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WHEN OPPRESSED WOMEN ATTACK: FEMALE-ENACTED VIOLENCE THROUGH
MINORITY AMERICAN FEMALE PLAYWRIGHTS' WORKS

by

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B.F.A., Michigan State University, 2013

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT

As an Actor Combatant with the Society of American Fight Directors, theatrical violence is something that has always captivated me. When a female combat instructor once told me that even though I throw a great punch I will never be able to use it because women are always on the receiving end of violence in theatre, I wondered if this was truly the case. After a thorough exploration of several works with theatrical violence, I am glad to say that it is not the case. When most scholars examine violence in theatre, the focus is either male-centric or specifically on domestic violence situations involving a male abusing a female. I will examine theatrical violence through a new lens that has yet to be thoroughly critically explored: violence where the female is the aggressor. Through selected works of three American minority female playwrights: Suzan-Lori Parks' *In the Blood*, Maria Irene Fornes' *Conduct of Life*, and Young Jean Lee's *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, I will analyze the female-enacted violence that occurs within these plays using feminist theories and psychology to examine how it happens, why it happens, who the victims are, and what these acts of violence say about minority American women in society today. I will explore the stage directions and dialogue surrounding the violence and analyzing the use or absence of weaponry, the breakdown or build-up of language prior to and after the violent action, and whether or not the violent action occurs before or after a violent action is committed against the female. For comparison, I will also analyze work by an American male playwright with violence in the same way: Tracy Letts' *August: Osage County*.

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INTRODUCTION

As an Actor Combatant with the Society of American Fight Directors, theatrical violence is something that has always captivated me. When I would watch *Power Rangers* as a child, I would always jump out of my seat or audibly gasp when a fight would make an unexpected turn. I worshipped my copy of *The Princess Bride* and was fascinated by the sword fighting sequences between Cary Elwes and Mandy Patinkin and the final duel between Patinkin and Christopher Guest. It was no surprise, then, when I reached my undergraduate study at Michigan State University, that I elected to take a course in stage combat. While training in unarmed combat, my female fight instructor told me, “Kate, you throw a great punch. It’s too bad you’ll never be able to use it.” When I asked her what she meant, she told me that women are always on the receiving end of violence in theatre. I wondered if this was truly the case.

Violence is a universal experience. Everyone has hit someone in their lifetime, and everyone has been hit. For a majority of the population, these violent instances occur when we are very young and learning about boundaries. Early on, these tendencies are repressed into the deep recesses of our minds as our society tells us these tendencies are unacceptable. But for some, these tendencies are never dampened. Those few who never lose their violent tendencies expose the rest of us to the violent nature that we no longer possess. The sex of the violent offender does impact the type of crime one is likely to commit. “Both official reports (UCR [Uniform Crime Report]) and victimization studies (NCVS [National Crime Victim Survey]) show that women represent a small percentage of violent offenders” (Pollock and Davis 10). In regards to the most violent of crime, homicide, women are more likely to kill an acquaintance than a stranger, specifically an intimate partner or a child under the age of eight (most likely an

infant in the postpartum period) (Pollock and Davis 11). While these tendencies are noted across the world, homicides committed by women occur more often in the United States than anywhere else (Pollock and Davis 12). Statistically, African American women are overrepresented in female violent crime and are most likely to reoffend (Pollock and Davis 13-15).

We are exposed to violence everywhere—through books, video games, the Internet, but mostly through television. Many primetime television programs contain violent content and the news media is particularly saturated with violence:

Images and descriptions of violence abound hour after hour on the news media. Twenty-four-hour news is by its nature ever-present; there is no special space or time in which audiences can pause to think about this knowledge of violence, violence's reality and its implications. Theatre, whether it directly represents real-world examples or employs fiction and fantasy to explore violent possibilities, provides us with space, focus and stimuli for a concentrated consideration of the subject. (Nevitt 9)

By constantly being exposed to violence, we lose our sensitivity to it, or, as Nevitt states, have created a "spectatorial distance" to it (3). It takes a special setting—like theatre—to be able to critically examine the repercussions of violent action.

Theatre permits and enables us to contemplate violence. A piece of theatre is a collaborative act of imagination in which theatre-makers and their audiences can explore possibility and fantasies as well as reconsidering known realities. In the theatre we can play out different imaginary versions of the world, and so theatre provides space, structures and contexts for the contemplation of actual and potential violence. Theatre plays with cause and effect and with sophisticated analyses of concepts and events. Since fictional framing and the relative safety of the not-real enable theatre-makers to push their ideas to the extremes of cultural imagination, it is inevitable that theatre will be concerned with violence. (Nevitt 6)

If it is inevitable that theatre will depict violence, then one would assume that violence committed by women would be part of that discussion and have a lengthy documentation throughout many cultures. While violent female characters do exist, it is clear that the patriarchal

values of certain societies hindered the development of female-enacted violence onstage by examining the existence of violent female roles.

The history of female characters enacting violence onstage is significantly shorter than one would think with the limited knowledge that there is out there available at this juncture. In this introduction, I shall attempt to document and track a baseline lineage of female-enacted violence on the stage. Many would believe that the first instance of female-enacted violence would be Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, where Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon and Cassandra in the first play of the trilogy. However, this instance of female-enacted violence occurs offstage, and the audience only sees the aftermath of the attack, and Clytemnestra was originally played by a male actor (per the societal rules and norms of theatre). Per strict script analysis standards, it does remain as the first written female character who commits violence. Seneca's version of *Oedipus* may be the first version of female-enacted violence onstage when Jocasta stabs (or disembowels, depending on the translation) herself, but this play was intended to be recited at parties rather than performed. If it ever was performed during the time period, this would be the first instance of public female-enacted violence. However, it is questionable if women were allowed to perform in Ancient Rome, raising questions regarding this instance as the first documented act of a woman performing female-enacted violence. With the fall of the Roman Empire comes the decline in theatre worldwide (excluding Asia), thus leading to a lull in plays including women as characters at all. The Middle Ages are quite hazy regarding women on stage, let alone female enacted violence in theatre; it is not until the Italian Renaissance that we clearly see women onstage. Columbina, one of the *zanni* archetypes in Commedia dell'arte, had a reputation for beating male counterparts in order to keep them in line ("Commedia Stock Characters: Columbina"). As lazzi are often scenarios that are improvised upon, it would be

extremely difficult to attribute credit to who originated the idea. These lazzi would likely be the first instances of female-enacted violence. In England, the tradition of female characters committing female-enacted violence continued, but the roles were played by young boys rather than women as acting was considered to be immoral for women. As weaponry developed in warfare, so did weaponry for the stage, and simple weaponry that was seen in Ancient Greece and Rome (such as hand-to-hand combat, knives, and nooses) fell by the wayside in favor of the newest fashion in fighting: dueling with broadswords, rapiers and daggers, and single swords. Also at this juncture, no specific play can be pinpointed as the first, but the first scripted instance of female-enacted violence committed by a female actor likely occurred in Spain or France during the Spanish Golden Age or French Neoclassic era. This was due to the willingness (begrudgingly, by the Spaniards) to allow women to perform and the propensity for violence (for honor's sake in Spain, for comedic effect in France) that both cultures embraced. Female-enacted violence by women finally crossed the English Channel after Oliver Cromwell during the Restoration era and achieved success mostly with Restoration comedy. Restoration comedy also brought forth the refined art of dueling with smallsword—a delicate weapon that even women could maneuver with ease. Over the course of the 1800s, the trend spreads throughout Europe and explodes with the emergence of realism and naturalism. Having refined the guns and rifles to a safer domain, they make their crossing to the stage, as well as the reappearance of hand-to-hand combat while dueling falls out of favor. Now, female-enacted violence, and violence of any kind on the stage, is most commonly categorized under Theatre of Cruelty—a term coined by Antonin Artaud early in the twentieth century—but this may be due to a lack of understanding of what Theatre of Cruelty actually is and is a malapropism for theatrical violence.

With the emergence of the third wave of feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, even more plays emerge containing female-enacted violence, and, for the first time, by female playwrights.

For this thesis, I will focus on works written by minority American female playwrights written after 1960. I specifically wanted to focus on the works of female playwrights because they are historically underrepresented in the canon and on the stage. Funding for studies on representation of women playwrights in theatre is nonexistent; the most recent data is from the 1994-1995 season, where it is estimated that female playwright representation was around seventeen percent for American theatres (Shamas). No university or other major organization has offered funding for a long-term study of female playwrights in theatre, which is why the data is spotty at best. When most scholars examine violence in theatre, the focus is either male-centric or specifically on domestic violence situations involving a male abusing a female. I will examine theatrical violence through a new lens that has yet to be thoroughly critically explored: violence where the female is the aggressor. Through selected works of three American minority female playwrights: Suzan-Lori Parks' *In the Blood*, Maria Irene Fornes' *Conduct of Life*, and Young Jean Lee's *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, I will analyze the female-enacted violence that occurs within these plays using feminist theories and psychology to examine how it happens, why it happens, who the victims are, and what claims these playwrights are making about minority American women in society today. Primary methodology will examine the stage directions and dialogue surrounding the violence and analyzing the use or absence of weaponry, the breakdown or build-up of language prior to and after the violent action, and whether or not the violent action occurs before or after a violent action is committed against the female. For comparison, I will also analyze work by an American male playwright with violence in this same

manner: Tracy Letts' *August: Osage County* and comparing the violence in it to the previous three works.

IN THE BLOOD BY SUZAN-LORI PARKS

About the Playwright: Suzan-Lori Parks

Suzan-Lori Parks was born in 1964 in Fort Knox, Kentucky. An “army brat,” she lived all over the United States and spent many years growing up in Germany. “Parks recalls writing short stories, poems, even novels as a little girl...she grew up in the world’s cradle, moving from place to place, country to country. That provided her with large cardboard moving boxes that became puppet theaters for the talented youngster” (Hartigan 31). She entered Mt. Holyoke College pursuing a BA in English and German Literature, but discovered her love of theatre and playwriting when one of her professors, James Baldwin, noticed she was prone to acting out the stories in class and adding voices to the characters. “But after she submitted her first play, *The Sinner’s Place*, the set for which was lots of dirt, the battle lines were drawn at Mt. Holyoke. The English department hailed it while the theatre department railed, ‘You can’t put dirt on stage. That’s not a play’” (Craig, "Suzan-Lori Parks: Putting Dirt and Deadly Games Onstage" 260). Most would assume that Parks would then take the opportunity to study theatre (or more specifically, playwriting) at this point in her career, but she took an alternative path to her final destination:

Parks didn’t think studying theatre would help her that much. Instead, she studied acting at Drama Studio in London, although she ‘never wanted to be an actor. Never. Ever. Ever.’ Then, in Yale School of Drama’s playwriting program, she forged ties with top-string theatre innovators who would help shape and launch her career. One of them was the major new force in stage direction, Liz Diamond, who would direct a string of Parks’ plays. (Craig, "Suzan-Lori Parks: Putting Dirt and Deadly Games Onstage" 261)

Along the way, her theatrical persona was born: “Susan L. Parks, or ‘Susie Parks’ as she was known to her college instructors, became Suzan-Lori Parks as a result of her name being spelled

incorrectly on a promotional flyer” (Kolin and Young 3). Rather than being devastated by the mistake, she embraced her new identity and threw herself into the world of playwriting.

Parks’ writing style is quite distinctive relative to her contemporary counterparts. “Parks herself is known for her formula of ‘rep and rev’: repetition and revision. Do it again; do it differently” (Wetmore Jr., "Introduction: Perceptible Mutabilities--The Many Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks/The Many Suzan-Lori Parks of Plays" xvii). This formula includes repeating themes, revising old texts and adapting them to contemporary audiences, and repetition of dialogue. One of the elements that Parks is most notorious for is her use of “spells,” in which she simply repeats character names in a sequence. These often indicate transfer of power within a moment of silence. In fact, the way the text is written is what Parks has received the most criticism and analysis for her work:

The historically focused elements of Parks’s aesthetic position her as an author whose work challenges the ways readers imagine and experience history and/or receive recorded accounts thereof. These texts make history more visceral and relevant by asking readers to see the past as more personal and urgent: history and identity remain ever entwined, haunting each other while still seeking to redeem both the other and itself. Parks’s texts represent this tumultuous relationship by revisiting, or, more accurately, by revising some of the most famous texts and contexts in our culture and history. (Larson 2-3)

Parks’ influences are numerous as they are unique; most of whom are or were avant-garde artists in their time: Samuel Beckett, Gertrude Stein, Adrienne Kennedy, Zora Neal Hurston, James Joyce, and William Faulkner, jazz, blues, and James Brown (Peterson and Bennett 271). Her influence from Beckett is especially evident from the structure of her plays.

Marked by seriocomic linguistic play, discontinuous settings, characters that are choruses, and characters that are historical syntheses as much as psychologies, her plays are meditations on history and the American black experience (among other experiences). But as the play’s fractured and multiplied worlds suggest, there is also no single ‘Black Experience’ (Parks 1995: 21). In this sense, her plays do what they mean, rather than deliver a thesis to an audience. (Fordyce 547)

However, Parks distinctly dislikes being labeled as a “black woman playwright.” “It’s an assumption too many people make about her without even seeing the work, she says... Her thing is time. She wants her plays to be suspended in time, like a lemon liquid floating in clear fluid in a test tube” (Hartigan 30). While claiming her plays contain no metaphorical elements, her plays contain overwhelming allegory and verbal jousting that throw staying true to life out of the window, specifically when it comes to politics and culture (Craig, "The Early 2000s: 'Bang, Bang--You're American'" 251) (Fordyce 547).

In spite of the weight and troubling issues her plays examine on the stage, “Parks’ personal life holds no trace of the psychic and socio-economic traumas she depicts” (Craig, "Suzan-Lori Parks: Putting Dirt and Deadly Games Onstage" 266). She not only writes plays but also teaches how to write them at Tisch School of the Arts. Parks also occasionally performs as a musician under the name Sula Parks with her acoustic guitar. Having skyrocketed to the pinnacle of her career at the tender age of forty, it is no surprise that “Parks has garnered considerable scholarly attention, culminating in the recent publication of three full-length studies devoted to her work that together fortify her reputation as perhaps the foremost American playwright of her generation” (Black 31).

