

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: PLAYING AT LIVES: LIFE WRITING AND
CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST DRAMA

Ryan Matthew Claycomb, Doctor of Philosophy, 2003

Dissertation directed by: Professor Brian Richardson
Department of English

Amidst the trends of confessional narratives and theories of gender performativity that took root in the 90s, the feminist maxim “the personal is political” is no longer sufficient to account for the complexities of women’s lives transformed into life-stories and live performances. Given the push to recover silenced women, and the more complex discourse that governs both feminist art and criticism, it is not surprising that feminist life-writing has found many of its richest realizations in performance. On the feminist stage, history, narrative, bodies, voice, identity and community all converge in three related dramatic forms that we can group under the heading of “life-writing”: autobiographical performance, biographical plays and staged oral histories.

In this study, I take a look at these forms and argue that each one offers both theoretical obstacles and political possibilities to the feminist playwrights and performers who use them. By placing narratives of real lives within the context of performance, these artists point out the degree to which gender, identity, and history are socially constructed performances and are subject to the manipulations of power. And by highlighting the gender biases embedded in these performative notions, they are then able to revise and reconstruct them within a new framework, one that resists hegemonic power and acknowledges difference.

In three chapters, I examine how feminist playwrights and performers use body, voice, community and history to create potent rhetoric out of women's life narratives. In the chapter on autobiographical performance, I argue that narratives of the self in performance deconstruct notions of selfhood as a way of avoiding essentialism and establishing female agency. At the same time, however, these narratives rely on historical referentiality and an essentialism of the self to reinforce their efficacy. The chapter on biographical drama asserts that feminist playwrights respond to the imperative to reclaim lost feminist lives, but must do so in ways that subvert the objectifying impulses of life writing. Finally, the oral history chapter shows that the communal subjectivity established in these plays generates feminist notions of community in its performance, even as it advocates for such community among its audiences.

PLAYING AT LIVES:
LIFE WRITING AND CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST DRAMA

By

Ryan Matthew Claycomb

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Advisory Committee:

Professor Brian Richardson, Chair
Professor Jackson Bryer
Professor Susan Leonardi
Professor Laura Rosenthal
Professor Catherine Schuler

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Introduction

In the summer of 1998, Jennifer Ambrosino, Producing Director for The Theatre Conspiracy (TTC)—a Washington, D.C. feminist theatre company for which I served as literary manager in the late 1990s—joked that she was tired of directing plays about real people—that she wanted a little fiction in her life. And no wonder. She was at that point directing a staged reading of Allison Pruitt’s *The Trial of Susan B. Anthony* for the Source Theatre Festival in Washington, D.C., had just finished with TTC’s run of Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *New Anatomies* (a life of fin -de-siècle iconoclast Isabelle Eberhardt), and had helmed Lynn Kaufman’s *Shooting Simone* (about Simone de Beauvoir) the season before. And I had experienced the same phenomenon. As coordinator for TTC’s Emerging Women Playwrights Series that summer, I read over 50 scripts from around the country, and of these, at least 15 were biographically oriented. One of them, Jamie Pachino’s *Theodora: An Unauthorized Biography*, became one of our featured readings for the series. That made four biographies in two years between Jennifer and myself, which doesn’t count Studio Theatre’s production of Suzan-Lori Parks’ *Venus*, the Source Festival’s *Soulmates: The Passion of Petra Kelly*, by Nancie Carraway, or Horizons Theater’s partially improvised *In Good Company*, which featured several historically prominent women, all produced in the Washington DC area within the span of a couple of years in the late 1990s.

At around the same time, the Spring of 1998 to be exact, feminist performance artist Karen Finley stood at the steps of the Supreme Court and told the world that she felt that Senator Jesse Helms had been sexually harassing her through his political

attacks on her and the other artists now known as the “NEA Four.” When the Supreme Court verdict against the artists came down that summer, Finley interrupted her autobiographical show *Return of the Chocolate-Smeared Woman* to hold a press conference, a blurring of the lines of life writing and life, of making history and of history-making. Finley’s co-plaintiff in the case, Holly Hughes, would go on to perform her account of the trial two years later in her show, *Preaching to the Perverted*. And finally, only a few months after Finley’s incendiary Supreme Court statements, and a few stops up the metro, Eve Ensler brought her wildly popular oral history play *The Vagina Monologues* to a highly successful run at the Studio Theatre.

What these events, all concentrated in a short span in the late 1990s, tell us is that theatrical events that draw their material from the lives of real women have been very near the center of feminist theatrical practice, if not near the center of dramatic production itself, over the last few decades. This observation speaks to a more firmly established space for feminist ideology on the contemporary stage, and furthermore to the influence of the 1970s feminist slogan, “the personal is political.” But amidst the growing trend of confessional narratives and theories of gender performativity that took root in the 90s, this old feminist maxim is no longer entirely sufficient to account for the complexities of women’s lives transformed into life-stories and live performances. Given the push to recover silenced women, and the more complex discourse that governs both feminist art and criticism, it is not surprising that feminist life writing has found many of its richest realizations in performance. On the feminist stage, history, narrative, bodies, voice, identity and community all converge in three

related dramatic forms that we can group under the heading of “life writing”:
autobiographical performance, biographical plays and staged oral histories.

In this study, I take a look at these forms and argue that each one offers both theoretical obstacles and political possibilities to the feminist playwrights and performers who use them. By placing narratives of real lives within the context of performance, these artists point out the degree to which gender, identity, and history are socially constructed performances and are subject to the manipulations of power. And by highlighting the gender biases embedded in these performative notions, they are then able to revise and reconstruct them within a new framework, one that resists hegemonic power and acknowledges difference.

Before embarking on a long project on life writing in feminist drama, we must first recognize that these foundational terms—drama, feminist, and life writing—are unstable and that they require some definition from the outset. Let us first begin with “drama.” I, like many others who navigate the murky waters between English, Theatre, and now Performance Studies programs, recognize that the boundaries between drama, theatre and performance are neither fixed nor uncontested. The traditional distinction between “drama” and “theatre” is made between a written play and its live realization in the theatrical space, and the traditional distinction between “theatre” and “performance” suggests, as Marvin Carlson puts it, that performance (or performance art) breaks down the notion of an “other” that “traditional theatre has regarded . . . as a character in a dramatic action embodied . . . by an actor” (Carlson, *Performance* 6). Instead, performance artists “do not base their work upon characters previously created by other artists, but upon their own bodies, their own

autobiographies, their own experiences in a culture or in the world, made performative by their consciousness of them and the process of displaying them for an audience” (6). Carlson’s definition seems to set performance art and drama (via traditional theatre) at odds with one another. However, any consideration of life-narratives in performance must acknowledge that the autobiographical component of much performance art makes the assumption of such a distinction between drama and performance troubling. Therefore, allow me to broaden our working definition of drama to merely *a narrative written for the purpose of performance*.¹ In this way, drama includes not only the traditional plays that we will examine in the biography chapter here, but also the self-narratives of feminist performance artists in the autobiography chapter, and the blend of self and other we see in the oral history plays of my final chapter.

While arriving at a broader definition of drama here is a fairly simple endeavor, defining *feminist* drama is a more complex issue. Definitions set out by theorists and critics of the last 25 years range from the hopelessly broad to the maddeningly restrictive. Elaine Aston, in her *Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*, surveys the range of these definitions, from the useless “anything about women,” to more specific ones like those of Lizbeth Goodman. Goodman, for example, opens her study of contemporary feminist theatres by suggesting that feminist theatre is a “political theatre oriented toward change, produced by women with feminist concerns” (1). She elaborates on the component of “political change,” though, by

¹ I acknowledge that there is drama that is anti-narrative in form, such as the later work of Samuel Beckett, just as there is dramatic narrative that is not designed for performance, such as Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* or the Circe chapter of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. These boundaries of dramatic representation, however, are not ones tested by the works considered in this study.

differentiating between “women’s theatre” and feminist theatre. Here she follows Susan Bassnet, who defines feminist theatre through seven specific political goals: “equal pay; equal education and job opportunities; free 24-hour nurseries; free contraception and abortion on demand; financial and legal independence; an end to discrimination against lesbians and a woman’s right to define her own sexuality; freedom from violence and sexual coercion” (Bassnet-McGuire 447).

I find Bassnet’s definition (which, published almost twenty years ago, reflects the specific concerns of the second-wave Women’s Movement) overly restrictive, and instead prefer Janet Brown’s more recent, broader, yet still instructive, definition. Brown defines feminist drama by its “commitment to telling the stories of silenced and marginalized women, celebrating women’s community and sense of connection through group protagonists, and expressing the moral concerns and societal criticism that arise from women’s experience” (Brown, “Feminist Theory” 155). While Brown’s third goal encompasses Bassnet’s definition, her first and second axes touch on concerns that are undoubtedly feminist, but are less connected to immediate, concrete political action. Instead, they focus on some of the larger representational concerns of feminist artists and scholars. Ultimately, though, we must consider a definition of feminist theatre that encompasses both a multiplicity of feminisms and a continuum of rhetorical emphasis on those ideologies. For example, while we may examine April DeAngelis’ *Playhouse Creatures* (Chapter 2) within the context of Bassnet’s seven demands, Anna Deavere Smith’s performances (Chapter 3) are far more concerned with racial politics than gender politics. Nonetheless, Smith’s formal structures accord the same space to female voices as male voices—an implicit

invocation of Brown's call to tell women's stories –while her emphasis on community satisfies Brown's second goal.

Furthermore, we must acknowledge the enormous overlap between feminist theatre and queer theatre, in terms of content, social position, and formal methodology. Certainly, playwrights and performers who identify as lesbian almost undoubtedly fit into both categories, and lesbian plays abound in this study. But given the critical debt of queer theory to feminist inquiry, and the degree to which recent advancements in queer theory have pushed feminist theory forward, I consider queer theories of representation as they illuminate feminist performances. For example, while Tim Miller and David Román's 1995 article "Preaching to the Converted" specifically describes gay and lesbian theatre, its observations frequently apply to feminist performances as well. And finally, because of their similar positions on the political margins, feminist theatre and queer theatre frequently deploy the same tactics, and, as I will show in my analysis of Moisés Kaufman's *The Laramie Project*, side-by-side comparison of the two categories reveal a rich artistic exchange. Nonetheless, while a variety of queer performances and theories pepper this study, I acknowledge that the concerns of these two (often overlapping) camps can be quite different, and sometimes actively divergent.

Compared to "feminist drama," "life writing" is a category seemingly easy to define. Life writing is what its name suggests: narrative writing based on the life of a historically verifiable person or people, living or dead. The category can be divided into three basic subsets: autobiography, a first-person autodiegetic narrative of one's own life experiences; biography, the narration of another's life experiences; and oral

history, a collection of narratives from a variety of perspectives that collectively form a more complete narrative than any of the individual voices that comprise it.

Problems in defining life writing stem from the vague nature of the phrase “based on.” A huge body of work has been devoted to analyzing the truth claims of life writing, and still more work is being produced on this topic. I cover this subject more extensively in the chapters on autobiography, biography, but let me suggest here that, like the term “feminist,” my assignment of the label “life writing” as opposed to something like “fiction” to a text works on a continuum. We will see some texts, like Emily Mann’s *Greensboro*, that pay meticulous attention to documentary accuracy, while plays like Joan Schenkar’s *Signs of Life* or Karen Finley’s *Return of the Chocolate-Smeared Woman* openly indulge in tall-tale, fantasy, and outright fiction. Nonetheless, the presence of a verifiable life narrative at the center of these texts qualifies them for examination in this study, especially given that the truth in such outlying cases is often less important than the reasons that the truth is being stretched, or the revelations that such truth stretching offers about more traditionally accurate narratives.

When placed in a performance dynamic, life writing in feminist drama represents a rhetorically explosive combination for feminist artists. The project of this study is to explore why and how the convergence of these two genres makes such a potent persuasive tandem. I will argue, ultimately, that life writing at its heart fulfills Janet Brown’s first characteristic of feminist theatre, inasmuch as it tells “the stories of silenced and marginalized women” in a way that is not easily written off as mere fantasy. Staged feminist life writing further works as rhetoric simply by

establishing the speaking woman as a viable presence in both the art-making world and in the space of public power. However, as feminist politics and conservative responses to those politics evolve and become more sophisticated, fundamental questions of how gender is constituted and represented come to bear on these discussions of voices in public spaces. And in the last 15 years, a more subtle use of life writing has begun to emerge. In short, recent feminist playwrights and performers seem to be drawn to bringing real life into performance in order to reveal the performativity of real life, and to reclaim radically subversive performative lives as part of a broader tradition of feminism across history.

Despite what I believe is the radical potential for life writing on the feminist stage, the traditional manifestations of life writing are not without theoretical problems for feminist practitioners. The first and most pervasive objection of feminist critics to the canon of life writing is that it is populated almost entirely by male writers whose lives are presented (by themselves or others) as coherent, unified narratives of a concrete, discrete self. Commenting on the classical tradition of autobiography that begins with St. Augustine's *Confessions* and extends through Benjamin Franklin's autobiography and the bevy of biographies of great men that currently line bookstore shelves, feminist critics identify first the dearth of women's voices. Then they note that these narrated lives share a sense of the individual male who controls his own life such that it can be ordered into a coherent, linear narrative of which he is the center. This notion of the male subject at the center of experience taps into an enlightenment epistemology of self that assigns an excessive degree of authority to the subject and his accomplishments. Feminist critics suggest,

furthermore, that this monologic, univocal presentation of self both elides the fragmentary, fluid nature of identity and privileges the male voice to order experience according to his own values.

When applied to women's lives, however, this notion of the individual as object of scrutiny has traditionally failed to center the woman as empowered subject, but rather has positioned her as an object of observation. Even though, as Brownley and Kimmich point out, "Autobiography . . . requires that the writer lay claim to subjectivity," (1) those writing women's lives must work against a long history of objectification of women's lives and women's bodies, and must at once establish subjectivity while working to subvert the operations that allow patriarchal impulses to categorize women within proscribed gender roles. When these lives are brought to the stage, the issue is doubly problematic, since the body of the performer also becomes a site for potential objectification as an object of visual pleasure for the male gaze.

Moreover, the traditional notion of the single subject of life writing serves to elide the importance of community in individual lives. Brownley and Kimmich suggest, for example, that "the male autobiographer, whose narrative may suggest that he alone deserves recognition for his accomplishments," will ignore that his "life is a part of a larger social fabric" (1). This notion of the self as autonomous is particularly problematic for an ideological stance that privileges community among women. Plays, therefore, that position the exemplary woman in much the same way as the exemplary man risk alienating the "average woman" whom these plays often

hope to persuade into action at the same time as they minimize the importance of community and collectivity in establishing women's empowerment.

Finally, feminist critics identify the overwhelming number of male autobiographers as indicative of the male bias of traditional accounts of history. Given that male voices are privileged over female voices, it is no surprise that a patriarchal view of history that preserves male values and male power has emerged. Because it manifests as a self-preserving system, one that establishes the conventions upon which history-writing is founded, male life writing privileges the unified, linear, male-centered narrative as the standard against which alternative histories (like those of women) are measured, and therefore excludes those viewpoints from consideration as cultural memories are manufactured and reified.

The confluence of life writing and live performance, however, offers feminist playwrights and performers theoretical and practical possibilities to respond to these formal biases in such a way that women's lives are given center stage without reinforcing the epistemological and aesthetic standards of the male life writing tradition that moved women off of the stage in the first place. This project will examine the three forms of life writing along four axes, ones that draw at once upon the narrative conventions of life writing and the performative conventions of theatrical representation: voice, body, community and history.

Susan S. Lanser opens her groundbreaking *Fictions of Authority* by noting, "Few words are as resonant to contemporary feminists as 'voice'" (3). She then describes the affinities between a feminist notion of voice as the seat of authority and the narratological approach to voice as a component of narrative poetics. "In linking

social identity and narrative form,” she asserts, “I am postulating that the authority of a given voice of text is produced from a conjunction of social and rhetorical properties” (6). In the context of life writing, these properties are magnified by the implication of the real attached to the narrative voice; from both a narrative and a feminist perspective, the voice’s claim to truth-value also represents a claim to authority. When literalized by the stage, this claim to truth-value is enhanced by the notion of performance (despite Derridean objections) through the existence of the performer’s body in the presence of the audience. Therefore, we can see that staged life writing offers feminists a compelling conduit to bringing women’s voices—often silenced ones—into the realm of authority, a claim I will examine more closely in Chapters one and three.

If voice is among the most compelling aspects of life writing in performance, then the body of the performer is certainly the most contested. While the truth-value of voice enhances the rhetorical impact of a performance, the truth-value of the body complicates it, and does so differently in different forms. Biography, for example, uses the body of the actress as what Elin Diamond (following Benjamin) calls a “dialectical image,” a physical embodiment that uproots the body of the biographical object and the body of the actress from their historically specific places and creates a dialectic of historical narrative: a marker of the long history of women’s oppression in this one performing body. But the form runs into problems when audience members want to collapse the identity of the performer too neatly with the identity of the biographical subject. Such an interpretive move assumes that women’s identities are easily interchangeable, and therefore reinforces a notion of a uniform women’s

identity rooted in the sexed body. While Brechtian alienation tactics are widely used to defuse this tendency, the actress' body remains at an interpretive nexus of both radical and conservative reading practices. Meanwhile, autobiographical performance leverages the body of its authors into pointed critiques of self-construction, while oral history performers like Anna Deavere Smith are praised for their virtuoso ability to perform others. In Smith's case, though, this leads to a critique of her work because, as Tania Modleski points out, it designates "a black woman as a container of the teeming multitudes" and evokes "the notion of the black woman as the archetype of the maternal" (106). So we can see that the contested relationship between the performer's body and the body of the performed subject, whether alive or dead, gives rise to a range of theoretical binds that various performers solve in various ways.

In addition to the problem of performing the body of the subject of life writing, there remains the problem of objectification that both women's performance and women's life writing face. Because the male gaze is a factor in all varieties of women's performance, feminist playwrights and performers seek to disrupt, subvert and outright critique the tendency to turn the performing female body into an object of visual pleasure. Accordingly, we see a range of tactics used to accomplish this, from the overt deconstructions of the female body as sexualized object in the autobiographical work of Orlan, Annie Sprinkle, and Karen Finley, to the approach found in many biographical plays of splitting the subject between the biographical figure and a biographer who helps the audience contextualize the act of witnessing a life.

This impulse to bring the audience into the process of life writing suggests to a large degree the emphasis that many of these plays and performances place on the notion of community. While community is not a narratological term, inquiries into the nature of community in feminist performances necessarily turn to theories of readership for background. Notions of implied readers who are generated at the moment of writing get transformed into real audiences in the moment of performance, which complicates any textual study of feminist drama. Nonetheless, we consistently see how these performances rely upon individual lives (in the cases of biography and autobiography) as lightning rods for the constitution of community among audiences, and how they leverage the collective lives of oral history to acknowledge the social fabric of experience, model community practices onstage for their audience offstage, and ultimately attempt to create community among their audiences for the purposes of encouraging collective action.

The fourth dimension of staged life writing that feminist playwrights and performers utilize comes in the form of history. It is perhaps commonplace to suggest that feminist artists typically enact revisionist histories as a way of reclaiming their positions in the annals of human history. However, when these feminist performances are rooted in the lives of real people, the label “revisionist history” can be used as less of a dismissive term than it is in the popular media. Because the term “revisionist” often implies an element of fictionalization—a convenient fabrication for the purposes of hawking a specific political agenda—alternative histories are often written off as indulgent and suspect. Reviews of April DeAngelis’ *Playhouse Creatures*, for example, suggested that DeAngelis’ history was exaggerated for

rhetorical purposes, and therefore used this critique to discount the merit of the performance. But when the voices and events of those histories are historically verifiable (as they are in the case of *Playhouse Creatures*), they shore up the validity of the revisions and help to create a narrative of critique that underscores not only the abuses that these feminist life stories chronicle, but also the silencing operations that have kept women out of power for so long. In feminist biographies in particular, where the subjects are scattered throughout both recent and distant history, this notion of verifiability becomes exceedingly important. Furthermore, it would be inaccurate to suggest that revisionist tactics are uniform across the spectrum of feminist performances. Some performances take greater license with the details of historical fact than others, while others (especially oral histories) de-emphasize the details themselves in favor of concentrating on the meta-discourse surrounding events.

These four axes of inquiry—voice, body, community and history—together comprise the primary elements of this study of life writing and feminist drama. In the following three chapters (one on each narrative form), I argue that these aspects provide both representational dilemmas and rhetorical opportunities to the playwrights and performers who rely on them. The first chapter on feminist autobiographical performance concentrates significantly on the constitution of the subject in staged life writing, and reveals how that act of subject formation in the moment of performance inflects the creation of audience community and revisions of history. The chapter shows how performance artists bring particular power to their life stories by adding their bodies as elements of their narratives. At the same time, because they apply unreliable or self-contradicting narratives to these real-time,

physically-present performances, they call into question the stability of their own gendered identities, thus prodding at these seemingly stable concepts that they hope to complicate and explode. In short, these artists perform the self to reveal selfhood as performative.

Moreover, while self-narration allows the performer to highlight her own agency to self-construct identity, it also provides a rallying point around which the performance of self helps generate community among like-minded feminists in the audience. The chapter then continues examining this notion of self-constructed identities in the realm of lived history with the work of Holly Hughes and Karen Finley. In their responses to the infamous “NEA Four” controversy, these performers use their own experience to call attention to the problems with the official history of the legal battle, and in doing so, question the official, gendered mythology of America itself. Through an examination of the performativity of autobiography, we find that the form offers specific potential to establish women as speaking subjects around whom communities can form and history can be rewritten.

The second chapter covers biographical plays, and opens with a concerted examination of the theoretical difficulties of writing biographical plays, including the problems of performing history and the dangers of representing a biographical subject as an object of historical inquiry and of visual pleasure. Nonetheless, I argue, feminist playwrights are responding to an imperative present in both feminist criticism and feminist drama at large. In re-claiming erased or mistold women’s histories, these plays also reclaim the radical gender performances of those women. The chapter also examines the complex intersection of gender with race and ethnicity

in plays by Timberlake Wertenbaker and Suzan-Lori Parks, and concludes by considering conflicting accounts of writing and performance as viable tactics for memorializing women's lives in plays by Hélène Cixous and April De Angelis. Ultimately, this chapter fleshes out issues of performing history that run throughout this study.

The third chapter moves from traditional first- and third-person narratives of real lives into the communal narratives of staged oral history. This section posits that staged oral histories like those of Anna Deavere Smith and Emily Mann perform community in order to create community in their audiences. These plays produce a radically pluralized subject, one that implicitly values community over the individual voice, and thus questions the authority of the patriarchal voice. The chapter then applies this notion of the communal voice specifically to plays that imagine all women as a community, and implicates Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* as the most problematic example of this group of plays. Meanwhile, we can see how other playwrights work to avoid the traps concomitant with the presentation of the unified self by representing individual life histories within their far more complex social networks. In doing so, I argue that these plays (when they avoid the hegemonic impulses of masking an authorial "I" in a narrative "we") place a value on community—an important factor in Janet Brown's definition of feminist drama—that other forms of life writing can only achieve with much more difficulty.

Through extended consideration of the impact of real lives upon feminist rhetoric, and the problems and possibilities of performance in this already-complex equation, I believe we will find that the theoretical underpinnings will explain the

prevalence of life writing in the context of feminist theatre. Moreover, this study speaks to larger issues: the pains and pleasures of self-representation and the power of representing others, the politics of life writing as a genre, and ultimately the possibilities for a political theatre in an age where politicized art is contested at every turn.

Performative Lives, Performed Selves: Autobiography in Feminist Performance

The first iterations of feminist performance did not all fit under the rubric of traditional drama. Rather, the period from the 1960s to the present saw a boom of feminist performance practices that we now call performance art, ranging along a continuum from the art-world installations of Eleanor Antin and Carollee Schneeman to the more recent, theatre-oriented work of Holly Hughes. These performers clearly work on the fringes of what we might call drama, but by blurring the boundaries of traditional theatrical practice, they are also blurring the boundaries of the roles and identities that are associated with the category “woman.” Moreover, it is time, I would argue, to examine these performances alongside the literary and theatrical practices of conventional drama to understand the relationship of life narratives to feminist performance. Given that these performers—many of whom in conceiving the narratives for their own performances are also playwrights—implicitly and explicitly narrate their own pasts, we must consider their stories within the frames of both their narrative and performance dimensions. These artists also bring particular power to their life stories by adding their bodies as an element of their narratives. At the same time, because they apply unreliable or self-contradicting narratives to these real-time, physically-present performances, they call into question the stability of their own gendered identities, thus prodding at these seemingly stable concepts that they hope to complicate and explode. In short, these artists perform the self to reveal selfhood as performative, even as they rely on the truth claims of selfhood to ground their critiques.

In their introduction to *O Solo Homo*, their 1998 collection of queer performance art pieces, David Román and Holly Hughes note a boom in queer performance art, even as funding streams are drying up at a disheartening rate. The same boom can be said to be true of feminist performance (indeed, many of the pieces in both that volume and in this chapter might be said to fit into both categories). Second-wave feminism from the late 60s into the 80s found female artists locating forums for performance in unprecedented numbers. Performance art scholar RoseLee Goldberg documents this rise, and explicitly connects autobiographical performance to the surge of feminist politics: “coinciding with the powerful Women’s Movement throughout Europe and the United States, [autobiographical performance] allowed many women performers to deal with issues that had been relatively little explored by their male counterparts” (Goldberg 174). That an already-established tradition of avant-garde performance took this auto-diegetic turn with the resurgence of feminism suggests the affinity between this narrative form and feminist ideology.

At the height of this period in feminist performance in the late 70s and early 80s, Goldberg notes, performance art also took a turn toward theatre. As it became more popular, “‘new performance’ was given the licence to acquire polish, structure and narrative” (Goldberg 196). It is the narrative element of these performances with which I am most concerned here, and that brings many of these pieces into the discussion of the more or less conventional plays that appear elsewhere in this study. While the divide between “drama” (the traditional text that describes a semiotic elsewhere and *elsewhen* in a convention that suggests a live performance) and “theatre” (the performed realization and interpretation of that drama) is fairly clear,

the line where either of those categories ends and performance art begins is less clear. While performance art certainly encompasses a broader range of practices, we can say that it overlaps with drama specifically when it makes use of a narrative text that is performed in a time and space inhabited by an audience. Of course, some of the artists whom I discuss here do not precisely perform narrative drama. For example, Orlan's carefully conceived plastic surgeries, while they do involve the self (revealing a resemblance to autobiography), do not purport to narrate the self in the same way that Holly Hughes does in *Preaching to the Perverted*. Nonetheless, Orlan's experiments with her own body reveal much about the rhetorical potential of the self in performance, an element that lies at the center of the narratives studied here. Therefore discussion of her performances will illuminate other more traditionally narrative performance that we can more clearly call autobiographical drama.

Having situated autobiographical performance art at least partially within the tradition of drama, we must also consider the more specific narrative category of autobiography here. As I suggested above, the fact that many of these performers use their own bodies in space to create art is a major factor, establishing the self as a component of their performances. However, as in most conventional drama, that body is often used to depict a character, a fictive other who inhabits the body of the performer for a time. In his essay "Performing the Self," Marvin Carlson invokes Eric Bentley's simple "A impersonates B while C looks on" only to revise it as "A impersonates A while C looks on," suggesting at once an equation of actor and character, but simultaneously indicating a similar sort of otherness in the term

“impersonates” (Carlson “Performing the Self” 599). John Brockway Schmor is a bit more specific, depicting what he calls “confessional performance” as a form

in which the performer uses often intimately autobiographical text, chance improvisation and ritual to deconstruct or at least deflect traditional notions of identity and social reality. This form emphasizes almost exclusively the actual unmediated event in an inversion of traditional illusionist principles of theatre. Following Brecht, autobiographical performance art breaks theatrical illusion . . . but unlike Brechtian Theatre, such works disrupt even the illusion of the “real” event by problematizing the identity of the performing self.

(Schmor 159)

Schmor’s definition at once evokes the real that, however contested, is at the center of life writing, and at the same time recognizes the degree to which that real is always up for debate, for reexamination. What we can say is this: the performer not only claims to be essentially the same as the “character,” the identity constructed onstage, but is believed to be so both in the dramatic world and outside the dramatic frame. The identity of the character must referentially indicate the identity of the author/performer, even if it often problematizes it: “A impersonates A (or A', a public or stage self) while C looks on.” As we will soon see, the tenuous, imbricated relationship between self-as-actor and self-as-character speaks volumes about the nature of identity and the ability of feminist performers to manipulate notions of identity once thought to be stable.

Before I continue on past basic definitional issues, let me first take a step back to contextualize autobiographical performance as a genre within my larger project on feminist drama. In part because performance art is situated at the theoretical outskirts

of traditional theatre, and therefore represents a scholarly hotbed of inquiry, an extraordinarily large body of work has already been produced on autobiographical performance, even specifically feminist autobiographical performance. Given that the most exciting theatrical advances for most of the 70s and 80s came in the field of performance art, that much of that performance art was confessional or autobiographical, and that a significant number of the performers creating these pieces were self-identified feminists, it is no surprise that much of the most engaging feminist theatrical criticism of the last twenty years has examined precisely this phenomenon. Scholars like Sue Ellen Case, Jeannie Forte, Elin Diamond, Marvin Carlson, Claire MacDonald, and David Román, not to mention the host of artists like Holly Hughes who brought the same acute intelligence of their art to their criticism, have all given us a sense not only of the many individual artists who do this sort of work, but of many of the theoretical underpinnings that foreground it. Add to that the equally daunting amount of material that has been produced on written feminist autobiography by scholars like Carolyn Heilbrun, Sidonie Smith, and Nancy K. Miller, and there may appear to be little left to say on the subject.

Nonetheless, this chapter is intended to lay out the grounds upon which the larger mode of inquiry (the function of narrated lives in feminist performance) can take place. Certainly, autobiographical performance is a well-traveled subject; existing scholarship has already at least touched upon the appeal of autobiography to feminist writers, the authority offered by the suggestion of presentness made by autobiographical performance, the ways that the body-as-text and the life-as-construction in tandem reveal the performativity of everyday identity, and the

community-building functions of performed autobiographical narrative. These subjects not only help establish the rhetorical power of autobiographical feminist performance, but also indicate potential areas of inquiry for other genres of life writing.

What I will establish, though, is precisely what makes the intersection between live performance and life narrative so compelling both as performance and as rhetoric, and what theoretical implications of verifiable performing bodies have on constructed narratives of self. I will show that even the earliest live performances of women's life narratives at once make political the personal, fulfilling the charge of that tried-and-true second-wave feminist slogan. Autobiographical narratives grant women the power to write their own stories. And by bringing the self to the stage, autobiographical performers assert themselves as politically viable speaking subjects. Yet because performance makes an object of the performer's body even as autobiography asserts her as the speaking subject, this simplistic notion of live presence as unassailable subjectivity goes inevitably awry. Instead, we see performers undermining their own assumed presence and apparent subjectivity, both by revealing the very constructibility of the female body—as performers like Orlan and Kate Bornstein do—and by deconstructing the notion of the life narrative—as performers like Carmelita Tropicana and Bobby Baker do. And yet, as I hope to suggest below, after all of the detritus of discursive notions of the female body and the circumscribability of the female life are discarded, what remains of the speaking subject on stage is precisely the agency to speak to determine (whether negatively or positively) the identity she chooses to claim.

The Feminist Appeal of Autobiographical Narrative

Even without the effects of performance, autobiography as a narrative category carries a strong appeal to feminist performers. When feminist literary critics discuss the status of women autobiographers, the most frequent critique rests on their place (or lack thereof) within the autobiographical canon, decrying the degree to which the very category of autobiography is often defined by male narratives like those of Saint Augustine and Benjamin Franklin, even as women's narratives from the same time periods exist and present a viable counter-tradition that has been thoroughly excluded from inquiry. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck write that "the (masculine) tradition of autobiography beginning with Augustine had taken as its first premise the mirroring capacity of the autobiographer: *his* universality, *his* representativeness, *his* role as a spokesman for the community" (1). The logic of this tradition suggests that the exemplary male recounts his life as a way of shoring up his public influence at the end of his life, as a way of determining his own legacy. Embedded in this notion are the ideas that autobiography signifies public impact and that the author has some measure of control over that public impact.

It is no wonder then that feminist critics have decried the decided absence of women's narratives from the autobiographical canon. Given the significant relationship between self-narration and very real political power, it would seem natural that feminist artists should adopt autobiographical form. Indeed, when Janet Brown defines feminist drama, she identifies woman's autonomy as a central component of feminism's rhetorical goal (*Feminist Drama* 14), and autobiography seems to offer precisely this autonomy. Moreover, such autonomy also manifests in

very practical ways that respond to the market economy of theatre; since feminist performance still hasn't gained a foothold in mainstream theatres, the control afforded to the solo autobiographical performer allows her to minimize economic impingements on the political content of her performances. Therefore, she is more like to be able to present public, feminist art while avoiding many of the ideological and economic constraints that the mainstream theatre industry would inevitably enforce. The ability to control the presentation of women's identity and experience within the public sphere therefore runs counter to the long history of women's circumscription within male narratives of dominance.

Part of this authority can be derived directly from the personal voice of autobiography, the first-person narration of the self as protagonist. That is, the power to narrate the self into existence assumes an authority to exert control over how the self is perceived, how it is to be accepted into the discourse of women's experience in general, even if the self and its reception are always to some degree inherently unreliable. So when Holly Hughes relates her side of the NEA Four story, she is doing so as an act of self-definition, refusing the identities assigned to her as aberrant and perverse by the popular media and instead constructing an identity that reflects her positionality. Susan S. Lanser notes that the personal voice does not retain the same sort of authority that the omniscient authorial voice might, and that "a female personal narrator risks the reader's resistance if the act of telling, the story she tells or the self she constructs through telling it transgresses the limits of the acceptably feminine" (19). But when the goal is precisely to transgress those norms of femininity, to break down the barriers that silence women's voices, then to speak in

the first person, to speak as the self, offers the power to exceed *immediately* the restrictions traditionally placed on women.

Beyond simply the power to speak the self, autobiography also offers the feminist writer and performer the opportunity to bring personal experience into the public sphere. The choice of the word “opportunity” here is not accidental, although it is not necessarily the accepted line on the appearance of personal material. Heilbrun notes, for example, the scorn typically associated with “confessional” narratives (“New Forms” 23), while Holly Hughes acknowledges that “memoirs and solo performances are frequently dismissed by critics as ‘self-indulgent’ and artless, as though there were no art involved in rescuing images and metaphors from the flotsam and jetsam of daily life” (*O Solo Homo* 2). The assumption of artlessness that the general public seems to attach to women’s autobiographies (as well as those of other marginalized identities) suggests the degree to which the power structures have reserved autobiographical narrative for themselves, at the same time as they refuse to acknowledge the life narratives of those marginalized identities. Since these performances are obviously not artless at all, but intelligently constructed and forcefully argued, when we read them as such, we must then understand autobiography as opportunity: the entrance of the personal into the public politicizes women’s experience and forces the dominant discourse to confront the realities that women’s lives are legitimate sources of art and argument. Indeed, Marvin Carlson connects the power of the personal narrative to the shift toward narrative performance that was brought about through feminist performance:

Clearly a major impetus for the shift from image to word was the work of feminist performers who beginning in the early 1970s offered an [sic] powerful alternative performance orientation that was deeply involved in social and political concerns and, thus, in textuality and narrativity. Personal experience was central to this work, and much of it was specifically autobiographical, such as Linda Montano's *The Story of My Life*, in which Montano walked uphill on a treadmill for three hours while reciting her autobiography into an amplification system or Yvonne Rainer's autobiographical performance *This is the Story of a Woman Who ...*, which she later made into a film.

(Carlson, "Performing the Self" 600)

Heilbrun chooses the same time frame, with the 1973 publication of May Sarton's *Journal of Solitude*, as the watershed for feminist autobiography, "because Sarton deliberately retold the record of her anger. And above all other prohibitions, what has been forbidden women is anger, together with the open admission of the desire for power and control of one's life" (Heilbrun, *Writing a Woman's Life* 12-13). What Heilbrun's observation about Sarton and Carlson's claims about Montano and Rainer recognize is that the ability to assert narrative control over the personal material of one's life, often through expressions of rage, is a powerful political statement that transgresses conventional views of the place of women in society, and furthermore, is the necessary first step in enacting power in larger arenas and making more sophisticated claims about women's identity.

If the narrative aspects of autobiography make the form appealing, then performance enhances that appeal. Specifically, if a component of the draw of autodiegesis is the degree to which it emphasizes the speaking voice of the women, the literalization of the vocal metaphor makes performance even more potent.

Jeannie Forte argues, “Women’s performance art has a particular disruptive potential because it poses an actual woman as speaking subject, throwing that position into process, into doubt, opposing the traditional conception of the single, unified (male) subject” (254). She goes on to connect the power of the speaking woman to the idea of the woman’s body. According to Forte, presenting the female body as subject instead of as an object of the male gaze “clashes in dissonance with its patriarchal text, challenging the very fabric of representation by refusing that text” (254). Forte not only recognizes the power of the speaking subject to define the actual woman, she also highlights the political importance of speech’s ability to do so. The presence of the woman as speaker, woman as agent, woman as presence (as opposed to Lacanian notions of absence) situates feminist auto-performance, the intersection of feminist solo performance and autobiographical narrative, at a particular political nexus of power that has until recently largely excluded women from speaking.

Carolee Schneeman’s *Interior Scroll* makes this marriage of autobiographical narrative, voice, and the body as subject absolutely explicit. By verbally recounting an apparently autodiegetic text that she reads from a scroll she unravels from her vagina, Schneeman collapses the notion of voice and body into one narrational identity. She reads:

I met a happy man
a structuralist filmmaker
—but don’t call me that,
it’s something else I do—
he said we are fond of you
you are charming
but don’t ask us
to look at your films
we cannot

there are certain films
we cannot look at
the personal clutter
the persistence of feelings
the hand-touch sensibility
the diaristic indulgence
the painterly mess
the dense gestalt
the primitive techniques . . .

(qtd. in Forte 255-256)

Here Schneeman collapses into one performance the “personal clutter” and “diaristic indulgence” of autobiographical narrative (and critiquing the male filmmaker’s resistance to it), along with the written text of autobiography, the explicit image of her own female body, and the disruptive potential of her own female speech.

Schneeman’s piece represents the appeal of “presentness”—here understood to be that confluence of voice and body in performance that signals the self—that early feminist autobiography deployed. She positions her self as a woman who speaks in what cultural feminists understood to be female ways (personal, diaristic, emotionally grounded), and does so through the uniquely female aspects of her body.

Furthermore, she uses this feminist lexicon to lampoon the structuralist filmmaker, a signal of male empowerment, and in doing so, she disrupts patriarchal authority over women’s bodies and social positions through the performance of her female body.

In this and other examples of what we might call the early stages of feminist autobiographical performance, we see a very particular approach to the political situation of women. Performances like Schneeman’s support the assertion that women’s emotions are valid material, that women must be accepted as present, embodied speaking subjects, and that we must emphasize the femininity of the

woman's body (e.g. Schneeman "giving birth" to her text). Catherine Elwes epitomizes this position when she says, "Performance is about the 'real-life' presence of the artist. She takes on no roles but her own. She is author, subject, activator, director and designer. When a woman speaks within the performance tradition, she is understood to be conveying her own perceptions, her own fantasies, and her own analyses" (qtd. in Forte 257). In this context, when interpreted as the unmediated presence of the woman as speaking subject, it is no wonder that autobiographical performance has been touted as a powerful tool for feminists.

Deconstructing the Unmediated Body as Object

And yet assumptions about such unmediated performances are problematic on a number of theoretical fronts. The first danger is that by privileging the woman's body as a defining characteristic of women's agency, these performances tread dangerously close to an array of essentialist traps. Bringing women's agency to speak in a new way together with the immediacy of the female body may grant women access to a public space—and in the 1970s, this access was sorely absent. But as the relative success of feminist ideology and activism in the 1970s has made women's roles more complex (and more varied) the use of the female body as a conduit to women's speech has itself become limiting. The assumption that "women's speech" is a category separate from male speech (typically seen as universal) and connected exclusively to the female body still sets female speech off into its own corner, allows that speech to be circumscribed, regulated and ultimately marginalized once more.

