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Writing about the South "in her own way": gender and region in the work of southern women playwrights

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WRITING ABOUT THE SOUTH “IN HER OWN WAY”:
GENDER AND REGION IN THE WORK OF
SOUTHERN WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by
Casey Kayser
B.A., Westminster College, 2001
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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my parents, Jim and Kay Kayser, and my sister, Christy Kayser Arrazattee. The completion of this degree would not have been possible without their constant love, laughter, friendship, and support. I am grateful to my parents for cultivating in me a love of learning and knowledge from a young age, and they have always encouraged me to set lofty goals and achieve them. When I was young, I thought my father was the smartest person in the world, and he still seems that way to me today. I'm convinced much of my gift for storytelling comes from my Dad, whose stories about growing up the oldest of seven in a very animated family, or his vivid tales about the Mississippi River bandit, "Swamp Fox" Swampy Bolen, were endless sources of entertainment when I was a child. I learned my earliest lessons about feminism from my Mom, and I have no doubt that the mantra I first heard in kindergarten, "You can do anything a boy can do!" set the stage for many of my life's successes. My Mom is always the first person I turn to in a crisis or a moment of joy (unfortunately for her, I'm an academic with a background in dramatics, so the crises are more frequent), and I am eternally grateful for her sage perspective, patience, and sense of humor. I am also appreciative of the financial support my parents have provided for my education and offered in tough times. It means very much to me that they understand and value the path I have chosen, and that throughout these long and financially unstable graduate school years, they never once said, "Get a real job!" When I moved to Baton Rouge in 2005 to pursue the PhD, my sister and best friend Christy was my willing partner in a great adventure, and I am grateful to her for that. We have both found much happiness and success in our new home, and it has been wonderful to have such a strong supporter, confidante, and partner in crime here with me. I feel blessed to have been born into what is surely one of the most loving, fun, and funniest families to have ever existed.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how identity—gender, race, sexuality, regional affiliation—intersects with considerations of the dramatic genre, commercial and critical factors in the American theatre, and understandings about the American South to complicate how contemporary southern women playwrights represent region. In light of the always-already “performative” nature of the South, and geographical, commercial, and ideological factors that set the South in opposition to the North, southern women playwrights face additional difficulties in navigating issues of authenticity and simulacra, the universal versus the specific, ideas about southern “backwardness” versus northern sophistication, and audience participation in fetishizing or distancing the South. Using drama as their medium creates unique problems—for instance, the multiple layers of authorship, the collective reception format, and the demand for exaggeration within production—but it also provides opportunities for southern women playwrights to challenge conventional ideas not only about the South, but also about the assumed universal spectator, who has always been figured as male/white/heterosexual/middle-class, and I argue—not southern. Reading the work of playwrights such as Pearl Cleage, Sandra Deer, Rebecca Gilman, Marsha Norman, and Shay Youngblood, I argue that these women draw on several strategies to respond to these problems of region and genre. Through conscious approaches that involve placing, displacing, and replacing the South, and by foregrounding their challenges to traditional southern notions of gender expression and sexuality, community, and domesticity, these women use the stage to reimagine the South and the dramatic genre.

INTRODUCTION

SOUTHERN WOMEN'S DRAMA AND THE PROBLEM OF PLAYWRITING THE SOUTH

It is at once compelling and ironic that two of the greatest American playwrights, Tennessee Williams and Lillian Hellman, are artists whose work has been strongly linked to the southern tradition. Aside from his firm place in the literary canon, Williams' hold in the popular imagination is strong—and distinctly southern—if the lyrics of country music, old and new, are any indication. Take for example, Don Williams' 1980 song "Good Ole Boys":

When I was a kid, Uncle Remus would put me to bed,
With a picture of Stonewall Jackson above my head.
Then daddy came in to kiss his little man,
With gin on his breath and a Bible in his hand.
He talked about honor and things I should know,
Then he'd stagger a little as he went out the door.

I can still hear the soft southern winds in the live oak trees.
And those Williams boys, they still mean a lot to me:
Hank and Tennessee.
I guess we're all gonna be what we're gonna be;
So what do you do with good ole boys like me?

Perhaps only Don Williams, who was nicknamed country music's "Gentle Giant," could juxtapose Hank Williams next to Tennessee Williams, and in a later lyric remember falling asleep "With Thomas Wolfe whispering in my head." The emotional thrust of the song is that his memories of the South will never leave him, and he will always be a "good ole boy," despite the fact that he has left his region of birth. He sings of childhood friends burning themselves "up on bourbon and speed," and claims, as his literary knowledge might evidence:

But I was smarter than most and I could choose:
Learned to talk like the man on the six o'clock news.
When I was eighteen, Lord, I hit the road,
But it really doesn't matter how far I go.

He must abandon what ostensibly marks him as southern—his accent—but all that he associates with the South—honor, bourbon, religion, soft southern winds in oak trees, and Tennessee Williams—remain a part of him even as he has distanced himself geographically.

Or consider Pam Tillis' song "Maybe It Was Memphis," which was nominated for the Country Music Awards Song of the Year in 1992:

Lookin' at you through a misty moonlight,
Katydid's sing like a symphony.
Porch swing swayin' like a Tennessee lullaby,
Melody blowing through the willow tree.

What was I supposed to do?
Standin' there lookin' at you,
A lonely boy far from home.
Maybe it was Memphis,
Maybe it was southern summer nights,
Maybe it was you, maybe it was me;
But it sure felt right.

Read about you in a Faulkner novel,
Met you once in a Williams play.
Heard about you in a country love song,
Summer nights' beauty took my breath away.

It is clear that Tennessee Williams' work is an immediate corollary to the images that many people have—or create—of the South, and he is even figured as the dramatic counterpart to Faulkner, the quintessential writer of the southern literary canon. The mere "mention of his name evokes for readers and playgoers all over the world a vivid image of the Deep South" (Holditch and Leavitt x), visions of porch-lounging on bourbon-soaked, hot summer evenings, perhaps on the Mississippi Delta plantation home of his *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), or in the mythical Glorious Hill, Mississippi, of *Summer and Smoke* (1948) and several other of his plays, or Stanley and Stella Kowalski's crude but charming New Orleans flat in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951). Williams wrote an array of rich and complex female characters, including Amanda Wingfield of *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and *Streetcar's* Blanche DuBois,

who is arguably the most memorable female character in all of southern literature, rivaled only by Scarlett O'Hara. DuBois is the archetype of the fading southern belle, one character of the southern landscape populated by such types as her younger counterpart, the southern lady, the good ole boy of Williams' song, and the Mammy. Williams was extremely devoted to what he called his "native Southland," and while his given name was Thomas, he actually changed his name to reflect his father's state of birth. No other American writer besides Faulkner, and certainly no other playwright, is as closely associated with the region of his birth as Tennessee Williams.

Hellman is also frequently categorized as a southern writer, although she is probably less likely to be casually mentioned in a popular country song, for a variety of reasons. On the one hand, the success of Williams' and Hellman's southern plays is evidence that the South has been and continues to be a compelling place, but one which is a departure geographically and perhaps ideologically from the northern nexus of American theatre culture, New York City. It is also ironic that the two writers were able to find so much success writing from marginalized identities: Hellman "the sole woman considered a major playwright during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, an era when Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams reigned" (Burke 104) and Williams, a gay man. Further, they were working in a genre that literary critics and anthologies of American literature in general have slighted in favor of the poem, novel, or short story. The levels of marginalization go deep: not only is American drama marginalized next to its more powerful European counterpart, but also in its struggle to gain legitimacy as a genre in the American literary canon; in which dramatic literature becomes secondary to production; and in which American women, African American, lesbian and regional playwrights' voices are silenced as well. Writing, then, from these marginalized positions, in a

marginalized genre, about a marginalized place, Hellman and Williams' success is compelling, if not a little mystifying.

Even literature scholars might struggle with naming any southern women playwrights aside from Hellman—maybe Beth Henley or Marsha Norman—who with Hellman, complete the three southern female playwrights that Robert L. McDonald and Linda Rohrer Paige recognize as a “kind of artistic Trinity” (ix) to which criticism has been limited, despite the diverse number of female voices who have participated in the southern theatre. While the Southern Renaissance led to the critical recognition of many of America's finest writers, whose names are now inextricably linked with the southern tradition—William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor—the same is not true of southern playwrights, save Williams and Hellman. As Milly Barranger has pointed out, “among the legions of the southern writers—novelists and poets—who have received critical attention since the 1930s is the curious phenomenon of the southern playwright. In contrast to their fellow-writers, southern playwrights have been largely ignored” (5). McDonald and Paige's 2002 edited collection, *Southern Women Playwrights: New Essays in Literary History and Criticism*, is the first book length study to explore women dramatists with attention to their southern roots. In his introductory essay, McDonald claims that the neglect of southern women's drama “originates in deep, historical prejudices against every term of the label ‘Southern Woman Playwright’” (2); thus the reason why southern women playwrights are given so little attention is a direct result of their regional identity, their gender, and the genre in which they write. Yet the roots and implications of this combination of prejudices have not been explored in any length. My dissertation seeks to extend the much-needed dialogue about the role that region plays in southern women's drama. Further, I explore how identity—gender, race, sexuality, regional affiliation—intersects with considerations of genre, commercial and critical factors in the

American theatre, and understandings about the American South to complicate how playwrights represent region.

The seeds of my project began not so much with the texts of the plays themselves, but in several pre-script notes included by playwrights before their plays, narratives that I began to see as sites of anxiety related to setting choices. For instance, Kentuckian Marsha Norman's pre-script note for her 1983 Pulitzer Prize-winning play *night Mother* reveals her conscious decision to avoid regionalism in any way:

Under no circumstances should the set and its dressing make a judgment about the intelligence or taste of Jessie and Thelma. It should simply indicate that they are very specific real people who happen to live in a particular part of the country. Heavy accents, which would further distance the audience from Jessie and Thelma, are also wrong. (1491)

In the acting edition, she emphasizes after the property plot, "All food, cleaning supply, refrigerator, and candy props should be national brands which do not indicate any specific area in the country." These directions make pretty clear that Norman doesn't want actors and directors to assign any regional identity to Jessie and Thelma, and certainly they should not make assumptions based on the playwright's southern roots or the southern settings of her other plays. Kentucky-born playwright Naomi Wallace offers a similar note before her play *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* (1998) that speaks to region as well as class: "Accents of the characters should be as 'neutral' as possible, an accent from 'somewhere' in the U. S. No overalls for any characters. Being poor and white in 1930s America is not synonymous with poor dress taste, nor Ma and Pa Kettle outfits" (281). In her production notes for *So Long on Lonely Street* (1986), Atlanta native Sandra Deer writes: "These are realistic characters, not Southern types. King is not a buffoon. Clarice is not just a silly twit, and Annabel Lee is nobody's servant. Ruth and Raymond are sophisticated and have traveled, but they are not contemptuous of what they come from" (6). Deer seems concerned that critics and audiences

will see her characters as surface replications of familiar southern character types. Reading these notes, of one thing I was sure: these playwrights are responding to *something*, something wrapped up in the particulars of the genre and conceptions about region. I began to see a trend that I call the problem of “playwrighting the South,” and in this project, I attempt to define that problem, confirm playwrights’ awareness of the challenges they face, and study how these women make several kinds of choices that respond to it. I argue that these marginalized playwrights (women, African American, and lesbian) with roots in or writing about a marginalized region (the American South), writing in a genre not typical of that region, dramatize the South through varying strategies that respond to their marginalization and the problems of playwrighting the South.

The goals of my project are multiple: first, I am interested in how female playwrights represent the modern South, and how contemporary southern playwrights draw on and depart from the earlier models of Hellman, Henley, and Norman. Yet these representations cannot be fully understood without considering how marginalization operates on these levels of gender, race, sexuality, genre, and region. Southern playwrights use varying strategies to respond to their marginalization, and they make choices that negotiate the problems of playwrighting the South, some of which bring with them an additional set of risks. The “problem” is rooted in geographical, ideological, interpretive, and genre-based challenges exacerbated by the difficulties presented by the region that is the American South. Despite the relative homogenization of America, the South continues to retain a complex, distinct identity, one that has often been figured as “other,” or at odds with American culture as a whole. In her book *The Nation’s Region: Southern Modernism, Segregation and U.S. Nationalism*, Leigh Anne Duck argues that in the early to mid-twentieth-century, nationalist ideology distanced itself from the South, as southern conservatism and racism [what Duck calls “apartheid”] conflicted with the

liberal, democratic image of itself the nation wished to put forth. These dualities of “a backward South” and an “enlightened nation” “disavowed both the contemporaneity of the South with the larger nation and the presence of apartheid in other areas of the country” (3). Regional cultures became associated with tradition, whereas the national “chronotype”¹ was characterized by capitalist modernity. Americans were encouraged to cling to a romanticized vision of the South proliferated in narratives like *Gone With the Wind*, a formation which had several effects on nationalist ideology: Americans were assured that modernization would not obscure regional distinctiveness, and this “romanticization of the southern past served to retain white supremacist conceptions of a national people as a prominent trope in U. S. nationalism” (20). These notions shaped the consciousness of non-southerners, as well as southerners, who continued to see themselves as somehow separate from the rest of the nation.

New York City is America’s theatre capital, as well as “the capital of capitalism” (Kessner xii), which would seemingly put it at odds with the South. In fact, like the South, New York City carries a cultural distinctiveness—mixed up in a bundle of realities and stereotypes, conceptions and misconceptions, the narratives of New York City rival the stories we know about the South, although they are largely opposing ones. New York City, often figured as urban, dangerous, alienating, yet cosmopolitan and liberating, arguably represents a place antithetical to notions we have about southern places as rural, safe, friendly, backwards, conservative. If making it in New York City signifies the height of success in dramatic discourse, if plays are more often presented to northern audiences, or if playwrights expect that their play, if successful, will eventually be viewed by predominantly northern audiences in northern spaces, how does this influence their setting and other dramatic choices, if at all? Susan Bennett affirms that “the playwright invariably shapes a text [...] to provoke particular expectations and responses within an audience” (20); further, they shape a text to *avoid* or

challenge particular expectations and responses as well. I argue that this geographical, narrative, and ideological framework does affect the choices that playwrights make. In fact, they respond with conscious strategies to both negotiate and challenge these difficulties that involve *placing, displacing, and replacing* the South. I use the term *placing* to indicate when a playwright takes an explicitly southern setting, presents characters that audiences will easily identify as southern, and draws on familiar southern tropes or themes. *Displacing* signifies a strategy in which the South will be present but slightly removed from the central position—used as a peripheral physical setting or present only in characters’ memories, and often set in contrast to New York City. Characters comment that their southern settings and New York City are so different that they might as well be “another planet” (Cleage 278) or “another world” (Bingham 21). By juxtaposing the South with New York City, these playwrights respond to the specifics of their medium and comment on their marginalized place within its framework. I use *replacing* to indicate a strategy in which a playwright expands genre, temporal, and spatial constraints and redefines notions of belonging in southern communities to create a new picture of the South.

Despite the uneasy juxtaposition of the terms southern and feminist, I work from the assertion that each of these playwrights is writing in the feminist tradition. The use of the plural “feminisms,” rather than feminism, is a recent trend that acknowledges the many and diverse perspectives in the theory, movement, and ideology. There are, then, different perspectives on what might be identified as “feminist” theatre, and though feminist critics might label a writer’s work feminist, the writer may not claim that label. Janet Brown has argued that “when woman’s struggle for autonomy is a play’s central rhetorical motive, that play can be considered feminist drama” (1), and Sally Burke says “a feminist playwright, by bringing woman’s previously ignored or discounted thoughts, actions, and words onstage, illuminates

the workings of power that the patriarchy would keep dark” (viii). Megan Terry’s succinct definition is also useful: “Anything that gives women confidence, shows themselves to themselves, helps them to begin to analyze whether it’s a positive or negative image, is nourishing” (Chinoy and Jenkins 329).

Both content and form have been considered when scholars look to deem a work as feminist. However, as Michelene Wandor notes, the trend of immediately deeming plays by women “women’s theatre” or “feminist theatre” is dangerous because these terms may provide fodder for misogynists to sneer at any play by a woman; more importantly, they are not analytical or always accurate, since even if a play has an all-female cast and centers female experience, it may not challenge gender-based oppression or the anti-feminist notions of biological determinism and cultural inferiority (131). Even “female experience” is a questionable concept, as feminism has moved away from that limiting view to acknowledge the differences among individual women for reasons of race and ethnicity, age, class, sexual orientation, and ability, among others. Realism has been a major problem in this discussion, as scholars like Jeanie Forte have asserted that “classical realism is always a reinscription of the dominant order” [and is] “not useful for feminists interested in the subversion of a patriarchal social system” (116). Some also feel that feminist theatre must shake up the traditional Western model of drama of a linear chronological plotline leading to a climax and a resolution. Patricia Schroeder cautions, however, that “to insist that plays conform to any rigidly defined feminist aesthetic will only mean that feminism is, indeed, just another hegemonic system” (*In Defense* 115), and Michelene Wandor confirms that “the feminine, the female, any one or any combination of the feminist dynamics can appear in any kind of play written in any kind of form” (184).

There has been significant disagreement over the feminist status of the major works by the “Trinity”: Hellman’s work has troubled feminist scholars, especially *The Children’s Hour* (1934), which ends with a woman committing suicide after she is accused of lesbianism. Beth Henley and Marsha Norman were the first women since the 1950s to receive mainstream critical attention and recognition for their plays, and they came of age during the final years of third-wave feminism, during a time when women’s studies was becoming a topic for serious study in the academy and literature scholars were beginning to critically reexamine the American dramatic canon’s exclusion of women’s and minority voices. Because Norman and Henley’s work sits at the juncture of these historical moments, they have been the scapegoats for many of these debates. While many scholars do celebrate their work as feminist, there is not universal agreement, and the debates continue. Jonnie Guerra is especially harsh on Henley, claiming, “at the core of Henley’s failure to advance positive images of women lies her consistent and unimaginative dependence on the forms and modes of the dominant male tradition of American drama” (119). *Night Mother* was faulted for its failure to deviate from the male model as well. In her review of the play, Jill Dolan was horrified that “Women are getting the Pulitzer Prize these days for plays that depict women killing themselves” (78). She later retracted her statements, to some extent, recognizing that *Night Mother* is “animated by the absent male,”² but still argues that the play’s “unwillingness to discuss Jessie’s dilemma in terms of a wider social context” renders “it weak as a political statement” (*Spectator* 36). These are tensions we don’t see in the more explicitly feminist work by contemporary southern playwrights, many of whom, like Paula Vogel and Pearl Cleage, self-identify as feminists, and Rebecca Gilman, whose characters actually declare themselves feminists and in whose work critics generally recognize the “feminist underpinnings” (Reid). Perhaps because we are moving further and further from enduring but oppressive notions about southern womanhood

and the idea that southern and feminist are “two classifications [that] are seemingly in opposition” (Saunders 63), the playwrights who have followed the Trinity seem to feel more comfortable exploring controversial issues and do so from a decidedly feminist stance. Consider, for instance, Paula Vogel’s unflinching portrayal of pedophilia in *How I Learned to Drive* (1997) compared to Marsha Norman’s *‘night Mother*, the subject matter of which Norman perceived as shocking at the time: “You have to remember, this was 1983. People didn’t talk about suicide” (Talkback). I read Hellman, Henley, and Norman as feminist writers, and while they present a more subtle form of feminism (which explains why it is easily missed and often misunderstood), they serve as models for later representations of the South from a feminist perspective.

Many of the plays I discuss deal with violence in one form or another, especially gendered violence, resulting from societal and institutional masculine control, the eroticization of violence, and the objectification of women’s bodies. I argue that all of the women’s plays I study in this project *are* explicitly feminist works, because they focus on gendered violence, emphasize structures that define women as objects or commodities, or give voice to ordinarily silenced individuals, ultimately revealing the ways in which women and other marginalized groups have been rendered powerless by sexist, racist, classist, and homophobic forces, and patriarchal, oppressive institutions. While such forces are hardly regional phenomena, they have been particularly complex, institutionally sanctioned, and enduring in the South, which makes it a compelling and effective specific space in which to dramatize these concerns. Obviously, by the very act of writing and in creating characters that have not traditionally had voices, these playwrights confront their own marginalization and they flout the notion of the universal spectator. I hope to also challenge such marginalization by introducing the work of some playwrights that have not been widely read or studied and to invite further inquiry into

their work. Regardless of how the South figures in these plays—placed, displaced, or replaced—each of these works challenge traditional and southern notions of gender expression and sexuality, racial hierarchies, community, domesticity and family, and in some cases, they redefine the dramatic genre as well.

Drama: The “Unwanted Bastard Child” and Southern Dramatists: “The Stepchildren of Southern Literature”

Drama is unique because of its two components: it exists as both a written text that can be encountered by the solitary reader, as well as a narrative that can be performed on stage for a collective audience. It is curious that as the oldest and most multi-faceted of the arts, drama has not been celebrated, but ignored and devalued. In *American Drama: The Bastard Art*, Susan Harris Smith recognizes the deep prejudices against drama in American literary history: “For too many critics and historians American drama is still American literature’s unwanted bastard child, the offspring of the whore that is American theatre” (10). Smith’s conception places the dramatic text even secondary to its theatrical realization, and since most plays are written with performance in mind, sitting and simply reading a play on the page may be difficult or seem incomplete to some readers. Drama’s literary conventions themselves—the *dramatis personae* (introduction to the characters prior to the text), the reliance only on dialogue and action to present character emotion—present a different and unfamiliar reading experience for those accustomed to prose, fiction, or poetry. In light of contemporary culture’s increasing prioritization of the visual and new pedagogical practices that indulge this preference for digital/visual texts, today’s student of American literature may express frustration with reading a play rather than watching it performed.

American theatre sits at the bottom of the hierarchy in an arena that has been maligned since its inception. In *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, Jonas Barish provides a chronological exploration of the ways in which a bias against theatre has operated over time, taking its roots

in Plato's first articulation of the dangers of theatre, and charting prejudice through the twentieth-century. He points out that discrimination towards those involved in theatre has not only been confined to the West, but worldwide:

In India, until recent times, actors belonged to the despised castes, and were subject to crippling social disabilities. In Indochina, acting was for centuries classified as a vile profession, while in China, until the Communist Revolution, actresses were regularly recruited from prostitutes, had effectively to continue as prostitutes while acting, and accordingly suffered the reprobation and ostracism inherent in that role. (2)

Within the field of southern studies, as well, drama is given short shrift. Charles Watson's *The History of Southern Drama* (1997) is the first comprehensive history on the subject of southern drama, and he acknowledges that dramatists are "the stepchildren of southern literature" (101). Watson points to where criticism has been lacking: Louis Rubin's *The History of Southern Literature* (1985), a 605-page volume, devotes only one paragraph to pre-1900 drama, and one chapter on "Modern Southern Drama" mentions Paul Green, Lillian Hellman, and Tennessee Williams, all in seven pages (ix). *The Companion to Southern Literature* (2002) does better in its coverage of southern drama, in an entry written by Watson, who charts its development in sections, starting with beginnings to 1800, 1800 to 1900, and finally 1900 to the present, but still in only nine pages.

While women's roles in the theatre have admittedly been limited, especially in the South, Watson's study focuses heavily on male playwrights. He says upfront that he doesn't consider plays by writers who primarily worked in nondramatic genres, but that approach leaves out some important figures in southern women's drama: Lillian Smith and her stage adaptation of her novel *Strange Fruit* (1944), and Carson McCullers, who wrote two plays, a 1950 stage adaptation of her novel *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) and *The Square Root of Wonderful* (1957). In a review of Watson's book, Jeffrey H. Richards notes the author's failure to mention Louisa McCord and her verse drama *Caius Gracchus* as a glaring omission and

points out that despite his neglect of McCullers, he does spend three pages discussing plays by William Gilmore Simms, who most scholars would identify as a novelist (112-113). I agree with Gerald Weales that Watson's discussion of Hellman is limited, because he discusses only two of her southern plays, *The Little Foxes* (1939) and *Another Part of the Forest* (1946), leaving out *The Autumn Garden* (1951) and *Toys in the Attic* (1960), presumably because, as Weales suggests, they don't fit the thesis of his chapter "The Southern Marxism of Lillian Hellman" (lx). Ultimately Watson's study is a significant contribution, but more work remains to be done on southern women playwrights, both from a critical and historical perspective.

A thorough history of women's roles in southern theatrical centers such as Charleston and New Orleans in the antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction periods has not yet been written. While it was far more acceptable for women to work as actresses, some female playwrights did see their plays staged in the South during these periods, and there were also plays written and performed in the types of venues far more accessible to women at that time: churches, schools, and camps. Southern women who were writing and seeing their plays published and staged during these periods include New Orleanian Alice Dunbar Nelson, Angela Weld Grimke of South Carolina, Atlanta native Georgia Douglas Johnson, North Carolina native Anna Julia Cooper, Louisa S. McCord of South Carolina, Alabama native Mollie Moore Dennis, who spent much of her life in New Orleans, and Caroline Lee Hentz, who, while born in Massachusetts, spent many years in the South and wrote in defense of slavery and the southern cause, themes common at the time.

There were several African-American women dramatists in the early parts of the twentieth-century who wrote protest plays, seeking to expose southern social evils, focusing specifically on lynching and other acts of racial violence. Most notable of these are Angelina Weld Grimke's *Rachel* (1916) and Georgia Douglas Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South*

(1925) and *Blue Blood* (1926). Yet these plays reached far fewer audiences; it was not until Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) that a black female dramatist would receive any significant attention. Most were criticized as propaganda and faulted for their overly romantic and didactic tone, even though these were stylistic conventions of the period. Yet the only one of these playwrights that Watson mentions is Georgia Douglas Johnson, and many other definitive collections such as Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins' *Women in American Theatre* leave some of them out entirely. While some of these women, such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Angelina Weld Grimke, and Anna Julia Cooper have been rediscovered and studied in recent years, their plays generally receive less attention than their work in other genres, and there is relatively little attention to the region of their birth or their treatment of southern themes. Others, like Caroline Lee Hentz and Mollie Moore Davis, have received very little attention at all, and even less in regards to their plays. While a historical perspective is outside of my goals for this project, consideration of these women is a direction for further research that is crucial to a complete account of the history of southern drama. Even important texts that expand the southern canon to include women, such as Carol Manning's *The Female Tradition in Southern Literature* (1993), Anne Goodwyn Jones' *Tomorrow is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936* (1981), and Mary Louise Weaks and Carolyn Perry's *Southern Women's Writing: Colonial to Contemporary* (1995) fail to include extensively, or even at all, the work of southern women playwrights in their survey of women's writing. While a 1987 special issue of the *Southern Quarterly* was devoted exclusively to southern women playwrights, prior to McDonald and Paige's collection, no thorough critical study existed that considered female playwrights in relation to the South. Clearly, more work remains to be done in exploring southern women's contributions to drama.

Women's Drama, Regional Drama, and the "Universal Spectator"

The exclusion of American women's drama from scholarly consideration is concurrent with historical trends that have marginalized women authors in general. As Robert L. McDonald points out, the fact "that American women have written interesting plays since the earliest days of the republic is not something one could know from our literary histories and the bulk of criticism" (1). The continued marginalization of female dramatists is only further evidenced by Harold Bloom's 2005 collection *Dramatists and Dramas*, a thirty-three chapter collection, with each chapter devoted to the work of a single playwright. His study ranges from Aeschylus and Sophocles to Tony Kushner, but each and every one of the playwrights he considers is male. However, it is not just literary scholars and anthologies that slight women playwrights. A January 2002 report on the status of women in the theatre prepared for the New York State Council on the Arts Theatre Program (NYSCA) reveals a shocking underrepresentation of women working in the theatre. In the non-profit regional, off, and off off Broadway theatre, the study found that only 17 percent of produced plays are written by women (Jonas and Bennett). Not surprisingly, as money, prestige, and risk increase, this number declines: in 1999 women wrote only eight percent of all plays and only one percent of musicals that appeared on Broadway. That same year the Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous group of feminist activists who create art and performances that expose racism and sexism in politics, art, and culture, published a full-page ad on this issue in the 1999 Tony awards issue of *In Theatre* magazine, with a headline that read: "There's a tragedy on Broadway and it isn't *Electra*" (Jonas and Bennett). Though there are organizations committed to mentoring women playwrights and promoting and producing their plays, such as the New York-based Julia Miles Theater and the Women's Project, the Women Playwrights Initiative, and similar regional movements, their efforts don't seem to be making a significant difference.

In almost every culture, women have been relegated to the private, domestic sphere, and women who step outside of this realm to engage in public or artistic and intellectual pursuits have aroused suspicion and antagonism. Further, drama is, according to Lynda Hart, “more public and social than the other literary arts [. . .] thus the woman who ventures to be heard in this space takes a greater risk than the woman poet or novelist” (2). Since women were legally prohibited from acting on stage in ancient Greece and through the Elizabethan period, women’s roles were played by men and boys. Women were finally granted permission to appear on stage around 1660, but this role has traditionally done little to disrupt the conventional function women have served in larger society or altered their compulsory display of “to-be-looked-at-ness” (299), in Laura Mulvey’s phrasing. As Faye E. Dudden points out:

Acting is linked to sexuality because it is an embodied art—in contrast to the relatively disembodied business of writing, or the decorative arts so long associated with women. To act you must be present in the body, available to be seen. The woman who acts is thus inherently liable, whatever her own intent, to become the object of male sexual fantasy and voyeuristic pleasure. Acting is a particularly acute case of the general phenomenon of women being reduced to sexual object. (2)

Playwrights, on the other hand, wield a different and more threatening form of control: “The author lurks unseen with godlike powers, able to shove living, breathing human beings around on stage, able to ‘bump them off’ at will, capable of making us cry or gasp out loud or otherwise embarrass ourselves in front of others” (Betsko 452). The theatre has historically been regarded as a space for commenting upon, challenging, and even defying political and social structures, not the type of behavior traditionally accepted from women in any society. The expectations for appropriate conduct and punishment for deviation have been especially salient in the South, where racial and gender oppression took a different shape than it did elsewhere, and was historically more deeply institutionalized into the fabric of society. Varying roles and images of womanhood have existed in the South, these different forms largely

dictated by race and class. Antebellum upper-class white women were expected to be “submissive,” “physically weak,” “timid,” “beautiful and graceful,” “pious,” devoted to her husband, children, and managing the household (Fior Scott 4-5). This image of the wealthy, white southern lady was different than it was elsewhere, because it was inextricably linked with southern history and mythmaking. In Anne Fior Scott’s important study on white southern womanhood, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930*, she explains why:

In the South the image of the lady took deep root and had far-reaching consequences. The social role of women was unusually confining there, and the sanctions used to enforce obedience peculiarly effective. One result was that southern women became in time a distinct type among American women. Another was that their efforts to free themselves were more complex than those of women elsewhere. (x-xi)

Anne Goodwyn Jones also explains that while upper-class white southern womanhood shares much in common with notions about British Victorian womanhood and American true womanhood, it differs from these because “the southern lady is at the core of a region’s self-definition; the identity of the South is contingent in part on the persistence of its tradition of the lady” (4). Without essentializing the diversity of experience among women in the South, some generalizations can be made about how race and class shaped southern women’s lives. While the white lady or belle was controlled, she was revered and mythologized, a central component of the South’s romanticized identity. The black woman in the South was not entitled to full personhood, and physically and sexually demeaned and exploited through slavery and Jim Crow. Lower class or working class white women’s histories have also been starkly different than their counterparts. Among other reasons, the necessity of labor disallowed any timidity or physical weakness for many such women. Ultimately, these variable but distinctly southern images of womanhood have endured in the South and their remnants continue to be visible today. Therefore the female playwright who attempts “to communicate her vision to the world is engaged in a radical act” (Betsko and Koenig 9), an act that perhaps becomes even more

radical in a southern context, when the playwright asserts an identity or dramatizes concerns antithetical to these enduring southern notions of womanhood.

In *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, Jill Dolan investigates the implications of the idea of the “universal spectator” on reception and canonization for plays about women’s spaces, representations, and concerns, which “are not seen as generic to theatre” (21). In the series of roundtables and discussions organized in response to the NYSCA report, this notion of the universal emerged as a major factor in the marginalization of plays by women. *Newsday*’s Linda Winer and *Village Voice*’s Alisa Solomon noted that stories about men are considered universal while those about women are not, and performer/writer Lisa Kron articulated it simply: “Men are universal; women are specific” (Jonas and Bennett). The concept of the universal spectator is based in historical, cultural, and canonical hierarchies that have figured the universal as male/white/heterosexual/middle-class, and I argue—not southern. This troubling notion of the universal spectator seems to hold more sway in theatre and drama than other genres, which presents particular challenges not only for women’s plays, but lesbian and gay voices, and for the drama of the American South. While good art admittedly must somehow connect with shared human experiences and emotion, both the existence of a universal spectator and/or the mandate that art must not deviate too much from the experiences of those it reaches are highly problematic conceptions.

Recent revisions of the American literary canon have acknowledged as much by including writers who were traditionally marginalized because of their race, gender, class, or sexuality, as well as by recognizing marginalized genres such as journals and epistles. Yet American drama has not kept equal footing in this reconstruction; as a result of drama’s marginalization in literary studies, the few representative plays included in an American literature anthology leave little room for diverse, new voices. In 1989, Lynda Hart called drama

“the last bastion of male hegemony in the literary arts” (1). The same seems to be true of America’s stages; Patricia Schroeder speculates that “this neglect has something to do with the American theater’s dependence on white-controlled, male-dominated hierarchies for production and funding; scholars seem to be associating drama with the traditional and oppressive rather than the marginalized” (*Legitimizing* 421). Further, mainstream critics are overwhelmingly male. After thirty years of collecting and studying theater reviews, Kathleen Betsko concludes that reviews of women’s plays demonstrate misunderstanding, derision, and make use of rampant gender-biased language. Overall, “the concerns, the irony, the innovations, and intentions of women playwrights are, for the most part, woefully lost on the majority of critics” (Betsko 457). The power that mainstream, New York critics have in influencing production success also complicates the reception of plays by women and regional writers. Jill Dolan confirms that “most mainstream critics are powerful enough to influence a production’s success or failure in a given venue, and their response molds and to a certain extent predetermines the response of potential spectators for the play reviewed” (*Spectator* 19). The situation has not improved too much, if the experiences of contemporary playwrights are any indication, and it is even worse for lesbian women. Paula Vogel has remarked, “The American theater remains homophobic. In fact, there’s a peculiar misogyny combined with homophobia that’s very potent. If we say that only 17 percent of all plays produced are written by women, can you imagine how few of those are written by lesbians?” (Abarbanel 15). Although Vogel is herself a lesbian, her most successful play—*How I Learned to Drive*—does not actually represent lesbian identity or issues.

Lest these seem like archaic accusations, in a November 2010 piece in *American Theatre* called “Not There Yet,” Marsha Norman rails against the American theatre’s continued discrimination against women playwrights. Incredulous that “we [are] still having this

discussion” (28), she cites her own experiences and those of other women artists as evidence that the revolution she and other playwrights—Paula Vogel, Wendy Wasserstein, Ntozake Shange—thought they were beginning in the late 1970s never brought the change they assumed it would. Norman attempts to define the problem, going through the stakeholders—literary departments, Artistic Directors, audiences, donors, ticketholders, critics—and ultimately chalks it up to deep-seated bias and stereotyping within American theatre discourse about the kind of plays women write. She recalls a comment critic Mel Gussow once made to her:

He said, “Marsha, people like the plays of yours where the women have guns.” In other words, Gussow was saying, people like plays in which the women act like guys, talk like guys, wave guns around and threaten to kill each other. In my experience, his observation is true. The critics have liked my “guy” plays—the ones with guns in them—and pretty much trashed the rest. Seven of the nine plays I have written go virtually unperformed. Thank God I had the sense to write for television and film and write books for big musicals, so I could get health insurance, feed my family and can now afford to teach. Are those other seven plays of mine worse than *Getting Out* and *‘night, Mother*? Well, how would you know? You haven’t seen them. They are perceived to be “girl plays,” concerned with loss and death, love and betrayal, friendship and family. But no guns. Are you with me here? *There’s no such thing as a girl play*. But the girl’s name on the cover of the script leads the reader to expect a certain “soft” kind of play. I don’t get this. Lillian Hellman did not write girl plays. Neither did Jean Kerr or Lorraine Hansberry or Mary Chase. (qtd. in *Not There Yet* 30)

In the NYSCA discussions, playwrights Neena Beber and Tina Howe also discuss being pressured to write from a male point of view because it was more commercially viable (Jonas and Bennett). In her article, Norman echoes the complaint about the derisive language in critics’ responses to women’s plays Kathleen Betsko made in 1987, asserting that

communities must insist that critics be removed if they prove they cannot judge the work of women without snide condescension and dismissive ire. There have been several such situations over the past few years that should have ended up in court, in my view. Critics should be put on notice by their publishers and by our theatres. Newspaper boards may not be able to challenge a critic’s taste, but they sure as hell can fire people whose reviews reveal a dislike of women. (79)

That the experiences of Marsha Norman—perhaps the most established, canonized female playwright writing today—have led her to so passionately speak out against gender bias and inequity in the theatre in 2010 suggests a very real problem still exists.

Another rather unlikely source has emerged to offer a contemporary, and to some, startling, perspective—Princeton undergraduate Emily Glassberg Sands’ 2009 thesis in economics, which has probably been the most talked about undergraduate thesis, at least in drama, in many years. Sands completed her project under the direction of *Freakonomics* (2005) author Stephen Levitt, and at the request of playwright Julia Jordan, a childhood friend of Levitt’s. Sands’ thesis, “Opening the Curtain on Playwright Gender: An Integrated Economic Analysis of Discrimination in American Theater” confirms that gender bias does indeed exist in the American theatre. She too begins with the premise that men write the vast majority of plays that are produced, a fact that has not changed since the beginning of the twentieth century; according to theaters’ announcements, in the 2008/2009 New York Broadway season the percentage of plays written by women was 12.6%, almost identical to the 12.8% percent the Internet Broadway Database reports for the 1908/1909 season (Sands 1). Using qualitative and quantitative data, and even sending Artistic Directors scripts with male and female pen-names written by well-respected playwrights, including 2009 Pulitzer-Prize winner Lynn Nottage, Sands determines that:

Female-written plays are perceived by artistic directors and literary managers to be of lower overall quality, to have poorer economic prospects, and to face worker discrimination. These results are most pronounced within the sample of female respondents, who also perceive customer discrimination against female playwrights and believe that a script fits less well with their theater when that script is purportedly written by a woman. In addition, the theater community seems to react particularly aversely to women writing about women. Plays with female protagonists are, according to respondents, less likely to reach production if they bear a female pen-name; this result arises in part because female-written characters are less well received when purportedly written by women. (90)

Interestingly, Sands' study also indicates that Broadway plays written by women actually make more money than those written by men, earning an average of 18 percent more and selling 3,538 more seats per week, even when the data is controlled for play type and massive flops and incredible successes (Sands 99). Some of her findings have been controversial and divisive in the theatre community, most notably the indication that female Artistic Directors and other theatre employees not only participate in such discrimination, but may do so more often than males. Sands is reluctant to identify women as more discriminatory, but suggests that female Artistic Directors and other theatre employees are more keenly aware of the obstacles women playwrights face (Cohen C1). While few have failed to see the value of Sands' query and effort, doubts have been raised about her methodology, and critics have pointed to factors she may have failed to consider, as well as charged that such a complex study would be difficult in the hands of an experienced economist familiar with the commercial and critical interworkings of the American theatre, much less those of an undergraduate student. Ultimately, Sands' thesis raises still-relevant questions and may have simply demonstrated the impossibility of definitively nailing down the root causes for the inequities. It is clear, however, that in literary form or in production, drama seems to continue holding on to the ideal of universality more than other literary genres, which presents unique challenges for female, African American, lesbian, and regional writers.

The Southern Problematic and Compounding Genre Challenges

One of the foremost challenges for southern dramatists has been simple geography. Historically, southern playwrights faced simple logistic challenges in producing their plays, because of their distance from the mecca of theatre culture, New York City. Milly Barranger writes, "southern playwrights, unlike novelists and poets, could not remain among the piney woods of Georgia or the bluegrass plains of Kentucky and gain access to professional theatres

necessary for production of their work” (5). During the first part of the nineteenth-century, plays by southern artists played mostly in local theaters in the South; their works did not begin to play in New York until after World War I. And while southern novelists could communicate with editors, agents and publishers long-distance, “the very nature of American commercial theatre has not permitted such geographical disjuncture” (Barrenger 6). Thanks to the growth of the regional theatre movement, southern playwrights now have far more opportunities to see their plays produced in southern venues, and modern communication technology has made geography less of an obstacle.

The Actor’s Theatre of Louisville (ATL), the first to produce many of Henley and Norman’s plays, was founded in 1964 and thrived under Artistic Director Jon Jory’s leadership from 1969-2000. While Jory stepped down to join the University of Washington’s School of Drama faculty in 2000, it continues to grow under new Director Marc Masterson. ATL’s annual Humana Festival of New American Plays, where both Henley’s *Crimes of the Heart* (1979) and Norman’s *Getting Out* (1977) premiered, has often been called the “Kentucky Derby of American Theatre,” and each year it presents some of the best emerging drama, southern and otherwise. Not surprisingly, Atlanta, long known as the capital of the “New South,” has become a thriving southern theatrical center, and playwrights Sandra Deer, Pearl Cleage, and Shay Youngblood all got their start in Atlanta theatres.

However, if southern playwrights are able to reach the theatre mecca of New York City, they may then run up against ideological and interpretive challenges based in national understandings of the southern region. Marsha Norman explains the logic in her approach to *‘night Mother* and discusses some of the difficulties the South presents for characterization, setting, and subject matter:

When you are even remotely from the South, there is always this judgment: People in the South talk funny and they aren’t very smart, and they sit around on

the porch all the time. One has to fight that. I want to give the characters a real chance at getting through to the audience. To do that, I had to get rid of all the things that stood in the way, like locale, accents, dialect. (Betsko and Koenig 337)

The South is not only a place, but it is a literary and cultural production, sustained and created by competing romantic and pejorative narratives like the ones to which Norman refers. It is full of the images of landscapes and values in the Don Williams and Pam Tillis country songs: the soft southern winds in the live oak trees, the misty moonlight, katydids singing, porch swings swaying, and the hard-drinking, masculine father who teaches his son about honor and religion. On the one hand, some of what have become markers of southernness are desired: the landscape, the food, manners, a particular philosophy on life. Both northerners and southerners alike may see the South as temporally and spatially closer to a more relaxed, simple, maybe rural way of life, where people greet those they meet, friend or stranger, and offer southern hospitality, in the form of lemonade on the veranda porch or a big pot of jambalaya.

The commercial success of both the 1936 book and 1939 film version of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* is evidence of the appeal romanticized southern narratives hold not only in America, but worldwide. Considering contemporary films such as *Driving Miss Daisy* and *Doc Hollywood* and advertisements for Jack Daniel's whiskey, Richard Gray claims that "the South is registered in popular perception and marketed as a desirable other, one potential, purchasable release from the pressures of living and working in a world governed by the new technologies and international capital" (356). It has become a commodity, packaged neatly and sold to southerners and non-southerners alike in *Southern Living* magazine, bumper stickers declaring "I Love G.R.I.T.S." (Girls Raised In the South), and the *Sweet Potato Queen* books.³ The South can be both purchased and experienced, as evidenced by the proliferation of plantation tourism, where brochures encourage visitors to visit Louisiana plantation homes

where they will “experience a bygone era in the South’s most beautiful setting” and be transported to a time “when Southern aristocracy ruled the land” (qtd. in McPherson 43).

Tara McPherson claims that we have a type of “cultural schizophrenia about the South: the region remains at once the site of the trauma of slavery and also the mythic location of a vast nostalgia industry” (3). The South is simultaneously figured as aberrant, backwards, stunted, still not too far removed from Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1938 declaration of the South as “the nation’s number one economic problem.” Southern states still sit at the top of the worst lists and the bottom of the best. Southerners have been caricatured and ridiculed in popular culture for decades, as stupid, lazy, incestuous, violent, and racist, to name a few, but many of these stereotypes are uniquely shaped by class, gender and race. Remnants of the violence and injustice surrounding slavery and racial segregation seem to linger in the South more than they do other places, and they take on more significance—I can draw on several examples just in the last five years that I’ve resided in Louisiana, events that have captured national attention and shocked Americans in their proximity to the racial violence supposedly of the past. Two have very particular southern connotations as well, bringing to mind lynching and other acts of racial violence committed by the Ku Klux Klan in the South during and after Reconstruction: in the 2006 Jena Six incident, in Jena, Louisiana, white students allegedly hung nooses on a tree as a message to black students who sat below “their tree,” and in 2008, an Oklahoma woman who traveled to Louisiana for a KKK initiation ceremony changed her mind midway and was shot and killed by the KKK members. In October of 2009, a Louisiana judge refused to marry an interracial couple, not because he was racist, he claimed, but out of a concern that it is their children who will suffer (even as Barack Obama, born of an interracial relationship, had just been elected President of the United States). Clearly hate crimes and discrimination happen in other places as well, but you can be sure that when they happen in the South, they take on

additional meaning, especially when they are reminiscent of the particular form that racial violence has historically taken in the South.

In his book *Inventing Southern Literature*, Michael Kreyling draws on Benedict Anderson's understanding of "identity" as a product of consciously created cultural and historical narratives to understand how the supposed constants of southern identity have actually been invented, through "the polemical writings of the Agrarians to recent works of criticism, biography, literary history, and even film reviews, [in which] the established formula is repeated, the narrative of forgetting and making continued" (ix). Because the South has been invented, sustained, and marketed this way, consumers expect, in fact demand, to be given particular southern narratives. Some contemporary visitors to the South probably don't care to hear too much about racial trauma (largely left out in the plantation tours), but they want to recognize the elements they have come to accept as southern, to experience their "purchasable release" (356). This was, in fact, the case for the particular conception of the South that existed in the early decades of the twentieth century: when the first southern dramatists' plays reached Broadway, they "were expected to recycle stereotypes of the South," as exemplified in Jack Kirkland's 1933 adaptation of Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road*, in which "ignorance, clownishness, and violence drew big crowds" (C. Watson 8).⁴ In response to this type of demand, southerners often deliver or *perform* their southernness. The humorist Roy Blount Jr. reveals an anecdote that seems to capture this phenomena:

If a Northern visitor makes it clear to Southerners that he thinks it would be typical of them to rustle up a big, piping hot meal of hushpuppies and blackstrap, Southerners will do that, even if they were planning to have just a little salad that night. Then the visitor will ask how to eat hushpuppies and blackstrap... The strictly accurate answer is that nobody in his or her right mind eats these two things, together, in any way at all. But that isn't a sociable answer. So Southerners may say, "First you pour your plate full of the molasses..." [...] Southerners get a charge out of being typical" (28-29).