About the Work: *In the Blood*

First performed in 1999 at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre’s New York Shakespeare Festival, *In the Blood* is one of two works called *The Red Letter Plays* by Suzan-Lori Parks. It, and Parks’ *Fucking A*, draw inspiration from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. The only person who can adequately describe the abnormal birth of these works is Parks herself:

With *Fucking A*, I was in a canoe with a friend. We were paddling along a river or lake – this was years ago. I was in the back of the canoe and I said to her, ‘I’m going to write a play called *Fucking A*, and it’s going to be a riff on *The Scarlet Letter*. Ha, Ha, Ha’, and I started laughing really hard. I hadn’t actually read *The Scarlet Letter*, of course. It was one of those books that was assigned in high school but I hadn’t read it. I hadn’t wanted to. So we paddled around in the canoe, laughing, and we got back to land and dragged the canoe up onto the shore and the idea was still with me – I had been hooked. That was the beginning of that play... So then I had to read *The Scarlet Letter*. Then figure out what about *The Scarlet Letter* had so sneakily hooked me... *Fucking A* started off as *Fucking A* and then split into two plays: *Fucking A* and *In the Blood* *FA* and *Blood* came out as almost-twins... (Wetmore Jr., "It's an Oberammaergau Thing: An Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks" 124-125)

While *In the Blood* was conceived second, it was produced first in the sequence of *Red Letter Plays*. Hester La Negrita, a homeless woman, attempts to raise her five children (Jabber, Bully, Trouble, Beauty, and Baby) the best way she can with her limited resources. As much as her children depend on her to survive, she also depends on them, relying on Jabber to steal food to help feed the children’s hungry mouths and to teach her how to read, but so far only learning the letter “A.” Set “Here” and “Now,” the drama of the play begins when the word “slut” has been discovered to be written in their camp, and Hester is asking Jabber to read the word to her. Jabber claims he cannot read the word. Throughout Hester’s quest for survival, she interacts with five other characters who are played by the same actors who play her children: Jabber doubles as Chilli, his father, who later attempts to court Hester to recreate what they once had; Bully doubles as The Welfare Lady, who attempts to put Hester on the right path but does not do so in a caring way; Trouble doubles as The Doctor, who wants to “spay” Hester to prevent her from having more children; Beauty doubles as Amiga Gringa, who is a prostitute that serves as council and town gossip to Hester; and Baby doubles as Reverend D, his father, who eventually leads Hester to her demise. Following the scene in which each of these characters deliver some form of ill-fated news to Hester, each of the adults deliver a “confession” and reveal that they all have had a sexual encounter with Hester and have taken advantage of a destitute woman. When Hester

goes to Reverend D in hopes that he will claim his child, Baby, Reverend D instead forces Hester to perform oral sex on him. She returns again for one last attempt, and Reverend D calls her a “slut.” Jabber witnesses this and reveals to Hester that the word written in the camp was the same and asks Hester what the word means. Broken down by the societal constraints put upon her, Hester “snaps” and beats Jabber to death with a police club that Jabber stole at the beginning of the play. Not processing what she has done, she scrawls the letter “A” into the dirt and seeks Jabber’s approval. Hester then has her own “confession” stating that she should have had a whole army of children. The adults return in a final moment of choral chaos to shame Hester, spit on her, and dismiss Hester into the great abyss for her actions.

Many questions have been raised as to how similar Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne and Hester La Negrita really are with the inspiration for writing *In the Blood* and *Fucking A* initially being a play on words while paddling in a canoe. Dr. Rena Fraden found many parallels in her article “Suzan-Lori Parks' Hester Plays: *In the Blood* and *Fucking A*”:

Both authors ask in what sense is someone you love, someone you bore, your own? What sign, what mark, tells you he or she belongs to you? At what point does the wayward child seem to disown you, grow up, read the signs differently, all of a sudden becoming independent and unrecognizable? The thing you wrote, the child you bore—not yours anymore? Both of them take for their subject whether one can or should want to break free from convention, and how one may not be able to, and how, perhaps in a circular way, that one can't is partly because that has become their subject. (441)

In addition, all of the Hester variations deal with the letter “A” in differing ways: For Hester Prynne, it represents her branding as an adulterer; for Hester in *Fucking A*, it represents her career as an Abortionist, and for Hester La Negrita in *In the Blood*, it is the only letter of the alphabet she knows that is taught to her by the child she murders. The final scene of *In the Blood*, “The Prison Door,” shares the same name as the first chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, which could imply a suggestion that *In the Blood* is intended to be a prequel to *The Scarlet Letter*. This

would not be surprising if this was Parks' intent because it would fall in line with the writing conventions of most of her work:

Parks views the theater as a place where history and literary history can be revisited and rewritten. In part because the African-American cultural tradition was oral rather than written, much of this tradition was not included in the Western literary canon as it had been conceived prior to the postmodern era. Nor were African-Americans historically in positions of power that would foster publication and respect for their stories. (Schafer 182)

By modernizing the plight of Hester Prynne and making her homeless with five children, Parks “focus[es] on the scarlet parts of his story, exposing [Hawthorne's] genteel avoidance of his risqué subject through her bloody, screwed-up renditions” (Fraden 439). In doing so, Parks reflects the contemporary issue of the plight of single black mothers back onto the audience to contemplate their role in the problem.

In the Blood has often been compared to a Greek tragedy. Parks herself even makes this argument, stating, “Violence is what happens in plays. If I model my plays after anything, it's Greek plays, where he's stabbing his eyes out, she's putting the poisoned dress on and the horses jump off the cliff (Savran, “Suzan-Lori Parks” 159).” Carol Schafer, Associate Professor of Theatre, Integrative Arts, and Women's Studies at Pennsylvania State University, explored this avenue fully with her article “Staging a New Literary History: Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*, *In the Blood*, and *Fucking A*”:

As in classical tragedy, Parks begins *In the Blood* with a *parados* and ends with an exodus; the actors become a kind of chorus and circle Hester like vultures. These are the oppressors who ostracize Hester as Other. Parks alternates the scenes within the play with *stasimons*, soliloquies in verse that she calls “confessions.” The action of the play, with the exception of the prologue, occurs over a period of a little more than the single day that Aristotle preferred, but the elapsed time is of much less duration than that of an epic. All action occurs out-of-doors because Hester is never allowed inside literally or symbolically, thereby providing us with a unity of place. The unity of action that Aristotle prized also is apparent with each action (scene) leading to the next. (188-189)

Unlike a prototypical Aristotelian tragic hero, Hester has no desirable qualities of an upstanding citizen that one would expect: she is not wealthy, she has no political power, her children are illegitimate, she is uneducated, and she is uncivilized. However, Aristotle argues that a purely good person falling to misery is not an ideal plotline, rather “the intermediate kind of personage, a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and by depravity but by some error of judgment” is the ideal tragic hero to follow (55).

Despite the many characteristics that would seem to rule Hester out of the tragic hero category, she does have one redeeming quality: her caretaking skill as a mother:

The only identification that Hester, her children, and society agree upon for her is that of ‘mommie,’ and at this she excels, not only in her fertility but in her fierce protection of her children. She starves herself so that they can eat; she goes without sleep in her attempts to provide for her “treasures.” As soon as she gets “a leg up,” she intends to buy shoes for her children (22). Like Hawthorne’s Hester Prynne and Euripides’ Medea, she is a model for motherhood. (Schafer 190)

Schafer continues to draw parallels between Medea and Hester La Negrita to further the Greek tragedy argument by adding that they both share the same tragic flaw: the “error to distinguish that love is separable from the act of lovemaking” (192). With this tragic flaw, Hester La Negrita believes that all who make love to her also love her and it is not until she is spurned that she realizes this is not the case, but there are inconsistencies with this particular argument for a tragic flaw. If Hester truly wants to be loved by anyone she has made love with, why does she spurn Amiga Gringa when Amiga Gringa tries to kiss her and say “I dont got no love for nobody cept the kids” (Parks 41)? The tragic flaw is too broad for this particular circumstance. A more applicable tragic flaw may be that Hester believes that a man she has made love to will lead to her escaping her lowly status. This would work both in the case of Chilli and in Reverend D,

who have both fathered children with her but spurn her after realizing how destitute and lovesick she really is.

The role of the chorus is also more complex in *In the Blood* than in traditional Greek tragedy. In Greek tragedy, the chorus is intended to be representative of the audience's perspective; Parks created a tumultuous relationship between chorus and audience that begins similarly to traditional Greek tragedy, but ends in a way that makes the audience question their own views on what they have witnessed. During the prologue, Hester is scorned by the chorus and spat upon in the prologue because of her socioeconomic status, which is the attitude shared by many among society towards homeless individuals. "Since the chorus represents society, the audience is asked to join vicariously with them" (Schafer 189). By the time the end of the play is reached, however, the purpose of the audience is entirely different:

Hester's fate is not determined by gods or heredity but rather by a society that cruelly withholds its support, manipulates Hester for its own benefit, and blames her for her circumstances. While Hester takes responsibility for her actions, those in the audience who, by virtue of their race, gender, wealth, status, position, and/or education, remain members of the social structure that condemns Hester to her fate are forced to admit their complicity in what has occurred. While order is restored to society by Hester's downfall, the audience must question whether this order offers the hopeful beginning implicit in the conclusion of a tragedy. If there is to be hope, then the audience must change." (Schafer 194)

Unlike Greek tragedy, the chorus determines the fate of the tragic hero and then victim shame Hester for what she has experienced. The chorus is adamant in maintaining their original viewpoint rather than taking in new information and processing it, which is typical of Greek tragic choruses. By illustrating what happens when society does not change, Parks' hope is that the audience will enact change to avoid this fate. Moreover, "by asking the audience members to

question their identifications with the chorus, Parks also asks the audience to empathize with a hero who lives outside of the normal boundaries of social acceptance” (Schafer 191).

Differing from Greek tragedy, Parks allows her female characters, namely Hester and Bully in *In the Blood* to commit acts of female-enacted violence onstage in front of the audience, which will now be critically examined in three parts: acts committed by Bully, acts committed by Hester, attempted acts of female-enacted violence.

Female-Enacted Violence in *In the Blood*

Female-Enacted Violence: Bully

While almost all of the literature available on *In the Blood* focuses on the actions of Hester, it is important to note that she is not the only female who enacts violence within the play. Her eldest daughter, Bully, is also violent. Most would dismiss her behavior as nothing more than childish, but it is worth interrogating because it is a child played by an adult, her age is not determined within the confines of the play, and her violent outburst may be replications of her mother’s behavior or indicative of behavioral problems of her own, so there are further complications within the role than just “child’s play.”

The first instance of female-enacted violence we see in the play committed by Bully is after she has been struck by her mother for not wanting to relinquish details of why Trouble was running from the cops. After Trouble returns, Hester confronts him to get a clearer picture:

HESTER. That why the cops was chasing you?
TROUBLE. Snitch!
BULLY. Jailbait!
(*Bully hits Trouble hard. They fight. Pandemonium.*)
HESTER. Suppertime!

(Order is restored. Hester slips the club into the belt of her dress; it hangs there like a sword. She wears it like this for most of the play. Her children sit in a row holding their bowls. She ladles out the soup.) (Parks 11)

Bully is clearly reacting to Trouble calling her a “snitch.” Research has shown that “when confronted with aggressive responses from others, highly aggressive youths tend to have difficulty arriving at non-aggressive solutions, endorse retaliatory aggression, believe that aggression reduces aversive treatment by others, and believe that aggression increases one’s self-esteem and image” (Dahlberg 262). This may also indicate why Bully is named Bully—because her aggression increases her self-esteem and image, she retaliates aggressively through female-enacted violence, and always strikes first to avoid maltreatment from her siblings. Bully’s name is a badge of honor for her behavior bestowed on her by Hester; in a sense, Bully’s name is a self-fulfilling prophesy for her behavior.

Later on in the same scene, Bully returns after being sent to bed with her hands clenched in fists. She is unable to unclench them after waking, so she seeks Hester’s help. Seeing Amiga Gringa and Hester socializing, the only two female role models she sees on a regular basis, she attempts to stay and talk with them, but Hester sees through it and sends her off to “brush” her teeth. Trouble then “sleepwalks” into the scene with a box of matches and lights one. Hester confiscates the matches, then sends them both off to bed:

HESTER. Go on to bed.

(Bully passes Trouble and hits him hard.)

TROUBLE . Aaaaah!

BULLY. Yr a bad person!

(She hits him again.)

TROUBLE. Aaaaaaaaah!

HESTER. Who made you Policewoman?

TROUBLE. Ima blow you sky high one day you bully bitch!

(Bully goes to hit him. Again.)

HESTER. Trouble I thought you said you was sleep. Go inside and lie down and shut up or you wont see tomorrow.

(He goes back to sleepwalking and goes inside.)

Bully. Go over there. Close yr eyes and yr mouth and not a word, hear?

(Bully goes a distance off curling up to sleep without a word.) (Parks 19)

This time, Bully attacks Trouble with no provocation. One possibility is that Bully is still upset with Trouble for calling her a snitch earlier and wants to make it clear that their feud is not over. Having just squatted outdoors to use the restroom and brushed her teeth with her own finger, her environment may also be a contributing factor to her behavior:

Children in single mother households, particularly those in which the mother has never married, often have fewer resources and are more likely to have behavioral problems and health vulnerability than children from a two-parent family (FIFCFS, 2000; Runyan et al., 1999). (Lutenbacher 159)

Bully is a child of s single mother household, and Hester certainly has never married, so her likelihood for behavioral problems because of Hester is significant. Not only is Hester a single parent, but she is a single homeless parent, which affects Bully negatively behaviorally as well:

Previous research has identified a number of precursors to violence, including early onset of aggressive behavior, early development of beliefs supportive of aggression, information- processing/social problem-solving skill deficits, exposure to violence in the home, poor parental supervision and monitoring, and weak family bonding and social supports. (Dahlberg 261)

With no two children having the same father, Bully has no sibling that she can share a special bond with. Because they have no permanent residence, Hester has no control over Bully's actions or behavior outside of the camp, so Bully may also have witnessed violent behavior and have lacked the development of proper problem-solving skills despite Hester's best mothering efforts.

