of its timespan are not out of the question. *Three Tall Women* gave its first performance in Vienna in 1991, and its first act is set, for all intents and purposes, in the present. In Act One, "A" claims to be ninety-one, although "C" insists that she is ninety-two. Either way, her birth date can be charted somewhere around 1900. "B," as her incarnation at fifty-two, tells "C," as her incarnation at twenty-six, that she will meet her husband in two years (78). In this sense, the play's main character is truly as old as the century.

spite of the crap he pulls, and you'd better keep your nose clean ... for the *real* battles..." (94). Her needs and concerns as a woman are effaced by the social and financial pressures of her role as wife, the role for which she had her whole life been groomed (pun intended, perhaps?). She finds there are only two subject positions within the limited identity of conventional femininity which she can occupy, that of wife and that of "whore" (83). Since the latter is social suicide, she is trapped in the former.

Within this context, it is perhaps not surprising that "B" is mad as hell. On one level, she enacts the part of the quintessential Albee emasculating bitch-mother - shrieking at the incarnation of her "son" on stage and insisting that she is the only glue holding her family together (95)[60] - but on another level, that of critical inquiry into the main character's history, motives, needs and desires which the act foregrounds, she also enacts the deconstruction of that now-familiar stereotype. By interrogating the attitudes, pressures and expectations which map that cruel identity onto women's bodies, *Three Tall Women* provides the critical matrix through which to re-view all of Albee's female characters. The violence, it seems, is not always directed towards American society and the American male; the American female shares equally in the pain.[61]

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[60]In her rage against her child, her drunk sister and the husband she complains won't stand up for himself, "B" is literally a re-visioning of Agnes from 1967's *A Delicate Balance*.

[61]The play does a deft job of deconstructing feminine stereotypes, but it leaves masculine stereotypes relatively untouched. "A" and "B" list a number of reasons why women may cheat on their husbands; men however, they say, cheat simply "because they're men" (84, 85). Generalizations that extreme are never condonable, but in this context I would argue they are understandable, serving perhaps as an ironic counterdiscourse to the pat generalizations made in *The Zoo Story* about women's motives and actions. As Jonathan Culler points out, sometimes "a movement that asserts the primacy of the oppressed term is strategically indispensable" (Savona 541).

Act Two's perspective on marriage as a business continues a theme already active in Act One, that of woman as commodity. The main character buys herself a future with her feminine wiles because she has no real alternative, and is deemed a whore by a social order that would rather not admit her actions are a necessary survival tactic. But a legitimate future is not a one-time purchase, as "A" reveals in Act One; she must continue to pay indefinitely, growing into the label with which she has been branded. The story she tells of her husband's "gift" of the bracelet turns out to be a tale of legitimized prostitution, legitimized because bound by the social sanction of marriage. Her husband expects oral sex in return for the bracelet, and leaves angry and disappointed when she explains that she "can't *do* that" (56). "C" inadvertently articulates how the pursuit of the feminine ideal encourages women to internalize their own commodification: for her, jewels represent "tangible proof ... that we're valuable" (103, ellipses in original). This statement, made in defense of her ideals (and the "ideal"), nevertheless renders visible the construction of woman as commodity in a (heterosexual) economy that expects her to trade her body for a social identity; when "C" realizes what she has said, she is embarrassed at having once again exposed one of the deftly disguised tenets of patriarchy upon which her own identity is constructed.

**The Unmaking of Spectacle**

The moment of greatest transformation in *Three Tall Women* may be the intermission between its two acts. Poised between the traditional dramatic frame of Act

One and the performative, deconstructive frame of Act Two, it is the moment where our expectations of the actions to follow are formed, and the moment when our participation in "a scopic economy that splits visual pleasure between an active [traditionally] male specular subject (who looks at women through ideologically encoded eyes) and the passive female specular object" is confirmed (Silverstein 507). We sip our drinks, patiently waiting to return to our seats, to return to *watching*. We are smug in our role as theatre spectators, bearers of the all-seeing gaze.[62]

The theatre is the stronghold of the gaze, Western culture's original source of sanctioned voyeurism. Barbara Freedman has referred to traditional theatre as the locus of "a taming of the gaze by the symbolic order" (60), part of a narrative of domination and mastery in which, since the eighteenth century, all scopic power has been associated with the spectator.[63] But the gaze, like the "feminine act" and the "bitch-mother," is merely another theatrical construct, one which conceals its origins in the darkness of the theatre, denying that it is dependent for its very existence upon the spectacle on stage. Foucault himself comments in "The Eye of Power" that the gaze is a construction "in which everyone is caught, those who exercise power just as much as those over whom it is exercised" (156). Sharon Willis concurs: "the relationship between spectator and image

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[62]Foucault, in "The Eye of Power," suggests that the transparency of the gaze's object is one of the cardinal assumptions of its bearer, who assumes that he or she will be able to *see* all there is to know about the object of the gaze.

[63]Kristina Straub, in her essay "Ocular Affairs," argues that, before the Restoration, most power and influence lay with the spectacle on stage; after the Restoration a shift occurred, and the spectator came to occupy the position of greatest power and privilege during a theatrical performance. For more information see Straub, *Sexual Suspects: Eighteenth Century Players and Sexual Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

is one of 'reciprocal construction'" she writes; "the spectator addressed by the spectacle is also mapped in place by it" (87). The gaze, in other words, is not objective, but intersubjective.

The benefits of this understanding for feminist theatre criticism have not gone unnoticed. Both Freedman and Willis argue that the male-identified gaze can be displaced and disrupted by a 'looking back' on the part of the actresses on stage, one which forces spectators to recognize and account for their own position in the scopic economy by making them "confront and interrogate [their] desire," and by "allowing [them] to see how [that] desire ... supports dangerous forms of cultural power" (Silverstein 515). Elin Diamond and Elaine Aston have termed this a "looking-at-being-looked-at-ness" (Aston 94), a 'watching the spectator watching' while articulating an awareness that "one's look is always already purloined by the Other" (Freedman 73), thereby making the Other self-aware. Freedman, in fact, contends that the performative challenge to theatre emerges most clearly as "a process of staging the disturbance and reversal of the gaze" (72). Within this critical context, *Three Tall Women* appears to engage its Act One audience in theatre, and its Act Two audience in performance, not simply because Act One supports a traditional dramatic frame while Act Two deconstructs that frame, but also because Act Two interpellates, engages with, looks at and calls on the spectator's gaze as part of that deconstructive project, troubling the artificial barrier between spectator and spectacle which makes easy objectification of the female subject in traditional theatre (in this case, in Act One of the play) possible.

Act Two of *Three Tall Women* troubles the gaze in two different ways: first by splitting, and then by reversing. From the moment the actresses return to the stage after intermission, the business of looking becomes complicated. Because the coherent, separate identities of Act One are replaced with a plural, decentred identity, the gaze, which demands discrete wholes on which to focus, is continuously displaced. Suddenly, looking at "C" (who, as we have seen, solicits the gaze actively) requires a constant awareness of "A" and "B," as well as of the inert figure in the bed. The complications of personal context is what gazing normally rejects; here, however, the gaze is forced to confront that very context, one which disrupts the voyeuristic pleasure of looking at "C," for she is always already middle aged, old, and dying before our eyes. The result, in Sharon Willis's terms, is "an image un-framed, perpetually re-framed, such that we as spectators cannot master it, contain it, or maintain a fixed distance from it" (88).

The characters enter Act Two with an awareness of the audience which they were not permitted in the closed dramatic world of Act One. They freely address us, speaking often as though from a podium, interpellating us directly as their spectators and actively engaging us in the performance. Nowhere is this more startling than during "C"'s interrupted monologue (69-78). The stage directions call for her to "come down front" (69) and address the audience when not actively engaged with "A" and "B." As she describes her job as a mannequin - the quintessential female object: a living statue, a body made to be gazed upon - twirling and sashaying in time with her memory, we take the bait: we gaze, we titillate, "sit silently in the darkness and fulfil our role as sanctioned

voyeurs" (Freedman 54). In the next moment, however, our gaze is split: "A" and "B" mimic "C"'s movements, disrupting and undermining her performance as their incongruous bodies act the role of a young *femme fatale*. Angry, "C" addresses us, and suddenly raises the stakes in the "old game:" "Don't look at them; don't ... listen to them," she insists (*TTW* 71), addressing us explicitly *as bearers of the gaze*. We have been caught in the act of looking. In fact, "C" watches us watching her - "we *know* there are people looking at us, studying us," she says (71, my emphasis) - and we become the objects of her gaze, the gaze that knows it has always already been objectified. We are forced to acknowledge our participation in the scopic economy that has frozen her into the role of a living statue, and are then - most importantly, perhaps - asked again by "C" not to address our attention to anyone else (72). In Freedman's terms, "To return the look in this context [as "C" has done] is to break up performance space, deconstruct the gaze, subvert the classical organization of showing and seeing, revision spectatorship..." (69). We as spectators are not only called upon to examine our participation in the scopic regime, but are called upon to make a choice, to take responsibility for the act of gazing: if we choose to look, we must do so with an awareness of the ethics of gazing, and of its consequences in a legacy of visual violence perpetrated against women in English theatre since actresses first took to the stage during the Restoration, and perhaps long before. Simultaneously, we are asked to re-view the theatre's power relations, and our position within them: near the end of the play, "A" proclaims generally to the auditorium, " I deny you *all*" (107), rejecting the fiction of our power over her even as we

sit and continue to "fondle" that very fiction (Freedman 54).

**The Politics of Aging**

The aging female body in *Three Tall Women* - be it the body of the character "A" as it is represented differently in each act, or the dummy "A" in the bed during Act Two - exists as more than just a foil for the gaze, the shocking revelation that "C"'s young, conventionally attractive body is not a permanent fixture. If this were not the case, *Three Tall Women* would be guilty of reinforcing and exploiting what Barbara Frey Waxman has called "the artificial divisions between youth and age" (8) which continue to legitimize young women at the expense of their elderly counterparts. Instead of reinforcing this division, however, *Three Tall Women* troubles it, challenging us to view not only "C" in the context of "A," but "A" in the context of "C." Albee stages the "unaging" of the female body (the term is Jane Desmond's), not in the sense that age is rendered irrelevant, or that aging is reversed, but rather in the sense that aging is presented as a visible continuum, a "major constituent of identity" (Waxman 88) rather than an inevitability to be feared and denied. The play's interest lies in what Desmond has called "the complexities of our identities as people situated in a never-ending generational chain ... [in] our bodies' changes over time" (115), and as the women on stage confront themselves in relation to one another, we in the audience are challenged to imagine ourselves "unaging," to confront the issue of our own old age.

Albee's plays have often directly confronted taboos surrounding aging and

death,[64] but perhaps nowhere else in his *oeuvre* are both of these taboos rendered as palpably visible as they are in *Three Tall Women*. The very first line of the play lays the issue on the table: "A" insists she is ninety one years old, while "C" insists she is ninety-two. "C" cannot let the issue drop; whereas both "A" and "B" are beyond calculating their self-worth in terms of age, "C" continues to value her youth as the source of her identity, proof that she is still vibrant. The "vanity" of which she accuses "A" is in reality her own (*TTW* 3), yet it is not a simplistic vanity: Waxman has pointed out that aging is a more crucial fear for women than for men in Western culture, because we tend to value men more with age, while we value women less (Waxman 14). "B"'s approach to aging is more fluid than "C"'s, challenging its social construction as a "boogeyman": dying, she contends, begins "from the minute [we're] alive" (*TTW* 14), and the only real difference in value between a new-born child and an old woman is that which we as a society place arbitrarily on the former, while choosing to discard the latter.

As audience, we are meant to be made uncomfortable by the directness of "B"'s comments; *Three Tall Women* pulls no punches on this topic. From the moment the curtain goes up, aging makes its presence felt. Medical equipment is a permanent fixture in on stage Act Two, while "A"'s frail and unwell body draws attention to itself throughout Act One with long trips to the bathroom, the ordeal of getting up and sitting down again, and a long fit of crying during which no dialogue nor other action is permitted to disrupt "A"'s display of self-pity and helplessness (7). The play frowns upon denial:

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[64] *The American Dream*, *The Sandbox*, *The Death of Bessie Smith* and *The Lady From Dubuque* are just four examples.