Because of the romance southern narratives have taken on, and probably because of Scarlett O'Hara, the most visible mainstream conception among the types of southern womanhood is that of the white southern lady or belle, most glorified in the plantation tours, often given by docents in full period dress.⁵ A 2008 MTV "documentary" *True Life: I'm a Southern Belle*, featured two Ole Miss college girls and one girl from Tennessee who proudly claim that identity. The show introduces "three young women doing their best to uphold southern tradition while keeping pace with the modern age," and claims that, "while contemporary belles embrace the conservative values of old, many find it challenging to adapt to our changing times." The three girls articulate different, but familiar forms of white southern womanhood: one who wants to "get married young and have children right away," but is struggling to "snag a guy." They talk of "debutante balls," being "always dressed to a T," and for one girl, "competing in pageants helped forge her southern belle identity." The Tennessee girl grew up on a cotton plantation and says she was "raised to love the land," isn't a pageant girl, or one of those "who never want to get near dirt." She "rides horses and shoots shotguns," but also "loves getting dressed up for formal dinners and balls and cocktail parties."⁶ The network and reality-television genre of the show recapitulate and shape a narrative that the women enact, performing, or at least exaggerating, their southernness for audience consumption. This show's existence is a solid indication that this image of white southern womanhood endures in popular culture, "the narrative of forgetting and making continued" (Kreyling ix), and evidence of contemporary southerners' continued willingness to perform their regional identity.

The "other," while aberrant and alienating, is often simultaneously attractive and fascinating. Theatre already has a built in voyeuristic quality, as Eric Bentley notes: "if one took from theatre the element of voyeurism, the occasion would lose much of its appeal" (156). Critics will commonly express "fascination" in response to a southern play, and nearly every

headline for reviews of Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes* (1939) incorporates the South somehow; one review headline lacks any reference to Hellman or her play, but reads simply: "Dixie" (Watts 491). The collective and experiential component of theatre approximates the South as tourist attraction in a way that encountering the South in other literary genres does not, further feeding this tendency for fetish. Southern representations, then, may engender a unique combination of detachment and voyeurism in audiences. In studying critical reviews of southern plays, I have found several interesting patterns. First, critics do have a tendency to respond to southern plays on two opposite ends of a continuum: by holding representations of southernness at a distance or by fetishizing their difference. A reviewer not so impressed with Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* admits to the fetish response: "New York theater critics, like many of their fellow citizens, are so accustomed to thinking their own life artificial that when they hear Southern or Midwestern accents they imagine they are being exposed to 'real life' and immediately surrender their normal sense of judgment" (Kissel 140).

Even if we recognize them as narratives, are the images of the South in the Don Williams or Pam Tillis songs accurate representations of what it feels like to be southern, or what we feel and sense in a southern setting? Gray continues his discussion of how the South is represented and marketed in popular culture:

When we watch films like *Gone With the Wind* or, say, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, we are probably aware that we are looking at a counterfeit, a projection of our own culturally formed desires on to a particular location in Southern space and time. Still, we receive momentary satisfaction from it; we accept the counterfeit *as if* it were true currency. (Gray 360)

The songs, films, products, advertisements, the tourism, from the Louisiana plantations along River Road, bus tours of Savannah, the Grand Ole Opry, Graceland to Dollywood, are mere copies of a southern time and place that actually never existed in the pure form we have been led to imagine it did. Like Jean Baudrillard's conception of Disneyland in his book *Simulacra*

and Simulation, these places and experiences are mere simulacra. Discussing such tourist attractions, Tara McPherson points out that these places “highlight the degree to which specificity and stereotype interweave, suggesting the difficulty of isolating ‘pure’ examples of regional authenticity” (McPherson 12). Since Lewis P. Simpson first coined the term “postsouthern” in his 1980 essay “The Closure of History in a Postsouthern America,” southern studies scholars have extended and critiqued his conception, interrogating how we might think about the South in the postmodern age. In Linda Hutcheon’s *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1998), she argues that “the postmodern’s initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life, to point out that those entities we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact ‘cultural’; made by us, not given to us” (2). In light of Hutcheon’s definition, according to Kreyling, “the first step of the postmodern critic of southern literature is to question the natural authority of the foundation term: *southern*” [which] “has been used so much, invested with so much meaning, that we can no longer distinguish between what if anything is inherent and what other interests have attached over time” (155). Both Kreyling and Fred Hobson, in his book *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World*, argue that the problem of postsouthernness is inextricably linked with the influence of major southern writers of the past, particularly Faulkner, who casts the largest shadow over southern literature. As a result, Kreyling argues, “parody, though, is power—perhaps the only type of power available (or desirable) to a writer or critic living in the post-conscious sequel to a successful age of inimitable originals” (157). This move toward parody in southern representations, perhaps manifested most in the comic plays of Henley and Deer discussed in my second chapter, presents challenges on the stage, where the demand for exaggeration in performance already leans toward the parodic. For example, Helene Keyssar claims that the key to *Crimes of the Heart* is whether “the

ordinariness of the women is made specific and honest in performance,” but she says this power was lost in the Broadway production as “each of the actresses parodied their role, exaggerating the ‘Southernness’ of the women” (*Introduction* 158). Obviously, playwrights come up against difficulties in defining and representing place, and audiences in interpreting it, especially in a contemporary/postmodern/postsouthern South seemingly so removed from the circumstances that first began to define it.

My second observation about reviews is critics’ tendency to embrace the concept of southern “authenticity” uncritically. The pitfall of *placing* these images for examination is that audiences and critics may see recapitulation rather than parody, satire, or irony, and they often make hasty, superficial judgments of any representation of southernness as stereotyped or clichéd. Frank Rich in the *New York Times* called Sandra Deer’s *So Long on Lonely Street* unauthentic, a “vulgarized Chekhovian theme-mongering of a Lillian Hellman melodrama with the off-center Southern humor of a Eudora Welty or Beth Henley. But, like that other recent Atlanta export, new Coke, this play is not the real thing” (C5). Critics cannot be entirely faulted, since the ability to discern between the real and the fake is a cultural competency that has been “widely diffused in contemporary society” (*The Real South* 10). This capacity is further diluted if we consider the South an always-already performative site, in which southernness is performed not only for expectant visitors but for particular purposes among southerners themselves. And in light of drama’s dependence on “types,” combined with the fact that some of the most well-known social types are southern ones—the southern belle, the Cavalier or gentleman, the good ole boy, the “Mammy”⁷—audiences and critics encounter double difficulty in negotiating authenticity and imitation.

Drama’s textual multiplicity also complicates regional issues, as we run into questions about intention and authorship, ask whether the playwright or the director is the “author” of the

play, and risk the conflation of the two entities. It's usually the published play that is displaced by the production:

Recently, dissemination of dramatic literature has depended on prominent (and usually popular) theatrical production; a published play is a secondary phenomenon, an afterthought in an economically driven system. This commodification also represents a simple confusion of "texts" in which a production supersedes and displaces the script and privileges a director over the playwright. (S. Smith 13)

Further, women playwrights participating in an arena dominated by males often have to battle even more furiously for their vision. Speaking in an interview about the problems of criticism and textual multiplicity, Marsha Norman says, "Most of them [critics] can't tell the difference between the play and the production. [...] Also, they don't understand that the director is the author of the production. It is a myth that playwrights have total control. [...] Of course, ultimately you end up taking *full* responsibility for the production" (Betsko and Koenig 324-5). While "the performance text presented each evening is an amalgamation of the director's, actors', and designers' interpretations of the playwright's text" (*Spectator* 23), drama is wrapped up in a series of continuous adaptations, with the director's vision, actor appearance and interpretation, theatre space, and audience varying not only from production to production, but performance to performance within production. It seems especially dangerous to include regional identifiers when a playwright's vision can be so easily misrepresented by directors' and actors' artistic choices. Further, one of the first and most obvious markers of southernness is the accent, as Don Williams reminds us. The southern accent can be a particular challenge for directors and actors, who, regardless of their intentions, may not be able to approximate it without rendering it comic, or may choose to overemphasize it to signal the play's southernness to the audience. Reviewers will nearly always comment on the effect of the accent in southern plays, and are quick to look for "authenticity."⁸

Ultimately, a spectator's response to a play is influenced by many factors:

in addition to the expectations generated by critical response to previous productions, the spectator's reading of the performance text has been influenced before she or he arrives at the theatre by the producers' marketing and advertising strategies, by published reviews, and by her or his own ideological perceptions and cultural [and regional] heritage. These combined expectations and spectators' subsequent individualized readings of the play can work to obscure the playwright's original intent. (*Spectator* 23)

What is the culminating effect of all of these challenges? Each of these difficulties, competing tensions, and negotiations explain why I have chosen to title and conceive of my project as a study of how each of these writers write about the South "in her own way," a line I have adapted from Sandra Deer's *So Long on Lonely Street*. In the play, Ruth Brown is a poet from a small, southern town, and twin of Raymond, an actor in New York City. Their cousin, good ole' boy King Vaughnum III, asks Raymond why Ruth doesn't write about the South:

KING. I always thought writers was the ones that cared the most about what they come from. Like William Faulkner and Jack London. That's what they're supposed to write about, isn't it?

RAYMOND. I imagine Ruth's writing about what she comes from. In her way.
(56)

Like much of the dialogue in Deer's play, this conversation is a self-reflexive comment upon some of the central questions in southern studies and in my project, about the expectations readers/critics/audiences have about what a "southern" writer/playwright is and what kinds of narratives they will/should produce. Ultimately, I argue that each of these writers comes to the South "in her own way,"⁹ a phrasing that indicates autonomy, choice, and diversity. There are patterns in the work of southern women playwrights, but there is also a great deal of divergence, and they each make conscious choices as they *place, displace, and replace* the South.

Certainly these playwrights don't always write about the South, or even New York City, and in some plays the setting may be more incidental than strategic, but southernness always

presents problems to be addressed. It must be acknowledged, of course, that the South is not monolithic. In fact, there are many Souths and many southerners—New Orleans is a very different type of place than is Jackson, Mississippi, and factors such as gender, class, race, sexuality, among many others, shape a variety of different southern experiences. I am also less interested in defining geographical boundaries of the South or limiting which writers can be called “southern” than I am in identifying spaces and representations that seem characteristically southern, are represented as characteristically southern, or evoke southernness, such as the border state of Maryland, where Paula Vogel is from and sets many of her plays. Atlanta-based playwright Pearl Cleage, for instance, was born in Massachusetts, grew up in Detroit, but has lived in Atlanta for thirty years and engages with the South in much of her work. I also do not mean to present a monolithic image of New York City or of the North as opposed to the South, or of northern and southern theatre audiences, especially since the makeup of theatre audiences everywhere will be comprised of visitors from other places, and New York theatre audiences often include international visitors as well as tourists from Alabama thrilled to be seeing a play on or off Broadway for the first time.

After reading W.J. Cash’s *The Mind of the South* (1941) and saying as he read, “How does he know that?,” sociologist John Shelton Reed has spent his career trying to understand the mind of the South in more definitive terms. He attempts to map the South geographically and ideologically through such methods as studying occurrences of “Dixie” or “Southern” in phone book entries, analyzing which states are the birthplaces of country music notables or are mentioned in country music lyrics, and asking people questions about whether they think the food in the South is better, or if women from the South are prettier. His studies analyze responses from southerners and non-southerners to questions about each other and about themselves, and while regional perceptions have changed some since his first study, *The*

Enduring South in 1972, the best assessment of his conclusions is that “perceptions of regional differences exist and are widely shared [...] and have been quite consistent across time” (32). His work corroborates much of my discussion about regional differences, but whatever the differences or perception of differences, I recognize that northerners and southerners are not so different that they can’t possibly understand and appreciate each other’s plays. Indeed they often do, just as American and British, Western and non-Western audiences and viewers participate in cross-cultural appreciation. However, ultimately, my readings of critical reviews of southern plays, playwrights’ pre-script notes, playwrights’ work and their comments suggest that these regional differences are an important part of how individuals understand themselves and each other, and part of the motivation behind playwright’s choices and the focus of their plays. These issues of difference figure not only as obstacles to communication, but also as key sites of communication about gender, race, sexuality, and national and regional conceptions.

Those playwrights who *place* the South do so in varying milieus, all ones immediately recognizable as assorted forms of reality or fiction about southern history, culture or characters. In this strategy, they choose the familiar images, motifs, and character types common to that place in order to examine these images more closely, and overturn them. For instance, Chapter One, “Spirit and Sugar Water: Lillian Hellman’s South,” examines three of her plays that *place* the South: *The Little Foxes* (1939) and *Another Part of the Forest* (1946), which are set in 1900 and 1880, respectively, at the friction of Old and New South values. *The Autumn Garden* (1951) is set in 1949, in a Jim Crow South mitigated some by the summer resort setting’s proximity to the more culturally-mixed New Orleans, but many of its boarders are passionate believers in Old southern tradition. Hellman utilized irony to uncover the artifice in southern mythology and national narratives about the South, but she battled to convey that view, and many critics and audiences saw only a recapitulation of the images she sought to deconstruct.

In this chapter, I look at Lillian Hellman as the predecessor of contemporary southern women dramatists, acknowledging her early southern feminist perspective, her attempts to satirize the South, as well as the nation, her engagement with lesbian issues, and her attention to lower-class and African American women. She also presents a point of departure for more contemporary southern women playwrights who attempt to avoid Hellman's difficulties with conveying straight satire by experimenting with an overtly comic frame. Chapter Two, "'That Moony, Off-Kilter View of Things': Reflexivity and the Absurd on Stage" examines three plays: Sandra Deer's *So Long On Lonely Street* (1986), Elizabeth Dewberry's *Flesh and Blood* (1996), and Linda Treiber's *Do's & Donuts* (2005), all immediately recognizable for their southernness. These women *place* the South, satirizing it as did Hellman, but expanding that satire into the frame of parody, comic, slapstick, or the absurd, as Beth Henley does in *Crimes of the Heart* (1979). Like *Crimes*, they are family dramas in the Southern Gothic tradition, taking such topics as incest and violence, and presenting the quirky and zany—death by potato salad, and women named Velveeta and Miracle Whip after their mother's favorite sandwich. However, one of the hazards of *placing* these types of comedic representations squarely in the South is that the spectator is given room to distance themselves from the play's concerns. A subsequent danger in *placing* their work in a familiar southern milieu, replete with the expected tropes and images, is that while the playwrights intend to examine and deconstruct the myths, audiences often miss the satire and irony, and see only a recapitulation of these images. While Henley's *Crimes* and each of these plays that follow it frame their narratives in familiar ways that set the South in opposition to the norm, undergirding the comic frames are serious issues, and careful readings of the plays reveal reflexive moments that actually disrupt clichéd representations of femininity, domesticity, and even interrogate the role of the southern writer in attending to the South and creating place. Chapter Three, "'Another World, Another Planet':

Displacing the South,” explores how playwrights Paula Vogel, Sallie Bingham, and Pearl Cleage interrogate regional perceptions, often through juxtaposing the South with the theatre capital of New York City. They avoid the hazards of discrete regional categorization and bridge gaps between northern and southern audiences by *displacing* the South: moving it to the side, either in physical setting or character memory. Chapter Four, “‘It’s Just a Thing That Happens to a Type’: Objectification and Gendered Violence” examines work by Marsha Norman and Rebecca Gilman, and attends to the common thread of gendered violence in southern women playwrights’ work, a commonality that I argue attests to the unlikely but possible pairing of southern and feminist. This chapter foregrounds how playwrights negotiate setting choices in light of their play’s focus—*placing* narratives in both expected and unexpected regional settings, and exploring what it means to be confined to or escape these places. Chapter Five, “‘Women Who Gave Stories as Gifts’: Reenvisioning Genre, Setting and Community” examines the plays of two contemporary African American, lesbian playwrights: Sharon Bridgforth’s *loveconjure/blues* (2004) and Shay Youngblood’s *Shakin’ the Mess Out of Misery* (1988). These playwrights create more flexibility in their conceptions of the South by abandoning strict constructs of mode, action, characterization, genre, chronology, and place. They *replace* the South in a larger context by reaching back to Africa, the slave and Jim Crow South, collapsing temporal and spatial boundaries, and widening the possibilities for gender expression, sexuality, and belonging in southern communities. While drawing on various strategies that *place*, *displace*, and *replace* the South, each of these playwrights find ways to negotiate regional conceptions and problematic responses to southern plays, and they challenge the notion of the universal spectator, producing work that will hopefully contribute to American theatre’s wider acceptance of plays by women, African American writers, and lesbian and gay voices.

End Notes

¹ Duck draws on Bender and Wellbery's use of this term as a "collection of temporally coded traits."

² See Sue-Ellen Case's article "The Personal Is Not the Political," in which she criticizes *'night Mother* and *Crimes of the Heart* for being driven by the absent male figures of the father, husbands, and grandfather. I would argue that even though the men are discussed, the women's relations with each other aren't defined solely by the male figures in their lives and family, and the men's absence on stage is more powerful than Dolan and Case acknowledge. Dolan does write that the radical element of Norman's play is "that it was performed in a space historically reserved for male playwrights to address father-son relationships" (*Spectator* 21), which corroborates my feeling that Norman consciously appropriates the male model in a female domain, a strategy appropriate given her cultural milieu, and one significant in that it led the way for wider canonical acceptance of women's plays in general and in more varying forms.

³ This phenomenon began in 1982, when a group of white middle-aged women dubbing themselves the "Sweet Potato Queens" donned feather boas and tiaras and rode in a sweet potato farm truck in the annual St. Patrick's Day parade in Jackson, Mississippi. In 1999, the Queens' ringleader, Jill Conner Browne, published *The Sweet Potato Queens' Book of Love: A Fallen Southern Belle's Look at Love, Life, Men, Marriage, and Being Prepared*. Since then, Browne has published eight books, with titles such as *The Sweet Potato Queens' Field Guide to Men: Every Man I Love Is Either Married, Gay, or Dead*, *The Sweet Potato Queens' Wedding Planner/Divorce Guide*, and *American Thighs: The Sweet Potato Queen's Guide to Preserving Your Assets*. The SPQ have become an international phenomenon, and Browne has created a sweet potato empire, complete with the books (some of which have been translated into Japanese and German); products including accessories, apparel, and even a line for men to declare themselves "Spud Studs"; her national tours; philanthropies; lunch at the White House; and there is even a Sweet Potato Queen musical in the works. Tourists flock to Jackson each year to witness the Queens in their element at the annual St. Patrick's Day gathering. The Queens' philosophy on life as presented in the books and products is a raucous, humorous, and irreverent view on the trials, tribulations, and joys of women's life at middle-age, and seems to have spoken to large numbers of women, both southern and non-southern, as evidenced by the now 5919 chapters, not only in the United States, but in 22 countries around the world. The books have been said to empower women, and the philosophy has been called "southern-fried feminism" (Tyre 60). Despite its appeal for predominantly white, middle-aged women everywhere struggling with divorce, kids, and thighs, "southernness" is at the heart of much of the Sweet Potato Queen identity. The SPQ franchise/phenomenon is a reinvention of white southern womanhood with a risqué, feminist twist, but it nonetheless represents a commodification of both southern culture and southern womanhood, and its popularity affirms how southern material is fetishized.

⁴ It's important to note here, however, that both the stage and screen version of Caldwell's novel "distorted to some extent Caldwell's artistic and social vision. [...] Whereas Caldwell's style was hard-boiled and unflinching in its depiction of the unpleasant realities of a region in distress, Kirkland's was cliché-ridden, sentimental and sensational" (Howard 59, 60). Despite its departure from his vision, Caldwell defended the play when it was under attack by critics

and threats of censorship. William L. Howard explores some possible reasons for Caldwell's support of the play in his article "Caldwell on Stage and Screen."

⁵ In my experience, some Louisiana plantation homes do employ black female docents who don the southern belle period dress that would have historically been worn by white women. Of note is Nottoway Plantation on historic River Road in Whitecastle, Louisiana, in which our group was greeted a young African American female docent, a performance that significantly reverses the traditional historic roles.

⁶ See John Shelton Reed's chapter "Ladies and Other Women," in *Southern Folk, Plain and Fancy: Native White Social Types*, for a discussion of the varying images of white womanhood in the South. The two Mississippi girls fit the belle persona, but the young lady from Tennessee would be more of a "good old girl." While the show attempts to present her as a fresh alternative to the other two, she is another familiar type.

⁷ For discussion of white southern types, see John Shelton Reed's *Southern Folk, Plain and Fancy: Native White Social Types*, in which he argues that "the South has been America's most fecund seedbed for regional social types" (5).

⁸ I would be remiss if I did not point out a further bizarre contradiction in the saga of southern drama: Vivien Leigh, the talented cinema actress who solidified the effect that Scarlett O'Hara and Blanche DuBois have left in the national imagination, was not from the American South; in fact, she was not even an American. The actress who portrayed the most recognized white female character type of southern narratives—the southern belle—was not American or southern, but British, a fact that further collapses notions of "authenticity."

⁹ I have taken the liberty of adding the "own" to the title for clarification and flow and I think it still captures, if not emphasizes, the essence of Deer's meaning, as well as foregrounds my emphasis on autonomy and choice throughout these writers' works.

CHAPTER ONE

SPIRIT AND SUGAR WATER: LILLIAN HELLMAN'S SOUTH

Lillian Hellman (1905-1984) is arguably one of the most recognized female American playwrights, perhaps the only one who has unequivocally made a place for herself in the male-dominated dramatic canon. For many, Hellman is “always the benchmark for women playwrights” (Chinoy and Jenkins 346). She experienced immense commercial and critical success with her plays, especially *The Children's Hour* (1934), *The Little Foxes* (1939), a Pulitzer finalist that year, *Watch on the Rhine* (1941), and *Toys in the Attic* (1960), which both earned top New York Drama Critics Circle Awards. However, Hellman battled to gain the recognition her male contemporary dramatists received, and over time, she's remained in the shadow of many of them, especially Tennessee Williams. Writing in the *New York Times* in 1996, William Wright declared, “It is now fashionable to dismiss her plays as melodramas” (*Remains Fascinating* H9). Feminist scholars have sought to celebrate her place in dramatic history, but they have debated whether or not she can be considered a feminist writer. Hellman escapes categorization in many ways and there is much validity to Jackson Bryer's assertion that Hellman's “place in modern American literary history has yet to be satisfactorily explored and defined” (xv).

She was “the first American playwright to make productive use of the mores of the changing South in the theater” (Goodman 138), and, in the language of my project, the first to *place* the modern South. Further, as a female playwright, her experiences and work serve both as a model and as a point of departure for contemporary women playwrights writing about the South. Marsha Norman has expressed her debt to Hellman, and does so in a specifically regional way:

When I was a kid I did not know that writers for the theater were from Kentucky or were women, except of course for Lillian Hellman. Lillian Hellman was it, as

far as I was concerned. She was my only indication that this kind of life was possible. And, of course, because of me, no kid growing up in Kentucky has to worry about that again. (Betsko and Koenig 341)

Norman has said that one of her main goals with her art is “to make visible people that are rarely seen and never heard” (Stout 29), as she does with the incarcerated Arlene in *Getting Out* (1977) and *‘night Mother*’s Jessie. The social and political climate of Hellman’s time was quite different than it was even in the 1970s when Norman and Beth Henley began writing, and certainly, that of now—the regional theatre movement was only just beginning, and mainstream theatre was less interested in women’s and other marginalized voices. Nonetheless, Hellman does confront her own marginalization by giving voice to underrepresented groups, although she places these within an upper-class milieu, instead of the lower classes to which many contemporary playwrights are drawn. Although her feminism is of a more subtle type (easily missed or misread), I argue that Hellman was deeply engaged with feminist discourses in her work, tacitly pioneering this possibility for later southern female dramatists.

Three plays in which Hellman *places* the South are *The Little Foxes* (1939), *Another Part of the Forest* (1946), and *The Autumn Garden* (1951). In these, she is concerned with critiquing women’s subjugation and the southern cultural ideology that perpetuated it. Aside from disrupting patriarchal systems that utilize women as objects for exchange and asserting women’s economic independence, Hellman incorporates humor, satire, and irony to ultimately reveal the artifice inherent in narratives about the South and southern white womanhood, and she also calls attention to the plight of women of color and economically disenfranchised women. Despite her relative success, Hellman’s experience portends some of the interpretive problems that later playwrights would encounter in navigating male-dominated arenas and translating satiric and humorous modes, especially in the context of the South, to the stage. This

chapter rethinks Hellman's contribution to southern dramatics, ultimately arguing that her vision of the South acts as a point of departure for later playwrights.

Throughout her life, Hellman expressed ambiguity in regards to feminist concerns. Although scholars have pointed to strong evidence of gender bias in the theatre, especially at that time, she was reluctant to acknowledge that her gender might have influenced critical response to her work. She once corrected a writer's labeling of her as a leading female playwright, saying, "I am a playwright. [...] You wouldn't refer to Eugene O'Neill as one of America's foremost *male* playwrights" (*Image* 98). She also claimed, "I don't think I had any battles as a woman. I know I didn't get paid the same sums for jobs as men. That was an economic fight, not a battle as a woman" (Bryer 203). And later she said, "Listen, I don't write with my genitals. Why should I have been at a disadvantage?" (Brater ix). However, she seems to contradict herself later in another interview: "Women *have* been put down, there's no question of that. For centuries and centuries" (Bryer 203). In various interviews, she confirmed her belief in many issues considered crucial to the well-being and equality of women: economic independence, equal pay for equal work, reproductive rights. Hellman was enraged when in the mid-1960s the *New York Times* named Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, and Arthur Miller the three greatest living playwrights, yelling, "I'm still alive! How dare they, how dare they forget about me! I can't stand to be forgotten!" (qtd. in Martinson 4). Hellman wanted to be counted among the best playwrights, and she seemed ambivalent to admitting that her exclusion may have had something to do with prejudices against women writing for the theater, even when they seemed blatant.

Despite her own mixed responses to feminism, her plays are often read as feminist because of their focus on women's status as property to be bought and exchanged, and their concern with women's economic liberation and independence. In particular, she disrupts an

established patriarchal structure that she probably senses but does not name. In her article “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” Gayle Rubin argues that patriarchal heterosexuality is heavily engaged in the traffic in women. Drawing on Claude Levi-Strauss’ previous work, Rubin discusses kinship rituals of exchange in which women, through marriage, are precious gifts—commodities— to be exchanged. In this framework: “If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it. [...] As long as the relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges” (277). For Rubin, the subordination of women is not natural, but a direct effect “of the relationships by which sex and gender are organized and produced” (278) and account for not only modern quirks, like the traditional giving away of the bride by her father, literally transacting her onto the arm of another man (277), but a significantly larger patriarchal system in which “women do not have full rights to themselves” (278).

Gayle Austin has recognized the value of Rubin’s observations for understanding one of Hellman’s plays from a feminist perspective in her article, “The Exchange of Women and Male Homosocial Desire in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* and Lillian Hellman’s *Another Part of the Forest*.” Austin utilizes Rubin’s theoretical basis to contrast the representation of women in each play, arguing that the father/son, male-centered focus of *Death of a Salesman* gives women little attention aside from their role as objects of exchange, but in *Another Part of the Forest*, Hellman “represents women as active subjects, making efforts to arrange their own exchange among men” (63). While she mainly analyzes how the female “property” in *Another Part of the Forest* speak and act for themselves as subjects, even as they are being exchanged by the men as if they were objects, Austin’s analysis stops short of seeing that Hellman does more than just give her female characters subjectivity in *Another Part*

of the Forest. In *The Little Foxes* and *The Autumn Garden*, as well, Hellman draws attention to this system and disrupts it by allowing her female characters to enter *into* this previously male space, at times participating alongside men in the exchange of capital, and even at times, another woman. Hellman's women are active agents in a male system and know how to utilize the conventional tools of that system to emerge as beneficiaries.

Her feminist counterthesis is made more salient by placing it in the South, a region in which women's bodies have historically served as objects or commodities for communication among men, an arrangement in fact institutionalized into the fabric of society. Black women were literally bought and sold as slaves, and their bodies forcefully used to satisfy the sexual needs of their white masters. The sexual exploitation of black women's bodies also had an economic function, as their reproduction meant more slaves, more productivity, and more profit for white men. It was also a handy tool for white men to communicate not so much with the women they were exploiting, but to send a clear message to black men that they were powerless. In contrast, white southern women were put on a pedestal, revered as holy and pure and in need of protection. During Reconstruction, when black males finally gained some forms of legal and political agency, white men felt their power threatened and began to assert dominance through lynching and other acts of racial violence. In her essay "The Mind that Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape and Racial Violence," Jacquelyn Dowd Hall argues that "lynching reasserted hierarchical arrangements in the public transactions of men" (333). Further, many lynchings were based on the false premise that the black man punished had raped a white woman. Suddenly the southern white woman is embroiled in an exchange among men, justified by the supposed ruin of what makes her most precious in other exchanges among men: her sexual purity. She herself is nothing more than "the ultimate symbol of white male power" (Hall 334). Lynching, however, sent a double message: as "the right of the southern

lady to protection presupposed her obligation to obey” (Hall 335), white men were able to suppress white women’s sexuality, prevent any potential unions with black men, and convince white women that they did indeed need protection from the “Negro rapist.” The South’s institutionalization of a race and gender system in which men communicated with other men, with the woman serving as a mere conduit, make Hellman’s feminist counterthesis particularly relevant in a southern setting.

Particularly troubling for many feminist scholars is one of her most well-known plays, *The Children’s Hour*, which dealt with lesbianism in 1934, when homosexuality was still an extremely taboo topic. The play was banned in Boston, and the response to it was one of the driving forces in the formation of the New York Drama Critics Circle, which developed its own major award after Hellman’s play and others deemed deserving had been passed over in the Pulitzer Prize selections in the first seasons of the 1930s. In *The Children’s Hour*, two female friends, Martha Dobie and Karen Wright, run a boarding school for young girls. When one girl tells a lie—accusing Martha and Karen of carrying on a romantic relationship—the women are shunned from their community and lose all their students, whose families are horrified to think that their daughters have been exposed to this insidious environment and the two women’s “unnatural” (20) relationship. While the girl’s lie is eventually proved untrue, the damage is already done, and this ambiguous lie leads Martha to question or acknowledge that she has felt romantic feelings towards her friend: “I love you that way—maybe the way they said I loved you. I don’t know” (71). Immediately after this conversation, Martha kills herself. This ending is troubling for feminist scholars because it would seem to reinforce a conventional narrative in which the only alternative to heterosexuality is death. Yet deeper analysis would suggest that this ending reflects an indictment of a society that silences and effectively kills those who express alternative sexualities. Mary Titus’ reading also offers a valid alternative: “If in the

play that society [...] brought on Martha Dobie's suicide, outside the play, another society forced the playwright to murder the lesbian in her text, and perhaps in herself. In both worlds the result is the same: isolation and grief, not a renewed, happily heterosexual social order" (229).

It is not surprising that it is Tennessee Williams' name who completes the images of the South that come up in Don Williams' and Pam Tillis' country songs, not Hellman's. Hellman's plays have remained in the critical shadow of her contemporaries Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams. For instance, David Krasner's 2005 *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama* has entire chapters devoted to Miller, Williams, and O'Neill and mentions Hellman only sporadically. In her essay "The Fox's Cubs: Lillian Hellman, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams," Charlotte Goodman finds it "ironic that some reviewers accused Hellman of imitating Williams" (138) when *The Little Foxes* was a Broadway hit in 1939, six years before Williams' 1945 *The Glass Menagerie*. Goodman argues that while contemporary critics and Miller and Williams themselves refused to acknowledge the debt that they might have owed Hellman, the parallels between Miller's *All My Sons* (1947), Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), and Hellman's *The Little Foxes* suggest that Miller and Williams were in fact heavily influenced by Hellman. Both Goodman and William Wright suggest that the broken alcoholic Birdie gave Williams an important model for and ultimately made possible two of his strongest and most identifiable southern characters, *The Glass Menagerie*'s Amanda Wingfield and *Streetcar*'s Blanche Dubois. Yet critics generally failed to give Hellman any credit for any influence on Williams' work, and Williams himself seemed oblivious as well: in his autobiography he writes, "there were no Americans who seemed to be working a vein related to what I had come to sense was mine" (qtd. in Goodman 139). While Hellman may have first imagined these memorable

characters, Williams' characters and his work remain the strongholds in popular conceptions about the South.

Hellman's view of the South was no doubt informed by the unique insider/outsider perspective she developed in her formative years. Hellman was born in New Orleans, but after spending six years of her life there, her father's Canal Street shoe business failed, and the family moved to New York. For those first six years in New Orleans, her family lived at a boardinghouse run by her father's two unmarried sisters. After the move, Hellman's life was then divided into six-month periods each year, half spent in New Orleans at the boardinghouse and the other half in New York. In New York she spent time among her mother's wealthy family, who were southern transplants originally from Demopolis, Alabama. This arrangement continued until she was sixteen, after which she still made periodic visits to New Orleans. Hellman describes this constant geographical shifting as "a kind of frantic tennis game" that forced in her a "constant need for adjustment in two very different worlds" (*Unfinished* 9). In a 1975 interview, Hellman acknowledged that her years in New York far eclipsed the amount of time she spent in the South throughout her life, but she felt her southern roots quite deeply: "I suppose most Southerners, people who grew up in the South, still consider themselves Southern. [...] I came from a family of Southerners. It wasn't simply a question that I was brought up and down from the South. I came from a family, on both sides, who had been Southerners for a great many generations" (Bryer 186). Her mother's family provided some of the inspiration for characters in *The Little Foxes* and *Another Part of the Forest*, and the rich cast of characters she encountered on the streets of New Orleans and at her aunts' boardinghouse would also contribute to the people and settings she created on stage.

Hellman's experience in the South was complicated since her southern home was New Orleans, a city whose southern credentials are complicated by its diverse mix of cultural

influences—Creole, French, Carribean and American—and its laissez-faire attitude so conducive to this cultural blending. Hellman was aware of this contradiction: “New Orleans had a live-and-let-live quality about it. That was rare in the South” (Bryer 197). She also linked her rebellion with her region of birth, seeing it not only as a form of personal rebellion, but one that emerged against social forces at work in the South as well: “I was very rebellious and that I think in part I inherited. You know that I grew up in part in the South, and I was very rebellious. [...] The way negroes are treated...it seemed to me very unjust and ugly. I wasn’t only rebellious about myself” (Bryer 150). Hellman’s plays would later give voice to this early rebellion against social conditions that she found “unjust and ugly,” most notably capitalist greed and gender and racial oppression.

Although it was not produced until 1946, seven years after *Foxes*, *Another Part of the Forest* is essentially the prequel to *Foxes*, detailing how the Hubbards, who are the foxes—Regina, Oscar, and Ben—got to be that way. Hellman takes her title from the Bible’s Song of Solomon: “Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines; for our vines have tender grapes.” *The Little Foxes* is set “in a small town in the deep South” in the Spring of 1900 and is preceded by a pre-script note: “There has been no attempt to write Southern dialect. It is to be understood that the accents are Southern” (151). Hellman’s pre-script note reveals none of the anxiety about audience response to southern characters that we will later see in other southern dramatists’ pre-script notes. *Another Part of the Forest* is set twenty years before *Foxes*, in 1880, this time with a particular location: “the Alabama town of Bowden” (306). *The Autumn Garden*, the play Hellman thought her best (Bryer 55), is set in a boardinghouse near Pass Christian, Mississippi, a setting no doubt borne out of her New Orleans time at her aunts’ boardinghouse. *Toys in the Attic* also takes place in New Orleans, but the southern setting is more “incidental” (Mooney 27).

In fact, Hellman thought the southern setting so crucial to what she wanted to do with *The Little Foxes* that she spent much time and energy researching the South before writing. In his article “Lillian Hellman’s *The Little Foxes* and the New South Creed: An Ironic View of Southern History,” Ritchie D. Watson, Jr. outlines her notes and script revisions and argues that through Hellman’s insistence on creating an accurate depiction of social and economic trends in the South during this period, her portrayal is informed and reveals an ironic awareness of the corresponding mythology of the Old South. In her research, “she compiled over 100 pages of amazingly detailed material covering every conceivable aspect of both American and Southern economic social history between 1880 and 1900, with particular emphasis on the South’s agricultural and economic development during those decades” (R. Watson 60). She utilized texts such as Julian Ralph’s *Dixie, or Southern Scenes and Sketches* (1896) and Philip Alexander Bruce’s *The Rise of the New South* (1905) and incorporated much of what she learned into the play’s script, including expectations about southern ladyhood that enter into the play’s action. For instance, Hellman’s notes read that social standards dictate that a mother “must accompany her young lady everywhere,” so Hellman makes an important point about Regina’s nature by having her break this convention when she allows her daughter Alexandra to travel unaccompanied to bring her father home (R. Watson 60-61). Hellman even incorporates her research notes into direct dialogue in places, taking Harry Frick’s remark that “the railroads are the Rembrandts of investments” from Matthew Josephson’s *The Robber Barons: The Great American Capitalists* (1934), and having Ben Hubbard reference it in a toast to seal a business deal (R. Watson 60-61).

While her commitment to historical accuracy is admirable, Hellman need not have reached too far outside of her own experience growing up interacting with her father and mother’s families, who “had been Southerners for a great many generations” (Bryer 186). In

her memoir *An Unfinished Woman*, she recounts an incident with her Uncle Jake that would later make for one of the most powerful lines of the play:

When I graduated from school at fifteen, he gave me a ring that I took to a 59th Street hock shop, got twenty-five dollars, and bought books. I went immediately to tell him what I'd done, deciding, I think, that day that the break had to come. He stared at me for a long time, and then he laughed and said the words I later used in *The Little Foxes* [Regina's words to her daughter Alexandra]: "So you've got spirit after all. Most of the rest of them are made of sugar water." (*Unfinished* 4-5)

In fact, her portrait of the Hubbard family came directly from her observations of her mother's wealthy family, so much so that she claims some of her family members "threatened to sue" her after they saw it (Bryer 197). The time she spent in New York and visiting the summer cottage of her mother's family made her envision herself and her mother as the "the poor daughter and granddaughter," shaped her "into an angry child and forever caused in me a wild extravagance mixed with respect for money and those who have it" (*Unfinished* 5). In fact, some of Hellman's most memorable southern female characters are based on her grandmother and mother. Her maternal grandmother, Sophie Marx, was the model for Regina of *The Little Foxes* and her mother, Julia Marx Newhouse, was Hellman's inspiration for *Foxes'* Birdie, and parts of Lavinia in *Another Part of the Forest* are reminiscent of her mother as well.

Hellman puts her research to good use in Act One of *The Little Foxes*, immediately highlighting a distinction between the North and South as Regina Giddons and her brothers, Oscar and Ben Hubbard, entertain William Marshall, a business investor from Chicago, who they are hoping will put up the capital so that they can establish a textile mill in their Alabama town. Marshall is intrigued by his visit to such a different world than his Chicago, observing, "You Southerners occupy a unique position in America. You live better than the rest of us, you eat better, you drink better. I wonder you find time, or want to find time, to do business" (155). Even in 1939, the South has been figured as the "desirable other" that Richard Gray discusses,

outside of the “pressures of living and working in a world governed by the new technologies and international capital” (356). Southerners had created an Old South myth so successfully that many northerners accepted it and envied it, and the Hubbards are all too quick to indulge him, spewing southern mythology about honor, masculinity, and womanhood. Ben Hubbard assures Marshall that “Our Southern women are well favored” in beauty (154), yet the men establish a particular type of southern womanhood in which beautiful, true ladies remained naïve to the public world outside their domiciles. When Oscar’s son Leo, a playboy type, speaks up about his frequent trips to Mobile which bring him into contact with “elegant worldly ladies,” Oscar quickly corrects him: “worldliness is not a mark of beauty in any woman” (154).

The Hubbards take great care to correct Marshall’s misunderstandings about the southern aristocracy. Ben explains, “But we are not aristocrats. Our brother’s wife is the only one of us who belongs to the Southern aristocracy” (156). It is Oscar’s wife, Birdie, who is “the delicately nurtured flower of antebellum plantation society” (R. Watson 62) whose family ran the lucrative cotton plantation Lionnet until it failed after the war. The Hubbards wish to make a distinction between the aristocratic man who could “adapt himself to nothing” (157) after the failure of agriculturalism and themselves, whose grandfather and father “learned the new ways and learned how to make them pay” (157) in commercial trade. As Ben explains the turn of events, “To make a long story short, Lionnet now belongs to us. Twenty years ago we took over their land, their cotton, and their daughter” (158). The Hubbards represent those white southerners who set aside loyalty to their region for personal financial gain and collaborated with northern speculators during the Civil War and after the fall of the South. One reviewer identified the Hubbards right away, explaining:

they who spoil the vines are the greedy, crooked, petty, grasping remains of the South after the Civil War [...] who exploited the country below the Mason-Dixon line for all the good, hard cash it was worth, replacing black slavery with economic slavery for black and white, defacing their countrysides with grim

soot from mills that were rapidly erected with the moneybags from the North, blind to all the codes of human decency. (Ross 491)

In the Hubbards' profit-driven world, there is no allegiance to neighbors, region, or the past, and women are commodities to be bought and sold along with land and cotton.

The Hubbards, then, don't represent the supposedly benevolent and loyal Old South, but have commandeered the parts of its mythology that suit them and know how to perform its elements for their own gain. The only remnant of the southern aristocracy is the broken and vulnerable Birdie, whose husband demeans, abuses, and generally treats her as property, as the premise of their marriage would suggest. Birdie longs for the idyllic days gone by, and when asked what she would do with her part of the profits, she imagines it in a narrative similar to "Blanche's recollection of the loss of the family plantation Belle Reve" in Williams' *Streetcar* (Goodman 138):

I should like to have Lionnet back. I know you own it now, but I'd like to see it fixed up again, the way Mama and Papa had it. Every year it used to get a nice coat of paint—Papa was very particular about the paint—and the lawn was so smooth all the way down to the river, with the trims of zinnias and red-feather plush. And the figs and blue little plums and the scuppernongs—. The organ is still there and it wouldn't cost much to fix. We could have parties for Zan, the way Mama used to have for me. (163)

This futile dream is compounded only by her delusion that her husband Oscar would allow her access to the money or any input into decisions about how to utilize it, or that he would grant his wife control of the property that signifies his ownership of her. Birdie is a memorable "combination of silliness and pathos," the same found in both Williams' Amanda Wingfield and Blanche DuBois (Goodman 137).

In *Another Part of the Forest*, we learn that Regina was forced by her father and brothers to marry Horace Giddens, an arrangement Regina must be referencing when she tells her daughter Alexandra in *Foxes*, "Too many people used to make me do too many things" (225). Yet then Regina repeats the cycle in her willingness to give Alexandra in marriage to her

brother Oscar's son, Alexandra's cousin Leo. However aware she is of her own status as a victim of exchange among men, Regina does something very surprising in this play. She inserts herself into the communicative framework of her male kin, not only engaging in financial dealings with them, but even offering her own daughter up as a gift in marriage to her brother Oscar's son, Alexandra's cousin Leo, as part of their agreement in these dealings. Regina needs her husband Horace's third of the money to participate in her brothers' deal, so she schemes to bring him home from his five-month stay at the hospital in order to procure the money. She sends Alexandra, unaccompanied, to fetch her father, a southern transgression that horrifies even their African American maid Addie, "Going alone? Going by herself? A child that age!" (171).

Regina steps into a financial exchange among men and continues to deal as it leads to the potential exchange of a woman—her own daughter. Because she knows that her husband's \$88,000 is the necessary component to the fruition of their deal, Regina ups the stakes with her brothers, asking for twice the profits they had originally agreed upon, and admits as part of the arrangement she would consider giving Alexandra in marriage to Leo. Regina can't convince Horace to invest his money in time for the deal to go through, so her brothers and nephew come up with a new plan. Leo, an employee of his uncle's bank, has access to his uncle's safe deposit box with the bonds they need for their investment. Unbeknownst to Regina, Leo "borrows" Horace's bonds to give to Marshall, and the men plan to pay them back within five months when Horace will check the box again. However, Horace learns of the theft and goes to Regina. He tells her he will keep quiet about the theft until his impending death, when he plans to leave the 88,000 in bonds to Regina and the rest to Alexandra. Regina's brothers have, in effect, stolen her share of her husband's inheritance, leaving her destitute. In the course of their conversation, Horace has an attack of his heart trouble, and Regina watches him stonily as he

grabs desperately for his medicine, refusing to help him as he falls down the landing to his death. To regain power, Regina then blackmails her brothers for seventy-five percent of the profits, threatening to go to the authorities and report the bonds stolen if they do not give in to her demands. Regina emerges as the ultimate fox, joining the Hubbard men and beating them in their own game.

Perhaps because the Hubbards—Regina, Ben, and Oscar—are so despicable and they’re juxtaposed with the sympathetic Birdie, some audiences and critics may have assumed that Hellman means to indict the New South and glorify the Old. Elizabeth Hardwick, in her 1967 assessment of the play after a Lincoln Center revival performance, declares, “The picture of the South in *The Little Foxes* [...] is what you might expect and what many serious historians believe to be a legend, not to say a cliché.” Interestingly, she argues that in the 28 years since it played on Broadway, it had somehow morphed from a melodrama attacking capitalism to an extended ode to the Old South. She writes:

But what odd things time has done to the text—or to us. It appears to me now—perhaps because of a world around us begging for “development”—that the play is about a besieged Agrarianism, a lost Southern agricultural life, in which virtue and sweetness had a place, and, more strikingly, where social responsibility and justice could, on a personal level at least, be practiced. It is curious what a catalogue of sentiment about the Old South the play turns out to be. I do not know whether this represents the author’s conviction, conscious or unconscious, or whether it is the by-product of the plot.