With all of these factors layered in, one can see that Bully is far more complicated than "just a child." In line with the aforementioned Greek tragedy that *In the Blood* emulates, Bully's

fate is predestined by her name, her environment, and her lack of control over her anger. Bully is destined to commit female-enacted violence.

Female-Enacted Violence: Hester

While Hester threatens to enact violence on four occasions, she is only successful twice during the course of *In the Blood*. These instances are almost like bookends of the play with one happening in the opening scene with her eldest daughter and one happening near the end of the play with her eldest son. The first is certainly less violent than the last:

HESTER. I dont like youall stealing toys and I don't like youall stealing food but it happens. I wont punish you for it. Yr just kids. Trouble thinks with his stomach. He hungry he takes, sees a toy, gotta have it.

BULLY. A policeman saw him steal and ran after him but Trouble ran faster cause the policeman was fat.

HESTER. Policeman chased him?

BULLY. He had a big stomach. Like he was pregnant. He was jiggling and running and yelling and red in the face.

HESTER. What he steal?

BULLY. –Nothing.

HESTER. You talk that much and you better keep talking, Miss.

(Bully buttons her lips. Hester pops her upside the head.)

BULLY. Owwww!

HESTER. Get outa my sight. Worse than a thief is a snitch that don't snitch. (Parks 9-10)

Clearly, Hester is upset with Trouble's behavior of stealing in the presence of a police officer, but she also wants to teach Bully the value of not being a tattletale. This certainly can read to be no more than just a teaching moment and that Bully did not receive much pain from the blow (no more than a spanking would deliver), there are some psychological and environmental factors that may indicate that the strike is stronger than written:

When compared with children from dual parent households, children from single parent families have an 80% greater risk of suffering serious injury or harm from abuse or neglect (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). Abusive punishment is more prevalent and more

acceptable in poorer households (Kelley, Grace, & Elliott, 1990), particularly single-parent households (Gelles, 1989). This is attributed to the additional responsibilities and stresses of single parenting, together with limited support (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). (Lutenbacher 159)

Hester is a single parent whose resources are rapidly depleting as each scene passes. She is the only resource her children can come to, so the added stress does not reduce this violent risk:

Single parents must assume the roles of both mother and father. They must earn a living as well as manage the household (Sack et al., 1985). Moreover, they must assume these roles without help or relief from another parent. Thus, no matter what the economic situation of a single parent, being alone and having to fill both parental roles for their offspring can lead to stress and, eventually, violence and abuse. (Gelles 496)

From the studies previously mentioned, it has been indicated that corporal punishment and poverty are intertwined, and Hester is an excellent example of this. Threats of violence are her primary mode of dominance, but she is not afraid to hit her children. This may be in part with how abusive mothers are behaviorally:

Abusive mothers are more authoritarian, use anxiety and guilt induction techniques, are inconsistent in discipline, use little rational guidance, and have little enjoyment of the parental role (Susman, Trickett, Iannotti, Hollenbeck, & Zahn-Waxler, 1985). Abusive mothers tend to criticize their children more often than nonabusive mothers (Whipple & Webster-Stratton, 1991), and have more negative behavior and lower affect during play with their children (Wasserman, Green, & Allen, 1983). (Lutenbacher 159)

Hester seems to vent her anxiety and frustration caused by her children directly at them. It is clear that she also fulfills the lower affect during play by “checking out” and gazing at the sky during games of tag with her children. She often shows irritation with her children in these moments who do not understand that she is no longer playing the game. This reoccurs just before Hester commits her most violent act: murdering her own son, Jabber.

Prior to this encounter, Jabber has witnessed Reverend D rejecting Hester, physically harming her, and calling her a slut. He approaches her the only way he knows how, through initiating a game of tag in an attempt to create levity to the situation. Hester, who is broken,

destitute, and has lost all hope, wants none of it. Jabber recognizes the word that Reverend D called his mother as the same that was scribbled in their camp, so in an attempt to please her, he tells her:

JABBER. Wanna know what it was? Wanna know what the word was?

HESTER. What.

JABBER.

JABBER.

HESTER. What?

JABBER “Slut.”

HESTER. Go to sleep, Jabber.

JABBER. It read “Slut.” “Slut.”

HESTER. Hush up.

JABBER. Whassa “Slut”?

HESTER. Go sleep.

JABBER. You said if I read it youd say what it means. Slut. Whassit mean?

HESTER. I said I don’t wanna hear that word. How slow are You? Slomo.

JABBER. Slut.

HESTER. You need to close yr mouth, Jabber.

JABBER. I know what it means. Slut.

HESTER. (Shut up.)

JABBER. Slut.

HESTER. (I said shut up, now.)

JABBER. I know what it means.

HESTER. (And I said shut up! Shut up.)

(*Rest.*)

(*Rest.*)

JABBER. Slut. Sorry.

(*The word just popped out, a childs joke. He covers his mouth, sheepishly. They look at each other.*)

HESTER.

JABBER.

HESTER.

JABBER.

(*She quickly raises her club and hits him once. Brutally. He cries out and falls down dead. His cry wakes Bully, Trouble and Beauty. They look on. Hester beats Jabber’s body again. and. again and again, Trouble and Bully back away. Beauty stands there watching. Jabber is dead and bloody. Hester looks up from her deed. To see Beauty who*)

runs off. Hester stands there alone-wet with her son's blood. Grief stricken, she cradles his body. Her hands wet with blood, she writes an A on ground.)

HESTER. Looks good, Jabber, dont it?

Dont it, huh? (Parks 65-66)

Hester has now become one of the characters that society fears the most: a woman who has murdered her own child. There is no dialogue to warn of what is to come, and there is no resolution or “why” that the audience gets to hear from Hester’s mouth during this exchange. It is a violent deed with many victims—not just Hester and Jabber, but also the witnesses: Bully, Trouble, and Beauty, who have witnessed the aftermath of their mother’s deed and could have easily been her next victims. One blow is enough to kill Jabber, but Hester continues to strike his dead body to unleash all of the rage, pain, and anguish she feels onto someone or something that can no longer feel. Her only resolution is to go back to the beginning—literally—by proving to her son’s dead body that she has mastered the first letter of the alphabet: A. “It is her final attempt to write her own story and claim her own identity rather than accept that offered by a society that will condemn her” (Schafer 193).

Knowing that Hester exhibits many of the characteristics of an abusive mother in poverty, does she share characteristics with mothers who murder their children?

As Cheryl Meyer and Michelle Oberman point out in their recent study *Mothers Who Kill their Children*, throughout history infanticide ‘may be understood as a response to the societal construction of and constraints upon mothering’ (13) and to the demands placed upon mothers who are not given the concomitant power to determine what those demands should be or by what means they will be fulfilled. (Foster 78)

This certainly falls in line with the suggestion that Parks is making with *In the Blood*: society is failing the homeless single mothers and institutions set up by society are holding them back from success.

Hester is a single parent with no support system, either familial or various 'othermothers,' who is unable to provide for her children. She suffers from depression and possibly even temporary psychosis (seeing 'the hand of fate'). A relationship that she thought was being renewed (with Chilli) has just broken up irrevocably. She has been traumatized by her violent confrontation with the Reverend D. Indeed, Jabber's murder is a 'spontaneous crime . . . reflecting a loss of control rather than a cool-headed calculation' (Meyer and Oberman 174). Hester fits well one of the standard sociological models for infanticide and may help audiences to adopt a more sympathetic attitude to women who murder their children in response to unbearable stress. (Foster 80)

Adding in the elements of depression, temporary psychosis, and a reversal of fortune in her love life, it is almost understandable how Hester could commit such a heinous crime. Killing Jabber is Hester's attempt to escape from the stress of her life once and for all. Illogical as it may seem, Hester desires to strike out the last stressor in her life that she *can* control, and that is her children. "*In the Blood*... can be taken as showing that killing one's child is at once the ultimate form of maternal autonomy and of the victimization of both mothers and children, who are deprived of all autonomy" (Foster 85).

The impact of the female-enacted violence within *In the Blood* is powerful. The acts fulfill Parks' intention with the play: make the audience think about their role in the societal structures that keep homeless women destitute. They accurately recreate what life is like in the lowest level of poverty in single parent households as well as the consequences of being raised in these households. Moreover, the acts reflect the times of the growing problem of single-parent homeless families in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Finally, this play gives the canon a true glimpse a segment of the contemporary African American experience.

Attempted Acts of Female-Enacted Violence: "Don't *Make Me Hurt You*"

The first threat of female-enacted violence that is not carried out occurs in the scene between The Welfare Lady and Hester. Welfare laments that she has done everything she can

possibly do for Hester and it is time for Hester to step up or else dire consequences will take place to Hester:

WELFARE. ... Yr doctor recommends that you get a hysterectomy. Take out yr womans parts. A spay.

HESTER. Spay.

WELFARE. I hope things wont come to that. I will do what I can. But you have to help me out, Hester.

HESTER ((Dont *make* me hurt you.))

WELFARE. What?

HESTER I didnt mean it. Just slipped out.

WELFARE. Remember yr manners. we worked. Good and hard on yr manners. Remember? Remember that afternoon over at my house? That afternoon with the teacups?

HESTER. *Manners*, Maam?

WELFARE. Yes. manners. (Parks 33)

This threat from Hester seems to come from left field. Even Hester seems surprised by her remark by stating “I didnt mean it. Just slipped out” (Parks 33). A certain level of decorum has been established by Welfare and must be maintained in order for Hester to get what she wants, and Hester regressed to her low-class ways in which she speaks to her children when threatening to physically discipline them for not doing what she asks. Welfare points this out to her by reminding Hester of her manners that Welfare taught to Hester at tea. Hester’s response, “*Manners*, Maam?” is likened to the discovery the audience makes during Welfare’s confession where it is revealed that Welfare, Hester, and Welfare’s husband had a threesome after Hester came over for tea and Welfare slapped her during the act (Parks 33). This is no surprise with Parks’ writing structure that elements that seem out of character in one scene are contextualized with backstory in another. The implication by Hester, depending on the director’s or actor’s choice, may or may not go over Welfare’s head in the context of the scene. It is when Welfare speaks ill of Hester’s children that Hester nearly comes to blows:

WELFARE. You haven't learned yr letters yet, have you?

HESTER I want my leg up is all.

WELFARE. You wont get something for nothing.

HESTER. I been good.

WELFARE. 5 bastards is not good. 5 bastards is bad.

HESTER. Don't make me hurt you!

(Hester raises her club to strike Welfare.)

WELFARE. You hurt me and, kids or no kids, I'll have you locked up. We'll take yr kids away and yll never see them again.

HESTER. My lifes my own fault. I know that. But the world don't help, Maam.

WELFARE. The world is not here to help us, Hester. The world is simply here. We must help ourselves.

(Rest.) (Parks 34)

It is only the threat of losing her own children that stops Hester from fulfilling her desire to strike Welfare. Hester knows it is a threat that Welfare can carry out successfully and there is no hope for Hester to protest against it, so decorum is once again reestablished once Hester attempts to demonstrate guilt for her attempted actions to Welfare. From the stage directions and from the text of the scene, it is unclear when, if at all, Hester lowers her club from a threatening position towards Welfare. Depending on where this decision to lower the club is made, many of the lines' intentions may have a stronger sense of urgency, pleading, and desperation.

Later in the play, Bully is fantasizing about her future and what her wedding will be like, not unlike most young girls. Her timing, however, is poor—during one of Hester's desperate moments of contemplation not long after she performed oral sex on Reverend D in hopes he would take responsibility for Baby:

BULLY. When I get married my husbands gonna get on top of me and—

HESTER No ones getting on top of you, Bully.

BULLY. He'll put the ring on my finger and I'll have me uh white dress and he'll get on top of me—

HESTER. No ones getting on top of you Bully no ones getting on top of you, so shut yr mouth about it.

TROUBLE. How she gonna have babies if no one gets on top of her?

HESTER. Don't *make* me hurt you!

(She raises her hand to Trouble who runs off. Bully starts crying.)

Shut the fuck up or I'll give you something to cry about!
(The kids huddle together in a knot.)

HESTER.

JABBER/BULLY/BEAUTY.

HESTER.

JABBER/BULLY/BEAUTY.

HESTER.

(Rest.)

HESTER. Bedtime.

BEAUTY. Its to early for bed—

HESTER. *BEDTIME!*

(They hurry off. Hester goes back to contemplating the sky.) (Parks 52)

Following in line with Parks' "rep and rev" style, the phrase "Don't make me hurt you" is once again repeated preceding a physical threat of violence. Now, it is clear to the audience that the threats towards Welfare earlier in the play were indeed made in the same vein that Hester threatens her own children. The suggestions of marriage and sex for her eldest daughter are enough to set Hester off; she does not want to promote Bully's promiscuity in hopes that Bully will not end up like Hester. Trouble is the child who makes the connection that babies come from sex, so Hester's anger and threat towards him is to discourage promiscuity from any of her children.

The last instance in which Hester attempts to enact violence on another, but does not follow through, violence is enacted upon her. Hester returns one last time to Reverend D to see if he will claim Baby as his own child and love her once again, but is rejected and abused in return:

REVEREND D. Youd better go.

HESTER. Why you dont like me? Why you dont like me no more?

(He tries to go back inside. She grabs ahold of him.)

HESTER. Dont go.

REVEREND D. Take yr hands off me.

HESTER. Why you dont like me?

(They struggle as he tries to shake her loose. Then, in a swift motion, she raises her club to strike him. He is much stronger than she. He brutally twists her hand. She recoils in pain and falls to the ground. Jabber, wide awake, watches.)

REVEREND D. Slut.

(Rest.)