"C" continues to reject the process of her own aging right up until the final curtain falls, and insists she will never become "that thing" (69) in the bed, but "A" and "B" merely laugh at her misplaced wilfulness given the "living" evidence in front of her. We deny the need to identify with "A" when "C" seems so much more recognizable, but, as "C" and "A" conflate before our eyes in Act Two, our denial is rendered as laughable as "C"'s own. We are alternately tricked and forced into recognizing the body as time eventually renders it; likewise are we challenged to see beyond the empty figure in the bed, beyond the ravages of time to the aging body still vibrant and alive before us.

Perhaps the most sacred (and no less sacred because generally unspoken) social taboo which *Three Tall Women* confronts is the gendering - or, rather, un-gendering - of the aging woman. Barbara Waxman has written extensively on what she calls the "interlocking oppressions of sexism and ageism" (4), noting that "age adds to the burden of women's oppression in a culture that still valorizes youthful beauty as a major source of women's power" (8) and that relegates aging women to "the lower echelons of the second sex" (2). What this double oppression amounts to is an "un-gendering" of the aging female, who, because she no longer fits society's ideal of youthful femininity, is socially neutered and treated as a sexless entity. Albee articulates this un-gendering directly in *The American Dream*, as Grandma declares that she "[doesn't] hardly count as a woman" (*AD* 86) because her "sacks are all dried up" and the fluid in her eyeballs is caked to the inside of her eyes (82). Her comments point to the inconsistency of the social prejudice that ungenders older women in a cultural economy that still insists gender

and sexuality are natural traits. If an older woman is deemed no longer a "woman" because her reproductive organs no longer function and her face and body no longer exhibit the traits that denote culturally sanctioned femininity, then those traits cannot be markers of "natural" gender identity after all.

*Three Tall Women* uses a different tactic to make the same point. Albee foregrounds our hidden assumptions about gender and aging using over-emphasized costume techniques. The costume directions note that "A" in Act One must appear "a very old woman," but with hair, nails and make-up immaculately done. The result is a show of femininity which seems out of place somehow - even a bit ridiculous - on this frail old creature. On an old woman, the "mask" of femininity is alienated, rendered an absurd costume which comments directly upon the "nature" of femininity regardless of the bearer's age: it is always already a guise, a mask which can easily render itself absurd outside the social settings that declare it normative. Perhaps this very commentary has forced Western patriarchal culture to adopt the ungendering of the aging female as a survival tactic: if we reject her femininity, we can also reject the statement her femininity makes about all femininity as posture or mask. Albee, however, refuses to reject it. In Act Two of the play, that "mask" is always already on stage - literally - on the face of the bed-ridden dummy, a silent but throbbing comment on the way we map gender identity onto the body, *any* body. "C" refers to the dummy in the bed as a "thing," but that "thing" is always already "A," "B" and "C" as well. The difference between them is nothing more than a pronoun: "it" versus "she." But how can one individual be both

"neutered" and gendered in the same moment? It is not possible - unless gender is not natural, is in fact pasted on rather than blooming from within.

*Three Tall Women*, in its final moments, is ultimately more than a confronting of taboos: it is a celebration of aging, and of coming to dying. As such, it fits Waxman's definition of the *Reifungsroman*, or story of ripening. The goal of the *Reifungsroman* is to celebrate life as a journey through adversity, and to problematize the culturally constructed binary oppositions which lead to negative stereotypes of aging. In practice, therefore, the *Reifungsroman* seeks to blur boundaries between youth and age, reality and fantasy, integrity and fragmentation, and experience and memory, wherein the first term is always arbitrarily assigned superiority (Waxman, 17, 18). Like a textbook *Reifungsroman*, *Three Tall Women* deconstructs all of these oppositions. Act Two portrays age as a continuum, and, as "A," "B," and "C" meet "out of time," it complicates our understanding of time and reality as linear progressions. Memory and experience create one another as "A"'s memories become "B" and "C"'s future realities, while "C"'s current lived experience is already known and (sometimes differently) remembered by "A" and "B." Fragmentation, rather than integrity, becomes the preferred means of representing the female subject position on stage, and aging is incorporated into the play's celebration of multivalent female identity. The play ends with "A," "B" and "C" sharing what they consider to be the "happiest time" in their collective life (108), and all three, fascinatingly enough, point to moments that favour age over youth: "C" hopes that the happiest time is still to come, that she isn't "all done at twenty-six" (107); "B"

sees her middle age as a peak rather than a decline, "the only time you get a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view - see in all directions" (108); and "A" declares, contrary to all accepted social mores, that approaching death, "coming to the end of it" (109), is the happiest time. Her final monologue is a celebration of the aging body which we as an audience found so disconcerting throughout the first act; she speaks of the joys of thinking of oneself "in the third person," waking up each morning just to "see what works" (109). The play ends with the sight/site of their collective body at the footlights, hands joined as though in anticipation of the curtain call,[65] confronting the audience for the last time with a celebration of the most feared moment in human life: the moment "when we stop" (110). This final tableau, ironically, or perhaps appropriately, fits Hélène Cixous' program for the rebirth of women on stage: "this movement of women towards life ... this outstretched hand which touches and transmits meaning, a single gesture unfolding throughout the ages ... *it will be a text, a body decoding and naming itself*, the song of women being brought into the world" (*Aller* 547, my emphasis). *Three Tall Women* begins within a dramatic frame that moves its characters about like pieces in the "old game," but ends with their shared moment of self-discovery, in their own time and on their own terms.

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[65]Are the actresses perhaps peeking out from beneath the guise of character in this moment, challenging the audience to read the play's deconstruction of the aging female body as more than just a fiction, a good evening of theatre?

**Theory, Performance, Ethics: Toward a Practical Feminist Criticism**

This final tableau, however vindicating, is not unproblematic. Reviewers have called it unconvincing,[66] and certainly, given the amount of fighting that takes place between the three incarnations of the main character in Act Two, it seems to come dangerously close to proclaiming an unprecedented unity among them. Could it be that Albee is suggesting a last-minute reunification of Act Two's fragmented body as a means of neatly wrapping up the play? Such a solace-giving ending seems quite out of character for the man who once proclaimed his need to terrify his audiences. Is he perhaps mocking unified identity by contrasting this eleventh-hour reunion with all the anger and denial it follows? Neither the London (1995) nor the New York (1994) productions which I saw conveyed any sense of irony, but that does not mean that irony must be ruled out. Dramatic texts are living texts; their meaning is continually recreated with each new performance (be it on stage in front of an audience, or in the minds of readers). Irony will never be impossible, as long as new performance contexts exist.

Ultimately, all reading, writing and performing, like all theatrical viewing, carries with it enormous responsibility. *Three Tall Women* lays the groundwork for a highly subversive performance of the fragmented female body, a thorough deconstruction of the feminine ideal and the gendering of aging, and a striking challenge to the theatrical gaze as it fixes and objectifies female bodies in conventional theatre practice. Like all performances of this nature, however, it does not come without risk; as Sharon Willis

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[66]See Benedict Nightingale, *London Times*, June 22, 1994, 39a.

observes,

> To play with visibility, with femininity as spectacle, allows feminist performance practice to uncover certain contradictions which inhabit ... the logic of the gaze. But to seize the apparatus of spectacle, to expose and display the feminine body on stage demands that this practice maintain a consciousness of the risk of reinstating these structures. (78/9)

In order to subvert conventional modes of representation, female bodies must first *enter* representation. What is needed, then, to foreground rather than undermine the beneficially subversive elements of a text like *Three Tall Women*, is an awareness, on the part of all participants in a production, of the risks involved in representing female bodies on stage, regardless of the critical intentions of that representation. Without a carefully self-conscious performance, the actress playing the role of "C," for example, may find herself the source of nothing more than titillation. And, without careful staging, the final tableau of the play may merely reinforce female subjectivity as coherent and unproblematic.

How, then, should we read the last few moments of *Three Tall Women*? Each new performance will bring a new interpretation, born of the interaction between actresses' representations and audience members' reception, but I prefer to think that the generous viewers in the audience - those willing to give Albee's female characters the benefit of the doubt - will view the final tableau firstly as a show of defiance toward the theatre and its attempts to frame and contain the female subject on stage, and secondly as a challenge to themselves, a challenge to read - and represent - women's identities as plural and multivalent (the play's title remains *Three Tall Women*), identities enhanced -

rather than reduced and dismissed - by complicating factors such as aging. I prefer to think that the final tableau will be performed, and received, within the context of all that has come before. After all, (to borrow from Barbara Freedman),

> 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...(73)

...these are the benefits of *Three Tall Women* for feminist performance practice.

# Chapter 3.

## Coming Full Circle:

## Gender Trickery and Gender Transformation in Tomson Highway's Rez Plays

> What performance where will ... compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality? What performance where will compel a reconsideration of the *place* and stability of the masculine and the feminine? And what kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire.
>
> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* 139 (emphasis in original)

> The dream world of North American Indian mythology is inhabited by the most fantastic creatures, beings and events. Foremost among these beings is the 'Trickster,' as pivotal and important a figure in our world as Christ is in the realm of Christian mythology. 'Weesageechak' in Cree, 'Nanabush' in Ojibway, 'Raven' in others, 'Coyote' in still others, this Trickster goes by many names and guises. In fact, he can assume any guise he chooses ... The most explicit distinguishing feature between the North American Indian languages and the European languages is that in Indian (e.g. Cree, Ojibway), there is no gender. In Cree, Ojibway, etc., unlike English, French, German, etc., the male-female-neuter hierarchy is entirely absent. So that by this system of thought, the central hero figure from our mythology - theology, if you will, is theoretically neither exclusively male nor exclusively female, or is both simultaneously.
>
> Tomson Highway, "A Note on Nanabush," *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*

In chapter one, we investigated *Top Girls* as it exposed binary, hierarchical gender division as a completely inadequate means of representing the complexities of gender identity, particularly female identity. As it deconstructs this binary system, Churchill's play calls for a more complete, more inclusive form of gender representation which would

compel exactly the kind of "radical rethinking" of gender and identity for which Butler wishes (above). Albee's *Three Tall Women*, in its answer to this call, develops a performance practice able to represent female identity as inclusive and intersubjective, challenging the boundaries of "the feminine" as both a discrete body and a discrete identity. But where, as Butler asks, is the performance that heralds a breakdown of normative perceptions of gender altogether, the performance that, in its physical display of alternative constructions of gender relations, would allow us to revision gender as a "field of experience" rather than a pair of discrete and opposing categories (Reinelt, *Feminist Theory and the Problem of Performance* 51)?

In this final chapter, with an examination of Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing*, we come full circle in our quest for that performance. I propose that it is in the Trickster figure of North American Indian mythology - a creature who inherently defies gender categorization and hierarchization as Western culture enforces it - that we as feminist critics find a practical means of revisioning the divisive way in which our society continues to view gender. Nanabush,[67] never simply male nor female - and often both simultaneously - offers us a view of gender representation almost inconceivable in a society predicated upon the impossibility of being both one gender and its "opposite." S/he is the border-crosser that troubles sexual difference and dissolves it into *différance*, as the enthusiastic embodiment of that principle against which Churchill's characters fought for fear of losing their supposedly

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[67]While mindful of the fact that 'Nanabush' is only one name for this elusive and plural character, I use it because it is the name Highway gives to the Trickster figure in his plays.

essential feminine identities.