Whether the Americans of 1967 were looking for a return to a slower time, or the South of 1939 had not quite become such a saturated narrative, Hardwick suggests that the passing of time influences the play’s reception. The 1939 reviews were largely favorable; most did label it a melodrama, but found it “convincing proof of Miss Hellman’s standing as a dramatist” (Watts 491) and critics almost uniformly agreed on the absolutely “hateful and rapacious” (Watts 491) nature of the Hubbards. It was also immediately recognized as a dramatization of the collision of the Old South and New, and most reviewers incorporated the South into their headlines

somehow, feeding excitement about a southern play on Broadway: “Taut Drama of a Ruthless Southern Family” (Mantle 490), “Lillian Hellman’s Drama of the South” (Atkinson 490), “Decay of the South Hellman Play Theme” (Ross 491), “Tallulah Bankhead Plays a Highly Unsympathetic Role With an Authentic Southern Accent” (Waldorf 492), or simply, “Dixie” (Watts 491). Reviews talk about their own response or the audience’s as “deeply engrossed” (Ross 491) and “fascinated” (Mantle 490). They also look for authenticity in the southern accents, commenting on the varying quality and consistency of the actors’ accents, and make a point to mention that the popular stage and film actress Tallulah Bankhead cast as Regina, “is a native of Alabama and therefore the possessor of a genuine Southern accent” (Waldorf 492). However, the specific time and place, the turn of the century at the collision of the Old and New South, and the specific type of people the Hubbards represent in American and southern history led some critics to call it “a ‘period’ piece” (Waldorf 492). Richard Lockridge found the play “steadily interesting” but looks for a universal theme:

But what she says is that Oscar and Benjamin Hubbard and Regina Giddens, who lived in a small town in the South in 1900, were despicable people. [...] But she seems to me to have failed to make their case anything but a special one. (492)

The critics who reviewed the 1981 Broadway Revival were mostly distracted and captivated by Elizabeth Taylor as Regina, but there is evidence of misunderstandings that year as well. T.E. Kalem in *Time* praises the actor who played Horace, who he seems to think “raises his feeble but valiant arm in a salute to the values of the Old South that is being displaced by the New” (231). Kalem’s reading seems a gross misunderstanding, as Horace is disgusted with his wife and her family, not because they represent the New South, but because they are greedy and vile. His progression from the Old South is evident in his dying request to Addie, their African American maid, that she take Alexandra away from her mother and their home. He also leaves her seventeen hundred dollars in an envelope, a gesture so untraditional at

the time that he must do it that way rather than in a will, as Addie points out, “Don’t you do that, Mr. Horace. A nigger woman in a white man’s will! I’d never get it nohow!” (207).

Hellman’s attempts to satirize rather than glorify the Old South were missed by critics during each production over a period of roughly forty years, and the geographical, regional, and temporal specifics that Hellman places in *Foxes* seems to have both fascinated and alienated audiences and critics. In 1939, after the initial response, Hellman felt that people had misunderstood *Foxes* and she describes her disappointment:

I sat drinking for months...trying to figure out what I had wanted to say and why some of it got lost...I had meant to half-mock my own youthful high-class innocence in Alexandra...I had meant people to smile at, and to sympathize with, the sad, weak Birdie, certainly I had not meant them to cry; I had meant the audience to recognize some part of themselves in the money-dominated Hubbards; I had not meant people to think of them as villains to whom they had no connection. (*Pentimento* 180)

These misunderstandings led her to direct *Another Part of the Forest* in its first production on Broadway in order to take more control of her vision. She “believed that I could now make clear that I had meant the first play as a kind of satire. I tried to do that in *Another Part of the Forest*, but what I thought funny or outrageous the critics thought straight stuff; what I thought was bite they thought sad, touching, or plotty and melodramatic” (*Pentimento* 197).

Unfortunately, Hellman’s attempts at satire continued to be missed and misunderstood.

However, a close, informed analysis of *The Little Foxes* uncovers Hellman’s ironic view of the Hubbards and southern mythology. Throughout the first act, Marshall displays some skepticism and amusement at their descriptions of southern history and manners, telling Ben, “You have a turn for neat phrases” (159). Yet he’s not wary enough to back out of the deal and not too impressed with their symbolic narrative: “Well, however grand your reasons are, mine are simple: I want to make money and I believe I’ll make it on you” (159). When they seal the deal, Ben explains a convention of southern masculinity to Marshall: “Down here,

sir, we have a strange custom. We drink the last drink for a toast. That's to prove that the Southerner is always still on his feet for the last drink" (159). When his brother remarks later that he had never heard that before, Ben responds, "Nobody's ever heard it before. God forgives those who invent what they need (162). In Ben's invented toast, Hellman reveals the artifice of it all. Watson agrees that "A careful reading of the opening act reveals a subtle, unsentimental, and complex understanding of the South's postbellum history well removed from the naively romantic historical vision" (R. Watson 61) that Hardwick and other critics saw. While some critics might have found *Foxes* too specific, most agreed that greedy and ruthless people like the Hubbards are certainly not a regional phenomena. Warren French observed that *The Children's Hour* and *The Little Foxes* would "never become period pieces as long as malice and greed make the world wobble round" (177-8). The southern setting is powerful because the South institutionalized some these forces in a way that other regions did not, but Hellman acknowledged, "I didn't mean it to be just for the South" (qtd. in Martinson 144), and Ben Hubbard's lines reflect Hellman's intent to universalize her critique: "There are hundreds of Hubbards sitting in rooms like this throughout the country. All their names aren't Hubbard, but they are all Hubbards and they will own this country someday" (223). Aside from understanding Hellman's ironic view of the South, Watson also sees that "Hellman achieves both a universally human dimension and a specific social identification as representatives of a new post-bellum Southern class of ambitious and opportunistic nouveau riche" (67). Further, Hellman's critique of the Hubbards' capitalist greed, *placed* in the South, also disassembles the national view of the South as a region of tradition and leisure not dictated by modernity and capitalism. So while Hellman critiques southern racial and gender hierarchies and satirizes southern myths about womanhood, masculinity, and life in the South, she also aims her satire at

the larger nation's capitalism and its misguided conceptions about the South existing outside of these material conditions.

Regina is not, thankfully, victorious in her exchange of her daughter, and other female characters emerge out of the play with agency, perhaps in a much more satisfying way than does Regina. It is Alexandra's diminutive Aunt Birdie who whispers to her the inklings of this deal, and she immediately protests, "But I'm not going to marry. And I'm certainly not going to marry Leo. [...] Nobody can make me do anything" (173). She confronts her mother, telling her that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who "who ate the earth and other people who stood around and watched them do it" (225). She repeats it as conventional wisdom from Addie, the one character in the play who would have suffered most under both types—their African American female cook. The Hubbards are the earth-eaters of those two types of people, but there is hope with the young Alexandra's refusal "to stand around and watch [them] do it" (225). She rejects her mother and her family's way of life, a life in which she too was a commodity to be bought and sold by her own mother. In the final stage directions before curtain, "Addie comes to Alexandra, presses her arm" (225), and what we know about social convention and Horace's request to Addie presupposes that Alexandra will leave for Chicago accompanied by Addie and her seventeen hundred dollars and the two of them will "be fighting [...] some place where people don't just stand around and watch" (225). Here "Hellman suggests that a better future may arise from the interaction of the wisdom of an oppressed black woman and the energy of a young white woman" (Burke 118).

Poor Birdie, however, is left stuck at home with the men, but in her last scene on stage, Hellman gives her a voice for the first time. Birdie reveals an awareness of her role as property, admitting that she knows "Ben Hubbard wanted the cotton, and Oscar Hubbard married it for him" (205), says she doesn't even like her own son Leo, admits that her frequent

“headaches” are only a cover for her alcoholism, and warns Alexandra that if she stays, “in twenty years you’ll just be like me. They’ll do all the same things to you” (206). Hellman calls attention to Birdie’s only display of pseudo-subjectivity by having Addie remark, “Well. First time I ever heard Miss Birdie say a word. Maybe it’s good for her” (207). It’s too late for Birdie, but Alexandra will escape a life in which she too could be traded in marriage as property, like her aunt and mother before her.

However she appears, Hellman’s South is nearly always inhabited by an Addie figure. We know that Hellman’s first glimpses of injustice were racial, as she recalled from her childhood in the South: “The way negroes are treated...it seemed to me very unjust and ugly” (Bryer 150). She has called Sophronia, her family’s black nurse, “the first and most certain love of my life” (*Unfinished* 14). Hellman felt so out of place in her affinity and sympathy for black people that she once called herself “part nigger” as a child (*Unfinished* 25). Whether or not Hellman avoided the sentimental trappings of many other southern whites’ fond memories of their childhood nurses, in her inclusion of figures like Addie, she gives voice to ordinarily silenced individuals. Coralee, the black maid of *Another Part of the Forest* has an interesting double in Regina’s mother Lavinia. Regina’s father and Lavinia’s husband Marcus Hubbard, the patriarch, has dismissed his wife as crazy, partly because of her unconventional behavior. She attends church with Coralee, explaining, “I always go to the colored church. I ain’t been to a white church in years. Most people don’t like my doing it, I’m sure, but I got my good reasons—” (311). Her wish for many years has been to go away with Coralee to establish a school for black children and she has attempted to speak to her husband about this arrangement every year on her birthday. He dismisses and taunts her by making her wait each year only to put her off one more time, even as she pleads, “It can’t be another day, Marcus. It was to be on

my birthday, this year. When you sat right in that chair, and I brought my Bible and you swore—” (331).

In this second play we learn how deep are the Hubbards’ sins against the southern cause: everyone in town knows that in 1864, Marcus Hubbard was the culprit behind the carelessness that led Union troops to a Confederate camp and ended in a massacre of the southern soldiers. For years nobody had any proof, but it is Lavinia and Coralee that carry the burden of the secret truth. Lavinia has it all written down in her Bible too, with names and dates, detailing how Marcus paid two Confederate soldiers to write false passes to help him evade capture by law enforcement or the lynch mob. Coralee has transformed her guilt over this secret into a great need to repent for her racial and southern sins: “Your people are my people. I got to do a little humble service. I lived in sin these thirty-seven years, Coralee. Such sin I couldn’t even tell you” (333). Lavinia confides her secret to her son Ben, who is about to be disowned by Marcus; armed with this new bargaining chip, he forces his father to give him the family store and all of his assets in exchange for his silence. In the end, Lavinia is not so crazy after all, and her sharp memory and indictment of her husband’s crimes allows her and Coralee the financial means and freedom to go away and establish their school with money given to her by her son Ben. As in *The Little Foxes*, Hellman ends with the unlikely activist coupling of a white and black woman, the very same pair whose rivalry was institutionalized in the Old South. Hellman developed Lavinia’s character in part on her mother Julia, for whom “the only comfortable period of her life had been with the Alabama Negroes of her childhood” (*Pentimento* 70) and who made a habit of attending different churches—Catholic, Baptist, and synagogue—and always felt spiritually comfortable. Lavinia’s identification with blacks highlights the dual oppression of race and gender, and reminds the audience of her also silenced double, Coralee, who otherwise remains a peripheral figure.

In *The Autumn Garden*, the Addie figure is Sophie Tuckerman, a passive young girl who has been sent over from Europe to stay with and help her aunt, Constance Tuckerman, run her summer boardinghouse near Pass Christian, Mississippi. Set in 1949, Hellman describes the setting as “a summer resort on the Gulf of Mexico, about one hundred miles from New Orleans” (398). While the South of *The Autumn Garden* is not as crucial to the setting as it is in *The Little Foxes* and *Another Part of the Forest*, the play is also sprinkled with southern nuance, and Hellman uses the same satiric approach, which is illuminated through Sophie’s characterization and involvement in the plot. Constance describes the curiously tragic circumstances under which Sophie came to live with her after Sophie’s father, Constance’s brother Sam, died in World War II: “Her mother didn’t want to come and Sophie didn’t want to leave her mother. I finally had really to demand that Sam’s daughter was not to grow up—” (425). She takes Sophie away from her mother against both of their wills simply because she does not want her to grow up poor. Constance claimed upon taking Sophie that she intended to raise her as a southern lady: “I’ve tried to send her to the best school and then she was to make her debut, only now she wants to get married, I think” (425), but in reality Constance’s life more closely resembles that of a domestic worker or favored slave. While Constance pretends that she and her niece run the boardinghouse together in willing harmony, she barks orders constantly at Sophie, gives her the grunt work, and leaves her only the couch in the living room as her living quarters when all the rooms are full. Back at home, Sophie and her mother are very poor and owe money, and Sophie knows that “in my kind of Europe you can’t live where you owe money” (429). She can’t go home but recognizes, “I have no place here and I am lost and homesick” (429). Her only alternative to her life with her mother has been semi-forced servitude for her aunt and marriage to a man she doesn’t love as an escape from the boardinghouse. Unlike Regina in *Foxes*, Constance is not party to this proposed marriage, but it

is Sophie's decision, because it is an alternative to a life of working tirelessly for her aunt. The unmarried Constance's "ownership" of Sophie is a departure from the framework in which women don't own property, but *are* property. And since Constance does not rely on a husband's income, she benefits financially from running the boarding house and taking in guests, which she could not do without her niece's servitude. Constance has entered into traditionally male models of profit through her ownership of another woman.

When one of the houseguests, Nick Denery, becomes drunk, propositions her in what she calls a "most mild fashion" (although the spectator might disagree with Sophie's description), and passes out on the couch, Sophie doesn't know what to do. Hellman's stage directions read: "She turns, goes to hall, stands at the foot of the steps. Then she changes her mind and comes back into the room. [...] Sophie draws back, moves slowly to the other side of room as the curtain falls" (466-67). Simply because the two slept on opposite ends of the same living room, the houseguests are scandalized over Nick's impropriety and Sophie's ruined ladyhood. Constance is furious at Nick and points to the open window facing the neighbor's porch where they and their guests are having breakfast: "I am not making anything out of it. But I know what is being made out of it. In your elegant way of life, I daresay this is an ordinary occurrence. But not in our village" (472). Perhaps in the life of Nick, the New York artist, this type of behavior is acceptable, and Sophie's reality of social and economic circumstances are very different than those of the wealthy southerners at the boardinghouse:

In my class, in my town, it is not so. In a poor house if a man falls asleep drunk—and certainly it happens with us each Saturday night—he is not alone with an innocent young girl because the young girl, at my age, is not so innocent and because her family is in the same room, not having any other place to go. (485)

Guests have varying views on who is to blame; one boarder says "a nice girl would have screamed" (473), and Ned Crossman recites an all-too familiar southern narrative that recalls

the historical victimization of black women by white men: “The girl’s a foreigner and they don’t understand her and therefore don’t like her. You’re a home-town boy and as such you didn’t do anything they wouldn’t do. Boys will be boys and in the South, there’s no age limit on boyishness” (475).

Yet Hellman’s assignment of this line to Crossman belies its surface verisimilitude, as it is Crossman who consistently makes these observations about the southern character, asking, “Haven’t you lived in the South long enough to know that nothing is ever anybody’s fault?” (413), and explaining Nick’s view of Constance and Sam at one point: “Nick is still a Southerner. With us every well-born lady sacrifices herself for something: a man, a house, sometimes a gardenia bush” (418). Crossman recognizes the irony in Nick’s characterization that Constance “sacrificed her life for [Sam]” (418) when in reality her commemoration of his memory is her theft of her niece from her mother, so that she herself could benefit from Sophie’s domestic servitude. It is Crossman alone who seems to understand the failure of southern ideology, even if it’s only when he’s “had enough to drink—just exactly enough—” (429), and he tells Sophie “You’re beginning to talk like an advertisement, which is the very highest form of American talk. It’s not your language, nor your native land. You don’t have to care about it. You shouldn’t even understand it” (428). Crossman recognizes that Sophie’s passivity and weak English skills have made her susceptible to picking up the language of her milieu, the tendency of “a turn for neat phrases” that William Marshall observed in Ben Hubbard, which is the language of advertising, southern ideology, and for Hellman, capitalism.

Further, the irony is that in all of their fuss over Sophie’s ruined ladyhood, Sophie’s place in southern society has more resembled that of a slave than the southern debutante daughter, and she finds herself in the same position she was in at home, in her class and town, with no other rooms to go to. Suddenly Sophie develops surprising agency, and like Regina,

utilizes the communicative tools developed by white men—in this case, southern ideology about female purity—to blackmail the Denerys, blatantly transforming her initial bored reaction: “I have lost or will lose my most beloved fiancé; I cannot return to school and the comrades with whom my life has been so happy; my aunt is uncomfortable and unhappy [...] and is now burdened with me for many years to come. [...] I am ruined” (484). We are told that Sophie will use the blackmail money to go back to her mother in Europe. As the beneficiary of this exchange, Sophie gains economic independence and escapes a life in which she matters little to her aunt as anything except property.

Unlike *The Little Foxes* and *Another Part of the Forest*, which “could not exist...without the Southern setting as its historic and artistic reality” (Mooney 29), the southern setting of *The Autumn Garden* is less crucial. A complimentary review notes the universal quality Hellman achieves: “Hellman has taken another look at the South (though these people could come from anywhere)” (Guernsey 326). However, one displeased reviewer thinks “*Autumn Garden Harps on Depressing Theme,*” suggesting that the characters are even more miserable because they are southern: “Since Miss Hellman has chosen the South for her pet whipping boy, they are a sorry lot” (Coleman 327). Once again, he misses Hellman’s ironic view of southern mythology and confuses her Old South/New South loyalties: “We think Miss Hellman might do well to pay a visit to the new South, which boasts a good many happy, prosperous and moral people. And we doubt that they are as prudish and stupid as she etches some to achieve a third act for her play” (327). Contemporary playwrights may be fortunate that we have moved past the Old South/New South confusion that entangles critics in Hellman’s work, but their attempts at representing the South become more complicated as the region evolves far beyond that simple dual categorization.

Hellman's representations of the South at the friction of Old and New, then, are perhaps less relevant in a contemporary landscape, but the remnants of racist and sexist mechanisms once institutionalized there continues to make the South a meaningful site in which to overturn such ideology. In each of these plays, Hellman places silenced women in a position of power, offers them an escape from bondage or commodification, and gives them economic independence. Hellman's southern female characters are full of spirit, not made of the sugar water that southern society might have them be. Still, it's partly clear from this discussion why Hellman's work has not always been easily identified as feminist—the value of active female characters that insert themselves into male spaces and emerge as the economically independent beneficiaries is mitigated some by their embodiment of damaging male behavior, especially when it involves the exchange or ownership of another woman. While Hellman doesn't solve these tensions in her work, “neither does she cooperate in reestablishing male power” (Burke 123). Hellman was working within a milieu much less friendly to feminist voices, perhaps one that had grown tired of “the woman question,” at least as she perceived it: “By the time I grew up the fight for the emancipation of women, their rights under the law, in the office, in bed, was stale stuff” (*Unfinished* 108). It is remarkable that Hellman had established herself as the sole female playwright among the most successful playwrights of her time, and she clearly desired to be viewed exactly as they were, as a leading playwright rather than a leading *female* playwright. Clearly, “that Hellman, with her liberal feminist desire to be admitted into the male ‘universal,’ would not identify herself as a feminist yet would dramatize feminist issues to expose injustice and oppression is not difficult to comprehend” (Burke 108). It is not surprising, then, and perhaps essential, given her cultural milieu, that she dramatized feminist issues in a more subtle way than her predecessors.

Perhaps Hellman's feminism is best illustrated through Megan Terry's definition of feminist drama, in that she shows women themselves and encourages them to examine the type of image presented. It's clear that "Hellman must work out her ideas in the lives of women" (C. Watson 138), and Hellman herself acknowledged her need to center the female experience: "I can write about men, but I can't write a play that centers on a man. I've got to tear it up, make it about the women around him, his sisters, his bride, his mother" (*Pentimento* 206). Ultimately, in each of the plays where Hellman *places* the South, her ending "points not toward the reinscription of some previous social structure but to the hope of creating a new order—still undefined—based on sharply different values" (Barlow 162-3). These sharply different values discard the mechanisms of racist and sexist southern ideologies and create a space in which women enter into male systems of exchange and communication, utilize the tools of this system to dismantle male power, and emerge as ultimate beneficiaries of these exchanges. Ending with the cross-racial pairings of women we see in Alexandra and Addie, Lavinia and Coralee — while perhaps idealistic—disrupts the institutionalized communicative systems of white men that pitted the two as enemies.

In Hellman's perception that the critics failed to see her satire, she articulates a problem that has not necessarily been resolved in contemporary female playwrights' most essentially southern works, even forty years later in a different South than Hellman's South, and a very different South than the one of *Another Part of the Forest* and *The Little Foxes*. Critical reviews of southern plays continue to reveal many of the same problems—misunderstanding, detachment, or fetishization of difference. Some of Hellman's successors draw on her ironic view of traditional southern culture and American myths about the South, but they too have struggled with mediating irony and satire in their depiction of the South. Perhaps taking a lesson from the failure of Hellman's straight satire, the southern playwrights that follow her,

like Beth Henley, Elizabeth Dewberry, and Linda Treiber, experiment with satire in an overly comic frame.

CHAPTER TWO

“THAT MOONY, OFF-KILTER VIEW OF THINGS”: REFLEXIVITY AND THE ABSURD ON STAGE

In 1981, Beth Henley (b. 1952) earned the Pulitzer Prize for *Crimes of the Heart*, marking the first time that a woman had earned that distinction since Ketti Frings' *Look Homeward, Angel* (1957) twenty-three years prior. Marsha Norman (b. 1947) won the Pulitzer for *'night Mother* three years after *Crimes*, and the temporal proximity of these two successful plays by female playwrights (and both southern playwrights) naturally invited comparison. While *Crimes* explores some serious issues, it is essentially a comedy, whereas *'night Mother*, while humorous in spots, is essentially a tragedy. Henley made pointed moves to present her play as “southern,” and it “was generally received as a regional play—it was flavored with Southern dialect, ambiance, and eccentricities, and was not reviewed as making a universal statement. *Crimes* was a comedy people could laugh at (i.e., distance themselves from)” (*Feminist Spectator* 25-6). Reviews nearly always point out the southern setting, calling the play “homespun” (Barnes 137), full of “folksy warmth” (Kalem 140) and “Southern comfort” (Barnes 138). They note that it makes use of the “macabre aspects of the Southern tradition” (Wilson 138) and claim Henley provides “a tangy variation on the grits-and-Gothic South of Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor” (Kroll 139). Some seem pleased, then, that Henley gives us all the bizarre and comedic elements of the southern that we have come to expect, and on the other end of the spectrum, some reviewers corroborate the sense of “detachment” (Snow 141) the play's regional and comedic elements could cultivate, claiming, “we're encouraged not to take seriously any of the disasters that befall this family while the sisters seem to compete for Loonie of the Year Award” (Snow 141). T.E. Kalem comments on how the southern setting adds to our acceptance of the play's reality, wondering whether it

“would seem so antic in spirit if its lines were delivered in the brisk, flinty inflections of Bangor, Me., instead of the languorous resonances of Hazelhurst, Miss.” (140).

While Henley’s play was successful partly because of its southern particulars, ones that seemed to enrich the comedic elements, Norman seemed very aware that regional influences could detract from the dramatic vision of her play. Norman’s pre-script note for *‘night Mother* reveals her conscious decision to avoid regionalism in any way, as she instructs that there should be no accents and that the set and props should not indicate that the characters live in any specific area in the country. In fact, Norman confirms that she did several “things to keep the audience from pulling away,” and in addition to removing curse words, she wanted to avoid regional identification because:

There is a tendency of northern theatre audiences to think, ‘Oh, those southerners, they’re killing themselves right in front of their mothers!’ With *Mama and Jesse*, I didn’t want them to feel specific. I wanted them to be heroic and large, not of a particular place and time. I just wanted to specify gender, and a mother and daughter. I needed to do something for a clear, classical view; I didn’t want audiences to put them in that box, and [referring to her Pulitzer Prize] I turned out to be right about that classical form. (Talkback)

Norman’s discussion corroborates my assertion that regional perceptions lead playwrights to make careful choices in how they stage regional elements, and because of lingering notions about the universal spectator in the theatre, they may fear that such elements could detract from the achievement of a universal vision, especially in a tragedy. Regional elements do seem to lend themselves more easily to comedies, however, as evidenced by the success of Beth Henley’s *Crimes of the Heart*. Moving away from Hellman’s subtle, straight satire, many contemporary southern playwrights who explicitly *place* the South choose to do so through an overtly comic, satiric frame, as Henley does in *Crimes*.¹ They model a strategy Henley developed, one that attempts to ensure satire won’t be overlooked as it was in Hellman’s southern plays. However, this strategy comes with additional interpretive challenges that

complicate the geographical, ideological, imaginative, and genre-based problems already involved in representing the South.

If American drama has been called the “bastard art” (S. Smith), satire that “blasted art” (Clark and Motto 22), and both female and regional voices deviate from the universal spectator, then southern women playwrights utilizing satire are navigating some slippery terrain that might explain why their plays are so often misread. What I call that “moony, off-kilter view of things,” a line taken from Linda Treiber’s *Do’s & Donuts* (2005), are the satiric viewpoints utilized by contemporary playwrights that employ two main forms of irony:² a juxtaposition of disparate elements (the serious and the absurd), or a self-reflexive view of the southern region and the narrative traditions in which their plays participate. Utilizing satire is a strategy that reacts to their marginalization and the problems of regionalism, but it’s also an approach that brings with it a whole host of additional challenges. First, the audience may distance itself from the concerns of the play because it is a southern and/or comedic depiction; further, satire as a form creates immediate reception problems because it is often easily unnoticed or misinterpreted. Satire makes significant interpretative demands of its audience and can be alienating, whether or not the audience is complicit in the institution, group, way of life, or values at which the satire is aimed. In fact, “the demands of satire and its irony for special knowledge and choosing among values gives satire a unique capacity for alienating an audience, quite apart from any individual irony blindness” (Test 253).³ If satire and irony are more likely than other comic approaches to alienate the viewer, and if the universal spectator—a troubling concept still lingering in attitudes about drama and theatre—is alienated from the South, then placing these within a southern context only intensifies this dissonance. In this chapter I discuss three plays: Elizabeth Dewberry’s *Flesh and Blood* (1996), Linda Treiber’s *Do’s & Donuts* (2005), and Sandra Deer’s *So Long on Lonely Street* (1986) in tandem because,

like Henley's *Crimes*, they are all family plays that center on women, they are immediately recognizable for their southernness, and their comic—and in some cases, tragicomic—approach is steeped in satire and irony, either through reflexivity or the juxtaposition of the serious and the absurd, and they utilize this approach to critique and disrupt traditional southern narratives.

By “absurd,” I do not mean to solely reference Martin Esslin's concept of the Theatre of the Absurd,⁴ but in the context of Henley's *Crimes* and the plays I discuss in this chapter, I utilize the term “absurd” in its more common form of usage, to reflect the ludicrous, eccentric, ridiculous, incongruent, wacky, or unexpected. These absurdist elements seem somehow natural in the South—especially the Gothic South populated by the plays in this chapter. Henley acknowledges: “If a play is set in the South, it can be kind of eccentric and people will accept it” (Berkwitz D4). Like Hellman, Henley *places* her text in a recognizable type of South—the Gothic—in order to examine that site.

Like *Crimes of the Heart*, which had its world premiere at the 1979 Humana Festival of New American Plays at ATL, Birmingham native Elizabeth Dewberry's (b. 1962) *Flesh and Blood* also found its world premiere at ATL during the 1996 Festival. The two plays have much in common aside from their premieres at the same venue—Dewberry's *Flesh and Blood* immediately brings to mind Henley's *Crimes* through its southern Gothic tone, the juxtaposition of the serious and absurd, its explorations of female familial relationships and family dysfunction, and reversal of traditional southern manners and gender expectations. However, while the final scene of *Crimes* leaves us with the possibility of enduring family love despite obstacles, Dewberry's play offers us a dark perspective on the meaning of “flesh and blood,” in a complex and violent denouement that presents a more unsettling view of the southern family, womanhood, and domesticity.

In her essay “‘Unruling’ the Woman: Comedy and the Plays of Beth Henley and Rebecca Gilman,” Janet Gupton draws on Natalie Zemon Davis’ concept of the “unruly woman”⁵ to demonstrate how Henley and Gilman “use their own style of comedy” and “combine an interesting mixture of the gothic and grotesque to create ‘unruly women’ characters who affront the notion of the Southern lady” (124). Gupton examines several of Henley and Gilman’s plays, arguing that “the dialectical tension between the content of the plays and the comic forms the playwrights employ necessitates a new reading strategy for women’s comedies [...] as they must adhere to certain structures or conventions when writing so that their work is considered comedy while simultaneously attacking these very conventions in order to avoid reinforcing traditional outcomes” (125). Henley acknowledges the difficulties with this approach: “Despite Louisville, it [*Crimes*] was turned down all over town. I guess it’s not an easy play for people to pick up the tone of—to know whether it’s funny or sad” (Berkvitz D4). Dewberry’s *Flesh and Blood* also requires this new strategy for reading its absurdist, comedic form in conjunction with its serious final vision. *Crimes* grapples with some solemn issues—the domestic violence that led up to Babe shooting her husband, her affair with a fifteen-year old black boy (and her husband’s racially-motivated violence towards him), Old Granddaddy’s stroke—but these are nearly always figured in comic terms. As Billy J. Harbin points out: “Henley’s grave vision in *Crimes of the Heart* is both masked by and realized through a depiction of the ludicrous” (83). Some reviewers noted Henley’s achievement through this strategy, including Frank Rich in the *New York Times*, who claimed Henley “shows how comedy at its best can heighten reality to illuminate the landscape of existence in all its mean absurdity” (136).

Flesh and Blood’s treatment of family betrayal and murder functions in much the same way, but its vision ultimately emerges as more grave than the one offered in *Crimes*. As Gupton

notes, “comedy that does not end happily or that provides an alternative ending risks not being identified as a comedy” (126), so while a comic undertone to serious issues might leave the audience wondering about a play’s artistic unity, an ending other than a happy one may only add to the confusion. Not surprisingly, Dewberry’s play has elicited this response. Responding to a 1997 San Francisco production, one reviewer seems to recognize that Dewberry is satirizing the Southern gothic tragedy, but he seems uncomfortable with negotiating the final scene with the comedic structure:

The other recently opened Southern family drama is a kind of anti-Streetcar, an emetic for people who are sick of Gothic tragedy. *Flesh and Blood* seems to say, “All right. You want sex and sisters and dirty secrets? How about this?” It’s probably not intentional. Elizabeth Dewberry’s script seems earnest enough, and the actors do their best with it, but something’s gone wrong when the most you can say about a sex-motivated sibling murder story is that it makes you laugh. (Moore)

Like *Crimes*’ focus on sisters Lenny, Meg, and Babe Magrath, *Flesh and Blood* also focuses on sisters Charlotte and Crystal, and both plays are studies in familial dysfunction. In each, the sisters have gathered together at their childhood home: in *Crimes*, the sisters come home to Hazlehurst, Mississippi, because Babe has just shot her husband Zackary because she “just didn’t like his stinkin’ looks” (17), and in *Flesh and Blood*, they have gathered together for the occasion of Crystal’s wedding to Mac, a ceremony that was unexpectedly called off earlier that afternoon. Dewberry’s pre-script note on “place,” reads: “Summer, late afternoon. Dorris’ backyard, kitchen and den, somewhere in the present-day suburban South” (59). The play opens in the kitchen of mother Dorris’ house, with Crystal moping in her wedding dress, tight-lipped about the catalyst of the cancelled wedding. Her mother, sister Charlotte, and Charlotte’s husband, Judd, seem to be attempting to comfort her and decipher her reasons for calling off the wedding.

Both Henley and Dewberry's sets of sisters have inherited warped understandings of family relationships in which abandonment, betrayal, and even murder pass as acceptable responses to family difficulties. In *Crimes*, both the mother and father are absent—Mrs. Magrath hanged herself years earlier after her husband, the girls' father, left them. The Magrath sisters were raised by their grandfather, Old Granddaddy, who is hospitalized, and never appears on stage. In Dewberry's play, Charlotte and Crystal's mother Dorris seems relatively well-intentioned, but she nit-picks her daughters throughout the play, and harbors a dark secret about her husband's death thirty-one years ago. Both sets of sisters keep secrets from each other and hold onto past grudges, and even when they attempt to communicate honestly, understand and support each other, their conversations often deteriorate into anger and blame.

Dewberry plays with tropes of the southern Gothic in the details surrounding Dorris' husband's death, which is not unlike the bizarre and comic juxtaposition between domestic southern lady and psychopath that Henley creates in *Crimes* with Babe, who shoots her husband, immediately fixes lemonade, offers some to her husband groaning on the floor, and drinks three glasses before calling the police to announce that her husband has been shot. It turns out Dorris' husband died by potato salad—one that Dorris made with bits of raw pork, left to stew in the trunk of the car for two days, and then served him.⁶ At nine-years-old, Charlotte stumbled upon her mother taking the salad out of the trunk and has since resented her mother's confession to her, especially when her sister has been allowed to be blissfully ignorant of her mother's crime. Despite Charlotte's resentment, she has guarded and carried her mother's secret, even lying to the police as a child to protect her.

Aside from the inherent absurdity in death by potato salad, Charlotte and Dorris' discussion of it is framed in comic terms. In a discussion that seems to be the first time that the

two women have confronted the truth since the event, Dorris and Charlotte's understandings of it are very different:

DORRIS. And I didn't mean any harm.

CHARLOTTE. Yes you did.

DORRIS. Not any *real* harm.

CHARLOTTE. I don't blame you, but you did.

DORRIS. I just wanted him to have a stomach ache.

CHARLOTTE. You wanted more than that.

DORRIS. Okay, a little vomiting. Maybe a little diarrhea. But the rest was a mistake. It could have happened to anybody. (71-72)

After years of avoiding the subject, Dorris seems to have created an alternative surface narrative in her mind, in which his death was an accident, and alternates between this narrative and admitting her intentions. The impetus for the murder seems to be her husband's infidelity, also a detail that Charlotte knows but Crystal does not. This becomes clear as Dorris speculates what might have led Crystal to break off her wedding: "Maybe she's in the same boat I was in, maybe Mac's got a woman on the side and she has no idea what to do" (72). Dorris suggests that certain punishments (such as the one she inflicted on her husband) are acceptable in the case of infidelity: "Nobody would criticize you for that [leaving him at the altar]. They'll think you went easy on the bastard. Which if that's what happened, believe me, you did" (68). While Charlotte tries to force her mother to confront her crime for what it really was, she is, as Dorris tells her, "a good daughter" (73) and ultimately accepts and justifies it, telling her mother that "he deserved everything he got" (73). The second revelation of the play is that Charlotte's husband Judd and Crystal have slept together once, in "a mistake" (91) three weeks prior, and Crystal, determined to enter into her marriage with a clean conscience, has told Mac about the dalliance, hoping he can forgive her. Ultimately he cannot and we learn that it is he, not Crystal, who has called off the wedding. The play's final revelation is that Charlotte will take the life not of her husband in revenge—as her mother did years before her—but her own sister, by stabbing her in the back with a kitchen knife.

Both Henley and Dewberry utilize humor to critique traditional conceptions of southern womanhood, recognizing the absurd and somehow compelling image of a woman striving to remain a lady in the midst of decidedly unladylike acts. Dorris asks her daughter:

DORRIS. Do you really think I did it on purpose?
CHARLOTTE. Yes.
DORRIS. It's not like I shot him.
CHARLOTTE. Yes it is.
DORRIS. You really think so?
CHARLOTTE. Yes. (73)

Babe mixes up the lemonade, and Dorris cloaks her murder in domestic terms—she killed her husband through her cooking rather than with a gun, a transgression more forgivable and fitting a southern lady. And Charlotte's eventual murder weapon, a domestic tool, echoes her mother's years before. We also learn that the potato salad in itself might not have been fatal in small portions; Dorris admits to Charlotte:

DORRIS. You know what's kind of funny?
CHARLOTTE. What?
DORRIS. I tasted that potato salad.
CHARLOTTE. Was it good?
DORRIS. Best I ever made. He liked it pungent.
CHARLOTTE. That's probably why he ate so much of it.
(They giggle, then stop abruptly). (73-74)

Dewberry calls attention to the fact that Dorris' actions, and the play itself, are ultimately “kind of funny.”

Each narrative Dorris has created in her mind has allowed her, over time, to undermine the seriousness of her actions. The image of his gluttonous consumption of the potato salad works both for comic effect and makes Dorris sympathetic, suggesting that he deserved death, not only for eating too much, but as punishment for the selfishness and excess that characterize infidelity. And it suggests that what she did wasn't so bad, that she didn't mean “any *real* harm” (71), a line that could be delivered in a perfect southern drawl, and one reminiscent of coding strategies widely-practiced by the most memorable female “types” in both southern

literature and drama, such as Scarlett O'Hara, Blanche DuBois, and Regina Hubbard of Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*, who feign innocence to gain power and manipulate others. Gupton explains this behavior as one strategy of the "unruly woman" who appears in Henley and Gilman's work:

The ability to 'perform' femininity and recognize it as a performance can empower a woman to create her own subjectivity as long as she realizes that she is performing and controls that performance. In this regard, many a Southern woman has realized and reaped benefits from performing the role of the Southern lady. (128)

Throughout the play Dorris performs femininity to mask her crime and forces the others into playing out southern manners and conventions, attempting to regain control and grace in the midst of family scandal. Like the Magrath sisters' cousin Chick who is embarrassed by the Magrath sisters' behavior, however ironic, Dorris' voice acts as that of southern society, as she consistently reminds her daughters to be attentive to their appearances: "Don't [...] you'll mess up your make-up" (64). Despite Dorris' own experience with marriage, she expects her daughters to be wives and mothers. She chastises Crystal, "You've already ruined one marriage— [...] And while you have kept yourself up, this might be your last shot. Men don't just grow on trees. [...] Children don't grow on trees either" (65). Dorris is immediately concerned about how Crystal's cancelled wedding will look to the community, wondering how to field phone calls from friends, and she's relieved to hear that an announcement wasn't set to appear in the newspaper: "No sense in airing your dirty laundry" (69).

Yet it is clear that these female characters do not fit into the myth of white southern womanhood; they are not the gentle, submissive, pious creatures devoted to husband and family. *Crimes'* Lenny has never married and has an underdeveloped ovary, Meg is "known all over Copenhaven County as cheap Christmas trash" (6), and Babe has had an affair with a fifteen-year-old black boy in the neighborhood prior to shooting her husband. Crystal has already been

through one divorce and has now been jilted at her second wedding. In fact, Charlotte is the only one of the women who has tried to fulfill these expectations—she’s done her best with Judd and their children, and Dorris holds her up as an example to Crystal. But when Charlotte learns about Crystal and Judd’s sexual encounter she recognizes the absolute failure of family and domesticity:

I’m redoing every Christmas, every Thanksgiving, every birthday, Sunday lunch, every time the family was together the last twenty years. Twenty goddamned years of foreplay. [...] All my life I’ve been so busy making dinner, I never even guessed it was coming. (92)

Charlotte now views her domestic drive as the very thing that made her oblivious to the eventual collapse of her home; this is visually represented throughout the play as Charlotte continuously fixes dinner. The stage directions repeatedly instruct: “Charlotte returns to dinner preparations” (77) and “Charlotte keeps fixing dinner” (81). She’s oblivious to Judd and Crystal’s interactions and her efforts are canceled out when Judd ignores her orders and returns with side dishes as well as a bucket of fried chicken, the same dishes she has been preparing all day. Finally, Charlotte, Dorris, and Babe’s murderous impulses certainly set them apart from traditional conceptions of the polite, submissive southern woman.

The home and domestic space are as central to *Flesh and Blood* as they are to *Crimes*, which is set entirely in the Magrath kitchen. Most action takes place in the kitchen or on the picnic table, so it is not surprising that food is a focal point, as it is in *Crimes*. The only character who leaves the home throughout the play is Judd, who goes for the bucket of chicken. Not only is potato salad an integral part of the narrative but the characters endlessly discuss food—what there is to eat, what they don’t want to eat, what they should cook. The perennial discussion of food, including potato salad, continuously calls to mind the father’s manner of death. Further, the present doesn’t function as solely a reminder of the past, but it seems to have inherited its reality from it. Charlotte may well murder Crystal because this is the vision of

family she inherited. And her reasoning for choosing to kill Crystal instead of Judd, so that her children will have what she didn't—a father—is based entirely in her memory of her past. Her logic emerges in a moment of foreshadowing:

CHARLOTTE. I don't want my girls to grow up without a father.
JUDD. They're not going to grow up without their father. That's not a question.
CHARLOTTE. It would be if I killed you.
CRYSTAL. Charlotte, don't talk like that.
CHARLOTTE. (*To Crystal.*) I'm not going to kill him. (*To Judd.*) Because I want them to have what I always wanted. To be able to wake up in the middle of the night and know that their father is right down the hall and he loves them. (94)

In one of the most alternately comic and cringe-worthy scenes of the play, everyone sits down for dinner at the picnic table. While it's an unlikely, awkward time for a communal family meal, they follow the conventions as if the shocking truth about Judd and Crystal hasn't just been revealed. As they first sit down, Charlotte says to Judd: "Don't sit across from Crystal, don't look at her, and don't imagine her breasts" (96) and then they move into the blessing. In another performance of southern manners, Dorris asks Judd how things are at the automotive shop, and then inquires about Charlotte's work at the hospital. The potato salad becomes even more salient, as there are two types on the table—Charlotte's homemade version and the one Judd has brought back from KFC—and Dorris tries to ease the tension by discussing it:

DORRIS. Two different kinds of potato salad, that's a treat. Like one of those great big hotel buffets. (*Charlotte picks up the fast-food potato salad, takes it in the kitchen, and throws it away.*)
DORRIS. Of course homemade is always best. Nothing beats homemade. (*Beat.*)
Everybody got everything they need? (*Pause. They eat quietly, tensely. Crystal picks at her food.*)
DORRIS. This potato salad sure is good.
CHARLOTTE. It's warm and the potatoes are too hard.
DORRIS. But it's good. I've seen recipes for warm potato salad. It's gourmet. (96)

Yet Dorris' discussion only calls attention to the potato salad and what it signifies—Charlotte's anger at Judd, primarily for sleeping with her sister, but also for bringing an extra potato salad, which she symbolically discards. Charlotte will of course remember that the potato salad of her mother's crime was too warm, sitting inside the trunk of a car for two days. Dorris is less bothered by her topic of discussion, as she once again makes a domestic defense for the murder: warm potato salad is *gourmet*. The potato salad made salient here signifies the major point of difference in all three women's memories of the past: Crystal's ignorance to her father's infidelity and her mother's crime, Charlotte's burden of knowing, and Dorris' denial of it through domestic and southern manners.

The absurdity builds as Dorris continues her futile attempts at establishing normalcy within a situation well-suited for the Jerry Springer show. The polite dinner discussion ends when Charlotte, clearly still imagining their coupling in her head, exclaims to Crystal suddenly: "I've never even seen your breasts!" and Crystal responds: "They look just like yours" (98). Dorris continues her inane rambling to drown out the reality of what is happening to her family: "I'm afraid you girls both got my breasts. All of the women in my family have small breasts, we all do, every last one of us. It's like a curse" (98). Suddenly Dorris remembers her manners and looks at Judd, "Excuse me. You know I don't usually discuss intimate bodily parts at the dinner table" (99).

In Charlotte's breast comment, Dewberry foreshadows the final scene, which represents the most discordant visions that Henley and Dewberry's plays offer. In the final scene of *Crimes*, there's also a knife, but it's used to cut Lenny's birthday cake. The three sisters gather laughing and smiling as Lenny blows out the candles; admittedly, the Magrath sisters' transgressions don't quite rival Crystal's betrayal of Charlotte, but Henley presents a version of family in which pain and betrayal can be overcome, if not forever, then at least in small

moments. But despite Charlotte's suggestion that family is about "sticking together through the hard times, no matter what" (76), she ultimately can't apply this value in the face of this particular disloyalty. In an increasingly uncomfortable final scene between the two sisters, Charlotte demands to see Crystal's breasts, and orders her to disrobe: "I know how Judd is about breasts. [...] I want to see what he saw. [...] I want to see what he sucked on. [...] Take off your dress" (101). Crystal begins pleading, telling Charlotte about her understanding of family—that they can move on, "They get it out in the open and then they forgive each other and just pretend it never happened. We could do that. We could. Please" (101). Charlotte begins to play out her version of family history aloud, mentioning lying to the police and covering for each other. Crystal reacts desperately at this point, agreeing with Charlotte even though she doesn't understand her references:

CHARLOTTE. They lie to the police.

CRYSTAL. Right! Anything!

CHARLOTTE. They cover for each other, even when there's murder involved.

CRYSTAL. Of course they do. That's what families... It's how they keep...(101)

Finally, Crystal is nude, and Charlotte studies her, "You're not like me. Not at all" (101). In denying their shared genetic characteristics—their breasts, the ones that "all the women" (96) in the family share, Charlotte repudiates Crystal as her sister. Crystal rushes to her sobbing and throws her arms around her sister. With one hand, Charlotte attempts a hug, and then with the other hand, picks up the knife and stabs Crystal in the back. In the final moment, Dorris appears in the doorway. And the last line of the play is Charlotte's to her mother: "I need your help" (102), which presumably includes covering up the murder and lying to the police, in the same way that she did for her mother years earlier.

Dewberry presents two distorted versions of family—an intense loyalty that includes covering for family members even when murder is involved, and one in which a breach of that

loyalty is punished by death. Ultimately the failure of these women to connect as family in the present is a result of the disconnect in their varied understandings of the past—had Crystal known about her father’s infidelity and her mother’s murder of him, she might not have betrayed her sister in this way, and if Charlotte had not been privy to her mother’s crime, she might not have responded to her sister’s actions with murder. This unsettling final scene literally replaces our previous understandings of the concept of “flesh and blood,” a phrase that characterizes undying familial bonds, as we have instead Crystal’s naked breasts and blood spilled between sisters. And Charlotte’s murder weapon and manner of killing is literally “a stab in the back,” a commensurate punishment for the crime and a reverse replaying of her mother’s murder of her father.

While reminiscent of *Crimes of the Heart*, Dewberry’s play offers a dark alternative to Henley’s vision of family, more Hubbard than Magrath. Especially because it does not end happily, Dewberry’s play necessitates the new reading strategies Gupton suggests to negotiate serious themes underscored by a comic tone. In satirizing Doris’ performances of southern womanhood—in light of all evidence to the contrary—and highlighting Charlotte’s devotion to her domestic role as the very thing that made her oblivious to Judd and Crystal’s betrayal, Dewberry seems to be recognizing the failure of domesticity in southern, and perhaps by extension, other women’s lives, when it is set up as a mythological, unattainable ideal. She offers surprising and initially humorous variations on southern femininity and domesticity, as the kitchen becomes the site not of communal family gatherings, but confession, betrayal and murder, and domestic devices are used in surprising ways, as a kitchen knife and food itself become murder weapons. However, Dewberry’s satire is darker than Henley’s, Trieber’s, and Deer’s, offering a comic frame but a disturbing final vision that does require new reading

strategies. Despite the play's absurdity, in taking a bold step with her ending, she challenges the audience to acknowledge the seriousness of her critique.