Don't ever come back here again! Ever! Yll never get nothing from me! Common Slut. Tell on me! Go on! Tell the world! I'll crush you underfoot. *(He goes inside.)* (Parks 64)

It is not clear from the stage direction if Hester grabbing Reverend D is intended to be violent or not, but Hester is more likely to be pleading in this situation than attempting to be controlling, so this is likely not an act of female-enacted violence. Hester receives instant, negative, painful feedback for attempting to strike Reverend D with her club. Not only does Reverend D physically abuse Hester, but he also verbally abuses her by calling her a slut. On top of this, Jabber witnesses the entire transaction and hears the word that will soon seal his fate. Hester's last hope of escaping her destitute lifestyle is gone.

SONGS OF THE DRAGONS FLYING TO HEAVEN BY YOUNG JEAN LEE

About the Playwright: Young Jean Lee

Young Jean Lee was born in Daegu, Korea in 1974 and immigrated to the United States (Pullman, Washington, specifically) with her parents at the age of two. Her parents very quickly became evangelical Christians in an attempt to assimilate into American society, which informs much of her later work. Her college years were spent at UC Berkeley focusing on Shakespeare, and eventually she was accepted into Berkeley's English Ph.D. program. This is where her life took a creative turn: she dropped out of the program after six years, moved to Brooklyn, and decided to pursue playwriting. She received her MFA in Playwriting from Mac Wellman's playwriting program at Brooklyn College, then started her own theatre company: Young Jean Lee's Theater Company.

Lee's approach to playwriting is positively unique in comparison to her contemporaries:

My strategy of art-making is always to ask myself what's the last show in the world I'd ever want to make, and then make it. I do this to combat my inherent desire to be cool and imitate the artists I admire, which would result in terrible work. Then I turn off my inner critic completely and write as badly as possible for as long as possible, and then I take a look at all the crap I've churned out and try to make it into something beautiful. I do tons and tons of editing, and I do much of it while the actors are on their feet, speaking their text. I get tons of feedback from outside listeners and viewers. I am a total collaborator, getting opinions from everyone around me no matter who they are and separating the wheat from the chaff. Most of my best ideas come from other people. (Svich, "IN CONVERSATION WITH Young Jean Lee" 33)

This strategy of playwriting may seem odd, but it may be the most freeing. One's ability to "quiet the inner critic" is enhanced. In addition, her use of collaboration causes her to not be the only creative mind on the work, but she does maintain the primary vision. Her theater company works in a very specific way to produce the most effective collaboration:

I learned to make theater by watching young companies descended from Richard Foreman and from the Wooster Group—collaborative ensembles where everybody writes, everybody acts, everybody directs. In the collaborative groups a lot of the time it's democratic, but I definitely wanted to be the boss. I started this process, which is I cast the show before I write it. I don't know what gender the characters are going to be a lot of the time; I don't know how many there will be. It's just based on who comes into the room, who triggers that desire to write for them. People will say, I wish you would do this for my character; I wish this would happen—and then I go home and write more and bring it in. I'll take feedback from anybody. Between somebody else's good idea and my good idea, if theirs is better I have no issue with whose good idea it was. I just want the best idea. (Smallwood 33)

While collaboration is a major component of her work, so is music.

Out of ten shows listed in Young Jean Lee's Theater Company's production history, only one play, *Pullman, WA* (2005), does not feature any music. Most of her plays are tightly woven musically with clear specifications of song titles, composers, and performers. One of the reasons for her rich use of music is that many of her plays have the characteristics of total entertainment involving music, dance, comedy, and spoken drama all together, which is similar to Korean traditional *madang nori* or vaudeville shows. The actors often talk directly to the audience to encourage them to be actively engaged with the play. (Ceon 15)

By engaging with the audience directly, either with music familiar or unfamiliar to them, Lee's works take on an alternate structure that is Brechtian in nature; she jars the audience out of the action and gives them the opportunity to objectively reflect on what is being presented to them.

Lee's later plays—*Pullman, WA*; *Church* and *Songs*—are increasingly presentational: not so much plays, in the conventional sense, as structured events, which purportedly happen in real time. The characters are the performers themselves, and the action—no longer confined behind a fourth wall within the context of a story—takes place directly with the audience. Dramaturgy, freed of the freight of meaning, now creates patterns from an assortment of elements which may or may not have connections with each other. (Jones, "What's Wrong with These Plays?" 197)

Another distinctive quality of the Young Jean Lee Theater Company is that only *they* can perform Lee's works. She has stated in interviews that she would feel odd if someone else directed her work because these works are created in such an intimate, strategic way; releasing the rights for performance may do injustices to the collaborative nature in which her works are

created. She has, however, released her plays for publication to Theatre Communications Group, which is how her notoriety is slowly, but surely, expanding outside her off-off Broadway turf.

About the Work: *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*

Originally premiering at HERE Arts Center in September 2006, *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* is arguably Young Jean Lee's best known work. This, however, is incongruous with her label as a contemporary avant-garde theater artist, which is repeatedly given to her by the press who knows no other means of categorizing her work.

Songs of the Dragons is in fact an unflinching depiction of race in America, rife with stereotypes, anger, and ambivalence—along with a deadpan literalizing of its tagline. As Lee puts it, 'It ended up being a real ethnic play in that it honestly depicted all my contradictory and confused feeling about race. It was also by far my most successful show, so I guess that makes me a sellout.' (Grote 27)

The tagline that Grote mentions in his article is not attached to the published version of the play, but "when it premiered, *Songs* bore the subtitle 'A Show About White People In Love,' and in early interviews and advertisements, Lee claimed that while it was about many things, it was *most of all* about white people" (Ryan 90). This collision of a flowery Asian myth and the subtitle accurately reflect the collision of characters within the play: while Korean-American explores her identity through three Korean women, a seemingly unrelated plot of two blasé white persons trample through the story from time to time having "meaningless" arguments about their relationship.

[T]he narratives of the Asians and the whites do not at first appear to be related to each other. However, the structure suggests strong connections between them. For instance, the couple first appears in scene nine, right after the Koreans shift their language from Korean and Cantonese (which they use for the first half of the play, though the Korean-American always uses English) to English. (Hwang 30)

In a sense, the white couple unknowingly “colonize” the Korean characters throughout the play and eventually overtake the action, finishing out the play with a scene about them rather than what the audience expected: a conclusion to the Korean-American’s identity narrative through reconnecting with her Korean roots. Because *Songs* completely subverts all expectations as far as dramatic structure, narratives, character arcs, and commentary, “*Songs of the Dragon[s]* is clearly a play that vexes all attempts to situate it neatly in terms of politics or aesthetics” (Shimakawa 92).

Songs is the ultimate collage of what audiences do not expect an “identity play” to be, which fits in line with Lee’s play development process:

‘The inspiration for *Songs* was that I felt pressure to write ‘ethnic’ plays and resented the hell out of it,’ Lee declares. ‘So the spirit behind the piece was, ‘You want me to write an ethnic play? Okay, I’ll write the most politically incorrect, horrible ethnic play I can come up with.’ But of course the play ended up being much more complicated than that, since race is an issue I actually care about a lot, and I’m as critical of political incorrectness as I am of political correctness.’ (Grote 27)

This dichotomy of political correctness vs. political incorrectness can best be seen in the various ways that Lee presents the harmonies and dissonances between the two:

Songs cobbles together video art, song-and-dance, pantomime, slapstick, even the stock conventions of realist drama in an effort to explore and undermine the fantasies that structure the specular “meaning” of ethnicity and that nourish the widespread expectation that such meaning can and ought to be communicated in and as narrative—as one’s story, or as the larger cultural story to which one is said to belong. (Ryan 90)

By attacking a topic from a variety of angles, it is likely that at least one will be accessible to her audience to communicate her viewpoint. At the same token, this strategy could equally alienate and confuse her audience, which would fall in line with Brechtian aesthetics. “Lee deliberately provokes the audience to experience a feeling of uneasiness, and watching *Songs* is not a

comfortable experience. This discomfort is a useful theatrical device, which allows audiences to maintain their critical distance as the play unfolds” (Hwang 31).

This critical distance is important in navigating the waters of identity changes among all of the characters in *Songs*. While it may seem on the surface level that each ethnic group plays to their racial stereotype,

Closer examination reveals something much more unsettling. Racism, after all, presupposes that ethnicity and cultural background are absolute determinants of identity and therefore, of one’s place in society. But here as elsewhere in Lee’s plays, identity itself turns out to be mutable and unreliable. For one thing, the Asians vacillate between submission and defiance. Their Asian identity is sometimes a source of pride, sometimes a source of humiliation. Dominant Asians express contempt for submissive Asians (and clueless whites), while some seem willing to reject their Asian identity altogether to become white. Like whites, they can find reasons to hate themselves which have nothing to do with being Asian. In fact, the distinction between Asian and white frequently disappears in a blur of mutually felt self-loathing. And both sides are depicted with equal parts mockery and sympathy. (Jones, “What’s Wrong with These Plays?” 193)

Where the identities clash and start to blur is where the most violent acts tend to occur in *Songs*, and all of the violent acts in *Songs* are, indeed, female-enacted—a rarity in the theatrical world.

Female-Enacted Violence in *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*

Female-Enacted Violence towards Others

The first instance of female-enacted violence towards others in *Songs* occurs after Korean-American spews a reverse-racism diatribe about the ugliness and stupidity of Asians. As if this paradoxical speech was not alienating enough for the audience, the following sequence of events occurs to further distance the audience from any emotional connection to the characters:

(“I Was Born A Unicorn,” performed by The Unicorns from the album Who Will Cut Our Hair When We’re Gone?, begins.)

KOREAN 1 (*Offstage, in Korean*): It’s fun!

KOREAN 3 (*Offstage, in Cantonese*): Yes, it’s fun!

(Koreans 1, 2 and 3 run in from stage right, wearing brightly colored traditional Korean dresses, They shake the outer layer of their skirts above their heads so that they look like big balls of color, and run in manic circles around Korean-American, who tries to smile but is weirded-out.

The Koreans lower their skirts and begin skipping in circles around Korean-American, swinging their skirts from side to side and getting closer and closer to her until their skirts are assaulting her face. The Koreans scatter and begin slapping each other playfully on the ass and giggling while Korean-American edges uneasily out of the way.

Korean 1 smacks Korean-American, viciously on the ass. Korean 2 smacks Korean-American viciously on the ass. Korean-American makes, "What the fuck?" gesture.

The Koreans lift their skirts daintily and run in a wide circle, each whacking Korean-American audibly on the head as they pass her, and then resume playfully slapping each other on the ass.

Korean-American finally retaliates and angrily smacks Korean 2 hard on the ass. Korean 2 grabs Korean-American's hair and yanks her forward so that Korean-American's head collides with her knee, then punches her in the face. Korean 3 punches Korean-American in the face. Korean-American swings at Korean 1 and misses. Korean 1 kicks Korean-American in the stomach, sending her backward into Korean 3, who shoves Korean-American toward Korean 2, who smacks Korean-American with the back of her hand. Korean 3 grabs Korean-American and bites her shoulder until Korean-American hurls her to the ground. Korean 1 runs at Korean-American, who hurls Korean 1 to the ground. Korean 2 grabs Korean-American's hair, pulling her over the prone Korean 1 and yanking her to the floor, Korean 3 holds Korean-American under her arms while Korean 2 kicks her in the crotch. Korean 1 punches Korean-American in the gut, and Korean 3 rolls her over and spits on her.

The Koreans leave Korean-American passed out on the floor. They begin straightening out their dresses and hair, talking and smiling among themselves. They notice Korean-American trying to drag herself offstage and Korean 1 grabs her by the hair and punches her in the face repeatedly. Koreans 2 and 3 begin smiling and making peace signs with their fingers, which they shake frantically, as though someone in the audience is trying to take their picture. Korean 1 joins them and the three of them step over Korean-American's prostrate body, smiling and making peace signs.

Split-second blackout and flash as they step over Korean-American.

When the Lights come back up, Korean 2 and Korean 3 are on their knees with their hands held straight above their heads [a traditional punishment in Korean schools], while Korean 1 stands over them watchfully. Korean-American crawls offstage and sits at the stage left entrance, watching the Koreans.) (Lee 41-43)

To an unknowing audience member, this violent sequence is at best bizarre and at worst incomprehensible. "The audience is lulled by familiar (and perhaps comforting) stereotypes only

to be confronted with the disturbing ramifications of that seduction: the violence (self-)directed at Asian women is literally and figuratively the flip-side of such Orientalia” (Shimakawa 91). They have been repeatedly jarred into different realities, so the moment Lee presents something that the mainstream audience can grasp onto (silly Asian girls giggling and playing with each other), she subverts that norm by making them incredibly vicious and violent towards Korean-American. “What begins as a playful, comic dance transforms into vengeful butt slapping. As the audience laughs, the 'vicious' slaps force them to reconsider their laughter. This pattern of using abrupt, violent maneuvers continues throughout *Songs*” (Hwang 31). Understandably, Korean-American does not know how to appropriately react to the appearance of Koreans 1-3 and has no meaningful connection with them or the cultural framework they are presenting. For this, she is beaten. The communication is entirely physical between the two sides, and it is clear that any knowledge that Korean-American may try to seek about her indigenous culture will cause her to be shut out and unwelcome because she is not “one of them.”

Now that Korean-American is no longer a concern of the Koreans, they begin to discuss sex and sexuality.

(Everyone stares wide-eyed at Korean 1.)

KOREAN 2: Have you had sex, Mook-Jong?

KOREAN 1: What’s the big deal?

KOREAN 3: Oh no!

KOREAN 1: I don’t care, I like having sex. I like having sex. I like having sex for money.

KOREAN 2: For money! Mook-Jong, have you become a prostitute?

KOREAN 1: It’s fun!

(Korean 1 slaps Korean 2 on the ass and runs away. Korean 2 runs after her. Korean 3 is left alone.) (Lee 44)

Korean 1 has now embodied one of the typical Asian female stereotypes:

prostitute/courtesan/concubine. It is unclear from the stage directions if this slap is hard, like the ones inflicted upon Korean American, or more playful, like the slapping earlier in the fight sequence, but it is clear that the other Koreans frown upon Korean 1's practice. A mere two pages later, Korean 2 reveals:

KOREAN 2: Mook-Jong, You are only thirteen years old! How can you be so bad?