As a gender-less (or perhaps, more accurately, 'gender-full') being, the Trickster embodies more than *différance*; s/he is the corporeal representative of many of the theoretical principles upon which feminist gender critiques are based. Because the Trickster's gender is inclusive rather than exclusive, s/he displays gender as a series of roles - "disguises" is the term Highway uses - rather than as a fixed representation of an inner essence. S/he thereby foils any attempts to cling to the belief that our discrete gender identities are inherent rather than performative. In fact, Nanabush is the quintessential gender performer because, *on Nanabush, all gender must be a performance.* Since his/her gender is not fixed, any appearance of discrete gender which s/he assumes stands out *as disguise*, revealing itself to be no more than trickery - a trickery perpetuated by an artificial division between genders. Furthermore, because the Trickster is an inherently transformative being, living in each disguise for a relatively short time, s/he not only performs gender, but continually *transforms* it. Rather than as a rigid and limiting identity, the Trickster conceives gender as a fluid process, a field of possibility in which gender identities can be continually recreated depending upon need and circumstance. And, because each identity s/he assumes represents only one facet of the Trickster's complex subjectivity, s/he remains elusive to the prying eyes of gazers. The Trickster thus presents feminist critics with a means of transforming gender critique into absolute gender performance, moving from the level of theory to the level of critical practice, one which may serve to transform Western notions of gender from fixed and

limited to fluid and malleable, radically revisioning our sense of how gender is created and how it can be recreated.[68]

## At The Gender-Culture Junction: Alternative Viewpoints, Alternative Possibilities

*Top Girls*' dinner party scene revealed the cultural contingency of gender roles and expectations. Nevertheless, each woman around Marlene's table came from a culture predicated upon the tenets of patriarchy, and thus all remained bounded by a sex-gender system based in binary opposition, and in which sexual identity and gender identity were construed as one and the same.[69] Their gender universe was populated by males and females, men and women. What roles each played and what those designations meant

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[68]The figure of the Trickster may be foreign to Western theatre, but the basic concept is more familiar than we might think. It is not only Native oral tradition that recognizes the inherent theatricality of a Trickster figure: "trickstemess" is also a persistent element of Western theatrical tradition. Many of the characteristics of classic Native Tricksters can be found on the Western stage: masks, disguises, cross-dressing and the assumption of secret identities litter the plots of much "classic" English drama through Shakespeare, the Restoration and beyond. Dramatic theatre is actually predicated upon the "tricky" phenomenon of disguise; what we see when we go to the theatre, after all, is not a character but an actor in the *guise* of character, a professional trickster. In addition, much of our critical theatre is predicated upon the idea of "tricking" the audience into realization and reflection; Churchill and Albee, as we have seen, are both practised tricksters themselves.

The parallels which I have drawn here between the mythological Native Trickster figure and the trickster-like elements of Western theatre tradition are a bit deceptive. The distinction which needs to be made between them is perhaps one of degree rather than one of kind, but it needs to be made nonetheless. As I have noted throughout this investigation, traditional dramatic theatre employs the majority of its tricks (or illusions) to create a seamless dramatic world on stage; it then hides these tricks from view as a means of reinforcing the integrity and authority of that world. Native Tricksters like Nanabush, on the other hand, are in the business of shattering illusion and exposing it *as trickery*. The difference between traditional Western theatre and the traditional Native Trickster is then, on one level, akin to the difference between "theatre" and "performance."

[69]Throughout my discussion I have referred to patriarchal culture as the source of binary sex and gender divisions. I have deemed it appropriate to do so because the plays I am dealing with themselves deal with patriarchal cultures, but I do not mean by my terminology to suggest that patriarchies are the only cultures in which binary sex/gender systems may occur. Any culture predicated upon gender hierarchy - including matriarchies - I expect would suffer from the same divisive thinking.

varied from culture to culture, but the basic division remained the same. There was no third option.

In examining the Trickster in particular and North American Indian culture in general, we are asked to acknowledge not only that gender is a culturally contingent construct, but that binary gender division is as well. So-called "Western" cultures tend to assume that, because males and females have distinct genitalia, a division between them follows *naturally*. As I noted in chapter one, however, that assumption of natural division is predicated upon the extreme signifying value which we as a culture place upon genitalia as the defining sex organs, as well as upon our tendency to read sex and gender identities as inseparable. Many North American Indian cultures, however, as anthropologist Sabine Lang points out, do read sex and gender identities as potentially exclusive from one another, and therefore make room for the "third gender option" which traditionalists and some radical feminists alike have deemed untenable.[70] Lang, in her illuminating article about gender variance in North American Indian cultures, "There is More than Just Men and Women," notes that in most of these cultures "there exist not only two genders, but three or four" (185). She explains that, in North American Indian societies, these "other"[71] genders describe those who "combine, to varying degrees, elements of both the man's and the woman's roles [typical to their cultures]" and

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[70]Judith Butler herself, despite calling for a radical deconstruction of normative notions of sex and gender in *Gender Trouble*, remains unwilling to consider the deconstructive potential of a third gender (see *Gender Trouble* 127).

[71]I use the term very self-consciously, because Lang presents no evidence that these third and fourth genders are considered at all out of the ordinary in these cultures.

therefore "rather than becoming 'women' [or 'men'] they are seen as a separate gender, combining masculine and feminine elements" (184). The category of "the deviant" as Western culture knows it does not exist to these societies; rather than limiting individual gender identity to discrete, prescribed categories that inevitably incite deviancy, they allow for a more comprehensive representation of the field of gender experience by conceiving of hybridized gender categories. They thereby present binary gender systems with a possibility they have long refused to acknowledge: the possibility that gender hybridity is not deviancy, but merely a more accurate conception of all gender identity.

Incredible as the presence of a third gender or fourth gender may seem to Western eyes,[72] perhaps the most significant aspect of this alternative gender system is the basis on which it is created: as Lang explains, "the earliest sign that a person will turn out to be a 'woman-man' or a 'man-woman' [her terminology; she makes it clear that there is no direct translation for the original terms] *is not an interest in sexual relationships with members of the same sex, but a marked interest in work activities belonging to the role of the 'other' sex*" (185, my emphasis). Whereas our culture continues to assume that gender roles, including sexual orientation and work preferences, are the "natural" expression of a gendered "inner self" determined by an individual's biological sex at birth, the cultures Lang sites construct gendered selves based upon work preferences displayed at any time in an individual's life, *independent of their sexuality*. In other words, role

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[72]Lang points out that, for a long time, not only did multiple gender options *seem* impossible to Western anthropologists, they were actually deemed impossible. Until fairly recently, representatives of non-typical genders were classified as "deviants" by the scientific community (Lang 185).

preference *determines* gender, and is not read as merely expressive of it. Gender therefore becomes a matter of choice rather than enforcement, changeable rather than fixed, a system within which multiple gender identities are possible.[73]

Admittedly, Lang is speaking quite generally from anthropological data about a wide variety of cultures, all tremendously different, and while she is confident in making certain generalizations about gender constructions in all North American Indian cultures, we must be wary of any desire to generalize about a large and varied group of cultures, regardless of the strength of the data upon which these generalizations are made. What Lang's discussion makes clear, however, is that gender variance within North American Indian cultures exposes both discrete gender categories and rigid gender divisions as constructions which differ tremendously among different cultures, and which are therefore subject to scrutiny and possible alteration *within all cultures*. However, as we examine other cultures' gender models as a means of deconstructing our own, we must be careful not merely to appropriate those models wholesale, heralding them as the "correct" way to view gender identity. While it certainly is tempting to idealize gender systems that allow for greater freedom of choice and movement, we must keep in mind that any

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[73]One might quite rightly argue that Western culture, despite long refusing to recognize the fluidity of gender roles, now accepts women's participation in traditionally male roles, and vice versa. As I noted in chapter one, however, and as Lang herself points out (186), Western culture remains extremely reluctant to abandon traditional gender categories and allow for freer play of gender signifiers. Despite advancements at work and at home, we are still bound by a sex/gender system that classifies individuals as opposites and our identities continue to be limited by those univocal categories. The University of Michigan, for example, recently released a study that suggests career women who are their household's primary earners nevertheless feel the need to fulfil the role of housewife traditionally viewed as women's only career option. Its research points to the strides that have yet to be made in revisioning the division between genders ("Female Breadwinners Dislike Role - Study," *The Halifax Daily News*, Sunday August 17, p.28).

such idealization would be based upon data whose collectors and compilers themselves show certain cultural biases. What Lang presents us with, after all, is not a "pure" view of Native cultures, but a view based upon the intersection of her own cultural, scientific and personal views with the information she has gathered as a "cultural tourist." Similarly, the Trickster figure, as it is presented by Native artists like Tomson Highway, is not a pure expression of a wildly "other" culture, but rather a hybrid figure, grown out of the junction between Trickster figures of traditional Native lore and the beliefs and expectations of colonizing cultures within which Native peoples in North America have been forced to live ever since the time of first European contact.[74] The Trickster can tell us as much, if not more, about our own gender assumptions as it can tell us about traditional Native views on gender, and simply to objectify and idealize the Trickster as a representative of a purer Native understanding of gender under these circumstances would be grossly to underestimate his/her complexity. It would also be to characterize Nanabush as something akin to a living shopping mall, wherein opponents to tight, restrictive gender categories can purchase new, looser ones for the price of a little research. In other words, it would be to apply a reductive, subjugating and appropriating gaze to what is now a complex and hybrid cultural icon, recreating the act of colonization.

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[74]For interesting discussions of the Trickster's mediated status, see Sheila Rabillard, "Absorption, Elimination and the Hybrid: Some Impure Questions of Gender and Culture in the Trickster Theatre of Tomson Highway," and Alan Filewood, "Receiving Aboriginality: Tomson Highway and the Crisis of Cultural Authenticity."

**Gender and Colonization: The Invisible Bind**

When we think of the colonizing forces that have shaped North American Indian culture as we perceive it today, we tend to imagine the violent destruction of aboriginal spirituality via the rigid enforcement of Christianity, or the unsympathetic replacement of Native languages with English, French or Spanish. What we rarely consider is the link between these two forces: gender. The Christian faith and its languages of expression are based upon the governing principle of a patriarchal gender hierarchy, and therefore this hierarchy has become indispensable in the act of colonization.[75] Highway himself has identified the link between religious colonization and gender colonization in numerous interviews and profiles:

> Whereas [in Christian myth] one superhero is definitely a male, definitely a man, in our mythology by virtue of the fact that the sexual hierarchy is completely absent, theoretically, our superhero figure is neither exclusively male nor exclusively female... ("The Trickster and Native Theatre" 135)

Because the colonizing culture's notion of gender is based in the belief that God is both Almighty King and male, a gender hierarchy based upon the "natural" superiority of men was imported into Native societies which themselves may have been previously either

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[75]In colonial terms, "gender hierarchy" extends beyond the hierarchy between gender categories into a hierarchy between gender systems. Not surprisingly, colonizing cultures would have regarded the binary sex/gender system as it exists in Western cultures to be superior to a lack of gender division or hierarchization in Native cultures, which undoubtedly seemed crude and "unnatural" to the colonizers.

governed by matriarchy, or by no gender hierarchy at all.[76] This new hierarchy implicitly devalued the feminine Mother Earth figure and the gender-bending Trickster figure which stand at the centre of Native spirituality. By restricting cultural authority to the masculine, the colonizing culture completely suppressed those sources of Native power which lay elsewhere than in the patriarchal. Truly, the colonizing tactic appeared to have been *divide*-and-conquer.

If Christianity introduced the notion of a patriarchal gender hierarchy into certain Native cultures, the promulgation of the English language reinforced it. The hierarchy, as Highway explains, became central to communicating:

> [One] distinction [between the Cree and English languages] is that [in Cree] there is no gender given to words ... In European languages you must always deal with the male-female-neuter hierarchy. God is male, irretrievably. (Wigston 8-9)[77]

For Highway, the crisis of losing the Cree language lies particularly in English's inability to represent the Cree ethos, its myth figures, its spiritual power. With an implicit gender hierarchy governing everyday speech, linguistic terminology based in alternative

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[76]Bryan Loucks, in his interview with Highway, explains that, while in Native culture it is generally the mother figure, representative of the earth, that is sacred, balance and harmony between all life, human and otherwise, remains the prevailing ethos.