Moreover, despite Forte's assertion that when assigned the subject position, the woman's body disrupts the male symbolic order, the audience of autobiographical

performance is still liable to objectify the performer—a symptom of both women’s performance and autobiographical narrative. Brownley and Kimmich assert, for example, that “reading an autobiography is an act of voyeurism” (xi), while accounts of Karen Finley’s career contain more than one anecdote of drunken frat boys heckling the naked woman smeared with chocolate. That much of feminist performance of the last forty years has relied on what Rebecca Schneider terms “the explicit body” underscores the body not only as site of feminist resistance, but also as potential object of the male gaze, especially if viewed as the unmediated, coherent signifier of the self.

And while Elwes’ statement about the presence of the self may suggest the potency of performance, it also represents a somewhat naïve position on the truth-claims that can be reliably forged by the narrative form of autobiography. Following Hayden White’s historiographic notion of the necessary fictionality of history, and therefore of the life histories of autobiography, the notion as life writing as the sign of authenticity is contested at best. So while early feminist performance artists relied on personal experience specifically, and women’s experience broadly (Sidonie Smith, “Constructing Truth” 37), narratives of this experience are sometimes no more than fabrications, and therefore subject to a slipperiness of signification that defies authenticity.² Furthermore, as Sidonie Smith notes, “As it promotes a literary theory of reflectionism and transparency, the celebration of a reified ‘experience’ paradoxically obscures the influence of determining structures” (“Constructing Truth”

² While the nature of these representations are textual, and their claims to referentiality are difficult to establish, I will explore the significant impact of referentiality and the truth claims of performed autobiography below.

39). As such, the very notion of personal experience that seemed initially to undergird the exigencies of feminist performance not only proves to be faulty as authentic portrayals of women's selfhood, but covertly supports the very "determining structures" that mask the operations of power in traditional male autobiographies like those of St. Augustine and Benjamin Franklin. For these reasons, the appeal of feminist autobiographical performance as a tactic to establish the woman as publicly acknowledged speaking subject seems easily undermined, despite what was, through much of second-wave feminism, a desperate need to establish exactly that.

Recognizing these theoretical obstacles to the notion of the embodied performer as unmediated speaking subject, artists in the late 70s through the 90s began to deploy more overtly deconstructive techniques to work against these obstacles. Perhaps foremost among these tactics is the notion of the constructible woman's body. That is, if the notion of woman's body as a discrete sign plays into a dangerous essentialism, even as autobiographical performance allows for objectifying viewing tactics, then it follows that feminist performers could effectively use Brechtian deconstructive tactics to disrupt not only the essentialized body, but also the male gaze. Indeed some of these tactics extend back to the earliest iterations of feminist performance, and while many of them are not autobiographical per se—they enact women's experience in the present instead of narrating past experiences—they reveal much about the construction of the self through the performed body. Lisa Tickner, for example, emphasizes the theme of corporeal transformation in works such as Eleanor Antin's photographic documentation of "a ten pound weight loss over

36 days in 144 photographs of her naked body in a piece called *Carving: An Intentional Sculpture*” (Augsburg 288). With the notion of intention in the piece’s title, Antin links body together with self and explicitly calls attention to both the status of woman’s body as art object and the violence inherent in the act of “carving” that constructed the weight loss. Antin is “intentionally” constructing the body to underscore the violence associated with idealized images of women, and in doing so lodging a critique against (among other things) the apparent attractiveness that a ten-pound weight loss would purportedly bring.

Feminist performance has a long history of using such tactics to expose how much cultural notions of beauty inflect the discourse surrounding women’s bodies. Furthermore, they begin to reveal the way that these notions forge a stylization of the female body that constitutes the very concept of gender itself, as Judith Butler has persuasively shown (“Performative Acts”). Valie Export, herself a performance artist, notes, “What was being foregrounded in particular in my work is the social construction of the body, the body as a carrier of signs, and with it the social construction of the subject in performance” (33). Rachel Rosenthal’s 1980 piece, *Bonsoir, Dr. Schon!* reveals the same tactics in use, as when the performer undresses and has her assistant mark her “bad spots” with tape (Lampe 181). By acknowledging those parts of her body that do not conform to patriarchal notions of beauty or womanliness, and displaying them anyway, Rosenthal flaunts her body *as text* in a direct confrontation of the patriarchy and its objectification of women. By revealing her body to be a textual signifier, Rosenthal’s self-critical move works to disrupt the male gaze that might make the same notations silently. Instead, she

embraces these flaws and like Antin, critiques the processes that provoke such self-criticism as a common practice.

Similarly, Annie Sprinkle's *Post-Porn Modernism* creates a denaturalized text out of the female body by trafficking in the image of the prostitute as cultural signifier. In her most famous scene, entitled "Public Cervix Announcement," Sprinkle invites audience members to the stage to examine her cervix with a flashlight and a speculum. And while some professed "porn aficionados" bring zoom lens cameras to fetishize Sprinkle's open vagina, Rebecca Schneider reads this as the most fascinating aspect of the performance's cultural critique: "All of us at The Kitchen who chose to look stood in line for the theatrical 'moment' when, at the site of the cervix, the name of art would slap against the name of porn across the stage within the stage, the proscenium of the prostitute's body" (55). Here, Schneider explicitly acknowledges the degree to which Sprinkle foregrounds the constructed nature of the prostitute's body as an image of both economic and physical desire. In contextualizing her own identity as a prostitute within the space of "art" and "performance," Sprinkle overtly calls attention to both the image of the prostitute in art's history and the degree to which that image is shaped by a constructed set of stylized gestures that can be parodied as easily as they can be invoked in earnest. Therefore, the use of the self as deconstructive text allows artists like Annie Sprinkle to use auto-performance as a forum for critique by foregrounding the abstract discourse of gender against the very real material bodies that discourse affects.

While Antin, Rosenthal, and Sprinkle reveal the degree to which the female body is subject to discursive construction, French artist Orlan literalizes the process

by explicitly constructing and reconstructing her body through a series of surgical “interventions.” While her first stagings of cosmetic surgery (primarily liposuction) as performance art were less about the end product of her transformed body as art object than about the surgery itself, they did produce “relics,” as Tanya Augsborg notes, little jars of her suctioned fat that the artist then sold to call attention to the female body as commodity (303). In subsequent performances, parts of a series entitled *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan*, the artist has undergone a series of videotaped surgeries, appropriating physical features of various women in famous works of Western art in an implicit critique of the history of standards of beauty, even as the results defy “the current supermodel ideals of beauty” (Augsburg 290). Augsborg also calls Orlan’s performances self-conscious blurrings of the subject/object distinction that seems to mark much of feminist performance art in this period, and I think it is important to note that this corporeal self-construction also represents the artist co-opting herself as object in order to establish her subjectivity. In essence, Orlan manipulates her body as an object of the gaze to at once reveal how that body is already subject to discourse, and to demonstrate some measure of control over that discourse by constructing the body’s outward appearance to make specific and pointed critiques about the status of women’s bodies as objects in general.

Perhaps even more complicated than Orlan’s case is that of Kate (née Al) Bornstein, the transsexual performance artist whose performance piece *The Opposite Sex is Neither* suggests the degree to which corporeal construction taps into more abstract notions of identity. While the piece is largely made up of character monologues, its autobiographical elements and Bornstein’s own complex gender

identity make her work particularly fertile ground for examining the degree to which both sexual and gender identity are social constructions.³ Indeed, it is difficult to call Bornstein a feminist, since after taking on the physical sex traits of a female, she insists that she is no longer female: “I went from male to female in this world, (and then to neither, but that’s another story entirely),” she asserts (qtd. in Russell 50-51). And even though one does not need to be female to be a feminist (and I cite myself as an example) Bornstein’s refusal of gender as a category in and of itself may represent an implicit rejection of womanhood, and perhaps more importantly, a rejection of the entire system of gender upon which feminism is reliant. Nonetheless, her transsexual performances force her audiences to reconsider the dissonances in her identity, revealing the fissures in the social discourse that surrounds both gender and sex identity categories, thus aligning her gender critique with many consonant aims of other feminist performers. While her body is at least the simulacra of femaleness (photos reveal her to be, in true drag style, more female than female), her genetic composition still maintains the initially telling Y chromosome. And given that the social discourse has no neatly marked category for her, her identity confounds the very existence of such categories. Performers like Bornstein and Orlan, then, seem to be using the self in performance as ways to pick apart the notion of the body as signifier of identity, a notion that girded much earlier feminist performance art.

³ The terms “social constructions” and “performances” here are interrelated, but not precisely interchangeable. While social constructions can be constituted by a nebulous, free-floating cultural discourse, performances (which are one contributing factor to the constitution of social constructions) are connected to specific bodies and specific identities. Therefore, we will frequently see individual performances pointing out the nature of a discourse as constructed.

Still, we mustn't confuse such explicit body performance with autobiographical narrative per se. Bornstein does use some autobiographical text to provide context for the self-constructed body she puts on display. But in writing about Orlan, Augsburg asserts, "If we are to take Orlan's own statements about her life and work seriously, we need to first consider her art in relation to her autobiography" (292). Such a statement reveals the importance of the self-created life narrative in understanding the larger point of Orlan's body art, but its structured dialectic between art and autobiography also suggests to a certain degree that the creation of that life narrative is not central to Orlan's work. In fact, the distinction between embodied art and life narrative in the cases of both performers begins to refute the claims of the unmediated presence of the self asserted by Elwes and Forte. If the constructed body, mediated by surgical and videographic technology, is the art, and the life-narratives in these cases are merely the context for the art, then the status of the body as an essential signal of presence and of subjectivity is impossible to assert. In fact, given the degree to which these particular bodies are being used as objects for public consumption, we can also see that feminist performers might find this distancing and denaturalizing effect to be desirable in establishing an autonomous female subject.

The Performativity of the Self

Nonetheless, to suggest a binary opposition between body and narrative that posits the body as constructible and the life narrative as somehow more discrete, more authentic, is similarly problematic. Linda S. Kauffman calls artists such as Schneeman, Sprinkle and Orlan "cut-ups," not only because they often deploy humor

as a denaturalizing tactic, but also because they “examine the vicissitudes of psychic life, particularly the drives that lead men to turn the female body into fetish, icon or cut-out” (104). Similarly, Amelia Jones links the deconstructed body to a deconstruction of psychic life by suggesting that “Body art splinters rather than coheres the self; far from assuming some presocial coherence of the self, body art enacts narcissism as contingency” (51). And indeed, if revelations of the constructible body reveal the contingency of the self that the body might be said to “contain,” then the discourse of autobiography, with its now-well-established emphasis on the notion of the life narrative as mediated and to some degree necessarily fictional, ups the ante even further.

“Body art,” as Jones calls it, does indeed invoke the fragmentary subject through constructions of the body, but its interrogation of the self does not necessarily indicate the narrativizing of a life history that autobiography does. When these narrative lives are performed, though, they similarly, and perhaps more significantly, reveal the contingent status of the speaking subject. Surveying the range of performances that explore alternative and fantasy identities, Marvin Carlson asserts, “It would thus be very difficult to construct a clear line between the mimetic characters of traditional drama and the authentic ‘alternate identities’ of autobiographical performance” (“Performing the Self” 603). That the boundary between these forms is blurred underscores the necessarily fictional component expressed most clearly at the outer edges of what we might call autobiographical by performers like Whoopi Goldberg or even Carmelita Tropicana. Indeed, “Carmelita Tropicana” is the stage name of Alina Troyano, though it is a persona by which she is

known offstage as well. That is, criticism refers to her as Carmelita, and her given name is far more difficult to locate. She, as Marvin Carlson suggests, is performing (onstage and off) a character that both overlaps with and encompasses the identity of the actor within a constructed identity, one that is simultaneously a manifestation of the self, a representation of the self, and a representation of type through which the self may be (erroneously or not) read.

This blurring of constructed persona and “real-life” extends quite thoroughly to her performance. In the introduction to the published text of her piece *Milk of Amnesia—Leche de Amnesia*, Tropicana writes, “In *Milk* I combined the campy stylized satire with a more personal autobiographical style, in this solo, I was able to let my schizophrenia surface, turning it into art” (Tropicana 19). This casual reference to schizophrenia at once taps into the notion of the fragmented subject. More importantly, the intermingling of “stylized satire,” art of overt, even extreme artifice, and autobiography, which is presumed to be real, indicates the degree to which Tropicana’s art plays with her own identity in order to problematize the very nature of that identity. We might note that she even refers to her more “authentic” source of material as “a more personal autobiographical *style*” (emphasis mine), slyly pointing out the degree to which even the personal is stylized, just like her satire. In the piece itself, Tropicana moves from persona to persona (including ones named “Carmelita” and “Writer”), detailing her amnesia, a forgetting of her identity through American assimilation, and her recovery of that identity through the exploration of these many personae. Identity here is connected to memory, and through Tropicana’s process of remembering, when her amnesia has been eradicated, there is still no

discrete identity to be claimed. “After so many years in America, I can drink two kinds of milk The sweet condensed milk of Cuba and the grade-A, pasteurized homo kind from America,” she tells us (47). A unified self is impossible to recover, if indeed, it ever existed at all.⁴

Locating an authentic self in this piece is equally fruitless. It certainly is not Pingalito Betancourt, “the Cuban Antonio Banderas” (24), who welcomes us to the show. We might, however, consider the characters of Writer and Carmelita. Both seem to narrate the same life, but they speak in markedly distinct voices. Writer’s is a methodical, date-oriented voice that narrates events in a straightforward fashion; Carmelita’s a more figurative, reflective, out-of-time voice, one that suggests a real fragmentation of selves. The end of the piece further problematizes this divide, since the character of Carmelita’s final lines is notated thus: “(STEPPING OUT OF CARMELITA CHARACTER AND ADDRESSING THE AUDIENCE.) I agree with Pedro Luis, and I want to leave you with a song by him called ‘Todos Por lo Mismo,’ a song that says it best . . . (THE TAPE PLAYS SEVERAL CHORUSES AS CARMELITA EXITS)” (47). There is a curious calculus of identities here, since while the character speaking has stepped out of the central role and is therefore not Carmelita, it is also not Writer, the persona equated in the introduction with autobiographical voice. Yet we are clearly meant to assume that the persona that remains is some sort of authentic self, since stepping out of character is typically interpreted as stepping back into the “real world.” Curiously, the stage directions note that it is Carmelita who exits, reminding us that the performer goes by

⁴ Tropicana’s performance is even further complicated by an additional component of national identity and cultural memory, a category that extends beyond the simpler concerns of individual subjectivity explored in this chapter. The degree to which cultural identity comes to bear on Tropicana’s construction of self, however, cannot be underestimated.

Carmelita in real life as well. Furthermore, if these words are spoken in yet another voice, that of Alina Troyano, who is never named in the piece, then we might find the notion of “authentic self” problematic, even empty, since this voice says nothing of its own, except to agree with another person altogether, and to play us his song. When this last voice speaks, the one we might otherwise assume to be the *most* authentic, have the *most* authority to establish identity, it actually seems almost *without* identity.

Therefore, identity in Tropicana’s performance, be it that of Carmelita, Writer, or Alina Troyano—or even Cuban or American—is connected to memory, which is always suspect, always compromised, always being created in an act of recovery, and revealing not a unified self, but fragmentation, multiplicity. For feminist artists, this notion of fragmented identity is part of a larger critique of the illusion of the coherent subject as authority in classical autobiography; by revealing identity slippage, these performers reveal the authority of the individual subject to be contingent, even illusory. As Sidonie Smith says, “Autobiographical narration begins with amnesia, and once begun, the fragmentary nature of subjectivity intrudes. After all, the narrator is both the same and not the same as the autobiographer, and the narrator is both the same and not the same as the subject of narration” (“Performativity,” 109). And in the case of *Milk of Amnesia*, where the fragmentary subject not only intrudes but dominates, the autobiographer, narrator, and narrated subject all appear as separate personae, each alternately taking on roles that are the same and not the same as the others.

Similarly, Bornstein, in the introduction to her somewhat autobiographical piece *Virtually Yours*, meditates on the notion of the performer's bio (which she points out is actually an autobiography written in the third person). She muses, "Artists complain that 'my audiences don't know the real me!' Good Lord, what on earth is the real me? The boy or man I used to be? The woman I was briefly? Is the real me the ex-Scientology cult member? Ex-IBM Salesman? Is the real me one of the several personas I use when I do phone sex to pay the utility bills?" (234). After meditating on the ease with which she could claim multiple identities, and indeed, the absurdity of the theatrical bio as a way of establishing a coherent public identity (and therefore, public authority), Bornstein considers the following one of the nine bios she offers:

KATE BORNSTEIN has called over fifty-five geographical locations "home." Identitywise, she has transitioned from boy to man, from man to woman, from woman to lesbian, from lesbian to artist, from artist to sex worker, and it's taken her nearly fifty years of living to discover that she's actually more comfortable transitioning than she is in arriving at some resting place called an identity. (234-235)

The performance that follows remains true to this movement from persona to persona. Bornstein opens speaking as Allie (we recall that her given name as a male was "Al"), a solo performer who receives calls from Jayne (Wenger, Bornstein's lover and director of *Virtually Yours*), and Mark Russell, proprietor of New York's famous performance art venue, P.S. 122. While we are seemingly to take this persona as autobiographical, it seems (as the introduction suggests) that this is no more the "real Kate" than is any of the five video-game personas she takes on throughout the show

as ways of confronting her fears. Ultimately, as she considers whether or not to leave her lover (who himself was going through a female-to-male transformation, Jayne to Daniel), she moves through these personas to come to the following question, asked by her video game: “Once the game is over and the players have left the field? Who am I?” (278). That this question remains unresolved by Bornstein’s performance points to the degree to which the self claimed by Bornstein is as malleable as her sexed body, or for that matter, any sexed body.

If the body is constructible, and the self is equally constructible, then feminist autobiographical performance firmly establishes that the female body cannot be limited to the simple set of roles that patriarchal authority prescribes, nor is patriarchal authority itself any less a construction. Speaking of British performance artist Bobby Baker, Claire MacDonald affirms the notion of the self in performance as “assumed identities.” In the piece that MacDonald describes, Baker uses monologues from her life as a mother, and the material that comes from that life, to create a work of art. As the artist tells stories, she uses the items found in those stories—beer, milk, treacle—to mark a canvas that she ultimately rolls her self in, making the work of art disappear. This performance of art (the canvas) alongside the performance of a mother’s autobiography (the narrated monologues that accompany the production of the canvas’ contents) signals, as MacDonald notes, a movement back and forth between two identities even as it shows the collapse of the work of art and the artist into one. She writes, “I read Bobby Baker’s work as angry and subversive, using fractured notions of self to work across the divide between self as artist and self as mother. The divisions are signaled in her text and implied, of

course, in her title *Drawing on a Mother's Experience*" (190). Even more than Orlan's surgical interventions on the status of the gendered body, which remains limited to the corporeal self, this movement from role to role—and the refutation that this movement offers to the notion of an interior self “inside” the body—reveals the concept of identity to be unstable.

Indeed, MacDonald's reading of Baker's performance suggests that the autobiographical life, like the very notion of gender, is performative, an argument advanced by Sidonie Smith. Just as Judith Butler argues that gender does not preexist the set of actions that constitute it, Smith argues that a coherent identity does not preexist the self-produced narrative that orders it. She says, “Narrative performativity [the performance of self through the narrative act] constitutes identity. That is, the interiority or self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an *effect* of autobiographical storytelling” (“Performativity” 109). In short, the identity, or internal self (or in the cases of many performers, multiple selves, public and private), that we might say is being outwardly expressed in an autobiographical performance is actually being created by that performance. In her Introduction to *Milk of Amnesia—Leche de Amnesia*, Carmelita Tropicana blurs the lines between life and performance by asking, “Could it be true that artists don't suffer from broken hearts, we just get material?” Her question, more complex than it initially appears, implicitly asks whether life itself *is* material, whether it is the making of experience into narrative that actually creates the self—or the selves—who experiences it. Artists like Baker, who moves from role to role, or Tropicana and Bornstein, who move from persona to persona, or Laurie Anderson, whose *Stories*

from the Nerve Bible relies on self-contradicting narratives of self, overtly call into question the very nature of identity as a way of problematizing the seemingly stable categories they perform and hope to explode: woman, mother, Cuban, lesbian, artist. In short, these artists perform the self to reveal selfhood as performative. And in doing so, they destabilize the roles that have always precluded women from being artists, implicitly and explicitly refuting the idea that art-making is outside a woman's domain.

Bobby Baker's *Kitchen Show*, subtitled *One Dozen Kitchen Actions Made Public*, further exemplifies the performativity of identity and of autobiography as an expression of that identity. Her show is constructed as thirteen individual units (a Baker's dozen, of course), each of which contains three elements: an autobiographical monologue, an action, listed in the program, and a mark, some way of literally marking her performing body as a way of remembering the experience she narrates (Ferris, *passim*). So for example, as Lesley Ferris (who offers a detailed description of the performance) notes, "In action No. 3 . . . Baker describes her occasional need to vent her anger and then proceeds to demonstrate this by smashing a ripe pear against a cupboard door" (Ferris 196). That monologue and action are then marked with "*Mark No. 3* To put a pear in the top of my overall—all ready for the next occasion" (qtd. in Ferris 195). This series of monologues, thus contextualized, reveals the autobiographical performance as completely performative. By phrasing her mark of each monologue as an action, Baker explicitly turns our understanding of her performance (and therefore her identity) into a verb rather than a

noun or object. “Throwing a ripe pear against a cupboard door”⁵ is an action constituted by language, a performative that itself takes a step toward narrating Baker’s experience and ultimately constituting her identity as a woman capable of experiencing rage (which for Carolyn Heilbrun is a hallmark of feminist autobiography). The constructed body of auto-performance is also implicated here in the mark following each action. In this way, Baker’s corporeal identity is implicated in the actions she performs and the monologues she utters. The pear in her overall is a pointer to the action of throwing, which itself produces through narration Baker’s anger. Therefore, Baker’s corporeal identity is a trace, a memory of those performative and uttered iterations that constitute the self.

Baker’s performance also foregrounds the notion of performativity in its content as well as its structure. For instance, she consistently emphasizes the concept of repetition in her piece. Ferris notes the ritualistic quality of Baker’s work, the way that each unit binds her body to the actions she performs, and through this ritual, “The kitchen space becomes a site for sharing, telling, demonstrating and enacting her fantasies of chaos and violence. The kitchen is the space where we serve our guests, but it is also a daily battlefield of onerous tasks and repetitive activity” (196). The affinity of Baker’s performance with ritual, and her choice to reproduce the most repetitive tasks of homemaking foreground repetition as a component of domestic identity. In another monologue, Baker reflects on a freshly opened tub of margarine and remarks, “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again—it’s moments like this that

⁵ Indeed, as my colleague Stephen Severn has pointed out, “throwing” is actually a gerund, and therefore a noun. But it is a noun formation that itself has a verb as its root—even its linguistic status is composed of an act.

make it all worthwhile” (qtd. in Ferris 196). The emphasis on repetition (“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again”) signals to the audience that she *has* said this before, every time she opens a new tub of margarine in front of an audience. The return to this domestic moment in performance after performance underscores how homemakers themselves return to the same tasks in their proscribed roles as women in the home.

Baker’s emphasis on the repetitive nature of homemaking further taps into the performative nature of the self, especially in its most proscribed gender roles. Repetition is, for Judith Butler, a crucial component in the performativity of gender. Among her simplest iterations of her theory of gender performativity is that gender is “an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (“Performative Acts” 270, emphasis mine). That is, through the continuous and compulsory performance of a range of specific activities and gestures, gender is constituted and becomes a system of control. In Baker’s performance, such repetition signals not only the degree to which women’s roles in the home are performative constructions, but also the degree to which cultural norms insist that these constructions be reified over and over again by demanding their repetition: serving tea, cleaning, and cooking must be repeated daily for the woman to be a “good” homemaker. And yet, as Butler later iterates in her landmark “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” “It is precisely the repetition of that play that establishes as well [as the power exerted through gender and sexuality categories] the *instability* of the very category that it constitutes” (311). Therefore, by underscoring the repetitive nature of the activities she chooses to

perform, Baker both constitutes the gendered nature of her performance and also destabilizes it by calling public attention to the very performativity of its operations.

Finally, in Action No. 13, Baker stands on a cake plate to display the marks of her performance on her body. These marks are not subtle: She is drenched with water, has a spoon in her hair, a plastic trash bag draped over her shoulders, cutlery hanging around her neck, and dishtowels affixed to her shoes. She remarks, “I stand with one foot on the cake stand and revolve around slowly so that all the marks can be noted and remembered. It’s the image they make all together that matters most” (qtd. in Ferris 201). Her identity as homemaker is now put on display, coherent when viewed all together, but made up of a series of stylized actions, exactly as Judith Butler defines gender: *Kitchen Show* is thirteen stylized gestures—actions with corporeal marks accompanied by self-narration—that place Baker within the domestic sphere most commonly associated with women (i.e. female gender). Taken all together, these bodied marks, the actions that they point to and the narration that these actions engender encompass the entirety of her show; what we may call her entire identity as revealed in this autobiographical performance. By breaking her gender roles down in this way, and pointing in her final tableau to the way that they *seem* to make up a complete, unified portrait of femininity, Baker methodically deconstructs these roles as distinctly and repetitively performative. In short, Baker not only moves fluidly between her identities as homemaker and artist, she also reveals the performative nature of such identity categories.

When performance artists present the self in this way, they reveal the performative, constructed nature of gender in order to critique the very idea of gender

identity; and they do so both by undermining the body as a coherent, meaningful entity, and by undermining the notion of a unified subjectivity that can speak in the moment. We will recall, however, that the presence of the woman's body as speaking subject is precisely what 70s feminist artists claimed as the political power in autobiographical performance. These two conflicting ideas potentially represent a serious problem for these various feminist ideologies, but ultimately they can be reconciled. We must first recognize, however, that what remains after all of the discourse of the sexed and gendered body and all of the discourse of multiple, fragmented identities is exposed, is precisely and only the *agency to construct those identities and to participate in the discourse*. Again speaking of Baker, Claire MacDonald asserts, "In all performance art the artist is always present *as agent* but to allow for a range of readings the subjectivity of the artist must always be left open to question, fluid, ambiguous and unsettled" (193, *emphasis mine*). The performances discussed above call into question all of the mechanisms by which women are circumscribed into specific biological, cosmetic, or social roles, precisely because these are the mechanisms that deny women's agency. So the performance of the constructible female body (sex and gender) and the fluid feminist self is a two-front operation. It both refutes patriarchal boundaries placed on female identity as it further asserts the ability of a woman to construct her own identity, her own life and to control both her own body and to some degree society's perception of that body.

Indeed, much of the impact of this agency to construct the self in the moment of performance is the ability to self-name. While many performers certainly use their given names in autobiographical performance (the "real" name is indeed a signifier of

authenticity), the ability to control the discourse of the self can be revealed with direct attention to the naming of the performer herself. For example, while Bobby Baker does use her real name, she calls attention to the gendered aspect of that name at the beginning of her performances by saying “I’m Bobby Baker. Once a long time ago someone expected to see a man, so I want you to know that this is me” (qtd. in Ferris 193). Baker’s introduction illuminates the power of naming: by calling attention to her gender-ambiguous name, she is able to foreground the role gender construction will play in the rest of the show. For others, though, naming is part of the act of self-definition. Carmelita Tropicana’s chosen name taps into the stylized camp persona that she uses on- and offstage. Kate Bornstein’s name signifies to some degree the notion of transformation that she embraces, but her choice to take “Allie” as the autobiographical character name signifies the fluidity that she ultimately seeks to promote, standing as it does on the brink between “Al Bornstein,” her given name, and “Alice Silverman,” her character’s name. It is Orlan, though, who has publicly called the most attention to the act of naming as a significant component of the performance of subjectivity. Augsberg, writing in 1998, noted that “Orlan will ask an advertising agency to change her name and then will go to court to have her name changed legally” (308). In making naming a part of her art of self-transformation, calling attention to the commodification of the self by involving an ad agency, and implicating the juridical status of the subject by seeking to make the name change a legally binding performance, Orlan’s planned performance taps into the notion of self-naming as productive of the subject’s status as such, and of the performer’s agency to construct the discourse of the self that naming entails.

But if identity cannot be said to pre-exist narration, can any notion of the performer's agency pre-exist narration either? Butler's notions of subjectivity suggest that even the subject cannot be said to pre-exist the act. Similarly, Foucault argues that the individual becomes a subject (as it operates within systems of power) at the moment of confession.⁶ And the notion of agency in self-performance also raises the specter of the intention as we consider how to interpret the self in performance when the embodied author is present to speak for her text—an issue I will take up shortly. In short, it is perhaps too easy to say that agency remains the essential component of selfhood as revealed in performance. For after all, if women's autobiographical performance is a direct refutation of those forces that seek to co-opt women's agency, can it not be said that until those forces are themselves deconstructed, women's agency is as tenuous as the subject that might be said to claim it? In that sense, the performance of self-narration not only constitutes identity, it also constitutes the very agency that might be said to shape that identity. Agency as woman—and even more so as a woman artist—is generated and realized in the performance itself. Therefore when a feminist performer such as Bobby Baker performs the role of homemaker in *The Kitchen Show*, a role that is often perceived as one without agency, one that serves patriarchy, she is not only creating an art work that critiques perceptions of the domestic sphere and reveals “homemaker” to be a construction that she creates in her performance, she is also moving the role into a

⁶ I have always wondered how we might conceive of the human entity in the moments before confession, before the entrance into subjectivity. How, for example, do we describe Bornstein's choice to undergo transformative surgery if her subjectivity is only constituted in the moment that she “confesses” her “sin” to use Foucault's language? This is a crucial question, but perhaps one best handled in another forum.

position of agency by making the role she takes both onstage and in real life a site of insistent play. It is this excess of signification⁷ that both produces the subject in real time and provides the critique of the same notions of identity that have historically worked to make the speaking female subject an oxymoron. Moreover, the self that is constituted by performed narrative disappears as narration passes, leaving only traces (Marks 1-13, in Baker's case), and according to Peggy Phelan, "The after-effect of disappearance is the experience of subjectivity itself" (149). It is precisely this disappearance, this performativity of auto-performance, this slippery subject fluidly moving from identity to identity across time and space, that makes such explicit self-narration not only powerful, but impossible to contain.

To suggest that the performance of self constitutes the agency necessary to perform the self may seem tautological, an abstract version of Escher's "Drawing Hands," in which two sketches of hands seem to be simultaneously in the process of creating the other. But we must remember that agency and intention are not precisely the same things, since agency here has a public component. The autobiographer becomes a public agent by bringing the heretofore-private self to the stage, something that she as an actor is able to complicate through the art-making process of theatre itself. This dissolve of the public/private barrier—a barrier that Kate Bornstein, for example, openly denigrates (234)—represents the entrance of the performer into agency, into identity, and ultimately, into power. There is a radical notion at work in

⁷ While semioticians note that theatre is remarkable for its density, even excess of signification, Judith Butler notes in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" that "psychic excess," the repeated and persistent play of compulsory gender codes creates ruptures in the efficacy of those codes. When brought together in performances like Baker's, the density of theatrical signification helps to produce the very psychic excess that Butler identifies is crucial to gender transgression.

this moment of self-proclamation: it is the achievement of presence through the declaration of presence—one made even more politically efficacious through its status as a work of art in the presence of an audience. It is the self in real time because it is precisely the self that the performer chooses to construct in real time. That self may be fragmentary, multiple and assumed—signaling virtuoso acting skill even as it signals a theoretically complex conception of selfhood—or it may appear to be unmediated, aligned with an essential notion of the sign “woman” precisely because the artist chooses that self-definition. Therefore, the single linear narrative of Linda Montano’s *The Story of My Life* is just as radical as Carmelita Tropicana’s avowedly “schizophrenic” self-construction, and Carolee Schneeman’s work, often interpreted as essentialist, is no less performative than Bornstein’s, precisely because all of these performances reveal the audacity to perform the self (and its past) in real time, in the presence of an audience.

The Performative Self and the Performative Community

Moreover, in the moment, the performer’s choice to perform in public is not only a self-constitutive move; it also constitutes the audience as a community as well. Certainly, a step toward community is forged under the material conditions of the theatre, in which audience members choose, of their own volition, to arrive at a theatrical space for the purpose of witnessing a performance. And yet this alone does little to create the sort of community that might be united by a call for social change, in this case, a change in the ways that gender is perceived and treated in this culture. Certainly, narrative drama that takes social issues as its subject takes yet another step in this direction, since it brings an audience together within a unified rhetorical

community. The presence of autobiographical performance, however, also brings the audience together in even more rhetorically significant ways, since it places the audience within the realm of the performer's experience and literally makes them part of the narrative (an extension, to be sure) that they see performed in front of them. Such experience is precisely the source of the performer's autobiographical narrative, which itself is the site on which the performer's agency is constituted and her rhetoric is generated. Since the performance of identity is also the narration of past experience, the audience makes an assumption (based on the assumption of the truth claims crucial to the label of "autobiography") that the experience itself continues from the past of the narrative into the present of the performance. This extrapolated continuation of the author's narrated past into the performed present places the audience within the experience of the performer, and thus within the unnarrated part of her life. In the introduction to her *Clit Notes: A Sapphic Sampler*, Holly Hughes writes, "This part of the script isn't finished. My role in the Culture War is still very much a work in progress, a story I'm telling as I'm living it. But the point is, it needs to be performed in front of an audience. If I'm ever going to be able to write this wrong, I'll need your help" (Hughes, *Clit Notes* 22). As such, the audience is transformed into a feminist community—one marked as much by its ideological commonality as by its fragmented identities—existing together within the performer's experience in the present and joining her in her ideological fight.

Since I have suggested that the performer's life narrative is not coherent, unified, unmediated, nor even precisely "present" as a coherent whole, it is impossible to claim that the audience can be constituted as a coherent community

when brought within the presence of that performer. Instead, what links the performer with each audience member as members of a community is the discursive formation of narrative and rhetoric that makes up the feminist performance itself. Indeed, Bornstein's *Virtually Yours* has the performer entering the "video game" wherein she constitutes and reconstitutes her identity by playing out various fears through various personas. The moment in which the "Virtual Audience" appears (or rather, the moment the house lights are raised) is the moment that Bornstein enters into the game, and therefore into the narrative exploration of her and her partner's transsexual identities. The audience makes the performance, and the performance makes Bornstein's identity: "Of course I want an audience," she says, "I'm a performer" (242). Tim Miller and David Román write about the importance of queer performance not as a primarily didactic tool, but as a tool for creating community, an observation we can also apply to feminist performance (especially since many of the performers discussed here would self-identify as both queer and feminist). Miller and Román argue that "Once gathered into this space, spectators, artists and technicians enact, even if only temporarily, community" (176). As the performer's narrative creates a discursive lightning rod around which community develops, each player in the ritual—from technician down to spectator, is performing that community.

Similarly, Jill Dolan, in describing what she calls the "utopian performative," identifies performance as an impetus for a notion of community that serves as the lynchpin for social change. She explains, "Audiences are compelled to gather with others, to see people reconsider and change the world outside the theatre, from its macro to its micro arrangements. Perhaps part of the desire to attend the theatre and

performance is to reach for something better, for new ideas about how to be and how to be with each other” (455). For Dolan, the development of community within the space of the performance event gives live theatre a potential for a specific type of social change, here “how to be with each other.” She goes on to describe three feminist performers—Holly Hughes, Peggy Shaw, and Deb Margolin—as their performances create utopian moments (specifically during a Fall 2000 performance series that she curated in Austin, Texas). She defines performance in this context as “an address to an audience that converts strangers into community” (475), and describes moments in each performance that flesh that definition out. In Peggy Shaw’s performance of *The Menopausal Gentleman*, for example, Dolan describes a moment when Shaw “leaves the space marked off for performance to approach the audience, to mingle freely, empathizing, greeting, allowing for moments of identification, curiosity, desire, even love to extend through the audience” (471-472). In this moment, which Dolan describes as “intersubjective (471), Shaw’s performance brings the audience together as part of *her community*, constructing them as part of her experience, and therefore as a group of people more closely bound to her and to one another than when they entered, and therefore, more prepared, as Dolan puts it, to “change the world outside the theatre.”

But it is the discourse of the life narrative in these performances, the need to interact simultaneously with a performer’s life even as we objectify it, that generates the discourse of community. While written life narratives let the audience share in the author’s life experience, performance of life narratives create an even richer exchange, since not only does an audience member experience something with the

playwright/performer, she also shares it with other audience members, while the performer herself shares in the audience's experience just as they share in hers.⁸ The shared community, however, excites both rhetorical possibilities and political anxieties. Román and Miller note that these audiences:

Bring to the theatrical occasion a specific social paradox. On the one hand, the support of many lesbian and gay audiences for community-based theatre results from the desire to be in a crowd of other lesbian and gay people. This desire rests on the comforts of identity politics and easily adapts to the primacy of sexuality in identity construction. And yet, on the other hand, many spectators also attend community-based events in order to defy the politics of sameness.

(Miller and Román 176)

Indeed, this paradox is just as evident (although in a somewhat different way) for feminist audiences and performers. Although the desire for community among ideologically sympathetic women (and men to a lesser degree) brings these communities together by posing the feminist life narrative as a site for identification and as a common experience for both audience and performer, the move to subvert essentialism (an essentialism that might be propped up by the cultural feminist emphasis on community as a uniquely female value) is perhaps even more powerful when connected to female bodies as opposed to queer practices. Such "community-building," therefore, presupposes the audience of the converted that Miller and

⁸ We must also remember that the rhetorical and narrative situation alone cannot accomplish this; rather they set up a system of preconditions that allow the skilled performer to harness their potential. To do so, a performer must not only craft a compelling life narrative, she must also be generous enough as a performer to let the audience into her performance, and skillful enough to avoid alienating them. In performances where Brechtian tactics prevail (as many of them do, this is a tricky operation, since this experiential model of community and the critical notion of alienation seem to work at odds. When working well, however, a skillful performer can rally an audience around a common critical reaction, as we will see in the case of Holly Hughes and her audience participation section of *Preaching to the Perverted*.

Román are attempting to recuperate. Performers like Karen Finley and Annie Sprinkle, on the other hand, seem to be working in a very different mode, one that works on a model of challenge and conversion. While performances like those that Dolan describes seem to be relying on an ideological affinity among the audience, Finley relies instead on critique as her primary operation, one that may disrupt the operations of what she sees as a hegemonic community. In cases like this, and to a lesser degree like Annie Sprinkle (whose critique is offset to a certain degree by a more feel-good, sex-positive discourse), the community that is implicitly being created is as much a target of political intervention as it is a resource of political support for the performer.

As such, we see feminist performances that toggle back and forth between a general critique of the larger category “woman,” and a reliance on the particulars of the individual life. Bobby Baker’s *The Kitchen Show*, for example, draws on the common experiences of being a housewife and mother as a way of critiquing the proscribed gender roles of women, even as she celebrates the work that women do in these roles. Thus, she creates a commonality among her viewers, a sense of solidarity based on the similarity of their experiences, even as she demands that they recognize that those experiences derive from socially constructed assignments. Similarly, breast cancer survivor Susan Miller narrates the particulars of her own battle with the disease, ending by unbuttoning her shirt to reveal her scar. But she turns her narrative into a call for solidarity among other women like her by saying, “I miss it, but I want to tell all the women in the changing booths that we are still beautiful, we are still powerful, we are still sexy, we are still here” (120). This final invocation of

presence—“we are still here”—positions Miller as a part of her community, not as merely an exemplary member. And it is this dialectic between the particular autobiographical life and the life of the female performer as “Woman” (or even more so as that identity is complicated by additional identity markers, as is the case for a performer like Carmelita Tropicana) that generates community in the moment of performance.