The next two plays I discuss in this chapter, Linda Treiber's *Do's & Donuts* (2005) and Sandra Deer's *So Long on Lonely Street* (1986), are particularly strong examples of a problem of the postsouthern, what Thomas F. Haddock calls a paradox for the postsouthern writer and critic "who wishes to reject the metaphysical claims of the southern literary past [but] can do so only by recycling the content of that past by redeploying all of its familiar tropes" (567). In his article "Elizabeth Spencer, the White Civil Rights Novel, and the Postsouthern," Haddock argues that several Civil Rights-era novels are marked by "a focus on the particular that often collapses into stereotype but also by an inherent (and no doubt, often unintended) tendency toward the parodic, the postsouthern" (568). He focuses especially on Spencer's *The Voice at the Back Door*, asserting that even though it was published years before the term postsouthern came into use, her novel presents symptoms of the postsouthern, "by depicting characters that are formulaic, predictable, and often laughable," and claiming that Spencer "foregrounds the novel's parodic element, suggesting that the southern tropes that once resonated with mythic grandeur have become clichés to wield ironically" (568). Like Spencer, both Treiber and Deer redeploy these southern tropes with an ironic view, but this strategy risks the collapse of these images into stereotype for audiences, a result that was especially a problem for Deer when her play moved from Atlanta to New York.

Treiber's *Do's & Donuts* (2005) is set in the fictional mountain town of Mishap Gap, North Carolina, and this "southern fried whodonor" (Schneider) also has many of the same comical elements we see in *Crimes of the Heart*. The zany bits of *Crimes*—Babe shooting her husband because she "just didn't like his stinkin' looks" (17), children Peekay and Buck Jr., eating paint, Lenny chasing Chick up a mimosa tree with a broom—are rivaled in this play

about two working-class sisters, Veeta and Mira, who run a beauty parlor/donut shop called, appropriately, *Do's & Donuts*. Mishap Gap is also a recognizable southern milieu, set in the Appalachian mountains, a region that has struggled with poverty and has been stereotyped and caricatured in specific ways separate from southerners in general. Those who made their homes in the mountains were perceived to be isolated from civilized society, and people of Appalachia have been stereotyped as uneducated, illiterate, dirty, eccentric, and toothless. Treiber presents the eccentric element, but ultimately uses this space to overturn these stereotypes. Veeta and Mira's mother, Firelight, captivated their late father "ever since she walked barefoot down from the mountains with that moony, off-kilter view of things" (29) and it is this moony, off-kilter view that no doubt led her to name her daughters after her "favorite luncheon sandwich" (29). While the girls have made a deal never to utter their full names in public, in one comical fight they antagonize each other by shouting them out, "Velveeta!" and "Miracle Whip!" and threatening to knock each other "square into Buncombe County" (27). In one scene, the aging Firelight passes away, her head on her shoulder, after enjoying her favorite meal: "Velveeta cheese spread and Miracle Whip on Wonder Bread. Miller Lite and a watermelon pickle" (37).

However, the absurd elements of this play are also undergirded by serious topics like domestic violence, racial hatred, classism, and homophobia. Treiber gives voice not only to the working class, but reminds her audience of those rarely seen in larger society, not just the poor, but the almost invisible: the homeless and traveling individuals like "tramps" and "hobos." She validates their lifestyle and contributions, and Treiber both *places* the South and *replaces* it by including the types of people we might not expect to see in a traditional southern landscape.

Like *Crimes* and *Flesh and Blood*, domestic violence is an issue, but it's more visible in this play because the abuser actually appears onstage. Mira's husband Earl is vile—a misogynist, racist, violent man who beats up on his wife and terrorizes the town's inhabitants.

Mira is fearful of her husband but makes excuses for him, sure that “anger management therapy is working” (7). Earl seems to be the main issue of contention between the close sisters, as Veeta is also trapped in her sister’s violent marriage. She tells Mira, “I put aside everything especially to look out for you little sister. I should be married. [...] I should have kids. But damn it I’m not doing any of that. Because? I have your mess of a marriage to look to” (61). Aside from torturing Mira and Veeta, Earl also makes fun of Willis, the Native American police chief, calling him a “Cherokee freak” (13). Willis happens to be sweet on Veeta, who is reluctant to marry him because, as she articulates it, “I’m set in my ways. [...] I stay up late with the owls and get up at the butt-crack of dawn. That alone is not conducive to marital bliss. Besides, who’d want a bossy old donut rollin’ flour-covered, crack shot, vodka drinkin’, foul mouthed, workin’ woman like me? I ain’t no spring chicken” (18). Earl also repeatedly harasses Cecil, a quiet and kind former hobo who lives in a tent on Mira and Veeta’s property, upturning his tent and destroying his meager home and belongings. Earl manipulates the naïve and aging Firelight behind the sisters’ backs, and before her death has her ready to sign over the land to him so that he can build a golf course, upscale mountain-view condos, complete with a putt-putt and a Piggly Wiggly out on the state road. It also turns out that the shotgun suicide of Mr. Whitmore, who was dying of cancer, was actually a murder assisted by Earl, out to stake claim to the property. Mira remembers the Earl she first met as “so sweet and charming. Dreamy good-lookin’ too. Pure south Georgia gentlemanly romantic attention just won me. And Daddy. Earl was a man’s man” (59).

Like Zackary Botrelle, the “gentleman” lawyer and future senator in *Crimes*, Earl, the “gentlemanly” good ole’ boy—“the man’s man”—won over both the daughter and the southern patriarch, whose approval is required and perhaps more important in a system where women are exchanged through marriage from the father to the husband. Old Granddaddy’s “finest

hour” (21) occurred when Babe married the lawyer Zackery Botrelle, and the girls remember how he went on about how “Babe was gonna skyrocket right to the heights of Hazlehurst society. And how Zackery was just the right man for her whether she knew it now or not” (22). While the Whitmore sisters don’t know until later that Earl murdered their father, Mira remembers how Earl changed after her father died and the abuse began: “Earl stood by his grave as they lowered Daddy holdin’ our poor bewildered Mama like a son, and I swear I saw him change right then and there. He stared at me like he wanted me in that coffin, not Daddy. It was all for show, his bein’ a southern super hero. He was waitin’ it out. He broke my nose that night” (60). These tropes of gendered violence take on additional meaning in a southern context as these playwrights continue to collapse not only myths about southern womanhood, but also about southern masculinity, figuring the gentleman or Cavalier or the “sweet and charming” and “gentlemanly” (59) good ole’ boy as a potential domestic abuser.

The play begins with the aftermath of another of Earl’s insidious acts, one that sets the action in motion. Earl has managed to score an invitation to a golf banquet at the Country Club, but has too many Jack Daniels, and the lawyers, doctors and bankers begin making fun of him and Mira, the “local yokels” (8). Mira explains, “the drunker he got the more he went on about that damn railroad and the tramps ruinin’ his property value with their camp down on our land” (8). After leaving the party, apparently Earl wandered off toward the railroad and “hunted himself a hobo” (8). Driving home alone, Mira sees a man, presumably one of the tramps from the camp, lying on the side of the road alive but shot with crossbow arrows, and takes him to Veeta’s for help. She recognizes the arrows as her husband’s since he “marks them with this red paint here to prove to his hunting buddies that he had the best shot when they’re practicin’ (6). While Veeta sees Earl’s crime as a chance to send him away for good, Mira begs her sister to help her cover up the crime. Veeta calls up her former nursing skills, pulls out the arrows,

and lays the man down in the house for the night, planning to nurse him back to health. The next morning, the hobo has disappeared and Veeta reluctantly agrees to Mira's suggestion that they take a "Hangdog Holler oath" (30) of silence. Six months pass and business goes on as usual at Do's & Donuts, except a new girl, Gianna, has come to town and begun working for Mira at the beauty parlor. In the end, it turns out Gianna is actually John, the man who Earl shot and thought he killed. Rather than a hobo, he had been a New York writer working on a book about riding the rails. Apparently he had dressed the part and assimilated into the lifestyle for research, and he takes the same approach in his plan to repay Veeta and Mira for their help and enact revenge on Earl, dressing and identifying as a woman for months in order to get close to Earl before making his move, all while probably sensing "fertile ground in Mishap Gap for his writing" (Treiber). Once he sees the perennial black eyes and bruises on Mira and hears her talk of being trapped and afraid, he is even more set on getting rid of Earl, promising, "I'm going to get this fixed for you, Mira" (58).

John/Gianna doesn't dress as a woman simply as an avenue to gain revenge: while it is never explicitly stated, through the use of small textual clues and symbolism, Treiber represents John/Gianna as a gay or transgendered character. Midway through the play a new figurine appears in the collection of "homemade wooden objects" (3) that line the front porch of Do's & Donuts, described as "a three foot high sculpture depicting St. Sebastian eyes cast in agony to the heavens pierced full of arrows in all his bloody glory tied to the railing" (62). This sculpture calls to mind the way in which John was pierced with arrows by Earl, who attacks him because he is different, an outcast of some kind, whether he perceived him as a hobo or a gay man. Further, St. Sebastian has been appropriated from his association with martyrdom and Christianity to become a gay idol and common symbol for gay sensuality in art, film, and literature. Richard A. Kaye explains: "contemporary gay men have seen in Sebastian at once a

stunning advertisement for homosexual desire (indeed, a homoerotic ideal), and a prototypical portrait of tortured closet case (87). Not sure if this figurine has been placed there to remind them of their deceit, Mira and Veeta are concerned: “Do you think he’s still around? Do you think he’s taunting us with bloody old St. Sebastian there? Do you think he’s tryin to make us nuts so we’ll spill the beans? Think he’s Catholic?” (72). Later, the drunken Earl sits on the statue, which has been covered and placed in a chair, and injures himself on the arrows. When he cries out in confusion, Mira explains, “(*Slowly because she knows this is risky*): It’s St. Sebastian, Earl. Bunch of folks hated him so much they shot him full of arrows. But he survived because a nice lady pulled all them bolts out and nursed him back to preach salvation another day” (77). Treiber utilizes the St. Sebastian sculpture and Gianna/John as a symbol of the persecution that gay and transgendered individuals have suffered, especially through hate crimes. She has said that she “quietly dedicate[s] the play to Matthew Shepard,” the 21-year-old gay man who was tortured and killed in 1998, allegedly targeted for his sexual orientation, a crime which prompted national hate crime legislation.

Earl is forced to confront that Gianna is really John in the climax of the play and his homophobic response parallels his attack on John with the arrows, making it more salient as a hate crime. Since Gianna showed up in Mishap Gap, Earl had been hanging around the beauty shop making advances on Gianna, offering to show her “some real southern hospitality Earl McCall style” (39), so it’s not difficult for her to set up a plan for revenge. After enlisting the help of police chief Willis, who suits her up with a wire, she pretends to seduce Earl with a sexy game of truth or dare on Halloween night. She feigns arousal by Earl’s “dangerous and devious” (89) ways and cajoles him into admitting to killing Mr. Whitmore and “one of those shit-heel tramps” (90). As Earl is grabbing and Gianna is resisting, he finds the wire, and angry, tries to take both the tape and Gianna forcibly. John then unveils himself as a man, removing

his wig and costume bust. Earl responds with homophobic disgust: “What th’!?! Oh God, oh God, you kissed me! You, you TOUCHED me” (95) and begins beating John savagely.

Cecil and Willis emerge from the shadows to knock Earl unconscious and call for an ambulance for John, who is badly injured. The play ends happily with a wedding between Veeta and Willis, perhaps a surface conventional ending, but because it represents what Veeta always wanted but couldn’t have because of her sister’s marriage, it represents a release for both sisters from the vicious Earl, who will go to prison for his crimes. While Veeta and Mira were not involved in the men’s attack on Earl, another woman’s efforts also work to insure the happy ending. Apparently, the land on which Do’s and Donuts sits still belongs to the sisters, thanks to Mrs. Galloway, a retiree who hangs around Veeta and Mira. Far from the image of uneducated mountaineer, she turns out to be a skilled lawyer who finds a loophole in the business deal Firelight had forged under Earl’s manipulation.

Earl’s crime is not only reminiscent of the violence suffered by those who deviate from societal sexual mores, but also the homeless or wandering workers, those on the outskirts of visibility, whose lifestyles make them vulnerable to harassment and life-threatening danger from mainstream society who wishes to render them invisible, make them go away. For instance, we know that Cecil, the former rail rider, has retired because he suffered “too many whacks on the head from the rail bosses” (68). While Cecil wasn’t involved in the plan to take down Earl, when Earl begins beating John, Cecil emerges from his tent, taking the first blow at Earl and knocking him unconscious. He never speaks a word until the end of the play, when John thanks him for saving his life and acknowledges, “You knew all along too didn’t you? [...] St. Sebastian there was a nice touch. A little too close for comfort, but effective” (103). John’s words here suggest that his sexuality connects him to St. Sebastian, and Cecil is

revealed as the talented carver behind the wooden art displayed along the Do's and Donuts porch.

In this final scene, Treiber validates Cecil's knowledge and talent—John asks Cecil to help him fill in what he might have missed about rail riding in the book, and Mr. Armbruster, John's publisher from New York City, sees Cecil's carvings and wonders if he'd like to show them at his gallery in Tribeca. By sprinkling references throughout the play to the hobo code that traveling workers and rail riders used to help each other navigate the difficulty of the life, Treiber also legitimizes their lifestyle and knowledge. They would scratch or use chalk or coal to draw symbols on signs and fences to warn other travelers of danger or identify helpful places and people: Veeta has always fed those that come around, and her house, where Cecil has retired in his tent, has a smiling house cat drawn on it, which means “nice lady lives here” (68). Ultimately the play replaces the South with figures that might be unexpected and unwelcome in a traditional southern setting: the Native American police chief Willis, rail riders and “hobos,” gay and transgendered people. And John might want to stay a while: when his publisher immediately starts talking about when they'll need the script, John says, “Drink some champagne and slow down. You're in Mishap Gap now. Life kind of creeps up on you here” (101). Treiber says that she wrote *Do's & Donuts* partly to “show that the South is not just populated with Caucasian ‘hillbillies’ but with the railroad, there came diversity from the North, and indigenous Cherokee were already there, and that people from everywhere may find a small town in North Carolina a place of refuge.” The play's tidy and happy, idealistic ending, which also includes several heterosexual couplings besides Willis and Veeta, seems aware of its absurdity, but it's Mishap Gap—the type of place where we might accept that these whimsical things happen. Underneath the absurd, though, Treiber examines grave issues about

hatred and violence, legitimizes the lives of invisible and persecuted members of society, and expands understandings of traditional southern settings.

Sandra Deer's *So Long on Lonely Street* (1986) plays with a different type of irony than does *Flesh and Blood* and *Do's & Donuts*; further, it serves as an excellent example of the reception problems that identifiably southern plays like these might face. Atlanta native Sandra Deer's pre-script note reflects a real understanding of the problems of regional representation and the interpretive challenges she might come up against. Set over the period of two days in the mid-1980s, the play's setting is the Vaughnum family home, "Honeysuckle Hill, a few miles outside a small Southern town" (5). In her note, Deer tries to preempt what she assumes could be a criticism of her play: "These are realistic characters, not Southern types. King is not a buffoon. Clarice is not just a silly twit, and Annabel Lee is nobody's servant. Ruth and Raymond are sophisticated and have traveled, but they are not contemptuous of what they come from" (6). *Lonely Street* was adored in Atlanta, where it premiered at the Alliance Theater, moved onto Boston, where it was also well-received, but it was uniformly panned when it played off Broadway in New York. It turns out that Deer's pre-script note was necessary for New York audiences, but it did little to persuade them. Aside from a *Time* magazine review that called it "the most impressive playwrighting debut of the New York season" (Henry), most critics agreed with Frank Rich, the chief *New York Times* critic at the time, who summarizes the play as a:

vulgarized Chekhovian theme-mongering of a Lillian Hellman melodrama with the off-center Southern humor of a Eudora Welty or Beth Henley. But, like that other recent Atlanta export, new Coke, this play is not the real thing. Much as Miss Deer gratuitously tells us exactly which stereotype each of her characters is meant to be, so most of her lines and plot twists are laborious replications of theatrical clichés rather than, as intended, loving representations of real life.
(C5)

One headline declared, “*So Long on Lonely Street* [...] Long on Southern Clichés,” calling it out for “just about every cliché known to Tennessee Williams, with quite a few thrown in from the more-serious bent of William Faulkner. The characters, and clichés, are lovingly and regularly paraded by like familiar visitors from cat on a not-so-hot roof to a streetcar named wannabe” (Vincent E4). It closed after only 53 performances.

It’s not surprising that critics responded in such a way to Deer’s play, as it contains all the trite elements we have come to associate with southern literature, and especially of the Southern Gothic:⁷ illegitimate children born of taboo interracial couplings, the complexities of relationships between blacks and whites living in close proximity, the grotesque, an emphasis on death and dead bodies, a fight over land and the once-majestic, now crumbling edifices left on it, a focus on southern heritage, manners, and patrilineal legacy, and even incest. As they did with Hellman’s work, what many critics missed about Deer’s play is its attempt not to reproduce, but to address, evoke, and satirize these southern themes, exactly the paradox that Haddox discusses in his article. But Deer’s pre-script note and the self-reflexive tone of the play demonstrate a cool awareness of tensions between art and life, reality and representation, and memory and creation. More specifically, she engages these issues within the context of the South, raising questions about the disconnect and intersection between how the South existed in the past, how people remember it, and in doing so, how they create and sustain it. Further, she is interested in narrative’s role in these processes—how the stories people tell, write, read, and request about the South have helped produce and maintain stable elements—whether or not they were ever stable and/or present in the first place. *So Long On Lonely Street* might seem at first to be ardently and blindly participating in expected tropes, but it is actually a metanarrative that comments upon its own participation in southern literary tradition and intervenes in southern studies dialogues about the difficulties in defining and representing the South in a

postmodern or postsouthern landscape. Further, her reversals of expected southern narratives cement Deer's work as a smart, self-aware piece that remarks upon southern tropes, rather than shallowly reproducing them. Rather than allowing intrusive characters to break the fourth wall and remind the audience that they are viewing something that is itself a representation, Deer draws on more subtle forms of reflexivity through style, characterization, and dialogue. She comments upon her play, first as a piece of literature, framing it within references to literary works from the Bible to Poe; secondly, as a piece of *southern* literature in the Southern Gothic tradition, acknowledging the southern literary canon, including Gothic and Faulknerian tropes in both dialogue and style, and she interrogates the tensions between art and life, memory, and representation, ultimately drawing attention to the commodification and audience fetishization of the South, and questioning the role of the southern writer in attending to region and creating place.

As the play begins, twins Raymond and Ruth Brown have come back to their childhood home, Honeysuckle Hill, for the funeral of their spinster Aunt Pearl Vaughnum—Raymond from New York City, where he works as an actor and is known for his swoon-worthy character Chance Rodney on the soap *All Our Yesterdays*, and Ruth from nearby Sparta, where she writes and teaches poetry at the junior college. Ruth and Ray's professions and perspectives provide the main backdrop for Deer's reflexive view of the South, as they each make a living in fields that require them to consider theories of representation and the connections between life and art. They're educated and well-read, familiar with the literature that has defined the South and the narratives that have characterized southern culture in general, and they've traveled, giving them that larger view that one develops upon leaving their home or place of birth. While they are "not contemptuous of what they come from" (6), they do have the distance and inclination

to comment upon it, and thus their professions and perspectives provide voice for Deer's self-reflexive view throughout the play.

In true macabre form, Aunt Pearl's body sits laid out in the casket in the living room when the twins arrive. The dead body is one of the first things the audience sees and a central focal point throughout the play. The remnants of the Old South are still alive in the character of Annabel Lee, or Anna, an elderly black woman whose relationship to Brown/Vaughnum family has been rather ambiguous over the years. She has always lived with the Vaughnums, she raised Ruth and Raymond after their parents' deaths, and after nearly everyone else has died off or left, she has continued to live at the house and care for Pearl, where they have lived all their lives together "like sisters" (15). While there have always been whispered rumors, for the first time Annabel is talking openly about her belief that she is the illegitimate child of Ruth and Ray's grandfather, Big Jack Vaughnum, the late patriarch of the white family, which would actually make Pearl her sister—as she corrects Ruth's phrasing: "We didn't live together *like* sisters. We were sisters. Half sisters, anyway" (15). While Big Jack never verified this relationship in his lifetime, Annabel is certain, and most members of the family have at least considered this a tacit possibility.

On the first page of the play, even prior to the act and scene breakdown, Deer places her text as a piece of southern literature by beginning with an illustration of the Vaughnum family tree. While perhaps merely a useful resource in deciphering the relationships among the characters and their late relatives, it's also an inclusion that emphasizes southern literature's focus on the past and community and familial lineage, and an echo of addendums like William Faulkner's detailed genealogy, chronology, and map of Yoknapatawpha county he includes in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). More obvious literary allusions begin with the origin of Annabel Lee's name, the Edgar Allen Poe love poem, and the alternative personality of sorts that she has

developed over the years, which she calls Sharon Rose, King Solomon's daughter, she says, from the Biblical Song of Solomon. Here Deer echoes Lillian Hellman's use of Song of Songs—from which she took her play's title *The Little Foxes*. Annabel explains the function Sharon has had for her:

I made her up to have somebody to be. [...] Who the hell is Annabel Lee? Huh? A little colored girl growing up and growing old in the middle of a rich white family. Eating with them, playing with their toys, wearing their clothes. But not being one of them. No way I could ever be one of them. Wasn't one of anything. A freak. That's Annabel Lee. A freak. (11)

While the Vaughnums seem to have been kind and caring towards her, Annabel Lee has lived her entire life largely unacknowledged, unclaimed, and very aware of her difference. Like most southern white children, Pearl eventually learned and began to mimic adult racial codes in their interactions, so Anna's sisterly relationship with Pearl remains complicated even after her death. Their intimacy is such that, despite everyone else's horror, Anna thinks nothing of lifting Pearl's dead body to dress her for the funeral, because she "wouldn't a liked men messing with her body" (10).

As was often the case for relationships between black and whites in the antebellum to Jim Crow South and beyond, somehow the romantic view of Pearl as Anna's "life-long companion," as well as "a selfish white girl who looked at me everyday for seventy years and thought to herself that the only thing worse than being her would be being me" (23) are both accurate characterizations. However, Anna's grasp on reality is questionable throughout the play, and we can't be sure if she's touching Pearl's dead body out of obligation and sentiment, or if she's gone off her rocker completely. Sharon Rose is clearly a psychological response to the divided nature of her upbringing, and not one particularly abnormal in light of the contradictions of southern social roles and codes. Lillian Smith has perhaps best described the split it required to accept southern tradition growing up in the Jim Crow South, and while it

took different forms, it is applicable to both whites and blacks: “I learned it the way all of my southern people learn it: by closing door after door until one’s mind and heart and conscience are blocked off from each other and from reality” (29) and “to split my body from my mind and both from my ‘soul,’ [...] to split my conscience from my acts and Christianity from southern tradition” (27). Still, Anna seems completely caught up in her alternate personality, walking around the house muttering to herself and quoting relevant Biblical passages at length: “I am the Rose of Sharon. The lily of the valley” (18). We also learn that she let Pearl’s body sit in the house for days before telling anyone about her death, shades of Faulkner’s treatment of the dead in *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and “A Rose for Emily,” (1930) and not exactly the behavior of a sane person.

Ray and Ruth’s cousin, King Vaughnum III, is the most despicable type of “a small town Southern wheeler-dealer” (5), and he and his wife Clairice represent the new generation of southerners still clinging to southern ideology. Of course King has his sights set on procuring the family estate, and he assumes it will simply be a matter of buying Ruth and Raymond’s part out to be sole owner. Offering them \$25,000 each for Honeysuckle Hill, he muses:

As you both know, this house and the twenty-five acres behind it are all that’s left of Big Jack’s empire. [...] What was once the seat of power and wealth for this whole county—the farm, the tannery, the sawmill, the livestock, all that has now dwindled to a falling down old ramshackledy house and twenty-five barren acres. It is sad. So sad. But I’m a dreamer. I believe in the past, and I believe in the future. Big Jack started out with nothing but this twenty-five acres and his dreams and I’m willing to do the same. (36)

Raymond and Ruth rarely allow King to indulge in his overtly southern rhetoric without ridiculing the artifice in his pronouncements—Ruth chimes in: “Is that the Ottoman or the Holy Roman Empire?” (36). King seems to embrace a shallow, mixed-up version of Agrarianism and

the forward-looking survival mentality of Scarlett O’Hara. He sentimentalizes and claims an older South than he actually knows:

KING. We come from the land, and we know the feel of a plow in the hand and the good ole smell of turned up earth. Vaughnum earth.

RUTH. King, you never followed a plow in your life.

KING. It’s my heritage. And I am a man who puts great stock in his heritage. Memory is the only thing that separates us from the animals.

RAYMOND. Well, I seem to remember that Big Jack got rid of all the mules and plows before Ruth and I started first grade. By the time you were born all the mules had been replaced by Allis Chalmers. Why your heritage ain’t mules and plows, King boy. Your heritage is tractors. (34)

If it ever existed, the “authentic” rural way of life has long disappeared, replaced with nostalgia and simulacra—for instance, there’s no longer a hen in the old hen house, but Pearl had been paying the grocery boy to leave half a dozen eggs in some straw twice a week, because “Anna was driving her crazy about the hen not laying” (40). While perhaps mere evidence of the elderly Anna’s dwindling grasp on reality, the hen replaced by a grocery boy who mimics the hen, is symbolic of the artifice in the mentality of southerners like King who appropriate archaic conceptions of the South to the present southern landscape, and a major symbol that Deer utilizes to call attention to how the South has been consciously constructed. When his cousins question his claims, he accuses the twins of thinking themselves superior: “I know you two went off to college and traveled all over and got smart and think you’re better than everybody. But there’s more important things to do in life than write poems and priss around on TV. I’m the one that’s made something of hisself. I’m the one that’s gonna lead this family out of its land of famine” (35). King’s contradictions abound as he both glamorizes the past and spouts progressive rhetoric, depending on which suits him best at the time.

Raymond calls King out for his hyperbolic and inconsistent understanding of southern heritage—in discounting the possibility that Big Jack would have left the home to Anna in his will, King remarks: “You don’t go leaving family plantations to—bastard mulattoes” (37). Ray

reminds him of his earlier articulation of the estate: “By family plantation, you mean this falling down old ramschackledy house and these twenty-five barren acres?” (37). But Ray also knows how to put his talent for acting to good use when he feels the need to smooth things over, mitigating his sarcasm by playing good ole’ boys with him: “I think we should forget about the past. Except the part that’s our heritage, of course, and look toward the future. I say let’s give it another shot, King boy. How ‘bout it?” (35). When Ruth accuses him of feigning to appease King, he’s clearly aware that he’s taken on a new role for himself in a familiar narrative: “Why, Honey, King and me, we’re the Southern planters in residence” (35).

For all of King’s talk of heritage, once he acquires Honeysuckle Hill, he actually plans on tearing it down to build a shopping center, plans reminiscent of Earl McCall’s in *Do’s & Donuts*. Ironically, King calls it “a monument to our family,” claims it will be “a place for Christian merchants to dwell and sell in the name of the Lord,” and plans to dedicate it to their grandmother, Big Jack’s wife, Beulah Samuels Vaughnum, “the finest Christian lady who ever lived” (43). King has dismissed Anna as “nutty as a fruitcake” (73), and he’s made arrangements for Anna to go to a nursing home once the estate is settled. However, Anna is more aware than he gives her credit for. Convinced that the estate is rightfully hers and not King’s, the real reason she kept quiet about Pearl’s death for two days was to look for Big Jack’s will, which Pearl had hid in the smoke house. His will reads that upon his death the estate goes to his natural children, and then to the grandchildren after the death of the last natural child. The twins aren’t initially thrilled about being the beneficiaries: Ray and Ruth have spent most of their lives trying to stay away from their childhood home, which holds mostly sad memories. Their father died in war soon after they were born, and their mother committed suicide on the same day that her twin brother, King’s father, died in a tractor accident. Her brother’s death was apparently not the impetus for her suicide, but in an eerie yet

somehow appropriate coincidence, they died at the same time, he out in the fields and she at home. As King explains:

She couldn't a known that Daddy was dead. No way she could of. Nobody did. Just one of those crazy coincidences like you read about. [...] In the mind of God it was all planned out, of course. I guess He planned it that way because they were twins. God figured those two came into the world together and they oughta go out of it together. (55)

But Ruth and Ray stay away from home for another reason—they haven't spoken in five years, terrified of their feelings for each other, which extend beyond a brotherly-sisterly love. They finally confront this in the middle of the play, and dance around their mutual suggestion that they might as well give into it, since “neither one of us has ever had a decent relationship with anyone else” (64). Whether or not either of them could ultimately stomach coming back to Honeysuckle Hill to live, they want Anna to have what is rightfully hers, and they definitely don't want their greedy cousin to have the estate. However, the difficulty lies in proving that Annabel is Big Jack's last living natural child; as Ray acknowledges, “There isn't going to be a birth certificate for an illegitimate black child born seventy-five years ago. And if there were, it would hardly identify the father as Big Jack Vaughnum” (61). In a desperate attempt to validate Anna's right to the estate, Ray makes a trip to the courthouse and finds what he thought he never would—a birth certificate for Annabel Lee, which, as they expected, doesn't list a father's name, but lists the mother's name: Beulah Ruth Samuels, Big Jack's wife, the supposed fine Christian lady and namesake of King's shopping center dream.

The surprise about Anna's origin is a major reversal of southern narratives about white men's sexuality and white women's piety. Most biracial children in the South during Big Jack and Beulah's time were the product of white male and black female couplings, often non-consensual relationships forged by white masculine power and entitlement over black women. Yet white men's sexual behavior with black women was simply not spoken about in polite

company, and framed as an inevitable part of male biological impulses; as King puts it, “we all know what a vital and lusty man Big Jack was” (48). Deer plays with the valorization of the southern white women’s sexual purity and the accompanying southern obsession with young white southern women’s virginity, often figured as “owned” by her fathers and brothers who were the protectors of her piety and naïveté⁸—a trope played out most famously in Quentin Compson’s reaction to his sister Caddy’s sexual promiscuity in Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Ruth provides a spontaneous, in-jest eulogy in front of the body of Aunt Pearl, who is transversely the old maid, not the virginal maiden: “Friends, we are gathered here today to pay final tribute to the oldest virgin in Bartow County” (26). Clairice is horrified that Ruth would “desecrate” Pearl’s memory that way, and mocks Ruth: “I didn’t realize that you were among those of us who considered virginity an essential virtue for a woman” (26). Ruth doesn’t, of course, as a late-thirties/early-forties single, sexually-liberated woman of the 1980s, but she acknowledges that being at home in the South affects her behavior: “Sleeping my way across Europe was fine, but after I moved back here, it seemed sort of tacky. I used to think I’d end up killing myself like Mama” (32). While southern narratives about white women’s sexuality have changed significantly—what was once a transgression of the sacred is now simply tacky—Ruth seems to comment on a lingering sexual repression for women. The obsession with white women’s virginity went hand in hand with the image of the southern lady on the pedestal, and King’s Beulah Land shopping center is a physical manifestation of this misplaced gyneolatry. Yet the irony that it is a shopping center—the ultimate symbol of the capitalist, consumer economy, and the antithesis of Agrarian ideals—is not lost on Ruth or Raymond, who asks dryly: “Do they dedicate shopping centers to women down here now?” (43).

Deer disrupts these narratives about white men's sexual behavior and white women's piety by giving Beulah a powerful sexual agency, and while details of Beulah's relationship with Anna's father are never revealed, it's assumed that Miss Beulah must have loved Anna, and perhaps her black father, very much to risk exposure by keeping her daughter with her. Anna is overjoyed at the news and finally learning at least part of the truth about her origins, she seems to find peace at last: "Miss Beulah. I was your little girl, Mama. [...] I know you loved me. I wish you'd told me so I could have loved you back. I'll love you now, Mama. Mama. You were always so sweet to me. [...] I was cared about. She was afraid to tell me, but she loved me and wanted me close" (79). At one point we wonder if Anna's muttering is not just a product of senility, as Ray and Ruth recall something they have heard Anna say all their lives: "Pearl is a Jewel, but I am a poem. Miss Beulah taught me the poem that I am. It was many and many a year ago, In a kingdom by the sea" (31). Finally, Anna is able to truly embrace her name, her identity, and the beauty of her mother's love for her.

The revelation about Anna's birth means that the estate legally can't be hers, but Ruth, Ray, and Anna work out a mutually-beneficial plan. Declaring that "Annabel Lee is through living in somebody else's house" (82), Anna offers to buy the house from Ruth, who, as the eldest grandchild, is the executrix with the power to sell. King will still get his share, but with the \$27,000 that Pearl left to her, Anna will buy the house, finally validating her belonging and right to her origins. They will all live there together, and Anna will leave the house to Ray and Ruth when she dies. Inspired by their grandmother's ability to carry a life-long secret out of love for her daughter, Ruth and Ray decide to act on their romantic feelings for each other, devote their lives to each other and their home, and to care for Annabel in her final years, acknowledging a long-owed family debt to their aunt. The twins weigh their options before deciding to take this step: Ray's first marriage ended in divorce, he very rarely sees his

daughter since his ex-wife remarried, and not unlike his playboy character Chance Rodney, Raymond has found only emptiness in briefly seeing a succession of too-young girls. He also recognizes that his soap opera career is in decline—*All Our Yesterdays* is moving toward writing a tragic death for Chance. In a most comic moment upon his arrival home after five years, Anna sizes him up after a hug and declares, “looks like to me your parts are getting smaller” (7). Since moving back to the South, Ruth hasn’t had much success with dating, and lacks the freedom and anonymity to enjoy casual sex as her brother does in New York City. She had even been considering marrying Bobby Stack, the country lawyer who’s been pursuing her, who appears in the play only as a boring but socially-sanctioned option for Ruth, one that she discards for her brother.

When Ruth protests at first: “We can’t do that. People would...,” Raymond asks her to abandon her fears of what southern society will think and convinces her through describing a simple, happy existence:

People won’t think a thing. Except that a middle-aged brother and sister came home to fix up the old place and take care of the woman who raised them. You’ll ride your motorcycle over to Sparta every day and teach the kids about poetry while Anna and I start hammering and painting. In the fall when the leaves turn we’ll drive up in the mountains, and at Christmas we’ll chop down the biggest evergreen on the place and put it over there next to the piano. On Saturday nights we’ll go to the movies, and one Sunday a month we’ll have our cousins King and Clairice and all their children over for fried chicken and eggs goldenrod. Nobody will ever know, Ruth. There won’t even be a record anywhere for someone to find a hundred years from now saying Ruth and Raymond Brown loved and needed each other all their lives, and finally came home to live the way their hearts told them. (80-81)

This resolution is framed as a viable and positive one for Ruth and Raymond, and it rejects traditional understandings of incestuous relationships as sinister and taboo. Ray and Ruth embrace the “southernness” of it all, and they seem to find humor in viewing their happiness as the ultimate, ironic joke on southern society. In fact, Raymond turns the talk of heritage right back on his cousin, who is dumbfounded that Ruth and Raymond now want to live at

Honeysuckle Hill: “It’s an arrangement in keeping with our heritage and our way of life, King. Bachelor brother and spinster sister share the old family home and take care of their elderly aunt. What could be more Southern and respectable?” (85). Like their mother and her twin, who came into the world and went out together, we are to assume that Ray and Ruth will do the same, writing a happier story along the way.

Aside from overturning expected narratives, it should be clear that Deer is exploring the very context in which these narratives take place, how they are created and sustained, partly by readers and audiences who expect and even fetishize southern material. At one point Ruth tells Raymond, “You know you’re lucky, nobody gives a damn where an actor comes from. Writers it’s different. If you were born in the South, you are Southern forever, and God help you if you aren’t Gothic” (33). The Gothic is of course populated by the very material of Deer’s play: irreverent, odd treatment of dead bodies, grotesque and freakish characters, incest. When Annabel Lee calls herself a “freak” because of her place growing up in the Vaughnum family, she tells Ruth, “You could write a book about that. People like hearing about freaks” (11). Here Deer pointedly remarks upon the voyeuristic impulse that humans have to examine the “other,” and how that translates to the South and the grotesque characters and situations of the “spectacle” that is the Gothic South (Hobson 2). Ruth’s comment speaks to a multifaceted dilemma for the southern writer: people expect southern writers to write about the South, and if/when they don’t, they question why not. If they do write about it, there is pressure to indulge audience fetishization with the South as a dark and foreign other, to reproduce stereotypes about southerners for audience consumption. Even if the writer uses these tools in a satiric mode, the audience may misunderstand. Ultimately, however a writer chooses to write about the South, once they do, they’ve labeled themselves a southern writer indefinitely. These are not uncommon complaints among contemporary writers, some who reject the label “southern

writer” for many of these reasons. It seems being identified as a southern writer somehow simultaneously limits and expands one’s artistic choices and marketability.

Even King, who remembers studying some poems in a “writing themes” (57) course at the junior college, seems to have expectations of regional loyalty in writers. Talking to Raymond, he seems confused and disapproving of Ruth’s choice of topics:

KING. We share the same heritage. You and me. And Ruth. Although Ruth don’t seem to have much use for her heritage. Funny thing. Her being a poet and all. I always thought writers was the ones that cared the most about what they come from. Like William Faulkner and Jack London. That’s what they’re supposed to write about, isn’t it?

RAYMOND. I imagine Ruth’s writing about what she comes from. In her way.

KING. Mighty funny way. (*King picks up a thin volume from the bookcase.*)

These poems of hers, they’re not about the South. I can tell you that. Less you call below the waist the South. Doing it. That’s what Ruth writes about. [...] Well, you tell me then. What’s she talking about besides sex?

RAYMOND. Oh, loneliness, memory, broken dreams. (56)

In juxtaposing William Faulkner with Jack London, King doesn’t seem to buy into the notion that southern writers should be more invested in place than other writers. Here Deer points to a significant discussion in southern literary studies: while southern literature continues to be identified by its “sense of place,” this definition presents “a paradox—how can any regional literature be distinguished on so ambiguous a basis? Places, are, after all, found everywhere and in all literatures, and it is doubtful that even a rigorous poetics could reliably identify a ‘sense of place’ that is distinctly southern” (*Where Is* 23). Deer questions surface understandings of how “place” functions in literature, what makes literature “southern,” and troubles the notions of the universal and specific, acknowledging that all literature engages with place. While writers might explore loneliness, memory, and broken dreams in the context of the South, these are foundations of universal human experience hardly particular to the South. And the constraints that have been put on southern women are not much different than those that have been assigned to women historically under patriarchal systems across the globe. And we also

must ask whether the South can claim much distinction anymore in a postmodern or postsouthern landscape populated by giant shopping malls. And it's especially vexing for the neo-Gothic novelist, says Fred Hobson, that "southern social reality, broad and representative reality, no longer so dramatically supports his fiction" (7). Deer voices these acknowledgments through Raymond, who reminds Ruth, "Mortality's not a singularly Southern predicament, you know. It's a universal condition, Honey" (63).

The play's constant reference to forms and mediums of representation—Ruth's poems, *All Our Yesterdays*, William Faulkner, Edgar Allen Poe, the Gothic—underscore Deer's reminder to her audience that her play is also a representation and itself a participant in several larger traditions. King has to remind his star-struck wife upon meeting Raymond/Chance Rodney that, "It's just a television program. It ain't real life" (25), and through moments like this, Deer asks her audience to reflect on art, life, and ultimately, the intricacies and difficulties inherent in representation, especially representations of the South. In this convoluted conversation between Ruth and Raymond, Deer seems to arrive at the only satisfactory answer to her questions:

RUTH. You won't miss it? *All Our Yesterdays*.

RAYMOND. If I do, I'll find something else. It's just a job, Ruth. It's not life.

It's certainly not art.

RUTH. What is?

RAYMOND. Art.

RUTH. No. Life.

RAYMOND. I think it's this.

RUTH. Honeysuckle Hill?

RAYMOND. Ah huh. The pecan tree, the hen house with its imaginary hen, the pond down behind the cemetery. (51)

It's not initially clear whether they're talking about art or life, but whatever it is, it seems to boil down to their southern home, Honeysuckle Hill, which is comprised of a mix of the real and the imaginary—the tree and the pond, the hen and the cemetery.

When New York critics panned Deer's *So Long on Lonely Street*, fans and supporters in Atlanta rallied to Deer's defense. Attempting to explain how a play that fared so well in Atlanta and did well in Boston could be so unanimously disliked in New York, some did point to a New York City bias against southern plays. Calling the response to Deer's play a "whipping merciless and unjustified," Helen C. Smith looks for a rationale, suggesting that "there may be a collective consciousness among the New York critics that anything that draws raves in little ole Atlanta [...] must be old, tired, trite, clichéd" (J2). She implies that Frank Rich, then the chief critic for the *New York Times*, who she calls "the most powerful critic in the country" (J2),⁹ opened the floodgates for criticism with his damning review in which he claimed the play was full of "theatrical clichés" and "not the real thing" (J2). She goes on further:

There's also a lot of feeling that the War Between the States still rages, usually to the detriment of the South. There's paranoia in that but also a grain of truth. Broadway, except for a rare exception like Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*, has long scorned Southern playwrights. [...] Tennessee Williams bombed as often as he triumphed in New York. Lillian Hellman got—still gets even after death—her share of barbs from the New York press. (J2)

And she says this, not as a bitter southerner, but as a "Northerner who adores New York" (J2). She ends her column with a message for New York City: "There is life outside New York...and good plays, and good playwrights" (J2).

Fortunately for Deer, even if they didn't get it in New York, some critics and audiences possessed the interpretive skills to catch her satiric view. Kevin Kelly, writing about the Boston production in the *Boston Globe*, pointed out the "sudden breathtaking moments, a genuine sense of ironic comedy, and an aura of shock that spirals down to a conclusion worthy of Faulkner on a particularly sweet-tempered day" and in an appropriate comparison, predicted that Deer might "turn out to be better than Lillian Hellman ever was." In the one scholarly essay that exists on the play, "Humor and Heritage in Sandra Deer's *So Long on Lonely Street*," Linda L. Hubert declares there is "something more universal than southern" (107) in Deer's

view. Ultimately, however, Deer's play requires special interpretive skills that not all audiences will possess—a sophisticated understanding of the popular, literary, and cultural markers that have defined and continue to define the South and a sense of the difficult questions that inevitably come up in studying these symbols. Those who do are also unlikely to uncritically embrace the idea of an “authentic” southern representation. If Deer failed to convey her satire clearly, it is in part a failure rooted in the challenges of the postsouthern and in representing the South, ones that operate on a myriad of levels, whether they are geographical, imaginative, ideological, interpretive, or genre-based. Deer's pre-script note for this play provides an especially strong example of southern playwrights' awareness of the challenges they face and the New York production of *So Long on Lonely Street* provides some evidence that southern plays may run into difficulties when playing to New York audiences.

In each of these three plays, the playwrights *place* the South, utilizing irony and satire in the tradition of Hellman, but also taking Henley's lead in experimenting with a comic frame. However, in light of the many paradoxes of southern history, culture, and narrative, it seems an appropriate paradox that this is a strategy that both responds to hazards and brings with it an additional set of risks. In light of these hazards and the problem of the postsouthern, some southern playwrights may be motivated to *displace* the South in a way that bridges gaps between northern and southern audiences, a strategy we see in the work of Paula Vogel, Sallie Bingham, and Pearl Cleage.

End Notes

¹ For more discussion on the use of comedy in southern women playwrights' work, see Gupton and Hubert.

² It's worth noting that defining and distinguishing between parody, satire, irony, and many other forms of comedy is difficult and a topic that has been endlessly debated by scholars and rhetoricians. I'm working with George Austin Test's perspective in *Satire: Spirit and Art* that “satire by its nature and conventions generates irony” (151) and that “to recognize that satire is

inseparable from irony and that irony, whether it be playful or sardonic, is an essential technique that the satirist uses to force a judgment on the audience, whether the judgment is based on moral, ethical, political, social, religious, cultural, intellectual, or emotional values. The strategies and techniques for creating irony will vary in kind, in the number used, in the ways they are used, but they will be at the heart and core of the satire, a basic element in the humorous, gamy, critical aggression that is called satire” (256).

³ Test is referring to another helpful text in distinguishing the nature of irony, Wayne C. Booth’s *A Rhetoric of Irony*, in which he lists five factors that limit people’s abilities to read irony: Ignorance, Inability to Pay Attention, Prejudice, Lack of Practice, and Emotional Inadequacy (222-227).

⁴ Esslin coined this term in his book of the same name as a critical concept for studying the new modes of expression employed by European playwrights in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. Perhaps best exemplified by Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953), the work of playwrights such as Beckett, Edward Albee, Jean Genet, Eugène Ionesco, Harold Pinter, and Tom Stoppard are often categorized as Theatre of the Absurd. Their work deviates from the traditional well-made play, presenting strange, nearly unrecognizable characters rather than well-rounded, thoughtful, human characters; arbitrary beginnings and endings; dream-like or abstract sketches rather than scenes that mirror the real world; and seemingly meaningless babble rather than logical dialogue (Esslin 21-2). As Esslin defines it, “the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought” (24).

⁵ Gupton draws on Davis’ discussion in her essay “Women on Top,” in her book *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*. Davis says that in early modern Europe, women were viewed as “the disorderly one par excellence,” (124) a misogynist understanding of woman related to her supposed “fragile and unsteady temperament” (125). Yet sexual inversion—“women on top”—has long been represented in art and literature and widely practiced in cultural play such as carnival and festival. Davis argues that the image of the unruly woman hasn’t always been a tool to constrain women, but that it actually can work to “widen behavioral options for women” (131).

⁶ While this trend does not seem to have garnered significant attention from scholars, *Flesh and Blood* participates in a larger tradition of narratives about women using food to gain revenge or kill men, especially men who have been abusive or unfaithful to them. Further, this motif seems particularly common in southern narratives. While not southern, Roald Dahl’s short story “Lamb to the Slaughter,” first published in the September 1953 issue of *Harper’s*, is about a wife who kills her husband by hitting him with a frozen leg of lamb, then feeds the evidence to the investigating officers. One popular southern narrative adapts this motif in a similar way: in Fannie Flagg’s novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* (1987) and the 1991 film adaptation *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Idgie and Ruth kill Ruth’s abusive husband and then feed his remains to the sheriff. The popular country song “Earl Had to Die” by the Dixie Chicks also tells the story of two friends, Wanda and Mary Ann, who kill Wanda’s abusive husband Earl by feeding him poisoned black-eyed peas.

⁷ *The Companion to Southern Literature* defines Southern Gothic as “a mode of fiction utilized by critically acclaimed modernist writers of the Southern Renaissance, characterized by grotesque characters and scenes, explorations of abnormal psychological states, dark humor, violence, and a sense of alienation or futility” (311). Rooted in the traditional Gothic novel established in Britain during the eighteenth-century, it was adapted by modernist southern writers such as William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Carson McCullers, and Eudora Welty, and continues today with contemporary writers such as Doris Betts and Cormac McCarthy.

⁸ This southern value is played out in contemporary “Purity Balls,” a practice most common in southern and midwestern communities and especially associated with Evangelical Christian movements. Fathers and daughters attend together, as if on a date, and a ceremony occurs in which the daughter pledges her virginity to her father until her eventual marriage to a man. Rings are often exchanged as well, as tangible reminders of this vow. For more information and on the implications of such practices, see Gillis, Gibbs et. al, Banerjee, and Stange.