[77]While Highway subsumes English under the umbrella term "European languages" in his discussion of those languages as gendered, there is of course a distinction to be made between the gendering of latin languages such as French, and the gendering of English. While French, Spanish, Italian, even German (although not a latin language) all give gender to definite articles and therefore incorporate gender into language itself, English does not directly gender its words. Indirectly, however, English speakers have long found themselves subject to gender heirarchy in the form of a "slippery slope" that uses "man" as a substitute for "person," genders boats as female, and otherwise subsumes women under male-oriented signifiers. Although efforts have been underway for some time to neutralize this slippery slope effect, the male-female heirarchy remains insidious to the English language, and it is to this insidiousness that Highway is pointing.

representations of gender relations is theoretically impossible. Highway articulates this crisis especially poignantly in a scene from *Dry Lips* wherein Simon Starblanket, one of the reserve's only crusaders for a return to Native languages and spirituality, can find no words in English with which to address Nanabush's gender position:

> ...weetha ("him/her" - ie: no gender) ... Christ! What is it? Him? Her? Stupid fucking language, fuck you, da Englesa. Me no speakum no more da goodie Englesa, in Cree we say "weetha," not "him" or "her" Nanabush, come back! (111)

Finding the point at which English fails most startlingly to represent the Native experience, Simon drives it to the margins, abandoning "good English" for a slang-inflected dialect representative of his contempt. Cree succeeds where English fails him, and thus it is the Cree word "weetha" in this passage that is vibrant with meaning, while English is rendered literally meaningless. Simon's speech accomplishes what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari would term a subtle "deterritorialization" of the colonizing language, deconstructing its assumptions about its own superiority by making its pitfalls glaringly obvious ("Toward a Minor Literature" 17). English speakers in the audience listening to Simon's cries can comprehend only simple words ("Him", "Her"), loud curses and crude slang, while the meaning of "weetha" - untranslated in performance (and generally untranslatable into English) - remains a crucial absence. Highway destabilizes the hierarchy that assigns privilege to English while devaluing Cree, marginalizing the former language in a strategic reversal of linguistic colonization.

Gender's role as a colonizing agent extends beyond its participation in religious and linguistic invasion. As Sheila Rabillard and Mariana Torgovnik have explained,

Western gender constructions have become the means by which the colonizer casts the colonized in the role of "other," feminizing and therefore automatically subordinating the colonized culture to the colonizer's masculine-identified power. Torgovnik writes,

> ... gender issues always inhabit Western versions of the primitive. Sooner or later those familiar tropes for primitives becomes the tropes conventionally used for women. Global politics, the dance of the colonizer and colonized, becomes sexual politics, the dance of male and female. (quoted in Rabillard, 8)

Rabillard identifies this slippage between "primitive" and "feminine" as an exoticizing impulse similar to that which Edward Said investigates in his landmark text, *Orientalism*. By associating Native peoples with Western culture's fantasies of femininity - passive, emotional, delicately beautiful yet wild and natural - colonizers make Natives both familar and exotically "other." As a result, they become subsumed under the gender hierarchy imposed upon them and forced to inhabit the position of the gendered subordinate. This feminizing impulse remains evident in popular Western culture to this day: Disney's construction of the primitive female in *Pocahontas*, the wildly natural yet spiritually grounded Sioux in *Dances With Wolves*, images of Native female community in *The Piano* - all serve, with varying degrees of consciousness, to recolonize Native peoples by reinforcing the feminized stereotypes by which our culture seeks to know them.

**A Flick of the Trickster's Tail . . .**

> I'm a trickster. All indigenous people are tricksters. We have to run, hide, jump over, pretend and fight so that we can live in two worlds.
>
> Gloria Miguel (Baker 52)

Given the subtle, implicit role of gender in the violence of North American colonization and in the continued subordination of Native peoples today, it would seem clear that the ideal tool of resistance is the Trickster, that creature who, in its refusal to be singularly gendered, contains inherently the potential to disrupt the very principles upon which colonization is based.[78] Highway, who sees his theatre as Native activism, repeatedly argues that the key to decolonization is a reclamation of the Trickster figure and its ability to dupe and defy authority (Loucks, Morgan). But just who is this Trickster figure, exactly? Highway's cast of characters for both *Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips* seems to suggest that there is only one Trickster in his plays: Nanabush, as the spirit of various individuals and both genders - male in *The Rez Sisters* and female in *Dry Lips* - is the "official" Trickster in both cases. Yet Gloria Miguel's statement above suggests something quite different, that the Trickster is perhaps not an exclusive being, far removed from the human world, but is rather a *state of being*, a means by which "ordinary" Native peoples can resist neo-colonization by the remnants of imperial forces as they continue to limit Native identities today. Simply because Highway does not officially designate other Tricksters does not mean they are absent from his plays; in fact,

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[78]Rabillard contends that "Highway's drama moves toward a dissolution of divisions of gender and in so doing not only subverts the definition of the Native North American as passive, female, inferior, but also disrupts the Orientalizing system of knowledge itself..."(16).

in refusing to name other Tricksters he may be playing Trickster himself - "posturing raven" as Lee Maracle might say (13) - in order to interrogate his audiences' understanding of his characters.[79] Marie Annharte Baker has suggested that, since the elusive Trickster is so difficult to define, "we always need to define the moment of the Trickster" (48); my suggestion in this final chapter therefore is that Highway's drama is peppered with Tricksters and trickster moments, all of whom seek to recreate gender along less hierarchical and more fluid lines for the practical benefit of their communities. Gender is transformed in their hands from a colonizing tool into a source of community activism: the construction of gender (as discrete, fixed, binarily opposed) perpetuated as "natural" and therefore "correct" by Western colonialism is itself exposed as a kind of dark trickster, and as the drama destabilizes its privileged position audiences are encouraged to recognize that "nature does not necessarily lay out things in binary opposing systems" (Lang 186) and to orient themselves to "a different way of being in the world" (Loucks 11).

**. . . In Which We All Get Caught.**

> *Everyone* knows the Trickster to be half-hero, half-fool, an everyman and a no-one.
>
> Daniel David Moses (87, my emphasis)

Before we go on to examine the Trickster in Highway's plays, before we go on to

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[79]Many critics have suggested that Highway himself is the foremost Trickster in his drama, and indeed, as an artist born of Native culture but educated in Western universities who combines classical training with Native spirituality to produce works of what Anne Nothof has called "cultural collision," he certainly seems to display the border-crossing qualities of the classic Trickster figure.

attempt to *know* the Trickster, we need to remind ourselves of a very important caveat. Knowing the Trickster is a contradiction in terms; one of the Trickster's greatest strengths as a figure of resistance lies in its ability to defy labels and baffle the instincts of those who want to *know* all about Native culture. In fact, the Trickster calls into question the very meaning of knowledge. Academic enquiries are predicated upon the need to know; a critic's cultural authority is based upon the pretence of having mastered some area of investigation. The Trickster, however, cannot be mastered. As an embodiment of life's "many contradictions" (Nothof 38) - defiant of gender yet embodying all of its most visual aspects, a theological figure yet possessing none of the absolute authority of Western religious icons (Morgan 135) - s/he cannot be contained by the notions of "man," "woman" or "God" as they exist in the dominant culture. Nor are our tools of interpretation sufficient for describing the Trickster; as Simon points out, our language fails Nanabush at the most crucial moment - the moment of interpellation into culture. Defiant of our terms and conditions, Trickster can never be fully interpellated into Western culture, and hence can never be fully known to it. The Trickster, therefore, forces critics like myself to accept a tremendous hermeneutic paradox: to live within contradiction for a moment and accept an imperfect argument, a certain degree of unreadability, right from the start. To acknowledge, that is, that there are some things even critics do not know.

This acknowledgement may seem, on the level of common sense, perfectly reasonable; yet on the level of academic inquiry, it may also be considered a sign of

defeat. I would suggest instead that it is the basic premise with which all academic inquiries should begin. To attempt to master, of course, is to attempt to subordinate, to assert superiority over; this is exactly the kind of inquiry which feminist critics must resist.[80] It is also the kind of inquiry which feminist texts themselves inherently resist.[81] In chapter two, we watched Albee's main character boggle the gaze as she splintered into multiple identities, never fully knowable because never fully stageable. The Trickster figures in Highway's plays operate in much the same fashion; every glimpse we get contains a hint of that which we are not glimpsing, the realization that the Trickster can never be fully recognized or fully objectified. Trickster's greatest benefit to Native decolonization is

thus also its greatest contribution to feminist critical practice - the implicit understanding that the very concept of mastery is itself an illusion, a fallacy that need only be exposed in order to be rendered useless.

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[80]Elin Diamond makes a similar claim in "Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism."

[81]So, I would argue, do dramatic texts; because plays are living texts, and each production of a play heralds a different interpretation, there can technically be no one way to read or "master" a play text. Drama is, perhaps, the "trickiest" of literary genres in this sense.

## The Rez Sisters[82]: Wasaychigan Hill's Gender Tricksters

> The most insidious and effective strategy [of undermining discrete gender categories] is a thoroughgoing appropriation and redeployment of the categories of identity themselves ...
>
> Butler, *Gender Trouble* 128

In *The Rez Sisters*, the first of Highway's two Rez plays, Nanabush's role is much less gendered than in the second play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. In the former play, Nanabush inhabits the guise of a seagull - first in white feathers and later, as the Nighthawk, in dark feathers (*RS* xiii) - and only assumes gender in order to portray the glitteringly attractive Bingo Master in the second act. Although Nanabush's gender trickery only really comes into its own in the second play, *The Rez Sisters* is by no means devoid of it. The otherwise all-female cast of the play become Tricksters themselves, bringing Nanabush home by transforming tricky Western gender modes into something more profitable for the Wasaychigan Hill reserve.

Wasy is a site of poverty and disempowerment, one whose troubles can be traced indirectly to the imposition of a foreign gender hierarchy. As Pelijia Patchnose puts it, there's "nothing to do" on the reserve "but drink and screw each other's wives and husbands and forget about our Nanabush" (6). The gender hierarchy has erected artificial barriers between the men and women of the reserve, and has rendered the women powerless. Many of the men appear to consider women to be almost akin to property: Emily Dictionary and Philomena Moosetail, we learn over the course of *The Rez Sisters*,

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[82]By "Rez Sisters" in this context I mean both Highway's 1986 play of that name and, in the broader sense, all the women of the Wasaychigan Hill reserve which this play and *Dry Lips* portray.

have been beaten or abused by former male partners; the handicapped Zhaboonigan Peterson describes near the end of Act One her brutal rape at the hands of a group of young white men (47);[83] and Pelijia expresses anger at having been woken up by two of the reserve's men "fighting over some girl. Heard what sounded like a baseball bat landing on somebody's back. My lawn looks like the shits this morning" (5). *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, meanwhile, is a virtual catalogue of violence against women.[84] The old (male) chief - the relic of a patriarchal system of government imposed upon Native societies by European rulers[85] - makes promises he does not keep, and as a result Wasaychigan Hill frequently finds itself doing without. The imposed gender system clearly does not "work" for Wasy: not only are the women affected by the unbalanced interpretation of gender relations, but the men clearly hurt one another and the whole reserve with their actions.

*The Rez Sisters* opens on Pelijia's roof, with Pelijia herself hammering away at the shingles. Like her roof, the reserve needs "fixing," and first to be hammered out is a new method of viewing gender roles and gender relations. Pelijia quickly shows us her own Trickster qualities; she chastises her sister, Philomena, for coming up on the roof in a

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[83]Throughout her description, Nanabush, as the white-feathered seagull, contorts its body as a physical manifestation of the pain and agony enforced upon Zhaboonigan's body, making the violence that is often the result of an unbalanced gender hierarchy palpably present to the audience.

[84]I will discuss this in detail in a later section.