Histories of the Self as Public Histories

While we have paid a great deal of attention to the “now” of the performative moment and the degree to which the present moment serves as the nexus of self, political agency and community, we must also remember that these autobiographical narratives are in fact histories of the self. I have already suggested that the extension of the narrative of performer’s past into the moment of performance is a key element in establishing community, but we cannot be uncritical of the personal history that provides this continuity. When feminist theories of life writing critique the unified conceptions of self that are presented by traditional autobiographies, part of the basis for that critique is the way that such an unproblematized notion of identity claims access to and authority on the truth and objectivity of the narrative it presents. As such, feminist autobiography (and indeed, much of the feminist life writing that this project explores) seeks to reveal history to be a construct while at the same time bringing alternative feminist histories based on the performers’ own lived experiences, their own performative pasts, to light.

David Román, again speaking of queer autobiography, notes that “autobiography is perhaps the most immediately understood form of . . . self-

representation, and it is also often part of a larger collective and ongoing process of revisionist history” (*O Solo Homo* 4). Román here acknowledges two crucial components of the project of autobiographical performance as history. The first is of course the notion of revisionism. As I will more fully articulate in my chapter on feminist biographical drama, the notion of the past as presented by traditional history books is overly simplified, male-centered, and, through its claims to objectivity, oppressive in its exclusionary tactics. And while this has changed, due in large part to the intervention of feminist academics and activists, male-centered biases still remain in place in both the administrative and knowledge structures of the institutions that govern such scholarly interventions. Female artists (along with a host of other marginalized populations) have spent much of their politicized energy on a process of combating the myths and filling in the silences of history, and autobiographical narrative fulfills these goals in a couple of ways. First, its emphasis on the constructibility of the self immediately destabilizes the history that is being narrated. By positing alternative perspectives on the lived past and then destabilizing even this “other side of the story,” these performances call into question the nature of historical representation.

The second important component of Román’s description involves the interaction of the ideas of self-representation and collectivity. In fact, it would seem paradoxical that the best response to the faux-objective, univocal, patriarchal presentation of history as a linear narrative of white male progress would be best met by similarly univocal performances of those who are left out of this presentation. Instead, part of the solution to this issue can be found in what Román and Hughes

identify as a boom in such politicized self-representation. Given that much of the boom in solo autobiographical performance from the 70s through the present has been overtly feminist, overtly queer, or in many cases, both, we begin to see that these individual monologic performances are significant both as solo pieces of self-representation and as part of this growing flood of voices that challenge the patriarchal norm. And even though the NEA-four scandal (which I will discuss in greater depth shortly) still found artists such as Karen Finley and Holly Hughes referred to as “non-mainstream,” the fact that such performances have garnered so much public and critical attention over the last twenty years speaks to the degree to which this chorus of voices is generating a powerful collective response to traditional patriarchal histories.⁹ In short, the collective personal histories that these myriad performers generate together narrate an experience of living in America that counters much of the official histories found in textbooks (although more and more, these collective voices are forcing their ways into those very textbooks).

Furthermore, the relationship between self-representation and collective revision comes through the very idea of constructedness that feminist performances have come to represent and that traditional history seeks to elide. That is, while we may say that feminist performances seek to present an individual personal history, we remember that these personal histories are themselves often presented as fragmented, plural and even collective in their own right. Carmelita Tropicana’s fragmented narrative of her search for her Cuban past invokes in its multiplicity of voices a whole

⁹ We must recognize, of course, that this relative success is counterbalanced by the fact that mainstream theatre venues still shy away from performances that are radical in both political content and artistic form.

range of experiences that she performatively shares with others who have experienced such searches for immigrant identities and with her audience.

But while there are answers to the paradox of the individual autobiography as remedy for the univocal history, there remains a further theoretical complication in that such performances rely on a lived experience, a personal history. If we insist on the constitution of the public self in the present moment of performance, how can we simultaneously insist on the existence of a self that inhabits those narratives of the past? The answer to this question, too, may rely on the deconstructive turn that feminist auto-performance has taken, although this answer may perhaps be too easy. That is, if we suggest that the self is constituted through a performed narrative, it certainly must seem true that the history (itself shown by Hayden White to be a fictionalized construct) in which this notion of self is couched is similarly constituted by its own utterance. But this is only one sense of history—history as discourse. What about the notion of history that describes the events themselves, history in the sense of the phrase “historically accurate,” history in the sense of the very lived experience we claim is being excluded from traditional history? If this type of history is only constituted at the moment of narration, how can we claim it to be excluded? There would be no “it” to exclude. We must remember, though, that while these performances do seem to constitute the self in the moment of performance, they also reveal everyday life to be performative. Such past experience then is a narrated collection of prior performances of self, some within the public sphere, and others outside of it. This simultaneous play between the performance of past experience and the performance of present self seems to be the crux of the theoretical debate as

well as a central issue for the same performers who narrate the selves that they construct onstage.

This dialectic between past and present gives rise to the complex critique of conventional history as linear experience and as narrative discourse that is found so persistently in these feminist autobiographical performances. Such critique of history through the self in performance seems to have in part taken place as a concerted deconstruction of a history of representations of women. Orlan's series of performances, *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan*, is not merely a deconstruction of contemporary standards of beauty. Rather, by choosing to emulate body parts of specific works of art from across the Western canon, Orlan connects these standards (that have been relentlessly applied to the artist's body by the general public and critics alike) to a long pattern of women's oppression through the enforcement of beauty standards. Similarly, Rebecca Schneider reads Annie Sprinkle's performances of *Post Porn Modernism* as a general take on the obsession of modernist artists such as Picasso and Joyce with the figure of the prostitute, and a specific take on images of artists Gustav Courbet (*Origin of the World*) and Marcel Duchamp (*Etant Donnés: la chute d'eau; la gaz d'éclairage*). How does the artist revise this trope of modernist art? "Sprinkle's body, unlike Duchamp's *Etant Donnés* and Courbet's *Origin*, bears a head and a gaze which complicates the seeming identity between view point and vanishing point" (Schneider 65).

Yet while Orlan and Sprinkle critique the past by performing the self in conversation with the history of representations, they cannot, as I have suggested before, be considered autobiographical performance per se, because they are not

narrating their own past experience as much as they are performing in the present, experiencing their performance in the moment of its occurrence. Autobiographical performance depends as much upon a performance of the self as presence as it does upon a narration of past experience of the self, precisely that component of identity that, along with agency, might be said to pre-exist, or at least exists beyond the boundaries of the constitutive act of autodiegesis.

Let us return then, to Sidonie Smith's claim that "the narrator is both the same and not the same as the autobiographer, and the narrator is both the same and not the same as the subject of narration" ("Performativity" 109). If as Smith suggests, author, narrator and autobiographical subject are both the same and not the same, we must think of their identities as imbricated, overlapping but not perfectly congruent, much like a Venn diagram. Therefore we might say that the self who performs simultaneously composes, is composed by and is composed of the performance of self onstage: that is, the performer as agent composes that narration, constructing the self through narration of past experience; the performer's self-identity is also composed by that narration, inasmuch as the self is constituted by the performative utterance of self through narration; and finally, the self, as it encompasses the entirety of past experiences, memories and self-constituting performances, is partially composed of (although not entirely so) the narration itself, an experience that falls into the body of material from which the performer herself can draw. In this way, therefore, we can say that Bobby Baker's performances feature Baker as an agent who narrates, a performative narration that helps constitute Baker's identity as homemaker (one she reveals to be over determined), and a body of experiences as a

homemaker and artist that both find their way into the narrative, and also include the performance of that narrative.

The self, as a collection of constitutive performances and experiences, leads up to and includes the moment of performance. We can say that the self in many ways exceeds the boundaries of the narrative self-history just as we must acknowledge that the narrative both includes and exceeds both the self and truth of past experience. This appears to be true of all autobiography, both text and performance. Sidonie Smith elaborates the ways that feminist autobiographers construct truth while exceeding the boundaries of experience. The first is through mimicry of traditional masculine autobiography, a tactic that adds menace by usurping traditional forms (“Constructing Truth” 46). Masquerade, as in Bobby Baker’s *Kitchen Show*, puts “into textual play an over-identification with the ‘feminine’” (46). And finally she describes “I-lying,” which stretches the truth of the self far enough to call into question the efficacy of the self, as is the case for both Carmelita Tropicana and Kate Bornstein, and also for Karen Finley, as we will see below. But while Smith’s tactics, and indeed much of this chapter, has concentrated on how performance underscores the little bits of slippage between author and narrator, between narrator and subject, we must also recognize that a great deal of the appeal of auto-performance lies not only in the slippage that complicates and deconstructs notions of gender, but in the sameness that separates autobiography from fiction, the referentiality of narration to reality and the role that the performing body plays in shoring up that referentiality.

If the key that separates autobiographical narrative from fiction is the overlap between the performing agent and the performed subject then we might locate that overlap in the performing body, the source and sign of the truth claims of autobiographical performance. If, say, Carmelita Tropicana's body represents the conjunction of the author (Alina Troyano), narrator (Carmelita and a host of other voices), and subject (Carmelita herself), it does so as an authenticating sign of her autobiography. The autobiography can lay claim to truth-value because each of these personages share a performing body. It is through this performing body, then, that auto-performance is able to establish a referentiality that eludes written autobiography, even as auto-performance is subject to the same machinations of constructibility.

The performing body, then, verifies the narrated past of experience: through narration, the performer implicitly says, "Trust me, I know. I was there," and through performance she is able to bolster that claim by further saying, "and I am here to tell you about it." Auto-performance then, is both presence and re-presence, presentation and representation, all brought together under the auspices of the performing body. Therefore, performed self-histories offer an appeal that textual autobiography cannot, since the very corporeality serves as a sign that resists potential falsification of the narrative itself. When Susan Miller, in *My Left Breast*, ends the show by unbuttoning her blouse to reveal her scar, she verifies through her performing body itself the veracity of her narrative as a cancer survivor.

Indeed, much of feminist autobiographical performance seeks to undermine notions of essentialism that tie identity to the female body, but in a sense, such

performance relies on that very essentialism: that the performer's narration is essentially *hers*, that if Kate Bornstein were to perform Susan Miller's piece, its truth-value, and therefore its rhetorical value would be undermined. There is indeed a creative tension here, since the performer relies upon her (sexed) body to authenticate her narrative of experience even as that narrative serves to undermine the politicized essentialism that so frequently circumscribes women as subjects.

Therefore, auto-performance reveals itself to be as composed of constructed text—as I have determined above in the anti-essentialist cases of Baker, Tropicana and Bornstein—as the histories of representation that they seek to deconstruct. Yet they implicitly claim primacy over those histories through the very presence of the performing bodies that stand in front of the audience as self-empowered agents. Their claims to referentiality are more reliable precisely because the corporeal body to which the narrative refers is present, cannot be falsified, and serves as a verifiable trace of the narrative it claims to have experienced.

We can see these operations at work particularly in two pieces that both seek to establish self-histories as alternatives to official ones even as they critique the process of patriarchal history-making as false. In 1990, both Karen Finley and Holly Hughes moved from a small-but-significant place in the world of avant-garde performance into the much more prominent national spotlight as two of the four artists who came to be known as the NEA four, artists whose National Endowment for the Arts grants were rescinded on the basis of a perceived violation of decency. In the now-familiar narrative, the four artists sued the NEA, and the court found in their favor, both in the original suit and in appeal. However, in 1998, the Clinton

Administration appealed that case to the U.S. Supreme Court, which found by a vote of 8-1 that the NEA could indeed restrict funds on the basis of decency. At the time of the ruling, Finley was in performance of a piece entitled *The Return of the Chocolate-Smeared Woman*, at once a deconstruction of her *We Keep our Victims Ready*, and a pointed diatribe against the titillating sexualization of art by Senator Jesse Helms, who led the attacks against the artists (Finley 254). Finley's self-narrative, which also included pieces from earlier performances, contained one particular monologue that echoed sentiments she first expressed on the steps of the Supreme Court the day of the hearing:

I've come to realize that I've been in an eight-year, sexually abusive relationship with Jesse Helms. Jesse is intensely, passionately out of control in his sexual need to dominate me. And I've had enough. The sexual relationship began on the Senate floor, when he eroticized my career, my work, my livelihood. He could never see me as a person doing my job.

(Finley 258)

In the memoir in which this monologue is published,¹⁰ Finley goes on to suggest that Helms' treatment of her was sexual harassment, and that the performance of *Return* was a way to end that relationship, "to get out of the role of the victim once and for all" (Finley 255).

Finley's camped-up account of the case's history (itself a version of Smith's "I-lying") and the public feud between herself and Helms runs counter to what we might call "accepted histories," which include on the one extreme narratives that

¹⁰ Finley's choice to publish much of this in a written memoir as opposed to performed autobiography speaks to a certain degree of the psychic danger of such public performance. It is clear from the memoir and from work that followed that the ordeal took a very personal toll on Finley. The degree to which her art was subversive is highlighted by the public brutality brought against her and the other performers as a way of maintaining the status quo.

paint Helms as a family-values champion and Finley as a filthy avant-garde deviant, and on the other, Finley as an embattled artist facing off against a vicious, self-serving politico. Sympathetic to Finley or not, these accepted accounts of the NEA Four case elide the sexualized nature of the proceedings, an element that Finley's performance emphasizes. Indeed, by choosing sexual harassment as her metaphor, she in many ways underscores the performativity of her self-history. That is, a component of sexual harassment law suggests that an offense doesn't need to follow the typical *quid pro quo* of the most identifiable cases; the mere creation of a sexually hostile work environment is grounds enough for prosecution. Moreover, the potential victim determines whether an environment is hostile or not. While actual court cases have been variously effective in granting women the voice to determine effectively whether their environment is hostile or not, the definition of the offense is itself linguistically performative: "I call it hostile, therefore it must be sexual harassment." By calling out Helms' eroticisation of her career, work and livelihood, Finley performs his sexual harassment of her as a way of moving out of the victim position. And by creating a personal history that taps into the performative, she underscores the degree to which the official history of the NEA Four case is a construct, built by those in power: the Supreme Court and Congress.

Nonetheless, even as Finley's performance deconstructs the history-making operations of Helms and company, she relies on the veracity of her own account to achieve rhetorical value. And here, her performing body is key as the authenticating sign. Given that the NEA controversy focused on Finley's *We Keep our Victims Ready*, her choice to re-perform sections of that piece tie her performance in the

present to her past performances, performances that themselves are a component of the past she narrates. In doing so, she reifies the referential nature of her piece, tying this self-constituting performance to a past performance that itself played a (perhaps over-balanced) part in constituting her public identity. Furthermore, given that what Finley does with her body in performance was precisely the point of contention in the Supreme Court case, her title (with its emphasis on the bodily acts she performs) and indeed the performance itself establish Finley's performing body as a site of authority. Because she is performing her own past, and doing so with her own body, she claims agency to narrate an alternative to the public, political and media portrayals that so quickly convert into official history, in this case even more crucial, since few of her assailants ever witnessed her performances.

Holly Hughes' 2000 performance of *Preaching to the Perverted* similarly offers an alternative history of the trial, and more pointedly of the patriarchal, heteronormative institutions that were in control of that history-making, in both senses of the word. Her performance directly narrates the experience of the Supreme Court hearing of *Finley v. The National Endowment for the Arts*, highlighting the patriarchal interests and control mechanisms of that institution while simultaneously working to reclaim some notion of her own identity out of the one that the courts, the government and the media constructed for her. And while Hughes' performance does not deconstruct the female body in the same way that many other autobiographical feminist performances do, *Preaching to the Perverted* exemplifies the potential of autobiographical performance for feminist artists, serving as a site to reconstruct her own identity within the space of transgressive performance, foregrounding her voice

as an alternative to the silencing impulses of the American political system—a system she methodically reveals to be patriarchal and euro-centric—and ultimately creating a sense of community among her audiences as a result.

I have suggested that much of the corpus (no pun intended) of feminist performance art directly taps into the history of representations of the female body by calling attention to the body and revealing it to be a construct. Finley's *The Return of the Chocolate-Smeared Woman*, for example, accomplishes this by pointedly displaying the body of the performer; many reviewers, like *New York Times* reviewer Ben Brantley, note with a mix of dismay and titillation that “much attention has been given to Karen Finley's body, or at least to what she does with it in public places” (Brantley E1). “Wearing nothing but bikini briefs, a pink feather boa, silver spiked heels and the obligatory coat of chocolate,” Brantley notes archly, “she hawks the chance to taste that coat for \$20 a lick” (E1). That Finley makes such a spectacle of her body in her tirade against male violence against women calls attention to the physical, psychic, and political dangers that women's bodies are in all the time. Hughes, on the other hand, chooses *not* to expose her body to critique in the way that Finley does, or even in the ways she was accused of doing. Richard Meyer observes:

The postcard [used to advertise *Preaching to the Perverted*] offers a wide-eyed Hughes holding an American flag at chest level. The flag drops, garment-like, in front of her body. Although Hughes appears at first glance to be naked beneath the flag, she is in fact wearing a black bra and panties, undergarments that become increasingly noticeable the more one looks at the image . . . In the postcard for *Preaching to the Perverted*, Hughes revisits the image of her naked body on stage but on terms that reveal that image to be a

misrecognition by others, a mistaken perception of
sexual exposure. (Meyer 546)

In the performance itself, Hughes wears a simple white shirt and black pants, hardly the salacious body exposure that the Right attributed to her during the scandal. But she still acknowledges the degree to which she (like Finley) is being sexualized. At one point, as a voiceover reads a newspaper article declaring that “these mediocre artists are in the enviable position of having every move watched with intense interest,” and another voiceover, a man breathing heavily, says, “I’ve been watching you. Holly Hughes . . . “ (15). Thus by insistently refusing to put her body on display and critiquing the sexualized gaze to which she has been subjected, Hughes cuts off precisely the objectification and circumscription of her body that Finley is more flamboyantly trying to disrupt through extreme exposure.

It is, however, the circumscription of identity that Hughes is more concerned with here. Like so many feminist performers before her (like Bobby Baker, for example), Hughes is consciously engaged in a struggle to control her public identity, the way she is perceived by the world around her. In this particular case, though, Hughes’ battle is even more pitched; the huge amount of “bad publicity” (6) she receives constructs her as merely one of the NEA four, or as she notes, “Karen Finley and the Three Homosexuals,” or alternately, “Karen Finley and the Three Non-Mainstream Artists” (5). In fact the show opens with a disembodied male announcer (a symbol of the amorphous but omnipresent patriarchal power structure) introducing her as a member of the NEA Four, a term that he repeats over and over, until she shoots a stage gun in the general direction of that voice. This action immediately

calls attention to the drastic measures that she must take to combat the identity that the powers that be have constructed for her. Hughes must also deal with misperceptions that she is a child pornographer (10) and a child molester (12). And Meyer notes the degree to which Hughes is lumped together with not only the other censured performers, but indeed, all homosexuals (549). She is working against nothing short of a complete hi-jacking of her own identity. This performance is for her, therefore, a public reclamation of her own agency, her own imperative to self-construct within the public space of performance.

This collapse of identity for Hughes is intimately connected to her voice, a voice that throughout the Supreme Court component of NEA Four trial was systematically denied her and her co-plaintiffs.¹¹ While another disembodied voice early in *Preaching to the Perverted* identifies the court case as a great opportunity “to get your side of the story out” (5), we quickly realize that this will not be the case, that there will be tighter and tighter limits on what of her side of the story will be: “one sentence,” “five words,” “rhyme,” or “as a joke” (5). These limits get more and more constricting until later in the performance, when the voice acknowledges “just because you’re not testifying, it doesn’t mean you don’t have a part” (11). This non-speaking part accorded to the performer reveals the degree to which the Supreme Court works to silence all but those directly in power. And if that weren’t enough, Hughes realizes the degree to which that silencing process is enforced when both posted warnings and Secret Service agents repeatedly remind her “that *there is*

¹¹ This denial of voice may, in fact, have been a precondition to the outcome, since earlier hearings that perhaps more thoroughly included the artists’ arguments consistently ruled in their favor.

absolutely no talking in the US Supreme Court!” (14, emphasis original). Even her own lawyer, who does have a speaking part, is thwarted in his attempt to tell Hughes’ side of the story: “David Cole doesn’t get to say anything about viewpoint discrimination / Or decency. He doesn’t get more than three words out / Before the Justices are all over him” (25). The process, Hughes shows us, is designed to silence those voices that it does not empower.

It is against this silencing process that Hughes presses in the performance. The performance itself is her side of the story, even as it critiques the silencing that first precluded that side. She narrates the publicity leading up to the case that erroneously labeled her. She narrates the feeling she experienced as she entered and waited in the silence-enforced Supreme Court. She explains the logic of the brief prepared by her lawyer, a defense based on the idea that ruling based on the grounds of decency is discrimination, and that the word “decency” itself is too vague to be deployed fairly. She even goes so far as to write her own review of both the performance and the case itself.

As she asserts her revised history of the performance, Hughes reveals the degree to which the Court—and indeed the entire myth-making process of American history—is bound up in patriarchal interests and practices. This is a process, she shows us, that takes place not only at the highest levels of government, but also in the smaller domain of the American family. *Washington Post* reviewer Lloyd Rose notes, somewhat dismissively, “Like so many other baby-boomer leftists, Hughes freely mixes stories of government wrongdoing with tales about how awful her parents were. ‘We weren’t a family,’ she says, and this seems to be, at bottom, the

essence of her political critique of the United States: It isn't a good parent" (C01).

While Rose seems to intend this point as a dismissive, she is in fact tapping into one of the Hughes' central critiques, one that is at once more serious and more pervasive than "America is a bad parent." By making explicit comparisons to her own family life, Hughes is implicating the extreme degree to which America (and Christianity to some degree) is euro-centric, patriarchal, and heterosexist. Early on in the performance, for example, she reveals her love of the American flag to be wrapped up not only in her father's position of power in the family (the flag is kept in her father's desk), but also in her complex relationship to the rules it represents, both the rules of decorum for handling the flag and the paternal power-structure by which those rules are devised and enforced: "I loved the flag but maybe I loved the rules more," she muses, "or the space between the rules and my desire to break them" (3). The association between her father and the paternal nature of the Supreme Court is strengthened when the cold, hard whiteness of the Court building is associated with the vanilla of the ice cream served at Kiwanis father-daughter banquets, both places where it would be impossible, for example, "to talk . . . about art" (26). She solidifies the analogy at the moment in her narrative when silence is demanded most directly by the Secret Service agent at the court. She tells us:

It feels like detention hall, a time out
We're supposed to soak in our own worthlessness
Until Daddy gets home
All nine Daddies
Including the two female daddies
And then
And then
And then—we'll be sorry!
That's when it starts to kick in

The steps
The velvet drapes
The metal detectors
The barking secret service men
It's having an effect
I am shrinking, shrinking!
Getting smaller when the
Room gets bigger
And bigger
I'm not here because I'm a citizen
Participating in an institution of a democratic country
I'm here because I have been bad
Very very bad
And I am so lucky to be sitting here at all. (14)

Here Hughes makes clear the connection between the patriarchal nature of the court's institution and its power to minimize her, to infantilize her by silencing and reprimanding her. By moving immediately from this scene to the press' documentation of the incident, which cast her as a pervert, and perhaps worse, as a mediocre artist, Hughes makes clear the power that the Court and the media had to control discourse, discourse that moved her further from the center of power while keeping her simultaneously in the spotlight.

In fact, the notion of the spotlight taps into what is perhaps Hughes most powerful metaphor, which is the degree to which the entire process of *Finley v. The National Endowment for the Arts* was theatricalized (Wolff 557). She focuses on, for example, the demand for tickets as if the hearing were a sold-out Broadway show; the disembodied voices describe her function in the case as her "part" (even without lines); as a performer, she recognizes the restrictions on noise in the Court when she says:

I know about the talkers
I know about the coughers

I know all about the people who enter the theatre in
apparent good health
But come down with severe bronchitis the moment the
curtains go up
So — quiet during the performance
I have no problem with that! (14)

Even the reactions to the case she characterizes as reviews, but she notes that only the ones that she writes herself are good ones. Karen Finley similarly theatricalized history-making in one particular performance of *The Return of the Chocolate-Smeared Woman*. The day the decision came down, Finley interrupted her show to hold a press conference. In her memoir recounting the event, she notes, “I wanted to turn the bad news into performance on my turf” (Finley 261). In the end, though, as *Preaching to the Perverted*’s voiceover reminds Hughes and her audience, “This is real theater, sister, big money, big production values, and there’s a script and it’s not yours” (29).

This script, and the way this script is recorded in history, suggests the power of Hughes’ own self-history in performance. She focuses on and deconstructs the process of history making—the silencing process of the Supreme Court proceedings, both the patriarchal and theatrical nature of the Court, the circumscription of the artist into various proscribed roles by the complicit media. In this way, she shows us that history is no less theatrical, no less performed, and no less a construct than what she is performing on the stage, only the U.S. government has more money, and more impressive production values¹². Yet even though she reveals the status of the

¹² At least one hostile reviewer noted by contrast that Hughes’ production values are spare indeed, calling the show “Less an artwork than a piece of spoken nonfiction presented with a minimal set and props” (Trav). The “slight” here appears to grow out of a misunderstanding of art, since most other

Supreme Court cases to be just as theatrical (and therefore just as constructed) as her own performance, she does not suggest that these are two equally valid versions of the event. Instead, her show, which includes both the past of the narrative and the present of performance, works to establish a greater rhetorical authority over the official accounts, and Hughes accomplishes this through her own performing body, the sign that verifies her experience and grants her narrative a rhetorical authority that the disembodied voices, quoted hate mails, and excerpted newspaper articles all lack. Therefore, by presenting a funny, eloquent narrative of her own history alongside her deconstruction of the Court's narrative, Hughes begins the process of revising the official history of the incident, one that interprets decency as "NO QUEERS, NO QUEERS!" (24).

The result of her performance, as Richard Meyer points out, is precisely the kind of community-building that Miller and Román identify in "Preaching to the Converted." Meyer argues:

Hughes' title (like her performance) also insists on the creative and political power of identifying with "the perverted" and of directing one's art toward—or "preaching to"—an avowedly queer audience. By speaking the very language through which she has been dismissed and denigrated by others (e.g. "perverted"), Hughes resituates it within a different register of representation and thereby reopens the question (and potential pleasures) of perversion for further inquiry.
(545-546)

This community is achieved in part through the discourse of perversion, as Meyer points out, but it is also built in very literal, consciously staged ways. While Peggy

reviewers seem to understand implicitly that "spoken nonfiction presented with a minimal set and props" is called performance art, and has been a lively genre for decades.

Shaw, in *The Menopausal Gentleman*, moves out into the audience to create a connection, Hughes takes the moment a step further, bringing the audience into her lived experience. Jill Dolan describes the moment in *Preaching to the Perverted* when Hughes brings audience members onstage to read the hate mail that she received during the NEA Four Scandal. By not only making the audience part of her experience, but literally making them experience it, she forces them into her narrative, a rhetorically charged tactic that creates community out of empathy, out of having experienced the same things Hughes experienced (Dolan 468). It is this shared experience that provides the appeal of autobiographical performance for feminist practitioners: this drawing of the audience into a common discursive community, momentarily defined by a speaking subject who dares to construct her own identity amidst a wave of hostile historical and social forces.

Innovations in feminist autobiographical performance have included extremely savvy, theoretically informed moments, from Bobby Baker's revelation of the performativity of women's roles in *The Kitchen Show* to Hughes' revision of recent history through her own reconstruction of lived experience in *Preaching to the Perverted*.¹³ And it is no wonder that the form, as Hughes and Román identify in the introduction to *O Solo Homo*, is booming. Such performers deconstruct the objectification of the female body, foreground feminist voice, and generate new notions of community, all while interrogating the structures and biases of history.

¹³ There is, of course, a symbiotic relationship between such theoretically savvy performers and feminist academics such as myself who help to propagate the reputation of these artists even as we benefit from their art-making careers. Certainly there is important work waiting to be done that interrogates this relationship, the power structures inherent in it, and the values—hegemonic and radical alike—that are furthered by this exchange.

One might suspect that in the wake of the NEA controversy, and the intense pressure brought against those artists, that autobiographical performance might be considered at once too dangerous, and too ineffective, preaching heresy to the converted, as it were. And yet the communities that have grown up around these performances—whether they be the more permanent, visible ones for lesbians in New York City and beyond, or the fragile, temporary communities that Jill Dolan describes as part of the series of performances she curated in the Fall of 2000 in Austin, Texas—seem to create a space for not only these brave performances, but for more empowered, more radical performances of feminist identity elsewhere. In short, while contemporary feminist auto-performance looks very different from Linda Montano reading her life story while walking uphill on a treadmill, it still carries much the same political weight, giving feminist playwrights and performers a forum to critique patriarchal institutions while asserting their own performing bodies as the authenticating signs of the power to speak.

Reclaiming the Exemplary Life: Biography and Contemporary Feminist Drama

In the National Statuary Hall Collection in the U.S. Capitol, a visitor can stroll the along the parade of great men, admiring the busts, standing figures, and horsed figures¹⁴ carved in Italian marble and other polished chunks of stone. The parade marches on in traditional style until you meet the suffragists, a memorial to Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony. Immediately the visitor notices the stylistic and ideological incongruities of the suffragette memorial amidst the phalanx of polished soldiers that surrounds it: Mott, Stanton, and Anthony are incompletely carved, their bodies seemingly rising from a partially-formed, seven-ton slab of marble, and rising behind them, taller than the three, is an unformed figure, the beginnings of a fourth feminist yet to be realized. I was introduced to the statue, a gift of the National Woman's Party, by a friend of mine, herself introduced to it by a friend who insists that every young feminist she knows take a photo in front of the statue as an image of her potential to become that as-yet-unformed fourth figure.

In a sense, this sculpture is a perfect metaphor for the biographical plays examined by this chapter; like these plays, this memorial is working to represent a life through a feminist framework. That is, feminists staging biographical plays face much the same parade of great men (Shakespeare's histories come to mind) as Adelaide Johnson, the sculptor of this piece, did. Like the sculptor, feminist playwrights find the masculinist tradition of biography (constructing a life into art)

¹⁴ All, meanwhile, observing the symbology of hooves—men on rearing horses died in battle, those on trotting horses died from wounds received in battle, those on standing horses had the dishonor of passing in peacetime—all are codified in terms of their relationship with war.

insufficient and problematic. Instead, in order to claim their places in the footlights of history, feminists must find a new way to represent their own. And they have: just as these suffragists are incompletely carved, overtly sculptural, many staged feminist biographies show the process of representing a life while they present the life itself; they show these lives in communities and not as discrete entities; and they do so in a way that makes the lives of the past a template for the lives of the present and the future. In short, like the memorial, staged feminist biographies respond to the imperative to place women in the pantheon of history, but avoid the patriarchal trappings of the biographical tradition by contextualizing and calling attention to the construction of their narratives and projecting the significance of their biographical subjects into the present and the as-yet-unformed future.

If there is any significant difference between the sculpture in the Capitol Building and the feminist biographies that populate today's stage, it is in quantity: While Johnson's suffragists stand alone as women in the long line of "great men," plays about real-life feminists are virtually everywhere. I mentioned in the introduction, for example, the sheer number of biographical plays staged just in the Washington, D.C. metro area in a very short span, and a quick flip through the New York theatre listings confirms that my observation in the nation's capital was neither a contemporary fad nor a geographical fluke. If autobiography is the dominant form for feminist performance artists, then biography is clearly vying for that claim among feminist playwrights. To even a casual observer, this must be considered at least a remarkable coincidence, if not a significant theatrical trend, and one that should not go unobserved. And yet despite all of the recent attention from critics to the role of

history in feminist theatre, research into the topic of staged feminist biography reveals a paucity of attention, especially in light of the recent flurry of dramatic scripts and productions. Indeed, neither *Theatre Journal*'s December 2000 issue devoted to women and history nor Maggie B. Gale and Viv Gardner's *Women, Theatre and Performance: New Histories, New Historiographies* devote a single article to feminist biographies. The lack of critical attention to this emergent category, which brings the same project to the stage that feminist theatre scholars have undertaken in their criticism, seems singularly odd given the explosion of texts and performances to examine. It is precisely my project here to pay that attention, to examine feminist biographical drama as a category that speaks not only to feminist playwrights' stagings of subjectivity, but also to their negotiations with history.

The significance of these texts is further emphasized in the context of the overarching discourse of feminism and drama, namely the recovery work of feminist critics from 1974's *Hidden from History* through to the Gale and Gardner volume and the *Theatre Journal* issue. Sue Ellen Case justifies the project succinctly: "I hoped to 'name' a few of the relatively invisible but pioneering women in traditional theatre, so that feminists can claim a heritage" (Case, *Feminism and Theatre* 2). Case's sentiment—that the recovery of women's voices throughout history is crucial to the establishment of a tradition (and therefore crucial to a legitimization of the current work)—is echoed throughout the body of feminist criticism. Even in "naming" the few, Case is undertaking the beginnings of feminist biography for the stage. This claim, of course, is a foundational assumption of my argument: that the exploration of history is central to scholars of feminism and the theatre, and that it is similarly

central to the work of feminist playwrights working over the same period of time, particularly the last ten years of the twentieth century. Given these assumptions, the explosion of feminist biographies appears to be right in step with what I argue are the primary aims of feminist drama: to respond onstage to the imperative of recovering a heritage for contemporary feminists. And these plays respond as both document and as form, since as they recover the lives in question, they simultaneously model the process of recovery within a feminist framework of life writing.

Issues and Obstacles

The task of constructing a feminist tradition by staging the historical lives of women is not without its problems. In fact, it is possible that the scant attention of critics—despite the similarity in aims and tactics of the stage and the page—has to do in part with the theoretical problems surrounding the confluence of feminism, theatre and life writing. Perhaps the most obvious (and most documented) is the problem of representing the “real” that is inherent in any life writing project, a problem made even more acute by the bodied representational tactics of the theatre. Evelyn J. Hinz argues that drama becomes an apt metaphor for the problems of theorizing life writing precisely because the two genres share the element of mimesis as a foundational concept (195). And yet, if drama solves problems for Hinz by providing a language to talk about textual biographies, when we actually turn those biographies *into drama* those problems are doubled: the theoretical binds caused by mimesis are compounded by the representational and performative binds of mimesis. That is, the responsibility to represent reality through narrative is compounded when that responsibility is extended to the bodied representation that theatre demands.

Twentieth century performance theorists from Brecht to Boal, Artaud to Grotowski have expounded meaningfully on the range of problems of mimetic drama, but when we add the burden of historical accuracy to the mix the center cannot hold—too much, it seems, rests on the tenuous suspension of disbelief; not only are modernist critiques of objectivity brought to bear, so are postmodern critiques of history that argue the necessary fictionality of historical narratives. This double bind leads to what Ken Mitchell calls “a long and cantankerous relationship between history and story, and between biography and drama” (263).

Indeed, that many of these plays could be accused of doing “bad history” may be evidence of this double bind, and also perhaps the reason behind the lack of attention many have gotten. However, what we might call historical accuracy is not always a primary concern for these plays. In fact, in the introduction to *Delirium of Interpretations*, about the life of sculptor Camille Claudel, playwright Fiona Templeton explicitly states, “In this play I am not interested in who or what was or should be biographically correct” (Templeton i). Instead she claims that her play is specifically about the interpretive problems of doing biography amidst all of the contradictory representations of the biographical subject. Even more blatantly dismissive of the strictures of historical precision is Joan Schenkar’s *Signs of Life*, based on the life of Alice James. In her author’s note on the relationship of her narrative to its historical antecedents, Schenkar argues that “Art made from extreme situation can often find its ‘facts’ (i.e., the hinges upon which certain of its circumstances swing) in history” (Schenkar 44), after which she goes on to explain the historical antecedents of characters and instances in her play, ranging from the

biographical—the presence of Katherine Loring in Alice James’ life, Henry James’ burning of his sister’s journals—to the inspirational—Dr. J Marion Sims’ Uterine Guillotine as the basis for her characterization of Dr. Sloper, himself a fictional creation of Henry James’ *Washington Square*. In this case, Schenkar makes it all but explicit that history is put in service of the political underpinnings of her art. Ultimately, for some of these plays, doing the work of history seems to be a secondary concern; the significance of history as an analogy for the present and as a practice unto itself (two topics that I explore more fully below) is much more at work in many of these texts than is the task of doing accurate historiography. Of course, different playwrights prioritize these issues differently (the recovery of history versus the interrogation of history-making), and yet both concerns find themselves in tension with one another across the genre. At the very least, it prompts an examination of the function and appeal of history for these plays.

And yet with postmodern historians such as Hayden White espousing the necessary fictionality of history, and narrative theorist Michael Riffaterre asserting the necessary truth-value of fictional narratives, good history seems an impossible goal, a task that can only be undermined by its own necessary fictionality, lost in the blurred lines between fictional and historical discourses. And yet assuming that the appeal of “real” historical narratives that lies at the center of these dramatic projects is simply a desire to excavate the processes of history is putting the cart before the horse, since these plays assume in their very exploration that historical narratives are worth exploring, and need to be excavated. The imperative to recover lives is at work here, but there is something more involved than the location of a tradition as a

justification for the present. These plays must also establish how they differ from more far-flung historical revisionists—holocaust denial comes to mind as an example. So an examination of these plays must establish the role of historical representation in establishing the truth of these playwrights' recovery efforts—both in terms of the past they excavate and the present they hope to illuminate. Perhaps, the “truth” that Riffaterre identifies as inherent in fiction provides clues to the appeal of historical narrative for feminist playwrights. Writing of fictional diegesis, he says, “As there are signs of fictionality, there must be signs palliating it, signs indicating a convention of truth, signs of plausibility that make readers react to a story as if it were true” (Riffaterre 2). If fictionality is counterbalanced by plausibility, and plausibility is measured in terms of an audience's expectations, then the truth of a narrative lies in part in its reception, in the coherence of the narrative facts with those notions, ideologies and facts that the audience carries with them (Riffaterre 9-10). Add to this the symbolic systems of truth that Riffaterre describes, which “provide a metalinguistic commentary that points to the truth of the context surrounding them [. . . and . . .] possess[es] a self-contained verisimilitude” (Riffaterre 53). This symbolic, metaphorical truth that Riffaterre speaks of can be likened to the rhetoric that these plays contain; their surrounding context is no longer the past, but the present in which the audience experiences them. So half of the appeal of the “real” is that the plausibility of narrative coherence justifies the critiques that these plays levy on the present by the truth available in their discursive arguments. That is, even fiction provides two significant connections to the “real”: the narrative coherence that

roots its subject matter to a plausible history, and its discursive applicability that engages with its readerly context.

If these truths apply to fictional narratives, their truth-value only increases when their subject matter addresses an historical real (as perceived by the audience). The questions that remain involve drawing a line between what constitutes fictional discourse and what constitutes history, the answer to which may lie in Schenkar's claim that the "facts" of her play are "the hinges upon which certain of its circumstances swing." Indeed, by characterizing the function of history in these plays as the hinges, she recognizes history's quite literally pivotal role in constructing the narrative, serving as the hub around which the functional elements of the drama (i.e. the political commentary, the polemic, the rhetoric, etc.) revolve. To extend her metaphor, we must acknowledge that a door may be decorated in many ways (coherent, plausible ways, if the rules of fictional truth are to apply), but that its service in the liminal path is that it opens, that it hinges on the frame that surrounds it. So too might these plays vary in their embellishments, but these essential facts, the "hinges," if you will, root them firmly to "the real." These moments in the text are those that fill out a plausible correspondence with the known facts of history, it is what separates them from purely speculative revision. This aspect of historical narrative grounds the contemporary rhetoric of the symbolic order in the verifiability of the historical facts: it establishes that the real underpins these biographical narratives, shores up the metadiscursive explorations they undertake, and legitimates the political critique that they hope to bring into the present.