KOREAN 1: It's fun!

(She giggles and slaps Korean 3 on the ass.) (Lee 46)

Not only is Korean 1 playing a prostitute/courtesan/concubine, but she is an *underage* one, fulfilling the stereotype even more than before. Prostitution and the sex trade are popular in Asian countries with male travelers who pay exorbitant amounts of money to sexually exploit young Asian girls when the men are travelling on business or for vacation. Korean 1 takes Lee's unexpected viewpoint to another level that the thirteen-year-old prostitute may enjoy her line of work, further subverting the audience's idea of "normal".

In another jarring topic switch, Korean 2 breaks out her Walkman and starts playing a K-Pop song similar to a classic Backstreet Boys or N*SYNC ballad in which this action transpires:

KOREAN 1: What is it, Hyan-So?

KOREAN 2: It's our favorite song, playing on my Walkman!

(She shares her headphones with the other girls and they listen together. Everyone bobs their heads in unison.

"Small Waiting," performed by Cool [The (ku:l)] from the album Love Is ... Waiting, begins.

The Koreans do a beautiful, traditional Korean dance to the music.

Korean-American walks onstage, unable to resist the charming dance. The Koreans flutter past her in a circle and Korean 3 takes Korean-American gently by the waist, bringing her into the dance. Korean 3 encourages Korean-American to join in the dance. Korean-American imitates their movements clumsily, beaming with happiness. Korean 3 critically eyes Korean-American's dancing and, makes a disgusted face,

shoving her away. Korean-American glares at the Koreans through the rest of their dance.) (Lee 46)

Again, when Korean-American attempts to assimilate with her indigenous culture, she is violently removed and ridiculed. The difference in this scenario is that only one Korean discourages Korean-American's participation whereas the other two encourage Korean-American to attempt to express herself through the traditional Korean dancing. This cyclical motif reminds us that no matter how hard Korean-American tries, she will not be fully accepted back into her indigenous culture.

After this sequence, the Koreans prepare to attend the Festival of the Falling Flowers. At the festival, Korean 3 goes into labor and "delivers" Korean-American, who is now dressed in traditional Korean groom's clothing. At this point, all of the Koreans begin to speak accented English, whereas up until this point, they were all speaking either in Korean or Cantonese.

KOREAN 3 (*Improvising awkwardly*): Oh ... Dong-Dong! You scare me so much!
KOREAN-AMERICAN (*to Korean 3*): I don't care! You were raped by our teacher.
Idiot!

*(Korean-American slaps Korean 3 in the face, who cries out and falls to the ground.
Koreans 1 and 2 are delighted by this.)*

Shut up, idiot! Go back to Dongdangnung!
KOREAN 3 (*Standing up*): But I from Inchon!

*(Korean-American taps Korean 3 again, who cries out and falls to the ground.
Koreans 1 and 2 get even more excited.)*

KOREAN-AMERICAN: Idiot! (Lee 49)

One may question whether or not this "counts" as an act of female-enacted violence because the character of Dong-Dong is male and dressed as a male. While she is representing a male, the

character of Korean-American is still being played by a female, making this an act of female-enacted violence. Here, Korean-American is representing the patriarchal society in all Asian cultures that often carry out disciplinary action against women. Even though the rape against Korean 3 was not her fault, she will be punished for it occurring because all women in Asian cultures must remain pure and chaste for their potential suitors that may eventually become a husband. This also explains why the other two Koreans delight in the fact that Korean 3 is tortured—she is getting what she “deserved” for having pre-marital sex. This is one of the few instances of violence the audience is groomed by the media to expect: a dominant Asian male abusing a submissive Asian female. This is subverted, however, because Korean 3 has just given birth to her abuser who is really a woman dressed as a man.

The final act of female-enacted violence on another person is actually committed solely by Korean-American, which is a shift from all of the other acts previously that previously victimized her. Following a scene between the white couple discussing why they need to break up, Korean-American enters with Korean 2:

(White Person 2 walks away from White Person 1 and exits. White Person 1 follows him. As this happens, Korean 2 enters carrying a chair and dragging a reluctant Korean-American. She sets down the chair and pushes Korean-American down on it roughly. She changes her mind, shores Korean-American to the floor, sits in the chair herself, grabs Korean-American's hand and leans back in the chair like an old lady making a dying noise.

Korean-American doesn't get it, so Korean 2 coughs loudly in her face and leans back again. When Korean-American again fails to respond, Korean 2 whacks her in the head.)

KOREAN-AMERICAN *(Finally getting it)*: Grandma, you're dying!

KOREAN 2 *(Tenderly)*: Oh, Myung Bean.

KOREAN-AMERICAN: I don't want you to die, Grandma!

KOREAN 2: I know. (Lee 53-54)

In this exchange, Korean-American is aware that Korean 2 knows English, but chooses physical gesture to communicate that Korean-American wants Korean 2 to play Korean-American's dying grandmother. When physical gesturing does not work, then Korean 2 is physically punished for "not getting it" and then has it explained to her verbally by Korean-American. While this could be written off as no more than slapstick, this instance of female-enacted violence provides a grander narrative of lack of understanding over cultural barriers. Korean-American did a gesture that she thought is common sense and logical, but that gesture did not "translate" to Korean 2's cultural ideas of what that gesture could represent. As the foreigner in this circumstance, Korean 2 is the alien body who does not understand the world she is being put into (or the scene) by Korean-American and remains passive until she can grasp the concept. Korean-American physically punishes Korean 2 for lack of understanding, which is similar to disciplining a dog who is not following a command. Korean-American is now asserting her power as the more empowered of the two due to her status of being an American and therefore oppresses Korean 2 in the process.

Self-Inflicted Female-Enacted Violence

Another unique quality of Lee's *Songs* is that it highlights self-harm. Self-harm is something that is rarely talked about in the media, let alone on the stage, so it is highly significant that the following "suicide sequence" takes place in the play:

("All I Want for Christmas Is You" performed by Mariah Carey from the album Merry Christmas, begins.

Korean 2 unfurls from her little ball shaking her legs in the air like an overturned insect. She lands in a squat on the ground. She makes a scary monster face at the White People and chases them offstage, scuttling like a crab and shaking her skirts. She scuttles in place stage left.

Korean 1 unfurls and scuttles stage Left. Korean 3 unfurls and scuttles stage left. Korean-American scuttles onstage wearing a traditional Korean dress over her jeans and T-shirt and scuttles stage left.

The Koreans and Korean-American begin scuttling all around the stage, making monster faces and shaking their skirts. Korean-American, Korean 1 and Korean 3 scuttle into the upstage right corner and scuttle with their backs to the audience, looking like they're feeding on something. Korean 2 head-butts them from behind, trying to get in, but they keep her out. When the bouncy part of the song kicks in, the Koreans and Korean-American, take turns walking downstage center to mime a gruesome suicide in a confident manner.

Korean 2 commits hara-kiri.

Korean 1 douses herself with kerosene and lights herself on fire.

Korean 3 stabs herself in the vagina with a knife.

Korean-American does way too much cocaine.

Korean 2 sticks a chopstick in her eye and pulls out her eyeball.

Korean 1 cuts off two of her fingers with a pair of scissors, then cuts off her tongue and stabs herself in the eyes.

Korean 3 drinks a bottle of beer, smashes the bottle over her knee, and uses the broken bottle to cut her wrists.

Korean-American puts her head in an oven and resumes scuttling.

Korean 2 cuts around her jawline, peels off her face, rolls it up, smokes it like a cigarette and resumes scuttling.

They all scuttle together.

The White People enter with chairs and shoo the Koreans offstage, shaking their chairs at the Koreans like lion tamers. The White People sit center stage. A row of fluorescent tubes turns on above them. They sit for a long time, looking miserable.) (Lee 63-64)

While the first two acts of suicide are almost expected acts of suicide to see an Asian female perform onstage, the rest are farfetched and highly imaginative, causing discord within the audience as to how to respond appropriately to the acts. .

Their [The Koreans and Korean-American] overblown gestures of such physical violence cause the audience to laugh due to the comic slapstick elements. Possibly, this laugh arises as a result of the audience's discomfort with such strange violence, or possibly just because the scene is funny. The most important effect of this combination of violence and humor is to open the audience not only to laughter but also to rethink the stereotyped images of Asian women, from a critical distance. The audiences at *Songs* are often mixed in their reactions to the chorus of the comic suicides—some laugh and smile because of the actors' exaggerated, comic mime of the suicides, while others feel discomfort because of their violence. But this is possibly the reaction that Lee is looking for: a mixed one. (Hwang 38-39)

Lee enacts her Brechtian alienation once again to distance the audience from the acts they are witnessing in order to process media portrayal of Asian woman through their acts of suicide. It is a common theme across all media, especially the horror film genre; an Asian woman committing suicide is often a troubled individual who did something to dishonor the family or her husband. “In historical retrospect, suicide was often the only solution available to certain women in Korea. Upper class women were given a knife called a ‘silver-decorated knife’ to commit suicide if they lost their chastity or virginity” (Hwang 39-40). By committing suicide, she will be “restoring” honor to their names and helping her family move forward in society without her. However, the ways in which these violent suicides are performed makes one question whether or not the way in which they kill themselves may bring further discomfort or dishonor to the family or whether these acts of self-inflicted violence are futile. “The violence of this scene is designed to dramatically realize how the typecasting of the Asian women’s self-sacrifice and self-hurt oppresses all Asian women in society” (Hwang 39).

Violence Against the Playwright: The Hitting Video

While the opening sequence of *Songs* is not an act of female-enacted violence, the disturbing, violent nature of the act cannot be ignored and deserves to be discussed for its unique qualities unlike any other play that has been presented before. This is how *Songs* opens:

Prerecorded sound of the plays writer and director Young Jean Lee and her real-life friends talking and laughing as they begin to make a video of Young Jean getting hit in the face. Dean is operating the camera and Yehuda is hitting. Young Jean. Rollo is helping with the lighting. The entire dialogue plays in darkness and the audience can't see anything that is taking place.

DEAN: Okay ... Everybody ready?

YEHUDA: So do a, just do a practice for the camera.

DEAN: That's it.

YEHUDA: All right. So.

DEAN: Hold on. Just...

YEHUDA: On a scale of one to ten what should this be?

YOUNG JEAN: Mmm ...

YEHUDA: Ten being as hard as I'm going to hit you, not as hard as I can hit you.

YOUNG JEAN: Right. Um, you know, I think we should be in, like, communication for the whole thing, because when we did it, it was fine when there was talking. So why don't you start out, like, pretty soft, and then, you know, like start out with like a one, and then I'll tell you to, like, increase it.

(Everyone giggles as Yehuda lightly taps Young Jean's face.)

ROLLO: A caress.

YOUNG JEAN: Are we rolling?

DEAN: We are rolling. Okay ... go.

(Slap.)

YOUNG JEAN *(Giggling)*: That's pretty hard, for a one. Like, projecting to a ten.

DEAN: Yehuda, when you slap her, don't stop. Follow through. Follow through so the hand disappears and we only have her reaction.

YEHUDA: I'll go softer, all right?

YOUNG JEAN: No, you can try it that—like that again.

YEHUDA: Ready?

(Slap.)

YOUNG JEAN: Dean, is this okay?

DEAN: One more time. This is okay. Um, Young Jean. I have a sense that you want to ... come back.

YOUNG JEAN: Come back where?

DEAN: Come back to the front, and come back to your composure as quickly as possible.

YOUNG JEAN: As quickly as possible?

DEAN: As quickly as you possibly can.

YOUNG JEAN: Okay.

DEAN: I know you're, you're kind of figuring out a lot of information.

YOUNG JEAN: Yeah.

DEAN: But try to—

YOUNG JEAN: Try to just come back—

DEAN: Try to, try to come back and let that be the figuring out.

YEHUDA: Yeah, that should be your blocking, because even if you can't do that, it'll look cool.

DEAN: Okay. Long neck. Thank you.

(Slap.)

Good.

(Slap.)

Better. Yehuda, that was better.

YEHUDA: Okay.

(Slap.)

DEAN: Young Jean, fix your hair.

(Slap.)

Chin up. Debutante.

(Really loud slap.)

Yehuda, not any harder than that.

(Slap.)

Hair. Beautiful.

(Slap.

Pause.

Slap.

Pause.

Slap.

Young Jean sniffles.

Slap.)

You can't be the signal.

YOUNG JEAN: Hm?

DEAN: You can't be the signal.

YEHUDA: I'm just saying it—you don't have to answer, I'm just gonna say it.

YOUNG JEAN: Okay.

(Slap.

A siren in the background.)

DEAN: Hair.

(Slap.

Young Jean sniffles.

*Slap.
Young Jean sniffles.
Slap.)*

Okay let's stop.
YOUNG JEAN (*Sniffing*): Why?
DEAN: Okay let's not.

(A video of Young Jean crying appears against the back wall. A traditional Korean pansori song begins. Young Jean gets hit in the face repeatedly. The video is edited so that you never see the hand hitting her face—only her reaction as her head flies back and she tries to straighten her hair and regain her composure. She cries throughout. The slaps increase in intensity and frequency, continuing after the song ends, until you see Young Jean mouth the words, "One more," before she gets hit one last time. The video ends.) (Lee 36-39)

There is a plethora to unpack from this sequence. First of all, it is a video projected onto the set prior to the beginning of the play. This is a prerecorded event preceding a live theatrical experience, which is innovative in its own right. What is especially unique is that Lee has posted the video on her website for anyone to view out of context from the play. In a sense, it is a stand-alone film that is immersed into the world of the play. In the way that this film is cut, the viewer never sees the acts of violence occurring, just the preparation on Lee's face and the aftermath of her head snapping back after each slap.