[85]Geoffrey York, in his 1990 book *The Dispossessed: Life and Death in Native Canada*, notes that in many Native societies decisions were traditionally made communally; once European rule was imposed, so too was a system of male chiefs with which the ruling government could liaison.

skirt and high heels. In Pelijia's opinion, "you gotta wear pants when you're doing a man's job" (7). Far from simply reinforcing an artificial division of gender, this statement demonstrates Pelijia's understanding of gender division *as* artificial. She reads gender as both performative and transformative: a "man's job" is a role not exclusive to that gender; as long as one wears the costume - in this case, overalls - anyone can play the role. Costume and action do not express Pelijia's inner gendered self; instead, she recreates her gender each time she dons a new costume to perform a new role. In her uniform of "masculinity," Pelijia points to the constructedness of the category itself; she represents a spirit of change and rejuvenation on the reserve, one which will destabilize the categories of masculinity and femininity by replacing them with a fluid conception of gender that will allow her to combine the role of wife and mother with that of reserve handyman and, later, beyond the play's final curtain, perhaps even chief.[86] Philomena, meanwhile, outfitted in the costume of an imported feminine ideal, proves herself useless to Pelijia's efforts. She practically falls off the roof, ripping her skirt and attracting Pelijia's good-humoured scorn: "People gonna think you just came from Big Joey's house" (7). With her attire in disarray but her affected femininity still intact, Philomena represents the kind of woman (like the infamous reserve *femme fatale*, Gazelle Nataways)

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[86]Philomena, devoted to Western conceptions of gender division, insists Pelijia will "never be chief" because she is a woman. Pelijia, who recognizes the position of chief as a role traditionally but not essentially occupied by men, calls her sister's reasoning "bullshit," and argues that "[i]f that useless old chief of ours was a woman, we'd see a few things get done around here. We'd see our women working, we'd see our men working, we'd see our young people sober on Saturday nights, and we'd see Nanabush dancing up and down the hill on shiny black paved roads" (114). By allowing a woman to become chief, Pelijia reasons, the reserve would signal a return to more balanced and equitable gender relations; this in turn would faciliate the return "home" of Nanabush, spirit of gender balance.

that gets screwed by someone else's husband and perpetuates the cultural, spiritual and economic inertia that plagues Wasy.

Once the sisters, all bingo fans, learn that THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD (emphasis in text throughout) is coming to Toronto, they seek a way to make their attendance possible. Their quest begins with a trip to the band office to ask the chief for financial assistance, trumpeting the possible benefits of a big win for the entire reserve as justification of their request. This "trip" is staged as a musical march around the stage which climaxes as the women (and Nanabush, as the seagull in white feathers) reach the downstage area and stand "in one straight line square in front of the audience" (60). The "invisible" chief denies their request, and the act ends with the women miming their rage, Pelijia raising her hammer to the chief and Emily fingering a "fuck you, man" (60). However, thanks to Highway's stage trickery, it is actually the audience to whom the hammer is raised and the finger given (we occupy the invisible chief's "seat"). As representatives of the culture responsible for the imposition of patriarchal rule on the reserve, we in the audience are held, in this startling moment before blackout, directly accountable for the chief's lack of action. The sisters have literally given the finger to the dominant culture and the hierarchical gender system which it has imposed and by whose authority they have historically been silenced.

Rather than allowing their ambition to be limited by the chief's authority, the sisters go on a wild fund-raising campaign that eventually leads to their arrival in Toronto,

their participation in the "game,"[87] and the overthrow of the Bingo Master, "the most beautiful man in the world" (100), portrayed by Nanabush. With his glittering attire and sleek manner of speech, the Bingo Master is "*dressed* to kill" (my emphasis), pure gender performance. He appears like a dream, but fails to live up to his appearance. When he does not call the magical B14, the women, rejecting the legacy of impotent male authority imposed by the dominant culture, lunge at the bingo machine that is the symbol of his power and carry it out of the auditorium and out of the play. The Bingo Master meanwhile disappears, dissolving into the Nighthawk in black feathers, his gender exposed as mere costume, his authority as illusion (102/3).

Pelijia and her sisters start Wasy down the path toward a more fluid interpretation of gender identity. Their quest is continued by the women of *Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing* who, like their sisters from the earlier play, become Tricksters in their own right by seeking to reinvent two Canadian stereotypes based on divisive and unbalanced gender interpretations. They form their own hockey team in a parodic appropriation of Canada's all-male "national" sport, and inflect it with the spirit of Mother Earth: in order to be eligible for the team one needs to be not only female, but also either pregnant or the mother of "piles and piles of babies" (*DL* 29). The Wasy "Wailerettes" thus not only challenge the gender 'laws' that bar women from playing professional hockey, but also topple the stereotyped image of the Native "squaw"

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[87]This "game," strictly speaking, is the monumental bingo for which the sisters have come. Highway, however, uses it as a metaphor for the many games in which British and Canadian systems of government have engaged Native peoples since the moment of first contact, laden with glittering but empty promises of prosperity.

overburdened by babies, revisioning Native motherhood as a sign of physical strength rather than weakness. Playing with these stereotypes gives Highway unique signifying power: because images of the white male hockey player and the Native squaw are not only familiar to Canadians, but have actually become crude cultural icons, by combining them he renders them completely unfamiliar to his audience, foregrounding not the image but rather the ideology that has produced the image. We are confronted not with something comforting because familiar, but rather with a difficult and unfamiliar question: on what grounds have we elevated hockey player above Native mother, white male above Native female? Their credibility shattered, the stereotypes deconstruct: like the Bingo Master, once their source of power (in this case, a context that discourages questions) disappears, their authority shows itself to be nothing more than trickery, the dominant culture's attempts to subordinate its Other, be that Other female, Native, or both.

The Wasy Wailerettes do more than simply expose two outmoded stereotypes, however; by combining traditional sources of male and female strength, they transform those stereotypes into a life force that empowers the dispossessed Wasy women "to action on a global scale" (Seidlitz 58), reaching beyond the community as aboriginal women's hockey catches on across Canada and around the world. Like Pelijia and her sisters, the Wailerettes must dispose of the remnants of imposed gender constructions in order to play freely: Gazelle Nataways, self-appointed captain and the one woman on the team who clings to the pose of *femme fatale*, perpetuating the objectification rather than empowerment of the female body (her hockey sweater is so low cut that the puck is lost

in her cleavage), must be overthrown before the Wailerettes will agree to join the Aboriginal Women's World Hockey League. Gender revision becomes gender activism; the "game" at last holds the promise of community betterment. The Wailerettes, however, are never seen by the audience. Their "gender activism" is made present to us only by the sounds of "women wailing" and "rocks hitting boards ... echoing as in a vast empty chamber" (44) which permeate the play. Like true Tricksters, the Wailerettes resist the audience's need to gaze upon them - need to *know* them - by making conspicuous, along with their absence, the ultimate inability of a limited theatre space to contain and fully represent their now-expanded subjectivity.

**Bodily Trickery: Gender Fluidity and the Permeable Body**

While the Rez sisters ultimately assert the permeability of gender identity by crossing its borders and problematizing its boundaries, by far the most permeable entity in both plays is the female body itself.[88] As Judith Butler explains in *Gender Trouble*, the body as we understand it is not so much a naturally occurring phenomenon as a culturally inscribed space, one contained by a strict distinction between interior and exterior spaces wherein the body's interior is understood to be the locus of personal

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[88]A close second for the title of "most permeable entity" in *The Rez Sisters* may be the theatre space itself. Highway challenges theatre's implicit distinction between spectator and performer, auditorium space and playing space, by incorporating one into the other. During the "drive to Toronto" in the play's second act, the seats of the women's "van" are located all around the auditorium, encircling the spectators and engulfing viewing space in performance space. Later, during the Bingo game, the audience is asked to play along with Bingo cards inserted in their programs; the actresses take seats in the front row and become themselves spectators of the glittering Bingo Master. Not only does Highway thus disrupt the division between spectator and spectacle, but he also intrudes upon the artificial barrier previously erected between colonizer and colonized. For a moment, the audience and the 'rez' become indistinguishable; we become the colonized.

(including gender) identity, and the exterior to be the receptacle of waste eliminated by the interior. In other words, the boundary between interior and exterior is the locus of a subtle play between essence and abjection, between what are considered acceptable markers of personal identity and what is considered taboo, between what constitutes the self and what is "other." As Butler states, "what constitutes the limits of the body is never merely material ... the surface of the skin is systematically signified by taboos and anticipated transgressions; indeed, the boundaries of the body become the limits of the social *per se*" (*GT* 131, emphasis in original). Yet this construction of the body always ignores the fact that the abject is a product of the self, that "the boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external is established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness" (133). Therefore, as Butler notes, by reclaiming the abject, by making the socially constructed limits of the body more permeable, one may render problematic the division between self and other within any bounded system, including the sex/gender system:

> If the 'inner world' no longer designates a topos, then the internal fixity of the self and, indeed, *the internal locale of gender identity*, become similarly suspect. (135, my emphasis)

The breakdown of the body as a discrete, bounded entity thus heralds the breakdown of discrete gender identity; body permeability signals increased gender fluidity by virtue of the fact that problematizing the distinction between interior and exterior space also destroys the possibility of a discrete, interior locus of gender identity. More important for our purposes, though, is that this breakdown of an inner "topos" also problematizes

gender hierarchy. Because the distinction which the bounded body system makes between interior and exterior, self and other, is not benign but is coloured by a hierarchy in which "interior" and "self" reign supreme, this distinction is not just the model by which what is not "self" becomes "other," but is also "the model by which others become shit" (*GT* 134). But others cannot be shit if shit is identified as always already part of the self; that identification therefore throws the hierarchy based upon the supposedly impermeable separation of self and other into question.

The women of Highway's drama make that very identification by reincorporating the abject into their sense of self. Like Albee's tall women, the sisters disturb the body's boundaries and challenge the limits of "the feminine" by reclaiming the category of the "unladylike" - marked by those bodily functions which have come to signify the association of the female body with that which is dirty and "other." As Sheila Rabillard explains,

> Perhaps the most powerful questioning of the colonizing bonds of sharply demarcated genders and cultures is effected in *The Rez Sisters* through the interplay of absorption and elimination. It is imagery that focuses the audience's attention inescapably upon the female body and, moreover, upon its most taboo aspects - its fluxes, flows and unstable boundaries, the features that have seemed perhaps most fearful and foreign to a male-dominated culture and that, consequently, have been most firmly associated with feminine inferiority, vulnerability and even uncleanliness. (11)

Not only is the abject not considered taboo by the women in these plays; it is literally reinvented as a primary source of personal identity and female strength. Philomena insists that Pelijia will never leave the reserve, no matter how much she complains,

because "all [her] poop's on this reserve" (3). Despite having left her body, Pelijia's "poop" remains a mark of her identity, is in fact one of the most significant markers of identity: that which designates "home." Philomena's home is similarly "where her poop is": her bathroom, remodelled with the money she wins at THE BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD, is the focal point of her home, and the toilet is the bathroom's *pièce de résistance*:

> But the best, the most wonderful, my absolute most favourite part is the toilet bowl itself. First of all, it's elevated, like on a sort of ... pedestal, so that it makes you feel like ... the Queen ... sitting on her royal throne, ruling her Queendom with a firm yet gentle hand. (117, ellipses in original)

The artificial distinctions between self and other, colonizer and colonized, Queen Elizabeth and Philomena Moosetail, dissolve in the toilet bowl and are flushed down the drain. Philomena's toilet-throne is the means by which she displaces the colonizing culture's definition of itself as "other" than its colonized subjects: both she and the Queen, after all, need to use it. Her bodily waste signifies her body's power to disrupt the limits of that which we label taboo, and resignify the female body as a fluid and intersubjective entity. These final moments of *The Rez Sisters* parallel closely Nanabush's final appearance in *Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing*, which finds him/her perched high above the main stage on a giant toilet: dressed as God in drag "in an old man's white beard and wig, but also wearing sexy, elegant women's high heeled pumps" (117), s/he sits contentedly filing his/her nails and "having a good shit." This tableau glances back upon Highway's deconstruction of bodily boundaries throughout both Rez plays, suggesting that the distinctions we draw between femininity,

masculinity, divinity and humanity are all artificial ones; by defying these distinctions Nanabush literally embodies a less fixed and enclosed interpretation of personal identity. In the Rez plays, the body itself becomes a border-crosser, an irrepressible Trickster.