Beyond the theoretical problems that involve staging history, feminism has taken ideological issue with the form of the traditional male biography. Feminist critics such as Anna T. Kuhn are quick to note that “biography has traditionally been a male domain” (Kuhn 13). In addition to this simple historical fact, if many feminist critics have found that realism—with its claims to truthful illusion—is a problematic form,¹⁵ then the patriarchal assumptions of verisimilitude and mimesis inherent in biography must be even more so. But beyond the phallogentric tendency of mimesis, it is the presentation of the subject in traditional biography that poses the greatest problems. In their preface to *Women’s Lives/ Women’s Times*, Trev Lynn Broughton and Linda Anderson note that the confluence of feminism and autobiography has resulted in “the location and problematization of the ‘subject,’ an answer—or part of one—to the claims of enlightenment epistemology” (Broughton and Anderson xii). And although Broughton and Anderson identify the enlightenment construction of autobiography as problematic, we can certainly extend that critique to biography. For if traditional autobiography assumes a discrete subject with a unified, apparently authoritative perspective on the world, then those claims to singularity and authority are heightened by the claims of biography, in which the biographical subject¹⁶ is represented in a supposedly objective fashion by a transparent narrator, who erases his own presence in service of what Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich identifies as “a

¹⁵ For a brief overview of the debate over feminism’s engagement with realism, see Helene Keyssar’s Introduction to *Feminist Theatre and Theory* New York: St Martin’s, 1996. Also contrast Jeanie Forte’s “Realism, Narrative and The Feminist Playwright—A Problem of Reception” (in the same volume) with Elin Diamond’s first chapter in *Unmaking Mimesis*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

¹⁶ I use the term biographical subject here specifically as a shorthand for the character at the center of these plays. I do recognize, however, as I explore below, that the term “subject” is problematic, given that the biographical subject is often objectified by the omniscient narrator.

falsely abstracted nonrelational objectivity not only on the part of the author, but also for readers of the biography” (Minnich 287). This formation, which imagines a great man doing undoubtedly great things in the public sphere, reinforces the enlightenment epistemologies that privilege the relationship between man and the world around him as centered and authoritative, to the exclusion not only of women, but of any disenfranchised voice not empowered by the hegemonic impulses of an invisible narrator. However, just as the notion of the unified self is a politically-charged fantasy, so is the notion of a unified biographical tradition—a stable set of conventions—that feminism must work against. Nonetheless, these ideas are perceived to constitute a tradition of “conventional” biography; they serve as a literary figurehead of life writing authority, and feminism’s responses to these conventions are not reaction to this straw man per se. Instead, they constitute an attempt to work against this perceived set of practices in a way that both espouses an oppositional ideology and also provides a methodology for recovering women’s lives that is viable within the framework of feminist discourse.

While the narrational issues of biography pose problems to the feminist playwright and critic, staging the biography creates even more pressing, if related, concerns. Despite the language surrounding the “biographical subject,” it is clear that we are also in part talking about an object of biographical scrutiny—that we as audience members are often positioned as the subjects examining the object of our inquiry. Add to this condition the tendency of realist staging tactics to promote unidirectional viewing practices that indulge the male gaze, and our proto-feminist biographical subject quickly becomes a spectacle—and object for the biographer’s

gaze. In fact, several of the plays examined below grapple with this paradox, choosing subjects who were notoriously objectified as spectacles during their lifetimes: the Restoration actress Nell Gwyn is just one example. In her case, as it is dramatized by April De Angelis' *Playhouse Creatures*, the objectification that seems to have been a fact of life for Restoration actresses is set in direct contrast to the status of emergent professionals that actresses of this period were beginning to enjoy.¹⁷ By using carefully juxtaposed plot points and metatheatrical performance, De Angelis highlights the degree to which the sexualization of the actresses' bodies may have actively inhibited their freedom as professional and sexual subjects. It seems then that feminist biography makes this representational problem part of its polemic, by using Brechtian strategies to problematize and call attention to the very practices that treated these women as objects in the first place, thereby (one hopes) subverting that same process in the present.

Alongside the ideological components of traditional biography to which feminist scholars object, there is also an issue of how to interpret a feminist biography. Specifically, scholarship of women's biographies often insists on reading these texts as partially autobiographical, ignoring the historical aspect of their narratives. Much like the feminist performance art of the previous chapter, such a critical tactic recognizes feminism's old maxim—"the personal is political"—and holds that autobiography is a politicization of women's private lives and thus an alternative strategy for resisting the great-man tendency of biographical narrative. In

¹⁷ Deborah Payne Fisk argues that this dichotomy—Restoration actress as reified object or emergent professional—is a false one, but does claim that the notion of emergent professionalism depends on objectification, simply in the field of taste rather than sexual desire.

fact, of the six essays on biography found in *Revealing Lives*, Susan Groag Bell and Marilyn Yalom's volume on life writing and gender, four insist on reading biographical texts by women more as veiled autobiographies of their authors than as biographies of their subjects.¹⁸ And certainly this reading strategy works against the notion of the discrete subject that feminists have found so objectionable. But to replace one discrete subject with another seems problematic on several fronts. At the most literal level, there is a degree to which correspondences between the biographical subject and the author may seem telling, and may even intertextually inform a discussion on the author's work and life, and yet, at some point those correspondences break down, typically revealing themselves to be metaphorical connections or affinities rather than truly veiled autobiographies.¹⁹ The "hinges" upon which the historical narrative hangs break down here, and we must read a biography—at its core—as being "about" its subject, and furthermore, we must press the relevance of that subject's historical status to the present. But the more subtle problem with deploying this strategy as a primary approach to feminist biography is that it implicitly assumes that male biases of biography preclude both the relevance of the public lives of women and the possibility that this bias can be written against or subverted altogether. This assumption is challenged by the proliferation of feminist biographical drama in terms of both its need to recover lives and its ability (which I seek to prove here) to resist the biases of traditional biography.

¹⁸ "The 'Failure' of Biography and the Triumph of Women's Writing," "Biography as Autobiography," and "Biography as Reflected Autobiography" all appear in the titles of articles in this collection.

¹⁹ Of course texts like Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* or Christa Wolf's *The Quest for Christa T* stand as obvious exceptions that quite obviously reveal Case's notion of the split subjectivity.

The second problem is that the strategy of reading biography as autobiography breaks down entirely when the text becomes a collaborative one, as is the case for drama and its staged realization. To interpret a biographical play as autobiography, the viewer would have to take into account not only the life of the playwright (as this biography-as-autobiography strategy would suggest) but also the lives of the director, dramaturg, actress, and any number of others who contribute to the task of bringing the subject “back to life.” The “autobiography” becomes completely diffuse, distributed out amongst three, four, even 20 lives in the present moment. And that present moment itself changes, as the role of different audiences from performance to performance alters the construction of the biographical subject, at least subtly. So this impulse, while sensitive to the feminist interest in exploring the reciprocal relationship between the author and her subject, is ultimately rendered untenable when applied to drama.

Motives and Strategies

While the intersection of feminism, biography and drama poses a variety of problems— including ongoing critiques of mimesis in both theatre and history, the “objective” representation of the subject, the representation of the biographical subject as a viewed object for the male gaze, and the impulse to read biography as autobiography—there remains the imperative to enter this intersection to enact the kind of recovery work that feminist criticism has been undertaking for over 30 years. So despite the theoretical problems associated with the task, it seems that feminist drama must do biography, but must do it in a new way. Some of the tactics identified by scholars of feminist biography include the notion of self-reflexivity; the notion of

a deconstructed, fragmented, or plural subject; some sort of reciprocity between the subject and the artists; and a concerted effort to use these tactics to disrupt the unidirectional gaze that plagues so many feminist performances. But beyond these tactics, feminist drama as art seems to bear an additional burden: to justify its project as worthy of art. And so, my project here is to lay out the grounds for study of this new generic category of feminist biographical drama, in order to examine how feminist drama uses history to advance its political theses, to soften the impact of those politics, and to justify its own presence on the stage. Below, I will examine three specific activities that staged feminist biographies undertake to accomplish their political goals while avoiding the theoretical binds that constrain them: recovering the biographical subject, contextualizing the act of biography, and representing the elision of the subject's life in order to justify the recovery work in the first place.

As I have already discussed here, the push to unearth lost or underrepresented lives from the graveyard of history is a primary task of these plays. Elaine Aston succinctly summarizes the impetus of recovering women's lives from a past heretofore composed of men's stories: "The feminist concept of women 'hidden from history' impacted on literary criticism in two ways. First, it motivated feminist critics to understand how and why women . . . had been buried by man-made history, and, second, it initiated a recovery of their 'lost' female ancestors." (Aston, *Introduction* 15). She continues on to note that "bringing the 'lost' tradition of women's theatre history is an important political step if feminist theatre scholarship is to change the future history of the stage" (34). The question of why it is an important task to undertake on the stage, however, bears some fleshing out. At the most basic level

(but one which must not be underestimated), this recovery work locates in history a past for feminist theatre practitioners to grasp onto, a place to situate their own stories, and a way to refute the gendered essentialism that for centuries has been deployed to reify sexist attitudes. Furthermore, these plays build upon that establishment of a tradition, as I will explore more fully below, and leverage the historical rootedness of these narratives from the past to offer legitimacy for their contemporary political critique.

It is easy to find these two goals at odds—the appeal of masking oppositional polemic in the accepted discourses of history at the expense of effective polemic or good history. But quite the opposite appears to be true. For in utilizing history, feminist drama taps into more than just legitimacy-by-association. It also relies upon historical verifiability—the provable correspondence between the facts, Schenkar’s hinges upon which her narrative hangs—to resist easy refutation. It is difficult to refute the argument that *Signs of Life* makes about women’s history being silenced when you recognize that Henry James *did in fact* burn his sister’s “hysterical” journals. Ultimately, the verifiability of historical narrative and its resistance to simple malleability makes criticism of its historical accuracy seem more like mere pedantry—history provides wiggle-room on the details to create better polemic, and furthermore, packs twice the punch, magnifying the urgency of these contemporary political analogues by pointing out how overdue change is, and how deeply entrenched many of these issues really are. So issues of “correct history,” while they offer room for close reading, don’t change the “facts” of the biographical narrative,

the correspondences between the real and the representational that foreground the arguments made by these plays.

But the question remains as to who is being recovered and how this recovery takes place; the dilemma of whose biography to present is not as simple as it might seem. Bell and Yalom, for example, while noting the exclusion of women from the canon, also note how feminist scholars “questioned the paradigm of ‘singular’ or ‘exemplary’ lives” (Groag Bell and Yalom 1). And Peggy Rosenthal, responding to the first biographies printed by the Feminist Press in the 1970s, identifies a discrepancy in the rhetoric of women as plural and generalized and the subject of the biographies as singular and particular (180). “The reader that [these biographers] seem to want to inspire by these stories full of achievement,” Rosenthal writes, “may very likely be inspired to wonder at these women but also to wonder about the inapplicability of their lives to her own” (183). Moreover, the implication inherent in presenting exemplary women’s lives seems to be that only these few women were capable of doing great things; so by granting the exception, biographies of exemplary women confirm the rule that exemplary public behavior is the domain of men. In fact, Jamie Pachino’s *Theodora: An Unauthorized Biography* dramatizes this exact dilemma. In a dialogue between Theodora, the purportedly scandalous wife of Byzantine Emperor Justinian, and her present-day female biographer, 1990, Theodora presents this argument as an objection to her own “recovery”:

1990

They talk about you because you were remarkable and strong and passionate and brave. And you lived at a time when women weren't allowed to do that.

Theodora

Women were always allowed to do that! Women have done things for hundreds and hundreds of years. Fought husbands and left them, brought children into the world illegitimately and raised them without shame. Fought battles and commanded empires. It's just that no one ever wrote it down.

1990

Then why did they write about you?

Theodora

Because I was Empress. Because if they made me "remarkable" and "unique" then women were not capable, only I was—women were not strong and powerful, or decisive and cruel and ravishingly beautiful, only me. (Pachino 65-66)

The argument that Pachino makes here is in part countered by the mere existence of her play, and the existence of the number of other staged biographies of women. Indeed the assumption that Theodora would be the exception to the rule is contradicted by the sheer numbers of biographies—instead of a few women emerging in a sea of men, women's lives are reaching the stage in scores, and in doing so, gradually establishing an historical image of women that is not circumscribed within the domestic sphere. If we then examine the proliferation of these plays as constituting a plurality, then such a problem with the singularity of the exemplary life is diminished. Nonetheless, individual playwrights and critics respond in different ways to this dilemma of the singular versus the plural. Rosenthal argues for a tactic that dramatizes "the connections between the inner and the public life, instead of reducing these connections to simple formulas" thus making them applicable to women in general (183). Others, like Pachino, or like Caryl Churchill in *Top Girls*,

use their “biography” of remarkable figures to create a dialogue with women in the present. Still others place women within larger communities of women, or in search of such communities, like Pam Gems’ title character in the second act of *Queen Christina*. What these tactics all seem to have in common is that they use the lives reconstructed from the past to do political work simultaneously in the present.

Gems’ 1977 *Queen Christina* is a classic example of this phenomenon. Elaine Aston notes specifically that “*Queen Christina* takes a historical subject as a vehicle for contemporary feminist issues” (Aston, “Pam Gems” 159). The play reads like a laundry list of late seventies feminist concerns: reproductive choice, female access to power, sexual choice, even clothing. Here, Gems is not simply doing the kind of revisionist history that is so often ascribed to plays like these—although most critics note the contrast of Gems’ stooped, hideous central character to Greta Garbo’s doe-eyed androgyne in the 1920s film. It is one thing to revise history. It is still another to use that history as a way to speak to the present. And yet these statements both represent simplified commonplaces in literary criticism. For when Christina argues for her own choice in having a child, or alternatively, shuns the blue-stockings of Act II for their complete rejection of all men, Gems is not *just* speaking to her historical subject matter, and she is not *just* making claims about and recommendations to her audience. Gems’ character instead serves a *dual function*, representing a conversation across time that interrogates the past, informs the present, and builds a greater sense of urgency and outrage—thus invoking a stronger call to action in the present. This is true for most of the texts in this category: they do the recovery work of history not just to revise history, but to use a revised version of that history to speak to the

present—not simply implicating two historical moments, but in doing so, implying a long narrative of repression that spans them both.

Incidentally, this reciprocity between past and present implicates present-day politics in the construction of the past just as much as it identifies the past as crucial to the construction of the present. This dialectic returns us to the reading strategies that want to locate a similarly reciprocal relationship between author and subject. As I have argued above, this strategy appears to disintegrate when introduced into the collaborative setting of the theatre: the subjectivity of the author is fragmented by the presence of other contributors to the dramatic process such that any unified subjectivity to read onto the biographical subject can only be that of a community of collaborators—the particulars of any individual are erased by the commonalities of the whole group. Yet we can speak coherently about the community of collaborators, the feminists who share specific political positionalities in relation to themselves and society at large. So if we refigure this biography-as-autobiography strategy as one that reads like the kind of dramatized connection of inner and public lives that Rosenthal advocates, then these biographies become as much about the communities that produce them as they are about the history they seek to recover. When cast in this light, such a strategy can indeed become a significant means to understanding these texts and their function for the contemporary feminist stage.

Interpretive strategies that focus less on the historical accuracy of the text, or even the physical resemblance of the actress to her historical referent, seem then to ask the question of what precisely is being reclaimed. Can such a reclamation project be valid if the historical context is revealed—by self-reflexivity, by stylized

performances, by the necessarily fictionalized embodiment of the character by the actress—to be a construction of the present? Elin Diamond, in *Unmaking Mimesis*, seems to provide an answer: “Thinking historically . . . does not mean . . . to recover the past ‘the way it really was’” (144). Instead, Diamond advocates reading feminist performance that evokes history as a “dialectical image,” citing Benjamin’s musings on reconstructing history. “The *dialectical* image, then doesn’t stand for an absent real (woman, man, toaster, Chevy), nor is it internally harmonious. . . . The dialectical image is a montage construction of forgotten objects . . . that are ‘blasted’ out of history’s continuum” (146). That is, the actress’ body, a dialectical image, provides an analogue for what is historically relevant: not necessarily the historical body itself, but the transgressive performances it undertook. Again, Pam Gems’ rogue queen serves as a salient example. “Central to her exposition of masculine and feminine identities,” writes Elaine Aston, “is the *gestus* of the cross-dressed body.” She argues that “Gems uses the device of the cross-dressed body towards a more subversive end: . . . a ‘misfit’ body which invites us to question gender roles, identity and behaviour” (“Pam Gems” 160). Here, the body of the actress playing Christina, her physical mannerisms, and the clothes she wears all work together to produce this image for the audience. So then, the body of the biographical subject, initial site of reclamation, is long gone; it can only be reclaimed *as history*. What can be reclaimed for the present, however, is the *performance* enacted by both bodies—the signifier of the actress’ performance, and the signified of those performances drawn from her subject’s life—and the metanarrative that the dialectic between the past and the present creates to reinforce the connection between them.

Once we establish a strategy for recovering the subject of biography, and understand how feminist playwrights work against patriarchal constructions of the subject, we must turn our eye to the second part of the equation: revising the epistemology that unearths subject-construction as we unearth the subject herself. While feminism objects to the unified conception of the subject as object of scrutiny, it also finds fault with the apparent objectivity with which the traditional biographer presents the subject. If these claims of objectivity assume a patriarchal authority in their implications of an absolute truth, feminist revisionists must respond in their biographies not only by revising the representations, but also by revising the methodologies in such a way that their own “authority” is contextualized. As a result, feminist playwrights do not often simply “do” biography. Instead they turn their critical eye not only on the life being recovered, but also on the process of that recovery, the act of doing biography itself, and the paths by which we as postmodern readers have access to that life. This scrutiny bears itself out in three typical ways: a presentation of the range of historical documents that serve to construct the life, an examination of a biographer figure alongside the biographical subject herself, and an examination of the subject through writing and of writing as means of representing a historical subjectivity.

The first strategy, the presentation of the documentation of history, implicitly reveals the constructed nature of the historical work being done in these plays. Texts that work this way typically do so by breaking into the representational action of the play by reading supposedly “objective” accounts of history which usually stand in stark contrast to the action we see onstage. Brechtian moves like this have a dual

destabilizing effect. First and foremost to this project, they reveal the inherently unreliable nature of the historical documents by contrasting them ironically with the apparently reliable narrative the audience witness on the stage. But this tactic is not merely an attack on masculinist history, because in contrasting these two epistemologies of the life in question, the move also implicitly acknowledges the constructed nature of its own narrative. In doing so, these plays often avoid falling into the same traps of feigned objectivity for which they critique their sources.

Fiona Templeton's *Delirium of Interpretations* serves as a relevant example. In her author's note, Templeton prescribes, "Only [Camille] has an invented or subjective voice—the play is specifically about subjectivity, not biographical objectivity. Mostly the characters speak in voices borrowed from history. Since reality is multiple, some of these are contradictory in their apparent facts" (ii). Instead of assigning the other characters a unified subjectivity, the playwright specifically has them speaking text from a wide range of historical sources, which she meticulously annotates in the margin. And while her notes indicate that this is a dramaturgical tool, it also provides some provocative staging possibilities—for the reader, at least, Templeton has "staged" the process of biography in every word that comes out of her characters' mouths. They are literally and overtly mouthpieces—Templeton makes every effort to lay bare her own process in order to represent what she calls "the very excess of subjectivities in all of their contradiction" (i).

In this case, the body of the actress becomes a dialectical image to highlight the very process of biography, the "delirium of interpretations" that marked Claudel's

life²⁰ and, as the title of the play, marks the audience's experience of the play. Templeton claims here that only Camille has what we might call a subjectivity, while the other characters are representatives of various self-proclaimed "objective" perspectives. Therefore, the play reveals that in their conflicting nature, and in conflict with the only voice of subjectivity onstage (Camille herself), these supposedly objective sources are as subjective, if not more so than voice assumed by the biographical subject. The difference here seems to lie in the body as a site for construction—their claims are conflicting precisely because they do not have the bodied experience to support the claims. By representing the bodies that surround Camille with a patchwork of various voices, the play points to the very project that these voices enact—the construction of the female body without the benefit of that body's experience to bolster those claims. Of course the irony here is that the actress who supplies the theatrical body relies on sources as much as the "objective" and alienated voices do. But hopefully, the Brechtian tactics that *Delirium of Interpretations* deploys reveal the actress' bodied performance to be as much a construction as anything else. In this excess of subjectivities, supported by a host of historical sources and an imagined bodied subjectivity, Templeton reveals the degree to which her biographical subject is overdetermined. What we are left with returns us to the title of the piece, both the contemporary term for the paranoia that marked Claudel's experience, but also the ecstatic experience of excess subjectivities, all bound up in the process of interpretation that the play invites its audience to enact.

²⁰ "Delirium of Interpretations," according to the author's gloss, is the contemporary name accorded to what we now term paranoia, or paranoid schizophrenia.

As a result, the audience is prompted to recognize that “we are all inscribed by prior, interdependent, and multiple evidence and interpretations of the world, and participate, creatively or not, in the constant formation of its present and future interpretation, including that of its past” (Templeton i-ii).

While Templeton and others contextualize the textual sources of their own biographical work, still others plays examine their own methodologies by staging the biographers alongside the subjects they purport to examine. Whether casting these figures as witnesses, scribes, analysts, journalists or scholars, many staged feminist biographies perform the very process of biography even as they undertake that process. From the very first, this tactic destabilizes the notion of the unified subject, since the subjectivity of the biographical subject is at least partially distributed across two figures—the biographer and subject. This effect seems to fragment the subject, ascribing the audience’s knowledge of the biographical subject not only to her lived experience, but also to the interpretative lens of the figure who chooses, for whatever, reason, to put that life to paper. Lynn Kaufman’s *Shooting Simone* portrays just this divide. The second act of that play narrates the experience of a young feminist TV journalist who interviews French feminist Simone de Beauvoir, and ends up applying her observations on Simone’s relationship with existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre to her own relationship with her cameraman.²¹ The last image of Simone that the audience is presented with comes in the form of the younger couple’s documentary,

²¹ I could spend a significant amount of time critiquing how this particular choice (to present the onstage biography through images captured by the male character’s camera) reproduces the processes of the male gaze in the construction of the biographical subject, but the purpose here is to examine what this technique has in common with other feminist plays that use it, no matter how much more or less successful.

foregrounding the degree to which Simone's narrative is embedded in theirs. Moreover, if the abstracted objectivity of traditional biography implicates the audience in its obfuscating processes, then it seems that by subjectifying the biographer, plays like *Shooting Simone* equally reveal to the audience their own subjectivity, and their own role in constructing the biography.

Furthermore, in revealing the constructed nature of these biographical portraits, these plays reveal the tenuous relationship between the representations being presented on the stage and the "Truth" that they might otherwise seem to represent. If Templeton reveals the inherently contradictory nature of multiple biographies, then Kaufman points out the same discrepancies embedded within representations of the subject herself. Indeed, while biographical inquiry reveals uncertainties in de Beauvoir's life as simple as her date of birth, Kaufman's portrayal of Simone links these incongruities to the slippery nature of subjectivity. Through these contradictions, Kaufman comes to her thesis about biography and "Truth," as Simone states: "That's all we ever get to know, our version . . . There are so many [truths] . . . [if] you believe in a solitary truth, life is quite simple and quite dull" (Lynn Kaufman 42). This conception of a personal and subjective truth certainly speaks to a feminist sensibility of biography, and illuminates the preference for autobiography. And yet the degree to which Kaufman's play relies upon a correspondence between the known of de Beauvoir's life and the narrative of the play belies a sense of radical subjectivity in truth construction. "Our version" of the truth, then seems to call for an exploration of the past, but also for understanding what constitutes one version against another. This notion highlights the degree to which

historical precision for these plays does not appear to be a primary concern, and perhaps is antithetical to a feminist construction of the past in its assumption of the existence of an objective truth. And yet it also reveals a concern for recognizing versions, the tension invoked by constructing a biographical narrative that itself identifies truth as less than objective.

A third strategy for contextualizing biography can be found in the performance of writing—specifically, in plays about women writers and their texts. Plays such as Liz Lochhead’s *Blood and Ice*, about Mary Shelley and her creation of *Frankenstein*, immediately foreground the representation of subjectivity on the contemporary stage. The play, which Adrienne Scullion argues “is as much a memory play as it is a history play” (98), uses the confluence of memory, history, and writing to create a space in which the experience and subjectivity of the author are posed as the defining parameters, as the play follows Mary Shelley after the death of her husband and through the process of writing her landmark novel. By foregrounding the voice and experience of Shelley, ‘in whose consciousness,’ Lochhead states, ‘my *entire* play takes place’” (qtd, in Scullion 98), Lochhead is able to place the context of Shelley’s life in conversation with her status as the author of *Frankenstein*. The path of the protagonist then, is not simply towards completing a novel, but towards writing as its own goal. “The dominant trope of *Blood and Ice*,” Writes Elaine Aston, “is Mary’s quest for her own story, which is emblematic of the feminist quest to find the lost woman writer” (*Introduction* 144). But while this dramaturgical tactic emphasizes the voice of Mary Shelley by calling attention to its more permanent manifestation in her novel, the play also highlights the transgressive

nature of that writing. Scullion compares Shelley's writing to the "'transgressive' progeny of the novel (98), and the element of performance reinforces this, since it is Shelley's *act of writing* that stands as the historically empowered moment. By enacting this performance of writing, Lochhead and other playwrights who represent writing as a performance of subjectivity both highlight their own tradition as female authors at the same time as they resurrect the writer as a dialectical image for current feminists.

Yet while writing and performance seem to strike a symbiotic chord in this instance, these plays are not always completely comfortable with this dialectic. Many of them seem to be staging this relationship in a variety of ways, each locating different implications of performance and writing in the task of establishing the women's voices in history. Helene Cixous' *Portrait of Dora*, for example, seems to be working on the assumption that performance is a way to work against the phallogocentric impulses of Freudian analysis. Citing a scene in which Dora re-enacts her infamous "incident by the lake" while she describes it for Freud, critic Sharon Willis writes, "This performance becomes, in effect, the theatre within the analytic scene. It is a play on the term 'acting out'—exactly what the analysand's discursive rendition is supposed to eliminate. The hysteric becomes an actress to make visible the scene she describes, thus sundering the analytic space" (82). In short, by performing this autobiography, Cixous' *Dora* resists the impulses of psychoanalysis that seek to translate her bodied experience into legible, written, narrative.

In contrast to Cixous' seeming assertion of performance and "acting out" as a blanket feminist remedy for the masculinist impulses of writing, De Angelis notes

that the very ephemeral, unwritable nature of performance also accounts for the difficulty of recording the history that these plays seek to recover, and that the public, objectified position of her subjects' lives might undermine the transgressive elements of women's performance. For example, in one incident in her 1999 version of *Playhouse Creatures*, De Angelis has one character, based on the Restoration actress Rebecca Marshall, devise the idea for a play with a female protagonist. Thomas Otway, the playwright to whom Mrs. Marshall tells the idea, comes back several scenes later with his masterpiece, *Monimia*, the play with which the character's historical antecedent made his name. By this time however, Mrs. Marshall has been exiled from the theatre in shame (the result of an ill-fated tryst with a persistent and powerful admirer), and Otway, as history dictates, goes down as the man whose scripts made Elizabeth Barry (depicted here as a desexualized prude) the most famous actress of the Restoration. Similarly, Nell Gwyn talks of a role being written for her by Aphra Behn. This allusion (while not apparently factually based) creates an interesting divide between the two figures of the Restoration stage—while Gwyn is remembered as Charles II's most popular mistress, Behn is remembered as a pioneering figure for women in the canon. The point that the play seems to be making is that while performance has potential, it is writing that withstands history. So however they grapple with the issue, these plays struggle to examine their own voices as the intersection of performance and text, and they do so to highlight the subjectivity of their biographical subjects, a task that has historically been an uphill climb.

The final aim of these texts, besides recovery of the subject and contextualization of the biographical act, is a representation of the processes of erasure that have made such recovery work necessary in the first place. At first glance, this may seem a curious and counterproductive endeavor for feminist biographies, to reproduce the processes by which their subjects are elided, but the presence of this element in many of these texts suggests that not only is this process not damaging to the entire recovery effort, it is necessary. Joan Schenkar's *Signs of Life*, for example, makes explicit and frequent reference to Henry James' destruction of Alice's journals—but also to the subsequent role of Katherine Loring in their reconstruction. By representing the patriarchal elision of the historical subject (burning the journals) alongside the process of recovery, Schenkar seems to be justifying her own recovery work, and justifying the revisionist nature of that work by highlighting the tyranny with which the patriarchy asserts itself against female subjectivity. And by giving body and voice to these historical figures, such metatheatrical discourse serves to produce dialectical images that uncover the history that the plays are reclaiming even as they reproduce the historical process by which these women were “hidden from history.” Essentially, this play works to perform a history of women's theatre by performing the elision of that history.

The matter of why these stories must be erased onstage in order to justify their writing recalls Griffin and Aston's claims in *Herstory*: first, that “women's theatre groups' work disappears as it appears . . . a perpetual silencing the result,” and second, that “Against this, the *Herstory* volumes [and, I would argue, feminist biographical drama] seek to work” (Griffin and Aston 9). It seems that the work of

recovering a tradition is dependent on the very silencing processes against which such a project struggles. I do not wish to suggest that without the oppressive influence of masculinist discourse, feminist theatre could not exist. However, combating the silence is no longer just a political goal for the art: it is its inspiration as well. That is, feminist theatre has so invested in this archaeology of the past that the project has created its own aesthetic of polemic wrapped in history. Therefore, in order to legitimate the very recovery work that they are doing, staged feminist biographies must also represent the reasons why such recovery work is necessary; the past that they unearth, then, must be one worth the dig.

In what follows, I will briefly examine four exemplars of this mode of contemporary feminist drama. Timberlake Wertenbaker's *New Anatomies*—which makes a reclamation of the heretofore obscure Isabelle Eberhardt as a feminist heroine its primary project—does this very archaeology of the past to recover the biographical subject, contextualize its own process of biography, and justify its project by reenacting the erasure that made the recovery necessary in the first place. Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus*—in retelling the life of Saartje Baartman, a 19th Century African woman displayed in the freak shows of Europe for her purportedly enormous buttocks—uses this process of interrogating the past to make even more pointed commentary on the viewing process of the present, thus exploring overtly the role of the biographical subject as object, not just in the past, but in the present in which her interrogation takes place. In my analysis of Helene Cixous' *Portrait of Dora*, I recast the discourse of psychology as a specific form of life writing, and examine Cixous' meditation of the role of Freud in constructing his famous case history, noting how by

implicating the psychologist in the process of subject-construction, she postulates performance as a resistant strategy against the objectifying impulses of biography. And finally, I will examine April De Angelis' two versions of *Playhouse Creatures* to map out her representation of the dual processes of elision and recovery as they both implicate the masculinist construction of the theatrical tradition, but also foreground the very rhetorical project of feminist polemic which they undertake.

Timberlake Wertebaker's *New Anatomies* as Staged Biography

New Anatomies depicts the life of Isabelle Eberhardt, a Russian Jew who, while dressed as a Muslim man, integrated herself into Sufi culture in turn-of-the-century Algeria. Eberhardt's life is intriguing and important on a number of fronts: her cross-gendered performance, her disregard of imperialism in Northern Africa, and her position as a woman in Islamic culture. She infiltrated the inherently sexist culture of Islamic Sufism by dressing as an Arabic man to become the first known woman to take part in the rituals of the Qadria, a mystical sect of Sufism (Mezger, *Passim*). In doing so, she flouted the strictures placed upon both women and colonized Arabs by French rule, traveling freely in Algeria and intermingling with the subaltern culture. Wertebaker recounts Eberhardt's life relatively closely, altering only minor details.²² Constructed chronologically, but framed by the events surrounding Eberhardt's death, Wertebaker's play follows Eberhardt from childhood to early contacts with Islamic culture to her infiltration and participation in the Qadria, and finally to her death in 1904 at age 27.

²² The major exception is Eberhardt's friendship with the French journalist Severine, notorious for both her radical politics and her lesbianism. She is positioned here as Eberhardt's "scribe," an extreme exaggeration of their real-life relationship, which consisted of one disastrous meeting.

Wertenbaker's purpose here certainly seems to be a project of reclaiming Eberhardt as a proto-feminist hero, highlighting her gender and cultural crossings as an analogue to the performative identities more consciously acknowledged in today's society. And Worthen's script encourages productions to recognize this analogy, pausing on moments in which Isabelle changes clothing from European woman to Arabic man. If the project of reclaiming a feminist history is crucial to this mode of feminist theatre, then Eberhardt is certainly a model of a woman "put away" by history for her social and political transgressions. Yet, the process of reclaiming Eberhardt simply for the sake of her traditional historical value seems less than relevant—while the French Government did apparently commission her to do a bit of spying on a rival sect of the Qadria, she seems to have had little impact on the course of human events as we currently understand them. Her relevance to today's feminists is much more apparent. Marjorie Garber writes, "Cross-dressing for Isabelle Eberhardt thus became both a way of *obeying* the paternal and patriarchal law ([her father] permitted her to go into Geneva only if she dressed as a boy) and a way of *subverting* it" (Garber 325, emphasis original). In not presenting her audience with the figure of Isabelle's father, Worthen chooses to emphasize the latter of these functions.

Throughout the play what Elaine Aston refers to in *Queen Christina* as "The gestus of the cross-dressed body" ("Pam Gems" 160) does the work of presenting Isabelle as a dialectical image for the audience. While Eberhardt herself may not be useful by traditional biographical standards, her transgressions are useful for the political agenda of contemporary feminism. And those transgressions are numerous:

her cross-gendered performances in both European and African settings challenge traditional gender categories; her sexual habits while cross-dressing (“I am not a woman. I’m Si Mahmoud. I like men. They like me. As a boy, I mean. And I have a firm rule: No Europeans up my arse” (Wertenbaker 38)) avoid easy classification; and her cultural crossings—not only assimilating into an Islamic sect, but doing so as a woman—resist cultural stereotypes of orientalism even as they violate the patriarchal customs of Islam. The body of the actress, therefore must do double duty: serving in a sense as a biographer herself by performing the life of Eberhardt, and also as the recovered object, since it is her use of costume and presentation of the body that embodies the historical transgression of her biographical subject.

Wertenbaker extends this image outward from the lead actress to the supporting cast as well. While Isabelle is the only *character* to enact these various transgressions, Wertenbaker calls for every character onstage to be played by a woman, making the theme of gender crossings even more explicit. Five actors play 17 parts, eight of which are male. The actress playing Isabelle is the only person who doesn’t double, and by extension, the only person who never plays a man, although she moves fluidly between genders. The four other actresses mirror this gender crossing by playing both male and female characters, often making costume changes right on stage, a choice suggested by the script. This foregrounding of costume as a tactic of gender performance by the other actresses mediates and makes accessible the actions of Isabelle. In a real world where transvestitism is taboo, Eberhardt is alien; in a dramatized world where such gender passages are expressed in the familiar language of costume, the identity of Isabelle Eberhardt is made more palatable—her

radical gender performativity is mediated for the audience by the fact that Isabelle Eberhardt's crossings (and by extension, those of the actress who portrays her) are normalized by the costuming of the other actors in the production. By enacting Eberhardt's transgression in the safe space of the stage, the rest of the cast demonstrates the power of gender performance, but also defuses its most dangerous appearances. These Brechtian strategies for presenting the performativity of identity create what Susan Carlson calls "combustible dialectical energies . . . [that] urge audiences and readers to accept the philosophical challenge of experimenting with new selves" (141).

Yet while this recovery work is undertaken with remarkable ideological force throughout the play, it is not being presented invisibly. Wertebaker uses dramatic possibility to move beyond conventional biography in her handling of the subject position in the narrative. Instead of presenting a single, unified perspective that encourages the audience to identify uncritically with Eberhardt, the playwright instead offers a fluctuating subjectivity with the point of identification moving between both Eberhardt and the character of Severine. The play is framed by the events surrounding Isabelle's death: in the first scene, she is incomprehensible and presumably insane. In the final scene she is dead. In both scenes, Severine is the audience's means of contextualizing Eberhardt; we look at her through Severine's gaze. While the narrative that exists in between these moments does conform more or less to a traditional positioning of the heroine as subject (Severine is not present for the early life, nor for any of Isabelle's travels across the desert), this narrative is bracketed off by the frame structure, and so our entrance into and departure from

Isabelle's life is mediated by Severine's perspective—one that is not coincidentally fictionalized in the representation of Eberhardt. She is quite literally a constructed perspective of radical politics for our present audience to filter the subject.

This divided focus parallels Sue-Ellen Case's notion of the fractured subject (Case, "Split Subjects" *Passim*). While Case imagines this position as representative of women's displaced subjectivity, reflecting the woman as both subject and object (which is represented by the protagonist's two identities, the European Isabelle and the Arabic Si Mahmoud), this split subjectivity serves a function for biography as well. As much as Eberhardt is the biographical subject, she is also the object of historical scrutiny, both by the audience and the characters around her. Not only does the audience see her through their own eyes, they see her through Severine's as well. Severine's position of subjectivity in the frame structure makes her an intermediary for the historical image of Eberhardt. She, like Isabelle, is both subject and object of the audience's gaze, but she also objectifies Isabelle. Severine, radical both for her politics and for her sexuality, desires Isabelle, but can have her only by writing her. As her "scribe," Severine is also her biographer. While in real life, biographers use Isabelle's own writings as a primary source, Wertenbaker imagines this intermediary figure—the dramatized biographer in the form of Severine. This presents an interesting problem, for while Severine's gaze is not male, it is partially objectifying and desiring. The final scene in the play includes a conversation between Severine, a nameless judge and Colonel Lyautey, who facilitated Eberhardt's journeys in the last years of her life:

JUDGE: Close the file. This person must be
officially forgotten.
LYAUTEY: We found some journals. Would you
like to see them, Severine?
SEVERINE: With pleasure. (Wertenbaker 52)

It crucial to notice that Severine's answer here is not merely affirmative, but an expression of pleasure. This pleasure, while not sexual, suggests the pleasure of biography, that by writing the subject, one possesses the subject, which suggests some of its danger to feminist scholars who note the way that the biographer/ subject relationship mimics the relationship on which the desiring male gaze is predicated.

But if Severine is the biographer in the play, she must certainly be a metaphor for the biographer outside of the play as well, one who writes against the eliding effects of history on women's subjectivities. And it is this last scene that thematizes this role: while the judge declares that Isabelle must be officially forgotten, her journals and her scribe insure that she will be remembered and—in a performance such as the very one the audience is watching—revived in the live, albeit mediated, three-dimensional image they see. In the bracketing structure of the play's frame, Severine is simultaneously the historical object watched by the audience, the subject gazing like the audience on Isabelle's image already acknowledged as significant, and, like Wertenbaker herself, the biographer serving as an intermediary between the object in the past and the audience in the present. This alternating subjectivity not only reclaims Eberhardt from the depths of official forgetfulness, it also subtly thematizes the mediated image that such a reclamation necessarily provides against the erasures of history. Yet because the "biographer" here is also marginalized, also female, not unlike Wertenbaker herself, this mediation is posited as the best possible

type.

The conversation between past and present prompted by the dialectical image of the actor's body and the presentation of the biographer figure resists the closure that traditional, male-driven biography encourages. Instead, a feminist biography such as Wertenbaker's foregrounds an open passage between the text and the audience, and subverts the classic teleological narrative associated with biography. Although the framing device might suggest that the entire narrative is leading towards Eberhardt's death—her last days, the mental incomprehensibility, the fact that her death is announced in the last scene—her death is, crucially, *not* the last action in the play. If this is a play about writing lives, the most important action takes place in the last three lines, quoted above, when Colonel Lyautey hands the journals to Severine and they walk off arm in arm. Had the play ended on the Judge's line, "This person must be officially forgotten," closure would have occurred seamlessly. But the moment in which the Colonel announces the existence of the journals to Severine pries open the narrative, suggesting both that the content of the narrative continues and, more significantly for biography, that the *construction* of the narrative continues as well. The disruption of closure that this final moment enacts not only opens up Eberhardt's life, it hands it to the biographer, and by extension to the audience in the form of this very play. By opening the narrative up like this, the analogy that Eberhardt provides for contemporary audiences is permitted to pass freely. While Eberhardt herself cannot exactly be reclaimed, her transgression can.

Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus*: Implicating the Present by Interrogating the Past

Choosing Isabelle Eberhardt, a figure whose transgression can be held up as a pioneering moment from the past, in order to celebrate in history, goes a long way in reclaiming a history for feminist performance and performativity. But the process of reclaiming the past cannot legitimately examine history only as a cause for celebration: since history is so often the site of patriarchal oppression, these plays must also look critically at the ways that women's bodies were and are under constant duress—the context from which these lives are being reclaimed. So while plays like *New Anatomies* use their central image to model transgressive behavior for the present, others must similarly hold up the oppressions of the past for the audience's scrutiny. And in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus*, the audience is made aware of its own complicity in those oppressions. A play about a South African woman exhibited in Europe as a freak for her allegedly enormous buttocks and genitals, *Venus* is best described by one of the play's own characters, the Negro Resurrectionist:²³

“Early in the 19th Century a poor wretched woman was exhibited in England under the Appellation of *The Hottentot Venus*. With an intensely ugly figure, distorted beyond all European notions of beauty, she was said to possess precisely the kind of shape which is most admired among her countrymen, the Hottentots.”

The year was 1810, three years after the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade had been passed in Parliament, and among protests and denials, horror and fascination her show went on. She died in Paris 5 years later: A plaster cast of her body was once displayed, along with her skeleton, in the *Musee de l'Homme*.

(Parks, *Venus* 159)

²³ In using this quote to summarize the play's subject matter, I follow the lead of Tony Kushner, who uses these same words to describe the play in “The Art of the Difficult.”

Parks' play, unlike Wertenbaker's, is not nearly so sympathetic to its biographical subject or to its audience, ruthlessly objectifying Venus (whose real name was Saartje Baartman) and forcing the audience into complicity with this objectifying process. Parks makes the objectifying and oppressive processes of history evident, even unavoidable for her audience, through staging historical text, creating analogues for her audience in Brechtian metadramatic moments, and representing the body of Venus as a site of convergence for any number of systems of oppression. In doing so, Parks confronts her audience not only with the uncomfortable matrices of power operating throughout history, but more appropriately, with how these operations are still at work today even in the very theatre in which her play is being presented.

That Parks' play is about history is without question. Parks entire *oeuvre* is to a great extent an interrogation of history and the way the present constructs the past, and *Venus* is no exception. The degree to which the play seeks to write history for the sake of good history, however, is negligible, it seems, particularly since Parks has frequently been berated for her revisionist stances. Jean Young critiques the playwright by arguing that "Baartman was a victim, not an accomplice, not a mutual participant in this demeaning objectification, and Parks's stage representation of her complicity diminishes the tragedy of her life as a nineteenth-century Black woman stripped of her humanity at the hands of a hostile, racist society that held her and those like her in contempt" (699-700). By following this claim with a detailed historical refutation of the points in which Venus' (the character's) complicity runs up against Baartman's (the historical figure's) victimhood, Young seems to have missed

the point of Parks' historical meditations: that history is not "what really happened" but rather how we experience it, live it, and duplicate it in the present. In an interview published in the play's program, the playwright asserts, "the butt is the past, the posterior, posterity" (Parks, "For Posterior's Sake," 34). Anne Davis Basting's review of the play echoes this, musing that "the past is quite literally, Venus's and our own collective behinds—carried with us as we step into a future more aware of the deadly effects of colonialism, gazing, and racially and sexually marked standards of beauty" (225). The emphasis here on "us" and our relationship to history seems to grapple more accurately with Parks' thesis: that our relationship with our constructed past is perhaps more important to our present conditions than the accuracy of that construction. And yet this quote also suggests the appeal of history for feminism—that when Davis Basting notes the degree to which history is "carried with us" she also recognizes the unshakability of the past as very real. To extend Parks' metaphor: while the details surrounding Saartje Baartman's posterior may vary, what remains true is the kernel of Baartman's celebrity—that she was objectified, ruthlessly, and that if this play in some way duplicates that phenomenon, even with an audience supposed to know better, it only goes to prove the degree to which this past, this posterior, is still connected to us—and the size of the butt—the enormity of the problem, its longevity, only suggests that the problem deserves address.

This framing of the past is in keeping with our notion of the dialectical image, in which the body of the biographical subject is just as important for its bearing on the present as it is for its historical significance. And in the case of Venus, that body is loaded with meaning, for as Tony Kushner notes, "Here is a moment of incredibly

dense history. All sorts of things convene at this moment, across and through the body of this woman” (Kushner 64). Earlier he observes, “*Venus* also treads the fault lines of several American cultural sensitivities, moving racial clichés and stereotypes out of the unlit mutterers’ corners and back to center stage, where the sight of them makes us wince” (Kushner 63-64). Once again, the emphasis is placed on the “us,” the audience of this play. For while the dialectical image of Isabelle Eberhardt represents gendered transgression to be celebrated in the present, the image of *Venus* represents a gross objectification that must be condemned in the present. But as Harry Elam and Alice Rayner argue:

It is easy to condemn the past abuses of spectatorship. That is what is obvious about the play. But the obviousness conceals the fact that even in a re-production we, the contemporary audience members, are still viewing the Hottentot *Venus* with an assumption of superiority over those earlier spectators, thus ignoring our own complicity in the sight. (276)

However, I disagree with this last assertion, that the audience is left unaware of its own complicity in the objectification. This is why Kushner says “wince” and why Robert Brustein’s review of the play notes that much of the audience “decamped before the final curtain” (29). If the audience were really left feeling too smug in their own superiority, they would not experience such emotional discomfort, yet reviews and accounts of the Richard Foreman production at the Joseph Papp Theater in New York all indicate that this is not even remotely the case.

There are two ways that *Venus* makes history-making and its objectifying impulses clear, and they work both to interrogate the machinations of the past and to implicate the audience as complicit within those workings. The first is the play’s

overt metatheatricity, which highlights the role of spectatorship in constructing Venus as a sex-object and extends that role specifically to the audience in the theatre. Parks sets up the historical objectification of the aberrant body in a number of ways throughout the play through the constant display of Venus' body: as a freak, as the Baron Docteur's lover, and as a medical specimen.²⁴ Here the character is displayed, ogled, and dissected in front of the audience, and in these scenes Young and Elam and Rayner locate Parks' reproduction of the very objectification that she seems to critique. Were these moments to be the entire narrative, the audience's "assumption of superiority" that Elam and Rayner claim would be unquestionable. Indeed, Parks seems almost deliberate (if not perhaps heavy-handed) in her replaying of the scenes of objectification and othering that mark Venus' narrative.

And yet there are several moments in the text that make the connection between the past's spectatorship and the present's all too explicit. The first is the interspersion of scenes from "For the Love of Venus," Parks' reconstruction of a contemporary comedy in which the Baron Docteur's wife's story seems to be playing out. In these moments, the audience watches the Baron Docteur impassively view this narrative. According to the stage directions, he "is the only person in the audience. Perhaps he sits in the chair. It's almost as if he's watching TV. The Venus stands off to the side. She watches the Baron Docteur" (Parks, *Venus* 25). These stage directions create an explicit diagram of objectification and implication. First,

²⁴ Elam and Rayner note the degree to which the objectification of Baartman's body continues into the present, as South African tribal governments and the Parisian *Musee de l'Homme* are locked in diplomatic negotiations as to who controls Baartman's remains. As late as April of 2000, France maintained control of the body, a testament to the continuing authority of the objectifying impulses of the "empirical" European gaze.

the audience is given one primary analogue for theatrical spectatorship in these scenes: the Baron Docteur—the most notorious of the nineteenth-century characters upon whom we might locate our “assumption of superiority.” By setting the Baron Docteur up as our most obvious site for identification, and positioning him just as we are positioned, as audience members watching the play, the play makes it difficult to imagine that a savvy theatre-goer would miss the connection. And to foreground the implication of spectatorship in the process of objectification, Venus stands off to one side, looking at the Baron Docteur in order to draw our attention to the theatrical spectatorship itself, as opposed to the metatheatrical spectacle onstage. Following Venus’ gaze, we are compelled to look critically not just at the historical objectifications of the Baron Docteur, but also at those in which we continue to participate, at the very activity in which we are engaged. The metatheatrical conceit that runs through the play makes the dialectical image of the Baron Docteur as significant an image of spectatorship as Venus is an image of the objectified body.

The play’s implication of the present in duplicating the sins of the past is also made explicit in its treatment of historical documentation. Like Templeton’s *Delirium of Interpretations*, Parks’ text demands that we stage the history that underpins the biography taking place onstage. Take for example the scene entitled “Footnote #7” in which the Negro Resurrectionist reads “A DETAILED PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION OF THE SO-CALLED VENUS HOTTENTOT” (Parks, *Venus* 109), the entire text of which is listed in quotation marks. Of course, a reader is left to wonder how one might stage a footnote, and whether the quotation marks around the text are relevant. And yet if we look at the excerpt I used to summarize the play’s

subject matter, we will notice that the first paragraph is set in these quotation marks, while the second is not. There seems to be some effort on Parks' part to demarcate her text from the texts of history (and a production of this play might devise ways to stage these punctuation marks—not unlike what I have suggested is possible in Templeton's play—so as to make Parks' own process of historical construction evident). More importantly, though, the quotation marks set apart the discourse of history from the discourse of the play itself, asking the audience to examine critically not just contemporary accounts of Venus, but also by extension our own accounts, and the degree to which they too duplicate the sorts of racism, sexism and othering that we might be tempted to displace completely on the past.

Ultimately, whether Parks' audience is given enough cues to do the sort of self-critique that I am suggesting, or instead is left with a feeling of smug superiority over the errors of the past is a matter of individual productions and individual audiences; a poor production of the play and an audience untrained in the dramatic cues that Parks relies on certainly will not produce the Brechtian effect that engenders critical self-reflection. In the text itself though, Parks leads her audience to think critically about the past, a task that each of these plays seems to have in common. And as Kushner points out, "Difficult Art [especially the example of this play] seeks to teach a posture to its audience, a stance. And I deliberately write that the art, rather than the artist seeks to teach, for this is instruction by example, not by preachment" (65). At the very least, this play interrogates history and its own role in re-presenting that history, and I believe that it asks its audience to do the same. In doing so, it calls attention to a long history of representational injustices and oppression of women

based on the object status of the female body, and thus hopes to help end the very objectification that it portrays, one implicated both in the past and in the present as they mutually construct one another.

Helene Cixous' *Portrait of Dora*: The Subject Acts Out

Perhaps the most prominent handling of the negotiation of feminism with the prevailing masculinist discourse of life writing appears in Cixous' *Portrait of Dora*. Essentially a re-telling of Sigmund Freud's *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, Cixous' play reframes the case history within the site of the analysis itself. But instead of presenting a coherent narrative that claims to know what "really" happened and why, Cixous resets the events of Dora's case at the conversation between analyst and analysand. These conversations are punctuated, illustrated, revised and complicated by what goes on behind the dialogue: images in various forms acting out what their words can't express—memories, fantasies, projected still images, scrim-shadowed tableaux, bodied performances. And framing these conversations and enactments is the disembodied Voice of the Play, whose third party interjections question, re-interpret and re-examine the events that the audience witnesses. Thus, the phallogentric narrative of psychoanalysis that pre-orders and shapes lived experience is displaced by what we apparently are to understand as the raw material, the fragments of Dora's life as they are experienced, recounted, and interpreted by both the psychoanalyst and his patient.

Much of the critical work on *Portrait of Dora* chooses to examine the play as a feminist intervention with psychoanalysis, in both its Freudian and later feminist incarnations. "Cracking' the case, breaking the frame of the portrait," says critic

Sharon Willis, “this spectacle of circulating voices and images stages a particular theoretical encounter: that of feminism and psychoanalysis” (77). Still others attend to the confluence of the play’s interventionary subject (psychoanalysis) and its formal presentation (theatre), making analogies between the way that Cixous fragments Freud’s version of Dora’s case and the way that she unstitches traditional theatre’s linear narrative and objectifying modes of viewing.

It is this latter project of examining theatre itself upon which I wish to build. However, here I re-imagine the play as less about the epistemology of psychoanalysis than biography as the template for that epistemology. For what is psychoanalysis if not life writing, the transcription of lived (and dreamed) experience into narrative, subject to interpretation, shaping, fictionalizing? What we have then is a play as much about a male biographer struggling with the narrative demands of his determinedly female biographical subject, as it is about a about an analyst and analysand puzzling over the pathology of the hysteric. We can then translate much of the criticism of the play’s engagement with psychoanalysis into an engagement with the life writing that lies at the heart of Freudian analysis: the problem for Freud (as character and historical figure) inevitably shifts from a diagnosis of Dora’s hysteria into a narration of her hysteria into history. In fact, as Elin Diamond notes, “the ‘presence’ of historical figures [in *Portrait of Dora*] creates a sense of history as an assemblage of patriarchal narratives that are ripe for revision. If there is a referent in [this text] it is historical experience, never fully describable, but invoked as nodal points of memory and desire” (38-39).

Indeed, when viewed as historical *experience*, Cixous' play, like the others in this study, foregrounds not only the biographical subject, but also the biographical act, splitting as its subject of study not only Dora, but also Freud. In fact, Dora is not even as much a historical figure as is her narrator, for in a sense, she exists only in Freud's narrative. Her real-life precursor, Ida Bauer, was elided as the biographical subject by Freud's publication of the narrative in 1905, and as Ann Wilson notes, "Arguably then, the only traces of Ida Bauer . . . are evident in Freud's portrait of her in the case history. Dora is really Freud's Dora as Cixous' Dora is clearly a construct mediated not only by Cixous' textual practices but by Freud's" (81). So by the time Cixous chooses the case as her own material, she has already chosen the biographical *act* as her object of scrutiny, more so than the biographical *subject*. In this sense, the recovery itself becomes secondary to the contextualization of the process of life writing more broadly speaking. Dora and Freud, as the dialectic image of history, become discursive formations rather than real people. Again, Diamond notes of Dora, "neither her character nor any other is a unitary object under scrutiny, but rather a tangle of textual-cultural references, what [feminist director Simone] Benmussa calls 'texts from elsewhere'" (38). This shift from unitary object to discursive field also signals a focal shift from the biographical subject to historical experience and the very subjective (and in Freud's case, patriarchal) practice of biography.

In fact, while we might read psychoanalytic biography as one of this play's concerns, Willis, among others, suggests that theatre itself is equally crucial to this interrogation. She suggests that Cixous' main tactic in pressing on the assumptions of traditional theatrical viewing is to disrupt scenic coherence, the unifying, ordering

impulse that theatre (particularly mimetic theatre) imposes on the messy business of life, in much the same way that Freudian analysis imposes a narrative order on lived experience. To achieve this, Willis argues, Cixous presents us with an array of images that can be interpreted as either fantasy or memory, seen and unseen, unseen and heard, split apart and doubled (81). In particular, Willis looks at the first scene of the play (as realized most famously in Simone Benmussa's 1976 production), wherein the "the scene by the lake"—Mr. K.'s supposed seduction of Dora—is projected in film and still images as Dora relates the incident to Freud—here she both speaks to Freud as if relating the story ("I never loved Mr. K., I was never crazy about him" (Cixous 30). and as if experiencing it ("I'm not staying, I'm leaving with my father" (Cixous 30)). As the audience, we never know how to interpret this split image of the scene of analysis and the scene(s) of the crime. Is it Dora's memory of the real-life instance? Freud's fantasy? Or can we take her father at his word when he says, "She has probably imagined the whole scene" (Cixous 30).

De-stabilizing the referent of lived experience by making its interpretation ambiguous, Cixous undermines the authority of Freud's biography as a representation of objective truth and calls into question the very act of life writing itself. Willis asserts that at moments like this, the narrative coherence imposed by Freud in his case study is "'pricked, pierced, stitched, unstitched. It's all women's work,' as Dora comments . . . 'Women's work' here consists of fragmentation, juxtaposition, and interruption" (81). Here Willis ties this strategy not only to the epistemology of

“women’s work,” but also to hysteria.²⁵ Male narrative, male viewing and male authority are all therefore frustrated by the bodied (and in Dora’s case, what is perceived by Freud as pathological) nature of woman. In the specific context of biography, Diamond’s characterization of the play’s history as “nodal points of memory and desire” becomes all the more apt—Cixous’ form revises the patriarchal epistemology of psychoanalysis, the masculinist impulses of biographical representation, *and* the objectifying gaze of the traditional theatre.

Indeed, the very viewing processes of theatre are frustrated by Cixous’ narrative. Because the narrative, as Erella Brown points out, is broken open through what she describes as a narrative representation of hysteria, this fragmented narrative facilitates a *mise-en-scene* that similarly frustrates the objectifying male gaze. She asserts that “By using the hysterical body as a model for her stage in order to overthrow the classical order of the ‘Oedipal stage’ Cixous undermines conventional theatrical representation and its apparatus” (Brown 634). If the mark of the hysterical body is “fragmentation, juxtaposition and interruption,” as Willis suggests, then the play must explode the notion of Dora as a coherent unified object up for scrutiny by both the biographer and the audience. Cixous begins this project of fragmenting our sense of Dora by fragmenting Freud’s narrative itself—throughout the text, Cixous uses citations from Freud’s narrative to participate in what Willis calls “a circulation of voices” (82)—and in doing so, imbeds the textualized nature of Freud’s account of

²⁵ This of course, feels like a troubling essentialism, especially from the materialist standpoint that I adopt throughout. This critique is, of course, consistent with critiques of much of Cixous’ work and its essentializing impulses. I think in this case, we must read *Dora* in light of the body of Cixous’ critical work and assume that an essentialist interpretation is appropriate to this text.

Dora's life. This strategy (although it requires some knowledge of the Freudian case history on the part of the audience) confounds the idea that Freud's Dora is somehow a singular and therefore authoritative version of Dora's (let alone Ida Bauer's) life. In fact, Mairead Hanrahan notes that the "critical difference between Freud and Cixous concerns their willingness to accept that their account of Dora is precisely a *version*, one of a number of possible accounts" (48). By disrupting the coherence of Freud's text, Cixous calls into question the rhetorical authority that Freud's biography has over its subject. And while Cixous' account differs from Freud's primarily in its formal elements, it disrupts the authority of Freud's narrative control over the subject, if not his epistemological authority of diagnosis.

To disrupt further the sense of Dora as a coherent whole, Cixous actually fragments the character of Dora herself throughout the play (at least as realized by Benmussa's production). The first occurrence of this comes in the recounting of a flashback scene, "DORA *at age fourteen is performed by the door near the staircase*" (Cixous 32). Here our image of Dora is divided between two bodies: the adult Dora and the adolescent Dora. This kind of flashback doubling also appears as Dora recounts the incident by the lake, which is simultaneously projected on the scrim. Erella Brown notes that Brechtian strategies like these disrupt the teleological continuity of Freud's case history, and disrupt the notion of mimesis that encourages masculinist viewing practices. She argues that "Through filmed and projected writings, [Cixous] creates an archival site of lost, forgotten and repressed strata that simultaneously hollow out and *take-the-place* of Freudian (in)sight" (Erella Brown 627). Indeed, as Dora retells/ reenacts her relationship with Mrs. K—with which

Freud's case history infamously refuses to grapple—Mrs. K and Freud “*change places, as in a ballet*” (Cixous 39), and in the place of the analyst, we hear Mrs. K saying, “You know that you are free to tell me anything” (Cixous 40). Here the audience is prompted to question Freud's interpretation as he is literally replaced by a figure from Dora's life, and specifically a figure whose importance Freud's insight is blind to in his own case history. That is, not only is the ordering logic of Freud's insight hollowed out, the objectifying impulses of sight—the male gaze—are similarly replaced with more ambiguous visual circumstances. These ambiguities immediately disrupt Freud's control over the narrative, abandoning a clear interpretation for this referential tangle. The “reality” of the lived experience is thus deliberately obscured, foregrounding the constructed status of *any* narrative or image of Dora, Freud's or Cixous'.

This fragmentation of the notion of Dora also has a distinct effect on the way that the audience views the staged body of the actress who plays her. Like the other plays discussed above, *Portrait of Dora* seems to make a concerted effort to frustrate the objectifying impulse of the male gaze that denies Dora's subjectivity—a sense reinforced by the Freudian narrative of analysis as interpretable text. But here Cixous works to present Dora both as viewed spectacle *and* as viewer in order to mitigate the gaze with the identifying impulse. Nowhere is this more prominent than the filmic sequence that accompanies Dora's account of her experience at the Dresden Gallery, in which images appear of the Madonna holding an infant Dora, a substitution of Mrs. K. for the Madonna, and an image of Dora mirrored behind the Madonna. The narrative, which positions Dora as viewer, suggests an image in which

Dora herself is at once the spectator and a double spectacle: specifically, images of how Dora views herself (as a mirrored Madonna) and her past (as the child held by the Madonna). At this moment, however, the audience is encouraged to identify with Dora, to imagine her past (her autobiography, if you will) and her present, even her bodily presence on the stage, through her eyes. In this moment of identification, Dora is subjectified and resists the objectifying impulse of the biographical act. In this sense, the resistant performances imagined through Cixous' text are used not only as a way to interrogate the body of the subject itself (which here is split, fragmented, doubled), but to put into question the conventional modes of viewing that subject. And when placed in the context of biography, these tactics contextualize the biographical subject (Dora) not as a fixed object of historical scrutiny, but as a discursive formation, constructed through narrative and subject to interpretation.

This notion of the biographical subject as discursive formation, a tangle of cultural references, is further foregrounded by the fact that the play, even more so than *New Anatomies* or the other plays examined here, splits its focus between its two biographical subjects: Dora and Freud. Like Wertenbaker's treatment of Isabelle and Severine, *Portrait of Dora* contextualizes its status as a portrait, as biography, making both the life being written and the life-writer its dual focus. As much as the Brechtian strategies of the play undermine the authority of Freud's narrative, they also redirect the viewer's gaze to the image of Freud himself, the transparent narrator whose interpretive authority over Dora's life goes unquestioned in his own narrative. Freud, like Dora, becomes both spectator and spectacle, subject who interprets and object of interpretation. In this sense, Cixous subverts the conventional notion of Freud as site

for male identification and Dora as object of the gaze; instead, both Dora and Freud are sites for identification, and in this way, the gaze is diffused and subverted.

Here again, a staged biography uses the dialectic image to open up that conduit to the past. The biographical subject is inaccessible; the biographer, and more importantly the biographer's narrative, however, open the dialogue and mediate between the lived life and the narrated one. And in *Portrait of Dora*, the dialectical image offered through the figure of Freud is similarly scrutinized. In part, this scrutiny comes through the "Voice of the Play." Willis, among others, identifies voice as a primary operator in this play, even more so than the body, inasmuch as Dora's body is fragmented and the gaze disrupted. Semantic authority then seems to derive instead from the notion of this disembodied voice. Hanrahan notes that while in Simone Benmussa's famous 1976 production the voice of the play was most often Freud's voice, Cixous' own 1986 publication of the play reverts to her original manuscript,²⁶ wherein the voice of the play is accorded a status that is removed from the action, disembodied and completely autonomous.

While Hanrahan notes that some criticism alternately assumes this voice (which refers to both Dora and Freud in the third person) to be representative of the hysteric subjectivity of Dora or the authoritative subjectivity of Freud, she ultimately argues that neither is exactly the case, that in fact the voice might most closely be labeled the voice of Cixous, one that casts Freud as a distinctly unsympathetic character, but whose identification with Dora is not perfect either (Hanrahan 53). In

²⁶ Anita Barrows' English translation used here also derives from Cixous' same original.

order to disrupt Freud's authority over the narrative, the Voice of the Play levels the playing field by assigning Freud the same objectified status that he assigns Dora:

It is possible that Dr. Freud had this dream toward the end of December 1899. Dora is then a blossoming young girl, about eighteen years old. There is something strange and contradictory about her . . . She resembles hidden, dangerous, vindictive loves. Dr. Freud cannot take his eyes off her. (Cixous 51)

By applying the same analysis to Freud that he applies to Dora, the Voice of the Play points out the false invisibility assumed by the biographer, and contextualizes his subjectivity in constructing the narrative.

Furthermore, the voice supplies us with a notion of Dora's subjectivity, writing in the language that we have come to associate with the hysteric: fragmented, stitched together:

What lily-of-the-valley says in a dream
Mr. K. says with a jewelry box.
What can be said with flowers
Papa says with pearls
What Dora hasn't said
the Doctor says with smoke. (Cixous 62)

This is language that at once distances the voice from Dora by referring to her in the third person and by critically analyzing her exchanges with Freud, and simultaneously identifies with Dora by referring to Mr. B as "Papa" and by accessing the idiom of the hysteric that Dora uses throughout. By positioning of the voice both to assign subjectivity to Dora and to highlight the assumed subject-position that Freud takes, Cixous writes against the depiction of Dora as sexual object and revises Freud's masculinist biography of Dora by making her a speaking sexual subject (Case,

Feminism and Theatre 125). The Voice of the Play accomplishes this by pointing out the subjectivities of its two biographical subjects and also by contextualizing its own authority over the narrative as well as the limits to that authority.

Here, then, we have a voice that further foregrounds the work of biography.

At the outset, the voice sets the parameters within which the narrative will be told:

These events appear, like a shadow, in dreams, often with such lucidity that one seems actually to grasp them. But despite that effect, they evade any definitive clarification; and if we proceed without any particular skill and caution, we find ourselves unable to determine whether or not such an incident has really taken place.

(Cixous 29)

Here the voice takes a distinct epistemological position—one that does not assert its authority over the “reality” that it reflects (as Freud would), and one that claims no actual experience with the events, no “I” that has lived the lives being written.

Instead the voice uses the first person plural, suggesting that when “we proceed” the voice and the audience are one, doing the inquiry of reading and writing a life, ultimately “unable to determine” the truth of the matter. By problematizing its own authority while simultaneously undermining Freud’s, the Voice of the Play solidifies the function of the dialectical image. And by textualizing the layers of biography (Dora’s narratives, Freud’s interpretations, the Voice’s mediations) before our very eyes, *Portrait of Dora* points out the very process by which biography is written and how its biases are written in.

To a certain extent however, these competing notions of voice can all seemingly be represented on the page, leaving us with the question: “Why theatre?”

How is this revisioning of Dora's case, this re-presentation of her life, specifically suited to the theatre instead of the written page? As I briefly discuss above, Willis seems to suggest that part of this question can be answered through the language of psychology in the term "acting out," aligning the notions of rebellion and performance. To put it another way, performance becomes a way to resist masculinist writing and the subjection that it often entails. In *Unmarked*, Peggy Phelan argues that performance exists only in the present and disappears as soon as it is enacted. In this way, it cannot be reproduced "or participate in the circulation of representation of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance" (146). In reproduction, it becomes coded, inscribed, part of the system of gender codes that Butler argues are consistently reified, made compulsory through repetition and reproduction, and ultimately circulated within the matrices of oppressive power. By resisting repetition, performance becomes a perfect expression for Dora's hysteric body, one that resists its "proper" reproductive function. Instead, as Phelan argues, "without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility—in a maniacally [hysterically?] charged present—and disappears into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control" (148). Dora's performance, then, in its sheer temporality, resists the ordering that Freud's narratization seeks to impose on it. Instead, Dora here is performed by a live body, which as Phelan suggests, "implicates the real" that disappears at the very moment of its presence. And "the after-effect of disappearance," Phelan argues, "is the experience of subjectivity itself" (148). In other words, Cixous chooses the performance venue for the revision of Freud's biography of Dora to resist the

tendency of Freudian narrative to inscribe her lived experience into a phallogentric narrative, to continue to fight against the impulses of re-production and to approximate the imagined experience of Dora's subjectivity as it disappears.

In short, because performance disappears in the moment of writing, *Portrait of Dora* must be performed and not taken simply as a piece of writing. It thematizes not the object—the piece of writing itself, the inscribed body of the biographical subject, which is subject to the control of power—but rather *experience*, the experience of the real, and the experience of narrating the real. Cixous represents Dora's performance, but also writes in her own position through the voice of the play, which in establishing its own subjectivity through writing, distances itself from Dora; as Hanrahan notes, "The crucial difference between Dora and Cixous is that Dora does not write" (Hanrahan 53). In this sense, Cixous' play stands not only as biography itself, but also (and perhaps more importantly) as the performance of biography-constructing, as it presents Dora's resistant narrative and Freud's oppressive one, but also the "Voice of the Play," which consciously does the work of biography for both of its subjects, Dora and Freud.

April De Angelis' *Playhouse Creatures*:

Women's Theatre as History / Women's History as Theatre

Perhaps one of the most interesting cases for women's biography on stage comes when the biographical subject herself is a part of a tradition for women in the theatre. April De Angelis' *Playhouse Creatures* reconstructs the life of Nell Gwyn, one of the first famous Restoration actresses on the English stage—although perhaps infamous is a better term, since Gwyn is more renowned for being the mistress of

Charles II than for her onstage skills, which were themselves quite noteworthy. De Angelis' play exists in two published versions: the shorter 1994 version was first produced the year before as a British touring production and focuses on Nell Gwyn and four other actresses in the King's Company circa 1670.²⁷ The play charts Nell's²⁸ rise from serving strong drink in Covent Garden through her introduction to the stage and finally to the peak of her stardom and her decision to leave the stage to become the king's more permanent mistress. The longer version, expanded for a 1997 production at the Old Vic in London and published in 1999, adds the character of Elizabeth Barry, often cited as the greatest actress of her age, the playwright Thomas Otway, and the Earl of Rochester. While much of the play remains the same from edition to edition (notably most of their respective first acts), De Angelis' second version drastically alters the ending of the play, highlighting the rise of the ambitious Elizabeth Barry and reducing Nell to an apoplexied, desperate woman, thereby altering how the play ultimately imagines its historical subjects.

And "historical subjects" is very much the purview of this play, as it tries to negotiate the ambiguous situation of these actresses as both notoriously sexualized objects and emerging professionals (Payne *passim*).²⁹ To accomplish this De Angelis draws heavily on famous circumstances and incidents as touchstones for her play.

²⁷ Here I will rely primarily on the 1994 publication, except when major differences alter a reading of the play.

²⁸ Throughout, I refer to the historical figure of Nell Gwyn by full or last name, while I speak of the character by using her first name.

²⁹ Here I use Payne Fisk's dyad as illustrative not only of the narratives that criticism uses to describe the actresses, but also those with which De Angelis struggles, with quite different results in the two versions of the play.

Deborah C. Payne-Fisk identifies a number of commonplace assumptions and extant tales of these women as they are traditionally cited when describing the oppression of the Restoration actress, and the vast majority of them appear in De Angelis' play: general conditions like the gender-based discrepancy in pay,³⁰ the paltry number of parts available to women, the threat of firing as punishment for pregnancy, the dangerous lure of leaving the stage to become a mistress; and more specific instances like Rebecca Marshall's excrement punctuated run-in with thugs hired by Sir Hugh Middleton, or a jilted Elizabeth Farley's destitute fate (Payne 17). Other moments throughout the text reveal, at the very least, the playwright's familiarity with the history in question.

And yet to say that this is a work of history is also something of an overstatement.³¹ Several characters, although they bear the names of real Restoration actresses and they share a very few incidents from the real women's lives, seem to be substantively fictions constructed to advance a thesis about the state of the actresses in the seventeenth century. For example, Nell's first entrée onto the stage is presented in the play as a tribute to the character's wit and cunning—convincing Mrs. Betterton that she was told by the actor-manager that she was to have a line in the play in rehearsal, Nell makes her first appearance on the stage something of an accident from the standpoint of the company. Biographies of Gwyn paint a different

³⁰ Although Payne Fisk recognizes in a later publication that these discrepancies may be overstated, it seems that at the very least only the most famous actress of the age, Elizabeth Barry, had access to shares in the company.

³¹ The 1994 version of the play is not quite as guilty of the gross manipulations that the later version is, and for this reason, I rely on this text except when elements from the 1999 edition serve as a useful counterpoint.

picture, however, suggesting that she first met Thomas Killigrew, Master of the King's Playhouse, because her sister was the mistress of Killigrew's son, and that she got her earliest roles because of her sexual relationship with Charles Hart, a leading actor (MacGregor-Hastie 39-40). So not only was her historical debut at least partially the result of sexual nepotism, the very company she debuted with is misrepresented in order to get all the necessary characters onto one stage.³²

More important to the historicity of the play than the particular details of the lives of individual actresses, however, is the *narrative* employed to frame their lives and the conditions of their presence on the stage. Again I return to Schenkar's hinge metaphor: although De Angelis quite liberally alters the surface details of her play, she grapples more substantively with the hinge facts, which not only reveal the compromised position of actresses in the Restoration but also underscore the degree to which this remains true in the present. In this case that narrative involves a split in the twin tropes of "actress as object" and "actress and professional." Payne-Fisk argues:

Modern criticism reproduces this split, construing the Restoration actress as either a reified object or an emergent professional. . . . Objectification and professionalization, far from opposing each other, can be seen as an effect of the late seventeenth century shift toward the primacy of the visual. And, like most cultural "logics," this one is also marked by contradiction. Thus while feminist critics are right to show how objectification undoubtedly diminishes

³² Nell Gwyn never appeared in Betterton's company; Nell Gwyn acted for the King's Company, while Betterton was the leading actor and then manager of the Duke's company. The two companies were not united by Betterton until 1682, years after Gwyn left the stage, meaning that not only did she not work with Betterton, as De Angelis presents, she was not in the theatre for the 1672 burning of the Drury Lane theatre that De Angelis shows in Act II of the 1994 version.

actresses, they also fail to note how, in a public sphere with an increasingly pronounced sense of the visual, objectification simultaneously *amplified* actresses, situating them at the new nexus of power. (16)

Payne-Fisk's argument poses a serious problem for the feminist playwright: in order to represent the Restoration actress' position at the "nexus of power," she must also represent objectification as a precondition of that power. This becomes a difficult task for De Angelis, one that is more successful in the earlier version of the play, in terms of both her representation of the Restoration and of her presentation of Nell's stage as a cipher for twentieth-century feminist concerns.

The 1994 edition of the play suggests, to a point, this paradox: Nell's first appearance on the stage is a result of her own cunning, but this first incident is by any professional measurements a disaster: she is struck dumb by stage fright, and after the rest of the actresses leave the stage, Nell can only think to dance. And yet, Nell describes "in a special box, a man in glitter, cheering" (De Angelis 1994, 25). Nell's ability to please the King as a spectator is crucial to her success as an actress later on. In fact, the next time we see her "onstage," she is performing a comic breeches role, the kind of role said to be her specialty. Here we see that her objectification leads to her success, a success, it may be argued, that depends upon her objectification, since, as Marjorie Garber, Kristina Straub and others argue, the breeches role is a spectacle that sexualizes the actress in a number of complex ways (Garber 86-87, Straub 128). Moreover, the play seems to set up a conscious link between poetry, consumption and sexuality. At least three times throughout the play (between the two versions), we hear a poem (loosely construed) that involves selling food by using double entendres.

By linking the recitation of a poem with consumption, and then marking that consumption as sexual, De Angelis seems to be underscoring the decidedly object-oriented nature of the stage, and it is this very fact that facilitates Nell's rise to her position of empowerment at the King's side.

The 1999 edition (and indeed, many moments in the earlier version), however, reinforce the divide that Payne Fisk critiques. The introduction of the plain Elizabeth Barry, who is historically cited as the most accomplished actress of the age, provides a dualizing counterpoint for the sexualized figure of Nell, and to a lesser extent, the characters of Mrs. Farley and Mrs. Marshall. In the cases of both Farley and Marshall, the play represents the sexualization and objectification of the actress as the key to their downfall, a case in which objectification distinctly undermines professionalization. Contrasted with this moralistic patterning of objectification resulting in ruin, Elizabeth Barry is represented here as an ambitious, greedy woman who lets nothing stand in the way of her success on the stage. In polarizing her actresses this way, De Angelis seems to insist on the very divide that Payne Fisk declares is false. The sense that we get from Mrs. Barry, that she must suppress emotion "to make room for money and success," relies on the precise myth of professionalism that underpins Payne Fisk's argument: "Professionalization, by forcing the subject into the public realm to be judged according to external criteria, functions as another version of Cartesian dualism. Once again the actress is looked at, objectified; only this time she is framed against the perspectivist backdrop of taste" (Payne 31). So not only is Mrs. Barry not claiming sexual subjectivity, she is not rectifying her status as object either.

It becomes fairly clear, then, that as history, De Angelis' text fails miserably. But given her relative conversancy with incidents that did documentably happen in the lives of these actresses, it appears fair to say that her bad history is not the result of bad research. And while we might easily write off De Angelis' prerogative to take some fictional license with her characters, we must examine how and why De Angelis deploys history in the particular way that she does, especially given that she refers to her use of history in interviews, noting that while *Playhouse Creatures* isn't purely a reflection of contemporary theatre, there were points of similarity and relevance between Restoration and contemporary actresses (Stephenson and Langridge 59).³³ Certainly the notion of the dialectical image again becomes useful, since these images are quite literally "blasted out of history's continuum" as Diamond suggests, thus diminishing the historical divide between the audience and the world of the play.

This effect is in part achieved by the metatheatrical passages within the play itself, moments that are at once contemporary and simultaneously doing some of the historicizing work of biography. Throughout the play, we see the actresses performing Restoration drama onstage. For the most part however (with the exception of passages from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Macbeth*), the lines they speak are not those of seventeenth century playwrights. They are De Angelis' approximations or reconstructions, and even in cases where the play in question is extant (as is true of George Etherege's *The Man of Mode; or Sir Fopling Flutter*), the playwright still replaces the text with her own. In these passages, De Angelis

³³ Interestingly, while I believe I have proven that De Angelis' history is not, in fact, solid as history goes, De Angelis seems to feel otherwise. In this interview with Stephenson and Langridge, she states, "I was just reflecting the history of the time!"

introduces into the metatheatrical performance the larger issues that she addresses in the play itself. The epilogue performed by Nell and Mrs. Marshall at the opening of Act II specifically demands shares in the company. The scene supposedly from Etherege's play addresses the issue of Mrs. Betterton's aging. Another scene involving Betterton comically represents the male fear of women's sexual appetites, which of course contrasts neatly with the sexual appetites of the male spectators with which the actresses must contend during every performance. And finally, another scene that presents the actresses as an Amazon tribe very much mimics the kind of utopian community that De Angelis seems to be presenting in the tiring room. And so the Restoration stage, as staged in the audience's presence, is presented as an analogue of the lives of the first actresses who populated it.

But it is also an analogue of the lives of the actresses who populate today's stage. That is to say that while the play is not exactly doing accurate history, it does attempt to address many of the issues that confront contemporary feminists. Of Susan Bassnet's seven requirements for a feminist play, De Angelis' play addresses no less than four of them: equal pay, equal job opportunities, abortion on demand, freedom from sexual coercion (Bassnet-McGuire 645). By setting up this conduit by which the actresses bring their concerns to the stage, De Angelis recontextualizes these debates in the twentieth century: if the stage of seventeenth-century actresses reflected their lives, then it follows that in this play, the stage of the actresses performing this play similarly reflect concerns that extend off the stage. If the typical claim that feminist biographies are masked autobiographies—or perhaps more appropriately, the overt application and manifestation of the dual nature of the

dialectical image—is appropriate anywhere on stage, it is here: Because the biographical subjects are professionalized counterparts to the actresses who create them, their biographies span history to tell a story about twentieth-century lives. Here then, the body of each actress onstage serves to diminish this historical divide: the problem of the objectified Restoration actress becomes the problem of the objectified modern actress. The issues of equal pay and sufficient roles for characters like Mrs. Marshall begin to reflect the legitimate labor concerns of actresses right now. As an image of the past, De Angelis' play may be imprecise in its details, but, but as a metatheatrical conceit it provides an image of the present, one that is reinforced by its grounding in the real.