⁹ While writing for the *Times*, Rich became known as the “Butcher of Broadway” for his harsh reviews. However, in his book *Hot Seat: Theater Criticism for The New York Times, 1980-1993* (1998), Rich attempts to demonstrate how the role of the chief drama critic of the *New York Times* has been overstated in history and throughout his career. As evidence, in an addendum, he lists shows which he reviewed negatively but enjoyed long runs, as well as many shows that were cut short even though he loved them.

CHAPTER THREE

“ANOTHER WORLD, ANOTHER PLANET”: DISPLACING THE SOUTH

Paula Vogel (b. 1951) puts a clever twist on the meaning of “oldest” in her 2004 play *The Oldest Profession*, which follows a group of five aged prostitutes—the youngest of whom is seventy-two, and the oldest, their madam, is eighty-three—who still make their living as working girls. The time is “a sunny day shortly after the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980” (130) and the place is New York City; specifically, their “corner” is a bench near the 72nd Street and Broadway subway station. While they’ve made their home in New York City for nearly forty-five years, throughout the play, the women reminisce about their heyday in New Orleans’ once legal red light district, Storyville.

Like several of Vogel’s plays, the setting of *The Oldest Profession* is northern—New York City—but the South—their New Orleans home—is never too far away, hovering on the margins, or existing only in memory and longing. Vogel is one of several playwrights who draw on the strategy of *displacing* the South: rather than taking explicitly southern settings, these playwrights navigate space somewhere between the North and the South, such as in border states like Maryland, or make bifurcated setting choices that alternate between decidedly northern and southern places, either in actual physicality or in dialogue and characters’ memory. In Sallie Bingham’s *Throwaway* (2002), set initially in New York City, a dysfunctional family must go to the old Kentucky home for healing in the final scenes. Vogel’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play *How I Learned to Drive* (1997) is set in Maryland, but Uncle Peck’s memories of South Carolina fill the play. The South is the site of his own sexual victimization and a crucial setting in scenes where he continues the cycle of abuse by molesting others, including his niece Li’l Bit. In Pearl Cleage’s *Chain* (1992), a sixteen-year-old African American girl, Rosa Jenkins, is torn between her southern and northern identities, after her

parents have moved her from a sheltered life in Tuskegee, Alabama, to New York City, where she has developed a crack addiction, become involved with a drug dealer, and now sits, chained to a radiator in her family's apartment.

In looking at these plays, a compelling pattern of displacement emerges that is a response to the unique conditions of the genre these artists are working in, their place within it, and the representational difficulties involved in placing the South. It is not incidental that of all U.S. cities, these playwrights choose to contrast the South with New York City specifically. By dramatizing these differences, the writers are commenting on the role that New York plays as the center of theatre discourse and the traditional site that marks achievement in their medium, and they also remark on their role within their genre's conventional framework, as marginalized writers due to their gender, race, sexuality or regional affiliation. Their questions about northern and southern dichotomies become even more salient in this context, since New York City is perhaps the nation's city most antithetical to the South. The most populous city in the United States, it's a destination and haven for those seeking anonymity or escape from small-town America; in fact, the very opposite of the rural, intimate and geographically-fixed connections between family and neighbors traditionally found in southern settings. While southern cities like Atlanta, Charlotte, and Houston have experienced economic booms in recent years, the South cannot boast any cities that match the role that New York plays in worldwide commerce. New York City is "the capital of capitalism [and] the most potent and inviting symbol of America's prosperity" (Kessner xii), while traditional conceptions of the South as impoverished, rural, and detached from industrialism and capitalism still remain, and southern states continue to experience poverty at a higher rate than the national average. Racial hierarchies deeply entrenched in the South by slavery and Jim Crow have established it as a difficult place for minorities and/or people of color, and while the South is increasingly

becoming more diverse, particularly with a growing Latino population, New York City continues to be the nation's most ethnically and culturally diverse city.

In these plays, the two settings are figured as polar opposites, and the play's characters even comment upon the fact that their southern settings are so different from New York City that they are "another world" (21), as articulated in Sallie Bingham's *Throwaway*, or as Rosa Jenkins in *Chain* puts it, "New York is so different from Alabama it might as well be on another planet or some shit" (278). If these places are so different, then, the displacement strategy is a response that attempts to bridge the gap between the North and South, and connect with northern as well as southern audiences on more familiar terms. However, these playwrights also question these assumptions about regional differences. In some cases, the playwrights may have noted the hazards of regional identification—for instance, Vogel's choice to displace the South in *How I Learned to Drive* is a wise one, an approach for navigating northern audiences who might be quick to dismiss pedophilia and incest as southern aberrations. In some cases, the South, while displaced, is a vital frame upon which the play's action or character development is based, as it is in *How I Learned to Drive*. In others, like *The Oldest Profession* and *Throwaway*, the displaced South seems simply an aside that nonetheless remarks on or interrogates northern/southern dichotomies and functions as a useful metaphor or symbol as well—for instance, Vogel uses the South to critique capitalism in *The Oldest Profession*. Often their characters indulge in nostalgia for the South, but the playwrights are careful to draw attention to the ways in which the characters may have reconstructed it fictionally through the failures of memory. In some cases the South is initially viewed as a better place, or a site where one might go for healing, but it often fails to successfully emerge as so for the characters, and other times is the site of hurt and pain. Alternating between

pathological and anodynic, the South functions in interesting but peripheral ways, allowing playwrights to avoid discrete regional categorization and audience disengagement.

The usually serious questions about exploitation and empowerment that come up with women's involvement in sex work, especially for a feminist like Vogel, aren't even on the drawing board in *The Oldest Profession*. Such unexpected treatment of taboo or serious topics is a hallmark of Vogel's plays, as David Savran notes. He asks, "What other playwright would dare memorialize her brother in a play [*The Baltimore Waltz*] filled with fart jokes and riotous sex? [...] What other feminist would dare write so many jokes about tits? (*Playwright's Voice* 263). The women's ages create an absurdist element that renders serious questions about prostitution moot, and it's difficult not to find humor in little old ladies sitting around discussing premature ejaculation and brainstorming new cost effective marketing strategies, all in a matter of fact tone, as if they're punching a time clock at the local Wal-Mart when they report to their bench each morning. While the five women, Vera, Edna, Lillian, Ursula, and Mae, bicker among themselves and occasionally complain about their clients, they seem to enjoy each other's company and their work very much. Granted, retirement with benefits isn't really an option, and they must keep working to support themselves, but they don't wish for any other kind of life. The typical pursuits of the golden years don't hold any appeal for them: the other women laugh wildly when Vera announces she is considering a marriage proposal from a long-time client (thwarted when his children "kidnap" him to New Jersey so they can supervise him), and they agree, "Thank Jesus we don't have any kids" (134), and "Marital sex is so dull" (151).

Vogel overturns familiar narratives about female aging and sexuality by "reimagine[ing] old age as a time of sensual delight" (*Loose Screws* x), but the main thrust of the play is its critique of capitalism, and especially the economic and social policies under the

Reagan administration. The New York City setting is crucial, both for its opposition to the South and since the city is “the capital of capitalism” (Kessner xii). The women’s reminiscences about New Orleans contributes to the play’s overall preference for a time when consumers and producers of goods and services not only knew each other, but shared mutual trust and respect. Vogel’s focus is emphasized by her specification that the action begins on “a sunny day shortly after the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980” (130), and the women are constantly talking economics: cost of living, supply and demand, debating the place of Social Security in a free market, throwing out phrases like “Keynesian economy claptrap” (135) and brainstorming for better investment and more “cost-effective” (141) marketing strategies. They bemoan the current state of their profession—they have to fight for their territory as a younger generation of prostitutes with “no tradition or finesse” (139) tries to encroach on their corner, they struggle to make ends meet with a shorter and shorter client list, as their long-time regulars, most of whom now live at a retirement facility or are in the hospital, die off or drift into senility. One customer who seems to be losing his mental faculties is a Mr. Loman, who pays Lillian in silk stockings circa 1942 while mumbling about the Japanese beating the pants off the boys in the Pacific Theatre. Robert M. Post notices that this mention of Mr. Loman, who has “two good-for-nothing sons”(146), is a clear reference to Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and Willy Loman, an allusion that underscores the play’s anti-capitalistic theme (44).

But Lillian’s reluctant acceptance of the stockings as payment is one example of the kind of business the women do—they care about their clients on a personal level, often visiting more often than the arrangement calls for because the men are lonely, or sick, or don’t have any other visitors. The women can’t seem to prevail in the market with this strategy though, and Ursula, the one who most “believes in rules, promotion, work ethic” (130) chastises, “We’re

running a business, not a lonely-hearts club” (163). But it is partly this business model that makes them authentic and engenders the type of satisfied relationship between producer and consumer that Vogel suggests isn’t possible in a capitalistic economy rooted in imitation and mass production. Yelling down the street at one of their young rivals, who has called them “old goods,” the women point out what sets them apart from their competition:

Well, I’ll tell you what—this has been our beat for over forty-five years, and listen, baby, we still tick! We’re built to last! We give service we’re proud of! Unlike you, your plastic twat is gonna fall out in the road five years from now! That’s right! Not like you, wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am down the alley and overcharge twenty for it. (137)

The women continue a commitment to their work rooted in what they view as a better place and time—New Orleans Storyville, a 20-block area full of jazz clubs, saloons, and bordellos that flourished on the outskirts of the French Quarter from about 1897 to 1917, and the only place in the United States at the time where prostitution was legal. It could also be argued that women had a great deal of power there—their work was legitimized by law as a bona fide trade, madams owned and ran the houses that served as bordellos, and “connections to powerful clients that frequented their ‘sporting clubs’ ensured Storyville’s madams a role in New Orleans politics” (Powell). The women recall feeling connected to and respected by their clients in Storyville:

MAE. Remember the House where we all first met? A spick-and-span establishment. The music from Professor Joe in the parlor; the men folk bathed, their hair combed back and dressed in their Sunday best, waiting downstairs happy and shy. We knew them all; knew their wives and kids, too. It was always Mr. Buddy or Mr. Luigi; never this anonymous “John” for any stranger with a Jackson in his billfold.
URSULA. And we were called Miss Ursula and Miss Lillian too...Men who treated their wives and mothers right treated their mistresses right, too.
MAE. There was honor in the trade...(139)

According to the women, working girls in Storyville were “decent, self-respecting businesswomen” (139), and far from struggling to pay the bills, they could do so well as to

even support a long-time client and his family in a tough time. Respectable women apparently acknowledged Storyville women on the street, and men's enjoyment of this service doesn't interfere with their familial duties or detract from their sexual relationship with their wives.

Mae explains:

My father went to Storyville often when I was a girl. Mother used to nod to Miss Sophie right in the street before Mass in the Quarter. Miss Sophie saved our lives, she did. The depression of '97—Papa lost work and there were seven of us to feed. So every morning before folks were up and about, Miss Sophie came and put groceries on the back step—Papa was a regular customer, she couldn't let us starve. And none of the neighbors knew a thing. Finally Papa got work again; the money came in for food on the table and Saturday nights at Miss Sophie's. And then my mother got pregnant again—I guess there was plenty of my father to go around. (140)

When the federal government shut down the operation in 1917, much of the drinking, gambling and prostitution continued to flourish unsanctioned, and the girls continued to work illegally until the area was bulldozed in the 1930s. We learn how the women ended up in New York City from New Orleans: Mae boasts that she paid her girls' bail, bought them train tickets North, and then kept them together for forty-five years, providing all they've needed. However, many years later, like their dwindling clients, one by one the women themselves begin to die; after each blackout, the lights come up to reveal one less of their group sitting on their bench on 72nd Street and Broadway. In this structure and in spotlighting elderly protagonists, Vogel parallels David Mamet's play *The Duck Variations (Loose Screws x)*.

The play both opens and closes with a discussion about food, bookending Vogel's critique of the disconnect between those who provide goods and services and those who consume them in a capitalist economy. Vera's discussion about her Friday night fish—no doubt a lingering habit from her upbringing in Catholic South Louisiana—reveals her preference for buying her fish from the fishmonger Joe, whose name she knows, over the anonymous fish market: “so I bought just the nicest bit of fish down the block at Joe's—fresh, pink—much

nicer than the fish store up on 89th Street; their fish isn't fresh at all; it smells like a bad joke about ladies of the night—(*Whoops*) and it costs five cents more the pound—five cents!” (131). The play closes with what seems like a nostalgic look at their New Orleans home, in a discussion about red beans and rice, a distinctly southern Louisiana dish. Yet their nostalgia is not the typical for-southern-days-gone-by kind, and the South and its cuisine function as one way for Vogel to look “back to a time when there was a palpable connection between people and both the work they performed and the things they consumed” (*Loose Screws* xv).

In the short final scene, the lights rise to reveal only two women remaining on the bench: Edna and Vera, described as best friends (130) in Vogel's *dramatis personae*. The audience knows at this point that death is imminent for one of the women, and Edna is sick, unable to eat. Vera tries to convince her she must eat, suggesting a BLT on toasted rye from the corner deli, but Edna repudiates the processed nature of this type of meal. She says she used to just see a nice BLT:

But now it's all changed. I look at it and I see union struggles for lettuce workers in California...tomato harvests, porker roundups, produce truckers, pigs to the slaughter...there's a factory that's designed just to make the bacon package somewhere; machines that do nothing else but cut the cardboard. And then there's the rye...someone is in a factory right now whose sole job is taking care of those little seeds...thousands of loaves on the conveyor belt, being sliced and wrapped, loaded into big, greasy trucks...thousands and thousands of hands just to make that one BLT. And you know what? It's all automatic. They don't care. (171)

Vera is “alarmed” by this tirade but tries again—“What if I made something from scratch...nothing out of a can? (*Brightly, desperately.*) What if I made you red beans and rice?” (171). The final moment is an extended ode to eating red beans and rice back home in the South:

VERA. Oh, God, makes my mouth water just to think of it...red beans and rice...our mothers made it every Monday in the heat of summer, they didn't mind the heat...

EDNA: I haven't had red beans and rice in I don't know how long...Do you really think you could make some for me?

VERA: Well, my red beans never come out like Mama's. And I used to watch her make them too. You'd ask her, "Mama, how much flour goes in the sauce?" And she'd respond...(*Cups her hand*) "Oh, about this much, and... (*Pinching her fingers together*) ...and then a tad more." Her beans were heaven. She'd leave a big pot simmering with the ham bone on the stove in ninety-degree heat, and then go out to the backyard and tackle the laundry. I could smell her beans a block away...the smell always makes me hungry. Thick, red sauce, over rice, with a bay leaf, and mopped off the plate with a thick crust of dilly bread...(*Beat*) I tried making them a while ago; I got some big ham hocks from the butcher's on 79th Street, and beans and tomatoes...but they turned out funny. I must have forgotten to put something in the sauce. I don't know what it is I forgot... (172)

We are left with the notion that somehow New York can't provide what New Orleans could—the right ingredients for cooking red beans and rice, or the right place to buy them (probably not the anonymous butcher's on 79th Street), or that living in New York for so long has robbed the women of their memory or their instinct to cook like they did at home.

Yet Vogel does not present this nostalgia for New Orleans uncritically, and something does not ring completely true about how the women remember Storyville. Their view of the red-light district is evidence of the obsession with respectability that was pervasive throughout the history of Storyville: first, in the actual creation of the physical space as a way to cordon off such disreputable happenings from "respectable" New Orleans society, despite the fact that many citizens who lived and worked in Storyville, men and women alike, had significant connections to the larger community, either through family relations or business and financial relationships (Long 149). Further, "there is also substantial evidence that the allegedly disreputable people whose bodies and businesses were technically confined to Storyville were as preoccupied with the idea of respectability as those who sought to protect themselves by creating or advocating a segregated district in the first place" (Long 149). Those proprietors and madams who could afford it outfitted their brothels and saloons in ornate, opulent interior decoration, and the advertisements in the Blue Books, published as guides to Storyville for

tourists, describe the establishments and the women in language that suggests luxury and refinement, which was amusing since “most of the women were anything but proper and charming young ladies” (Foster 396). In fact, Alecia P. Long discusses the 1903 version of the Book, which was entitled *Storyville 400*, probably a playful nod at the list of four hundred socially acceptable people said to have been created for New York socialite Lina Astor, whose ballroom would hold that many people. While there were actually 651 prostitutes listed in the Book, “the actual number mattered less than the idea of respectability and exclusivity that led to the creation of such lists in the first place” (165).

The women in *The Oldest Profession* seem to have internalized these notions about respectability, but there is much to suggest, both in historical record and in moments in Vogel’s play that this notion of respectability was manufactured, and that the women may overstate Storyville’s allure. For instance, at the end of Mae’s discussion about Miss Sophie and her father, she adds that when her father expresses gratitude to Miss Sophie for leaving money for his family, Miss Sophie only asks that he name his recently born son after her “gentleman protector” (140), the only mention of what sounds like a male pimp. She goes on, “So they named my brother—” and all of the women say “*(In unison)*: Radcliffe” (140). Vera comments on the “respectable” nature of the story and the gentleman protector’s name, “I love that story. It’s such a nice name, too. So refined” (140). However, Miss Sophie’s economic and sexual independence and the power that women may have had in Storyville are undermined to some extent by the ending to this nostalgic story. Further, the fact that Sophie needed a “gentleman protector” underscores the dangers the lifestyle presented for prostitutes in Storyville, who like today, were vulnerable to crime and violence. Clearly the women describe a high-class parlor house rather than a crib, the lowest type of brothel, but even in the expensive and refined houses, bad hygiene, venereal disease, drug and alcohol addiction, and violence and crime were

rampant.¹ Further, like Hellman's point in *Foxes* that capitalism exists in the South too, Storyville was obviously a capitalistic enterprise, so the women's understanding of it as a purer time is somewhat misguided. But in New York City, the women have lived good lives, and, as David Savran points out, "seized the means of production" (*Playwright's Voice* 265) and operate as a unified, all-female group. Mae interrupts their nostalgia:

I've kept you girls together for over forty-five years. When we were closed down in Storyville, I paid your bail; all of you got your train tickets North and a place to live. All of our gentleman here are nice, and good to us, with a codicil in the will now and then. There's always been money for the doctor when any of you girls are sick, and food on your table. And you know I've never held back on anyone. If any of you girls want to leave this stable for greener pastures, you can go. (142)

Of course, the women choose to stick together in place at their bench until the end. The women's memories of Storyville are skewed, rooted in invented notions about "respectability," not unlike contemporary narratives that circulate in New Orleans—ironically, after attempts to eradicate all evidence of Storyville, even bulldozing the entire area, New Orleans now tries to capitalize on the history of the red light district, manufacturing the notion that tourists can still approximate the experience of that bygone era by visiting the French Quarter and Bourbon Street, where vice and sin are still openly practiced and tolerated.² *The Oldest Profession* is a notable example of one play that calls attention to northern/southern dichotomies, and while it is not a vital frame to the play, the South, specifically New Orleans' Storyville, serves as a fun juxtaposition to New York City and a useful metaphor for Vogel's critique of capitalism, but she does not give in to pure nostalgia for the South.

The South also enters into the New York City setting of *Throwaway* by Kentucky-born playwright and writer Sallie Bingham (b. 1937). In her author's note, Bingham says that she enjoys writing about "twisted-up families" (Miles 8), and the one featured in *Throwaway* certainly qualifies. New Yorkers Penelope and Jay have been divorced for six months and in

that amount of time Jay and Penelope’s mother, Sheila, have begun a sexual relationship; in fact, Sheila has just moved into the house her daughter and Jay once shared. The play opens with Sheila and Jay lying in bed in their pajamas, attempting to watch videos of Sheila’s life—slides of her first marriage, her pregnancy with Penelope, family vacations, because Jay has told her he wants “to see it all—everything that happened to you, before I knew you” (11). The scene is initially confusing as it sets up the unexpected relationships and the audience begins to work out that Sheila and Jay are in a relationship, but that he used to be married to her daughter. After a few minutes of viewing, Sheila is pained and turns off the video, telling Jay, “The past—it’s just—you know, it’s a throwaway—like those yellow flyers they hand you at the supermarket” (11). They rise to get out of bed because Penelope is coming over to get her things before a solo trip to Mexico for “a break” (15), and it’s clear that all of these complicated family ties have been handled more calmly and frankly than one might imagine:

SHEILA. I don’t think she ought to find us in bed.

JAY. She doesn’t mind.

SHEILA. You talked to her about that?

JAY. Just to be sure she wasn’t feeling funny about it.

SHEILA. I asked you not to talk to her about that!

JAY. Look, I have to talk to her.

SHEILA. I mean, our sex life is our sex life, even if—

JAY. I didn’t go into details. [...] She said she was happy to see us happy together. [...] I told you, from the start, I wouldn’t do anything to make Penelope unhappy. (11)

In fact, it seems it is Sheila, not Penelope, who is most damaged by the turn of events. When Penelope comes to gather her things, Sheila alternates between mothering Penelope, pushing a hat on her because “that Mexican sun is fierce!” (13), and apologizing, “I want you to know I did everything in my power to prevent your divorce” (14). Sheila seems overcome with guilt and regret, and since the family seems to think it important to “have the courage to speak frankly” (14), the conversation is strained and awkward, but not angry:

SHEILA. Darling, I'd do anything in the world to make you happy.

PENELOPE. But I am happy, Sheila.

SHEILA. How can you expect me to believe that, when I know what you've lost?

PENELOPE. You mean...Jay?

SHEILA. Of course I mean Jay! (14)

After Penelope gathers her things, she gets in a cab headed for the airport, but realizes she wants to visit her father, Dan, and his second wife, Frances, before leaving for Mexico. Her intimate knowledge of both her ex-husband and her mother's feelings and personalities gives her unique perspective into their relationship, and Penelope, described by Dan as "generous" (15), is mostly worried about her mother. She asks if all five of them can get together—herself, Sheila and Jay, Dan and Frances, in the only place where they might have a chance for healing:

PENELOPE. Yes, I want us all to get together and work this out. You know when an elephant is wounded, the other elephants all gather around and support it...

DAN. I don't think your mother would care for the comparison.

FRANCES. Where do you imagine this little get-together taking place?

PENELOPE. I worked that out in the taxi. I know how important place is... There's only one house that has the right feel. Grandma's.

DAN. You mean Miriam?

PENELOPE. Yeah. The old family place, in Knott County, Kentucky. (20)

Her grandmother Miriam is a midwife and a healer, called an "old witch" by some (31), and Penelope is sure that she can help them heal because "she doesn't see the things that hurt in the world. She just sees the things that heal. She can help us—all of us, if we go down there to see her. The way she used to help me" (20). However, it is not just Miriam's perspective that they need; Penelope makes it clear that the place is also important. Dan has never taken Frances to Knott County and she's resistant, sure that Miriam won't accept her as Dan's new wife, because every time Dan has tried to mention his divorce to his mother-in-law, "she just changes the subject, goes right on about birds, or mushrooms, or whatever" (20). Frances seems to be the essence of the busy, urban New Yorker and while she's "always been curious" about the

southern family home (21), she seems uncomfortable stepping out of her comfort zone:

FRANCES. Penelope, Knott County's another world. I've never even been there—

DAN. You're right. It's another world.

PENELOPE. That's exactly why we need to go. It'll be like a pool of clear water. We'll be able to see our reflections.

FRANCES. Our reflections?

PENELOPE. The way we really are, without all these distortions. That's what she did for me, the summer I was eleven: showed me my reflection.

DAN. It's getting on for blackberry winter, down there, we might even have some mild weather.

FRANCES. I don't even know what clothes to take.

DAN. I've been meaning to take you down to Knott County, but you're always so tied up.

PENELOPE. Look, I know how busy you are here, but if you could just for once let it all go...(21)

Penelope isn't clear about what exactly is distorted in their lives, although it certainly seems to have something to do with the divorces and the tangled relationships they have with each other. She says she wants to "put this family back together" (21), a conception that Frances questions:

FRANCES: Back together?

PENELOPE. Well, you know, in a way, you could say we're all related. (21).

However, Penelope's understanding of the healing capacity that Knott County can provide is overly simplistic and idealistic, and it seems naïve for her to think that bringing this disparate group of people that are both bound and haunted by their connections with each other will result in something transformative. In Scene Three, the setting switches to Kentucky, and it offers some of what we might expect from southern places, as well as some of the unexpected. Miriam is more interested in fishing than hospitality or preparing the house for company—it is her male companion Joey who rushes off to buy food when he learns that the family will be coming in: "You can't have your whole family come down here and find nothing in the refrigerator but a mess of mushrooms and an old placenta you haven't gotten around to burying yet" (24). When they arrive, Miriam introduces the family to Joey, in accordance with the past state of affairs—her daughter Sheila and her husband Dan, her granddaughter Penelope and her

boyfriend Jay—turning to Frances and saying, “And this here is a lady—What did you say your name was, Honey?” (27).

Initially it seems that Bingham presents the southern and rural as somehow more authentic than the northern city, and that the family must shed the burdens of the city in order to connect with this authenticity. They all dump their keys, credit cards and other detritus on the table at Miriam’s urging: “Now, before I can do a thing for you, you have to get rid of your trappings. All them little doodads you carry around in your pockets and purses” (26). However, it’s soon revealed that this forced ritual shedding was a performance, not only to fulfill what the New Yorkers might expect upon beginning a sojourn in the South, but for her reputation as a healer. Miriam’s not really interested in offering southern hospitality or helping most of the family toward anything. She tells her granddaughter:

MIRIAM. I wish to hell you hadn’t brought a single one of them down here.
PENELOPE. I’m sorry. You know how I am. I get an idea and—
MIRIAM. Just promise me one thing. Haul them out of here tomorrow. I got to have my own house back by tomorrow night.
PENELOPE. So all that stuff with the credit cards—
MIRIAM. I had to do something, keep up my reputation. People around here find out the family came and went off empty-handed, it wouldn’t be good for me, professionally. You know I advise a lot of people. (31)

Miriam also admits to her granddaughter that she’s feigning ignorance about the divorces and even knows Sheila and Jay are now in a relationship.

Ultimately, neither Miriam’s conjuring or the southern family home offers the kind of healing that Penelope hoped it would for the family. Frances is ready to leave early in the morning, driven out by a spider in their bedroom, and declaring, “I’m getting out of here before this place catches up with me” (33). Dan follows her, and Sheila and Jay are close behind. Penelope, however, decides to stay with her grandmother. It’s clear that she’ll stay in Kentucky for a while rather than travel to Mexico, and that perhaps escaping the tangled web of her family in New York is just what she needs. In the final scene, Miriam washes Penelope in the

tub while singing “Washed in the Blood of the Lamb.” She tells her granddaughter she’s washing off “that sickness you brought here. You weren’t born with it, and you sure didn’t catch it here. I fumigate this house every week to run it off. You caught it up there in the city” (37). She doesn’t offer the bath or her powders as the solution: “I don’t have much to teach you, Honey, and that’s the honest truth—but if you’ll let me wash you in this water you’ll feel better for a few minutes, for sure” (37). In this play, the South fails to be the anodyne it is often set up as in contrast to the city—at least for everyone. For Penelope, however, the southern place, combined with her grandmother’s perspective and time away from her family does offer solace. As in *The Oldest Profession*, the South is a notable aside to the play’s main action.

In other cases, the South plays a much larger role in memory or characterization, such as in Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive*, which details the main character Li’l Bit’s experiences with her Uncle Peck, who teaches her to drive as a teenager but also utilizes these driving lessons as opportunities to prey on her sexually and psychologically. Li’l Bit tells her story from the vantage point of a thirty to forty-something year old woman, moving in a non-linear fashion between events that occurred in 1962, when she was eleven years old, up to her present adult perspective. The play is set in the southern border state of Maryland, and Li’l Bit and her family seem moderately southern—they eat gumbo and call themselves “cracker[s]” (1753)³. Not unlike the bifurcated cultural identity of Lillian Hellman, Vogel herself is the product of a Catholic mother from New Orleans (not surprising in light of the city’s role in *The Oldest Profession*) and a Jewish father from New York. She was born in Washington, D.C., and grew up in suburbs of Maryland. Images and memories of the South appear in several of her plays, and she seems to feel a southernness in the landscape where she grew up. At the beginning of the play Li’l Bit describes the scene of her driving lessons with her Uncle Peck, “in a parking lot overlooking the Beltsville Agricultural Farms in suburban Maryland” (1751). In this place

presumably akin to Vogel's hometown landscape, Li'l Bit inhales the smell of "sleeping farm animal [and] clover and hay" and says, "You can still imagine how Maryland used to be, before the malls took over. This countryside was once dotted with farmhouses—from their porches you could have witnessed the Civil War raging in the front fields" (1751). However, Peck is the "most" southern of the characters—throughout the play, he remembers his South Carolina home, for which he has very fond feelings but left years ago, presumably because it is the site of his own sexual victimization. His southern identity is a significant part of his characterization, and only several flashback scenes are set somewhere besides Maryland—two crucial ones in South Carolina: when Peck teaches Cousin Bobby to fish, an outing that implicitly culminates in Peck's first crime of sexual molestation, and the very first incident of Peck's victimization of Li'l Bit, on a road trip through South Carolina. Alan Shepard and Mary Lamb read the allusion to the Civil War as a hint "at the internecine struggle yet to come in Li'l Bit's narrative" (209) and the South functions in this way throughout the play—symbolizing both Peck and Li'l Bit's internal struggles, Peck's ambivalent feelings towards his home, the audience's ambivalent feelings toward Peck and Peck and Li'l Bit's relationship.

Vogel's work is often discussed in terms of its Brechtian influence, both for its "deeply rooted political sense" (*Loose Screws* xi) as well as her tendency to utilize devices that draw the audience's attention to the fact that they are watching a play, in the tradition of Brecht's distancing effect.⁴ She draws on a unique device, The Greek Chorus—divided into the Male, Female, and Teenage Greek Chorus—who represent multiple characters who appear in the play, such as Li'l Bit's grandfather, grandmother, mother, Uncle Peck's wife, Aunt Mary, and teenagers at her high school. Each scene is preceded by a title, and Vogel specifies in her production notes that in performance these can be spoken by the Greek chorus members or an off-stage voice, in a neutral tone, "the type of voice that driver education films employ" (6).

The precedent for this concept is set as Li'l Bit begins her story after a voice announces, "Safety First—You and Driver Education," and each subsequent title gives the audience a clue to the chronology of the scene that will follow. For instance, when a scene moves chronologically from the one that preceded it, the title is "Driving in First Gear," or "Shifting Forward from First to Second Gear"; when the action skips ahead several years, Vogel utilizes titles like "Shifting Forward from Second to Third Gear"; when she moves backwards, it is signaled by "You and the Reverse Gear"; and Li'l Bit's adult perspective is indicated by "Idling in the Neutral Gear."

Vogel may be motivated to displace the South in *How I Learned to Drive* because of the taboo themes she explores: pedophilia, sexual molestation, and incest. Since he is married to her Aunt Mary, Uncle Peck and Li'l Bit are not related by blood, but she calls him Uncle Peck, and their familial connection seems an ever-present consideration, as she talks often about how what they are doing has crossed lines or boundaries, is "very wrong," or "not nice to Aunt Mary" (1757). While little scholarly work has actually focused on the connection between incest and southern culture, it is the subject of a great many southern texts. Further, popular conceptions about incest have more often made it a southern aberration, in many cases depicting it in a cartoonish fashion. As Minrose Gwin points out:

narratives of incest have long circulated in southern popular culture and in popular culture about the South. Such narratives have been especially directed toward poor white Appalachian culture and other sparsely populated areas of the South (for example: the joke about the only ten-year-old virgin in Redneck/Hillbilly County; she's the one who can run fast [or the one whose daddy and brothers are in wheelchairs]. Or stories about *Deliverance*-style retarded offspring from the sexual relations of relatives). (420)

Gwin's article, "Nonfelicitous Space and Survivor Discourse: Reading the Incest Story in Southern Women's Fiction," explores father-daughter incest in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1993), Lee Smith's *Black Mountain Breakdown* (1981), and Alice Walker's *The*

Color Purple (1982). As Gwin notes, male southern writers often take on this topic too, particularly Faulkner, who explores relationships between white fathers and black daughters in *Go Down, Moses* (1942), and his male characters in *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!* are preoccupied with their sisters' virginity and sexuality, but unlike Allison, Smith, and Walker, Faulkner does not typically give voice to the perspective of the female victim/survivor. While there are some depictions of mother-son incestuous relations to be found in southern literature (Rebecca Wells' 1998 *Little Altars Everywhere* comes to mind), it is not surprising that racial and gender dynamics have most commonly produced incestuous relationships in which a male is the perpetrator and the female a victim/survivor, since "the white patriarchal family and its containment of female bodies for the purpose of holding and expanding property claims has had far-reaching repercussions, as a specifically institutionalized ideology of dominance, for familial dynamic and father-daughter relations in southern culture" (Gwin 417). Southern codes surrounding gender, race, and family, then, have created conditions that may contribute to a male's tendency to victimize a younger female family member, but whether or not incest actually happens more in the South is questionable.

That doesn't change the fact that popular representations often depict southerners as aberrant: aside from incestuous inbreeders, they have been figured as predatory rapists as well. The rape scene is probably the most salient memory many viewers have of the 1972 film *Deliverance*, set in rural Georgia, and more contemporary representations have not abandoned this depiction, as evidenced by a scene in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994). In this urban setting, the hardcore Marsellus Wallace and Butch Coolidge are captured by two hillbilly sadist rapists who use their pawn shop as a front to catch their victims and keep them captive in the basement. They call Marsellus a "nigger," the confederate flag is displayed prominently on the wall, and one of the men wears a sheriff's uniform, which contributes to the scene's horror

and calls to mind the historical institutionalization of racism and racial violence in southern culture.

Indeed, dealing seriously with behavior like pedophilia or incest—still considered especially taboo and aberrant—in a southern context is slippery. Moving the South to the margins rather than the fore allows Vogel to avoid both the risk of northern audience disengagement and caricature. Aware of the stereotypes that northern audiences might have about southern characters, Vogel recognizes that region is at least one factor in audience interpretation. Discussing *How I Learned to Drive* in an interview, she says:

I'm very curious to see how audiences in Baltimore and even further South perceive the play and interpret the characters. How will they place them class-wise? It's interesting how regionalisms play into that. In the North, some of the characters are seen as figures out of Appalachia. I was writing about the middle working class. Still, some see Peck as a fallen aristocrat from an F.F.A.—First Family of Virginia. Some see Li'l Bit as a hillbilly. One woman, on the other hand, told me Li'l Bit reminded her of a girl she went to school with at Montgomery High, a very middle-class suburban school. Class in this country is fluid. (Horwitz)

The overwhelming characterization of Peck in reviews and scholarly articles is more in line with the fallen aristocrat of a First Family of Virginia that Vogel mentions, so she seems to be somehow successful in painting Peck on the spectrum of southern types as more cavalier or gentleman than hillbilly. She instructs that Peck is an “attractive man in his forties. Despite a few problems, he should be played by an actor one might cast in the role of Atticus in *To Kill A Mockingbird*” (1751). Set in Maycomb, Alabama, Harper Lee's 1960 novel holds a firm place in southern literary and the southern Gothic tradition, and her Atticus Finch has long been held up as an icon of racial justice and heroism. This comparison no doubt shapes reader or audience interpretation, and it underscores the complexities of Uncle Peck's character, who despite his molestation of Li'l Bit, is never figured as solely vile.

In her review of the play, Jill Dolan notes that “Vogel’s choice to remember Lil’ Bit and Peck’s relationship nonchronologically illustrates its complexity, and allows the playwright to build sympathy for a man who might otherwise be despised and dismissed as a child molester” (1781). Aside from the nonlinear way in which we learn about Peck and Li’l Bit, Vogel uses the South strategically as well. Rather than rendering him backwards, Peck’s southernness seems to make him more sympathetic—N.J. Stanley seems to think as much: “Wisely, Vogel gave Uncle Peck South Carolina roots. He speaks with a Southern accent, and his inherent genteel nature complicates our feelings for him” (360). Peck provides a sort of fatherly guidance for the fatherless Li’l Bit, and while his feelings for her are inappropriate, he loves her, listens to her, and encourages her where other family members do not. In fact, he “is the only member of her family who makes a real effort to understand her, nurture her and help her grow up” (*Playwright’s Voice* 264). Vogel herself has repeatedly described the play as a love story between Li’l Bit and Peck, although she worries that incest victims/survivors in the audience will find her sympathetic portrayal of the perpetrator problematic, and she acknowledges that their relationship is “a little disturbing, a little off. And I think everyone is familiar with that experience, whether it’s a crush on a teacher, a student, or a priest” (Horwitz).

Vogel’s head-on treatment of these taboo topics have led reviewers to describe the play as “challenging” (Rawson), and to offer such warnings as “You will be uncomfortable in your seat for this 90-minute fast ride. You will squirm” (Anstead) and “Before you’re even aware of it, you’ve fallen into dark, decidedly uncomfortable territory, and it’s way too late to pull back” (Brantley). The play is also funny in many moments, although the audience may only be comfortable sticking to nervous laughter. In one such example of comic relief, though skewed, Li’l Bit’s family seems overly intimate with each other—adages like Lil’ Bit, Peck, and even

“titless wonder” and “blue balls” are products of the family’s habit of nicknaming family members for their genitalia. In fact, Li’l Bit’s other family members more closely resemble the hillbillies or crackers associated with incest than does Peck. Ironically, he is the only one who compliments Lil’ Bit on her intellect and encourages her in her desire to “learn things. Read. Rise above my cracker background” (1753). Other family members objectify her at the dinner table, commenting on how well-endowed she’s becoming, and express sentiments like Grandfather, who wonders, “What does she need a college degree for? She’s got all the credentials she’ll ever need on her chest,” and “How is Shakespeare going to help her lie on her back in the dark?” (1753).

It’s implicit that the family is aware of what Peck is doing to Li’l Bit, and rather than intervene, they blame her, which only reinforces our understanding of Peck as Li’l Bit’s only protector and refuge. In an offhand comment early on in the play, Aunt Mary says, “Peck’s so good with them when they get to be this age” (1754), but later she tells the audience, “She’s a sly one, that one is. She knows exactly what she’s doing; she’s twisted Peck around her little finger and thinks it’s all a big secret” (1767). Mary’s perspective, while distorted, is not an uncommon one among family members in such situations, and we do see Li’l Bit engage in adult, flirtatious behavior with Peck as a sixteen or seventeen-year-old, “a personality into which his abuse has twisted her” (Cummins). These scenes appear first in the play, and in the very first scene the audience sees, seventeen-year-old Li’l Bit responds immediately to Peck’s request to touch her breasts, although it’s easy enough to pick up on the automated, detached nature of her actions, often a characteristic response to long-term sexual abuse. And Vogel even complicates these questions about sexual maturity and consent in a conversation between Mother, Grandmother and Grandfather that figures Grandmother as an unwilling, too young

participant in their marriage and its consummation:

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS (*as Mother*). Well, Mama, after all, you were a child bride when Big Papa came and got you—you were a married woman and you still believed in Santa Claus.

TEENAGE GREEK CHORUS (*as Grandmother*). It was legal, what Daddy and I did! I was fourteen and in those days, fourteen was a grown-up woman—

MALE GREEK CHORUS (*as Grandfather*). —Oh, now we’re off on Grandma and the Rape of the Sa-bean Women!

TEENAGE GREEK CHORUS (*as Grandmother*). Well, you were the one in such a big hurry—

MALE GREEK CHORUS (*as Grandfather to Li'l Bit*). —I picked your grandmother out of that herd of sisters just like a lion chooses the gazelle—the plump, slow, flaky gazelle dawdling at the edge of the herd—your sisters were too smart and too fast and too scrawny— (1758)

Their conversation normalizes early and reluctant or unwilling sexual experience, and is even reminiscent of the jokes about the ten-year-old virgin who can run fast.

It is not until the final flashback scene, which goes back the earliest, titled “1962: On The Back Roads of Carolina: The First Driving Lesson,” that Vogel resolves some of her ambivalent perspective. Eleven-year-old Li'l Bit has apparently been invited to ride home from a family beach vacation with Uncle Peck, who is staying later than the rest of the family, and lured by an extra week at the beach, she begs her reluctant mother to let her go:

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS (*as Mother*). Your uncle pays entirely too much attention to you.

LI'L BIT. He listens to me when I talk. And—and he talks to me. He teaches me about things. Mama—he knows an awful lot.

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS (*as Mother*). He’s a small town hick who’s learned how to mix drinks from Hugh Hefner.

LI'L BIT. Who’s Hugh Hefner?

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS (*as Mother*). I am not letting an eleven-year-old girl spend seven hours alone in the car with a man... I don’t like the way your uncle looks at you.

LI'L BIT. For God’s sake, mother! Just because you’ve gone through a bad time with my father—you think every man is evil! [...] I deserve a chance at having a father! Someone! A man who will look out for me! Don’t I get a chance?

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS (*as Mother*). I will feel terrible if something happens.

LI'L BIT. Mother! It’s in your head! Nothing will happen! I can take care of myself. And I can certainly handle Uncle Peck.

FEMALE GREEK CHORUS (*as Mother*). All right. But I'm warning you—if anything happens, I hold you responsible. (1772)

Li'l Bit places herself in the car with Uncle Peck merely out of an innocent need for a father figure and her childish desire to play at the beach for an extra week. She is surprised when Peck suggests she practice driving, like he did when he was her age, but sits on his lap and steers as he instructs her. She is scared and confused when he begins to touch her breasts and orgasms beneath her, and “Vogel assures us in this shocking scene that Uncle Peck owns the responsibility” (Stanley 363). Her mother's words no doubt linger in Li'l Bit's ears, and explains to some degree why Lil' Bit is not always clear who is to blame for this situation and does not seek help.

We are partly sympathetic to Peck because we know that he too has been a victim of sexual abuse. In one of the final monologues of her adult perspective, Li'l Bit asks, “Who did it to you, Uncle Peck? How old were you? Were you eleven?” (1717). It is suggested that his experience was actual incest, indicated in a quick but revealing moment earlier in the play when Li'l Bit asks her uncle why he left South Carolina and then casually says, “I'll bet your mother loves you, Uncle Peck”; in response “*Peck freezes a bit*” (1756). Being sexually abused by his own mother has skewed his understanding of the normal boundaries of familial, romantic, and sexual love, and like many victims, he has continued the cycle of abuse. In a monologue addressed to the audience, the Female Greek Chorus as his wife Mary acknowledges, “I know he has troubles. And we don't talk about them. I wonder, sometimes, what happened to him during the war. The men who fought World War II didn't have “rap sessions” to talk about their feelings” (1767). He has sought solace from his problems in alcohol, and his struggles with alcoholism are charted over time throughout the play. In fact, it is Lil' Bit who provides inspiration for him to quit drinking, as well as offers him an unprecedented outlet to talk about his feelings. During Christmas 1964, when Lil' Bit is

thirteen, she asks him why he drinks so much. He explains that, “I have a fire in my heart. And sometimes the drinking helps” (1768). With a maturity beyond her age, Lil’ Bit thinks, “There’s got to be other things that can help,” and she proposes a deal: “We could meet and talk—once a week. You could just store up whatever’s bothering you during the week—and then we could talk. [...] As long as you don’t drink. I’d meet you somewhere for lunch or for a walk—on the weekends—as long as you stop drinking. And we could talk about whatever you want” (1768).

This tender moment is representative of the emotional support they provide each other throughout the play, and it is this dynamic between Peck and Li’l Bit that leads Vogel to correct Arthur Holmberg in an interview when he says, “*Drive* dramatizes in a disturbing way how we receive great harm from the people who love us”; instead, Vogel says: “I would reverse that. I would say that we receive great love from the people that harm us.” In flashbacks subsequent to this Christmas conversation, it’s clear that Peck does manage to stop drinking, for years at a time, although he often supplies the underage Li’l Bit with alcohol, using it as a lubricant for her while he abstains.

The South is a site of pain for Peck, but it also represents someplace special, like nowhere else. He recollects, “I go back once or twice a year—supposedly to visit Mama and the family, but the real truth is to fish. I miss this most of all. There’s a smell in the Low Country—where the swamp and fresh inlet join the saltwater—a scent of sand and cypress, that I haven’t found anywhere yet” (1757). He seems to have taken refuge in the outdoors, perhaps to escape abuse at home, but much of what he takes from the South are incomplete images, sounds, and smells. The southernness Li’l Bit feels in Maryland is North to him, and Vogel gives Peck revealing words that reflect the dilemma that leads her to displace the South: “I don’t say this very often up North because it will just play into the stereotype everyone has, but I will tell

you: I didn't wear shoes in the summertime until I was sixteen. It's unnatural down here to pen up your feet in leather" (1757). On a trip to the Eastern shore, Peck takes the sixteen-year-old Li'l Bit to dinner to celebrate her "first, legal, long-distance drive" (1757) and he says the restaurant and inn they are dining at reminds him of places back home in the South. When Li'l Bit is reluctant to order a drink at his suggestion, he explains, "In South Carolina, like here on the Eastern Shore, they're...*(Searches for the right euphemism.)*... 'European.' Not so puritanical. And very understanding if gentlemen wish to escort very attractive young ladies who might want a before-dinner cocktail. If you want one, I'll order one" (1755). This distorted understanding seems to be his creation, mixed up in the abuse he suffered, as well as his need to feel that his predilections could be public and accepted somewhere, maybe just not in suburban Maryland. Alan Shepard and Mary Lamb note his memory is "dubious," and that his conception that "'South Carolina' signifies a libertine space that winks at incest and pedophilia," is actually a fictional reconstruction of the past and place based in imagery and symbolic space (209). He chooses to explain his difference and his alienation from his wife in terms of a North/South divide, and he hides behind the images he's constructed about the South.

At this dinner, Peck orders martinis for Li'l Bit until she is quite drunk and she stumbles to the car, asking, "Where are you taking me? [...] You're not taking me—upstairs? There's no room at the inn?" (1757). Peck is excited at the thought of going up to a room, but the intoxicated Li'l Bit wavers, in an exchange that typifies Peck's manipulation and Li'l Bit's confusion:

LI'L BIT. What we're doing. It's wrong. It's very wrong. [...] Someone will get hurt.

PECK. Have I forced you to do anything? *(There is a long pause as Li'l Bi tries to get sober enough to think this through.)*

LI'L BIT. ...I guess not.

PECK. We are just enjoying each other's company. I've told you, nothing is going to happen between us until you want it to. Do you know that?

LI'L BIT. Yes.