The most unique element of this film-in-theatre sequence is that the playwright is subjugating herself to violence and incorporating herself in the dramatic action of the play. Lee's original ideas were not realized, however, because they were unsafe:

The hitting video now makes sense to me, but when I first thought of it, it just popped into my head as the right way to begin the show. I had this image of somebody beating the crap out of me—black eye, bloody nose, just beating me up. And everybody told me: Look, there's no way to control it so you don't end up with a broken nose or detached retina or something really serious. So I had to settle for the slapping. Nobody had ever hit me in the face before, so it was really an experiment to see what would happen. My immediate reaction was just to start bawling. It was so upsetting. To get hit in the face is something so deeply personal and insulting, and just so horrifying. And I got hit in the

face for about 20 minutes. After the fact, when I was thinking about how it fit into the show, I felt like it was really a play on Asian self-hatred. Which is a huge cliché—it's like bad '60s performance art. (Jones, “Script Sabotage” 74)

By beginning her play with such a vulnerable image—the playwright being slapped in the face repeatedly—the audience immediately assumes the mindset that this play will be a serious play about identity politics, but Lee immediately jerks the audience out of that assumption the second Korean-American opens her mouth and is then attacked by the Koreans. The play goes so far in the comedic direction that one almost forgets about the opening sequence until Lee reminds the audience of it later:

One of the big identity politics clichés is that it's a confessional narrative about you. So I put a direct reference to the hitting video in the grandmother scene, where the grandmother asks, ‘Why you ask your friend hit you in face? And then make video?’ I make it seem as if the Korean-American character is an explicit stand-in for me, when really she's this self-hating, racist freak who says a lot of crap I don't believe. I think that most people get that it's a joke, but occasionally someone will think that she's really supposed to be me. (Jones, “Script Sabotage” 75)

Again, Lee subverts audience expectation, even with presenting herself in her own work. She expects the audience to view Korean-American as a representation of Lee and Lee's sociopolitical ideology, but subverts that by creating a character who is unlike her sociopolitically in any way.

In addition to the sound of slapping in the film sequence, a traditional Korean *pansori* song is sang over top of the action. Lee distances the audience from what they are seeing because the tune of the music is upbeat and cheerful, but the action they are seeing is violent and depressing.

The slapping scene demonstrates staging strategies that Young Jean Lee employs to layer her text with multiple meanings that have the potential to call into question the notion of a single cultural identity. In the scene, the audience sees the slapped face and tears trickling down the character Young Jean's face, while it simultaneously listens to the two

sounds of the song and the slap. This synesthetic combination of sound and vision creates an ironic moment. In the video clip, while the traditional male character presents a love theme in an auditory fashion, the woman, who is supposedly in the love relationship, is visually beaten. The sound of Lee's weeping ironically matches the rhythmic beats of the love song. The slapping sequence in *Songs* can perhaps be interpreted as the result of being caught between two worlds: the world of Korean culture and parentage and the world of contemporary America. (Hwang 37)

Indeed, the song that is sung "at" Lee is a love song and describes how a good woman waits for her husband to return home to make love to him and only him, but as many American audience members do not speak Korean:

It is unlikely that non-Korean speakers will understand the significance of the lyrics – a kind of private joke between the playwright and Koreans. In spite of this lack of understanding, Lee's slapped face and the cheerful upbeat music create an emotionally off-kilter feeling of uneasiness. This theatrical moment displays Lee's ability to provide a kind of intercultural 'double-speak': the discomfort that comes from experiencing simultaneously the violence of repeated slaps with traditional music. (Hwang 34-35)

By creating a language barrier between the audience and her work, Lee again facilitates alienation from the audience to distance themselves and critically examine what they are viewing.

Rather than deeply moving the audience, the female-enacted violence in Young Jean Lee's *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* repeatedly forces the audience to question how to react to these acts of violence. Repeatedly, the audience is forced to question how to react to these acts of violence: are they funny, or are they tragic? By repeatedly distancing the audience using violence, Lee causes the audience to ponder the merits of identity politics and their role within the societal system that may oppress some who they may not have considered to be oppressed before. In addition, this play gives voice to those on the borderline of their ethnicity and their nationality; these citizens are constantly torn between cultural traditions from their

homeland and assimilating the norms of the new country while trying to maintain an identity that is accepted into mainstream society, which is an impossible task.

Discussed and Attempted Acts of Female-Enacted Violence

More often than not, violence is acted upon rather than threatened in this work. It is rare to find threats building up to moments of an act of violence; rather, they spontaneously occur and are likely unprovoked. There is one instance within the play where a violent act is discussed of female-enacted violence, but is not threatened towards another individual or acted upon. Korean 1 and 2 have just left the stage and Korean 3 is visited by the voice of Ghost-Man, who attempts to play a game of “Hookers and Johns” with her, which could insinuate either consensual sex or rape. Korean 3 flat out refuses his request and he vanishes. Relieved, she sings this song, “spookily, in English”:

KOREAN 3: When you cut her
Do not cut her with a knife.
Do not chop her with an axe.
Do not saw her with a saw.

(Slowly rising)

One, two, one, two.
Now you know what you must do.
Do not cut her with a knife.
This is how you take her life.

Put some fishhooks in her hand.
That is all you need.
She will put them in her cunt
And they will make her bleed. (Lee 45)

While Korean 3 sings, Koreans 1 and 2 overhear the song and inquire about it once the song is over. Korean 3 reveals that “[i]t’s just an old Korean song I learned from my grandmother” but the other Koreans demand she does not sing it anymore (Lee 45). While it is unclear from the

words of the song of who the woman is describing, it is clear that the victim is a woman; in addition, a woman is singing the song, which makes it a discussed act of female-enacted violence. Many have interpreted the song outside the literal realm and taken it to represent self-mutilation:

The lyrics of this song are horrifying examples of brutal, bloody self-inflicted violence. The song prefigures the suicidal stagings in scene 14. The fact that the grandmother teaches this song to her granddaughter is immensely troubling but recalls a legacy of such familial violence in Asian culture such as the now abandoned 'cultural' practice of binding girls' feet. In the previous section of the 'song of ten strokes' in *Chunhyang*, a woman's endurance against physical tortures for her faithfulness to her husband describes another such legacy. This evokes the ways in which one generation passes on to the next generation a maintenance of violence aimed at women to control and manage them. (Hwang 42)

Hwang makes an excellent point that this could be a continuation of secret, self-inflicted familial violence by comparing it to Chinese foot binding, but to play devil's advocate, it is equally likely that the violence could be directed towards another individual rather than the self. For example, it is possible that the grandmother taught the granddaughter (Korean 3) this song through committing this violent act to her. Hwang also makes the argument that this song is foreshadowing to the suicide scene later in *Songs*, but the only direct correlation is the described act of inserting a sharp object into the vagina; the difference lies in the device, methodology, and length of time it could potentially take one to die from hemorrhaging internally from a vaginal stab wound versus a fish hook slowly bleeding the victim out.

Because this particular act is discussed and not acted upon, the audience cannot see the ramifications of committing this act. The description of it, however, reminds the audience of the horrific traditions that Asian women often experience in secret and assume as their "normal" where a majority of other cultures do not hold those same values.

There is also one act of threatened female-enacted violence, and this occurs in the non-Korean narrative, or the play about white people in love. After the Koreans discuss the benefits and downfalls of Christianity and confuse the white person characters in the process, the white couple begin bickering about why they do not have sex with each other anymore. The topic then shifts dramatically:

WHITE PERSON 1: I want to have a discussion with you.

WHITE PERSON 2: About what.

WHITE PERSON 1: My pens. You have to stop stealing my pens. I like to use these very expensive roller-ball pens and you're always stealing them and shoving them in your pockets without the caps, and I am very disappointed in this, it drives me crazy. It makes me want to take those pens and jam them into the end of your penis.

(She makes a jabbing motion toward his penis.) (Lee 63)

Without a question, there is a strong connection between pens and penises. After all, the word, “pen” and “penis” are only two letters apart. This is far more than just a creative play on words for Lee, but a play on power symbols:

According to conventional theatrical metaphors, a pen suggests an idea of power and, in psychoanalysis, the phallus also entails power. The pen, as a phallic symbol, represents a sort of power in the love relationship, and thus the woman's power has been stolen by the man. In this sense, the woman's complaint to her boyfriend about stealing power in their unfair relationship, allegedly in the name of "love" seems correct. In patriarchal society, women's power has frequently been stolen by society and powerful men. (Hwang 51)

This metaphor is particularly interesting considering the time period in which the play was written. In 2006 and continuing to the present day, it is alleged that American society is in its fourth wave of feminism: the right to choose abortion and equal pay in the workplace. The latter of the two has experienced a boom since the 2013 release of Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, which addresses the issues women experience when attempting to assert male-associated qualities in the workplace. White Person 1

attempts to begin a diplomatic dialogue regarding the pen issue, but rapidly deteriorates to childlike “pen”-towards-penis thrusting. This breakdown in tactics could be a sign that White Person 2 is not truly listening to White Person 1 during this interaction, which only heightens White Person 1’s frustration as it replicates the female workplace experience so accurately. This is also the only time that any action is taken towards a man; in every other instance of the play, the violent act is committed, is committed by a woman, is often committed towards another woman, or is committed towards herself.

THE CONDUCT OF LIFE BY MARIA IRENE FORNES

About the Playwright: Maria Irene Fornes

Personal History

Maria Irene Fornes' life is as varied and unexpected as the plays that she creates. She is the elder stateswoman of the three female playwrights analyzed here; Fornes was born in 1930 in Havana Cuba and emigrated to the United States when she was fifteen with her recently widowed mother and sister during the Batista regime, "a time when Cubans moved to and from the United States more easily than under Castro" (Cummings 7). While she first attempted schooling, she dropped out six weeks later due to her language barrier and began working odd jobs to help support her family. Eventually, she learned English and "found a new community in the postwar counter-culture of Greenwich Village. It became her home for most of her adult life" (Cummings 7). Always creative, Fornes was initially inspired to become a painter. In 1954, she left for Europe to pursue her newfound passion, but experienced an event that would later change her artistic trajectory:

I saw the original production of *Waiting for Godot* in Paris, directed by Roger Blin. I'd just arrived in Paris and I didn't know a word of French. But I was so profoundly upset by that play—and by upset I mean turned upside down—that I didn't even question the fact that I had not understood a word. I felt that my life had been turned around. I left the theatre and felt that I saw everything so clearly. Maybe it was a clear night, but it was such a physical experience. I felt that I saw clarity. Maybe that night something in me understood that I was to dedicate my life to the theatre. My feeling was that I understood something about life. If you'd asked me then what it was I'd understood, I couldn't have

told you. If I had understood the text it still wouldn't have been clear. Of course, I knew the play had something to do with slavery and freedom (Savran, "Maria Irene Fornes" 54).

This profound experience still did not quite awaken her dramatic interests, however. She returned to the United States in 1957 thinking that she would pursue textile design. It was a chance encouragement of her friend and roommate Susan Sontag that would awaken her writing sensibilities. Sontag was depressed because she wanted to write a novel, but felt stuck.

Determined to show how easy it was to do if one forced oneself, Fornes proclaimed that she would write with her. While this prodding encouraged Sontag into scholarly theatrical analysis, it confirmed Fornes' theatrical passion first sparked by *Waiting for Godot* and she began writing plays. Her first published work was *The Widow*, but her first produced work was *There! You Died* (commonly referred to today as *Tango Palace*) in 1963. Through this, "Fornes became one of the leaders in the off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway movement of the 1960s and 1970s with such plays as *The Successful Life of 3* and *Dr. Kheal*, as well as the musical *Promenade* written with Al Carmines" (Peterson and Bennett 120). This shift from absurdism to musical theatre was the first theatrical transfiguration that Fornes endeavored stylistically as a playwright, but continued to shift and transform over each added decade of work:

Her 1960s plays...are playfully absurdist, full of logic and language games, whimsical ironies, zany transformations, and fanciful incongruities. Her 1970s plays suggest a discomfiting period of growth and a search for a more personal voice, one which was signaled by her pivotal, groundbreaking *Fefu and Her Friends* (1977). This is the decade in which she honed her skills as a director, in part by creating devised pieces from documentary sources. The plays of the 1980s, the period of her most enduring work, achieve a crystalline balance of lyricism, emotionalism, and formalism that reflected 'an increasingly expressive relation to dread, to grief and to passion' (Sontag 1986: 9). This is also when she emerged as an influential teacher of playwriting, celebrated for her innovative exercises designed to release a writer's creative spirit. Her 1990s plays focus more explicitly on themes of survival and friendship, even as they revive a metatheatrical

self-consciousness evident in the early work. These plays are ruminative, more personal, questioning, and sometimes tentative. They yearn for better days even as they manifest Fornes's resilient love and respect for life itself. (Cummings xviii-xix)

Like a fine cheese or wine, Fornes' work embodies different flavorful notes depending on the stage of ripeness. Her early absurdist work embodies the tartness and pizzazz of a young artist bursting onto the theatre scene, while her 1980s plays have had the time marinate and have become more poignant now that the audience fully embraces the emotional impact of her body of work.

Aside from being a playwright and director, Fornes also teaches playwriting as a part of the INTAR (International Arts Relations, Inc.) Hispanic Playwrights' Lab, a playwriting workshop exclusively for Latino/a playwrights. Notable playwrights that have studied under her at INTAR include Jose Rivera, Caridad Svich, Migdalia Cruz, and Cherríe Moraga.