And yet the issue raised by an exploration of this play is more complex than the commonplace that says that the past is used to reflect the present. In a sense, the playwright is using the past here not only to reflect the present, but to legitimate her task by both recovering the past's voices and replaying their erasure. The recovery work is quite evident: in her interview with Stephenson and Langridge, De Angelis notes that the play was “trying to say that there is a history there that is quite vital and it's a positive thing to know about” (Stephenson and Langridge 60). And the relevance of that recovery is similarly evident. Specifically, *Playhouse Creatures*' actresses struggle with the problems of representations of women in the roles they perform, but also the problems of representing those roles. Meanwhile, the contemporary actresses who play them enact those same struggles: actresses recovering a history of actresses seeking to establish a history. And by giving body and voice to these historical figures, such metatheatrical discourse serves to produce

dialectical images that uncover the history that the plays are reclaiming even as they reproduce the historical process by which these women were “hidden from history.” Essentially, this play works to perform a history of women’s theatre by performing the elision of that history. Since, as I have suggested above, in order to legitimate the very recovery work that it is doing, *Playhouse Creatures* must also represent the reasons why such recovery work is necessary.

The past that DeAngelis is unearthing, then, must be one worth the dig: hence the emphasis on contemporary feminist issues as plot motivators in the play. The prime movers of the plot include the push for shares in the company, Mrs. Farley’s, Mrs. Marshall’s and Nell’s individual interactions with various lovers, and the disastrous consequences of those interactions—pregnancy, accusations of witchcraft, disease and the like. But underneath the issues of the company shares and jilted lovers is the notion of a community of female theatre practitioners. At the center of this play is not the story of an actress’ rise to fame, or a moral about the dangers of succumbing to sexual objectification, but rather a portrait of an almost utopian collective of women’s voices that can accomplish virtually anything. The scenes between the middle of the first act and the beginning of the second play like comedy, with each dilemma being neatly remedied on the stage or in the tiring room: Mrs. Marshall’s run-ins with Oxford are rectified by the homunculus she constructs backstage; Nell’s inexperience and seemingly disastrous first stage-entrance move from “shameful!” to “a reprieve!” (De Angelis 1994, 24-25) in a matter of less than fifty lines, and she is promptly taken under the tutelage of the expert Mrs. Betterton; and a call for shares leads to an agreement that is ultimately cut short by disaster. By

representing this community as politically informed and capable, De Angelis makes her biographical subjects worth reviving at the same time as their stories reflect the work of the actresses reviving them.

Perhaps the best expression of interplay between recovery and elision in De Angelis' play is the notion of the female voice. At one level, *Playhouse Creatures* places voice in opposition to the objectified body. Witness Nell's first moments of instruction from Mrs. Betterton:

Doll and Mrs. Betterton go to the exit. Nell attempts her line as they are leaving. It stops Mrs. Betterton in her tracks.

Nell: . . . the live long day.

Mrs. Betterton: Never underestimate the value of opening one's mouth while speaking. One may go a long way in the theatre with an open mouth.

Doll: And not just in the theatre.

Nell opens her mouth but gestures wildly.

Nell: Watching my fellows fork the hay.

Mrs. Betterton: A word. Stillness.

Nell: Stillness?

Mrs. Betterton: (*with stillness*) "Here I stroll the live long day watching my fellows fork the hay."

See?

Nell: Oh yeah.

(De Angelis 1994, 17)

Mrs. Betterton introduces Nell into the profession with a lesson that, while fairly simplistic, teaches her to emphasize her voice while minimizing the role of her body as spectacle. By placing body in opposition to voice, De Angelis equates objectification with silencing, a move that will become important in representing the elision of the community she establishes early on in the play.

But voice and performance, while powerful, also seem to be treated with suspicion in this play. While the performance of the women on stage represents their growing professionalism, their intelligence, and their means to power (witness Mrs. Marshall and Nell's call for shares while taking on breeches roles), it is also cast by de Angelis as inherently suspect. While De Angelis cites voice as a key to women's empowerment, threats to that empowerment inevitably lead to a destruction of the professional identity of those who inhabit the stage. And in *Playhouse Creatures*, that threat seems to be the sexual objectification that Doll Common's play-framing monologues seem to express best. Her opening monologue recalls the Elizabethan days of bear-baiting and her sympathy for the bears that were treated with such cruelty. The metaphor (if it wasn't clear at the outset) is made explicit in the last scene: after telling another story about the bears, and the degree to which her father, the bear-keeper, abused the bears to make them dance, she turns to Nell and says, "Playhouse creatures they called you like you was animals" (De Angelis 1994, 60). It is precisely this objectification that underscores women's professionalization on the Restoration stage that Payne-Fisk identifies as central to the position of these actresses. But performance is not suspect in this play simply because it encourages objectification; performance is also cast as ultimately incapable of sustaining women's power precisely because of its ephemeral nature. We must recognize that every character who exists in De Angelis' utopian tiring-room of Act I ends the play disempowered: deranged, destitute, or exiled. Mrs. Marshall's economic victory in achieving company shares for the actresses, like performance itself, disappears when she leaves the stage. This casting of performance as transgressive, but ultimately

powerless, contrasts starkly with the disruptive potential that Cixous seems to assign “acting out” in *Dora*. And while Dora’s performances are private transgressions, the public nature of the actresses’ performances, the degree to which objectification became a precondition of their very professionalization, renders their resistance to oppression far more compromised.

Instead, while Cixous frames writing in her play as suspect and perhaps even integrally patriarchal, De Angelis seems to position it as a remedy to the inability of performance to signify women’s empowerment in history. For De Angelis, this comes in the form of the playwright’s hand, both in the seventeenth century and the present. While the acted scenes throughout this play seem on the surface to come from plays extant in the Restoration—Mrs. Betterton reads a list of plays that includes Etherege’s *Sir Fopling Flutter*, VanBrugh’s *The Provoked Wife*, and three plays by Shakespeare, in addition to the unattributed *Reluctant Shepherdess*—almost all of the passages acted onstage are re-written by DeAngelis herself. So what we have here is a consolidation of female voice: contemporary actresses reciting lines written lines by a contemporary female playwright, lines that reflect the lives of the female characters whose voices this play is resurrecting. For example, an early stage appearance finds the actresses dressed as Amazons who proudly declaim:

For Amazons we still remain
And live without the rule of men.
Fierce warriors both we be
And will go down in history.

(De Angelis 1994, 8)

It is hardly coincidental that at the introduction of this community of actresses, they are themselves acting the roles of a utopian homosocial community. Nor is it

coincidental that Mrs. Marshall and Nell are in dressed breeches and carrying swords (carpe phallus!) as they deliver the epilogue that makes their most outrageous demands:

And while we're at it, playing for your pleasure
We'll ask shares in your payments for good measure
The price of our glorious forms you see
Is shares in this very company.

(De Angelis 1994, 36)

The 1999 version reinforces this emphasis on the connection of women's voices and women's words in a nod toward Aphra Behn. In a scene that represents the peak of her career, Nell offhandedly remarks that Behn (who herself does not appear in either version of the play) has specifically written a part for her (even though Gwyn never appeared in a play by Behn). In pairing her biographical subject with perhaps the most famous female playwright before the twentieth century, De Angelis centralizes women's voices on her version of the Restoration stage, both as performer and author. Professionalism and the business of women's theatre, therefore, are doubly represented onstage and in history as a direct result of women's writing.

Conclusion

These dramatic depictions of feminist biographies reclaim and re-imagine women's lives while simultaneously scrutinizing the processes by which they do so. Moreover, the way in which these plays deal with both the biographical subject and the biographer suggest that the "problems" of dramatizing biography often solve the issues that feminists have with this traditionally masculine form. There is something to be said about the function of history in legitimating and justifying the political

work of feminist theatre. If feminist polemic is a subject that is often met with shudders from the average newspaper theatre critic, then history as reliably evokes coos of respect and admiration. The example of the London reviews of De Angelis' *Playhouse Creatures* is illustrative of this very point. The fact that the play *doesn't* play like polemic is its salvation: "The piece *could have* been a grim whine or a thinly disguised Open University programme," writes one reviewer. Instead, however, "it emerges as a funny and gutsy evocation of life on-stage and backstage in the attiring-room" (Taylor, 20, emphasis mine). The evocation of life here, that whiff of historical legitimacy, makes watching the play palatable. Nor is it simply that the historical politics aren't acknowledged: almost every review picks up on the feminist content as it relates to history. Another reviewer writes, "Women, De Angelis implies, irrevocably changed the English theatre but were victimized in the process" (Billington T20).

And yet, as I have mentioned above, the use of history to soften polemic seems to run the risk of confining that polemic solely to the past. While it is easy for reviewers to feel morally superior to our ancestors, few are willing to make the connection that these historical actresses (not coincidentally played by—gasp—actresses) offer to the present. Only one review of the play to date—written notably by a woman—extrapolates the political content of the play as relevant for the present. "In our time, actresses have acquired not just the properties of glamour but almost totemic quality," writes Carole Woddis. "But glamour is only the half of it; breaking free of the stereotype of 'sexual object' continues to haunt the profession now as then" (14). That so few informed audience members are able to identify the dialogue

between the past and the present is unsettling. Certainly there is the question of readerships and the conventions of the theatre review. But while these plays seem to solve the dilemma that both theatre and feminism have with biography, there remains the question of how effective they are for feminists' primary political goals. If feminism is best received when cloaked in history, we must wonder whether all that we see on stage is the cloak itself.

This dilemma seems to be the sticking point for staged feminist biography. Confronted with the need to resurrect history from the erasures of the past, challenged with the task of recovering that past in a new, counter-patriarchal fashion, and then further charged with a mission of making political arguments both evident and palatable, playwrights working in this form seem doomed to come up short. And yet, as Woddis' insightful review of *Playhouse Creatures* demonstrates, this outcome is not inevitable. Even in the cases of reviewers who merely recognize the oppressive tendencies of the past, these images serve to shore up the rhetoric that the plays espouse, whether or not the reviewers are conscious of it. In doing so, they reinforce the dual appeal of history and biography for feminist playwrights—that history not only serves to frame feminist rhetoric but legitimates it by extending and verifying its narratives of oppression at the hand of patriarchal authority. And if these plays can accomplish this in form as well as content, then their tasks are even further buttressed.

Moreover, as Kushner writes in his manifesto on *Difficult Art*, the most that these plays can do is to teach a stance to their audiences, to interrogate “by example, not by preachment” (65). These plays, then, serve as examples by exploring and critiquing the past, as well as by looking at their own role in constructing the lives of

the past, in doing the work of biography. So as feminist playwrights continue to shape this evolving form, they do not merely shed light on what history can tell us about our own present; their tactics also reveal their own tenuous relationship with the history they seek to bring to light.

(Ch)oral History: Docudrama and the Communal Subject

“The authority of one group over another, of one individual over others, is undermined by the presence of Smith as the person through whom so many voices travel. Smith gives these people the chance to speak as if to each other”

—Carol Martin, on *Fires in the Mirror*

“As a performance piece it's fantastic: a cabaret floor show by turns hilarious, brassy, lyrical, poignant, charming, romantic, tragic, vulgar, sentimental, raunchy and exhilarating.”

—Katha Pollitt, on *The Vagina Monologues*

Some of the hottest tickets to a theatrical event in the 1990s provided entrance not to the bombastic Disneyfied musicals that have come to define Broadway, nor to the intense, intimate, family psychodramas of playwrights like Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, or Sam Shepard. In fact, some critics may be hard-pressed to call the creators of these pieces “playwrights” at all, since the texts are taken almost entirely from “real life” in the forms of interviews and court transcripts. That docudrama and oral history performance have migrated from film and television to occupy a prominent space on the American stage speaks to a changing perception of and heightened urgency to rethink conventional notions of community, subjectivity, and even what constitutes human drama. And that much of the body of 1990s American docudrama is assembled by female playwrights with progressive social agendas—including feminism, queer theory, critical race theory, and Marxism—indicates the degree to which feminist and other progressive ideologies and sympathies are at work in revising these notions. While the most prominent examples of this mode do not

always directly address issues of gender and sexuality, they are all marked by formal and ideological features that indicate the influence of feminism. These oral history plays take the discourses of history- and life writing, and shift their discursive conceptions of the subject from the single protagonist to the greater community. This radical approach to subject formation not only disrupts the empowered status of the subject's patriarchal authority, but also encourages the integration of the audience into the tenuous sense of community created by the theatrical event itself.

This still-forming category of documentary theatre can be dated as far back as Georg Büchner, whose play, *Danton's Death* (1835) "rightly should be the beginning point of inquiry into this field of drama," according Gary Fisher Dawson (1). More recently, documentary theatre's roots derive from the 1920s theatre work of Bertolt Brecht and, more directly, Erwin Piscator, whose epic theatre tactics used "film, music, epic successions of tableaux and the immediacy of news coverage [to invigorate] the stage with new techniques while simultaneously calling for social action" (Salz 1-2). In the United States, these ideas were adopted by the American Living Newspaper, an initiative of the New-Deal-era Federal Theatre Project that staged fictionalized versions of contemporary social debates, often with a Marxist-materialist thrust. The formal and political influence of Piscator and the Federal Theatre Project on contemporary staged oral histories cannot be underestimated. Even though many contemporary playwrights using docudrama (particularly Anna Deavere Smith) often hide their ideological sympathies in claims of political neutrality, the leftist politics of radical 1930s documentary theatre inform the stances of these new playwrights as much as they influence their form.

More recent German post-war documentary theatre frequently drew from court transcripts to expose what playwrights saw as miscarriages of justice. Peter Weiss' *The Investigation* (1965), Heinar Kipphardt's *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (1964), and Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy* (1964) critically examine Nazi war-trials, Oppenheimer's contested loyalty to the United States, and the complicity of Pope Pius XII with European fascism, respectively. Each draws on diaries, court documents, letters, and interviews to reconstruct a distilled version of events that challenges the accepted truths of their initial context (Salz 19-35). The genre that has grown out of these works and has taken root on the contemporary American stage is, like the documentary theatre of the 60s and 70s, drawn from "real life" sources, most often interviews, but also occasionally court documents and other documentary material. But unlike these plays, contemporary oral history plays tend to focus less on "what happened" than on the discourse that surrounds crisis events. And as Melissa Salz points out in her dissertation on what she calls "theatre of testimony," "documentary theatre since 1980 often represents multiple points of view rather than a single point of view" (36).

Salz divides theatre of testimony into two camps: the social/ political, and the personal/autobiographical. Following John Brockway Schmor's concept of confessional performance, theatre of testimony features the self-reflexive presentation of admittedly subjective accounts of the recent past, tying the genre to postmodern notions of identity and history. Yet both "theatre of testimony" and "confessional performance" are broader categories than I intend to explore, and the term docudrama, which describes "based-on-a true-story" tales commonly found on

television, is slightly inaccurate in describing the mode I want to examine. Perhaps more accurate is the movement that Dawson identifies as a new form of documentary theatre, exemplified by the work of Emily Mann. This category, he suggests, features plays that draw upon “private oral histories and testimonies that, in the process, give platform to larger societal concerns in the public arena” (164). Therefore, I will use the term “staged oral history,” which closely corresponds with both Dawson’s description of the new phase of documentary theatre and Salz’s social/political theatre of testimony as she describes it in two statements: theatre of testimony is “aestheticized documentary drama that dramatizes oral history in the form of fractured and fragmented memory” (3-4) and more specifically, “social/political contemporary documentary drama combines interviews, trial transcripts and multi-media materials to create a kaleidoscope of images, perspectives, and memories” (2).

The distinctions that Salz makes regarding this last grouping conform not just to the subject matter that her heading seems to indicate, but also to the formal qualities she identifies that mark these plays—an emphasis on fracturing, fragmentation, and multiplicity that applies to narrative, perspective, and medium. And while the multimedia format seems to reveal a hybrid with filmic documentary, the fragmentation of narrative and perspective seems also to point to another dramatic influence, specifically a category of plays that rose to prominence with the success of Ntozake Shange’s 1975 “choreopoem” *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* and includes later plays like Diana Son’s *R.A.W.* (*‘Cause I’m a Woman*), Madeline George’s *The Most Massive Woman Wins*, Glenda Dickerson and Breena Clarke’s *Re/membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show*, and

much of the work of Spiderwoman Theatre. The commonality of these plays is their conception of voice, what Susan S. Lanser describes as the sequential communal voice, “in which narrative authority is invested in a definable community and textually inscribed . . . through multiple, mutually authorizing voices” (21) and “in which each voice speaks in turn so that [a] ‘we’ is produced from a series of collaborating ‘I’s’” (256). Shange’s play is perhaps the best illustration of the communal voice on stage, dramatizing as it does a range of African American women’s voices, portrayed by a cast of women whose only differentiating markers are costume colors. In this way, the actors in Shange’s play enact the communal voice of a large category of women. This general type of play positions characters in such a way as to create dialogue amongst them, investing none of them with a greater authority than another, and creating narrative by way of an accumulating discourse rather than by representing the perspective of a single unified protagonist.

In what follows, I will examine the work of five playwrights—Anna Deavere Smith, Emily Mann, and Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Project (a communal author), Eve Ensler, and Susan Snyder—each of whom are working in staged oral history. These are by no means the only theatre artists working in the form, and we might look to the multi-cultural work of Ping Chong’s *Undesirable Elements* series, Ensler’s work with Bosnian rape camp victims, Barbara Damashek’s *Whereabouts Unknown*, or Julie Crutcher and Vaughan McBride’s *Diggin In* for other examples. But what the plays I focus on have in common is their point of origin, their theatrical response to a specific moment of violence, and the way that they stage debate and dialogue from across a spectrum of political ideologies. Occasionally,

other texts will come to bear on the discussion, and all of them help to round out a form that I argue is a largely feminist intervention into documentary theatre specifically, and the discourse of staged life writing in general. For the purposes of this chapter, I intend to exclude the autobiographical/personal segment of Salz's category from discussion, because that category represents a very different sort of narrative tactic and occupies a very different space in the history of feminist theatre, a space covered more thoroughly elsewhere in this project. Moreover, it is important to note that "oral history" as I am using it here, is not precisely a discrete category, but rather a roughly constellated set of plays and tactics that bear many similar features. Yet while I might pose individual texts as prototypes of the category, many lack certain individual characteristics detailed here, each variation providing for different political and narrative possibilities. In general, however, staged oral history radically fragments the unitary subject and creates montages of voice that indicate a polyphonic subjectivity (which I will explore in part through Lanser's notion of the sequential communal voice), redefining the traditional narrative of life writing by shifting its focus from a linear subject-oriented trajectory to a multi-voiced community-oriented one.

Oral History as Feminist Form

The relationship of staged oral history and feminism is a difficult one to parse out, since the form is not *inherently* feminist, nor does every play of the genre take gender, sexuality, or for that matter, any one specific ideology as its primary subject. And yet contemporary oral history plays are, as I have described, both amenable to feminist ideologies and influenced by feminist discourse. As a result, I think it is

appropriate to discuss texts by Emily Mann and Anna Deavere Smith within the context of feminism, even if the playwrights claim, as Smith does, no direct connection to feminist politics. Moreover, to discuss the work of Moisés Kaufman and the Tectonic Theatre Project as feminist would be to succumb to the fallacy that equates queer and feminist politics, even if there is a great deal of exchange between these two political imperatives. The narrative form of these plays virtually presupposes an ideological opposition to the dominant discourse, employs non-traditional narrative trajectories, emphasizes the notion of community over the individual, and redefines the notion of the subject to denote that emphasis. The result is a form that is, if not by definition feminist, at least distinctly compatible with the narrative demands made by feminist theory, thus becoming a subject for formal analysis of the intersection of feminism and drama. Moreover, this compatibility between form and politics allows for both fertile political engagements involving feminism and other progressive discourses (e.g., those of Smith, Mann, and Kaufman), and it provides a potentially open structure for pieces with more focused feminist politics, as in the cases of Eve Ensler and Susan Snyder. In short, by examining staged oral history as a category inflected by feminist ideologies, we begin to see the political uses of narrative structure as rhetoric; this is a form whose very nature can be used to reinforce the political claims it contains.

Anna Deavere Smith's work is perhaps the most famous of this genre, and she is the most frequently invoked when discussions of the form emerge. Her work in the 1980s developed into a series of site-based performance pieces entitled "On the Road: A Search for American Character." In this series, Smith would travel from

commission to commission, creating pieces based on her interviews with members of the various communities that employed her. She would then invite her subjects to the performance(Anna Deavere Smith, *Fires*, xxiii) to see themselves being performed. She gained national acclaim in the early 1990s, however, when she brought this format to two contemporary moments of cultural and physical violence: the Crown Heights riots of 1991 and the Los Angeles riots of 1992. The resulting pieces, *Fires in the Mirror* (1992) and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1993), are hallmarks of contemporary staged oral history, dramatizing as they do a remedy to the polarization of these communities by presenting Smith's interviews in dialogue with one another. Indeed, while Smith works very hard to present an ethos of neutrality in any debate, many feminists have been eager to claim her work, as an interview with Carol Martin, the critical work of Tania Modleski, and the critical work of Charles and James Lyons all demonstrate.³⁴

Perhaps more easily aligned with feminist ideology—although certainly not directly so—is the work of Emily Mann, which she calls “Theatre of Testimony,” the term that Salz adopts. Mann's body of work extends back to 1980 with *Still Life*, a play that she describes in her production notes as being “about violence in America. The Vietnam War is the backdrop to the violence at home” (Mann 34). This and other plays, including *Annulla* (1985), *Execution of Justice* (1982)—concerning the murders of Harvey Milk and George Moscone—and *Having our Say* (1995), takes documentary theatre as its formal inspiration, with subjects ranging from a single

³⁴ Smith has been hesitant to call herself a feminist, and her work is more consistently aligned with discourse on race. Nonetheless, her rhetoric of neutrality disguises a stance that is unmistakably based in pacifism, critical race theory, and feminism.

interviewee (*Annulla*) to the courts and people of San Francisco (*Execution of Justice*). Here I will concentrate on Mann's most recent work, *Greensboro*, which remembers the massacre that occurred at an anti-Ku Klux Klan rally in the title city in 1979. It draws on interviews and court proceedings to create a dialogue some seventeen years after the event.

In terms of their ideological positioning, the staged oral histories of these playwrights—and indeed of the genre at large—almost necessarily claim a stance in opposition to the dominant discourse of their cultural context, and that stance is frequently a politically leftist one.³⁵ Lanser notes that “unlike authorial and personal voices [which in life writing correspond to biography and autobiography, respectively] the communal mode seems to be primarily a phenomenon of marginal or suppressed communities; I have not observed it in fiction by white, ruling class men, perhaps such an ‘I’ is already in some sense speaking with the authority of a hegemonic ‘we’”(Lanser 21). Indeed, when we apply Lanser's observations on the sequential communal voice in narrative fiction to the stage, the same holds true: historically, from Piscator on down, documentary theatre has often functioned as a mouthpiece for leftist thought, at least in part because of the traditionally leftist leanings of avant-garde theatrical practitioners. And while Gary Fisher Dawson notes that documentary theatre can be both de-politicized to a certain degree and used for conservative or totalitarian purposes, in many instances, he identifies “the anti-

³⁵ Peter Weiss' *The Investigation* stands as a notable exception. While his play seeks to expose what he believes is the inherent connection between fascism and capitalism, the play was roundly and scathingly panned for its refusal to place blame on Nazi practices (see Salz 32-33). And yet even this is in opposition to the dominant condemnation of Nazism in Germany circa 1965, so while the play is certainly not uniformly leftist, it does stay consistent with the tradition of staged oral history as an alternative truth.

hegemonic purpose that documentary theatre serves” (162). Therefore, because the ideologies presented in staged oral history are rarely “official,” the “truths” that these plays advance are often similarly alternative ones. Staged oral histories seek to reveal a hidden truth, to give voice to silenced voices, or to expose what has been kept hidden. This challenge to official authority and patriarchal discourse suggests a certain sympathy between staged oral histories and the feminist aims they frequently espouse. The emphasis on unearthing that which is not found in the master texts also puts this genre in concert with the other modes of this study, and furthermore, with other ideologies presented by the texts in this chapter—critical race theory, Marxism, gay and lesbian rights, etc.

Oral History and Community

Throughout this argument I suggest that the creation of some notion of community is central to the political goals of the staged oral histories that I examine. However, we need first to interrogate the term “community,” which can be applied in at least four different ways in this discussion: 1) as the larger represented community of all voices in the play, 2) as smaller represented communities that can be grouped together by perspective or by ideology, 3) as the community of actors who represent these first two communities, and 4) as the community of audience members and actors who together experience an individual theatrical event. At the widest level, the notion of community can serve as the most heterogeneous collection of voices represented by these texts: Laramie, Greensboro, Crown Heights, or Los Angeles serve as tangible locales that provide the communities for the texts of Mann and Smith. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the names of these geographical communities

all appear in the titles, at once defining the boundaries of community as the city itself, and setting that community off from larger, more universalized, categories. The first “moment” in *The Laramie Project* defines this explicitly, calling upon many of the characters in the play to define the town in which they live, and providing definitions ranging from “a good place to live” (8) and “a beautiful town” (9) to “Now, after Matthew, I would say that Laramie is a town defined by an accident, a crime. We’ve become Waco, we’ve become Jasper. We’re a noun, a definition, a sign” (9). Inherent in each of these definitions is a commonality located in a connection to place, and yet the differences between them signals a polyvocality, a dialogical nature that encompasses difference even as it asserts that commonality.

We must note that this notion of community is different from the ones that follow inasmuch as it is an accidental community, a community forced together by place, but not inherently one defined by the connections between people that it harbors. This notion of community more closely resembles what German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies termed *Gesellschaft* (often translated as “society”), a space in which people congregate to do business, but not *Gemeinschaft*, a community with a self-edifying membership in which actual connections, personal exchanges and communal ties are established (Tönnies *passim*). Yet while this notion of community may by definition be little more than a shared space, a commonality defined by place, part of the goal of these plays seems to endow the *Gesellschaft* with features of the *Gemeinschaft*: to establish in the city at large a dialogue that engenders more meaningful connections across the smaller, more insular communities that it harbors, a goal that many of these plays, in fact, accomplish.

The second possible meaning of community is a subset of the first, and more naturally corresponds to the *Gemeinschaft* where these plays find the greatest potential: self-identified communities within the larger site-specific communities of these plays. In Smith's *Crown Heights*, we might locate the Lubavitcher and African American communities as distinct parties within the larger debate. In Mann's play, the communities break down along political lines, and in *Laramie*, a local detective, Sergeant Hing, breaks the town into three groups: "What you have is, you have your old-time traditional-type ranchers, they've been here forever—Laramie's been the hub of where they come for their supplies and stuff like that. . . . And then you got, uh, the university population. . . . And then you have the people who live in Laramie, basically" (6-7). While *The Laramie Project* does not define communities as gay/straight, there is some sense that the university community contains a radical element. And yet Kaufman's choice to pose the communities along lines other than ideological ones suggests how much these communities blend and intermingle.

To varying degrees, these plays often try to represent dialogue between these different communities, if not by representing an actual dialogue, then by placing their monologues in close proximity to one another. Indeed, this might be the art by which we call these artists playwrights: if their words are not always theirs, the context they give to the words represents their greatest achievement, both aesthetically and politically. Take, for example, the section entitled "Territory" in Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, which contains a monologue from community activist Michael Zinzun, who talks of his experiences with and work against police brutality—a monologue in which he refers to policemen as "pigs" (19). It is immediately

preceded by a monologue from former LAPD Police Commissioner Stanley Sheinbaum who, while he maintains, “This city has abused the cops” (15), also wonders, “Why do I have to be on a side? / There’s a problem here” (15). The same section also contains a monologue from Cornel West (who wrote the Foreword to *Fires in the Mirror*), in which the African American scholar places blame on both the police and the oppressed Black male for buying into a machismo cowboy mentality. In short, while various characters place blame on one another, many also often acknowledge the complicity of their own community, and when placed up against one another, they create a dialogue unlike what is typically heard in the streets.

This juxtaposition is another marker of the sympathies between feminist politics and the art of playwrights like Mann, since the tactic works against the monologic nature of the interview—in which a single speaker engages in a one-sided discourse with a captive interviewer—and places the monologue of the speaker in dialogue with a range of other conflicting voices. By placing these smaller communities in discursive conflict with one another on the space of the stage, these playwrights not only disrupt the monologic control inherent in the form of the interviews from which their text is taken, they also replace that singular hegemonic voice with a dialogue of voices that presupposes a more democratic conception of power. Since each interviewee speaks to the playwright as if in a monologue, the playwright radically alters the notion of subjectivity as it is conceived in the initial interviews, not in terms of the words being spoken, but in terms of their context. When Edward Dawson, the complicit KKK informer to the Greensboro police, speaks in his real-life interview with Emily Mann (represented onstage only as

“interviewer”) his subjectivity is hermetic, one-sided, an “I” in contrast to every other “I” in the play, including the police, the Klan, and the Communist Workers’ Party (CWP).³⁶ In the play itself, though, his voice is interspersed among all the other voices; it is made a part of the whole dialogue instead of remaining a discrete identity that conceives of the rest of humanity as “outside,” as “other.” In this sense, these plays are radical realizations of Bakhtinian heteroglossia; the dialogic is a necessary part of communal subjectivity because in order to imagine these personae as part of a whole, none of them may be invested with an authority, as dialogue, above another. However, this disruption of the monologic voice is not without its consequences, since the wresting of authority from the interview subject—be that subject empowered or disempowered in the public sphere—inevitably means the playwright is vested with much of that authority, which plays out in the politically charged processes of editing and ordering in the final script, an issue I take up later on.

Nonetheless, the close proximity of these voices also suggests how these rigid communities are more porous than we might imagine. The title character of *Twilight*, Twilight Bey, says in her monologue, “I can’t forever dwell in the idea / of just identifying with people like me and understanding me and mine” (255). And in *Fires in the Mirror*, cultural critic Angela Davis notes that, “For many years in African American history / ‘race’ was a synonym with community” (27). But she goes on to note that:

³⁶ It is perhaps a bit of a false dichotomy to suggest that Dawson’s “monologues” are diametrically opposed to the more radically contingent context of the stage, since the real life circumstances of his speech is also contextual and shaped by discourse. Nonetheless, there is certainly a sense that Dawson approaches his speech as if imbued with an unshakeable hegemonic authority.

We have to find new ways of coming together,
not the old notion of coalition in which we anchor
ourselves very solidly
in our
specific racialized communities,
and simply voice
our
solidarity with other people.
I'm not suggesting that we do not anchor ourselves in
our communities;
I feel very anchored in
my various communities.
But I think that,
to use a metaphor, the rope
attached to that anchor should be long enough to
allow us to move
into other communities,
to understand and learn. (31)

Davis' metaphor of the rope that allows movement from community to community corresponds directly with Smith's philosophy about the function of her theatre: to create a bridge between communities "that makes unlikely aspects *seem* connected. The bridge doesn't make them the same, it merely *displays* how two unlikely *aspects* are *related*" (Anna Deavere Smith, *Fires*, xxix, emphasis original). Moreover, the image of the rope, of one cord composed of multiple strands, nicely illustrates the relationship between these first two notions of community in these plays.

The third notion of community—the group of performers who "bring to life" the communities in the text—is not necessarily present in each of these performances, and is certainly not unique to the mode of oral history, but rather, native to the collaborative nature of theatre. This onstage community can provide a crucial link between the voices of the play and the audience watching. Of course, many of these performances (Anna Deavere Smith's and some performances of Eve Ensler's) are

presented as solo pieces and solo performance carries with it an authority that seems to run counter to the appearance of dialogue that the scripts suggest. At one end, we might laud such performances for presenting us with an image of unification that encompasses many voices in one body. Smith, for example, is frequently praised not only for her virtuoso ability to portray Black men and Jewish women with equal skill, but also for the implicit respect for those divergent voices along the spectrum of identities. If one woman, this line of reasoning contends, can speak each of the voices, then the audience is provided with a model for understanding the other. Yet, consolidation of voices also represents a consolidation of authority on stage, and the appearance of neutrality created by such performances elides the control over the voices that stands behind each voice.

While Smith's own primary *modus operandi* is solo performance, the bodies of the actors in other plays in this mode provide a concrete visual image of dialogue in the performance that at once represents the contextualized dialogue created by the playwright and also represents for the audience a concrete example of dialogue in real time. By serving as a bodied image of community that encompasses both similarity and difference, a community of performers can drastically alter the reception of the dialogue presented onstage. For example, the members of Moisés Kaufman's Tectonic Theater Project represent themselves as not only transparent actors but as part of the communities they interviewed, recognizing their own biases and anxieties in the process of creating dialogue in Laramie. Their initial prejudices are noted onstage when they begin by setting "safety rules" (10), while another company member reveals his anxiety about an interview by noting, "So here we go: seven-

thirty a.m., two queers and a Catholic priest” (65). But the company’s own parts in the dialogue and in establishing connections are also clearly a result of the project. One character makes sure to tell a company member, “I love you honey,” (100), while another seems interested in auditioning for the play. And more than once, company members in the text of the play speak of their emotional responses to the voices around them, which in turn encourages the audience to invest themselves in the dialogue being represented onstage.

The final notion of community is the one created anew each time the curtain rises: the ad hoc community established in the theatre itself, one that can encompass difference and similarity in much the same way as the broadest notion of community discussed above. Indeed, Smith’s early performances in her *On the Road* series were site-specific performances, generated for the audiences for whom they were to be performed, so the community represented in the play was often the community who witnessed the play. In most oral history performance, however, the goal of the playwright is to create in her audience the kind of community that she imagines onstage, so as to create extra-textual dialogue. Anna Deavere Smith notes in her introduction to *Fires*, for example, that post-play discussions were a crucial element of the performance process, for “When the audience talks, they are talking as much to each other as they are to me” (xxxviii). And in her introduction to *Twilight*, she similarly notes, “I played *Twilight* in Los Angeles as a call to the community. I performed it at a time when the community had not yet resolved the problems. I wanted to be a part of their examination of the problems. *I believe that solutions to these problems will call for the participation of large and eclectic groups of people*”

(xxiv, emphasis original). The degree to which Smith wants to involve her audience in these dialogues speaks to her imagining of the audience as its own community.

This last category of community, which conforms closely to what Victor Turner calls *communitas*, seems to be the goal of these oral histories: to create in the audience a sense of community that encourages dialogue, that allows for the peaceful confrontation of individual identities and that incorporates them all into the utopian space of the theatre. Turner (often quoting his own earlier writings) defines it as “‘a direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities,’ a deep rather than intense style of personal interaction. ‘It has something “magical” about it. Subjectively there is a feeling of endless power’” (47-48). It is important to note that Turner’s definition both incorporates the confrontation of identities—Jew/Black, Communist/Conservative, homosexual/heterosexual, male/female—that these plays embody, and also accounts for the empowerment of the disempowered that Cornel West identifies in Anna Deavere Smith’s performances. West writes, “*Fires in the Mirror* is a grand example of how art can constitute a public space that is perceived by people as empowering rather than disempowering” (xix), noting the historical disempowerment that African Americans in particular have experienced in the public sphere. In short, this notion of *communitas* sees the clash of communities and empowers each of them in the space of the theatrical event.

This affective notion of community can be experienced in what Jill Dolan calls the “utopian performative,” for which she locates the *potential* in all theatre, but which she identifies as exemplary in the feminist/queer performance art of Holly Hughes, Peggy Shaw and Deb Margolin (*passim*). This notion is not precisely a

model for what should happen on stage, but for how what happens on stage should *feel like*, its experiential element for the audience, one that resists hierarchy, encourages community, and in its very definition, imagines human interaction as it should exist, but not as it does in the world at large or has in the recent past. These plays seem to be creating theatrical utopias by representing real world dystopias, a commitment to social change that ties these plays to progressive ideology whether, like Anna Deavere Smith, they purport to be impartial chroniclers, or like Mann, are clearly positioning their audience to band against repressive groups like the KKK and the American Nazi Party, in a move that both creates community in the audience and points to a renewed urgency for action. Admittedly, Dolan also ties utopian notions of community to progressive ideology writ large, rather than specifically to feminist theatre, and so it would be unnecessarily exclusive to call this theatrical experience specifically feminist. The utopian impulse, however, like most features of this genre, is particularly compatible with a feminist ideology. That Dolan's work in the past has been rooted in feminist politics speaks to this affinity.

Moreover, the emphasis of these plays on multiple viewpoints and multiple communities enveloped into a broader notion of community creates a safe space for dialogue within the audience. These plays specifically encourage the audience to configure themselves not only as a community of spectators, but also as members of the various ideological and identity-based communities represented on the stage. Such boundary-crossing is made possible for the audience in these plays because it begins with the performers onstage, for as Smith imagines it, "The spirit of acting is

the *travel* from the self to the other” (xxvi, emphasis original). Janelle Reinelt links the performer boundary crossings explicitly to those of the audience:

The relationship between interviewer and speaker is mobile—it changes—and since the audience is positioned in the direct address sequences to “be” Smith, they are positioned to experience the activity of bridging, working with difference. This effect is the most radical element of Smith’s—it engages the spectator in radical political activity to the extent that the spectator grapples with this epistemological process. (Reinelt 615)

With this fourth notion of community, then, we can begin to see how each of these configurations of community—the community represented, the ideological sub-communities, the community of performers, and the audience community—begin to bleed into one another. Since ideological communities make up the *Gesellschaft* of the play, the audience can place themselves within these smaller ideological communities; the audience and the performers can imagine themselves as a separate community within the theatrical space; and the performers (especially Kaufman’s) can begin to imagine themselves as part of the larger community being represented onstage, even as they are doing the representation. Angela Davis’ metaphor of the rope and the anchor becomes radically realized in these plays; an audience member can come into the theatre allied with one specific community, but during a performance, can imagine herself traveling through multiple communities, including the ad hoc community created each night in the theatrical space. The ultimate result is a narrative theatrical experience that lays the groundwork for progressive political action through acknowledgement and consideration of the other through dialogue about community.

Oral History and the Communal Subject

Perhaps the closest connection between staged oral history and feminism is not found in the notion of community itself, but in the way that the narrative emphasis on community configures subjectivity. Indeed, many critics have identified something significantly feminist in these plays' staging of subjectivity. Melanie Smith, for example, notes that "Mann's characters continue the feminist work of defining women in the subject position" (135), and later asserts that *Still Life* in particular "counters the omission of woman in the historical, social and cultural world" (136). Many critics of Mann (Melanie Smith included) also note how Mann roots the aesthetics of her theatre of testimony in women's experience. In an oft-quoted 1987 interview, Mann says:

Women sit around and talk to each other about their memories of traumatic, devastating events in their lives. Even women who don't know each other well! . . . Most of what I know about human experience comes from listening. That's why it's very natural for me to believe in direct address in the theatre. It is an extension of listening. When I put these stories on stage, the audience experiences a direct interaction which is in the moment.

(Betsko and Koenig 281)

Whether or not Emily Mann's formal innovations are specifically feminist, they, like Anna Deavere Smith's, seem to have had a distinctly feminist effect on the debates they address, and by extension, on how we conceptualize the parties in those debates.

Cornel West writes:

Smith explodes this narrow framework by taking us into the private spheres of American society where the complex discourses of women often take place in

patriarchal America. This is especially so in Hasidic and Black America where the access of women to public space—especially major leadership roles—is frowned upon. Yet Smith neither romanticizes nor idealizes Hasidic, Black, or secular Jewish women. Instead, she humanizes the Black-Jewish dialogue by including the diverse and often conflicting voices within Black and Jewish America. . . . In short the gendered character of the Black Jewish Dialogue often produces obstacles that compound the problems and render us more paralyzed. Smith's deepening of this dialogue by *de-patriarchalizing* our conversation is a major contribution in this regard.
(xviii-xix)

Despite indulging in a bit of wishful overstatement,³⁷ the depatriarchalized conversation that West identifies serves as a way to imagine the affinities between the feminist impulses that I identify in these plays and the other oppositional discourses clearly at work, and also seems to me to be a way to imagine this affinity without essentializing based either on the gender of the playwright or on the experience of the playwright among women. And if the conversation is depatriarchalized, its coherence, its univocality, and its status as authoritative are similarly disrupted. While I will suggest some qualifiers to the utopian image created by Smith's performances, the result is a staged conversation that, to some degree, is similarly depatriarchalized and anti-hegemonic in comparison to the often violent discourse that surrounded the historical events on which these plays focus.