PECK: Nothing is going to happen until you want it. (*A second more, with Peck staring ahead at the river while seated at the wheel of his car. Then, softly:*) Do you want something to happen? (*Peck reaches over and strokes her face, very gently. Li'l Bit softens, reaches for him, and buries her head in his neck. Then she kisses him. Then she moves away, dizzy again.*)

LI'L BIT. ...I don't know. (*Peck smiles; this has been good news for him—it hasn't been a "no."*)

PECK. Then I'll wait. I'm a very patient man. I've been waiting for a long time. I don't mind waiting. (1757)

As it does in this scene, their relationship always stops short of actual sex, but Peck continues to wait. He has particularly high hopes for her eighteenth birthday, but Li'l Bit leaves for college and she is finally able to gain the distance she needs to terminate their relationship. Her decision is facilitated by her horror at the letters, flowers, and gifts Peck sends her throughout the first semester she is away, each one punctuated by the date and a countdown: "Only ninety days to go! Nine days and counting!" (1768). When they meet in a hotel room to celebrate her birthday, she confronts him on the meaning of the numbers: "You were counting down to my eighteenth birthday. [...] So statutory rape is not in effect when a young woman turns eighteen. And you and I both know it" (1769). They continue their discussion over champagne—this time, Peck joins her in drinking—and he convinces her to lie down in the hotel bed with him: "Just lie down on the bed with me—our clothes on—just lie down with me, a man and a woman...and let's...hold one another. Nothing else. Before you say anything else. I want the chance to...hold you. Because sometimes the body knows things that the mind isn't listening to...and after I've held you, then I want you to tell me what you feel" (1770). Li'l Bit is torn, confused; Vogel's directions read, "*(Li'l Bit—half wanting to run, half wanting to get it over with, half wanting to be held by him)*" (1770). As they lie there, the Greek Chorus enters, and Lil' Bit joins them in reciting a series of images and phrases that call to mind the South and sexuality. Their lines build into a crescendo resembling the sex act that Peck wishes them to

have, and the “rhythms echo the call-and-response of a Baptist revival” (Shepard and Lamb 210). A sample of the ingredients in this “Recipe for a Southern Boy”:

A drawl of molasses in the way he speaks...A gumbo of red and brown mixed in the cream of his skin...A dash of Southern Baptist Fire and Brimstone...A curl of Elvis on his forehead...A splash of Bay Rum...The steel of military in his walk...The slouch of the fishing skiff in his walk...Neatly pressed khakis...His heart beating Dixie...The whisper of the zipper,—you could reach out with your hand and—His mouth—You could just reach out and—Hold him in your hand—And his mouth... (1770)

In the climax of this montage, Li'l Bit starts to kiss him, then wrenches herself free and gets out of bed. Shepard and Lamb view this scene as Vogel's satire of the “sprezzatura of the South behind which Peck takes refuge,” registering “both what is appealing and disgusting about a formula for masculinity that is intertwined with nationalistic nostalgia for the South” (210).

While Vogel doesn't utilize a strictly southern setting, it's significant that the South provides a backdrop for some of the crucial turning points of the play: Peck's first sexual molestation with Bobby, with Lil' Bit, and Lil' Bit's final encounter with Peck and her termination of their relationship.

The play ends on Li'l Bit's adult perspective, and it becomes clear that the metaphor driving has provided for sexual experience throughout the play now extends to Li'l Bit's ability to navigate life, to put herself in the driver's seat, and ultimately, to survive. In one of their driving lessons, Uncle Peck warns: “There's a lot of assholes out there. Crazy men, arrogant idiots, drunks, angry kids, geezers who are blind—and you have to be ready for them. I want to teach you to drive like a man. [...] with confidence—with aggression. The road belongs to them. [...] Women tend to be polite—to hesitate. And that can be fatal” (1762). Peck also figures the car as female and Li'l Bit is confused:

PECK. You're going to know this baby inside and out. Treat her with respect.
LIL BIT. Why is it a she?
PECK. Good question. It doesn't have to be a “she”—but when you close your eyes and think of someone who responds to your touch—someone who

performs just for you and gives you what you ask for—I guess I always see a “she.” You can call her what you like.

L’IL BIT. (*to the audience*): I closed my eyes—and decided not to change the gender. (1762)

Peck sets up a sexist dichotomy in which men are active—they drive—and women are the ones acted upon—driven—as well as in which women perform solely at the request of men for men. Li’l Bit’s response may be a subtle indication of her ability to imagine sexual attraction to women, or since Peck teaches her to drive “like a man,” it could represent her eventual mastery of the gender dynamics that have made her vulnerable to Peck in the first place. Ironically, the gifts that Peck gives her, according to Vogel, are the tools and training to “reject and destroy him” and protect herself from men like him in the future (Holmberg). At the end of the play, Li’l Bit tells us about caring for her car, checking the oil and tires, and all the habitual checks learned in drivers education that she still does upon entering the car—adjusting the seat, the mirrors, and in her final line: “And then—I floor it” (1773), it’s clear that she has found healing, forgiveness, and is in control of her life.

Like Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive*, the South plays a central role in Atlanta-based playwright Pearl Cleage’s (b. 1948) *Chain*, which was commissioned and produced in 1992 in conjunction with another of her plays, *Late Bus to Mecca*, at the Judith Anderson Theatre in New York City. The time is 1991, and the entirety of *Chain* is set in a single space: “a one bedroom apartment in a battered Harlem, New York apartment building,” and only one character appears on stage: Rosa Jenkins, who is described as “a sixteen-year-old black girl, addicted to crack” (267). The action occurs over a period of seven days, and there are six scene breaks throughout the play. In production, each is punctuated by a blackout and prior to the lights rising, the appearance of slides on a screen at the rear of the stage that indicate to the audience what day the action takes place, from “DAY ONE” to “DAY SEVEN.” The action opens in a dramatic, disturbing fashion, no doubt emotionally jarring for those not familiar with

the story. The lights will come up on complete dark and the slide reading DAY ONE appears on a screen at the rear of the stage, then disappears and gives way to the dark once again. Suddenly the sounds of a struggle emerge from the dark, and only Rosa's voice is heard, pleading "No! Stop it! Don't Daddy! Please don't!" (269). Cleage instructs that "it should be clear that there is a struggle going on, but the cause of the struggle should be completely unknown, adding to the frightening nature of the sounds" (269). When the sounds of the struggle subside, the audience hears footsteps, a door slamming, and a deadbolt lock. Rosa shrieks, "Da-a-a-a-a-deeeeee!" (269) and when the lights come up she is sobbing, crumpled in the middle of the floor of the apartment. She begins pleading with her mother next, alternating between desperation, fear, and anger, and still the audience is unaware of the exact cause of her misery. Soon she lunges for the door of the apartment, and the audience will see for the first time that Rosa is chained to the radiator in the room, a thick, six-foot long chain shackled on her left foot. The chain allows for some range of movement, but she cannot reach the door. The first day's action will end as Rosa paces around the apartment, desperately trying to remove the chain, weeping, angry, "wild" and "almost out of control" (271). She smashes a framed portrait of her father and mother, holds a shard of the glass over her wrist threateningly, then throws it away in defeat and collapses, and the stage goes to black.

It is not until the lights come up on Day Two that the audience will begin to learn Rosa's story, which she will tell over the course of the seven days in one long monologue. We learn that Rosa and her parents moved to New York City from Tuskegee, Alabama, when she was ten, so that, as Rosa explains it, she "could go to good schools and have better opportunities and shit" (278). Their plan fails miserably, though—upon moving to New York, Rosa gets involved with the wrong crowd, most notably her boyfriend Jesus, a Puerto Rican drug dealer and addict, and she's addicted to crack by the age of eleven or twelve. After

escaping rehab and all of her parent's hopeless attempts to get her sober and safe, the sixteen-year-old Rosa continues to run the streets smoking crack with Jesus. The chain is almost more difficult to bear because it is a symbol not of violence, but of the immense love and desperation that have led her parents to shackle her inside the apartment. They are hard-working, decent people, and the world Rosa has gotten involved in is scary and unfamiliar to them. They have what might be a naïve hope in racial uplift and spiritual guidance—their sparsely decorated apartment includes “a cheaply framed picture of John Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy [and a] framed dime store painting of a white Jesus” (269). They've tried everything to help their daughter, from pleading and crying over “Just Say No” pamphlets, to multiple rehab treatments, to sending her back South to live with her grandmother, but their efforts to save their daughter seem sad and ineffectual against the powers that have taken Rosa from them. Both parents have to work double-shifts at their “shitty ass jobs” (278), so they can't be home to watch her; chaining Rosa up in the apartment during the days is a last ditch effort to keep their daughter sober, off the streets, and away from her boyfriend Jesus.

Cleage is determined to force her audience to see and hear Rosa, to render visible a character who, because she is poor, female, African American, and a crack addict, might ordinarily be invisible to larger society or a theatre-going audience. Because of the play's continuous format, the lack of other characters, and her direct address to the audience, they simply cannot escape her. This strategy makes sense in light of how Cleage describes her approach to writing plays:

My response to the oppression I face is to name it, describe it, analyze it, protest it, and propose solutions to it as loud[ly] as I possibly can every time I get the chance. I purposely people my plays with fast-talking, quick-thinking black women since the theater is, for me, one of the few places where we have a chance to get an uninterrupted word in edgewise. (Perkins and Uno 46)

Rosa's last bit of dialogue at the end of Day One, just before the chain becomes visible, is a challenge addressed to her parents, but it's a message for the audience as well. She yells at the locked door: "Open this door and look at me! You scared to see me like this? (*Laughs crazily.*) Well, that's just too damn bad because you gotta deal with it. Look at me!" (270). At the start of the action in Day Two, Rosa continues this challenge when she notices the audience for the first time and addresses them directly. She distinguishes herself from them and acknowledges her invisibility:

Hey! I'm talking to you! Y'all got a match? (*Disgusted at the lack of response.*) It ain't no reefer, okay? It's a Winston or some shit. (*A beat.*) Oh, I see. I'm invisible, right? You looking right at me and nobody see me, right? Okay, no problem. (*A beat.*) Y'all probably don't smoke no way. Right? Lookin out for your health and shit. You probably wouldn't give me a damn match if you had it. (*A beat.*) My dad told you not to talk to me, right? Not to listen to anything I said cuz I'm a dope fiend and I might trick you into doin something bad. Fuck it. (271)

In the course of the seven days, her attitude toward the audience changes, and she begins to use them as a sounding board of sorts, to have a genuine conversation with them. And in return, the audience begins to see her as someone other than a dope fiend—to see the New York City Rosa and the Alabama Rosa and everything in between. Her story is enthralling, sad, touching, and she's smart, observant, and funny throughout, over time endearing herself more and more to the audience. Her perspective runs the gamut as she fiends for crack then gradually sobers up. She's alternately angry at her parents and her boyfriend Jesus, and her story is framed by her reflections on life in New York City versus life in Tuskegee and her identity in each place. New York City, she says, is so different from Alabama, "it might as well be on another planet or some shit" (278), and her understanding of her own identity is rooted in place: the difference between who she is now, a sixteen-year-old crack addict, and who she was in the past, a naïve eleven-year-old, is a direct result of her family's move to New York City.

When she arrives in New York from the South, it does feel like a different planet to her—she’s marked by her southernness because of her accent and the sheltered life she has lived in comparison to her schoolmates. At first she is shocked by the eleven and twelve-year-olds “smokin and fuckin like they was grown already,” and she remembers, “I didn’t do none of that shit for a long time. I was real *goody goody*. The kids at my school used to call me ‘Bama and shit and make fun of me because I wadn’t down wit the shit they knew from birth or some shit” (278). But Rosa is simultaneously captivated by this new urban environment, its difference from Alabama is “exciting as hell” to her (278). Yet she’s aware that this place needs to be navigated carefully—that one does not instinctually know how to live New York style. When she meets Jesus at the age of eleven, things turn around for her: “It was kind of a drag at first, but then I met Jesus and he hipped me to a lot of shit about living in New York. Stuff I really needed to know, right? And plus, he was real fine and real cool and a Puerto Rican” (278). Jesus becomes her guide and role model into the world of drugs, sex, and violence, and she acknowledges, “I don’t think I woulda started smoking this shit if it wadn’t for Jesus” (280). It was their move North that facilitated her meeting a person like Jesus, and she seems partly intrigued by his ethnic difference: “Wadn’t one Puerto Rican in Tuskegee, Alabama. *Period*” (278). Jesus is just as surprised to meet a black Rosa from Alabama as Rosa is fascinated to meet a Puerto Rican New Yorker; she explains: “He thought I was Puerto Rican before he met me because my name was *Rosa* and some nigga told him I had a *accent*. He thought they meant a *Spanish* accent, but they was talkin about a *Alabama* accent. He thought that shit was real funny, too. Pissed me off til’ I saw he didn’t mean nothin by it” (278).

The misconception Jesus initially has about what type of person the name Rosa signifies is not unlike ones that might be engendered by his own name, both based in divergent language pronunciation and cultural naming traditions. In Spanish, Jesus is pronounced “Hey-suess” and

it is a common name given to males in Spanish-speaking populations, whereas English-speaking populations reserve that signifier for reference to the Christian Jesus, son of God. Cleage does make that distinction upon Rosa's first reference to her boyfriend Jesus, instructing "(NOTE: *His name is pronounced in Spanish—'Hey-suess'*)" (275). Rosa's discussion of her Puerto Rican boyfriend, a drug dealer and essentially her pimp, juxtaposed with the apartment's framed painting of the Christian conception of Jesus, is a contradiction furthered when one considers the ironic and problematic symbol of a "white Jesus" (269) as black people's savior. Rosa's parents' Jesus is at odds with Rosa's Jesus, and they encourage her to switch loyalties, "to pray instead of gettin high" (292). Rosa's not convinced—"It works for some muthafuckas, I guess, but I don't believe all that shit" (292).

Rosa associates her parents' regional roots with their inability to navigate the urban world, much less the crack underworld. She calls her parents and the people in Alabama "country ass niggas" with an "old timey attitude" (281), and it's clear that Rosa's feelings about her father have changed since the move, when she begins to value different kinds of knowledge. She remarks: "I used to think my dad knew everything. But you can't know everything about New York City. Not even about Harlem! Not even this one block in Harlem!" (282). Jesus, on the other hand, is her hero: "Ain't nothing country about Jesus. He hard about shit. [...] Like *whatever* happen, it ain't gonna be no *surprise* to this nigga" (279). Jesus didn't have the loving, sheltered childhood that Rosa did and he's developed his hard demeanor out of necessity—at a young age, he came home to find his mother dead, shot and killed by her boyfriend in an argument over where she had hidden his crack. Her boyfriend is still sitting on the couch after, smoking the crack, and Rosa explains that Jesus' addiction began when he kept "thinkin about that nigga just sittin there smokin while his mama layin in the next room dead and he said he just thought, well, fuck it. *If the shit that damn good, let me have it*" (280).

Sadly, even when Rosa tries to connect with her parents, it seems as if their southernness is an obstacle: “I told my daddy I wish I believe in God, but I don’t. It take time, my dad tell me. You have to get to know him just like any good friend. You have to put the time in to *get the goody out*. That’s what he said. He talkin bout God and shit and then he come talkin *bout the goody!* He so country sometime!” (293). Although she loves her parents, she feels as if they can’t possibly understand why she likes getting high: “It’s no way for me to tell him how it feels, you know what I mean? They don’t understand nothin about none of it so there’s no place to start tellin them anything. They shoulda kept their country asses in Tuskegee, Alabama” (290).

She tells the audience all about the differences between Alabama and New York City, and how she’s had to adjust. For instance, the friendly, easy conversation among strangers she knew growing up in the South isn’t common in the big city. She knows better than to ask too many questions of others, even Jesus: “He never said nothing about his father and I never did ask him. People in Alabama ask you your life story if they sit next to you on the bus, but people in New York don’t play that shit” (278). While Rosa still holds onto one southern convention—she addresses the audience as “y’all”—she’s picked up the rough attitude and curse-laden vocabulary of New Yorkers. She explains, “Nobody talks like this in Tuskegee. They cuss and shit, but not like in New York. *Everybody* in New York cuss *all* the time” (277). When her parents send her back to the South to live with her grandmother, she’s shocked to overhear Rosa’s language in a phone conversation. Whichever New York friend that was on the other end of the line must have been surprised when Rosa’s grandmother picked up the phone and said, “I apologize for my granddaughter’s language. She did not learn how to talk like that in this house” (277), hung up, and then proceeded to wash her mouth out with Ivory soap. Rosa’s

grandmother ultimately sends her right back to New York after Rosa steals her social security check. The anonymity Rosa enjoys in New York isn't possible in Tuskegee, she learns:

I know they act like I killed somebody when I tried to cash one of my grandmamma's social security checks. It ain't like the government won't replace that shit! If you tell em somebody stole your check, they send you another one. People up here do it all the time. I didn't think that shit was no big deal, but the man at the store knew my grandmother and he called her and told her I'd been there with her check and he had cashed it this time, but could she please send a note next time. (277)

Despite stealing from her grandmother to support her crack addiction, Rosa is fundamentally still pretty innocent, and at times, we see through the New York City Rosa veneer to what her parents and grandmother keep searching for: what they describe as the "good girl they knew I still was *underneath*" (276). For instance, she's a virgin. Although she's been curious and has tried to interest Jesus in sex, he's focused only on getting high. He does teach her to masturbate because he likes to watch, and he makes her perform for others, and she does it although it makes her uncomfortable:

sometimes when we needed money, he'd get me to do it in front of some niggas. They thought it was funny that I could get off like that and still be a virgin. [...] I love to hear Jesus say my name like it was Spanish. 'R-r-r-r-r-rosa!' If I was doin it and he called my name like that, I'd get off in a second. When it was somebody I didn't want to do it in front of, he would tell me to just listen for my name and it would be easy. (283)

As she tells her story, it's clear that Rosa seems to be searching for some authentic selfhood, but she can't seem to understand herself outside of the New York City/Alabama dichotomy. Her parents clearly think they left their "real" daughter back in Tuskegee: on Day Five, they allow Rosa to watch television because she's been acting like her "old self." Rosa scoffs, "*My old self*. Who the hell is that? They mean my Alabama self. My before I met Jesus self. My don't know nothing bout crack rock self. That's who they lookin for. (*A beat*). I miss her too, but I think girlfriend is gone, gone, gone" (292).

It's her father and his "country ass" who rescues her from the most dangerous situation she's been in yet, and in reflecting over the course of the seven days, Rosa begins to reevaluate her father's strength and knowledge. He has always fought to save his daughter, chasing her down at crack houses and even lecturing the dealers, "tellin them how they ought to be ashamed to be sellin that shit to kids" (272). It's the most recent event—the scariest for both of them—that has precipitated the chain tactic. Jesus had left her as collateral in an apartment with two guys, while he claimed to be going to get the hundred dollars he owed them. He's gone for two days, and when the crack runs out, the guys get restless and start threatening her. She thinks she can settle their debt by performing for them as usual, but they want more, and Rosa is defending herself from a near rape when "my dad started beatin on the door and hollerin and shit and all hell broke loose" (289). The guys let Rosa's dad in, hold a 9 millimeter to her head and threaten to kill her if he doesn't give them the hundred dollars she owes them. Terrified, Rosa thinks, "*my daddy ain't got that kinda money! I'm dead*" (289), but amazingly, he pulls the money out of his pocket and takes her home. Later, she reflects:

I think that nigga was gonna rape me if my daddy hadn't busted up in there. And that wadn't gonna be the worst of it. Jesus wadn't comin back no time soon. That's why he called my pops and told him where I was. (*Laughs.*) He busted up in there, though. My daddy crazy. They coulda blown him away with his Alabama ass. (*A beat.*) I don't think he'd a brought me up here if he'd a known what these niggas up here were like. They treacherous up here in New York. You think you ready for it, but you not ready. These niggas don't care nothin bout you. Jesus spose to be my friend, and look how he act! (*A beat.*) My daddy bad though. He was beatin on that door like he was packin a Uzi and he didn't have shit. Not even no stick or nothin. He just standin there talkin shit about: *Where my baby girl at? Where you got my Rosa?* And I'm hollerin: *Here I am, daddy! Here I am!* (291)

She alternates between angry tirades about Jesus and fantasizing that he'll come rescue her from the apartment. Over time, though, Jesus doesn't come, and as she talks aloud more and more throughout the play, her parent's knowledge and love begins to win out over Jesus'.

The lights arise on Day Six to show Rosa unchained, although limping and occasionally rubbing her sore ankle. There's a phone in the room for the first time, presumably another privilege returned as her parents begin to recognize more of the "old" Rosa. She immediately goes to the phone, and after a hesitant half dial, she musters the courage and calls Jesus. She repudiates him and the drugs in this phone call, and in the process, seems to choose her parents' love:

I aint doing that shit no more, muthafucka cause I ain't no muthafuckin dope fiend, alright? I been up here without shit for five days, right? *And I handled it! I am handlin it!* So fuck you, Jesus. [...] No. My mom be home in a few minutes so don't bring your black ass up here. That's right. Not tomorrow either. I don't need that shit. I just called to let you know not to bring your ass around me and when you see me on the street, don't even act like you know me, you junkie muthafucka... You... you... *You left me!* (295)

Despite the finality this call suggests, Rosa's operating on the schizophrenic level of an addict, and Cleage's ending doesn't provide definitive answers about what the future holds for Rosa. When the lights come up on the final scene, she's smoking nervously, pacing, waiting, looking out the window at the street. We're not certain what has happened in between the action—if she has broken down and called Jesus to pick her up, or if she's simply agitated, frustrated, fiending for crack. She's unchained now, and she picks up the chain, handling it with both "resignation and comfort" (296). It is both liberating and dangerous that she is no longer restrained. In the scene she speaks on three occasions: "*Fuck this shit, okay? Just fuck it!*" and then a moment later in what appears to be her first attempt to pray to God: "Okay, look. This is a prayer, okay? (*A beat.*) I can't do that shit" (296). Then a furtive knock comes at the door and she seems surprised, hesitant. She goes to the door and asks, "*Jesus? (A beat.)* Jesus, is that you?" (296). No answer comes from the other side of the door, and the stage goes black as Rosa takes a deep breath and opens the door. Cleage does not ultimately give an answer as to which Jesus Rosa hopes is there for her. Her father has told her that "only God stronger than

crack” (293), and it seems that there are only two options for Rosa at this point—the crack or faith. Since the pronunciation will be crucial, reading this ending on the page is a different experience than hearing the lines in performance. Since Cleage gives no direct indication as to how this ending should be played, it is likely that directors will make choices based on their own interpretations, and it’s fascinating to imagine the possibilities.

The function of Jesus’ name, especially in this final moment, might not be as significant if Rosa’s name didn’t provide a parallel. Cleage emphasizes this naming element to remind us that the expectations we have about who people will be based on their regional affiliation are often deeply entrenched, whether accurate or not. However, Rosa acknowledges at points that she may present a too simplistic view of the characteristics of North and South, at one point thinking more deeply: “Maybe there was some country ass Puerto Ricans in Tuskegee and I just didn’t recognize em” (279). While we don’t necessarily know what is on the other side of the door for Rosa, it is clear that she has begun to think in more deeply nuanced ways about herself, addiction, her boyfriend Jesus, her parents, and regional and ethnic identity.

While in some cases it seems more incidental than tactical, the occurrence of bifurcated settings in southern women’s plays is a pattern not easily dismissed as coincidence, especially in the frequent juxtaposition of New York City and the South. Whether or not the South emerges as a vital frame to a play’s action or characterization, when playwrights set these two places up against each other, they enact a communicative strategy that comments on northern/southern dichotomies, including the centrality of New York in theatrical discourse and the South’s distance from it. They may bridge the gap between northern and southern audiences by moving between northern and southern settings and by creating characters who present a bifurcated regional identity. However, they also question such easy dichotomies at the same time. Their characters—the working women in *The Oldest Profession*, *Penelope*, *Uncle Peck*,

Rosa—remember or imagine the South in particular ways, but these playwrights also include moments that encourage audiences to engage with place in more thoughtful and nuanced ways.

End Notes

¹ For more information on Storyville, see Long, Rose, and especially Foster, for a discussion of the less-than-respectable conditions.

² See Vesey and Dimanche.

³ Originally a derogatory term for a poor, southern white person, although in recent usage, it has come to indicate a white person in general.

⁴ Often referred to as Epic Theatre, Brecht's conception of theatre is rooted in his belief that theatre can effect social change. One of his most influential theories is what he called *Verfremdungseffekt*, a term that is generally translated as the "defamiliarization effect," "distancing effect," or "estrangement effect." Brecht's theatre seeks to tear down the fourth wall, to remind the audience that they are witnessing a representation of reality. His approach "prevents the audience from losing itself passively and completely in the character created by the actor, and which consequently leads the audience to be a consciously critical observer" (Brecht 91).

CHAPTER FOUR

“IT’S JUST A THING THAT HAPPENS TO A TYPE”: OBJECTIFICATION AND GENDERED VIOLENCE

From the domestic violence in *Crimes of the Heart* and *Flesh and Blood* to Rosa’s sexual exploitation in *Chain*, whether they take southern or non-southern settings, violence is one of the most common unifying themes in the work of southern women playwrights. In fact, Charles Watson lists violence as one of the recurring characteristics of southern drama¹ in general: “Violence ties the early drama to the modern; [...] in modern plays [it] has replaced the sectional politics of slavery as the most deplorable trait of the South. Though not exclusively southern, of course, it crystallizes some of the sharpest conflicts in the region and exposes them to searching examination” (3-4). The violence we see southern women playwrights interested in is most often gendered violence, resulting from societal and institutional masculine control, the eroticization of violence, and the objectification or commodification of women’s bodies. Aside from gender, they also highlight institutionalized sexist, racist, classist, and homophobic forces which render particular individuals more susceptible to violence, and they work to give voice to those who have been hurt and silenced by these forces, therefore confronting marginalization and challenging the notion of the universal spectator.

Two plays representative of this approach are Marsha Norman’s *Getting Out* (1977) and Rebecca Gilman’s *The Glory of Living* (1999). In an interview, Norman has referenced the Gospel of Matthew, which says “Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, my brethren, you have done it unto me. That’s what I’m doing. I’m saying, ‘Let’s take the least of these, our brethren. Let’s look at them’” (Stout 32). She does so in *Getting Out* as she gives voice to Arlie/Arlene: Arlie the volatile teenage delinquent, prostitute, and inmate, and Arlene, her older, tired version trying to make a straight life for herself after being released from prison.

Writing twenty years later, Alabama-born Rebecca Gilman (b. 1964) reinvents many of the same themes in her play *The Glory of Living*. Gilman might have had Marsha Norman's *Getting Out* at least in mind with her play, as both explore the forces that might lead women to incarceration for violent crime. Writing in the tradition of Hellman, Henley, and Norman, Gilman also focuses on objectification, commodification, and gendered violence from a more clearly feminist standpoint. Several other of Gilman's plays are also illustrative of how playwrights negotiate regional, class, race, and genre issues as they make setting choices, such as in *Spinning into Butter* (1999), which places racially motivated hatred, violence, and hypocrisy in a northern setting and *Boy Gets Girl* (2000), where Gilman puts a different type of violence and sexual objectification in a New York City setting. Place functions in a different way throughout these plays than those I discuss in other chapters; Gilman *places* narratives in both expected and unexpected regional settings, and both Norman and Gilman explore what it means to be confined to or escape these places.

Of the playwrights I discuss beyond the Hellman, Henley, and Norman "Trinity," Rebecca Gilman has achieved the most commercial and critical success, and her plays have been produced widely outside of the South. While there is little scholarship on her work, some of it does consider her as a southern playwright, and her plays have been compared to Norman and Henley's,² although the connections between *Getting Out* and *Glory* have not been discussed. She's been the recipient of numerous awards, including the 1999 Evening Standard Award for Most Promising Playwright for *The Glory of Living*, marking the first time an American playwright won this British award. *Glory* was also a finalist for the 2002 Pulitzer Prize. Unlike Hellman, Henley, and Norman, the feminist qualities of Gilman's work have not gone unnoticed, as she raises questions central to feminist discourse in both southern and non-southern settings. Chris Jones' assessment of Gilman is right on: "she does not shirk from

exposing complex themes with a strongly feminist sensibility, dispensed with just the right quirky touch of nouveau Southern gothic” (*Beginner’s Guide* 29).

Gilman seems particularly aware of the demographics of her audience and the role that region plays in audience and critical reception, and she too has made strategic setting choices which are especially clear in her treatment of her Jeff Award-winning play *Spinning into Butter*, set at a fictional Vermont college. It was even adapted for a 2007 film directed by Mark Brokaw and starring Sarah Jessica Parker, as Sarah Daniels, the Dean of Students who is forced to confront some difficult questions and her own tacit racism when a black student at the college starts receiving racially-charged threats. White school officials and students are quick to plan ineffectual forums and discussions on race, which despite their good intentions, often explode into bitter arguments and escalating tension between the white and black students. Sarah recognizes the failure of the administration’s strategies: “All you do is talk about racism, and then you heave this collective sigh of white guilt, and then everyone feels better, and then they drive downtown in their Saabs and buy sweaters” (31). The play is essentially an exploration of liberal white guilt, and it highlights the damage engendered not just by deliberate acts of racism like the threats the student is receiving, but the unacknowledged inevitable racism that lies deep within everyone, blacks and whites alike. Sarah has taken “every class on African American literature and theory” (62), but when she is forced to confront her deepest prejudices, she recognizes that if she has the choice to sit next to a black man on the train or stand, she’ll stand. Finally, the questions are only complicated further when it’s revealed that the black student has actually been sending the threats to himself.

The play’s setting is based in Gilman’s brief time at Middlebury College in Vermont, where she attended college before transferring back home to Birmingham-Southern College. Gilman says she didn’t feel completely at ease as a southern transplant in Vermont, and during

her time there felt a sense of dislocation she wrote into some of the play's characters. Gilman remarks, "I didn't come from *Tobacco Road*," she said. "But I never felt comfortable where almost everyone was from New England and liked to ski. There was just a big cultural difference between me and everyone else" (*Spotlighting* 3). Gilman describes feeling a very real difference between the North and South, and placing a play about racism in a northern, rather than southern setting is strategic. Gilman knew that her audience in London and Chicago would be white, educated liberals, people like Dean Sarah Daniels. In an interview, she tells Lyn Gardner that when racists are portrayed on film and television, they are often stupid, fat people, which allows educated liberals to disassociate themselves from that mindset: "It makes it too easy for us. I wanted to play with people's expectations of the characters and force them to think about their own buried, unadmitted racism" (14).

The impetus for the play was actually a real-life incident at Middlebury when a black student was the recipient of racial threats. Gilman remembers that the New England students demonstrated a twisted curiosity about racism in southern culture: "People I didn't know would hear I was from Alabama and come knocking on my door and say: 'Tell me about racism in the south.' I'd say: 'Tell me about racism in the north.' It was as though they didn't think racism was their problem" (Gardner 14). As Sarah jokes in the play: "If you don't like black people, moving to Vermont can take care of that. Because there aren't any black people here" (60). Gilman's memories of this incident in college are telling and indicative of her approach for *Spinning into Butter*. In choosing a northern rather than southern setting (where racism might simply be expected) and depicting liberal, educated racists rather than fat, stupid (or southern) ones, she doesn't give northern audiences the opportunity to disassociate themselves in any way from the problem.

While Gilman finds it important to move race out of a southern setting, she does set sexual violence in “various locations in Tennessee, Georgia and Alabama” (4) in *The Glory of Living*. Norman also places *Getting Out* in the South, in the Alabama prison where Arlie is incarcerated and in Arlene’s new apartment in Louisville, and she endows her characters with “a country twang.” Norman now maintains that she would not give her first play the southern setting: “If I were writing *Getting Out* today, you would probably not be able to tell where it was taking place. As it is, it’s very specific” (Betsko and Koenig 337). However, she seems to find some difference between *Getting Out* and *‘night Mother* that dictated a non-specific setting for *‘night Mother*, as she views Arlene’s story as one “about general triumph over adversity. *‘night Mother* is about a different set of problems” (Talkback). In the reviews of *Getting Out*, most critics make a point to acknowledge either Norman’s southern roots or the play’s southern setting, but it did not especially suffer from these regional identifiers in reviews or reception; in fact, one reviewer praised it and dismissed the regional label it had been receiving: “it’s in no way specifically about Kentucky, or the boarder [sic] states, or, really, any one area of the country” (Kerr D5).

The play opens as Arlene, now in her late twenties, is being released from Alabama’s Pine Ridge Correctional Institute prison after serving eight years for the second-degree murder she committed during an escape from another prison where she was serving a sentence for forgery and prostitution. Arlene is joined on stage by the teenager Arlie, who Norman describes in her production notes as “the violent kid Arlene was until her last stretch in prison” and “Arlene’s memory of herself, called up by her fears, needs, and even simple word cues.” The two inhabit the stage at the same time, the action alternating and sometimes overlapping between Arlie raising hell in her jail cell and Arlene unpacking in her dismal Louisville apartment. Arlene hopes to start a new life, not simply one outside prison, but hopefully one

without abuse, crime, and prostitution. Yet the threats and temptations from her old life appear at every turn. Arlene has caught a ride home from Bennie, a guard she's befriended, unaware that he's smitten enough to have quit his job at the prison, thinking he'll just stay on in Kentucky with her. He's well-meaning and seems to be trying to care for her, but his presence is a paternalistic reminder of her old life. When she rejects his advances politely, saying, "I don't need nobody hangin around remindin me where I been" (13), he tries to rape her, although he refuses to call it that, suddenly shocked to hear himself accused of the types of things the men he guards have been: "Don't you call me no rapist" (36). Her cab driver/prostitute mother comes to visit first, and it's clear that she won't be a positive force in Arlene's readjustment. She discourages her daughter when she talks of trying to get her son Joey out of foster care and back with her, scoffs when Arlene hints at wanting to reorganize their Sunday pot roast family dinners, and leaves calling her the "same hateful brat" (27).

Her former pimp and boyfriend, Carl, arrives out on prison break, ridicules her talk of a dishwashing job and tries to tempt her with the easy money of prostitution: "You can either work all week for it or make it in two hours" (56). To escape the heat, he's got a plan for them. Not surprisingly, their destination is New York City, and Norman too highlights the difference between the South and the big city, where Carl promises they'll be rich and live a glamorous life: "We be takin our feet to the New York street. No more fuckin around with these jiveass southern turkeys. We're goin to the big city, baby. Get you some red shades and some red shorts an the johns'll be linin up fore we hit town. Four tricks a night" (29). He brags about a stylish green hat bought in Birmingham that just doesn't seem to fit in Louisville, but he's sure he could show his true pimp style in New York City: "New York's where you wear just what you feel like" (29).

Arlene manages to get rid of each of these poisonous influences, and Norman ends on a hopeful note, suggesting that through the help of her neighbor Ruby, who is also an ex-con, Arlene can be content with washing dishes for minimum wage, playing Old Maid, and watering her plants. But Norman doesn't give in to sentimentality or suggest that things on the outside will be easy for Arlene, who seems to accept Ruby's tough-nosed approach:

ARLENE. Well, I'm sorry...it's just...I thought
RUBY. ...it was gonna be different. Well, it ain't. And the sooner you believe it,
the better off you'll be. (59)

Weighing the pros and cons of her old life and potential new one, what emerges as most worthwhile is her own autonomy, when her body is no longer a commodity under Carl's ownership and her money is her own. Ruby reminds her that even if she's bored, tired and underpaid in a dishwashing job, at the end of the day, "when you make your two nickels, you can keep both of em" (59).

Unfortunately things don't end as well for Gilman's young Lisa, who sits on death row at the end of *The Glory of Living*. *Glory* begins with the fifteen-year-old Lisa and her mother in their Tennessee mobile home, welcoming two guests: men that her mother, a prostitute, has picked up off the CB radio. Lisa knows the routine, so she sits watching television with an ex-con named Clint while her mother has sex with the other man in the same room, with only a bed sheet as a barrier. Gilman's set description reflects Lisa's life: "While the stage itself is minimally furnished, what is there suggests poverty and disregard" (5). After this first scene, Gilman moves forward two years, in which Lisa has traded one bad option for another. She's married to Clint and has two children with him, although they've left the children with her mother while they travel, living in various dismal hotel rooms throughout the South. Clint, a sexual sadist, routinely rapes and abuses Lisa, but worse, he forces her to go out and convince young girls to come back to their hotel room, where he rapes and abuses them. After he's had

his fun, it's Lisa's duty to take the girls to the woods to shoot and kill them. Finally, Lisa's "anonymous" calls to the police land them both in jail, with Lisa facing death row because she pulled the trigger, not Clint.

Norman and Gilman's focus on unprivileged women places their work within the realist tradition and it is an approach that not only challenges the notion of the universal spectator, but is also in line with trends in southern literature in recent years. In *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World*, Fred Hobson argues that southern literature has evolved "from a writing by and principally about the privileged—though occasionally about the lower classes, comically rendered—to a literature by, and seriously treating, the common people" (23). Their approach is also naturalist as well, in that it highlights how environment and status can dictate an individual's experiences.³ Lisa tries to explain Clint's and her actions to her lawyer and the police, but she really offers no satisfying explanation. She says of the girls they victimized and killed, "They was gonna die anyway. [...] There's just people as are gonna die. Just people as are gonna get killed. [...] Because they're of that type. It's just a thing that happens to a type. And it woulda kept happenin' forever" (68-9). Lisa's comment reflects both Gilman and Norman's view that Arlie/Arlene and Lisa are also of that type—their experiences have partly been determined by their gender, class, and family environment and they are confined to these places.

Both girls were raised by mothers who made money working as prostitutes, presumably because of their own circumstances as poor women with little education and few job prospects. Lisa's mother clearly conducted her business more openly, but young Arlie's mother too would take her along on her outings as a cab driver, an occupation she used as a front for turning tricks, leaving her in the car while she would go into homes or bars for sex. The girls are given age-inappropriate introductions to sex, and their first knowledge of female sexuality is wrapped

up in notions of women's bodies as commodities and the gendered violence that often occurs in such contexts. In the encounter behind the bed sheet between Lisa's mom and the trucker, we hear shrieks and an "Ow!" (14) amidst sounds of pleasure, so Gilman at least hints at the potential for violence in this line of work. As for their fathers, Lisa's father died when she was ten, but she seems to remember him fondly, as she carries a toy piano he gave her.

We know that Arlie's father was physically violent to her mother, and Norman sprinkles subdued references to incest and sexual abuse in Arlie's dialogue. Unlike Vogel's unwavering treatment of Uncle Peck's abuse of Li'l Bit, Norman buries the incest in *Getting Out*. It's insinuated early on that Arlie's father has been sexually abusing her through remembrances that come in quick snippets next to the action in Arlene's apartment: "Nobody done this to me, Mama. [...] Was... (*Quickly*) my bike. My bike hurt me. The seat bumped me. [...] Daddy didn't do nuthin to me" (15-16). Whether he frames it as allowance or a bribe for her silence, it is implied that he gives her money after abusing her, in a type of twisted precursor to the prostitution work she begins as a teenager. Like Lisa who takes up with Clint to escape her home environment, Arlie moves from her father's abuse to that of pimps and johns. Since she works for a pimp, she doesn't even have full ownership of her own body and income; Carl arranges her transactions and takes a percentage of what she makes. While Lisa doesn't work as a prostitute, Clint abuses and controls her and routinely sexually victimizes her.

Both Norman and Gilman also comment on how patriarchy, misogyny, and sexual exploitation are actually built into and perpetuated by institutions like correctional facilities and the judicial system. The subtle references to the sexual abuse Arlie experienced from her father are magnified by the role of the male authority figures that Arlie/Arlene encounters, from the doctor and warden to guards at the prison, nearly all of which are figured as potential sexual predators. To be fair, Arlie does her share of antagonizing the prison officials, but the male

warden, guards, and doctor treat her roughly and leave her in constant lock-up. Their threats and teasing take the form of misogynist language, sexual exploitation, and violence. They remark to each other, “I’ll show that screachin slut a thing or…” (42), and tell her that they “Got us a two-way mirror in the shower room” (14). When Arlie sets a fire in her cell at one point, prison officials rush to put it out and inject her with a sedative. Searching for the accelerant while Arlie is unconscious, a guard’s treatment of her resembles a near rape: “So where is it now? Got it up your pookie, I bet. Oh, that’d be good. Doc comin back an me with my fingers up your…Roll over…Don’t weigh hardly nuthin, do you, dollie?” (11). What happens next is open to interpretation, but it’s clear that he finds a lighter under the mattress and he says, “Don’t you know bout hide an seek, Arlie, girl? Gonna hide somethin, hide it where it’s fun to find it” (12).

The only wholly positive male figure in the play is the prison chaplain, who never appears on stage, but seems to be at least partly responsible for Arlie’s transformation into Arlene. Perhaps her first encounter with a male who isn’t a sexual predator, his visits begin to mean a lot to Arlie, and when he transfers facilities suddenly, his departure is the impetus for a bloody incident with a fork. Over time Arlene began to believe that “Arlie was my hateful self and she was hurtin me and God would find some way to take her away” (60) and when the chaplain is gone, she stabs herself repeatedly, almost dying, in a symbolic killing of Arlie, the hate and anger inside of her. From that point on, Arlene says, prison officials said there was “such a change in me” (61). One of the few and obviously treasured belongings she unpacks is “a cheaply framed picture of Jesus” (10) the chaplain left for her upon leaving. Arlie doesn’t seem overly devoted, but keeps the picture around, more as a reminder of the chaplain, but perhaps as an option if she ever really needs one. In fact, Norman’s vision for Arlene is similar to Pearl Cleage’s conception of Jesus’s potential for Rosa in *Chain*—faith and religion are set

up as strong alternatives to their old life. The only other positive force for her in the play is another woman, her neighbor, an ex-con named Ruby, who seems as if she'll be a genuine, smart mentor and friend for Arlene. In the final scenes of the play, Ruby stops by, and her presence helps Arlene get rid of a particularly threatening Carl, who has returned, and an apologetic, once again kind Bennie. Arlene is ready to repel both types of men, and it seems definitive that they'll stay away, or in Carl's case, be caught and sent back to prison. Norman's ending suggests Ruby and Arlene have forged a female solidarity that will sustain them in a straight life and protect against male predators.

Gilman also calls attention to the failures of the judicial system to consider the role that Clint's abuse and control may have played in Lisa's actions. In a particularly astute observation, Lisa tells her lawyer that the men and women of the jury take gendered violence as a fact of life: "Half of them guys beat the shit outta their wives. And them wives, they say, 'Shit, I git beat up, I don't go killin' nobody over it'" (79). A witness—one of the dead girls' boyfriends—suggests that the system will show little mercy in the type of sentence she receives. He predicts her fate when he is being interviewed by her lawyer, Carl:

STEVE. I hope they give her the chair.

CARL. We'll see about that.

STEVE. How long you lived in Alabama?

CARL. All my life.

STEVE. Then you know what I do. They'll give her the chair. (63)

Lisa has just turned eighteen when she is apprehended, so she is eligible to be tried and sentenced as an adult. Carl also remarks that she's "not a convincing witness," because she lacks the appropriate display of human social cues and codes that are often more essential to convincing a jury than the facts of the case; he tells her, "you smile at all the wrong times" (68). Lisa is doubly bound by her regional *place*, the South, with its violent history and reputation for aggressive death penalty policies, and her *place* in society: as a young, poor

female who doesn't possess the means that might help her escape this fate: for instance, an expensive, skilled lawyer, or an understanding of the social "performances" she might enact to convince a jury to show her mercy.

Aside from the other forces that shape their lives, Arlie and Lisa may never have committed these crimes if they didn't have abusive men in their life who wield a type of control over them. Lisa says she committed the murders because "Clint tole me to" (52), and she says she didn't have a choice; if she hadn't followed Clint's wishes, "He'd a killed me" (52), and if she ran away, he would have "just found me" like he had in the past, because "he knows how" (66). Arlie does her first stint in prison for prostitution and forgery that Carl actually committed, and she becomes a mother at too young an age, an unfortunate consequence of biology that she figures as Carl's fault. She explains what led up to her first prison term: "He picked me up an we went to Alabama. There was this wreck an all. I ended up at Lakewood for forgery. It was him that done it. Got me pregnant, too" (32). Whether in pregnancy or a criminal sentence, the women carry the burden of consequence: Lisa will be put to death by electric chair, while Clint will "be out in a couple of years" (67).

The neglect and abuse Arlie and Lisa have experienced have skewed their view of normalcy, and they've developed techniques necessary to survive in this environment, like responding to violence with violence. At one point in the play, Clint tells Lisa to act normal so the girls will be more likely to get in the car with her, and she says that she does, to which he responds, "You don't know what normal is" (38). In an arranged conjugal visit, Lisa ends up rejecting him after they speak briefly, but he does try to comfort her: "You did what was right honey. Don't feel bad. You were just tryin' ta protect yourself 'cause wadn't nobody there to do it for you" (75). Gilman endows both Lisa and Clint with lines that emphasize her naturalistic viewpoint. In fact, Gilman has said "The springboard for the play came from a real

Alabama murder during my senior year of college. The criminal was a young girl who had not been taught to value her own life, so she could not be expected to value anyone else's"

(*Beginner's Guide* 27).

While Arlie and Lisa are both victims of family circumstances, poverty, institutionalized patriarchy and misogyny, and gendered violence, neither Norman nor Gilman excuse their actions, balancing the compassion we feel for these women with reminders of their culpability. As Mimi Kramer notices in her review of *Glory*: "We're never asked to sympathize with Lisa or excuse her, but it's possible to be moved by her explanation." While many of their actions are a result of their male lover/pimp's influence, in both instances they commit heinous crimes seemingly on their own without the supervision or cajoling of Carl or Clint. Lisa seems monstrous as she talks about injecting a girl with the plumbing fix Draino because she can't bear to shoot her as Clint has ordered. She genuinely seems to think she has done the most merciful thing she could have in the circumstances, even though Clint was miles away, back in the hotel room drinking beer.

When Arlie escapes from prison during her prostitution and forgery stint, she commits her major crime without Carl, described by the parole board as "second-degree murder of a cab driver in conjunction with a filling station robbery involving attempted kidnapping of attendant" (5). While it's not exactly clear what happened, Carl's version goes like this:

CARL. You forget, we seen it all on TV in the dayroom you bustin outta Lakewood like that. Fakin that palsy fit, then beatin that guard half to death with his own key ring. Whoo-ee! Then that spree you went on...stoppin at that fillin station for some cash, then kidnappin the old dude pumpin the gas.

ARLENE. Yeah.

CARL. Then that cab driver comes outta the bathroom an tries to mess with you and you shoots him with his own piece. That there's nice work, Mama.

ARLENE. That gun...It went off, Carl.