Throughout *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, the focus upon expanding the body's boundaries continues. In this play, however, while the "absent" women continue to gain strength from this expansion - the expelling of children gives the Wasy Wailerettes their force - the men, who tend to cling to imposed gender constructions and the contained sense of self they promulgate, are disempowered by it. The vaginal blood of Black Lady Halked paralyses Big Joey:

> ... when I saw this baby comin' out of Caroline, Black Lady ... Gazelle dancin' ... all this blood ... and I knew it was gonna come ... I ... I tried to stop it ... I freaked out. I don't know what I did ... *and I knew it was mine*... (120, ellipses in original, emphasis mine)

Vaginal blood is perhaps that "abjection" which men have historically been conditioned to fear most. Yet the vagina is also the most contradictory and troubling element of the female body for a construction of that body as discrete and bounded. While vaginal blood and waste may be considered the epitome of abjection, their release often accompanies the birth of children, who for centuries were considered upon their entrance into the world to be exiting their mother's grasp for that of their father, becoming the latter's property and (if the correct gender) heirs. Yet how can the vagina produce both waste and human life, a "self" that is both other than its bearer and yet (initially) physically tied to it? The umbilical cord represents "trouble" for the body's boundaries, transgressing those of the mother and undermining the construction of the baby's body as a separate

entity at the moment of birth.[89] For Big Joey, the moment of crisis is the realization that that which is being expelled from Black Lady's body is a part of himself, that in the birth of Dickie Bird the boundary between his body and Black Lady's dissolves in the blood on the floor. The dissolution of this boundary not only challenges the supposedly discrete nature of his male identity, but also disrupts the male-female hierarchy (to which Big Joey clings) and its assumption that men's bodies are cleaner and more contained than women's because not physically connected to the birthing process. Big Joey's identity is in crisis because he is unable to conceive of his identity as fluid; the sisters' agency, on the other hand, finds its source in that very fluidity.

**ReWriting *Top Girls***

Agency born of a more fluid sense of identity is exactly what sets the Wasy women apart from their counterparts in *Top Girls*. In many ways, *The Rez Sisters* can be read as "the play that might have been," had Marlene, her dinner guests and her colleagues allowed themselves to be empowered rather than intimidated by their ability to cross gender's borders.[90] Unlike the parody of women's community which Churchill sets up as a means of critiquing the sex/gender system, *The Rez Sisters* represents a true

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[89]Iris Young, as I noted in chapter one, regards the pregnant body as a means by which the distinctions between self and other, inner and outer, are blurred in "a bodily experience in which the transparent unity of self dissolves..." (Garner 216).

[90]By this suggestion I do not mean to imply that Highway's art is in any way superior to Churchill's, or that Churchill's play is flawed in a way that Highway's is not. Their messages are different: Churchill's play demands a means of liberating women from binary gender thinking, while Highway provides just such a means. They represent, if you will, a call to arms and one response to that call.

community, signalled immediately by titular differences. "Top Girls" denotes hierarchy implicitly ('top'), and suggests many women individually ('girls'). "Rez Sisters" implies no such hierarchy; if anything, the invocation of sisterhood suggests not only community, but a certain degree of equality. Equality is very much a key to the relationships between women in Highway's plays: Pelijia is reproached by Annie Cook for letting her overalls "go to [her] head" (41) when she assumes a little too much of the old patriarchal attitude, and the Wasy Wailerettes overthrow the one woman on their team - Gazelle Nataways - who strives to gain power over them (121). While the women in *Top Girls* - particularly the historical guests of Act One - view themselves as either masculine or feminine, fearing the consequences that may result from transgressing the limits of those categories, the Rez sisters freely transgress, translating the very idea of transgression into less rigidly patrolled gender boundaries. Marlene's vision of success is competitive and limited to the individual; she scorns assistance and conceives of her identity as very much defined by her own body and dependent upon her own success. The sisters, by contrast, are a community of misfits; chances are fairly good that none of them would "make it" (*TG* 120) in Marlene's estimation. Yet they do "make it," getting to Toronto and back not despite their commitment to one another, but because of it. Even Zhaboonigan, although handicapped, is embraced for her peculiar gifts rather than scorned, dismissed and feared as Angie is.

Pelijia is in many ways Marlene's antithesis: she is not a climber, does not seek personal success from her role as leader, but wishes only to better the living conditions of

everyone on the reserve (8, 59). She gladly constructs her gender identity as fluid and performative, embracing her ability to switch costumes and play other roles. She destabilizes the categories of masculine and feminine, while Marlene, on the other hand, sees her femininity as integral to her success and remains locked in her skirt. Unlike Pelijia and the other Rez sisters, Marlene fears her body. Her skirt is as much a mask for her shame as it is a badge of her preferred identity, one which keeps her chained to patriarchy's construction of femininity despite her seemingly progressive attitude. Marlene fears motherhood as an extension of her body, and seeks to suppress her relationship with Angie as a means of containing that body. Her Rez counterparts, meanwhile, celebrate the permeability of their bodies; motherhood for them is a means of empowering both themselves and the reserve at large. The sisters succeed where Marlene fails because, like Albee's tall women, they are able to conceive of their identities as intersubjective; the result is an activism that extends beyond the individual and out into the community.[91]

**Expect the Unexpected: *Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing***

*The Rez Sisters*' conception of gender (and thus identity) as a fluid and malleable process becomes much more sharply defined when that play is read in conjunction with

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[91]In many respects, the notion of identity as fluid and intersubjective is integral to the theatre as a medium of exploration of the human condition. If identities were not malleable, if characters were not permitted to grow, change or learn about themselves over the course of a drama, then plot and action would become frustrated and audiences would leave feeling a certain emptiness. (One need look no further than Samuel Beckett's satiric *Waiting For Godot* for an example of the kind of inertia that can result when character growth is denied.)

*Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, because only in the latter play is the full extent of Nanabush's role as a gender performer realized. Just as the intermission between acts is perhaps the most significant moment in *Three Tall Women*, the space between the Rez plays is where Nanabush's gender trickery reveals itself most clearly. While in *The Rez Sisters* Nanabush is male-defined, between plays s/he "switches" genders, becoming female for the purposes of the latter play. Therefore, in order to truly appreciate the extent to which Western constructions of gender are "made over" in these plays, one needs not only to read both plays, but to read them *intertextually*.

The inseparable connections between the two plays became clear during my above discussion of the gender transformations carried out by the plays' women; the efforts Pelijia and her sisters make towards a more fluid conception of gender boundaries are not self-contained, but spill over into and are expanded upon by the Wasy Wailerettes in the second play. Gender transformation is conceived as a *process* in these plays, one whose end would signal a return to stagnation and limitation. Highway's conception of the Rez plays as a cycle[92] thus furthers a process which Albee and Churchill began with their explosion of traditional narrative structures: the strategic revisioning of the notion of "theatrical progress" from a deterministic linearity to an ever expanding field of possibilities. Highway's plays do have a distinct beginning and a distinct end, but they do not simply move from point A to point B; the end of one play always signals a new beginning, the beginning of another play, another set of characters and actions that will

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[92]Originally there were to be seven Rez plays, but to my knowledge no others have as yet been completed or performed.

comment upon and therefore alter the significance of character and action in the plays that have come before. Progress within these plays is superseded by progress between them, a progress which ultimately foils the academic impetus: we are limited in our understanding of both *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips* because we have no means yet of addressing the Rez plays still to come. As a result, any discussion of these two plays in their current context must necessarily be an open discussion, cognizant of its own limitations and subject to future revisions.

Whereas *The Rez Sisters* is a play about seven women, there are technically no women in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, the companion piece which stars seven men. This is not, of course, to say that Wasy's women are wholly absent from *Dry Lips*; as I pointed out earlier, the Wasy Wailerettes make their presence known to us through soundscapes, and are frequently described by the male characters on stage. Nevertheless, their physical representation eludes us; their nearness is palpable, yet we are not allowed to gaze, not allowed to take up our usual, comfortable positions as sanctioned voyeurs despite the urge we feel to see and hear what the men are seeing and hearing. When I say there are no women in this play, I mean to suggest that it is *unproblematic representations* of women that are absent from view. Our urge to gaze is foiled, no more so than when it is addressed by Nanabush, whose hyperstylized parodies of femininity[93] - a drag performance *par excellence* - permeate the play, seemingly

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[93]While Churchill and Albee choose to expose gender's constructedness through dialogue, Highway chooses gender parody, an over-the-top performance which alienates and renders absurd our normative markers of gender identity.

satisfying while viciously interrogating our gaze, exposing the trickery that constitutes Western constructions of the feminine and rendering permanently problematic our attempts to view the female body on stage.

Nanabush, in switching genders between *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, baffles audience expectations in the same way that Albee's second act and Churchill's dinner party scene baffle expectations: by refusing to adhere to the conventions of traditional theatre set out by the drama's essentially "realistic" frame. Just as the second act of *Three Tall Women* interrupts and rejects the narrative thread (and discrete, separate characters) of its first act, Nanabush's appearances in *Dry Lips* interrupt and interrogate the (for the most part) realistic story unfolding around him/her. Nanabush, in fact, baffles all our expectations: of what a myth figure is, of what a spiritual figure is, of what gender difference means, of where gender exists on the body, of what "femininity" means. His/Her path through *Dry Lips* follows an unpredictable - although intricately planned - route designed to expose the assumptions behind our expectations, and it is this ability to pin us down while him/herself eluding fixity within traditional dramatic and ideological structures that gives Nanabush his/her disruptive power.

**Nanabush as Drag Queen**

> Garbo 'got in drag' whenever she took some heavy glamour part, whenever she melted in or out of a man's arms, whenever she simply let that heavenly-flexed neck ... bear the weight of her thrown-back head ... How resplendent seems the art of acting! It is the *impersonation*, whether the sex underneath is true or not.
>
> Parker Tyler, "The Garbo Image," quoted in *Gender Trouble* 128.

According to Judith Butler, drag is the ultimate gender performance. As an imitation or impersonation of gender identity, drag "*implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself - as well as its contingency*" (*GT* 137, emphasis in original). In other words, drag does not just perform gender; it performs gender *as always already performance*, and unabashedly displays the means by which *we* perform gender - and conceal our performance behind the "regulatory fiction"(141) of naturalized gender identity - every day. Drag is thus not a discrete performance: its parody of our culture's most sacred tenets of gender identity radically calls into question the nature and origin of its audience's gender just as it deconstructs its own.

If drag is the ultimate gender performance, then Nanabush is the quintessential drag queen. As a being without fixed gender, s/he is always already in drag; when s/he assumes a fixed gender identity, that identity is always already complicated by its status as performance, as costume, as inessential. There can be no illusion in these performances that gender is a natural identity; when Nanabush plays at being either male or female, his/her gender stands out as just that: play. In the space between *The Rez Sisters*' final curtain and the opening scene of *Dry Lips*, Nanabush changes costumes and "becomes female." Yet s/he is not simply cross dressing: Highway has taken care to cast

a male actor in *The Rez Sisters* and a female one in *Dry Lips*. The difference may seem slight, but its significance is not: were a male actor to play Nanabush in both plays, the audience could easily read his cross-dressed body in *Dry Lips* as a parody of femininity without ever having to call into question his own essential maleness. By casting a male actor to play the "male" Nanabush and a female actor to play the "female" Nanabush, the Trickster's gender remains unfixed, and unfixes in the process the gender of the actor or actress playing him/her. Nanabush is not just a "man" or a "woman" in drag; s/he is instead a performer who "reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without origin" (*GT* 138), and therefore that the act of cross-dressing itself is a bit of an illusion, because there can be no "original gender" against which to cross dress. Once destabilized in this fashion, gender identity becomes open to "resignification and recontextualization" (138), and Nanabush's drag becomes another means by which Highway demonstrates gender identity to be fluid, permeable, and open to trickery.