Although we imagine the subjects of these plays as the locales in which they take place—Greensboro, Los Angeles, Crown Heights, Laramie—these are certainly

³⁷ West's utopian view of Smith's work never acknowledges that power over the conversation that Smith maintains, and that I suggest is always present when the guise of neutrality is claimed in staged oral history. Therefore, his claims that Smith completely de-patriarchalizes the conversation ignores the power she does maintain.

not unified subjects, they are fragmented and multivalent. These cities are subjects of life writing who—unlike the biographical subjects of the previous chapter—implicitly critique the notion of a unified subjectivity and the enlightenment epistemologies inherent in the idea of a unified subject. This reconfiguration of the subject responds specifically to the critique registered by Peggy Rosenthal in her 1973 article on the issue of the singular (exemplary) and plural (general) subject in feminist biography. She writes, “The reader that [these authors] seem to want to inspire by these stories about lives full of achievement may very likely be inspired to wonder at these women, but also to wonder at the inapplicability of their lives to her own” (183). But the communal subject, fragmented into many personae and providing multiple and various sites for identification, encourages individual audience members to interpolate themselves into the community and the dialogue occurring before them. In short, by removing the notion of the specific protagonist whom we must either accept or reject as a site for identification, these plays create a truly dialogic space for multiple voices to be heard, voices that potentially include the audience.

Moreover, this departure from the unified subject also resonates with the features of two different notions of the subject that Sue-Ellen Case identifies in much of women’s drama. She observes, “In recent plays by women playwrights, three kinds of subject positions emerge: the split subject, the metonymically displaced subject, and the collective subject” (“Split Subjects” 129). The first she adapts from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, in which the female, unable to enter into the masculine symbolic discourse of representation, must inhabit a male subject position, thus splitting between the “real” self and the male-identified self that can observe

within the symbolic order. Case expands this even further, with fragmentation continuing as “the woman . . . observes her own subject position as both male-identified and female” (131). In many ways, we see this same split in the empowered and disempowered communities in these plays. For example, *Fires in the Mirror* has characters who oscillate between asserting their own identity and imagining themselves as other communities perceive them. In one scene, an anonymous Lubavitcher woman recognizes the degree to which she must be perceived as stupid by a boy who, on the Sabbath, comes into her house to turn off her radio for her (8). And while this schism is significant for individual voices, the collective subject of the city sees this fragmentation multiply, with each community recognizing the degree to which it is disempowered and constructed by others.

This fragmentation plays out most clearly in the way that the different communities within a specific site are able to maintain identity, what Ntozake Shange in *Fires in the Mirror* calls:

a way of knowing that no matter where I put myself
that I am not necessarily
what’s around me.
I am part of my surroundings
and I become separate from them
and it’s being able to make those differentiations clearly
that lets us have an identity (3)

And yet there is a tension between Shange’s notion of identity as the differentiation between self and other and Angela Davis’ metaphor of the anchor and the rope that allows for some crossover from community to community. In the plays examined here, this tension works to mitigate the dilemma that Susan Lanser identifies in the communal voice, when she notes that:

In the warnings of Marie Ponsot and Rosemary Deen (themselves a “we”), ‘where no community exists, ‘we’ may seem to presume too much.’ If ‘we’ dissolves the other/Self dichotomy, its danger lies in its power to reduce each Other to an explicit—or perhaps more troublingly—implicit norm. The utopian value of the ‘we’ is counterbalanced, then, by the equally strong dystopian danger of speaking for women, or a particular group of women, in general. (262)

By both highlighting the ideological and identity communities within larger local communities, and using the theatrical space itself to encourage the audience to identify with multiple voices in the continuum, each of these plays maintains an other/self dichotomy while building bridges that allow for the “confrontation of identities” that Victor Turner identifies as *communitas*.

The communal subjectivity of these oral histories, then, is marked by a subject that can be configured as a larger community. This community is represented not by one single voice but by a communal voice. Lanser identifies this type of narration as that which “allows each narrator a separateness and indeed a separate authority, yet each also helps create the portrait of an identifiable group” (264). She continues by discussing a novel narrated in the sequential communal voice, noting that each speaker “has her own narrative style and preferences, and through the metanarrative act of creating characters not simply as voices, but as storytellers, the novel legitimates every woman’s diegetic and mimetic authority” (265). Similarly, these plays invest each of their characters with a diegetic authority that is always counterbalanced by the other voices in the conversation. And it is this distribution of “diegetic and mimetic authority” that Smith responds to when asked, “Did you find any one voice that could speak for the entire city?” To this question, she answers that

“in order to have real unity, all voices would first have to be heard or at least represented” (*Twilight* xxiv). This rhetoric is perhaps undermined by the very real power that Smith has over the conversation that she mediates, since the excerpts she chooses to dramatize invest some characters with more nobility than others; to claim that each voice is presented as equally right or ethical or moral would be naïve. Similarly, Mann represents voices of the KKK and the American Nazi Party, despite her obvious bias against them, alongside those of the CWP with whom she more clearly sympathizes. Nonetheless, this side-by-side representation of multiple voices at once stages the idea of democracy at work while subtly taking part in that democracy by shaping the conversation and might be seen as the crux of a feminist notion of the communal subjectivity in these plays. Indeed, one might be convinced that instead of a collective “we,” these plays merely offer a series of “I’s” that at best add up to a few smaller “we’s.” And yet the push to transform the *Gesellschaft* into the *Gemeinschaft*, to bring dialogue and democracy to the normally hierarchical space of the city similarly suggests a push to imagine the individual “we’s” of smaller communities as a collective, but fragmented community (*vis à vis* Sue Ellen Case), a communal subject marked both by commonality and difference.

In the theatre, this tension can be illustrated by the different approaches to casting these plays, or more specifically, whether they are cast performances or solo performances. For while a complete cast does indeed enable a greater sense of *communitas* on the stage itself, it perhaps dampens the impact of the communal subject. For example, while *Greensboro* may in part create a powerful theatrical experience because of the multiple performers on stage, a representation of the

connections and dialogue that the play hopes to encourage, Anna Deavere Smith's performance on the other hand, more fully illustrates the conflicted nature of these subjectivities. In this case, Smith's body represents a single subjectivity, one that contains within it many fragmentary identities.³⁸ This is in part facilitated by Smith's skin color (she is a light skinned African-American), and by her skills as a performer. Nonetheless, in simultaneously appearing to an audience as a single body and multiple voices, the communal subjectivity is made explicit.

Furthermore, the communal nature of the subject onstage is in part realized in the style of acting that such pieces demand. In most cases (Mann's work is an exception), these plays require their performers to shift from role to role, acquiring the character of Brecht's actor in "The Street Scene" who is always working in *gest* to *show* what happened, instead of to *become* the character to whom it happened. As a result, the characters appear primarily as surfaces (Lyons and Lyons 48). And because they appear in a play of surfaces, these individual characters are not afforded a complete and fully developed subjectivity, but merely fragments of—the external markers of—subjectivity. Coupled with the comparative invisibility of the actors' external markers of subjectivity—and in the case of Anna Deavere Smith, her consistent refusal to make her own position known—a central subjectivity, or even a fully conceived subjectivity seems remarkably absent (even though it operates powerfully behind the scenes). And yet what so many critics call the overwhelmingly human character of these plays is created by the cumulative effect of those fragments,

³⁸ Tania Modleski critiques the notion of Smith's body as containing multiple identities as being stereotypical of the female body as container, as vessel, but ultimately finds Smith's performance radically progressive as political theatre.

a subjectivity that arises from the body of voices, the many voices of the local community being presented by each piece.

It is perhaps this tension that defines contemporary oral history: the tension between community and fragmentation, the tension between chorus and polyphony. We are in one room, this genre declares, but we speak in different voices. The collective yet diverse nature of the subject onstage in these plays seems to grow out of a feminist critique of the subject, and theorizations of subjectivity and voice that look toward investing women and other marginalized groups with the authority that hegemonic discourse has traditionally denied them. Indeed, this conception of the subject as a balance between unity and diversity is a hallmark of progressive politics: issues of equal representation across ethnic, gender and class categories signal a singular concern for egalitarianism that is rarely found in other formal categories. This radical version of polyvocality allies staged oral history itself with progressive politics not just because it espouses something of a democratic form, but also because it works to level the marginalized and the center, and gives voice to the typically silenced. While, as I explore more fully below, the evaluative project of selecting and arranging voices is clearly at work, and speaks to the power of the playwright not as neutral observer, but as ideologue, the range of voices presented in these plays stages a communal conversation that makes dialogue more possible for the audiences in attendance.

Oral History as History

If this formal notion of the communal subject finds echoes throughout feminist theory, then its political rationale similarly finds commonalities with the

other genres explored in this study of feminist drama. And given that the label I assign to this genre is “staged oral history,” it becomes important to imagine how history plays out in the politics of these performances. While the notion of chorus and community arises out of influences like Shange’s choreopoem, the most obvious antecedent for the historical concern of these plays comes from the more traditional versions of the docudrama by Piscator, Weiss, and others. And yet the engagement of feminism and the past is the central argument of this study, and this genre is no different in the degree of its engagement. The character of the engagement is quite different, however. While revisionist history is a common element among the other genres I discuss here, these plays do not primarily attempt to re-envision what happened in the past. They are not unearthing information that was not previously made available, nor are they even deconstructing an event the way that many performance artists do. Instead, these plays are enacting a formal revision, choosing instead to recapitulate *how the past is handled, considered, and presented*. More specifically, in choosing to create a dialogue of actual voices from the pages of the past, staged oral histories do not attempt to change the substance of what we know about, say, the Los Angeles riots. But they do change *how we look at them*. By reframing the past not as a series of individually held views, but rather as the kind of dialogue that can prevent future misunderstanding, these plays are revising the discourse around the past: by positioning monologic utterances of isolated characters into a bricolage that simulates an exchange of ideas, these plays create dialogue around violent events where none existed, and the dialogue is being presented as a remedy for the moment of violence itself. And of course, this is how they’re doing

their political work: instead of revising the events that happened, they're (re)constructing a dialogue that never existed in the hopes of inciting new dialogue.

This is an explicitly stated goal of *The Laramie Project*. University of Wyoming Theatre Professor Rebecca Hilliker says of her initial reaction to the proposal to create the play:

When you first called me, I wanted to say, You've just kicked me in the stomach. Why are you doing this to me? But then I thought, That's stupid, you're not doing this to me. And, more important, I thought about it and decided that we've had so much negative closure on this whole thing. And the students really need to talk. When this happened they started talking about it, and then the media descended and all dialogue stopped.

(Kaufman et al. 11)

Don Shewey, in his article in *American Theatre*, links this phenomenon specifically "to Greek Tragedy, in which the outcome is known from the beginning and the play provides an opportunity for the community to talk about the things that are on its mind" (15). And Kaufman himself echoes this goal in his article in the same issue, noting, "Many questions have been answered and many more will be posed. And that is a good thing" (18). Nor does this dialogue extend merely to the members of the Laramie community who went to Denver to see the premiere, for the play not only grapples with how the town itself handled the event, but poses larger questions about hate crimes, about how much homosexuality is or isn't accepted in the range of American moralities, about the role of the media in creating a martyr, and even broader questions like the ones posed by New York *Daily News* writer Albor Ruiz:

“What makes a community, what can tear it apart and what needs to be done to hold it together?” (52).

The (re)construction of dialogue is perhaps a less explicit but even more crucial goal of Mann’s *Greensboro*, since the event in question wasn’t being talked about at all, nor had it ever really been. Early on in the play, the interviewer, whom we take to be the playwright herself, asks one of the original protesters why the American public hadn’t heard more about the massacre, and he notes that the hostages in Iran were taken the next day. And so the massacre “got pretty much pushed off the front page” (Mann 263). In a sense this concern with recovery places the rhetorical situation of *Greensboro* as much in line with feminist biography plays, which are working to resurrect a lost history, as with oral histories; but the goal seems to be different, for as Athol Fugard notes in his introduction to Mann’s plays, “There was an even deeper process at work. The word that immediately came to mind was “healing” (xi). This is not unlike what we hear from the characters in the other plays of this genre: that these plays aren’t trying to revise what happened, but rather to come to some kind of healing through giving testimony, through memorializing the event, through replacing the violence with words. Indeed, in an interview with Melissa Salz, Mann pointedly notes, “I think what I rather do is provoke discussion . . . Now there are multiple points of view given in the *Greensboro* piece, multiple, but I’m not validating them. I want people to hear them” (qtd. in Salz 216). One of the *Greensboro* widows notes specifically that “we were fighting armed men with ideas, with *words*” (Mann 315) and this commitment to words as political action resonates throughout the play.

Caveats: the Hegemony of “We”

The notion of Mann’s play as rhetoric and political action marks a significant difference between her work and that of either Smith or Kaufman, since Mann is willing to choose sides. Speaking with Salz, Mann admits that despite her refusal to validate specifically one position or another in Greensboro, she is steering the audience toward a conclusion, even if it not a specific one. She explains, “Well I guess I’m hoping that the decision is so obvious, but I suppose I come down on the side of the good guys. . . . There are bad guys and good guys in this. The bad guys aren’t all bad, and the good guys aren’t all good, but still you can make value judgments and I have made value judgments. So yes, I suppose I am leading people” (qtd. in Salz 216). This willingness to lead the audience immediately calls attention to the tension in these plays between feminist form and progressive substance. That is, if the playwright chooses to privilege the politics of the form—which are invested in opening up dialogue and in avoiding the hegemony of the univocal voice—then the rhetorical effectiveness of the play would seem necessarily to be diminished. If Mann were actually to give the same space and emphasis to David Duke as she does to Nelson Johnson, a CWP leader, then she would undermine her own political position. And indeed, she acknowledges this power when she says, “With a different point of view, I could take the skinhead and Nazi and Duke and say: look how smart they are, they’re saying all the right stuff” (qtd. in Salz 215). The power that the interviewer can take through the appropriation of the communal voice is not negligible; the combined power afforded by the illusion of “Truth” and the collective voice makes for potent polemic.

Playwrights and theorists alike acknowledge that potency and its attendant dangers. While Mann notes and tries to account for how much her own stance inflects the “true story” she presents, others have critiqued the appearance of objectivity in these plays and the rhetoric that this appearance conceals. Janelle Reinelt, commenting on the videotaped production of *Fires in the Mirror* for American Playhouse, deconstructs Smith’s image as “bearer of truth, accuracy and validity” (611) and its relationship to “the claims of authority and historical truth presented by her piece” (610). While Reinelt does acknowledge that the text in question is a video and not a live performance, many of her critiques pose a challenge to Smith’s live performance, and to many of the texts presented here, relying as they do upon the codes of journalism and of documentary to endow their performances with a truth-value. Tania Modleski takes this critique of Smith in a slightly different direction, noting an affinity with Smith’s performance and what Shoshana Felman terms “‘the crisis of witnessing,’ the conflict between the necessity of telling all and the impossibility of ‘speaking the unspeakable’” (Modleski 110). And anthropologist Ruth Behar recapitulates this crisis of witnessing as a tension between objectivity and subjectivity. She calls the impulse to hide one’s own subjectivity as the invisible “observer” a way “to drain anxiety from situations in which we feel complicitous with structures of power” (Behar 6), but notes that, ironically, the authority that this invisibility affords aligns the observer with these same structures. In short, the claims of objectivity and truth value of staged oral histories serve to mask the actual power that the playwright has to construct rhetoric out of context as much as text.

Lanser raises a similar caution with regards to the communal voice. She writes:

Perhaps the very communality of such a narrative project means that certain values and norms may end up constituting their own hegemony. That is, while all narration is of course limited to and by the voices who tell it, this limitation may be obscured in communal narrative situations precisely by narrative plurality; whatever similarities emerge across differences, whatever spaces are not opened to dialogue, are bound to be reinforced. Here indeed, is the insidious underside of the single author's power to masquerade as a self-reinforcing community. (Lanser 266)

In the case of Smith, then, “the voices who tell it” are both multiple, dialogic, and open on the one hand, and authoritative, singular and univocal on the other hand, for the voice is always hers, even if the words aren't. And while the actors of *The Laramie Project* are themselves polyvocal, they share values that the subjects whom they interview do not necessarily share—in this case, a smaller “we” co-opts the voices of a larger and very different community. And while Emily Mann makes the “I” behind the “we” somewhat explicit in the onstage form of the interviewer, the assumptions and rhetorical bent of that interviewer are that much more prominent.

Yet the greatest conundrum of this form is that these two caveats—the hegemonic dangers native to both life writing and the communal voice—seem to either compound one another or guard against one another. That is, one might make an argument that the truth-value of these many voices—that these words were all spoken by real people—guards against the hegemony of the playwright; Emily Mann is bound by what her subjects actually say. And the contextual dangers of life writing

seem to be ameliorated by the sheer plurality of the project; *Laramie* quotes at least four clergy, two law enforcement officers, several GLBT residents of Laramie, etc. Many voices from the larger communities corroborate these individual voices, which reinforces the idea that no one voice was taken drastically out of context, and the accumulation of voices seems to refute and guard against any impulse of the playwright to manipulate severely one or a few voices. This apologist position, however, seems to ignore the control that the playwright has, not only in collecting the interviews, or in speaking them, but most powerfully in choosing what gets spoken. We might therefore see these illusions of objectivity and plurality as upholding one another. While the playwright's ability to construct the context of these voices is powerful, the impulse to protest, "But these voices are real, and there are so many of them!" is almost irresistible. And yet these plays clearly have a set of values that go virtually unquestioned—not the least of which is the privileging of dialogue over either silence or unquestioning submission to authority—all of which by extension inherently questions existing power structures. There is a temptation for progressive activists to take this as a sign that we can trust the genre; if the assumptions of the formal structures are anti-hegemonic, then the subjectivity behind them should be similarly so. But there is no guarantee in this correlation; to assume so grants even greater power to the playwright. As Lanser reminds us, "form is only possibility, the necessary but never sufficient means for transforming both fiction and consciousness" (266). Therefore, analysis of staged oral history must be constantly aware of the values that underpin the dialogue being crafted before us.

So how is the playwright to proceed? Where does one cross the line from challenging hegemony with an open form and constituting hegemony by hiding behind the guise of an open form? Emily Mann's solution in *Greensboro* seems to be to contextualize overtly the subjectivity of the interviewer onstage. The facts that the interviewer is a character just as Nelson and Dawson are, and that the playwright herself is not an actor in any production of the play helps to diminish further the univocal quality of the interviewer's rhetoric. She essentially becomes Behar's vulnerable observer when we see her outrage on behalf of CWP organizer Nelson Johnson, and we witness her discomfort with Eddie Dawson's racism. But she also exposes her own rhetoric by showing us her handling of Dawson in interviews. For example, when Dawson inquires about the purpose of the interviews, the interviewer vaguely replies: "I'm writing about the Greensboro event . . . maybe a play . . ."

(267) When he replies "Yeah? I like plays," her only response is "Good" (267) which doesn't even remotely point to the fact that he certainly won't like this one. And yet, while she does lay bare her own subjectivity, there are certainly elements that are left unquestioned: a privileging of education and articulate speech, for example. Dawson is revealed to be not only racist, but stupid, misspelling "Titan," T-I-T-I-A-N (306). Mann foregrounds this stupidity in the titles to her scenes, an element of the play that remains uncontextualized, left intact in its documentary codes. The first Interview with Dawson is labeled "An Escape Goat,"³⁹ after his own malapropism (265). This is contrasted with the previous interview, entitled "Extremist Informant," with the

³⁹ Titles to scenes are projected in performance on a multi-media screen, thus taking on the textual authority of the invisible author-journalist, as opposed to the more overtly subjectified interviewer.

very intelligent and articulate Nelson, who uses this phrase to characterize Dawson's relationship with both the Klan and the FBI (263-264). When confronted with this same moniker, Dawson interprets it as applying to his fearlessness: "We had a reputation. They needed anything done—cross-burning, intimidation—they called James Buck and Eddie Dawson . . . If anything had to be done, they'd call the extremist. You didn't scare me. I put up a good front" (310). By relentlessly exposing and highlighting Dawson's low level of education, Mann positions the audience to look down upon him, and to identify more clearly with Nelson and the CWP. Whether or not contextualizing her own position mitigates the textual hegemony of her rhetoric in relation to the communal voice (her voice is clearly one of many, but also the one with the most authority in encouraging audience sympathy), her rhetoric is still present, and to some degree masked by the conventions of documentary theatre that Reinelt identifies in Smith's work.

But despite this similarity, Smith's work onstage configures subjectivity in almost the exact opposite manner. While she hides her own subjectivity in both the guise of objectivity and in the multiplicity of voices she embodies, her claims to neutrality seem on the surface to be far more valid than any that Mann might make. While Reinelt relentlessly identifies the many ways that Smith's performance quietly establishes her authority to speak for the many people she interviews, to serve as a neutral and fair-minded persona, she chooses not to expose any rhetorical ways that Smith takes advantage of this perceived authority. In fact, as I have noted above, Smith implicates her audience in radical political activity not through the substantial rhetoric of her words, but in the formal positioning that forces them to grapple with

difference. Cornel West praises Smith's neutrality, noting "Not to choose 'sides' is itself a choice—yet to view the crisis as simply and solely a matter of choosing sides is to reduce the history and complexity of the crisis in a vulgar Manichean manner" (xviii). By suggesting that the complexity of her subject matter is overlooked by a more rhetorically-charged treatment, West ties Smith's neutral appearance to her effectiveness in prompting her audience to "examine ourselves even in a moment of ugly xenophobic frenzy" (xviii). West's praise here may succumb to an either/or fallacy, however, since Smith's rhetoric chooses sides while seeming not to, and at the very least, she employs an implicit value structure that gives greater voice to the disempowered than the empowered, which is itself a political shift from the norm. This shift, then, represents a *de facto* stance, perhaps less importantly on the crises themselves, but clearly on how these crises should be approached. So again, we see the dilemma for the progressive playwright: on one hand is the impulse to take a radical stance with this open communal form; but on the other, there is the danger of co-opting the communal voice in service of an ideal that runs counter to the community that is being represented.

The Laramie Project handles this fine line most subtly through its choice to dramatize the integration of the community of performers into the community of Laramie itself. In fact, the second "moment" of the text, entitled "Journal Entries," expresses Kaufman and his company's anxieties about the project. Yet unlike Mann, who highlights her interviewer's biases, Kaufman and company have a less obvious political agenda. True, the play villainizes the Reverend Fred Phelps and company, but the issue of hate crime legislation, which seems to have the support of the acting

company members, is given an equally compelling refutation by a police officer's wife, whose voice is, unlike *Greensboro's* Dawson, left relatively unmediated by the voices of the acting company.⁴⁰ That is, even though the actor playing Sherry Johnson delivers the monologue, this voice is not undermined by narration or by a staged interviewer who might challenge her claims. This moment immediately precedes a meeting of two company members with Father Roger Schmit, in which the priest implores the company to "Just deal with what is true. You know what is true. You just need to do your best to say it correct" (66). This plea from a priest acknowledges the gap between truth and performance, and the ability of his interviewers to negotiate that gap. In including this meta-discursive instruction, Kaufman points out his company's own positionality in bringing these moments to the stage. Through this Brechtian *gest*, Kaufman and company point to the rhetoric of the many voices being presented, and to their own presentation of those voices. In doing so, the play works to defuse the hegemonic danger of both the journalistic and communal aspects of these plays. Whether it does so successfully depends as much upon an individual production as it does on the tactics of the playwright.

While each of these examples represents a different approach to presenting the playwright's authority, these plays also reveal an anxiety about the authority of the interview subject. I have argued that part of the work of these plays is to equalize the authority of the voices who speak, and that in doing so, the shift from the monologic to the dialogic necessarily involves leeching the privilege from some voices and

⁴⁰ I offer this with its own caveat, since the 2002 HBO Production of the play portrays this character as narrow-minded and ignorant, a sense I do not get from the text of the play.

empowering others. This act endows the playwright with considerable power, as I have just suggested, but it also provokes a specific anxiety in many of the interview subjects, an anxiety about how their words are going to be used. *Greensboro's* Dawson wants to know what the purpose of his interview is, and *Laramie's* Father Roger Schmit implores his interviewers to “to say it correct” (Kaufman, et al. 66), while taxi driver Doc O'Connor talks about taping his interviewers from *Hard Copy* as a way of fighting back lest the tabloid news program misrepresent his words. And while these figures acknowledge how much power they forfeit when they give an interview, other characters—in each case, characters that are otherwise in positions of power—clearly view the interview as a platform. LAPD Commissioner Stanley Sheinbaum commands Anna Deavere Smith's attention with verbal cues, clearly understanding his relationship to the media (Anna Deavere Smith, *Twilight* 14); *Greensboro's* David Duke speaks as he would in any political setting; and when given the chance, the Baptist Minister of *Laramie* moves past his initial reticence to speak, using his time with the interviewer to condemn homosexuality as he would in the pulpit (Kaufman, et al. 69). These moments at once speak to a sense of privilege that these interview subjects feel they may take. But by presenting this privilege within the text of the plays, the playwrights deconstruct that privilege, essentially relying on the Brechtian *gest* to underscore the presumed authority of the speaker, while hiding the authority that the performer and playwright have to critique the interview subject. The best solution to this power imbalance may be the one used by Ping Chong in his *Undesirable Elements* series, in which the actors are telling their own stories and the stories of their families. In each case, the actor is given final edit

over his or her own story to ensure their comfort with the script (Wehle, *passim*). But ultimately, it may be impossible to stage public debate the way these plays do without divesting the interview subject of control over their words. The playwright, therefore, is forced to negotiate the line between producing political theatre and respecting the authority of their subjects, and how they negotiate that line depends as much on their own political beliefs as it does the form they choose to advance those beliefs.

To summarize, it seems that oral history is progressive in form, and the radical potential that it offers to present difference in the context of community itself has a rhetorical value, even if the politics of the voices presented are counterbalanced by one another. The form evokes oppositional discourse in its alternative presentation of truth; it invokes egalitarianism in its refusal to privilege the voices of power; and its rhetorical impulse to revise the past through a discursive shift suggests that these values are necessary to an activist project, one that not only seeks to remedy the damage done in moments of crisis, but to avoid those moments by instituting the more democratic notions of dialogue that form seems to necessarily espouse. And even though the moments of violence confronted by the plays examined above do not come out of gender-based biases, the formal remedy that these plays offer up to assuage the wounds of the past are certainly influenced by a feminist aesthetic that arises out of a challenge to the teleology of conventional narrative, an emphasis on community and a collective subjectivity, and the use of that community to acknowledge and tolerate difference, even as the audience acknowledges and tolerates the commonalities between the self and the other. In these manifestations, the oral history is not only a feminist-inflected form used by progressive playwrights,

it is one whose formal features serve as a vehicle for the engaged activism of these artists.

Oral History as Feminist Drama

But what of plays that actually use oral history for feminist rhetoric? How does a play that imagines the category of woman as a community use the radical potential of the oral history to espouse a feminist ideology? How is the collective subject configured? For which moment in the past is dialogue being presented as a remedy? And how does such a play configure difference within a community of women, and how does it imagine the community in relation to men? These questions are crucial to understanding the politics of two feminist oral histories, Eve Ensler's very famous *Vagina Monologues*, and Susan Snyder's unpublished one-act, *Size Matters*. Both of these plays, like the four plays examined above, use the combination of communal voice and life writing that marks oral history to open up a dialogue that replaces silences of the past. The crucial difference for these plays is that they imagine the category of woman as a community, and in doing so, encounter difficult theoretical problems in negotiating the essentialism that such a move offers up, and in negotiating the relationship of this "community" to the category of men that such a definition necessarily creates (granted, Snyder's play is a good bit more deft in negotiating this issue than is Ensler's). Both plays however, use the diegetic authority of a communal subjectivity to fight through the silences surrounding violence against women—be it physical, emotional, or symbolic—and work toward creating a dialogue not just about violence, but about the community created by the very events in question. These two plays, then, illustrate both the difficulty and

potential of imagining the feminist valences of form, demonstrating how the open possibility of oral history can be undermined and alternatively how those possibilities can be fully realized.

Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*: Essentializing Community

Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* is a collage of several hundred interviews taken by the playwright in the mid- to late-1990s, all centered on women's attitudes about their vaginas. Her interview subjects range across the spectrum of age, race, nationality and sexuality. The resulting play has been enormously successful, prompting dozens of college campus productions each year, and supporting an ongoing tour of the piece as a solo work. And yet, despite its popularity, it has garnered far less critical attention than the work of Anna Deavere Smith or even Emily Mann, partially because of some theoretical weaknesses that I will discuss below. The voice of this piece is more identifiably Ensler's than are the voices found in Smith's, Mann's or Kaufman's work, since the playwright in this case is not stitching together the results of her interviews, but rather using those interviews as source material, inspiration for her own writing. Indeed, very often snippets from interviews do appear whole cloth, but just as often the titular monologues are either composites, interpretations or even occasionally Ensler's own voice. This variation in the narrative voice, of course, alters the narratological lens through which we might view this piece, diverging as it does from the more straightforward sequential communal subjectivity created by Smith, Kaufman, and Mann. In many ways, this is a more radical conception of the communal subjectivity, except that Ensler's voice is

clearly privileged in the piece, and her bodied performance reflects this focus.⁴¹

Nonetheless, this is a piece that, despite some significant theoretical problems, can be aptly termed “choral history” for its approach to community-building, working to amend the silences of the discursive past through an engagement with the construction of female bodies and its focus on the notion of voice itself. Yet the result is a construction of community through a complex operation: identifying silence and objectification as the root of violence against women, Ensler reimagines the vagina itself as the speaking voice, and aims to create a “community of vaginas,” a construction that collapses the sign “woman” into a universalized notion of “vagina” as a signifier that can at once denote “woman” both individually and collectively. While Ensler may construct a more humanized, unified voice, it is also an essentialized voice that elides the diversity of those identities within it, thus further naturalizing the biological categories that many gender prejudices are built upon.

Ensler’s purported goal for the piece is to combat sexual violence against women and the silence that surrounds those instances of violence. As she explains in the introduction to the 1998 edition of the play, “500,000 women are raped every year in the United States; 100 million women have been genitally mutilated worldwide;

⁴¹ West’s utopian view of Smith’s work never acknowledges that power over the conversation that Smith maintains, and that I suggest are always present when the guise of neutrality is claimed in staged oral history. Therefore, his claims that Smith completely de-patriarchalizes the conversation ignores the power she does maintain.

⁴¹ Tania Modleski critiques the notion of Smith’s body as containing multiple identities as being stereotypical of the female body as container, as vessel, but ultimately finds Smith’s performance radically progressive as political theatre.

⁴¹ I will primarily focus on Ensler’s solo performance, since this is the form the show takes most often and at the highest professional levels. Nonetheless, as I suggest briefly both above and below, some of the larger theoretical problems are somewhat mitigated by cast performances which minimize the universalizing effects by distributing the monologues among many speaking bodies.

the list goes on and on” (xxii). Indeed profits from Ensler’s tour of the show, royalties from other performances, and proceeds from the annual celebrity performance that happens in New York City on February 14 all go to Ensler’s V-Day Foundation. According to the foundation’s mission statement, “V-Day is an organized response against violence toward women” (www.vday.org). This avowed money- and consciousness-raising effort supports various anti-violence charities, and is not limited to performances of Ensler’s piece, but now extends to more conventional fund-raising efforts including a line of products marketed through Eziba, an upscale direct mail sales catalog. The developmental goals of the foundation, therefore, in part determine the target audience for the piece—typically women who are upper-middle class, cosmopolitan, liberal, and, we might hypothesize through the general sense of enfranchisement, white.

Ensler’s engagement with the past is not as obvious as the crisis-focused pieces discussed above, and yet she is working on a similar axis. Her impetus for *The Vagina Monologues*, stated from the outset of the performance, is an anxiety rooted in the discourse surrounding women’s sexual bodies. She opens by musing, “I was worried about vaginas. I was worried about what we think about vaginas, and even more worried that we don’t think about them. I was worried about my own vagina. It needed a context of other vaginas—a community, a culture of vaginas. There’s so much darkness and secrecy surrounding them” (Ensler 3). We might notice that the problem that Ensler identifies in the outset is the silence and secrecy surrounding her subject; that the obvious problem, violence against women, is underpinned by a more pervasive problem, silence about women’s bodies and, by extension, silence about the

violence to which those bodies are subject. And the remedy to this problem is community, which of course dovetails with the stated goals of the other plays in this chapter. But while this play, like Smith's, Mann's or Kaufman's, does pose community as a remedy for violence, the other plays do so through dialogue: an exchange of voices airs conflicts between those voices. Ensler's play is more interested in chorus—a groundswell of voices that work together towards a common self-interest—rather than in dialogue that recognizes and overcomes the differences between the voices. Indeed, the V-Day foundation website lists a number of prominent contributors and performers in its annual gala as “The Vulva Choir,” marking out the contributors by what they have in common: their physical sex. This community of voices, however, does similarly enact a discursive revision of the past. By focusing on the personal histories of many of the interview subjects, many of which include some instance of violence, the play combats what it sees as the underlying enabler of that violence: silence.

While the V-Day Foundation's mission statement defines violence toward women as “rape, incest, battery, genital mutilation and sexual slavery” (www.vday.org), the monologues themselves define that violence more broadly to include physical violence, emotional violence and a symbolic violence that targets the discourse that surrounds women's bodies. This three-tiered approach combats the silence and objectification that Ensler sees beneath the most egregious among these: instances of physical violence that Ensler's foundation notes as its most obvious target. Of course narratives of physical violence feature prominently. Throughout the piece, she intersperses “Vagina Facts,” short encyclopedic references about the

Salem witch trial that identified a woman's clitoris as "the devil's teat" (31-32), or the statistics on worldwide ritual female circumcision (61-62), or the nineteenth-century American practice of performing clitoridectomies to "cure" masturbation (63-64). In a monologue entitled "The Little Coochi Snorcher that Could," Ensler talks of a young girl raped at age ten. In "My Vagina was My Village," Ensler assumes the voice of a Bosnian rape camp victim (the subject of Ensler's 1998 play, *Necessary Targets*). This monologue begins with bucolic, if somewhat sentimentalized descriptions of the interview subject's vagina before the camps, as in "soft, pink fields," "cow mooing," "Soft piece of blond straw," "goat bells," "wild autumn field songs," "Sun baked stones," and finally, "My vagina a live wet water village" (57-59). But these images are interrupted by post-traumatic language: "*There is something between my legs. I do not know what it is. I do not know where it is. I do not touch. Not now. Not anymore. Not since*" (57, emphasis original). The moment of violence itself is described in lapsarian terms:

*Not since the soldiers put a long thick rifle inside me.
So cold, the steel rod canceling my heart. Don't know
whether they're going to fire it or shove it through my
spinning brain. Six of them, monstrous doctors with
black masks shoving bottles up me, too. There were
sticks, and the end of a broom. . . . Not since I heard the
skin tear and made lemon screeching sounds, not since
a piece of my vagina came off in my hand, a part of the
lip, now one side of the lip is completely gone. . . . Not
since they took turns for seven days smelling like feces
and smoked meat, they left their dirty sperm inside me.*

(58-59, emphasis original)

The pivotal "not since" suggests that physical violence is directly related to a sense of the body's connection to the self—moving from a "wet water village" to "something

between my legs”—a dichotomy echoed in “Coochi Snorcher” in the difference between a “Bad-luck zone” (72) and “a kind of heaven” (75).

This overt physical violence is underscored by the emotional violence against women’s bodies that takes place more routinely: An early monologue entitled “Hair” tells of a woman’s negotiation with her soon-to-be estranged husband over the unshaved state of her pubic hair; she shaves it in an attempt to renew his sexual interest in her, and he responds with marital infidelity. “Coochi Snorcher” also talks of the messages sent to little girls about their bodies, leaving the persona of that piece wondering if her vagina is going to fall out, or scratch off. In the monologue entitled, “I was Twelve. My Mother Slapped Me,” Ensler compiles women’s recollections of their mothers’ (typically horrified) reactions to their first periods. It is in moments like this that her effort to provide a space for identification for her audience comes into play. By listing a range of scenarios, Ensler implicitly gives permission for her audience to imagine their own first menses, imagining themselves as part of the community of women that Ensler imagines her piece creating. This effect is underscored by the communal nature of the introduction to this particular monologue, which explicitly invokes a choral voice as its mechanism. She writes, “I interviewed many women about menstruation. There was a choral thing that began to occur, a kind of collective song. Women echoed each other. I let the voices bleed into one another. I got lost in the bleeding” (33). This statement implicates Ensler’s voice in the chorus, but also acknowledges the multiplicity of other voices that populate it, which suggests that Ensler is positioning herself here as a cipher for her audience: if

she can get “lost in bleeding,” her audience can similarly interpolate their own voice into this chorus.

But the effect on community of these depictions of emotional violence is complicated by the play’s engagement with the symbolic violence that Ensler identifies as even more pervasive. This symbolic, or discursive violence, can be best described as the distancing of the woman from the vagina—a sense of disconnection between the vagina and the self that Gloria Steinem, in her foreword, marks “the ‘down-there’ generation” (vii). Indeed, Ensler’s opening monologue concludes with a litany of names that women use to describe their vaginas: “pussycat . . . pooki . . . powderbox, derrière, a poochie, a poopi, a peepe, a poopelu, a poonani, a pal, and a piche,” are just the p’s. Other highlights include, “coochi snorcher,” “nappy dugout,” and “split knish” (6). All of these names obscure the reality of the vagina, and this list confirms Ensler’s suspicion that her interviewees are victims of discursive violence. These terms represent an attempt at distancing, at creating words so unmimetic (although “split knish” is descriptive in an unsettling way), so unconnected to the part itself, that we can speak them without really meaning anything at all.

This metaphorical distancing is—after the more egregious instances of sexual violence—Ensler’s major target. One monologue, for example, gives voice to a woman who began to think of her vagina as furniture. In another piece, entitled “The Flood,” Ensler illustrates the distancing process through the phrase “down there,” which Steinem suggests defines a whole generation of women’s attitudes about their bodies. Constructing a monologue from interviews with women between the ages of 65 and 75, she begins, “Down there? I haven’t been down there since 1953. . . . No,

no, it's a cellar down there. It's very damp, clammy. You don't want to go down there. Trust me. You'd get sick. Suffocating. Very nauseating. The smell of clamminess and the mildew and everything. Whew! Smells unbearable. Gets in your clothes" (25). This imagining of the vagina as a cellar—as an unpleasant, even menacing, remote space that has nothing to do with the rest of the house, particularly the parts of the house you show people—is exactly the same distancing that is going on with “pooki,” “peepe,” and “poopelu,” only here it is more specific. Not only does this language distance the vagina, it dehumanizes it as well: “It's not like a person who speaks. It stopped being a thing that talked a long time ago. It's a place. A place you don't go. It's closed up, under the house. It's down there” (30). More significantly, the woman of this monologue didn't always think about her vagina as a mere place: “It stopped being a thing that talked,” both suggests that some moment of violence (as in the two monologues above) facilitated the distancing, and signifies the degree to which the body is constructible as a discursive sign. That is, since the vagina was once humanized as a thing that talked, but was later conceptualized as an abstract “down there,” we can see how much the corporeally real vagina is still subject to linguistic construction.

While much of Enslar's politics seem to evoke cultural feminisms and the era of consciousness-raising, her seeming acknowledgement of the constructibility of the body is in keeping with more materialist feminist theory. In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler explicitly argues for a notion of corporeality “not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call matter” (Butler 9, emphasis hers). In other

words, Butler argues that our notions of the body are, like gender, constructed over time so as to be regarded as fixed, as unassailable. And, it seems, it is in this process that *The Vagina Monologues* seems to intervene, reacting specifically against the construction of the female body as a site, a surface, an object. Enslar identifies the cyclical nature of the problem that her piece addresses: Violence against women necessarily objectifies women's bodies, constructing the sexual body as a de-humanized other. These moments of violence beget an internalized objectification, a distancing of the self from the sexual body. And this distancing leads to silence about violence, which in turn permits violence to occur. Enslar's goal, then, is to combat violence by revising the discourse that typically poses only objectification and silence as acceptable responses to women's bodies. To combat this discourse, Enslar proposes revising the construction of "vagina" to work against the distancing, objectifying and silencing effects of sexual violence: she identifies the metaphorical distance women have been forced to set up between themselves and their vaginas, as we have already seen. And as we will see below, she personifies the vagina as a way of reclaiming it, and finally, sets the vagina up as a metonymy for the identity of the woman who houses that vagina.