A State of Fornesia: How to Define the Undefinable

Many have tried to categorize Maria Irene Fornes' work. Many have failed. This is partially due to how complex she is as a human being in a society that loves to label. She is a minority four times over: a woman, an immigrant, a Hispanic, and a lesbian. Much of the criticism surrounding her body of work examines her role as woman and debates whether or not her work is feminist, anti-feminist, or makes no stance on feminism at all. Fornes herself acknowledges her turbulent relationship with feminist criticism, stating, "As a writer, I am in an odd position in relation to feminism: Radical feminists don't consider me a feminist, but a great many people who are sympathetic consider me a feminist and see my characterizations of men as a harsh criticism" ("Creative Danger" 232). How did a female playwright wind up as such a paradox? Many fingers point to Catherine A. Schuler's article "Gender Perspective and Violence in the Plays of Maria Irene Fornes and Sam Shepard." Schuler juxtaposed these two playwrights

against each other due to the fact that they both released violent works in 1985: Fornes' *The Conduct of Life* and Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind*, respectively. In this article, Schuler attempts to analyze why Shepard's work received more attention and critical acclaim than Fornes' work:

With the possible exception of *The Danube*, her most recent plays, including *Fefu and Her Friends*, *Mud*, *The Conduct of Life*, and *Sarita*, are quite straightforward. Yes, *Fefu* requires a peripatetic audience, and photographic freezes punctuate the action of *Mud*, but, in general, these plays conform to relatively linear patterns of development that should be easily understood even by unsophisticated spectators. Perhaps the thematic content of her most recent work is too clear; because she is regarded in many circles as a feminist playwright, perhaps Fornes is being deliberately disingenuous when she insists that the mass audiences that currently flock to Shepard's latest plays and films reject her work on the basis of form rather than content. (219)

Many academics, critics, and supporters of Fornes have taken great offense to Schuler's observations, particularly with the idea that Fornes' plays are "quite straightforward," which is contrary to the well-supported argument that Fornes is avant-garde playwright. Schuler does make one of the first written arguments that Fornes is a feminist playwright:

Because Fornes maintains a genuine commitment to placing women in the subject position, she does not compromise her point of view to please popular audiences who are unaccustomed to seeing women at the center of a dramatic situation and who resist receiving an image of the world and men through a woman's eyes. (221)

Many academics support this view because her most recent works premiered after the boom of the third wave of feminism. Schuler continues her argument in line with feminist ideology by stating that "Fornes's tendency to concentrate on female rather than male psychology may be responsible for the hostility engendered by her work. This, however, is only a partial explanation, and the issue of audience reception and gender transcends the mere centrality of female characters" (Schuler 221). In addition, Fornes is upsetting the patriarchy by showing the effects of it through the female characters' eyes, and positive male characters are rarities in her works (Schuler 224). "If Fornes remains on the periphery of the mainstream," Schuler eerily predicts:

[I]t is because large, popular audiences come to the theater to have their most cherished beliefs reinforced, not challenged. They do not want to examine the implications of gender hierarchy or the dynamics of patriarchy too closely. Fornes's refusal to compromise, her refusal to write to please men, her rejection of romantic sentimentality ensures that she will remain on the fringe. (Schuler 227)

It is odd that Schuler's prediction of Fornes not crossing into the mainstream theatre still holds true; however, academics, critics, and theatre practitioners are increasingly exposed to her work, so a crossover into the mainstream may only be a matter of time. Two years following this article, Stacy Wolf published a response of sorts to Schuler's view: "While I don't disagree with Schuler's reading, I would suggest that it is Fornes' form as much as her content that enables a productive, feminist reading of the violence in the plays" (Wolf 19). Rather than broadly categorizing Fornes' work under the umbrella of "feminism," Wolf chooses to specifically categorize it under "materialist feminism."

Fornes' form, by pointing to the conventions of realism without using them to mask ideology, enunciates a materialist feminist performance. Materialist feminism, which grew out of Marxist feminism, critiques realism from an ideological perspective through troubling the naturalization of the Aristotelean form, thus focusing on the specific power structures that profit from identifying this form as 'natural' or 'normal.' Materialist feminists see realism and all other theatrical forms as constructions, 'ideologically significant' and 'ideologically circumscribed,' and work to foreground their very constructedness. Since, for materialist feminists, subjectivity is constructed by one's specific location in history and culture, the spectator also emerges as a constructed subject, occupying an unstable position in relation to the performance text. At the same time, materialist feminist performance practice is committed to representing women's lives and women's issues. However it might trouble the term 'women,' and however it aims to de-naturalize representation, materialist feminism theatre employs representational strategies... In a materialist feminist performance practice such as Fornes', violence is not represented as 'truth,' but rather as a culturally constructed behavior. In Fornes' plays, violence functions mimetically to imply its location in representation, referentially, pointing to its location in lived experience and, contextually, to construct and be constructed by gender. (Wolf 22-23)

This form of feminism troubles Schuler's ideas that Fornes' plays are "quite straightforward."

Rather than following a perfect dramatic structure as a "straightforward" play would suggest,

"Fornes disavows a stable, psychological identification with the characters in several ways. Little

is revealed about the women through their sketchy characterizations, and no linear narrative invites spectators to favor one over another” (Wolf 24). By not putting forth a specific, easily identifiable female protagonist with an equally identifiable (likely male) antagonist, it is difficult to argue that these are linear, argumentative feminist plays. What is equally difficult, however, is to argue that there is *not* a feminist element to Fornes’ work. The only certainty is that the female characters that Fornes has created through her canon are complex and embody many different representations of feminism, anti-feminism, or no representation of feminist theory at all:

Often, there are misunderstandings about my work because it is expected that as a woman I must be putting women in traditional or untraditional roles, or roles of subservience or subjugation or dominance, to illustrate those themes. Or when one of my women characters is portrayed in a position of work or leisure, certain assumptions or simplifications are made about the character which might be quite the opposite of what is presented in the play. When those contradictions occur, the critics never question their initial premise. Instead, they see it as a fault in the play. (Fornes, “Creative Danger” 230)

The fairest assessment, then, is to say that Fornes certainly has feminist elements in her plays, but are not necessarily the driving vehicle of her work. Her role as a woman in contemporary society has an impact on her perspective as a playwright, but it is not the dominating factor.

If one attempts to examine Fornes’ immigrant status or Hispanic heritage on her work, it would be easy to write it off to the fact that her characters are Hispanic and many of her plays deal with issues that most relate to those two subgroups. There are some subversions in the category, however. Some of her characters do not embody stereotypical Latin names such as Leticia or Orlando, but rather have names like Lloyd, Henry, or Mae. Their ethnicities are not explicitly discussed within the context of the play; instead, the ethnicity of the characters are indicated by the setting, such as an undetermined country in Latin America. This breaks society’s conventional ideas of what it means to be Latino/a in the present day and that simple

classification will not do for issues like race. The setting is often the strongest factor that indicates her cultural perspective.

Fornes's plays differ from those of most of her contemporaries in that almost all are set either in a preindustrial society or on the far edge of middle-class culture. They are filled with a deep compassion for the disenfranchised, for whom survival—rather than the typically bourgeois obsession with individual happiness and freedom—is the bottom line. They do not delight, even covertly, in suffering but take a stand unequivocally against dehumanization and violence in its myriad forms. Perhaps it is in this context that her revolutionary use of language is best understood, its simplicity and beauty signaling, in the midst of violence and decay, a verbal utopia in which things are called by their proper names and brutality is so embarrassingly evident that it can no longer hold sway. (Savran, "Maria Irene Fornes" 53)

Her works do not follow the "magical realism" or surrealistic qualities that many other Latino/a novelists, artists, and dramatists (including the ones she helped cultivate at INTAR like Jose Rivera) tend to follow. In its place, Fornes presents raw, gritty reality akin to naturalism to highlight her status as an ethnic minority.

What is particularly curious about the analyses that has been done on Fornes' canon of work is the lack of commentary on what impact her sexuality might have had or continues to have on her plays. Her sexuality is almost always treated as an anecdote in the tomes that have been written about her. Perhaps academics and critics have felt or feel that the feminist argument includes her perspective as a lesbian. With the pinnacle of her success coinciding at the time of the peak of the hysteria of the AIDS crisis, perhaps no one wanted to talk about her sexuality for fear that her sexual identity and the public's then ignorance of AIDS would impede her success in the mainstream. It is a bizarre absence of analysis in the body of her work, so it will be curious to see when it will finally be explored by scholars, critics, and theatre practitioners.

The most prolific debate concerning Maria Irene Fornes' body of work is whether or not she is an avant-garde artist. Since her first profound theatrical experience was the original

production of *Waiting for Godot*, many would argue that her plays would absolutely follow in the tradition of Theatre of the Absurd:

Samuel Beckett's plays, the quintessential lyrical dramas of the twentieth century, are her most obvious antecedents. Like Beckett, Fornes subjects her characters to the theater that only in part represents the world beyond the theater. In her three decades of writing, the politics of both her form and content have become more sophisticated but always within a context of deliberately articulated semiotics in which her primary concern has been the power dynamics between characters explored meticulously through the characters' physicality. As *Waiting for Godot's* Vladimir and Estragon's drama is demarcated by their relationships to each other, to the tree and road, to their shoes and bowlers, Fornes's characters' stories are manipulated within similar dramatic worlds... The progress-less stories of Beckett's theater also echo in Fornes's theater. Her plays are rarely plot driven; more often, structure is the consequence of characters represented by their participation in small and frequently absurd scenes whose juxtapositions equal dramatic events. Fornes's characters talk, pose, and posture incessantly, and Fornes's theater lends significance to those "small" acts with scrupulous theatrical framing; characters and audience alike are continually subjected to the carefully crafted and manipulated extraliterary spectacle of the body, light, music, color, and space. (Moroff 3)

The lack of progress that occurs within Fornes' plays is due to her incorporation of silence through use of pauses, a quality heavily associated with Theatre of the Absurd:

Fornes worries over the tone and duration of silences the way a musician does: These spaces are as busy with choices, regrets, and retreats as more obviously active passages. Like Harold Pinter, Franz Xaver Kroetz, and Suzan-Lori Parks, she assigns distinct emotional meanings to different kinds of silence. Ellipses following a line of dialogue, she has explained, imply hesitation, as if the speaker is pondering a further speech, or hopes to hear a reply. In either case, the character is gauging the effect his or her words have made before moving on. On another level of silence is the dash, usually preceded by a period. Unlike ellipses, which suggest that the hesitant speaker is still engaged with the listener, the period and dash mark a break: The speaker moves into a private space, sealed in fantasy, perhaps, or memory. The most significant silences (Fornes says) are indicated by stage directions. 'Pause' has the same weight as a line of dialogue; it is an event unto itself, or a window onto mental activity that runs parallel to the dialogue. (Robinson 13-14)

More direct than Suzan-Lori Parks, Fornes has guided the actor who attempts her script by conveying a sense of rhythm through silence, which is difficult to translate to the page. A director who approaches her script can begin to determine the pacing of the entire production by

quantifying the amount of time given to each type of pause. This is not to dismiss the importance of the words Fornes *does* include, however:

Rather than assaulting audiences with violently insistent and prolific verbal patterns, she offers something far more minimal and controlled: worlds in which the impact of language in performatively shaping reality is felt most acutely by the speakers themselves. Shepard or Mamet characters may create themselves through language but rarely seem to have trouble in finding the words to do so. Fornes' protagonists, conversely, tend to be only too aware that their own limitations in vocabulary and expression are the very factors that effectively restrict their ability to comprehend and transform their worlds. In seeking to acquire more language and more control over their language, they also seek to empower themselves. (Bottoms, "How to Do More With Less" 55)

By carefully crafting the words to best serve each character's point of view or argument, Fornes strikes the match for another dialogue regarding which style best fits her work: Brechtian epic theatre.

As an alternative to the Theatre of the Absurd lens, many argue that Fornes' plays primarily function as contemporaries of Brechtian style.

In Fornes' work, one is not only watching a character caught in different moments in time, but also watching a very distinct commentary on the theatrical role of such a character through the history of drama. Not consciously meta-theatrical like her peer Richard Foreman, Fornes nevertheless makes clear to her informed audience-and certainly as a director with her use of isolation, stillness, and profound intimacy between characters on stage-that her characters are part of a larger continuum of which they have often no control. (Svich, "Conducting a Life: A Tribute to Maria Irene Fornes" xvii-xviii)

Because each character has a specific role within the production, there is an inherent didactic quality to her work. Fornes herself acknowledges the importance of didacticism within not just her plays, but in theatre as a collective:

We have the potential to learn by example or by demonstration. If you're trying to teach people to be careful when they cross the street and not just trust the light, and you show them a film where someone doesn't look and a drunk driver comes by and kills him, you're not saying, 'You're going to get killed.' You're saying, 'Look what happened to this person. You look and don't get killed.' That is a classic way of teaching. But maybe that's old-fashioned and I am an old-fashioned person. (Savran, "Maria Irene Fornes" 57)

Unlike Brecht, who claimed to present equal views of a topic but inherently presented one lens stronger than others, there is truly no dominant viewpoint in Fornes' work, and she succeeds to a disturbing effect. This is most evident through *The Conduct of Life*. As an audience member or a reader, one longs to despise Orlando for raping and torturing Nena, but empathizes with his plight when he explains why he is the way he is. When he is killed, there is no comfort in knowing that he is dead because the gun is placed in his most violated victim's hands. The complexities each character possesses causes the audience to constantly fall in and out of sync with characters, which provides the audience moments for contemplation of the overall message of the piece.

In a similar didactic vein, Theatre of Cruelty is a label that could also be applied to Fornes' works. From my interpretation of reading Artaud, the art is cruel first and foremost to those practicing it, which is true of Fornes' writing process:

As I'm writing the play, I suffer with the characters and I share their joys—or else I can't write. I am dealing with them for a long time and then analyzing, breaking the play down, trying to see if it works. I become a technician and start moving things around. It could be that the shock is more violent to the audience than it is to me, because often that violent moment has to do with the violence of ending the work. That's a violence to an author. (Savran, "Maria Irene Fornes" 56)

By sympathizing so greatly with the characters she creates, Fornes is setting herself up for even more torture by subjugating some of them to a violent, sometimes wicked, end:

Often, when you become very involved in the life of a character, when you're riveted, and the play ends, you have a feeling of rupture. This world has died. But maybe that feeling of rupture is deeper in me...after all, audiences are involved for an hour and a half or two hours. But I've been involved for one to three years. I don't know how to end a play unless...who's going to kill whom? It could be that it's so violent for me that I transfer it to the stage. But to a member of the audience who doesn't have the same experience of loss when it's over, it's a shock, right? (Savran, "Maria Irene Fornes" 56-57).