The main target of Nanabush's trickery in *Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing* is the category of femininity itself. The men in this play, with the exception of Simon Starblanket, remain locked in Western gender modes, unable to imagine gender as anything other than a binary opposition in which women are fixed as the objects of the male gaze.[94] Unlike their sisters, these men are not Tricksters;

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[94]The men range from the intensely misogynist Big Joey and his sidekick Creature Nataways, both of whom regard women as their personal property (*DL* 16, 25), to the buffoonish Pierre St. Pierre, who cannot imagine women playing hockey, to Zachary Keechageesik who, despite his devotion to his wife and his planned bakery business, jeopardizes both by allowing himself to be seduced by Nanabush, in the guise of the sexy Gazelle. Throughout the play, a life-size poster of Marilyn Monroe presides over the

Nanabush, therefore, is a much more prominent and necessary figure here than in *The Rez Sisters*. Strictly speaking, in *Dry Lips* s/he assumes the guise of three of the reserve's women: Gazelle Nataways, Patsy "Big Bum" Pegahmagahbow (Simon Starblanket's girlfriend and one of the Rez' few crusaders for a return to Indian spirituality), and Black Lady Halked (the birth of whose son during a drunken stupor seventeen years previous continues to trouble the play's seven male characters). In these disguises, however, Nanabush's penchant for contradiction shines through: on the surface, s/he appears to "represent" these women, but it is ultimately the complications of representing these women which she portrays. Wearing huge, prosthetic breasts to denote Gazelle, a giant prosthetic bum to denote Patsy, and an outsized prosthetic stomach to denote Black Lady (who remains perpetually pregnant in the eyes of Wasy's male population) Nanabush performs femininity as more than simply the "grotesquely exaggerated guises ... shaped by the clichés of the dominant culture" (Honegger 90); s/he performs femininity *as a construction of the male gaze*, a collection of body parts that *are* Gazelle, Patsy and Black Lady in the eyes of the reserve's men.[95] S/he thereby foregrounds femininity as a prefabricated identity, an image or fantasy born of male-identified gazes and expectations (see Garner). His/her performance calls into question the means by which women have traditionally been represented on the stage - as the incarnation of (primarily) men's words

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main stage area, reminding the audience of the men's devotion to Western constructions of the feminine ideal.

[95]Nanabush's plasticized markers of femininity may recall the "dummy" occupying centre stage during Act Two of *Three Tall Women*. Although there is no evidence to suggest that the dummy, like the prosthetics, need be plastic, both nevertheless point to the representation of women *as objects* on the traditional stage.

- and suggests that, given the theatre's history of such objectifying and fixating representations, the only true alternative for feminist theatre practice is the permanent problematization of representation. Like *Three Tall Women*, then, *Dry Lips* takes the road not quite visible: Nanabush's performance points ultimately to the *absence* of Gazelle, Patsy and Black Lady; meanwhile, the women on the hockey team who are actively re-imagining themselves as other than a reflection of the male gaze are always already absent from view. The main stage - the locus of that gaze - loses its privileged position as the locus of representation; all it can signify is lack.

Highway further deprivileges the main stage by creating a second stage above it. This "perch," which demands our attention by its sheer conspicuousness, is the realm of Nanabush's gender performance, and of his/her critical commentary upon the attitudes and actions of the men down below. From this perch, Nanabush acts out the violence - visual, physical and spiritual - that has been done to Gazelle, Patsy and Black Lady as a direct result of the misogyny of the prevailing gender hierarchy: as Gazelle, Nanabush strips for "the boys" (*DL* 80), reprising her role as the dancing girl at the Dickie Bird Tavern, as Patsy s/he is brutally raped with a crucifix, and as Black Lady she inhabits the drunken, pregnant body that was left virtually to die on the floor of the Dickie Bird Tavern by Big Joey and his friends seventeen years earlier, giving birth to Dickie Bird all over again on stage.[96]

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[96]Throughout the second act, the men alternately reflect upon and argue over their lack of action at the tavern all those years ago. Big Joey, we learn over the course of the play, was both Dickie Bird's father and the bouncer at the tavern where Black Lady sat drinking for three days prior to giving birth. His refusal to remove her from the tavern or provide her with any other support contributed directly to Dickie Bird's tragic entry into the world as a victim of fetal alcohol syndrome.

Not surprisingly perhaps, *Dry Lips* has come under attack for these brutal portrayals. Many female spectators - primarily Native - have argued that the images of Native womanhood the play presents are debilitating and dangerous, reinforcing rather than interrogating violence against women.[97] The controversy, despite getting a fair amount of press during the play's 1991 revival, has not tarnished the play's reputation as one of Canada's premier works by a Native playwright. The inconsistency between these interpretations - blatant misogyny on the one hand and biting social commentary on the other - as well as between the significance granted to each, begs some important questions about the limits of what can or should be represented on stage, and about the way theatre criticism may or may not fail to take into account diverse spectatorial positions when examining those limits. To what degree have the concerns of Native spectators - particularly women - been ignored by the literary establishment that has accorded this play such high praise? To what degree do critics ignore the complexities of the position of the female spectator when judging a work of drama such as *Dry Lips*? Is *Dry Lips*, in Marc Silverstein's terms, one of those plays in which women are asked to make "the choice that is not a choice" (507) between masochistic identification with victimized women and sadistic identification with misogynist male protagonists? Is it

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[97]In her review, "Carte Blanche: Angry enough to spit but with *Dry Lips* it hurts more than you know" (*CTR* 68 (1991)), Marie Annharte Baker claims that some women actually had nightmares after seeing the play.

Alan Filewood, in "Reclaiming Aboriginality" (*Theatre Journal* 46:3 (1994)), traces the controversy over the play to its high-profile 1991 revival in Toronto, and argues that the controversy was a direct result of removing the play from its original context as one of several plays about Native issues performed and produced by the Native Earth Performing Arts troupe. Read intertextually with *The Rez Sisters* and others, Filewood suggests, the meaning of *Dry Lips*' potentially misogynist moments change.

ever ethical to physically portray violence against women on stage? If not, how do we convey and interrogate the overwhelming problem of violence against women as it continues in practice today?

As a partial answer to some of these questions, I propose that it is possible to portray violence against women on stage, and furthermore that *Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing* does so both critically and ethically, well aware of the problems female spectators face in view of its more disturbing elements. The play does not simply present a strip, a birth and a rape for the titillation of some members of the audience and the embarrassment and discomfort of others; it transforms each of these moments into a political act, foregrounding both the audience's and the play's male characters' complicity in the "rape which has always already occurred" (Freedman 73) long before Patsy is attacked by Dickie Bird.

Nanabush's over-the-top drag performance is crucial to Highway's politicization of these events. Nanabush does not simply portray a trio of female victims; s/he comments critically upon rather than passively accepting the violence done to him/her. Nanabush's doubly-gendered status always already complicates his/her position as victimized *woman*, and, furthermore, allows him/her to manipulate it. S/he solicits the gaze as a means of disrupting it: s/he is always already watching us watching. As Silverman notes, "to self-consciously demand attention [during a drag performance] is to author spectatorship; this is potentially empowering, for one may control what others see" (87). As the play opens, Nanabush, in the guise of Gazelle, slides herself

voluptuously into a pair of stockings, dressing to leave after having supposedly seduced Zachary. She puts her body on show, tantalizing the audience and inviting us to look. In the next moment, however, this voluptuousness is purposefully undermined by the "giant pair of false, rubberized breasts" which she extracts from beneath Zachary's head (*DL* 15). We, like Zachary, have been "tricked" by Nanabush into gazing at *Gaze*lle (whose name's aptness is likely not lost on Highway), and, like him, we begin the play with our pants down, caught in the act, our complicity in the *creation* of Gazelle's body thrown back in our faces as Nanabush dons the breasts, themselves no more than the costume of the *femme fatale* we wished to see.[98]

The order of Nanabush's performances are as politically charged as the performances themselves. Whereas the play opens with the voluptuous Gazelle, Nanabush closes Act One in the guise of Black Lady, "naked, nine months pregnant, drunk almost senseless" (76), inhabiting another hyperstylized body that is the antithesis of that with which the act opened. Nanabush contrasts Gazelle's "idealized" body with Black Lady's pregnant form, portrayed as grotesque to match the repugnance with which the men on stage view her, and forces the audience to contend with the disparity between these two bodily fictions. In the second act, Nanabush's three most controversial appearances are similarly well planned. Gazelle's strip opens act two, but this most objectifying of his/her appearances serves again only to lay bare the men's expectations,

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[98]In assuming the position of the audience, I obviously cannot claim to know the desires of all members of the audience. I merely wish to contend that, for those not tricked into gazing at Nanabush, an alternate position is readily available, that of identification with his/her critical impulse.

as Nanabush disappears and the men are left stripped themselves, having shed their clothes in the excitement (87). Not long after, Nanabush, once again in the guise of Black Lady, appears sitting atop his/her jukebox perch naked, "facing the audience, legs out directly in front" (92), ready to re-enact the birth of Dickie Bird. This pose deconstructs the pretence of the strip; Nanabush presents us with a full frontal view of Black Lady's genitals, ostensibly offering us that which we coveted during Gazelle's dance, yet at the same time suggesting, in Black Lady's full-term pregnancy and the subsequent "rebirth" of Dickie Bird as he is drenched in fetal water, the terms and conditions of the offer. We are forced to acknowledge that Gazelle's and Black Lady's bodies are always already one and the same body - that the female body is not only sexy legs and hips, but also contains a womb - and furthermore that both are performative constructs born of the men's - and our own - expectations of those bodies. Nanabush strips for her audiences both on and offstage, and leaves her willing dupes fucked.

The rape of Patsy, staged shortly after the "birth scene," is the culmination of the visual and spiritual violence that has already been done to Gazelle and Black Lady. Yet this most violent scene in the play is also the most political, the most critical, the most accusatory. As Dickie Bird rapes Nanabush in the guise of Patsy with Spooky LaCroix's crucifix, Highway's staging becomes crucial to the moment's meaning. Dickie Bird jabs the crucifix not into Nanabush/Patsy but into the ground, inflecting the moment with overtones of the rape of Native spirituality carried out by Christianity; meanwhile, Nanabush/Patsy ascends to her perch and "stands there, facing the audience ... slowly

gather[ing] her skirt, in agony, until she is holding it above her waist" (100). The rape is transformed from a moment of private pain into a moment of public responsibility, as Nanabush/Patsy returns the audience's gaze, demanding we acknowledge our complicity in the chain of violence that has culminated in this moment. Our titillation over the strip and our repulsion over the birth return to haunt us as we are forced to sit silently, witnesses to the violence we have helped perpetrate but unable to take the action necessary to stop it. Like Big Joey, we are "paralyzed" (100) by the hegemonic constructions of femininity to which we remain chained.

Nanabush's drag performance does more than just expose the violence which accompanies Western constructions of femininity conceived within the limits of a rigidly hierarchical gender binary; his/her final appearance in the play, a mixed gender performance carried out on the toilet in high heels and an old man's wig (117), suggests that perhaps an escape from the cycle of violence perpetuated by gender hierarchy has already been found - in the gender transformations which the reserve's women are busy carrying out offstage. The answer, Nanabush hints as s/he disappears from view, lies in turning Trickster.