The personification of the vagina takes place at first in playful ways, such as the monologue built around various answers to the question, "If your vagina got dressed, what would it wear?" The responses range from "an electrical shock device to keep unwanted strangers away" (16), to "a bikini" (17), to "a male tuxedo" (15). The question itself anthropomorphizes what has previously been made inanimate, and places the vagina squarely in the realm of "human things." This monologue then

gives way to the even more effective personification that asks what the vagina would say. Limited to a few words, these responses are telling ranging from statements of sexual exchange—“Lick me,” “No, over there,” and “Yum, Yum” (19-20)—to statements that suggest a more total sense of the self—“I want,” “Brave choice,” “Find me,” and “Embrace me” (19-21). The personification of the speaking vagina works as a mechanism by which the vagina is not only humanized but can be connected to the silenced self that corresponds with the masculinist construction of the objectified vagina. The voice of “The Flood” identifies her vagina implicitly as something that once spoke, but has since stopped. The persona of “My Angry Vagina”⁴² is represented entirely in her vagina’s voice, making clear that her vagina is speaking *for* her, not in addition to her. And hence, *The Vagina Monologues* can be read not simply as monologues about women’s bodies, but as monologues *by* the bodies themselves.

But while Ensler seems to drawing upon constructivist theories of the body to manipulate the discourse around vaginas, her move to metonymically align the sexual body with the self turns into a far more retrograde feminist stance, one that uses “biology is a construction” only to return to “biology is destiny.” That is, the move to give voice to vaginas turns into a move that completely collapses self and sex. Alisa Solomon of *The Village Voice* writes, “That self—the connection between sex organ and self—is what Ensler’s after. . . . And in doing so, Ensler contests the lurid and objectifying ways in which women’s privates are typically made public . . . she does

⁴² “My Angry Vagina” does not appear in the 1998 Villard edition, although it has appeared in her solo performance, specifically on the December 11, 1998 performance at the Studio Theatre, which I attended.

nothing less than reclaim women's ownership of our most intimate, incendiary selves" (98). But this ownership of the self is expressed only in terms of the female-sexed body. "The Little Coochi Snorcher that Could," contains a narrative of a seven-year-old being punched between the legs by an older boy: "It feels like he breaks my entire self" (70). "The Vagina Workshop" speaks through the voice of a student in one of famed sex educator Betty Dodson's seminars.⁴³ Situated at the center of the piece, the monologue is a composite of nine interviews with women who had their first orgasms in these workshops, and encapsulates Ensler's formulation of the reclamation process as distancing, reclaiming, and ultimately self-identifying. The persona begins, "I had always perceived my vagina as an independent entity, spinning like a star in its own galaxy. . . . I did not think of my vagina in practical or biological terms. I did not, for example, see it as a part of my body, something between my legs, attached to me" (44). But the process continues by collapsing the vagina with the woman. She says, "And then, without looking, with my eyes still closed, I put my finger on what had suddenly become me" (50).

While this narrated reclamation process embodies the ethos of 70s cultural feminism's loveliest moments, it also speaks of a more dangerous essentialism also associated with this ideology. If the vagina is the self, then the perceived biological functions of the vagina can be similarly used to mark the female body, an essentializing process to which *The Vagina Monologues* succumbs. So while the sexual pleasure of the vagina is marked in the "climax" of the piece—a chorus of

⁴³ Interestingly enough, Betty Dodson publicly berates *The Vagina Monologues* and Ensler's portrayal of the Dodson workshops in particular. See her website at <http://www.bettydodson.com/vaginano.htm> for the entire critique, made on a few of the same grounds as this one.

orgasmic moans that occurs near the end of the performance—its reproductive function follows immediately. The final monologue describes Ensler’s own experience witnessing the birth of her granddaughter, during which she lauds the vagina’s ability to function as “a sacred vessel” (106) that can “die for us and bleed and bleed us into this difficult wondrous world” (108). While this casting of the vagina’s ultimate function as birth offers an uncomfortably heterosexist teleology and closure to the last few monologues in an otherwise non-linear, open piece, this specific image of a vessel made sacred by its reproductive functions perhaps more troubling. Here, the text completely gives way to Monique Wittig’s critique of the naturalization of womanhood:

Not only do we naturalize history, but also consequently naturalize the social phenomena which express our oppression, making change impossible. For example, instead of seeing giving birth as a forced social production, we see it as a ‘natural,’ ‘biological’ process, forgetting that in our societies births are planned (demography), forgetting that we ourselves are programmed to produce children, while this is the only social activity ‘short of war’ that presents such a great danger of death. (104)

By linking the self, as expressed by the voice, to the sexual body, expressed in terms of the vagina, Ensler naturalizes the sign “woman,” even as she acknowledges the constructedness of the sign “vagina.”

This naturalization of “woman” suggests that the community that Ensler seeks to build is a universalized “community of vaginas” that, while it collapses sex into identity, also seems to collapse divergent identities into an artificially uniform

community of “women.” In Ensler’s solo performance,⁴⁴ this effect is heightened, since hers is the only body offered up as representation of this community, and it bears striking similarity to the body of her most common audience member—female, white, middle-class, cosmopolitan. Moreover, in performance, Ensler wears clothes designed to suggest her body as a cipher: plain black dress, simple shoes and hair. Blocking for each monologue is minimal, with Ensler sitting on a stool in front of a microphone. Of course, while Ensler does make some vocal modulations (suggested in the text by short bits of secondary text like “Jewish, Queens Accent” (25), “a slight English accent” (43), or “Southern woman of color” (69)) these modulations only suggest types, and not separate identities the way that Smith’s named, costumed, virtuosic portrayals do. These monologues exist as the only evidence of each speaker’s individual identity, and even that is often revised into Ensler’s distinctive rhythms.

We might even suggest that Ensler’s revisions of the words themselves minimize the potential utopian effects of the sequential communal voice. While each monologue suggests a different persona, they are all prefaced by Ensler’s own voice, which often reveals the degree to which the monologues we see are inspired by or pieced together from these different voices. The uniformity of the rhythms of the lines, the word choices, and repetition of themes across monologues, indicate at the least an active common interviewer, and almost certainly a singular “I” behind the “we.” This subtle shift from a sequential communal voice to something often like a

⁴⁴ Of course, this effect is minimized with the establishment of an onstage community of actors, especially in the numerous campus and benefit performances that occur each February, but since the piece was initially conceived as a one-woman piece, the correlation between the politics of text and performance cannot be coincidental.

simultaneous one, and the ambiguity that marks those shifts seems in line with Susan S. Lanser's caveat:

While all narration is of course limited to and by the voices who tell it, this limitation may be obscured in communal narrative situations precisely by narrative plurality; whatever similarities emerge across differences, whatever spaces are not opened to dialogue, are bound to be reinforced. Here indeed, is the insidious underside of the single author's power to masquerade as a self-reinforcing community. (266)

And with the differences between these voices consistently elided by Ensler's performance, by the narrative voice, and by the thematic equation of self and sex, the larger community that the audience is allowed to imagine themselves joining offers few realistic points of identification, and cannot account for otherness within that community.

Indeed, men—the only obviously constructed “other” in the play—are most often imagined as rapists, or at least adulterers. And when represented positively, they still only reinforce traditional patriarchal practices. Ensler tells of a fourteen-year-old girl who was born without a vagina; her father promised to get her “*the best homemade pussy in America*” (83) and he did, and was apparently proud of his daughter—and her pussy. But while this particular vignette can be easily seen sympathetically as a father's willingness to help his daughter, it also signals his extreme investment in his daughter's place in the reproductive order, since the girl's husband will apparently “know we had it made specially for him” (84). This line speaks not only the father's assumption of his daughter's heterosexuality, but also overtly signals her body as an object of exchange, literally having a vagina made for

the future husband, not particularly for the girl herself. And there is the story of Bob, an average-looking guy who transforms a woman's perception of her vagina from furniture to something much more magical, simply by looking at it, not just in a glance, but engaging in a prolonged, enrapt study of it, its folds, its contours, its depth (Enslar, performance).⁴⁵ Clearly, Enslar seems to posit Bob as someone for heterosexual men to emulate, never mind the degree to which the enrapt study of the vagina is as blatant an example as I can imagine of the male gaze as penetrative, recalling Laura Mulvey's famous implication of film in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

In short, Enslar's piece seems on the surface to be a doing important feminist work. However, by co-opting the "we" of the communal voice, and casting it as a uniform, essentialized image of "woman," *The Vagina Monologues* frustrates much of the utopian possibility for oral history and feminist politics. Nonetheless, the play remains wildly popular, and popular with prominent public feminists like Steinem, Katha Pollit, and Alisa Solomon, all of whom have published encomia on *The Vagina Monologues*. And indeed they seem to be picking up on what Enslar *seeks* to accomplish: by casting "woman" as a community, Enslar unifies a broad range of voices into a singular one, one that responds loudly to the silence that typically surrounds sexual violence. But in doing so, she writes out the notion of community's ability create dialogue that comes with recognizing sameness alongside radical difference. In creating a strong, unified voice in opposition to violence, she has almost completely elided the multiple identities that make up that voice, thus

⁴⁵ This monologue also does not appear in the printed text.

objectifying difference in much the same way that “woman” is so typically objectified.

Susan Snyder’s *Size Matters: The Writing on the Stall*

Taking cues from graffiti found on women’s restroom walls, Susan Snyder’s *Size Matters* is a non-linear ensemble piece that stages the “monologues” and “dialogues” of these found texts. *Size Matters* is not precisely an oral history, since its material is neither oral nor entirely collected from outside sources. Instead, the one-act is comprised primarily of words and issues found in the restrooms on the college campus of Snyder’s undergraduate years, and supplemented with material that grew out of workshops with the actors who premiered the work on that same campus. In 1994, the play was given a reading by The Theatre Conspiracy in Washington D.C, soon to be one of two feminist theatre companies in the area. Even though Snyder confines her text to the gendered space of the women’s bathroom (Six unnamed women inhabit the space), the community of the piece is configured neither as “all women” like Ensler’s, nor even as solely women, since the dialogue also integrates three male voices. Instead, by thematizing isolation, anonymity and erasure as dangerous to both these texts and to dialogue in general, Snyder uses the form of the oral history to imagine dialogue, community and connection as a source of empowerment for the women (and men) of her play.

The action of *Size Matters* begins where much bathroom stall reading begins, with crass, flippant sex talk: “Is there such a thing as too big?” asks one woman, reading from the walls. Responses then come from all corners, with the attendant catty remarks offset by earnest responses, immediately creating a dialogue that is at

once marked by anonymity, isolation and anger that seems to grow out of this disconnectedness. While the dialogue continues, three men wait outside the bathroom door. The exchanges inside range from sex to more traumatic experiences recorded on the walls: eating disorders, a mother's death, self-mutilation, rape, and the anxiety of being attacked. As the exchanges continue, they build to a frenzy of shouted declarations, sometimes directed at an earlier statement, sometimes made in complete isolation. Underneath these statements, however, is the fear that the words will be erased, that the anonymity and isolation under which these texts were produced will ultimately keep them from surviving (indeed, most of the ephemeral texts from which this play was taken have long since been painted over or scrubbed from the walls). As a remedy, *Size Matters*' first female character proposes that instead of writing on the walls, that the inhabitants of the bathroom and its outskirts write on her, recording not only their words but also their identities on the flesh of, but more importantly for the creation of valid community, on the experience of another person.

While Ensler directly targets violence against women, Snyder seems more interested in the cultural constrictions that underlie these moments of violence and that permit them to be spoken of only in the confines of a bathroom stall. The first of these constrictions appears to be the isolation under which each text on the bathroom wall is constructed. The play opens with five of the women in a heated exchange around the size of male penises; throughout this discussion and into the next several minutes of the play, "2" says nothing, opting instead to write frantically on the walls. As she writes, other women ask how long she'll be there, and the men on the outside

impatiently assert that they're waiting. Yet while these indications are made that this character is connected in some way to the people outside the stall, none of these people would ever link this text to her, and she will never connect with those women who follow behind with their own responses on the wall. This isolation suggests that the utopian conception of community that oral history plays seem to work toward is not initially at play here, and this very condition of disconnectedness is similarly related to the anonymity of these texts. Near the end of the play, "1" connects an earlier monologue with a real person, a concrete identity, and is met with the defensive response, "You don't know that! You don't know me!" (31).

This desire to write without being known, however, is connected for this play to a loss of actual identity, and moreover to the possibility of erasure. Not only is there a distinct concern about the loss of identity here, there is the more concrete, emblematic concern of the words themselves being lost. In one scene, a rape awareness sticker is partially removed from a wall, the explanation being that, "A Hispanic cleaning lady who doesn't speak English well has been instructed to remove all stickers and graffiti" (26). The immediate response, "We're graffiti?" (27), signals the metonymic connection between these texts and their authors, already forced into anonymity. Later "1" asks what happens when the walls are washed or painted, and another character responds simply, "I disappear" (32). This play asserts, then, that the isolation that surrounds the production of these women's texts condemns them, and by extension, their authors, to anonymity. This constant threat of complete elision can only be remedied by replacing isolation with community and connection.

Indeed, *Size Matters* marks the conditions of this textual production by a lack of any meaningful connection between voices, any actual community that might be said to exist in the women's bathrooms. Throughout the play, however, the space is identified as a *potential* site for connection. Male characters, for example, fixate throughout the play on the questions, "What do they do in there?" and "Why do they always go in pairs?" (29). These questions are in part answered with a nostalgic rumination on the community that seemed to exist in the high school bathroom as opposed to the more dysfunctional one that appears in more adult settings: "You sneak a smoke, or put on make-up. And hear about sex. Cram for a test. Hide for a while" (30). This character constructs the bathrooms of her memory not only as a haven, but as a place for exchange. The same spaces for these adult and college-aged women, however, find them apparently hiding from all connection. And yet by making the isolation implicit in these bathrooms the only safe space for expression, the cultural codes that govern the characters of *Size Matters* sentence them to anonymity. So, as it is constructed through the texts left behind in these spaces, the community that does exist in the women's bathroom is now dysfunctional at best, and in the play, this dysfunction can be seen as a mechanism by which women's voices are elided.

At the outset, of course, there is a distinct sense that the community here can only be a gendered one, which reinforces the false dichotomy of inside and outside that mark female and male bodies. The male characters approach the bathroom with a mixture of bafflement and sexual objectification. Early on, the men are constructed as penetrative, intrusive. The first man to speak responds to a claim that "there is

little variation in the size of erect penises in human males” (1), with “Then you haven’t seen me”(2) as he leans in the door of the bathroom and is subsequently pushed out. By constructing the male, fascinated with the size of his own penis, as a penetrating object that must be rejected from the female space, Snyder initially seems to be constructing her ideal community as female, a problem that plagues the politics of Ensler’s text. The gendered nature of this community seems to eliminate all of the male voices on the stage from ever engaging in the community that the play eventually lauds. Moreover, this bathroom space is also cut off from the public space that the men inhabit. And even this space is compartmentalized by the isolation that foregrounds its textual production: voices are cut off from one another, by the very walls that carry their texts and by the passage of time.

However, Snyder identifies this isolation as part of the central paradox of both the play and the spaces upon which it is based: while the circumstances of textual production do indicate total privacy, there is simultaneously an effort at connection here, and ultimately a real dialogue grows out of these texts. The playwright tells of returning to bathrooms that she had already researched just to revisit lines of argument, to follow the conversation (Snyder, personal interview). And as in many of these plays, the notion of dialogue becomes a central idea. At one level, we might see the central moments of these texts as confessional monologues that express the dark fears and experience that punctuate these women’s experiences. The tome that “2” writes for the first ten minutes of the play originally comes out as a long monologue about the voices she hears in her own mind, compelling her to binge and then vomit:

That fucking voice. “Binge—you need food, you have to stuff your face and then vomit. You’ll stop tomorrow.” My saner side yells “FUCKYOU! SHUT UP!” My sanity is so weak. So much weaker. I want to die. I want to kill myself. But I don’t. I give in. OK? Ok. I give in.

(Snyder, *Size Matters* 8)

But what builds around this and other monologues is a sea of responses and responses to responses, so that the texts that begin as anonymous monologues become the impetus for a polyvocal exchange.

Part of the effect of this dialogue is that it refocuses the community of women that the notion of the women’s bathroom initially seems to propose into the more specific community of women who actually wrote on these walls. In other words, these are not imagined dialogues between any two hypothetical women, but pieces of real dialogue that occurred on Snyder’s campus. This shift from a universal gendered “community”—such as the one that Ensler imagines—to one that is marked by actual voices and not composite voices allows *Size Matters* to imagine difference within this community. Of course, because the texts themselves are anonymous, this is not difference along racial or ethnic lines. But the difference that does arise appears through ideas, ideologies, and dogmas. Take, for example, the crescendo of voices that serves as the de facto climax of the play:

6
Sex or no sex -- show your responsibility.

2
Don't let men use you.

4
(*coming out from the stall, to 6*)
You're confusing "responsibility"
with "celibacy."

5
What if we're using them?

1
(jumping in)
All birth control is subject to failure.

5
A woman without a man is
like a fish without a bicycle.

3 Men suck but hopefully well. **6** Abstain until abortion is an uncontested right.

4 The correct quote is a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle. **1** I love Laura and I don't care what you straight ones think!

3
Fucking queer.

5 You're going to hell! **6** I'm happy with my man and you would be too if you'd chill out on the manbashing unless you're still dating boys. **2** Love and sex are beautiful!

1
Or bicycles.

4 But AIDS isn't, get tested! **3** Get out of my bedroom! **1** AIDS doesn't discriminate. (Snyder, *Size Matters* 34).

5
Why? Everybody else is there.

This section alone expresses dissenting views on AIDS, pre-marital sex, homosexuality, and even feminism. The willingness to challenge even the ideologies that form the basis for this play on which the construction of the play is based suggests the degree to which dialogue is privileged, and suggests that the features of this dialogue include a freedom to express a wide range of viewpoints, achieving an exchange that marks the most utopian of communities. But in the space of the restroom, these characters can only feel this freedom through anonymity and isolation that this writing allows.

While dialogue and difference typically prevail in this text, the one moment of unison in *Size Matters* (as opposed to the many suggested moments in *The Vagina Monologues*) comes after one character reveals that she's been raped, at which point a growing chorus begins to recite the rape sticker found on bathroom walls on campuses nationwide. The text describes this chorus as "a mechanical chant, a litany that is not really comforting" (26), and the purpose of this stage direction seems to be to represent on the one hand the facelessness of this attempt at rape education. The sticker affirms that "It does not matter if you were smoking pot or injecting heroin" (31), engaging in foreplay, or acquainted with the attacker, but Snyder remembers that she and her friends felt that this was somehow untrue⁴⁶—these factors *did* matter to many college women, and their own perception that mitigating factors might preclude an encounter from being labeled rape served to keep the drone of the sticker from even registering to the casual passerby (Snyder, personal interview). Yet the pervasiveness indicated by this chanting voice also indicates something akin to what Ensler is aiming for in her conception of the communal voice. While this information may seem monotonous, its language is empowering. It leaves no room for waffling on definitions of rape, and makes no attempt to place blame on the victim. Instead, the chant becomes a moment of empowerment that quickly shifts to rage when the voices stop and one character discovers the removal of the sticker. The elision of

⁴⁶ The entire text of that Snyder quotes is as follows: "Rape is defined as sexual intercourse against a woman's will and without her consent. No one is allowed to force you to have sex with them for any reason. It does not matter if you were smoking pot or injecting heroin. It does not matter if you were kissing, petting or having oral sex. It does not matter if you know the man as an acquaintance or if you have ever or are presently dating him or if you have ever had sex with him before. If you are raped, do not shower or wash. If you were forced to have sex against your will, go to . . ." (26).

even this most basic affirmation of women's rights signals the greatest danger to this tenuous community: the danger of erasure.

Snyder proposes the remedy to this danger through "1" who, at the end of the play, demands that instead of writing on the walls, the others write on her instead. Here the writing on the body is not an inscription of gender, as it is so often configured, but rather is the trace of a live connection, of actual experience. Snyder sees this impulse to connect beyond the walls of the bathroom doors as first a remedy to the isolation inherent in the compartmentalized community of the bathroom. With that connection comes a construction of identity that surpasses what is left behind in writing. The first character to write on the body echoes the first (anonymous) line of the play—"Is there such a thing as too big?" (35)—and is promptly asked, "That was you?" suggesting that already a deeper connection had been made than was possible through the original graffiti. And while Derrida might object to this privileging of live connection over writing, this is not just a shift from a perhaps false dichotomy of absence to presence, it also shifts the writing woman from the object position—the written material, the trace—to the subject position—the writer (Snyder, personal interview). This shift to the subject position for Snyder's voices stands in marked contrast to Ensler's, since the voices in the vagina monologues seem to sacrifice difference for the sake of subjectivity. Snyder, however, acknowledges this difference by asserting the space of writing as one that differs from the outside world, because in writing, it's okay "to feel fat or be gay or have opinions or be raped or scared or sad or strong" (33). And so the characters of *Size Matters*' from the bathrooms are allowed voices and individual identities that are not configured as

mutually exclusive, precisely because they are working to defy erasure. When the possibility that writing on the body will similarly be washed away, “1” responds, “Yes. I’ll wash my hands, my clothes, my body but I won’t wash you off. If you told me, it would stay with me, change me but you don’t speak or can’t...so keep writing but write it on me. Stay in my skin, in my blood. You won’t wash away. You are stronger than soap and water, you are stronger than clean. You won’t be left here and you won’t be wiped away” (Snyder, *Size Matters* 34).

Certainly, this call to “write on me” is a less-than-realistic alternative to bathroom graffiti, but it stands as a metaphor for a larger call to dialogue, which speaks to the formal revision of the past that this play represents. That is, much of this text is “real,” and the monologues taken from the walls are someone’s lived experience of the past; yet it is the past marked by the culturally dysfunctional circumstances that enforce anonymity and erasure that *Size Matters* struggles against. The playwright acknowledges that this play is itself a fantasy, despite the fact that so much of the material can be perceived as “true.” But it is a formal fantasy, a recontextualization of the material found in women’s rooms. By first giving voice to these texts and then taking the next small step of introducing human connection the play offers real dialogue and real community as a utopian alternative to the circumstances of their original inscription.

It is also worth noting that the community of *Size Matters* is configured out of a real community on Snyder’s college campus, and not out of an imagined community marked by gender. Indeed, the play initially seems to reinforce an inside/outside binary, with the bathroom in essence symbolizing the female body.

Male voices in the play do reinforce cultural stereotypes: responses to the character with an eating disorder include “Our dinner reservations are for 7:00. I hope you’re ready to party . . . And could you wear that dress? You know the one” (10) and “if you make her believe it’s a disease, she’ll never take responsibility” (13). But the men also provide support for characters in the space of the bathroom, for example, offering the character afraid of attack a walk home. *Size Matters*, then, is able to imagine men as part of the same community as its female characters. This refusal to generalize the categories of “woman” or “man” grows out of a sense that both categories are populated by individuals with voices and identities, and is rooted in the connection that the author makes between gender roles and the specifics of the community with which she is engaged. By denying an essential connection between gender and community, the play encourages its male characters to engage in the dialogue, and even, at the end of the play, to write alongside the women of the play, even if we never hear those voices. Snyder recalls draft critiques that pointed out her lack of research in men’s rooms, but found that the material rarely ascended beyond the lewd and obscene (personal interview). Accordingly, she got her material for the male characters (and additional material for her female characters) from ensemble workshops with the cast. This drive to incorporate the community of the cast with the community of the play suggests the political uses of both form and process.

Size Matters, then, seems to exemplify the utopian possibilities for feminist form. It taps into the ability of the oral history to construct dialogue and create community, and works in service of a revision of the discourse that avoids the trappings of masculinist authority and elision of the women’s identities. Moreover,

its narrative features follow its rhetorical strategy. The play, like so many oral histories, not only reads in a non-linear fashion, it was constructed in a non-linear fashion, with individual segments written at different times, and connected only after dialogue was workshopped for that purpose (Snyder, personal interview). Moreover, the play's rhythms mimic those of the source text. Certainly, the writing on a bathroom wall defies linear narrative, constructed as it is in a spatial fashion that is defined more by randomness than by perfect linearity. Instead of a coherent narrative on a single wall, fragments and snippets appear, with responses, and responses to responses, growing out of them. Snyder tells of finding the material that made up the section on eating disorders: The original desperate comment was written in a spot on the wall, and then responses literally spiraled around it, and responses to those responses spiraled even further. The end result is a dizzying cacophony of texts revolving around one idea but ultimately rendering impossible any chronological reconstruction of their inscription. The result in the text of *Size Matters* is similar, with one monologue beginning the segment, and responses overlapping and coming from all directions, sometimes responding to the first speech, but often in dialogue with one another, thus signaling the messiness of the issue even as they avoid imposing a single solution on the matter.

Size Matters is only a 30-minute one-act, and its box office receipts pale in comparison to *The Vagina Monologues*' ticket sales, yet it concisely represents the possibilities of oral history to enact activist work, using community as a space for feminist education, and modeling that ideology through its formal features. Its substance works to combat the social conditions that enforce anonymity, isolation,

and erasure as conditions of women's speech; it holds up community and connection as a palliative for those conditions; and it provides a space for the development of that community by fostering dialogue and encouraging connection. By using a form that implicitly carries the same values, Snyder has created a play that practices its own prescriptions.

Conclusion

As texts by Anna Deavere Smith, Emily Mann, Moisés Kaufman and Susan Snyder all demonstrate, many of the formal narrative features of oral history seem to carry with them an implicit set of values that are readily influenced by the textual critiques of feminism, and are uniquely suited to progressive rhetoric. They presume a non-linear structure, they privilege polyvocality and dialogue, and they radically re-imagine subjectivity by positing community as a subject that is at once unified as a locus of dialogue, and fragmented against itself in the different voices of that dialogue. In building on these features, these plays seem almost to necessarily engender a critique of monologic, hegemonic speech and narrative, and furthermore offer up an implicit critique of the unified subject that genres like biography and autobiography struggle with. And yet it is impossible to say that even this form is *necessarily* radical or progressive just in its features. For as Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* demonstrates, even a text that purports to feminist rhetoric can reinforce the very values that it imagines itself working against. In many ways, this genre serves as a test case for the entire argument made by this project: feminist plays, by using the formal features of generic categories, are implicitly making political arguments. And yet each of these forms—autobiography, biography, or oral

history—can easily be used to promote oppressive or authoritative political ideologies. Nonetheless, these forms have distinct rhetorical possibilities, and when the formal features are used in concert with feminist ideology, we find consistent and even predictable rhetorical effects on the audiences of these plays. That oral history serves to produce community through a formal discursive revision of recent history speaks not only to the rhetorical potential of the genre, but also to the connections that can be made across progressive agendas, and the connections that feminist theatre can make with the theatrical practitioners of other oppositional discourses.

Conclusion:
Performing Authorship, Performing Lives

This study examines the relationship between the performing female body, the historical female body, and the narrative ties that bind them together. Along the course of such an examination, however, we must contend with notions of subjectivity, agency, objectification, historical truth, narrative voice, community, authorship, and power. Yet lest we forget that central dialectic—performing body and historical body—let us consider an example from each of the three genres of this study to fully illustrate the richness of the field of life writing in feminist performance, and its potential as a site for powerful political engagement.

As an example of autobiographical performance, Holly Hughes' *Preaching to the Perverted* relies on an essential correlation between the body of experience, the authorial voice, and the performing self. The embodied experience that she narrates explicitly involves the sexed and sexualized female body, and the degree to which that body was made into a public spectacle. Because the narrative relies upon the speaking "I," the autodiegetic turn of her performance is crucial in supplying subjectivity as a response to the objectification, the feeling of being watched and judged, that the NEA Four controversy generated. Ultimately, by performing her own narrative, by verifying her experience through the presence of the same sexed and sexualized body that had been held up for vilification, Hughes reclaims her body and her experience from the discourse that sought to marginalize it. The performance could not have been effective had someone else performed it, in part because the narrating "I" relied on an audience expectation of truth that ultimately offered Hughes the political power

to speak. In this case, subject, author, and performer are collapsed, because the truth-value of the narrative depends upon the truth-value of the narrative *voice* as its verifying lynchpin.

Preaching to the Perverted, then, requires a congruence between historical body, narrating voice, and performing body. In contrast, April De Angelis' *Playhouse Creatures* does not—and indeed cannot—require a similar congruence, since the subject of the biographical inquiry, Nell Gwyn, is long since irretrievable. Her historical body is literally dead, her authorial voice silenced, her performing body a footnote in history. And yet De Angelis' narrative carries a political weight that is comparable to Hughes' performance, since even as *Playhouse Creatures* describes the working conditions of the first professional actresses on the English stage, she implicates the working conditions of the present-day actresses who perform the play. In this case, the image of Nell Gwyn is radically dialectical, evoking at once Gwyn's experience, De Angelis' voice, and the actress' body. This is drama's narrative third person, a representation of an other through the lens of performance. As such, the expectations of historical value are diminished, and what De Angelis' voice reclaims is less the specific experiences of Nell Gwyn than the radical nature of the performances with which Gwyn stylized her own body in history. Therefore, a contemporary actress can stylize her own body through the image of Gwyn, thus interrogating both history and the present through the very conflicts that such a dialectical image on stage presents. While the play cannot literally reclaim the historically significant body of Nell Gwyn, the groundbreaking performances she enacted can be disembodied, taken off and put on by actresses and ultimately perhaps

audience members; such a third-person performance as staged feminist biography makes this process obvious.

So while autobiographical performance demands that experience, voice and performance all coincide in one body, biography plays virtually presuppose that each player in the representation of history is different. Yet both of these genres generally feature a one-to-one correspondence between the historical body and the performing body. The third genre considered by this study, staged oral history, makes no such claims. In some ways, the form suggests the radical identity slippage that autobiographical performers often aspire to. Here, emphasis on what Anna Deavere Smith calls “the travel from the self to the other” (*Fires in the Mirror*, xxvi), the shifting of the performing body from one narrative voice to another, provides precisely the sort of empathetic, communal, and democratic approach to representing a broad array of experiences that staged oral history promises. And yet at the same time, as I have suggested, the form can also provide the façade for a virtually invisible exercise of power over the voices that are represented.

Take the case of Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*. On its surface, the play seems to be precisely the utopian chorus that oral history seems to make possible—in this case, a chorus of women’s voices against domestic violence. However, close examination of the text and its construction reveals a fairly uniform presentation of a white, middle-class woman’s values and perspectives masked by the illusion of diversity. While Smith works hard to mimic the vocal intonations of her interview subjects, Ensler’s solo performances collapse her hundreds of interviews into her own voice (indeed, the interviews themselves are often merely inspiration for

the monologues that Ensler writes). Here the singularity of the performing body (many diverse bodies collapsed into a white middle-class body) and the performing voice (many diverse voices collapsed into a white middle-class voice) undermines the multiplicity of experiences the playwright draws upon. But this effect is lessened when, every February 14, hundreds of college-age women across America perform Ensler's play, since the performing "I" that hides behind these monologues is replaced by a similarly diverse chorus of voices and bodies, coming closer to representing the choral effect that the play purports to present. So while autobiographical performance demands that experience, voice and performing body coincide, the progressive efficacy of *The Vagina Monologues* depends on as little coincidence as possible, since the consolidation of narrative power in Ensler's solo performances thwarts the most radical politics of her play.

These three contrasting examples tell us much about the breadth of theoretical configuration that field of staged feminist life writing can represent. Let me close this study, then, with a brief consideration of the challenges that these examples pose to notions that apply not only to feminist performances, but also to much larger concepts of authorship and political presence. I have suggested that the relationship between the real self and the performative self of autobiographical performance implicates notions of authorship in ways for which existing theories don't fully account. Certainly a simplistic understanding of the death of the author is undermined by a reliance on the physical presentness of the author's body (as opposed to another speaker's) in autobiographical performance; anyone other than Holly Hughes performing *Preaching to the Perverted* would fall flat, even Karen Finley, who like

Hughes was part of the same Supreme Court case. And Foucault's author-function only partially explains the imbricated nature of these multiple conflated identities, since his notion of authorship seems to account for identity slippages not intentionally created by an author or performer. While none of these genres suggests a return to a pre-new-critical one-to-one-to-one understanding of the relationship of the body that experiences, the body that writes, and the body that performs, theories that deny the importance of the identities of the body of experience and the writing body are confounded by these genres.

Of course, since biographical drama ultimately posits that transgressive performances (often transgressive performances of writing itself) can and must be recovered without the historical body that first performed them, we cannot harbor the old humanist notion that the author and the performing voice are precisely the same. Surely the difference between Isabelle Eberhardt, Timberlake Wertenbaker, and the actress in Wertenbaker's play help us tease out these identities, just as Carmelita Tropicana's "autobiographical-style" multiple identities reveal this fact just as clearly. We must then account for authorship in a way that does not completely discount the life experience of the historical bodies represented in *New Anatomies* or the playwright as they come to bear on performances of the actresses who play Eberhardt as the biographical subject or Severine as a biographer figure. Yet neither can such a theory work too hard to conflate the biography of Eberhardt or Severine with the literary or dramatic performances with which we might otherwise associate them. Oral history performances are again revealing in the challenge they pose to this theoretical question. Critics are often hard-pressed to call Anna Deavere Smith a

playwright (although most ultimately agree that she is), since the bodies that experience the narratives she retells are also the ones who “author” the texts she performs. Yet her performance, and the political efficacy of that performance, proves that even life narratives that are praised for their truth-value can be enhanced by the very performativity of life-writing: it is precisely Smith's ability to "be" all of her interview subjects, and to do so "truthfully" that garners her acclaim and allows audiences to read themselves into the communal subjectivity she conjures.

But to suggest that the identity and the experiences of those original speakers is worthless to us as readers is to fall into the same potentially hegemonic ethical traps that Ensler falls into: the obfuscation of the power of the performing "I." The material bodies and identities of the interview subjects of *Twilight* come to bear in crucial ways on how we read the power structures of that play, even as we acknowledge that its political effectiveness relies on the fact that Smith as performer stands in for those absent bodies. Death of the author theories ultimately seem to want to read the written text as a discreet entity separate from an originary writing body as a means of avoiding the intentional fallacy—Derrida’s “Father of Logos,” for example, deconstructs the privilege traditionally accorded to speech because its origin, the speaker, is present. Smith’s performances seem to produce precisely the phenomenon that Derrida argues for, in which the origin of the spoken word no longer seems inherently privileged over the reproduced sign. However, we mustn’t discard that origin (or the notion of the historical body *as origin*) precisely because

the material body of the original speaker remains crucial to an understanding of the context of that speech and its relationship to power.

Such a challenge to reigning notions of the author would be true, however, of any staged life writing, regardless of gender. The theatre of Spalding Gray and Moisés Kauffman's Tectonic Theatre Company requires the same complex understanding of the relationship of the material body of the speaker, the voice of the author, and the physical presence of the performer, as do performances by Hughes or Smith. But while the challenges are the same, the political implications are different, and these implications form the very exigence for a *feminist* study of staged lives. This is true precisely because while Barthes' "Death of The Author" generally supposes to elide the specific historical identity of the *auteur*, only to replace it with the anonymous language worker, the scriptor, that worker's maleness is never up for debate. When Barthes writes, "Succeeding the Author, the scriptor no longer bears within *him* passions, humors, feelings, impressions" (225, *emphasis mine*), he first of all acknowledges the gender of the scriptor as male (indeed, the original French offers him no other choice). Furthermore, Barthes' disdain for authorial passions suggest that he might as well be Carolee Schneeman's structuralist filmmaker, discounting the performer for

the personal clutter
the persistence of feelings
the hand-touch sensibility
the diaristic indulgence
the painterly mess
the dense gestalt
the primitive techniques . . . (qtd. in Forte 225-226)

Instead, Barthes seeks to accord the scriptor the same status as he sees accorded to the reader: “without history, biography, psychology” (225).

The problem is that when we view Barthes’ theoretical desire to elide the author within the field of staged feminist life writing, we find that women become the collateral damage of Barthes’ de(con)structive impulses. When the theorist attempts to take away Holly Hughes’ “history, biography, psychology” he seeks to elide precisely that which has been denied her as a woman throughout time. While Barthes’ desire to kill off the author does nothing to disrupt the status of men’s contributions to history, women’s contributions to history are by no means well established in the popular imagination, and much of what is established comes through what we know from women writers and their texts. To elide the historical body of the author—which in this case is the speaking body of the woman who experiences the narrative that she sets down to write—is to prevent women from writing themselves back into history.

Ultimately, then, the dialectic created by staged feminist life writing serves as a means of asserting the relevance of the material historical body to the body of the performer. Therefore, we must acknowledge the relationship of the historical woman’s body to the image we see on stage, thereby reasserting her place in history and revalidating her experience, which the notion of the dead author and the author-function invalidates as merely so much textuality. In the case of Holly Hughes’ *Preaching to the Perverted*, acknowledging such a dialectic permits us to understand Hughes’ narrative through the authority of her experience. This understanding therefore encourages the audience to join Hughes in her critique of the Supreme

Court and its institutionalized straight white male anxiety, and to understand the urgency of this critique by acknowledging its grounding in the real, a grounding that the elision of the author does not permit. It is Hughes' performing body—the same body that was made into spectacle by the NEA Four controversy—that verifies the experience of her performed narrative, and therefore underwrites the authority of her life performance.

In the case of biography plays, such a congruent connection between the historical subject, the playwright, and the performer is not necessary to establish the political connection, say, between the Restoration actresses of *Playhouse Creatures* and the contemporary actresses who play them, although to understand what is being reclaimed in this play, we must first understand how those disparate bodies function dialectically across history. And in plays like Wertebaker's *New Anatomies*, we must also be able to read the authorial process of doing biography onto the biographer figure if we are to imagine audiences understanding the contextualization of biography as a potentially objectifying act. To read the objectifying gaze of Wertebaker as biographer/playwright through the body of the desiring character of Severine forces us to understand precisely how the dialectic exceeds simply a pairing of historical body and performing body and includes the author's desiring body in its representational function. And in the case of staged oral history, to understand this dialectical relationship across history and to acknowledge the identity of the author(s) is to interrogate the relationship of Eve Ensler's white middle class body to the diverse bodies of her interview subjects. If we were to heed Barthes, we would ignore the disempowerment of those voices that Ensler's process of writing and

performing the play necessarily involves, and similarly underestimate the empowerment with which Anna Deavere Smith invests those diverse voices that she identifies as missing from the violent events that prompt her performances.

In seeking to put forward the feminist theatrical practice of playing at lives through autobiographical performance, biography plays and staged oral histories, this study also advances a few more mundane methodological assertions: that narrative study, despite the disciplinary turf battles that it inevitably invokes, can be usefully applied alongside performance theory in illuminating theatrical, literary and real-life performances of gender; that life writing and life performances can be read and viewed through lenses that consider both their fictional aspects alongside the truth-value that they assert; that the dialectic between the historical body the authorial body and the performing body must be scrupulously interrogated as a means of understanding how authorship functions, how women construct and assert their identities and political power, how transgressive performances can be reclaimed and disseminated, and how community can be propagated through single or multiple performing bodies.

It is difficult, then, not to return to the narrative that began the study, in which we looked at a boom in staged life writing in a single city at a moment in history when feminism was being asked to reconsider its continued relevance. In that short span of a few years that saw at least a dozen feminist biography plays, several college versions and Ensler's solo version of *The Vagina Monologues*, the Supreme Court case that targeted feminist autobiographical performers Holly Hughes and Karen Finley, and Hughes' response performance, staged feminist life writing found itself at

the center of a wide range of theatrical practice. That it should do so in a city—
Washington, D.C.— in which power is sought and wielded ruthlessly and
unapologetically suggests that its political intent and impact go beyond the specific
audiences who file into theatres night after night, and instead extends across
communities, across pages, and across history.

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