CARL. That's what guns do, doll. They go off. (30)

Arlene seems to be claiming the shooting was accidental, but it does seem significant that she shoots a cab driver who tried to “mess with” her, a cab driver like her father and mother. This shooting not only suggests that she was trying to survive and protect herself, but that her crime is a response to her association of cabs and cab drivers with her parents, her mother’s prostitution and her father’s sexual abuse. Clearly, while we sympathize, both Arlie and Lisa have committed violent crimes and they are not always likeable protagonists. While Arlene is more pleasant in her adult version, her moments of subdued anger in the present and what we know of her past actions hint at a still-present capacity for violence and unpleasantness. Lisa, on the other hand, is alternately dimwitted and astute, and it becomes difficult to discern her motivations.

Gilman and Norman challenge the idea of the universal spectator by presenting characters that deviate from that model. Lisa and Arlie/Arlene, poor, young, uneducated, incarcerated for violent crime or prostitution, are the types of women who might not ever enter the consciousness of the theatre-going audience until the playwrights give them voice. As her strategy for *Spinning into Butter* corroborates, Gilman is aware of the makeup of a typical theatre audience, one that perpetuates the troublesome notion of the universal spectator: “What you end up with is a more and more elite audience. And right now, of course, an older and older audience. You don’t get the kind of diversity or the young crowd that you want, and theater starts to feel like some sort of rarefied art form” (Renner 3). Critics generally comment on the southern “trailer trash” (Sommer) setting, but most agree that Gilman avoids stereotype and presents an honest portrayal of a group often caricatured. They will watch closely for regional stereotypes too, as Chris Jones’ comment illustrates: “Instead of sensationalizing the killing spree or indulging in Southern stereotypes, Gilman made the case that we all bear

responsibility for young people whose childhoods have been stolen by a society that no longer nurtures its young” (28).

Writing in *New York* magazine, John Simon notes both the hazards of “trailer trash” or “redneck” depictions, often closely related to southern ones or placed in a southern context, and praises Gilman’s achievement:

Trailer-trash comedy or drama, perhaps not quite in evidence enough for a genre, surely qualifies as a subgenre. It caters to an audience’s need to feel superior to at least some people without becoming politically incorrect. “Redneck,” after all, refers less to skin color than to a darkness of mind, a state that can be exploited for easy laughs and titillating goosebumps. That Rebecca Gilman’s characters in *The Glory of Living* are both risible and reprehensible, but not patronized or caricatured, is in itself an accomplishment.

Not all reviewers agreed, and Ted Hoover’s perspective, writing in the *Pittsburg City Paper*, demonstrates the hold that the ideal spectator has over theatre consciousness:

Unless, I suppose, you’re a serial rapist and murderer (and stranger than that, read this column), I think we can all agree that the entertainment potential here hovers around zero. And given the specificity of the milieu, the characters and their story, I don’t think Gilman’s trying to make any sort of point with *Glory*. Since the people *in* the play would never be the same people who *see* a play, Gilman must be trying to tell us something about *them*. But what? Rapists are bad people? Trailer parks are nasty places? Or is it just the mundane fetishizing of brutality? (2)

It seems a bit ridiculous and reductive to declare, basically, that plays depicting concerns that the audience cannot identify with have no value, and to assume that a play depicting rape and murder could not possibly have anything to say to an audience member unless that spectator was a serial rapist and murderer. He makes elitist assumptions about his column’s audience and the audience who attends the theatre, ones that may not be wrong, but ones that perpetuate the silence of the very people that Gilman is trying to give voice. Gilman is trying to tell people like Hoover that there is something to learn about “them,” but her message probably isn’t found in the questions Hoover asks. With her title and her play’s subject matter, Gilman

suggests that living isn't so glorious for some people, and even if those people aren't the ones with the luxury of attending the theatre, they deserve to be seen and given voice. She asks her audience to consider the fine line that separate the incarcerated from the rest of society—those lines that determine who is the “type” to go to theatre and who is the “type” to rape and kill or be raped and killed—and, ultimately, to consider the forces that influence the establishment of those “types,” whether that be through trappings of gender, socioeconomic class, race, disenfranchisement, or other circumstances.

Gilman's *Boy Gets Girl* (2000) also explores objectification and gendered violence, but its setting and characterization differ greatly from *Glory*'s. It's not surprising that Gilman would set her play in New York City rather than the South in light of our perceptions of both places and the play's focus on stalking, a crime with particularly modern roots and implications. Despite the supposed anonymity that New York City offers, we live in a time where the private information of an individual is increasingly more accessible, making us more susceptible to personal violations from identity theft to violent crime. The protagonist of *Boy Gets Girl* is an educated thirty-something professional woman, Theresa Bedell, who is seemingly well-adjusted and has a smart, in-control view of the world around her. While *Glory*'s Lisa probably doesn't know the word “feminist,” Theresa calls herself a feminist.

In fact, some reviewers seemed uncomfortable with Gilman's transparency. Writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, Charles Spencer commented that the play was “more entertaining than its earnest feminist themes might suggest,” but for some, like Mark Steyn, the feminist perspective was a liability: he writes that the play occasionally “starts turning into the Women's Studies paper it always wanted to be. [...] Increasingly the scenes seem like staged illustrations of Professor Gilman's talking points” (Steyn). The overall effect of the play was still solid, though, to many: “The emotional complexity of Gilman's script lifts it above the level of a cop-

shop drama with feminist underpinnings” (Reid). Writing in *The Guardian*, Michael Billington has a similar, but different criticism: “If I have any qualm, it is that Gilman tries too hard to work in every possible viewpoint” (16). Billington’s observation is true—we hear from ditzy, intelligent, feminist and non-feminist women, ordinary guys, and those who make a living objectifying women. While her approach is certainly feminist, the events of the play lead both the male and female characters to self-examination and to grapple with difficult questions about gender and sexual politics from the viewpoints of men and women. To say the very least, even if critics feel that Gilman is overly didactic, her engagement with feminist discourses does not go unnoticed, not the type of responses that Hellman, Henley, or Norman immediately elicited with their work.

Theresa Bedell is a never-married woman of thirty-five to forty who is completely devoted to her work as a journalist at *The World*, a New York magazine on “culture and politics and art” (39). She is the essence of the typical career woman: she has no social life, doesn’t seem to have any friends outside of work, no family, both of her parents are deceased. It’s clear that she’s an intellectual; she was a history major in college, went to graduate school in journalism, calls herself a feminist, and talks enthusiastically about the novels of William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, and Henry James. Her work at *The World* includes such diverse assignments as visiting Edith Wharton’s upstate estate and interviewing Les Kennkat, “a movie producer and director of low-budget, sixties sexploitation movies” (37), but she really just wants to write about the Yankees, her other passion.

When Theresa accepts a blind date set up by her former research assistant, she finds Tony, a thirty-something attractive computer technician, relatively unimpressive. Midway through the course of their mostly awkward conversation, Tony asks too early if she wants to go to dinner on that coming Saturday, and Theresa begrudgingly accepts. The next morning he

sends flowers to her office, then calls to make sure she got them. At first Tony simply seems overeager, but once Theresa tells him she doesn't think she's ready to date anyone, his actions soon accelerate into obsession. He shows up at the office, continues to send flowers, leaves long phone messages, and seems to somehow always know where she is or has been, as if he is following or watching her. After Theresa takes out a restraining order, Tony "turns genuinely ominous, with *Boy Gets Girl* becoming a case of Boy Hurts Girl" (Sommer). She receives sexually explicit, threatening letters from him, and he breaks into and destroys her possessions in her apartment. Finally, convinced that her life is in great danger and there is nothing she or the police can do to make him stop, Theresa is forced to relocate to Denver, where she will work as a sports columnist under a new name.

At first, both the audience and Theresa's coworkers recognize her as a familiar type: the driven, emotionally unavailable career woman, who, as Ben Brantley notices in his *New York Times* review, "wears the glossy, hard veneer that is the uniform of many New Yorkers [that] allows her to have her privacy and an interior life in a city of combative strangers." Theresa too has internalized this characterization—when she tells Tony she "just can't" date anybody, that's her reason: "because I spend so much time on my work. [...] I'm just not a good person to be in a relationship with. I'm too selfish or something" (29). Initially her coworkers attempt to explain Tony's strange behavior based on familiar narratives about men, women, and dating. When Tony calls to make sure she got the flowers, Howard overhears her turn down Tony's offer to pick her up for Saturday's date. He says you should have "let him be gallant" (22), but Theresa has little use for such chivalry, "That's like a hundred and fifty blocks worth of gallantry, round trip. That's ridiculous" (22). Howard tells her she should be flattered, reminding her she hasn't dated anyone in a long time since her last breakup, so she's probably just not used to it, not comfortable with the attention. Initially all of Theresa's coworkers see

her as the frigid career-focused woman who just needs to open herself up to a nice man in her life. Harriet, the perky, dense new secretary echoes Howard's early sentiments: "If some guy was sending me flowers, I'd be flattered" (45). When it later becomes clear that Harriet is responsible for some of the security breaches, she tells Theresa, " I didn't know. I mean, I just thought, you know, you had broken up with your boyfriend and Tony seemed so nice and everything. I didn't know you at all. And then, in all honesty, you seemed sort of mad or mean or something at first" (101).

As her coworkers try to rationalize Tony's behavior when his actions are still innocuous but insistent, they offer reasons based in familiar narratives that center the blame on Theresa. Perhaps Theresa is sending mixed messages, or hasn't said no emphatically enough. Howard tries several likely explanations:

HOWARD. Are you feeling guilty about something?

THERESA. What would I feel guilty about?

HOWARD. Well, did you sleep with him?

THERESA. No! Howard. Jesus. (48)

Then Howard decides Tony just doesn't get it, and likens Tony's oblivion to his own behavior with women in his life, although the comparison isn't useful:

HOWARD. All right, I'm sorry. Here's what I think: I think the guy can't take a hint is all. I'd say, just pretend he's not there and eventually he'll lose interest.

THERESA. I haven't been hinting. I've been directly stating.

HOWARD. Well, you know how guys are. It takes a while for things to sink in.

For example, I was positive that Claudia and I were going to get back together, until she served me with divorce papers. Probably this guy is the same. He just doesn't want to accept that it's over.

THERESA. Maybe so.

HOWARD. I'm not helping, am I?

THERESA. I just don't think the situations are the same. (48)

Or simply, he's a "schmuck," Howard decides, "He just doesn't know what he's supposed to do, obviously. With women. He's probably shy" (47).

They bring up all the usual “explanations,” but Gilman paints Teresa as inculpable in the face of these familiar narratives—she didn’t sleep with Tony, didn’t kiss him, even breaks their second date short to let him know it’s not going to work and leaves the restaurant. While women are often socialized to “be nice” no matter the circumstances—a quality that can make them more susceptible to crime or victimization—Teresa is not one of those women. In fact, she’s just short of civil to him and most everyone she encounters—sarcastic, abrupt, “mad or mean” (101), as Harriet articulates it. Theresa too, though, thinks she must have done something wrong, something to invite this attention: “I keep thinking I did something” (83). Gilman also removes sex appeal from the equation, as Tony is described as “attractive,” but Theresa’s appearance isn’t specified aside from Tony’s comment that she is “really thin” (14). When Les Kennkat asks her to have a drink and watch the Yankees with him after their first interview, he quickly qualifies: “It’s not a date or anything. You’re not my type, if you know what I mean. I mean, you know, I would never put you in one of my movies” (44). It doesn’t seem that Theresa is the “type” Kenkatt looks for when casting, girls with “a nice ass [and] colossal tits” (38), so her appearance doesn’t immediately suggest she “asks” for objectification. She also simply seems too smart, too cautious and self-aware, to get herself in a situation like this.

But ultimately, Tony doesn’t even really know her—he rambles about himself nervously throughout each date, and we learn virtually nothing about Theresa in comparison. Theresa truly does become an object, then, since Tony fixates on her despite the fact that they haven’t really had a significant relationship of any kind and he lacks an understanding of who she is as a person. It is almost as if Theresa simply was in the wrong *place* at the wrong time—that her former assistant could have sent any other woman and Tony would have behaved the same way. Theresa searches for answers, asking Detective Beck, the female policewoman who

handles her case, “But do I seem like a person who would get stalked?” (83). Beck tells her it doesn’t really happen to a type, that “there’s never any rhyme or reason to it” (83). Theresa notes that the detective seems to be following a standard procedure, which comforts her, that there’s “a standard reply to this. It means I’m not alone” (83).

The forces responsible for the kind of victimization Theresa is experiencing are a bit more difficult to identify than they are in Arlie and Lisa’s situations, but one of the culprits seems to be narratives about gender and sexual politics proliferated through the media. It is no accident that Theresa and her co-workers are magazine writers; throughout the play, Theresa and her coworkers create, consume and discuss narrative. The play’s title even references a happy and familiar denouement: boy gets girl and they live happily ever after. Upon first contemplating what seems to be happening to Theresa, Mercer, a writer relatively new to the magazine, decides he wants to write about it for his next story—not about Tony and Theresa specifically, but of the abstract concept from the male perspective. He’s intrigued partly because of the narrative quality of it: he says Tony’s actions are that of a “normal guy. Or at least he’s doing what normal guys do in movies. It’s a classic romantic plot. [...] Even though the guy has basically been stalking her, his perseverance pays off. He gets the girl” (70). While this is a familiar and accepted plot device, probably to both male and female movie-going audiences, Mercer suggests that men have internalized these messages more deeply, perhaps believing that this is the type of action required to get the girl. It is not only the men who liken movie plots to their lives: Theresa too notices the narrative power of stories like these. She mentions that she’s been watching a lot of television while “hunkering down” (75) and hiding from Tony, and “there’s that cable channel, Lifetime? It’s the women’s network? They play all these made-for-TV movies on there, and I don’t know, every other night, I guess there’s one about stalking. They’re all called, like *Poisoned Love* or *Love Hurts*” (75). And not to suggest

that such narratives exist only in low culture, as Mercer chimes in: “Or *The Graduate*” (75). Theresa repeats their familiar story lines, and notices that usually, at the end, the woman shoots the stalker: “At first I was disgusted, but I found I kept watching the stupid things, because, at the end, I felt this real sense of satisfaction when the stalker got it in the head” (76). Theresa, of course, doesn’t get the same satisfaction as the fictional women on the Lifetime channel do.

Critics recognized the plot of *Boy Gets Girl* as a familiar one from contemporary television and film. In fact, Elyse Sommer predicted that “upon hearing the basic premise of Ms. Gilman's play they’re likely to view it as a theater piece masquerading as a movie or an episode from *Law & Order*.” Indeed Mark Steyn called the play, in less than complimentary terms, a “television movie plot,” and Ben Brantley noted that “the subject, with its blend of dark eroticism and ever expanding menace, has been a favorite of film and television for a couple of decades.” In fact, Gilman acknowledges that her play participates in but re-evaluates these familiar dialogues: “The pitfall is the expectations of the genre. You expect someone to get shot and that there will be a neat conclusion in some way or other. I wanted to take the subject seriously and write about it more realistically” (*Beginner’s Guide* 28). Sommer felt that Gilman was successful in her aim, writing:

But while the situation is indeed something likely to crop up on the small or big screen, *Boy Gets Girl* is not a cheap thriller. Instead it is a skillfully crafted play that delves into serious contemporary issues without excessive moralizing. It fits the thriller genre but is not afraid to break from its conventions with an ending that fails to offer the customary neat solution to the crime or the victim's dilemma.

Throughout the play, because she doesn’t have anyone else, Theresa’s main confidantes and supporters ultimately become her co-workers, and they grow to understand her in more nuanced ways than they did previously. Theresa’s situation leads her male coworkers to some serious self-examination as well. Howard’s initial reaction of “You should be very flattered” (20) changes when Theresa must come sleep at his house for safety, and when Tony even

begins following him, presumably because he falsely suspects that they are a couple. Mercer struggles with reaching out to Theresa as a friend, when he too awkwardly offers the couch at his home:

You know, I told Michelle the other day, though, that we should have you over for dinner or something. But I didn't know how to broach it. I don't know how to make friends as an adult. [...] In college you'd meet somebody, and if you both really liked Aerosmith, you were best friends. [...] And I was thinking, maybe that's what happened with Tony. Maybe you said something, on that first date, that made him think you were perfect for each other. It could have been anything, really, because he already had a picture of the ideal woman in his head, and he was just looking for somebody to impose that on. You probably said one little thing that fit the picture. Or you wore your hair a certain way. Or he liked the shape of your *(Theresa is staring at him.)* he liked the way you looked. (78-79)

Mercer suggests that women function as objects to be fit into narratives created by men, not only in how he thinks he should act to get the girl, but how he imagines he will fall for her before he even meets her—how one expression of her love for the Yankees, or that one particular physical feature that captivates him, and suddenly, he realizes that she's the one he's been searching for all his life. Theresa's male co-workers contemplate what constitutes stalking behavior, as Mercer does in this passage:

You know, I was wondering, did I ever do anything to scare a woman before? Not intentionally, but did I ever do anything that came off as scary? And I know, when I was in college, I had a girlfriend who dumped me for another guy and I would call her dorm room, just to see if she was there, or walk out of my way to see if her light was on. But just a couple of times, you know. I didn't make a career of it. (69)

Howard assures Mercer, "Everybody's done something like that" (69), and Mercer seems to agree that nearly everyone has exhibited one behavior or another that might be interpreted as stalking—he says, "I think that's my point. It's not exactly normal behavior. But it's on the same continuum" (69). It's clear that Tony's behavior has surpassed normal, but it's difficult for them to identify when it might become frightening for the person on the receiving end of it.

If Gilman appears overly polemical, it is because she seeks to explore the root causes and broader social implications of Theresa's story. When Theresa asks Detective Beck about what she might have done to lead Tony to this behavior, Beck tells her: "We can't always tell how much is us, and how much is the world around us" (84). Clearly, how both men and women perceive and respond to themselves and to others are shaped by forces much larger than the individual. As Howard and Mercer discuss the situation, they think that Tony, having internalized the classic movie plot, must be wondering, "Why don't I get the girl?" (70). They go on, asking, "And what are the girls thinking?" and arriving at the conclusion that "They're thinking...I look great. Everybody's watching me. But I can't write that. [...] I'm a man. But it's true, isn't it? I mean, don't some women walk around thinking they look good?" (70). However, the men recognize the system that creates this dynamic: Mercer says, "I also think that's because she's been told all her life that she should want people to look at her. Just like I've been told that I'm the one who's supposed to do the looking" (70).

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger studies nudes and female bodies in art and advertisement and determines that these representations reflect and mold our society's structure, in which:

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight. (47)

Howard and Mercer actually recognize: "We're taught to look at asses. And women are taught that they want to have their asses looked at [...] [by] "everybody. Every ad on TV. Every song on the radio. Every *Esquire*. Every *Cosmopolitan*. Every Les Kennkat movie" (71). Later, Theresa, disgusted at her own complicity in cultivating "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 299), remembers, "When I got ready to go out to dinner with him, that Saturday night, I changed

clothes three times. I kept looking at myself in the mirror. [...] I was looking in the mirror to see how I would look to him. [...] It makes me physically ill. How much I wanted to look good” (92).

The Kennkat side plot is so obviously familiar ground for feminist discussions about objectification that it is not surprising that critics saw a list of Gilman’s talking points. Les Kennkat censors nothing in his interviews with Theresa, detailing his criteria for casting: “gigantic breasts,” and his ritualistic practice of immediately discarding a woman’s previous name for a screen name when he hires her, devising the perfect moniker by “staring at her naked breasts [...] or fucking her” (67). In juxtaposing Kennkat’s method for naming his film stars, in which he discards their real name for something that reflects a perception of them only as an object, with Theresa’s forced loss of her name and her identity at the end of the play, Gilman suggests that some of the same forces are at work in the genesis of both. Kate Bassett reads the ending as a “metaphorical ‘rape’ of Theresa’s identity as she has to abandon her apartment, her job, her name,” which as a writer, is central to her identity and reputation. Gilman suggests that Kennkat’s semi-pornographic movies, magazine advertisements, and Tony’s fixation on Theresa are all somehow symptoms and proliferations of complex problems surrounding how women are represented and perceived in contemporary society. *Boy Gets Girl* provides a solid example of what Gilman describes as her approach to writing plays: “I think writers have an obligation to be doctors. You’re a bad doctor if all you do is describe the symptoms of an ill society. You need to diagnose the underlying disease, then you might lead people towards a cure” (*Black and White* 6).

Theresa’s story is both individual and emblematic; as Ben Brantley notes, Gilman “takes scrupulous pains to present Theresa’s story as both particular and archetypal.” We see the specific effects the stalking has on Theresa, as it tears at every aspect of her life and leads

her to question her knowledge and confidence. It invades “not merely her physical privacy but also her professional skill and sense of identity” (Billington 16). When she interviews Kenkatt, she loses her cool, immediately judging him and calling his viewpoint “ridiculous” (42), and we sense that prior to the stalking, she might have found Kennkat vile but remained quiet and professional. Gilman reveals the emotional effect that objectification has on women, from Tony’s particular type of violation to what it feels like to be catcalled or be spoken to in a sexual manner randomly on the street. Theresa tells Mercer that even though Tony hasn’t killed her, “he’s already won” because:

It’s like when I go running in the park...if I still could...every week or so, not every day, but every week or two some guy drives by or walks by and says something to me. You know, “Nice ass” or “I want to jog with you” or “Fuck you.” Or “Fuck me.” It’s been happening since I was twelve, so I know how to ignore it. But every tenth time or so, I still feel it. I feel reduced. I feel like everything that I know about myself—that I’m a good writer and I’ve read a lot of books, and...I like fall better than spring or...[...] everything that I know about myself, just gets wiped out. It’s like I’m just this thing running down the sidewalk. I’m not me anymore. I’m just this thing. And that’s how I feel now. All the time. (111)

Over time, Theresa’s male co-workers begin to recognize Theresa’s experiences on a deeper level than a representation of the abstract, feminine perspective. When Theresa realizes that Mercer wants to write about what’s happening to her and confronts him, he tries to explain his reasoning to her, and their conversation escalates until Theresa forces Mercer into a raw, awkward moment:

MERCER. Well, I just want to write about how men and women see each other, but obviously I’m not qualified to write about this from a woman’s perspective. I mean, I can guess, but I don’t really know how women perceive themselves. In relation to the ways in which men perceive them. If you know what I mean.

THERESA. I do.

MERCER. So that’s where I would need your help. Or your blessing. Or something.

THERESA. [reading from Tony’s letter] Here are the ways in which I perceive myself. In relation to the ways men perceive me: I perceive myself to be a bitch.

MERCER. Don't read that.

THERESA. I perceive myself as something to be fucked until I scream.

MERCER. This isn't what I meant.

THERESA. As something to be nailed to the ground and fucked so hard I split
in two.

MERCER. Theresa, please don't look at that. (79-80).

If women do perceive themselves in relation to how men perceive them, as they both agree they do, then Theresa's perception of herself is distorted and damaged by how Tony has cast her.

Theresa's litany continues until she ends on, "You don't get to make something theoretical out of my life. [...] You stop. [...] I'm not theoretical. I'm real" (80). Ultimately Mercer validates Theresa's humanity, telling her, "I'm your friend. I see you and I know it's you. I know you're there. I do" (112). Finally, Mercer begins to see Theresa for who she is, not the story she represents. Just as Gilman writes the play—despite anticipating that some critics will view it as low-brow or overwrought—Mercer's still going to write the article, because it needs to be written, he needs to work out his own position within these difficult issues, and as the frequency with which the subject is treated attests—it has appeal.

The "feminist underpinnings" (Reid) of the play seemed to have alienated many critics and obscured their ability to see that Gilman ultimately does "try to work in every viewpoint" (16), an observation that Michael Billington at least makes, even if he feels it is a detriment to the play. For instance, Robert Shore, put off by Gilman's blatant feminist perspective, deduces that "Women, here, are the arbiters of high culture and justice; in her office, Theresa alone knows who William Dean Howells is, while the sole representative of the forces of law and order in the play is Detective Madeleine Beck. The writing is not unsubtle." Yet Shore's critique fails to acknowledge that Gilman also offers the male perspective from several camps: the seemingly ordinary guys Howard and Mercer, as well as Les Kennkat, the guy who makes a living objectifying women. If Theresa's professionalism hadn't been compromised by her situation, she might not have had the opportunity to engage with Les Kennkat in the way that

she does and begin to recognize his humanity. It's clear that Theresa's feminism is at odds with Kennkat's understanding of women, and in the scenes between the two, they disagree over whether his films "objectify" or "celebrate" (41) women. Each accuses the other of not being able to deal with the other gender, which amounts to "half the population of the world" (66). In this, Gilman does hint at "a tragic vision of a society in which men and women cannot see each other as human beings" (Zoglin), but that is not her overall assessment.

While Gilman does insist that men try to understand the implications of objectification for women, individually and collectively, she doesn't suggest that women have nothing to learn. Women, too, are guilty of utilizing men as tools to fit into idealized narratives—the ditzy Harriet has some pretty superficial requirements that she looks for in a romantic partner, and Tony recognizes women's potential narratives for the types of men they want to date, asking her if she doesn't want to see him anymore "because I didn't know who Edith Wharton was?" (30). And Gilman doesn't just indict men, but the larger forces that have contributed to this particular form of sexual objectification of women, which can lead to gendered violence, as well as more general forms of objectification. In an interview with Chris Jones, she alludes to these larger causes: "As a society we tend to dehumanize each other, whether through prejudice, sexism, economics, or the Internet. At some point we need to stop identifying so much with the things people are trying to sell us and try to think of each other on a more human level" (*Beginner's Guide* 28). Gilman directly links objectification with commodification here, as does Norman in *Getting Out*, which demonstrates the ways in which the commodification of women's bodies can lead to gendered violence.

In the end, Gilman gives humanity even to the man whose career is based on objectifying women. After their first disastrous interview, Kennkat asks Theresa, "Just don't crucify me in that article. Let me speak for myself. I can speak for myself" (44). However,

what is sarcastic to Theresa is truth to Kenkatt, who thanks her for the “brilliant” article: “I’ve never had a better write-up. You captured the quintessential me. Again and again, Les Kennkat, a lover of large breasts. I couldn’t have done it better myself” (94). It occurs to Theresa that maybe he “can’t help being a jerk” (94) and she visits him in the hospital after a colectomy, deciding this time to stay and watch Jeopardy with him. As they talk, she learns about his childhood and the experiences that shaped him, which leads her to recognize: “If girls were this unattainable thing to him, this prize that he didn’t deserve, then sure, he would go on to make movies about breasts in trees” (97). Finally, she learns that the greatest mistake of his life is not a missed pair of breasts, but losing his wife, a woman he loved, over his infidelities. Gilman asks her audience to look beyond the statistics that summarize stalking or violence to see the effects of victimization on one individual, but she also humanizes the type of person who many feminists might see as one of the quintessential contributors to the objectification of women and subsequently, gendered violence.

As the play, nears the end, it becomes increasingly clear that Tony presents a significant threat to Theresa, and while she doesn’t want to, moving and changing her name is her only choice if she wants to save her life. All along Tony has been sending Theresa threatening letters, leaving them in her apartment, with sentiments similar to the last letter he leaves there: “He said he wants to put a wire around my throat and pull it until it...until it slices through my throat” (109). At one point when Howard and Mercer return to her apartment to gather some of her things, it has been ransacked and nearly all of her belongings are destroyed. Aside from threatening her, by entering her apartment and damaging her possessions, Tony has violated some of the most intimate parts of Theresa, her safe place. He ripped up her pictures, even her deceased parents’ wedding photos, and destroyed one of the few things we know Theresa loves: her books, going to great lengths to rip pages and write “gross things in the margins”

(114). When Theresa returns with Howard and Mercer to pack her things for the move, Tony must still be watching, as he seems to know she's back. They see him lurking outside the window but he runs off when he sees the men. Mercer tries to chase him but comes back defeated: "He disappeared. I don't know where he went. [...] He could have gone anywhere"

(117). And that is exactly why Theresa must leave: Tony is still out there, with the intent and ability to hurt her, to kill her. Detective Beck makes clear the potentially horrifying conclusions these types of cases hold:

 THERESA. Well, what's the worst thing you've ever seen?

 BECK. You don't want to know.

 THERESA. Have you seen people killed?

 BECK. I've seen that.

 THERESA. That wasn't the worst thing? Detective?

 BECK. You don't want to know. (60)

The ending suggests that Theresa will be safe from Tony, living in Denver, and there is an undercurrent of hope: she finally gets to write about sports instead of sexploitation film directors, she'll at least be near a major league baseball team—the Colorado Rockies—and she's chosen the name Claire Howells, a nod to William Dean Howells, one of her favorite writers. Howard, Mercer, and Theresa exit her apartment to meet the police, and she tells Howard to leave the light on, "In case he's watching. I don't want him to know I've left" (120).

Gilman views *Boy Gets Girl* as the "flip side" (*Beginner's Guide* 28) to *Spinning into Butter*, in which she also treats objectification, but within the context of race. Whereas *Boy Gets Girl* explores what it feels like to be objectified, in *Spinning into Butter*, she takes white educated liberals to task for their unacknowledged racism, for the ways in which they claim to understand the minority experience, but might only be objectifying the people who supposedly represent it. Dean Sarah Daniels articulates this concept as she recalls her years in graduate school: "I read all this stuff I'd never read before. The whole shebang from Frederick Douglass to Henry Louis Gates Jr. to bell hooks. I wanted to hear the African American voice and the

African American viewpoint” (62). But she realizes later that “All I learned was how to appreciate black people. The way you might appreciate a painting or a good bottle of Bordeaux. I studied them to figure them out. Like Sanskrit. But that’s no different from hating them. [...] It’s called objectification (64).

As well as exploring objectification in both plays, Gilman utilizes region strategically in both *Spinning into Butter* and *Boy Gets Girl*, by placing racial tension in a northern setting and situating a particularly modern type of violence more appropriate in an urban, northern setting—once again, New York City. She also participates in a larger southern tradition of writing about violence, even though she does not always do so in a southern setting, and participates in feminist dialogues that consider the objectification of women and how it can lead to gendered violence. *The Glory of Living* parallels Marsha Norman’s *Getting Out*, and like *Boy Gets Girl*, each these plays investigate a particular type of violence: gendered violence. Theresa is not at all “the type” that Arlie/Arlene and Lisa are, but her experiences underscore the complexities and variety of forms gendered violence takes in women’s lives.

End Notes

¹ Watson lists several general characteristics of southern drama: the presence of one or more distinctive social types, of which the better plays will present clear and nuanced individuals within that framework; the evolution of the black character from comic to tragic, with a comparably intense attention to personality; violence; a loyalty to southern legendry and a focus on the past; fundamentalist religion captured in distinctively southern ways; a highly recognizable form of speech, marked by rhythms, pace, and phrases associated with the South; local color or picturesque settings and subjects; and a love-hate attitude toward the South (5).

² See Janet Gupton’s article “‘Unruling’ the Woman: Comedy and the Plays of Beth Henley and Rebecca Gilman” and Linda Rohrer Paige’s article “‘Off the Porch and into the Scene’: Southern Women Playwrights Beth Henley, Marsha Norman, Rebecca Gilman, and Jane Martin.”

³ For more discussion on realism, naturalism, and new modes within these approaches, especially in Henley and Norman’s work, see Demastes.

CHAPTER FIVE

“WOMEN WHO GAVE STORIES AS GIFTS”: REENVISIONING GENRE, SETTING, AND COMMUNITY

While most of the playwrights included in my project employ realism in their work, others depart from strict constructs of mode, genre, chronology, and place to create more flexibility in their conceptions of the South. This chapter examines the work of two contemporary African American, lesbian playwrights: Shay Youngblood's *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery* (1988) and Sharon Bridgforth's *loveconjure/blues* (2007). Shay Youngblood (b. 1959) is a native of Columbus, Georgia, who got her start in Atlanta theatres. Her play *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery* (1988), a stage version of her short story collection *The Big Mama Stories* (1989), was originally produced at Atlanta's Horizon Theatre and was presented at over 30 regional theaters around the country before its New York debut at the off off Broadway Vital Theatre in 2000. She is currently Writer in Residence at Texas A&M University in College Station. Sharon Bridgforth (b. 1958) grew up in South Central Los Angeles, but came from a family of southerners and often visited extended family in Memphis as a child. While she loved the urban diversity of Los Angeles, she describes feeling that her southern roots “were very fresh and on the surface” (Coward 1), and she lived among a group of black Americans whose families had migrated from the South at one point or another. She calls herself “urban raised and southern spirited,” noting that all of her work “is rooted in a southern voice and experience” (Bridgforth). *loveconjure/blues* developed out of several staged readings at the University of Texas-Austin and premiered at the Off Center in Austin in full in June 2007, then traveled in 2008 to the South Dallas Cultural Center and Northwestern University's Black and Latino Queer Performance Festival in Chicago. Bridgforth made her home in Austin for many years, but is currently living in New York.

Both Youngblood and Bridgforth draw on strategies that *replace* the South by transcending temporal, spatial, and genre constraints, as well as affirming the lives and creative expression of African Americans in the South, whose history has been obscured not only by racial oppression and trauma, but by a “vision of white cultural collectivity associated with the South” (Duck 21). Rather than narrowing their southern settings to a particular place and time, both writers expand traditional dramatic conceptions of space and chronology. Youngblood sets her play in the “1920s to present” in “a small southern town; a place where memories and dreams coincide” (384). Bridgforth gives no particular setting but writes prior to her text that it takes place “within a southern/rural/Black working class context” where “the past the present the future the living and the dead co-exist together.” While Bridgforth calls herself a playwright, she identifies *loveconjure/blues* not as a play, but a performance novel, explaining that it is “performance literature/a novel that is constructed for telling. the piece is not meant to be theatre/concert/an opera or a staged reading but is.” She also describes her work as “an articulation of the Jazz aesthetic as it lives in theatre,” and *loveconjure/blues* calls to mind this musical aesthetic in both form and content.

By emphasizing the African roots of African American cultural traditions as well as the racial traumas of slavery and Jim Crow, the setting of each play expands not only temporally, but geographically into Africa. Both Youngblood and Bridgforth affirm the value of African Americans’ lives in the South and celebrate African American artistic, creative, and ritualistic expression in storytelling, the music of spirituals, jazz and blues, and conjuring, considering these expressions as responses to racial trauma and violence. Kinship is not only defined through blood but through love, and for their characters, communion with family is not limited by time, space, life or death. Aside from their participation in larger African American literary traditions, Bridgforth and Youngblood redefine notions of gender expression and sexual and

romantic love acceptable in African American and southern communities. By intermingling geographies and temporalities and interweaving story, song, memory, and performance, these plays disrupt conventions of the dramatic genre, and *loveconjure/blues* especially reinvents the genre as the first “performance novel.”

Youngblood’s *Shakin’ the Mess Outta Misery* is a coming of age story told by “Daughter,” a black woman in her mid to late twenties who plays herself as a child and serves as the narrator in the present time. Most of the other characters are all “black women aged fifty-plus and have Southern accents” (383). Since the play is told through Daughter’s eyes, her female blood relatives are addressed by names that define the familial relationship, like Aunt and Mama, but those women who are less familiar and not related to Daughter by blood, as well as the older rather than younger women, are referred to as “Miss” prior to their first name, in the southern convention. There is Miss Corine, Miss Mary, Miss Lamama, Miss Rosa, Miss Shine, and Miss Tom. The actresses portray several different characters and Youngblood specifies that these can be reassigned at will except for the three most essential: Daughter, Big Mama (Daughter’s guardian), and Fannie Mae, Daughter’s blood Mama, described as “a dancing ghost” (383). When Daughter is young, her blood Mama Fannie Mae leaves home for New York City to pursue her dream of being a dancer. She leaves her daughter to be raised by Big Mama, but each of the women play a role in raising Daughter and they all become her surrogate mothers. Daughter knows her blood Mama is “up north,” where “she’s a dancer” (396), but remembers little about her. When Fannie Mae dies, they bring her body back from New York for the funeral, but none of the women explain the circumstances of her mother’s death to her until she is older. Her recollections chart her journey to her final discovery about her mother’s life and death and her final understanding of her own identity within her family and community of women.

Presumably because Fannie Mae dies while all of the women are still alive, she is called a “ghost,” but technically all of the women who appear on the stage are deceased, ghosts who appear in the recollections of Daughter. She has returned to her home for the funeral of her last Mama and begins to recall her upbringing and the lessons she’s taken from each of her caretakers. As the play opens, she enters the stage set of the home, humming, and “touching things in a familiar way” (385). She “eases into a story” that begins, “I was raised in this house by some of the wisest women to see the light of day. They’re all gone now. I buried the last one today” (385). Daughter is then joined on stage by her Big Mamas, also humming, who form a circle around the perimeters of the space with Daughter in center stage. She begins to introduce each one of them to the audience, and in doing so, Youngblood instructs: *“During their intro each woman exchanges places with Daughter in center. Women sing African ritual song to Yemenjah, Yoruba river orisha to accept their gifts and answer their prayers. ‘Yemenjah, Yemenjah olodo, Yemenjah ee ah mee olodo.’ Repeat one time”* (385-86). This opening sets up the play’s integration of story, memory, and African song and ritual.

As for Bridgforth’s play, the central setting of *loveconjure/blues* is a blues bar populated by a rich and interesting cast of characters all bound up in each other’s lives and loves. The first page of *loveconjure/blues* immediately signifies to the reader that it doesn’t present a typical dramatic reading experience. Bridgforth begins on the first page with a list:

cool water
 rum
 beer vodka gin
 liquor liquor liquor liquor milk

 honey
 watermelon
 candy
 coconut cake cookies
 rice roots peppercorn
 hot hot hot (1)

The reader begins to sense that how the words appear on the page will be just as important as what the words say, as is often the case in genres other than drama; for instance, in poetry.¹ As the introduction continues, Bridgforth moves into a crescendo of images:

it's a party it's a party it's a party/in my dreams
a party. flowers mirrors cowrie shells and pearls
ocean sunshine
lightning moon
wind clouds
sky
deep woods crossroads/the dead living
it's a party
the dice is tossed
5 7 6 9 3 4 8
again
9 4 8 6 7 5 3
again
yellow purple blue white red black green
again
drumming
again
drumming
again! (1-2)

These images, presented in a dream-like sequence, call to mind a place of happiness and indulgence where humankind and nature and the dead and the living intermingle together. The abundance of liquor and other edible intoxicants, the dice-throwing, and the festive, party feeling this narrative evokes is a perfect introduction to the rural blues bar in the deep woods crossroads where the majority of the action of *loveconjure/blues* takes place.

The power of storytelling, not only as a reflection of the historical importance of orality in African American culture, but also as a bonding and survival tool especially among black women, is a major thrust of both *Youngblood* and *Bridgforth's* texts. In fact, *Youngblood* draws on her own experiences for this play; she explains, "I was raised by great grandmothers, great aunts, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandfathers, in addition to everybody in the neighborhood. I was like 'poor little orphan girl.' But I also had a very special kind of upbringing because I

got to be with all these older women who had these totally great stories” (Waugh 6). Youngblood’s comment refers both to the intimacy and strength of African American communities, in which the responsibilities of child rearing are often shared, as well as to a storytelling tradition among African American women that fosters autonomy, connection, support, love and laughter. Both texts begin by announcing themselves as stories: the first words that Daughter speaks are introduced by “she brushes her hair in mirror, hesitantly sits in Big Mama’s rocker, closes her eyes and eases into a story” (385). Daughter describes her Big Mamas as “women who gave stories as gifts” (401). When Daughter rushes Big Mama as she’s telling her a story, she chides her, “Hold on, chile, I’m getting to it. A story ain’t something you just read off like ingredients on a soap box. A story’s like a map, you follow the lines and they’ll take you somewhere. There’s a way to do anything and with a story you take your time. If you wanna hear, you got to listen” (390). *loveconjure/blues* begins its telling by: “see/what had happened was/one night” (2), and the play is punctuated throughout with verbal storytelling cues such as “anyway” and “na” [now] (4).

Since slaves were often prohibited from learning to read or write, they often lacked the tools required for written communication; instead, they developed different and equally sophisticated forms of oral communication, such as stories and songs. This emphasis on orality shaped and continues to characterize black culture. Storytelling is empowering as it allows the speaker to captivate and influence an audience, and it functions as a form of “speaking your mind,” or “saying what you want to say.” The two texts also make use of the call and response pattern, a communicative motif of African civic processes and religious worship as well as the musical forms of gospel, blues, and jazz. In *Shakin’ the Mess Outta Misery*, one woman rarely tells a story alone, but is aided by the other women, who chime in and respond to what came before, adding details and helping each other tell the story. While the speaker’s identity is at

times more ambiguous in *loveconjure/blues*, the songs, vignettes, and stories complement each other in similar ways. These patterns resemble the cooperative format of storytelling often associated with women's narrative style.²

These women who share their stories with Daughter function in the text as her “othermothers,” a term that scholars Rosalie Riegel Troester and Patricia Hill Collins have used to describe women that either assist or replace bloodmothers in their childcare duties. Rooted both in the conditions that slavery created as well as African cultural traditions, othermothers have been and continue to be central to the institution of black motherhood. Since slavery often divided blood relatives—children would be sold away from their parents, families were separated and often had no knowledge of where their family members would end up—slaves adapted to these circumstances by forging familial connections with and caring for others, even if they were not related by blood. Youli Theodosiadou explains:

From slavery times the African-American community tried to adhere to African familial structures and to form new familial patterns so as to protect its members against oppression, hardship, and eventual annihilation. As slave families in the United States were divided and family members died, slaves relied on the African philosophy of cooperation and unity. The solidarity which developed and was particularly strong among slave women created a system of female interdependence that was instrumental in sustaining them despite the dehumanizing institution of slavery. (195-6)

Both Youngblood and Bridgforth's texts reflect nurturing and familial patterns that have existed in African and African American communities through slavery and are still common today. Like the various relatives and “everybody in the neighborhood” that raised Youngblood, each of the women in *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery* becomes an “othermother” to Daughter. Aside from non-kin connections, members of the extended family might also step in to help with childrearing duties or take control in the case of an absent or incapable mother. In *loveconjure/blues*, the primary speaker, Cat, remembers her mother leaving her when she was young:

there i found mama standing on the porch with she
bag packed. she said **bye gurl** **i be back.** i
thought/well I guess/mama need a time off from the
home house big paw uncle daddy and ma-dear. **bye**
mama I said/from the porch waving waving waving till
she disappear in the road

i turn to go in the house and there they were big paw
uncle daddy and ma-dear/standing around me justa
staring/smiling big ole toothless love. i hug them each
tight tight. (13-14)

Both texts stress the important role that othermothers, kin, and non-kin caretakers have played in children's lives has remained a feature of black life from slavery to the present day, in cases of

children orphaned by sale or death of their parents under slavery, children conceived through rape, children of young mothers, children born into extreme poverty or to alcoholic or drug-addicted mothers, or children who for other reasons cannot remain with their bloodmothers. (Collins 197)

While we don't learn why Cat's mother left home, it is not until the end of *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery* when we learn why Fannie Mae was incapable of performing her role as bloodmother. At the age of fifteen, Fannie Mae is the victim of a horrifying act of racial violence—raped by white boys while dancing through a “whites-only” park. Daughter is the product of this rape; no doubt her existence is a constant reminder to Fannie Mae, who leaves the South and her daughter for New York. Unable to overcome her trauma or fulfill her dream of becoming a dancer, she eventually takes her own life.

Bridgforth and Youngblood pair their stories with an emphasis on the tradition of African American musical artistry through spirituals, jazz, and blues. Trombonist and musicologist George Lewis has said that one crucial aspect of jazz “is the notion of the importance of personal narrative, of telling your own story” (Lewis 117). The blues setting of *loveconjure/blues* is also significant since black women were the first to sing the blues. In the 1920s, black women blues singers like Ma Rainey, Billie Holiday, and Bessie Smith enjoyed

not only economic autonomy and a capacity for glamour, but had unprecedented space to express themselves through song. While their reign was short-lived, soon to be obscured by the growing popularity of black male blues singers, Angela Y. Davis identifies their lyrics and performances as an early site of black feminist and working-class consciousness. These women often sang about finding freedom through leaving abusive and cheating men or taking out on the road traveling, rarely figuring themselves or the women of their songs confined to the domestic sphere. Their lyrics challenged sexism, racism and white superiority, and economic disparities, and both their words and performances asserted a sense of self and sensuality. However, these women were generally managed by white men and often performed for all-white audiences, thus they developed communicative strategies that helped them both couch and play up their protest depending on the context in which they were performing.

Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser would call this “set of signals—words, forms, behaviors, signifiers of some kind” (3) that the women blues singers used “coding.” Radner and Lanser acknowledge that their conception of coding in women’s folk culture is in part indebted to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s concept of “signifying” in African American culture,³ also a form of coding as Radner and Lanser conceive of it. They define coding as “the expression or transmission of messages potentially accessible to a (bicultural) community for whom these same messages are either inaccessible or inadmissible” (3). These strategies protect the communicator from the consequences of plainly expressing certain messages. Coding was a crucial part of communication and survival for African Americans during slavery times:

Through field hollers and work songs, black people communicated to one another a sense of membership in a community that challenged their collective identity as slaves. They created a language whose meanings were indecipherable to everyone who was not privy to the required codes. And, indeed, white slave owners and overseers often assumed that work songs revealed an acquiescence to slavery. In fact, slaves often used these songs to hurl aesthetic assaults at the slave masters and to share with one other a deep yearning for freedom. The language of the spirituals likewise was encoded in a way that permitted slaves to

communicate specific modes of resistance through metaphors based on biblical teachings. (Radner and Lanser 167)

Davis notes this connection between the blues and slavery songs and spirituals: “Given its place within the African American music tradition, the blues absorbed techniques from the music of slavery, in which protest was secretly expressed and understood only by those who held the key to the code” (111). The whites who saw Bessie Smith as “not interested in politics,” or those who missed the shocking images of racial violence in Billie Holiday’s *Strange Fruit* because of the sensual way in which she sang it, did not have the capacity to interpret the code.

These women are called to mind in *Shakin’ the Mess Outta Misery* in the character Maggie, a transient visitor to the house during Daughter’s childhood who works occasionally as a blues singer. Daughter thinks Maggie is beautiful and her admiration is reminiscent of Celia’s for Shug Avery in Alice Walker’s novel 1982 *The Color Purple*: “She walk real slow and sexy, look like she was smelling roses and time wasn’t in her way” (394). Daughter even says to her: “You can be my mama if you want to” (396), as she seems to associate Maggie’s artistry with her dancer mother. Maggie tells Daughter, “You got to live the blues to sing them, ‘lil sister” (396), and it seems she is well qualified for her job. She’s described only as a “con woman” (383), and she ends up back at the house after Big Mama finds her trying to forcefully rob an old woman, because, as Maggie explains, “I was tired of making a living on my back” (394). Big Mama seems intent on setting her straight, but doesn’t have any naiveté: “I know each piece of jewelry I got, so wash the honey off your hands” (394). But Maggie proves herself honest and becomes a part of their community of women, staying all summer, as Daughter recalls fondly, “dancing, cooking, telling stories” (396). Just as Big Mama becomes an othermother for Maggie, Maggie becomes one in turn for Daughter. While she was only a brief influence in Daughter’s upbringing, Maggie’s musical artistry provides a particularly strong connection for Daughter to her blood Mama.