## Turning Trickster: Towards A Transformative Gender Criticism

> As listener/reader, you become the trickster, the architect of great social transformation at whatever level you choose.
>
> Lee Maracle, *You Become The Trickster*

*Dry Lips* ends on a high note: Zachary finds himself at home with his wife and

daughter, shorts intact, realizing the events of the play were just a dream, after all. Or were they? Many critics have taken issue with Highway's choice of a dream frame; they argue that it undermines the play's action and belittles its message. But what if it's not a dream, after all? What if Hera Keechageesik's peal of "magical, silvery Nanabush" laughter signals a flick of the Trickster's tail, a hint that perhaps the play's end is not what it seems? Like any playwright worthy of his pen, Highway leaves us to decide for ourselves which of his messages to keep, and which might be as easily discarded. Critics who wish to discard them all simply because Zachary may have been dreaming are simply not very effective Tricksters.[99]

What are the benefits of the Trickster for a practical, ethical feminist gender critique? As a born drag queen for whom gender is performance, a figure inclusively rather than exclusively gendered whose power is based upon the perpetual transformation of gender identity, Nanabush suggests that we, as feminist critics, must turn Trickster in order to further our goals. We must mine texts not only for performative moments that expose the constructedness of discrete gender categories, but also for transformative moments that suggest a blending of those categories, a breaking down of gender boundaries, and a reinvention of our perceptions of gender along more fluid and more

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[99]They are also rather forgetful. After all, the English theatre is peppered with works that use a dream frame or advocate the significance of dreams; Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is probably the most classic example. Parallels with the latter, in fact, are made throughout *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, as Nanabush plays Titania to Zachary's bare bottom, suggesting that Highway means for us to accord the dream frame in his play the same respect we accord it in Shakespeare's - if we dare.

For more on the parallels between *Dry Lips* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, see Honegger.

practical lines. Like the Trickster, we must not fear fallibility, but must nevertheless constantly question and update our own critical strategies, taking on new disguises, remaining elusive to those who would master us, frame us, fix their gaze upon us. Can the binary opposition of genders that still traps and limits our identities be revisioned and rendered obsolete? Can a hybridized definition of gender replace the hierarchy under which we still labour? Can there ever be more than just men and women? Only time, and a trick or two, will tell.

# Conclusion.
## Curtain Call:
## The Feminist Critic, The Active Spectator, and the Command Performance

*If we shadows have offended,*
*Think but this, and all is mended -*
*That you have but slumb'red here*
*While these visions did appear.*
*A Midsummer Night's Dream,*
*V, i, 412-15*

Puck would have us believe, as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* draws to a close, that the experience of emotional or psychological discomfort at the theatre need not be cause for an audience to pause. If you do not like what you see or hear, he suggests, soothe yourself with the thought that plays are like dreams, after all; they need not be taken seriously. But Puck is a tricky figure - far too tricky simply to be taken at his word - because he, like Highway's Nanabush, is in the business of making mortals into fools. To be soothed by Puck is to be charmed into complacency: if we accept his advice, discarding his play as simply a good night's entertainment, then we risk falling into his trap - the trap of passive spectatorship. Why is this trap such a danger? Because good theatre is designed to hold up a mirror, after all, and make us a little bit uncomfortable; by rejecting discomfort altogether we inadvertently cheat ourselves out of half the fun of going to the theatre. Puck knows he is too clever a figure to be easily forgotten once the crowd files out of the auditorium; he knows he has made every member of that crowd at least a little bit uncomfortable with his magical antics over the course of the play, and no amount of reassurance will change that. His lines, in fact, are not really meant to reassure

the audience that it is alright simply to watch a performance and then forget about it; rather, they are meant to tease the audience into asking itself why it is *impossible* simply to watch and forget. Puck challenges us, at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, to interrogate our own positions as spectators.

At the beginning of this discussion, I posed the problem of how to represent woman in a sphere - the theatre - that has traditionally been a prime locus of her objectification and effacement. Caryl Churchill, Edward Albee and Tomson Highway have suggested that the solution to the problems created by conventional representations of women on stage lies not in any kind of simple, alternative representation, but rather in a thorough and consistent problematization of the tenets of representation itself. Female identity, these plays suggest, is too complex to be simply put on view; if anything, the kind of easy gawking invited by such stagings becomes its own illusion. Looking at a woman, these plays insist, is not equivalent to looking through a woman; simply looking at a woman amounts to a consistent failure to see her at all. By confronting and deconstructing normative assumptions about gender difference and gender identity, by abandoning the linear, deterministic narrative mode of conventional theatre and replacing it with performances open to possibility, by fracturing the integrity of character on stage, and by opting for critical and political stagings of the female body, these plays present above all a challenge *to spectators*, a challenge to engage with rather than simply absorb the events in front of them, to cross the imaginary line between performance space and viewing space, to look *at*, not *through* the complex composite subjects on stage, and,

most importantly, to look *critically*. These plays force spectators to accept part of the responsibility for the legacy of women's objectification and effacement which is the norm in the patriarchal theatre tradition; like Puck, they ask us to turn our critical eyes upon ourselves.

Revisioning female representation, then, has amounted to an equally important revisioning of the position of the spectator in feminist theatre. But perhaps we need now to return to the question of what exactly constitutes feminist theatre. As I mentioned in the introduction to this discussion, feminist theatre troupes are largely alternative, and are therefore unlikely to reach mainstream audiences in large numbers. While it is true that avant-garde feminist theatre rarely ventures into the mainstream, it is not, as I hope is obvious from the previous chapters, true that mainstream theatre cannot be feminist. But can traditional, dramatic, patriarchal theatre - that Goliath against which feminist performances have pitted their Davids - ever be feminist, as well? Is the distinction between "theatre" and "performance" really as clear as the latter would have us believe? From the standpoint of a practical feminist criticism, it is actually advantageous to see the difference between them as one of degree rather than one of kind. After all, despite ever-growing numbers of subversive performances, the bulk of theatre produced on a large scale is, for all intents and purposes, conventional, dramatic, and not self-reflexive. The salient question then, given these facts, is not how far removed from conventional theatre should performance be, but rather how can we, as feminist-conscious critics, producers and directors, inject performance *into* conventional theatre?

Playtexts are special among works of literature because they are very much living texts. They are not, like novels, short stories or poems, the work of writers alone; instead, they are constantly being re-written by actors and directors, and each new production of a play - be it five years old or five hundred years old - creates, in a sense, a new text of that play.[100] While the purpose of merely "reviving" an old script is, strictly speaking, to recreate as exactly as possible the original conditions of the first performance of that script, one could certainly argue that with each revival comes new interpretation - from new actors, new directors, a new audience, all of whom are affected, whether consciously or not, by new social, economic and ideological conditions. Furthermore, each new production of a play resonates against those which have gone before, and will affect those which will come after. A play is thus very much an intertextual event, a combination of script and performance material.

Near the end of my introduction to this investigation, I posed a few general questions about the conditions necessary for a feminist playtext. Those questions focussed quite exclusively upon the gender, cultural and critical differences of the playwrights to be discussed in the chapters that followed,[101] but, given the above

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[100]Recently, postmodern theory has made it vogue to regard all texts, including non-dramatic ones, as the product of the combined efforts of writer and reader. Textual meaning, the theory argues, can only be generated by the interaction of reader with written work, and therefore both reader and writer participate in its creation. One might be tempted to add that these theorists are only just now realizing something that the theatre has known for years.

[101]Given the material we have uncovered in the previous three chapters, I think it fair to conclude that the differences in background and critical context between Churchill, Albee and Highway which I highlighted at the outset have not had a significant affect upon each playwright's ability to produce a "feminist" text; in particular, I want to point out that gender differences between the three seem rather insignificant overall, suggesting that those who would argue that men have no business writing female

description of dramatic texts as "living" texts, one would certainly not be remiss in arguing that a feminist playtext can be generated from a rather non-feminist script by a group of actors, directors and producers interested in reading that script as feminist. As I have already pointed out, and as Churchill, Albee and Highway's work has confirmed, all theatre contains the potential for subversion, even if that subversion is not always considered desirable. The job of feminist theatre critics is to *make that subversion desirable* as a means of adding to the already recognized field of potential meanings affixed to traditional playtexts. Simon Callow states quite resolutely that Restoration dramatists - both male and female - were far from being feminists (81), but this does not mean that the texts they produced are necessarily not feminist. By engaging one of those texts with an eye to critiquing its assumptions about and attitudes toward women, a feminist reading of that playtext becomes possible. Exactly this sort of reading, of course, is what feminist critics have been applying to canonical plays for years.

But the questions remains, how does one stage a conventional drama with an eye to critiquing its assumptions about and attitudes toward women? How does one create a feminist performance from a not very feminist script? Exactly the same techniques which we saw Churchill, Albee and Highway employ in their subversion of the conventions of traditional dramatic theatre can be used to complicate productions of dramas that seem, on the surface, rather patriarchal. The illusion of character integrity can be disrupted by casting several actors to play one character, or through the strategic use of character

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characters may be doing more harm than good.

doubling.[102] Linear narratives can be interrupted by re-ordering certain scenes, cutting others, perhaps even adding new ones.[103] Normative assumptions about gender can be complicated with over-the-top performances of femininity or masculinity, or through cross-gender casting. Actors can engage the audience by addressing it directly, turning soliloquies into dialogues meant to make spectators self-conscious, and forcing them to address critically their own positions as viewers and the intentions of their viewing. Performances of this kind are already practiced by some theatre companies; what is needed now is a means of making more of these performances economically viable for production in larger, more prominent theatres. The survival of conventional theatre rests very much upon the rather conventional expectations instilled in its audiences; if those expectations can be foregrounded and interrogated by subversive performances, perhaps, in time, they will change - or at least become more self-aware - encouraging the theatre to do the same.

**Exit Stage Left? A Final Word**

As we near the end of this investigation, I wish, like Stoppard's proverbial Player King, to look upon this exit as an entrance somewhere else. I have chosen to focus my analysis of *Top Girls*, *Three Tall Women* and Tomson Highway's Rez plays upon their interrogation and subsequent re-creation of our normative conceptions of gender and

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[102]These techniques are already very much in use in "updated" productions of Shakespeare plays.

[103]This sort of refashioning of the playtext is, of course, contingent upon its being within the public domain, or upon permission from the copyright holders being obtainable.

identity - and in particular upon their use of gender performance as a primary means to these ends - but by no means do I consider this analysis to be all-encompassing. Although work of the kind which I have undertaken in the previous pages must be accorded value if we are to go on combatting the subordinate role which women continue to occupy in many sectors of our society today, there remain many other avenues that warrant following in our ongoing appreciation of these and other, similar texts. The four plays considered here, although stylistically quite unique, share in common the desire to explore and come to terms with past oppressions; the varied ways in which they transform the hand-me-downs of their individual and the theatre's collective pasts demand further analysis and exploration on the part of critics from all disciplines, not just feminism.[104] These plays may be "feminist" in many respects, but they also, like the characters which they offer us, ultimately transcend that label. If feminism is to remain a viable mode of social critique, it too must learn to transcend and transform its own labels; texts such as Churchill's, Albee's and Highway's provide us with a valuable starting point by looking to feminist issues, and beyond.

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[104]*Top Girls*, although not as widely written about as other Churchill plays, has received far more critical attention than the other texts considered here. *Three Tall Women* has been virtually ignored critically since its premiere in 1991, and Highway, although now considered to be one of the most significant playwrights at work in Canada today, still receives far less attention than many of his contemporaries. Clearly, much work remains to be done here.

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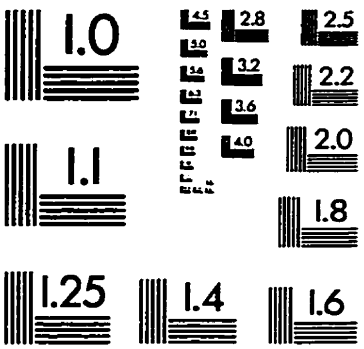


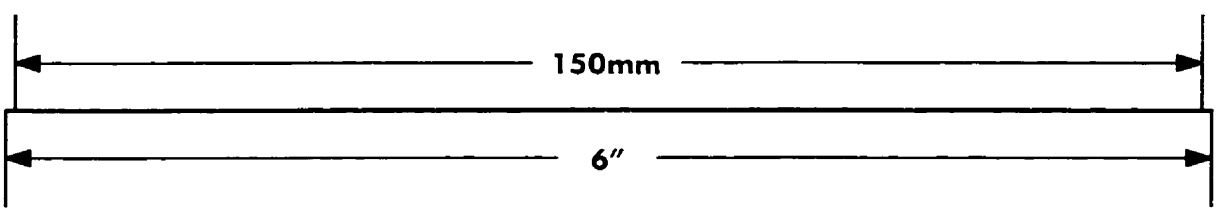


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