Bridgforth calls attention to the continuity between African and slave spirituals and the blues and jazz as they developed and are practiced in African American communities. While it is difficult to discern clear differences between the two musical forms of blues and jazz, Gayl Jones' description of jazz is useful for explaining why Bridgforth may have chosen to declare her play an articulation of the jazz aesthetic:

The jazz text is generally more complex and sophisticated than the blues text in its harmonies, rhythms, and surface structure...Jazz text is stronger in its accents; its vocabulary and syntax are often more convoluted and ambiguous than blues. It is often more difficult to read than a blues text, tending to abstractions over concreteness of detail. It shares with a blues text a sense of extemporaneity in its fluid rhythmical design and syncopated understructure, its sound and meaning systems, its rejection of duality. Jazz tends to have a faster pace and tempo than a blues text. (200)

Bridgforth's text is indeed ambiguous at times, challenging, and abstract, as it switches quickly between time and place, speakers, narrative and song. Even the individual words, sentences, and paragraphs as they appear on the page are convoluted, at least by traditional narrative standards, not to mention dramatic conventions. Bridgforth varies her emphasis by bolding and italicizing some material, utilizing different fonts, and adding spaces between words without any discernable logic.

Joni L. Jones sees the bar in *loveconjure/blues* as a liminal and transformative space, where love can exist outside of the social order. She likens it to Harpo's juke joint in *The Color Purple*, where Shug Avery's singing captivates Celie and leads her to her first healthy discoveries about sexuality, love, and happiness. The central setting of *loveconjure/blues* gives its inhabitants the potential for transformation as Jones describes here:

The bar with all the intoxicants of ritual—music, dancing, smoke, fire/alcohol, and the requirement of physical endurance—is a site for transformation. The people work themselves into the frenzy of spiritual ritual. The sweaty slow drags, rhythmic group slides, and bass-driven booty-shaking duets push people past fatigue into altered states. The tobacco smoke fires the nostrils and unhooks the vision, the low lights welcome spirits from other worlds, and the alcohol unleashes the imagination. (*Making Holy* xiv)

This transcendence brings along with it, according to Jones, “gender freedom—a freedom unfettered by the conventional definitions of male and female” (*Making Holy* xv). Throughout the play, Bridgforth describes the joint packed with “mens womens some that is both some that is neither” (9). Our introduction to the characters unfolds in narrative form as in a novel, rather than in the *dramatis personae* form of a play, and their names and characteristics resist easy categorization into traditional sexual and gender identities. There’s Big Bill, “she a guitar man” (23), who comes into the bar

with she suit black/hat low/glasses dark/and shoes
so shining [...]
as she walk/pants pull here
here
material ripple across she crotch which appear
packing a large and heavy surprise. (9)

There’s Mannish Mary, who wails over a lost love at one point, “snotting and carrying on till she pass out” (5), and Duckie Smooth, who “do female interpretations” (38). When Duckie Smooth performs, the whole crowd gets riled up: “till/the mens the womens the both and the neither be batting eyes at himshe” (39). A character’s gender is not always clear from their name or the way they are described, and Bridgforth juxtaposes gender-specific pronouns next to seemingly incongruent descriptions. As Richard Labonte notices, the characters we encounter in *loveconjure/blues* are all variations of “pretty girls and butch bulldykes, sissy boys and story gay men, sassy cross-dressers and assorted other benders of gender.”

This ambiguity is clear in the first story Cat tells, about a love triangle between three women: Nigga Red, Peachy and Bitty. Apparently Nigga Red had been beating on Bitty for years and Bitty has taken solace in a relationship with Peachy. However, “nobody had a clue” (3) until Bitty came into the bar, “Peachy’s knight in shining heels that night” (6), and “laid nigga red slump in her chair (5). Nigga Red is figured as masculine until we hear the part of the story when *she* is laid in *her* chair. However, even within a community in which same sex

relationships are accepted, confining notions about masculinity and femininity still prevail. Cat explains:

it was not an understood possibility
or yearned for idea
 well/maybe some folk had the yearning
 but
anyway

see/bitty and peachy both what you call long nail girls.
each one primp and fuss over they hair outfits and lipstick nails
and shoes shape and such and all and
well/we thinking them two fluffing up for a trouser
wo'mn or a man or
both/but nobody figure they been giving attention
to one the other.
after all
how
on earth
could two primpers work out all the mirror timing necessary to start the day.
well/I guess they proved our minds was real small not
real smart at all. (3)

Bitty and Peachy both appear to be “femmes,” a term generally used in gay, lesbian, or queer culture to describe women whose behaviors or style and appearance are generally recognized as feminine. The counterpart to femme is “butch,” a term identified with the masculine. While the two are often seen as complimentary pairs, they also tend to call to mind heteronormative notions about male and female couplings. Bridgforth suggests that to conceive of butch/femme pairings as the only potential for lesbian relationships is a reductive, further limiting conception, even in a community that accepts sexual and romantic relationships between women.

In *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery*, Daughter, too, finds different possibilities for gender expression and the potential for romantic love between women among her Big Mamas. Miss Tom, with a name that calls to mind masculinity more than femininity, is described in the character notes as “married to Miss Lily. Only woman in pants” (384). As Daughter remembers

her, she was “not a pretty woman, she was handsome like a man. Her hands were big, thick and callused. But she had a woman’s eyes, dark and mysterious eyes, that held woman secrets, eyes that had seen miracles and reflected love like only a woman can” (409). Since Miss Tom works as a carpenter, Daughter sees that she doesn’t have to limit herself to traditional occupations for women, but that a wide variety of career choices are open to her. Miss Tom and Miss Lily are married, live together, and their relationship provides Daughter with an example of the many possibilities for love among people:

DAUGHTER. Miss Tom, you the only lady carpenter I know of. Could I be a lady carpenter when I grow up?

MISS TOM. Peaches, you can be anything you want.

DAUGHTER. Could I marry a woman and live with her like you do with Miss Lily?

MISS TOM. Let me put it to you like this, there’s all kinds of possibilities for love. I didn’t have no choice ‘bout who to love, my heart just reached out and grabbed ahold of Miss Lily. She felt the same way I felt, so we lived together. Been together twenty-two years this May. You still got a lot of time to figure out that part of living. (409)

Daughter remembers the two women and their love for each other fondly, remarking that “She and Miss Lily’s spirits probably still live in that big, old, white house, loving each other with their eyes wide open” (410).

While the juke joint of *loveconjure/blues* is ostensibly owned by Slim Figurman, who “call himself running a ho house” (8) and passes out business cards advertising “figure’s flavors. the world’s finest. come get a taste” (7), it’s really his sister Bettye who is the proprietor, according to Cat:

but slim ain’t running nothing or nobody.
so the place he call figure’s flavors/we calls it
bettye’s
yessuh/cause slim’s sister bettye be the one running
that jernt
and what it is is the best blues inn in the country. (8)

Although the intoxicants at the bar offer transformative possibilities, Bridgforth does not ignore the danger they present for addiction and violence. In fact, Bettye’s joint is actually dry:

see/bettye don’t allow no drinking in she jernt.
not since she lost her first love lushy boudreaux to the
guzzle. (11)

Removing the alcohol from the bar scene prioritizes the transformative power of the other rituals there—the music, performance, dancing, love, and fellowship. Some patrons still find a way to sneak liquor in, and Bettye tolerates it, but her policy has one major positive, according to Cat, which is that it engenders much less violence. She explains:

bettye’s no liquor rule do cut down on the free
flowingness of it.
which is a relief really
because along with the drinking come the looking and
the looking bring the knives/cause folk can’t just look at
they own peoples they gots to always cast a looking at
somebody’s somebody else/and the knives bring the
cussing and the cussing bring the swoll chest and the
swoll chest
always
interrupt the good time. (11)

The kind of violence that occurs at Bettye’s, as illustrated in the opening vignette about Bitty, Peachy, and Nigga Red, is what Adam Gussow calls “intimate violence.” In his book *Seems Like Murder: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition*, Gussow studies the “gun-and-blade-borne damage black folk inflict on each other” (4) in southern blues culture beginning in the 1890’s. This violence is told about in blues narratives, but also commonly practiced in the juke joints themselves, and it carries deep cultural and racial significance. Gussow explains:

Both real ‘cutting and shooting’ and symbolic mayhem threatened and celebrated in song and story—was an essential, if sometimes destructive, way in which black southern blues people articulated their somebodiness, insisted on their indelible individuality. The intimate violence of blues culture could be rage-filled, a desperate striking out at a black victim when what one really wanted to strike back at was a white world that had defined one as nameless and worthless. But intimate violence could also be sexy, enlivening, a crucial prop in the struggle to make one’s mark within a black social milieu. (5)

Intimate violence pervades *loveconjure/blues*—the characters who frequent the juke joint are passionate about their lovers, sometimes expressing this passion through violence, as Nigga Red does with Peachy. Like the shared child-rearing responsibilities in African American communities, in this intimate bar setting, such violence is a shared burden, damaging to the entire community, as Cat makes clear:

what we did understand was that nigga red had done
whooped on chased down and squished peachy so
many times in so many different conflictions/till we
each done carried a bruise from pulling peachy from it. (3)

Other times the violence is in response to violence, as is the case when “it had just got to be all much” (3) for Bitty, who marches into the joint determined to “put a stop to peachy’s been-beat days” (4). This retributive response is prioritized over partner violence, as Cat and the others conceptualize it:

what bitty done
was in act of self-defense for peachy.
na/sheriff townswater
understand this.
but the law don’t/so we got to find a way to make the
law bend for the facts of it
and we will.
meantime
the law got our sweet bitty in jail. (6)

Vigilante or retributive violence has traditionally been celebrated in the black community because of the injustice and violence they suffered at the hands of whites. As Gussow explains, the anger blacks had at whites was often redirected into their own communities in the form of black-on-black violence in juke joints (a trend that some scholars would argue continues today, as evidenced by the high rates of violence in African American communities). However, the violence the juke joint engenders is due in part to the freedom such places represented for blacks. Aside from its potential for liberal gender expression, the blues joint has been a space

for “a wide-ranging expressive freedom: the freedom to sing, dance, curse, boast, flirt, drink, cultivate large grievances, and—not least—fight with and kill other black folk without undue fear of the white law, which considered black life cheap and black labor power easily replaceable” (Gussow 6).

However, blacks did also imagine retributive violence towards whites, a theme that Gussow notes has been a staple of black music since Mamie Smith sang “Crazy Blues,” the lyrics of which were shocking for 1920:

I’m gonna do like a Chinaman...go and get some hop
Get myself a gun...and shoot myself a cop. (qtd. in Gussow 162)

Clearly “Crazy Blues” was an early precursor to the gangster rap songs that would emerge forty decades later, songs like NWA’s “Fuck Tha Police,” and Ice-T’s “Cop Killer” and “Squeeze the Trigger” (Gussow 162). Retributive violence wasn’t only imagined by blacks, but practiced as well, and the dehumanizing conditions of slavery and Jim Crow often place our sympathies with the black perpetrator rather than the white victim. For instance, we are encouraged to see Sofia’s beatdown of the mayor’s wife in *The Color Purple* as a brave act of self-assertion in response to the white woman’s racism, one that forces whites to recognize blacks’ personhood. Narratives of resistance about triumphant slaves who managed to get away with poisoning their master’s birthday have also long been circulated and celebrated.

Conjuring is a major artistic strategy for resistance, retribution, and transformation that Youngblood and Bridgforth utilize in *Shakin’ the Mess Outta Misery* and *loveconjure/blues*, both through the actions of their characters, but also by acting as conjurers themselves—ritualistically calling up their stories and raising the dead to help tell them, and reaching for healing from the racial trauma experienced by African Americans through their creative acts. Like storytelling and music, conjuring too can be viewed as a powerful creative act; in his book *Workings of the Spirit: Poetics of Afro-American Women’s Writing*, Houston A. Baker, Jr.

views conjuring as a form of black women's creativity and agency, one that works for "retribution, redress, reward, and renewal" (90). The story that Big Mama chides Daughter for attempting to rush her through is about such an incident, and many of the women's stories are connected to the racial trauma they have survived: Daughter notes that her Big Mamas were "wise old black women [...] who managed to survive some dangerous and terrible times and live to tell about them" (388). This particular story begins with the backdrop of the racial climate, apparently during the bus boycotts of the 1950s and 60s. Big Mama explains: "Colored folks was stirred up over the lynching and the killings of colored peoples all over the south. A colored woman had just been found dead. She was raped and sawed open by six white men who made her brother watch 'em ravish her" (391). Soon after this horrifying act of racial violence, several of the women stand at the bus station discussing how they are "proud about what they're doing" (391) with the boycott. However, the Big Mamas don't have the opportunity to be involved in the boycotts, as they are on the north end of town and a local wealthy white man has purchased a bus to ensure their continued work in the Northend homes: "Doctor J.R. Whittenhauser done bought this number 99. Yes ma'am, even if they was rioting downtown, white ladies in Northend were gonna have they meals cooked, babies looked after, and laundry done. That's why they bought the bus" (391).

As they sit on the bus, Miss Corine realizes she's forgotten her spit cup, and she becomes desperate for somewhere to spit her snuff:

MISS CORINE. Lamama, let me use your handkerchief.
MISS LAMAMA. Woman, you lost your mind? This my Ethiopian handkerchief.
MISS CORINE. This a emergency...
MISS LAMAMA. No Lord, not this one.
MISS MARY. Use your bag.
MISS CORINE. I can't use my bag. I got them white folks lace tablecloths in here. Shit, y'all, I got to spit somewhere. (*She spits out the window.*)
MISS MARY. Oooh, Corine! You done spit in that white woman's face! (*Women all stare out of window.*) (393)

Just as Corine spits, a white Cadillac convertible cruises alongside the bus; its passengers are “a red-face white man” and a young white woman with “long blond hair just blowing all around her face” (392) who is on the receiving end of Miss Corine’s tobacco spit. A policeman pulls the bus over, demanding to know who spit at the woman. When nobody speaks up, he orders “all you niggers off the bus” (393) and forces them to line up. As Big Mama remembers it:

Then that white man [from the car] stomp over to where we was lined up against the fence like dogs and hark spit on each one of us. Miss Mary was behind me calling on her West Indian spirits and making signs. The white man laughed then he got into his Cadillac with his woman and pulled onto the highway. He drove right into the path of a tractor trailer truck. (393)

Miss Mary is described as “a maid with unearthly powers” (383), and her conjuring seems to have contributed to the accident, which functions as retribution for the demeaning treatment that the black women endured at the hands of the policeman and the white man. The white victims are also symbolic stand-ins for the whites who have lynched and killed blacks, and more specifically, the six white men who recently raped and mutilated the black woman. This incident also highlights the contradictory understandings of race and gender in the antebellum, postbellum, and Jim Crow South famously articulated in Harriet Jacob’s “Ain’t I A Woman?” speech at the Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1851: white women were afforded treatment and protection that black women did not qualify for because of their race.

However, the women don’t necessarily celebrate the white couple’s death, and Miss Mary doesn’t take full responsibility, saying, “You know the Lord works in mysterious ways” (393). Big Mama offers it as an ambivalent lesson to Daughter: “I’ll never forget it as long as I live. It was a mess of twisted white Cadillac, smoke and burning white flesh. Just a mess. Don’t you never forget where we been, or that we got a long way to go” (393). Like Baker, who sees such acts of conjuring as “retribution, redress, reward, and renewal” (90), Joni L. Jones argues that through this conjuring act, “Miss Mary draws on ancestral traditions in full awareness that

the U.S. judicial system will bring her friends no justice. Her conjuring is a re/membering of ancestral traditions and a restoration of African American dignity” (*Conjuring as Radical Re/Membering* 231). These creative acts *replace* the traditional forms of justice and authority that have indicted and failed African Americans.

Another story, one Miss Lamama tells her about their neighbor, Miss Shine, calls to mind the tradition of slaves’ retribution against their masters. When Miss Shine worked in the governor’s mansion, she polished silver, starched linen, and served the governor and his wife tea; however, her biggest and most loved job was cleaning a grand French crystal chandelier that hung in the entry hall. One Christmas, all of the school children choirs came to sing at the mansion, the white children singing in “high-pitched cut-off notes that didn’t sound right,” but the “colored children broke loose,” and when they were finished “there was a deep hush, quiet like even God had stopped what *she* was doing to listen” (402). After their performances, though, the governor invites only the white children inside for hot chocolate. Once again, this injustice is followed by a major happening, figured as the work of God:

She [Shine] was madder than a foam-mouth dog. But what could she do? She left it in the Lord’s hands, and he came through. With no warning, the big, round crystal that hung from the middle of the chandelier fell with a loud crash on the marble floor, breaking into a million pieces. It didn’t hurt nobody, but Shine took it to be a sign. (402)

Ordered to sweep it up by the Governor’s wife, she is hearkened back to Africa and the slave South: “every jagged edge was a dagger in her heart. Folks say things changed, but it’s still like slavery times. Miss Shine’s mind eased back, way, way back. She heard a chant far off and deep as slave graves and Old Africa” (403) The women’s voices chime together aside building African musical rhythms, as Miss Lamama “(*beats her calabas in time*)” (403). First the chanted images of racial violence: “Blood, boil thick, run red like a river, slave scream, wail, moan after they dead. Daddy lynched, Mama raped, baby sister sold downriver. Slaves scream,

wail, moan after they dead. The cook knew what to do to save the race, stop the screams” (403). Miss Shine, “possessed by her power,” spreads out the broken crystal and grinds it until it is “fine as dust” (403), and as she prepares and serves the governor and his wife’s usual afternoon tea, each day she mixes some of the crystal into the sugar. The women’s voices punctuate the story, repeating: “Blood boil thick. [...] Run red like a raging river. [...] Nobody knows how the master got sick. [...] Nobody know how he die” (403-4). Miss Shine serves their tea for two weeks before disappearing: “Some folks say she moved to an entirely colored town in Texas, other folks say she wasn’t really of this world in the first place. Nobody ever see Miss Shine again” (404). This story is presumably set in the not-too-far-removed but post-Jim Crow South—since the Big Mamas were hurt when the black children were not invited into the mansion—but the calls back to slavery and the African musical backdrop expand Youngblood’s temporal and spatial setting.

Bridgforth’s title obviously brings to mind the act of conjuring, and she too dramatizes similar narratives of resistance through magical acts. We’re told of a slave who won’t stop playing his drum, despite repeated beatings by his master, until finally the master cuts off all his fingers:

he still drum so marsa send they take other thumb he
still drum they take he finger he finger he finger every
time still drum
till none left.
they seal jar place on kitchen table where many have
to pass
remember stay in place. (50)

Still, the slave attempts to make music, in a scene that illustrates the unconventional form of *loveconjure/blues* both on the page and as it would translate in performance:

then all wee hours he sit and rocking back and forth
cry soft close eyes rocking and rocking till some full
moons pass/one night
he run to dirt trail between back of the big house and

field
jump center
with feet
ba ba ba
make sound
ba ba ba
with him mouth
make sound
gagaga gagaga ga
low to the ground legs bend feet ba ba ba
he spin
gagaga gagaga ga
fast fast stir dirt make dust
ba ba ba
loud and loud
ga gagaga ga gagaga ga
ba ba ba (51)

This slave continues his repeated resistance even without an instrument for making music, scaring the master, who runs into the kitchen to escape it. Isadora “the conjuration woman” is there, and suddenly she has fed him a lunch that takes revenge for the drumming fingerless slave:

let ole marsa can't move not even curse can't raise fist
whip gun or overseers can't beat can't drop his draws
and act the animal he has been can't make no tie and
cut and burn and starve and sell and kill like usual
Isadora stand there watch ole marsa eyes get big when
he notice she holding that jar which is empty. she
move her eyes to the table where his scraps from
lunch still scraps and him eyes get big at the plate now
empty cause he know they done fed him them fingers.
him eyes roll back in head
ga gagaga ga gagaga ga
gagaga gagaga ga
bababa (52)

The ga ga's of the slave's music is then translated into the choking gags of the master as he realizes that he has been fed the fingers, and he is then silenced in the way that he attempted to silence the slave's music.

The violence of slavery, Jim Crow, and the retributive and intimate violence is a thread that moves continuously throughout *loveconjure/blues* to unify disparate times and places. Immediately after the introductory images of *loveconjure/blues* is a slave spiritual song, followed by a vignette about racial violence:

*lawd/i'm gonn bring my burdens
bring my fears
bring my sorrows
bring my tears
gonn lay them down/lawd
gonn lay them down
I'm gonn lay
my burdens down...*

**we is people borned to violence. not our making and
not our choosing. just the world we came to. fighting
like animals leashed in a pen. maimed if we don't
win. killed if we don't fight. so we been
perfecting/fighting to win
the whole of our time here. and though violence is
not our first nature sometimes
violence boils the blood/explodes in the veins.
sometimes violence
shows up unexpected
and just claims a nigga. (2)**

However, the blues culture, while it is plagued with violence, provides “blues subjects a badly needed expressive outlet, a way of conjuring with and redressing the spiritual wounds that such violence had engendered in them” (Gussow 6). Like the blues and the other African American music traditions of jazz and spirituals, in these plays, conjuring and storytelling are also outlets for coping with the violence of which these characters have been victim to, witnessed, as well as the violence it has engendered within them. However, the women in *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery* also use conjuring as a complement to their sacred lives. Their “number 2 Mission Prayer Circle” (398) meets on Tuesday nights to pray for each other and members of their communities, to sing, heal, and commune with each other and God, and Daughter notes: “Them

women loved the Lord” (396). The women align their powers with God’s for healing, and when Big Mama lays her hands on Aunt Mae, the tumor she has in her stomach disappears.

Aside from emphasizing the continuity of violence and linking African American cultural traditions and creative expression with their African antecedents, both plays collapse boundaries of time and space, allowing for communion with loved ones in a setting where “the past the present the future the living and the dead co-exist together,” and “memories and dreams coincide.” When the women tell Daughter the story about the chandelier and Miss Shine, “who nobody ever see [...] again,” Miss Shine actually joins them on the stage, whether she is alive, deceased, or not “really of this world” (404). Fannie Mae appears as a “dancing ghost” (383) and all of the women are called to stage by Daughter’s memory. This communion and closeness of ancestors reflects the African tradition of ancestor veneration or ancestor worship, and at the end of the story, Miss Lamama tells Daughter, “remember, you must always honor your ancestors” (404). Cat meets her beloved “big paw uncle daddy and ma dear,” and sometimes her mama, in her dreams, in the ocean, most likely the ocean of the first dream sequence of images, with the cowrie shells and pearls. We are reminded of the continuity of racial violence when Big Paw speaks, telling about his father’s lynching:

**dey used ta hang niggas by dey thumbs
aaawwwhhh yessuh if’n a nugga had da
nerve ta tink dey life wuz worf mo den a
dog or cat dey’d strang dat nigga up.**

[...]
**my life it ain’t never been de same since
dat day I saw dey stringed**

**my daddy I saw he hanging from de tree by
he thumbs. (12)**

As in this particular narrative, Big Paw and Cat’s othermothers appear to her on stage throughout the play, delivering messages of love and guidance.

Both Bridgforth and Youngblood also emphasize the connection between African Americans and American Indians, one that exists not only because of shared racial trauma and discrimination, but because the two groups often formed alliances and intermarried, beginning in the seventeenth century when African slaves arrived in the English colonies. Miss Corine is part Indian, and when she was young, she learned from a medicine man that her great-grandmother, a full-blooded Indian, took her to see. She has continued her education with an African American Doctor Willie, who apprenticed with a Cherokee Indian medicine man. The Big Mamas discuss Miss Corine's apprenticeship:

MISS CORINE. I've been working with Doctor Willie as an apprentice.

MISS TOM. You call picking roots and berries, quacking and running numbers work?

MISS CORINE. Doctor Willie didn't pick up root work off the corner, it's a science. Doctor Willie apprenticed with a one hundred percent pure Cherokee Injun medicine man.

AUNT MAE. I got Injun blood in me, too.

MISS TOM. What Negro don't?

MISS CORINE. My great-grandma was pure dee Injun. She live to be 105 years old. She the one took me back to the reservation to meet the medicine man. He taught me some things that can't be found in the history books. The Injuns was doing just fine before the white man come here, living on land that didn't belong to nobody, taking care of business. (407)

This discussion *replaces* conventional forms of knowledge established by whites—traditional medicine, written history—with the alternative medicine, conjure work, spiritual healing, and oral tradition that were the domain of African Americans and American Indians and engendered some of the shared affinity and respect between the two groups. Aside from channeling the spirits of Africa, Bridgforth too calls on Native American spirits. In a seven-line list of names, each character of the juke joint landscape is named, then followed by a parallel list of additional names that transcend the mortal landscape:

bettye figurman slim figurman luisicious boudreaux cat
lil tiny ruthieann soonyay peachy soonyay bitty fon
[...]

morning sweet t lashay big paw uncle daddy ma-dear
the drummer the Houma the Fon the Ibo the Yoruba
the Wolof the Tunica the Choctaw the Chickasaw
isadora Africa jr. isadora Africa jr. isadora Africa jr.
isadora Africa jr. isadora Africa jr. isadora Africa jr.
here with me here in me/are me... (84)

In this juxtaposition, Cat and her community intermingle with her deceased loved ones, her African ancestors, as well as her American Indian ancestors who were in the South before white settlement displaced them. Through these strategies Bridgforth and Youngblood *replace* the native southerners, American Indians, back in the South. Here we see the culmination of “the past the present the future the living and the dead co-exist[ing] together,” which Bridgforth sees as an “African cosmology of time, as well as a characteristic of jazz” (Bridgforth).

Aside from acknowledging American Indians as vital members of their southern community of ancestors, the acceptance of a wide range of sexual and gender identities in *Shakin’ the Mess Outta Misery* and *loveconjure/blues* widens opportunities for belonging in southern and African American communities, which have often rejected those who express alternative identities. According to Patricia Hill Collins, “African-Americans have tried to ignore homosexuality generally and have avoided serious analysis of homophobia within African-American communities” (125). Bridgforth and Youngblood’s work is also unique in the context of the theatre, as Lisa Anderson notes:

Few black playwrights are writing about black lesbian experience, let alone black lesbian experience that is inextricably connected to the larger black community absent intense homophobia. Contemporary black women playwrights whose works are known more broadly in theatre circles, including Suzan Lori-Parks, Kia Corthron, and Dael Orlandersmith, have not written plays about or including black lesbians. (114)

While the characters of *loveconjure/blues* seem to accept each other’s varying gender and sexual identities, the bar creating space for “the mens the womens the both and the neither” (39), Bridgforth does acknowledge the reality for many queer, transgendered, or gay and

lesbian individuals who don't fit into the accepted categories, in the experiences of the character Sweet T:

see/sweet t was a man last life
is na woman/feel like a man
solid and sturdy/stern and silent/pressed and polished
sweet t
used to not know why he look like a she
packed like a she
sweet t
used to not understand why things didn't fit/why he
didn't make no sense
[...]
look like
sweet t was the one everything bad happened to
the one that never harmed nobody/but always got beat
since she was a child folk take they evil out on she
[...]
a man then
woman now/neither really
skin peel/heart pull apart (79-80)

Sweet T is saved by love, though, by Miss Sunday Morning, who “had got tired too” (80). Cat tells their love story:

miss sunday morning opened her eyes saw
sweet t's face and cried.
said i'm home now. and
they didn't need no words. they saw it all in one the
other's eyes
and knew what they knew.
[...]
and so now miss sunday morning and sweet t
they pray
in each others arms
in each others mouths
bodies wrapped / they make Holy
every Sabbath love (81)

The community that Brigforth creates attempts to *replace* the milieu that would “pull apart” (80) Sweet T's heart, and like the spiritual conjuring acts in these plays, Sweet T and Miss Sunday Morning *replace* traditional understandings of worship and prayer, especially significant in light of religious traditions that have strictly defined love relationships in

heterosexual terms and not accepted those who express alternative forms of love. In fact, both Bridgforth and Youngblood's final emphasis is on love, and they deliver "the essential message that, central to survival in a black working-class world, there must be the acceptance of love in all its varieties" (Labonte).

Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery ends with a ritual that affirms this love and celebrates and initiates Daughter's arrival into womanhood. Because Daughter's blood has come, the women tell her they must go to the river:

BIG MAMA. Your blood's come. There are some things you need to know and going to the river is a thing you need to do.
DAUGHTER. It's a long way to the river.
BIG MAMA. Don't have to be no river there.
DAUGHTER. Well, what happens at the river?
BIG MAMA. When a girl child get her first blood...
MISS LAMAMA. Her mama or one like her mama have to prepare her.
AUNT MAE. Tell her things a woman needs to know.
MISS MARY. Then the women in the family can take her to a secret place for the crossing over.
BIG MAMA. All summer long your Big Mamas gonna be getting you ready.

Just before they go to the river, Daughter finally learns the sad truth about her mother's life and death. Daughter has heard all kinds of metaphors throughout her upbringing, none of which make much sense to her: "One time I heard somebody say she died from dancin'. Somebody else I heard say she died from an old wound that was too deep to heal" (412). Sadly, just as it seems Fannie Mae's dream of dancing may come to fruition, she is the victim of a terrible act of racial violence. Big Mama finally explains:

When she turned fifteen she got a scholarship to a little dance school downtown. One day Fannie Mae got to dancing through the park them white folks claimed was theirs. Some white boys ran up behind her. Them boys raped her right there in that park in broad daylight. She fought back, though. When the police came, she carried on so they took her to the mental ward. When they got her in that hospital them animals shaved that poor chile's head clean. She bent after that. All your mama ever wanted to do was dance. Her dream was to dance all over the world. The closest your mama come to her dream was cleaning up in a dance hall. (413)

Fannie Mae leaves the South to escape the racial trauma she has experienced, to pursue her dream of dancing, but ends up committing suicide in New York by jumping out a window, “trying to fly” (414), a common trope in African American literature that references the folktale of the Flying African, and a finality reminiscent of Milkman Dead’s flight in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977). Knowing the truth about her bloodmama, and accepting her own identity as the product of the rape gives Daughter closure and understanding, and even stronger appreciation for the love and care her Big Mamas have provided her. Her Big Mamas ask her to remember her mother’s story for its lessons: “If you got a dance or dream or anything at all, don’t let nothing or nobody get in your way. We ain’t saying it’s gonna be easy, but we all got a dance to do” (413), and “Any woman can have a baby, but it takes a special woman to be a mama” (414). The final scene is their visit to the river, and the women reenact the circle from the beginning of the play. They surround Daughter, giving gifts and singing “Yemenjah ah say soo” (414), in between exclamations of love:

MISS MARY. I love you, baby.
MISS LAMAMA. I love you, peaches.
AUNT MAE. I love you, Daughter.
MISS CORINE. I love you, little mama. (414)

In the last line, Daughter says, “My Big Mamas had well prepared me for the river. I was blessed to have so many women, so much love. I keep their gifts in my heart, and I know to pass them on” (415). Her Big Mamas have prepared her for African American womanhood, and in narrating the play, telling about her Big Mamas, Daughter continues to pass along their gift of stories and fulfills her promise that she will always remember her ancestors.

Both plays call to mind Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1975), which also blends genres and features black women telling their stories, although Shange takes a national rather than southern context. In fact, the

opening of the play places these women as representative of black women in the United States everywhere:

LADY IN BROWN. i'm outside chicago
LADY IN YELLOW. i'm outside detroit
LADY IN PURPLE. i'm outside houston
LADY IN RED. i'm outside baltimore
LADY IN GREEN. i'm outside san francisco
LADY IN BLUE. i'm outside manhattan
LADY IN ORANGE. i'm outside st. louis. (4)

Like Shange, who christened her play a “choreopoem,” Bridgforth reinvents genre by identifying *loveconjure/blues* not as a play, but a “performance novel.” *loveconjure/blues* breaks convention in more significant ways than does *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery*, and it presents diverse possibilities for performance—it could be performed as a one-woman show, as Bridgforth has done in the past, or it could be performed by several actors or a large cast. In the 2007 performance at the Off Center in Austin, Bridgforth collaborated with filmmaker Jen Simmons and a large cast of actors to present the piece. A review by Abe Louise Young in the *Austin Chronicle* describes the format: “Bridgforth—the only live performer—moves through the space, sometimes narrating, sometimes not, while a multimedia visual-art installation moves on three large screens. The characters dance, mime, and act, wordlessly telling the stories of Figure's Flavors, a down-home juke joint.” Young calls the performance itself a ritual: “Audience members witness the raising of a full community of characters from memory, imagination, and the dead. As in any ritual, it's hard to describe later what happened: time shifts into a spiral.” Like *Youngblood*, Bridgforth ends with the necessity of love:

i
am
the conjure
come back/to Love.

remember
remember

remember (88-89)

Bridgforth says that she views the audience as “witness participants” (Bridgforth) in her performances, and in the Off Center production, Bridgforth ended by passing baskets through the audience with a folded love note for each audience member, affirming the audience’s connection to and participation in her story. Abe Louise Young recognizes that “you realize you have been part of the ritual all along” (Young). Through these strategies in performance, Bridgforth *replaces* the audience as crucial actors in her drama.

The strategies that Bridgforth and Youngblood utilize differ from many of the other playwrights discussed in this project, as they transcend strict confines of temporal, geographical, and spatial reality to create a South that reaches back to Africa, back to the slave and Jim Crow South and the southern home of American Indians, one where reality, memory, dreams, and the past, present and future can all exist together. In interweaving song, memory, narrative, and performance, and in Bridgforth’s case, inventing her own genre, they present variations on traditional dramatic genre conventions. Redefining notions of love among women, in familial, friendship, and lesbian contexts, they widen the possibilities for gender expression, sexuality, and belonging in southern communities.

End Notes

¹ Because the actual appearance of the words on the page is essential to Bridgforth’s vision, I have attempted to recreate their appearance as faithfully as possible throughout this chapter in terms of placement, punctuation, emphasis, and font.

² See Kalčík and Baldwin.

³ See Henry Louis Gates’ *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, in which he traces African and African American vernacular culture with black literary traditions. Like many of the types of coding Radner and Lanser discuss, signifyin(g) is “black double-voicedness” (51). Gates discusses the “(political, semantic) confrontation between two parallel discursive universes, the black American linguistic circle and the white”

(45), arguing that the same signs carry different sets of meaning in black and white communities.

CONCLUSION

Given the success of both the book and film version of *Gone With the Wind*, it is not surprising that the text would eventually find its way into a theatrical adaptation. While it's not the first attempt, the most recent stage adaptation of the epic story of the American South and its darling Scarlett O'Hara, which spans from antebellum time through the years of Reconstruction, found its premiere not in the United States, but in the center of theatre culture in the United Kingdom, in London. When the musical adaptation of *Gone With the Wind* opened at the New London Theatre in the West End in April of 2008, critics delighted in panning it through numerous variations on Rhett's final memorable line to Scarlett. In the *Sunday Times*, Christopher Hart offered his assessment, "Frankly, I fear, you won't give a damn," and the prediction from the *Evening Standard* was: "Frankly this show is damned." In the *Daily Telegraph*, Charles Spencer's headline read, "Frankly, my dear, it's a damn long night."

With music and lyrics by American and theatre newcomer Margaret Martin and under the directorship of Trevor Nunn of *Cats* and *Les Misérables* fame, on opening night, the show ran an excruciating 3 hours and 40 minutes, and even then, most critics felt the action seemed hurried. Spencer wrote, "It feels interminable, but moment by moment it also seems ridiculously rushed," and the West End Whingers bloggers also remarked: "The big question on everyone's lips, of course, was: 'How can they possibly squeeze the thousand-odd pages of Margaret Mitchell's epic novel into 'just' four hours?' The answer is simple...they cram it in," and the reviewers noted that by their count approximately a hundred audience members left at intermission. Revisions that cut the running time to 3 hours and 10 minutes including intermission still didn't change critical response or bring in the crowds, and *Gone With the Wind* the musical closed three months early on June 14, 2008, after 79 performances. Plans for

a New York production have been put on hold. In fact, the musical adaptation of *Gone With the Wind* wasn't just bad, it was a disaster that one West End insider sniffed out in the early stages: "We haven't had a proper, massive theatrical disaster for ages. Maybe it's time we had one" (qtd. in Curtis).

The reasons for the production's failure could be endlessly debated. First, the epic in general is notoriously difficult to stage, and many elements of the story present challenges on the stage—for instance, capturing the devastated, burnt remains of Atlanta, or Scarlett's lost wanderings amidst a sea of dead Confederate soldiers. The horse and Bonnie's death upon it is dicey as well; perhaps taking a lesson from the 1972 adaptation when a horse defecated on stage on press night, this production has Scarlett and Rhett only "pretend" to have a horse (Curtis). However, despite the difficulties it presents, Nunn has had success with the epic before. Upon the announcement that Nunn would direct *Gone With the Wind*, he remarked that he found it a "thrillingly ambitious as well as preposterously ambitious" endeavor (Kornhaber), but, "having now worked on adapting two vast novels for the stage, *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Les Misérables*, I am drawn to the challenge of telling Margaret Mitchell's epic story through words, music and the imaginative resources of the theatre" (Nathan). However, Nunn was not able to capture Mitchell's story with the same success as he had in his previous attempts.

Perhaps the musical partly failed because the classic, memorable performances in the film version simply cannot be matched, as Nick Curtis suggests: "Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable are ingrained on the collective imagination. Any attempt to recreate them on stage was always likely to come a poor second." Further, the addition of a musical element could sit funny with some viewers, who have probably never imagined Rhett wooing Scarlett while singing "I'm Your Man," or Scarlett breaking into a song about "Desperate Times" after

bravely shooting that Yankee at Tara. Benedict Nightingale acknowledges feeling this sentiment: “I often found myself wishing the musical just wasn’t a musical” (8).

Further, the novice Margaret Martin’s involvement in the composition of the book, musical score and lyrics may have been a liability. Upon her first attempt to procure the stage rights to Mitchell’s book from the William Morris agency, she was told that her work was “sincere but inexperienced” (qtd. in Curtis). Nick Curtis offers a fairly derisive assessment of her motivations and qualifications:

A doctor of public health, charity founder and single mother of three from California, she decided at the age of 45 to adapt *Gone With the Wind* as a musical simply because, she claims, she thought it would be a money-spinner. Later, she said that as a former “battered teenage mother,” she came to identify with the endless crises Scarlett has to face. Martin’s qualifications for writing a musical were a degree in music theory and an apparently unquenchable reservoir of self-belief.

Martin was persistent—she contacted delegates of the Mitchell family trust (who have built a reputation for being highly selective, controlling, and some say, unethical, in their handlings of the rights)¹ with tapes of songs and a draft, and they eventually agreed to give her the rights. She then sought out Nunn’s consideration after hearing about his interest in American history in an interview and amazingly, won his attention. It has all the hallmarks of a charming, unlikely success story if it hadn’t ended so badly, and ultimately, even the talented Sir Trevor Nunn was unable to pull off or salvage the production. Finally, another possible explanation and the one most relevant to my discussion about the problems of audience conceptions about nation and region: Nick Curtiss wonders: “it may be, too, that the (predominantly American) producers overestimated Londoners’ tolerance of Southern melodrama.”

However, this production was not the first attempt at a stage adaptation of Margaret Mitchell’s novel. More strange than the epic drama of the American South premiering in London, the very first stage adaptation, called *Scarlett*, was written by Japanese writer Kazuo

Kikuta and presented for a Tokyo production with a Japanese cast. Several Americans were involved—Harold Rome wrote the musical score and the production was directed by Joe Layton—and after Tokyo, Layton decided to take it to London’s West End. It was translated into English, the running time cut, and it opened with a new book adapted by Horton Foote. It received mediocre reviews, but producer Harold Fielding went ahead and scheduled an April 1974 Broadway opening. After revised versions played in Los Angeles and San Francisco to extremely negative reviews, Fielding canceled the Broadway plans. In 1976, a production was staged in Dallas, and after traveling to three other cities, it closed, signifying the end of *Gone With the Wind* on stage until the 2008 production.

Apparently *Gone With the Wind*, highly successful in both its novel and film version, didn’t translate well to the stage. The case of *Gone With the Wind* on stage does illustrate the appeal that these romanticized southern narratives would seemingly hold, not only to Americans of the North and South alike, but Londoners, and perhaps most surprisingly, the Japanese.² On the other hand, in light of the immense success of the novel and film, but the absolute failure of the stage production, it may also attest to the difficulties that I argue exist for southern representations on stage.

Admittedly, *Gone with the Wind* is a very different text, whether in its novel, film or musical form, than the plays I discuss in this project—one that presents a nostalgic rather than critical view of the South. Of course, the fact that *GWTW* was adapted as musical theatre also complicates the comparison. Shamefully, Martin and Nunn did little to update the novel and film’s nostalgia in the stage version or interrogate the previous texts’ racist ideology. Karen Fricker writes, “Overall, Martin and Nunn seem in thrall to, and eventually overwhelmed by, the scope of Mitchell and Fleming’s originals. As such they offer now politically questionable material (the film romanticizes the Old South and seems sympathetic to slavery) pretty much

straight up, swerving away from an obvious opportunity for criticism or updating.” Aside from the problematic implications of this oversight, Martin came to the project because she thought it would be a “money-spinner” (Curtis), and didn’t seem to consider the particular rhetorical problems—geographical, ideological, interpretive—involved in presenting particular versions of and ideas about the South in specific ways to particular audiences.

Unlike Martin, the playwrights considered in this project express a keen awareness of the difficulties they come up against because of their gender, race, or sexuality, the unique challenges of the dramatic genre, and how conceptions about nation and region shape audience response to southern material and representations of the South. Ultimately, the South remains a central problematic in American studies, one deepened when it is paired with the complexities of the dramatic genre and commercial and critical factors of the American theatre. These playwrights find varying and sophisticated strategies to respond to these challenges that are far more interesting and successful than Martin’s attempt at *Gone With the Wind*. By placing the South, playwrights Hellman, Henley, Dewberry, Treiber, and Deer present familiar tropes about southern history and culture in order to examine them more closely and overturn them, viewing such tropes with an ironic eye that not only satirizes traditional southern ideology and the South’s conception of itself, but national conceptions about the South as well. Yet because of the difficulties of mediating irony, satire, and the problems of parody and stereotype engendered by the postsouthern, they often encounter critics and audiences unable to successfully read their plays. Further, because of the authority that the troubling notion of the universal spectator still holds in drama, and what Tara McPherson terms the nation’s “schizophrenic” relationship with the South, audiences and critics may tend to hold southern representations at a distance or fetishize them. Other playwrights choose *displacing* the South as their strategy, as Vogel, Bingham, and Cleage do, which allows them to avoid these hazards

often engendered by a play's distinct regional affiliation, as well as offers opportunities for them to call attention to the realities and misconceptions wrapped up in ideas about region. Juxtaposing the South with New York City is a common strategy used by southern playwrights that not only bridges gaps between northern and southern audiences, but comments coyly on the South's marginalized role in theatre discourse. A third strategy is *replacing* the South, as Bridgforth and Youngblood do in their plays, abandoning strict constructs of mode, genre, chronology, and place to provide more flexibility in their conceptions of the South. Their settings reach back to Africa and the slave and Jim Crow South, as well as the South of the American Indians, giving us new understandings of southern milieus. They redefine traditional notions of gender and celebrate love outside of strict heterosexual contexts, widening the possibilities for gender expression, sexuality, and belonging in southern communities. However, within each of these diverse approaches, these playwrights challenge conventional regional conceptions, so each of these playwrights utilize the strategy of *replacing* the South. While they often encounter challenges in successfully conveying their representations, these playwrights also meet with opportunities for challenging the notion of the universal spectator, reinventing genre, and imagining the South in new ways.

End Notes

¹ The Mitchell family trust has carefully guarded the rights and interests of Mitchell's still-lucrative story. When they have offered permissions, they have controlled nearly every aspect of the process, requiring writers to submit detailed plans and even forcing them to agree that their book could contain no incest, homosexuality, or miscegenation. While some novels have managed to make it to press, including Alexandra Ripley's *Scarlett* (1991) and Donald McCaig's *Rhett Butler's People* (2007), British novelist Emma Tennant, who was approached to write a sequel to *Scarlett*, refers to a trail of "blood-soaked casualties," herself included, that the Mitchell family has accumulated over the years. There have been several authors who have signed agreements and poured years of their lives into writing a book, only to be told in the final stages that the family or publisher was no longer interested. While the Mitchell family argues they made these agreements clear and the authors signed willingly, the writers were left contractually forbidden from offering the book to another publisher or even discussing it with

friends, and feel they were treated unethically. For more information see the *Times Online* article “Gone With the Wind: The Never-Ending Story.”

² The novel has been translated into 32 languages, evidence not only of its appeal, but the world-wide proliferation of a romanticized version of the South. The Japanese people’s affinity for *Gone With the Wind* in particular, has been noted by Tony Horwitz in his book *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War*. His discussion suggests that the Japanese may be drawn to *GWTW* because of the strong family ties, traditional values, and gender roles that have characterized both Japanese and southern culture, for instance: “traditional [Japanese] women wear kimonos and are admired for their delicate nature, while men are tough and strong” (299). Both nineteenth-century Georgia and twentieth-century Japan rebuilt themselves after being devastated by war; in fact, the Japanese “symbol of royalty is the phoenix, just like Atlanta” (299). One Japanese man Horwitz interviews, Daijiro, explains his perspective on the draw of *GWTW* for many Japanese people: “You must understand the times. In the 1930s we saw American movies, then during the war we didn’t. These movies came back after the war and *Gone With the Wind* was the most popular. I think it gave people hope to see this woman fighting so hard to build her land back. Also, she stands by her family, which is something we admire. There is something else, but this is just my idea. I think people watched the movie and thought, “This is the real America, a wonderful place, not the one we fought in war” (300).

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VITA

While born and raised in Jefferson City, Missouri, Casey Kayser also claims as a hometown place Quincy, Illinois, her parent's birthplace and their current home. Kayser developed a unique view of northern and southern places while growing up in the southern border state of Missouri and spending time in southern Illinois, just across the Mississippi River from Mark Twain's birthplace of Hannibal, Missouri, another place characterized by both northern and southern qualities. Similar to Twain, the mixed atmosphere of her homeplaces cultivated in Kayser an interest in northern/southern dichotomies and place, especially liminal spaces not easily categorized as northern or southern. Kayser graduated from Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, in 2001 with a bachelor's degree in English and minors in theatre and psychology. She earned a master's degree in English from the University of Missouri-Columbia in 2003. In May 2010 she will graduate from Louisiana State University with a doctorate in English and a graduate minor in women's and gender studies.