In accordance with Artaudian ideology that I have interpreted, the goal of Theatre of Cruelty is to expose the audience to so much pain, violence, torture, and anguish in hopes that they have experienced a catharsis of sorts and will not go out and make the same horrific choices they witnessed characters making during the play in the real world. “The plays since *Fefu*, written in a great diversity of styles, explore the workings of violence—psychological, political, and sexual—and the self-destruction toward which it leads, with the aim of teaching, of asking the spectator to understand and to make another choice” (Savran, “Maria Irene Fornes” 53).

This is the clearest answer to criticism of Fornes’ works never having the “happy ending” that contemporary audiences may seek for the sake of escapism:

I don’t romanticize pain. In my work people are always trying to find a way out, rather than feeling a romantic attachment to their prison. Some people complain that my work doesn’t offer the solution. But the reason for that is that I feel that the characters don’t have to get out, it’s *you* who has to get out. Characters are not real people. If characters were real people, I would have opened the door for them at the top of it—there would be no play. The play is there as a lesson, because I feel that art ultimately is a teacher (Savran, “Maria Irene Fornes” 55-56).

With all of these avant-garde elements in her works, it is obvious that Schuler’s observation of Fornes’ work as “quite straightforward” is inadequate because of the depth and complexity that Fornes’ plays provide. It is impossible to categorize her into even one avant-garde movement holistically without any reservations.

That being said, Fornes herself has openly stated that she is not an avant-garde artist and not an avant-garde playwright.

No, I think that if the work is based on character and story it is not avant-garde. My work is based on character and story and think that those elements place the work in the realm of the traditional. Avant-garde characters seem to be subject to the imagery and the tones of the piece while traditional characters are mainly subject to their relationship with other characters. In the vanguard we frequently see a detached character, a stranger in an eerie world. One who sees the eerie world as normal. Or we see extroverts, characters who speak and act without inhibition and without understanding of traditional norms My work, in its structure, is not traditional, but in its content it deals with the real world and it

is basically humanitarian. In the early sixties my work may have been considered avant-garde when a great many people believed that the Aristotelian 'well-made' play was the proper form for a play. But I believe by now people prefer a theatre that is exciting because of the singular way in which it is written and performed, as well as because of its content. I feel that today we want the play to follow its own impulses and to let those impulses determine the play's form. The playwright must form the play but the form must respond to its content, not the content to the form. (Delgado 253-254)

Because she seemingly defies every category anyone attempts to place her in (with the exception of being a part of the off-off Broadway movement; she readily accepts that label), it is no wonder that academics, critics, and audiences have no idea how to address her canon of work. Borrowing the term coined by Steven Drukman, those who love her work are in a state of "Fornesia":

Fornesia is like amnesia—for critics, for audiences. It casts a spell, exists as a nudging force, dwells in the realm of the senses. It is, for some, an acquired taste, but the taste we acquire is one that Fornes shows us we had from the beginning. The cachet of this signature-less writer is a sensibility that, like any sensibility (as her former flatmate Susan Sontag noted in *Notes on Camp*), 'is almost, but not quite, a fable, Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with tilt rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all.' That is why most critics write about *writing* about Fornes or write *around* her plays. You can't catch a cloud and pin it down. (Drukman 38)

So how does one qualify Fornesia and what characteristics exist in it that are not necessarily avant-garde, nor realistic, nor naturalistic?

One of the primary characteristics of Fornesia is the idea of duality, not just for characters, but for Maria Irene Fornes herself.

Fornes, as woman and playwright—and, indeed, like so many of her idiosyncratic characters—are unconventional and irreverent... Her approach is often shamelessly erratic, which means that she makes use of distancing devices when they are convenient, while she may reject them for an unself-conscious assumption of narrative authority in the next scene; she will emphasize music for one act's purposes then deprive her audience of a single additional note. The demands of her 'messages' dictate her form as whimsically as their unruly structures would indicate. (Moroff 2)

By constantly changing her own dramatic form and dramatic structure, Fornes is always one step ahead of the critics and scholars that try to box her into a specific label. This is the true formation

of the inner complexities of her turbulent characters: they are just as difficult to define and label as she is:

Characters are consumed by curiosity, and then by the shame it causes them. They seek virtue and welcome abjection simultaneously. Their commitment to unvarnished reality and truth makes them no less prone to romanticism. Their desire for freedom doesn't cancel their need for security. The pleasure they take in being outlandish or vulgar coincides with their self-protective attention to their dignity. They value both spiritual and secular revelations. Because they are so susceptible to ideals, and serious about their promise, they remember to be skeptical of them. They seize and savor each moment, yet are anxious to move on, lest equally spectacular moments fade before they can experience them. (Robinson 6)

Every move is calculated, which is indicative of how highly intelligent she is as a playwright and an artist. Indeed, intelligence has to be the second component of Fornesia, because "Fornes's work has always been intelligent. Often funny, never vulgar or cynical; both delicate and visceral. Now it is something more... The plays have always been about wisdom: what it means to be wise. They are getting wiser" (Sontag 9). For someone who never completed high school and came to the United States not knowing English, her accomplishments in the artistic realm are certainly not deserving of scoffs. "But Fornes is neither literary nor anti-literary. These are not cerebral exercises or puzzles but the real questions, about... the conduct of life. There is much wit but no nonsense. No banalities. And no non sequiturs" (Sontag 8-9). While her work is intellectual, there is no doubt that the human component is equally important in her plays and the journey that her characters take. The third, and arguably the most important component of Fornesia, is the journey that Fornes takes the audience on through her complex characters.

Playwrights like Fornes are doing for theatre what people like Raymond Chandler did for the murder mystery. What matters in Fornes's plays is the moment-to-moment willfulness, the beautiful opacity of the human subject (thank God we all have skin) rather than the denouement. To emphasize intention over will, motive over desire, and arc over being, is necessarily to emphasize the future over the moment. And a theatre of pleasure, I think, must be of the moment. (Ruhl 203)

Perhaps the comparison of her work to a murder mystery is the most accurate; the audience focuses on the immediacy of characters' intentions and lives in the "now" of the play rather than falling behind or thinking ahead. Rather than plot progression, the focus becomes gathering all of the details and having all of the facts, which gives the audience the chance to make the most informed decision about the content they witnessed at the end of the play. Fornes seems to be on a journey to find what theatrical form will best suit her message and method rather than maintaining a recognizable aesthetic:

Despite the sharp differences between her early and her later plays, all of Fornes' work can be seen as a relentless search for a new theatrical language to explore what theatre has always been about: the difference between text and subtext, between the mask and the naked face beneath it, between the quotidian and the secret, between love and the fear and violence always threatening its fragile dominion. (Savran, "Maria Irene Fornes" 52)

By searching for this new theatrical language, Fornes has remained under the radar for mainstream theatre audiences, but she does not seem to mind.

While other American playwrights have become hobbled by the burden of importance that has come to signify 'great' theatre in the United States, Fornes has shrugged off the burden, in part, by staying true to her own vision, regardless of trends, and also by staying true to the nature of 'play' itself: the exploration of form within the theatrical space. Beginning her life in the theatre on the NYC fringe, she has, except for unfortunately rare instances, continued to work on the margins. While Shepard, Wilson, and McNally and other of her contemporaries from Judson Church and Caffè Cino days have tried to negotiate their visions in larger not-for-profit and for-profit venues, Fornes, by chance and often by design, has remained America's most lauded theatrical 'outsider.' (Svich, "Conducting a Life: A Tribute to Maria Irene Fornes" xviii)

Whether or not Fornes continues to stay hidden in the shadows will remain to be seen. What is unquestionable is her impact on contemporary theatre in spite of not having her name in flashing lights. Her impact will continue to last long after she is gone through her protégés at INTAR and through the legacy of her works.

About the Work: *The Conduct of Life*

The Conduct of Life unfolds in a series of short scenes or vignettes that do not necessarily line up plot-wise from scene to scene. Orlando, a soldier in an undetermined Latin American country, voices his desires to move up in the ranks in spite of being haunted by the horrors of political warfare and torture. His wife is Leticia, ten years older than he, resents the man she claims to love for not loving her in return. Their maid, Olimpia, lacks intelligence and is entirely dependent on Leticia and Orlando to survive. Orlando and Leticia also share a friend in Alejo, who is made impotent by the terrors of warfare that he has witnessed. Orlando kidnaps a twelve-year-old girl named Nena and rapes and tortures her in a warehouse. Leticia makes several phone calls to a friend named Mona (who the audience never meets) to discuss her crumbling marriage. Eventually, Orlando desires to make Nena not just a sex slave, but also a house servant like Olimpia. In the final scene of the play, Orlando accuses Leticia of having an affair and tortures her until she “confesses” to cheating on her husband. Orlando gropes her, then Leticia grabs a gun and shoots him in the head. Leticia then places the gun in the hands of Nena, pleading with her as the lights fade.

The play is one of Maria Irene Fornes’ more disturbing works, mainly for the sadistic male character it presents and the focal shift from the outside world to the inner workings of a home run by terror:

Fornes allows us no contact with the outside—but then she does not need to, because the outside world is brought to us on the lips of her characters. It is a world of terror, of nightmare, of which the world of the play is a microcosm. But in a sense this microcosm of the play is even more terrible than the world outside, because one cannot escape it. In *The Conduct of Life* there no sky for the characters to turn their eyes toward, there is no God to pray to, there is no distracting clamour in the streets. The sun does not shine here. There is only artificial light, or darkness. And so in this compressed space the terror that exists outside on the streets becomes magnified, as if under a microscope. The world of the play not only reflects the terror outside, it is that terror, it is more than that terror

even. What is within is always darker than what is without, and more frightening. Oneself is the only thing one cannot escape from. And in *The Conduct of Life* there is no escape: neither for ourselves as we read or watch it, nor for the characters. There is no escape because Fornes does not provide one. (Wooden 66)

When characters are trapped in this manner, often logic and reason go out the window. The focus becomes the fight to survive. The drama unfolds in the animalistic nature of the characters rather than their human qualities:

The system of causality is not Aristotelian—actions in *The Conduct of Life* are not reduced to rational objective. The causes and effects are, instead, grounded in the physical world—a chain of somatic dominoes. As Juster says, ‘We Westerners act.’ This picture of the will looks somewhat like a Stoic conception, which says: human beings aren’t so very different from animals. They both act based on a set of impulses and stimuli from the outside world. And yet, says the Stoic, human beings happen to have a pouch of reason with which to assent (in Stoic terminology) or not to assent to the act. (Ruhl 193)

The way in which their animalistic quality is best expressed is their inability to create heightened, poetic language à la Tennessee Williams. Because their language is rooted in what is happening in the here and now, there is no filter for what characters are thinking:

Just as there is often no naturalistic exchange between the characters, so there is no subtext under the text. Instead, the subtext *is* the text. Which means: no safety net. Under the text there is only the real thing: darkness. Listen, this is the darkness of my life. And then you realize: the subtext does not exist line by line, throughout the play, but rather under the whole play itself. Under the expressed I darkness, the unexpressed: that all this horror is being allowed to continue. I speak to you out of my heart. But you do not hear me. You speak to me: the same. So all this will continue, there will be no end to it, nor within the four walls of the play, nor in the streets outside, nor in the world beyond those streets, *our* world. Because we also listen: whether we listen in the theater or whilst we are reading the text, we listen. Oh, how hard we listen. But we do not hear. If we could hear, just once, then these horrors could surely not continue. But they do continue. (Wooden 68)

On the surface, this appears that characters speak in a naturalistic style, but the fact that characters refuse to listen to each other and empathize with each other’s plights is indicative of Theatre of the Absurd qualities creeping into the formation of these characters. Her avant-garde

roots rear their head once again as Fornes describes the Theatre of Cruelty-esque process of creating the character of Orlando:

When I wrote Orlando's speeches in *Conduct of Life*, I worked very hard to try to imagine the experience of a sadist. I went through hell. It was so difficult. It was so ugly. I have written violent things and they all come out of me...easy, natural. I have a monster in me. I have many monsters in me. But that particular one, Orlando, is not in me, I don't understand it. It was a nightmare for me to write those speeches. But I hope that I didn't write them too convincingly. If I did, I would eliminate them from the play. And I feel that Orlando is less dangerous because not many people, especially people who want to go to the theatre, are going to abuse little girls. (Savran, "Maria Irene Fornes" 63)

Fornes' experience with creating Orlando highlights her primary concern with all of her pieces—what message does she want to convey to the audience? This is especially evident in the case of *The Conduct of Life*. As complex as her plays are and as she is as a human, so are her play's messages. The ones interpreted from *The Conduct of Life* are varied:

Fornes is that most wonderful of teachers, one who lets us see old questions with new resonance. We are to consider the spiritual quest for self-knowledge, consider reward and punishment, confession and forgiveness. It is an emotionally charged play that speaks out for the individual. It denies the commonplace mitigating plea that individuals are insignificant, and that therefore individual actions are insignificant. Every action here has a consequence for, like it or not, all are interconnected. *The Conduct of Life* is a play about piety, empathy, compassion, coaxing us to rethink both beliefs and behavior. It is a play that utterly rejects cynicism and all hedging of bets. Fornes doesn't give us saints or heroes. She doesn't make it easy. She refuses us answers. (Mackay 140-141)

Mackay believes the primary message of *The Conduct of Life* is that for each and every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction for which one must take responsibility. Her interpretation is hard to argue due the breadth of her interpretation. Cummings narrows the scope to the home and government:

The Conduct of Life is a play about the circulation of power within the domestic sphere and social hierarchy of the home and within the political sphere and military hierarchy of the police state. These realms are homologous: each is a metaphor for the other; each is defined by Orlando's sadistic use of either rape or torture to dominate others and to gain control over his own sexual impulses. (Cummings 112)

Here too, the interpretation is accurate due to the heavy impact that the police state has on Orlando that he then exerts on the women in his home. While Cummings' interpretation does briefly mention Orlando's violence, his violence is not the only violence that occurs within the play, which is misleading for what the play as a whole represents. Diane Lynn Moroff best encapsulates the ideas of violence on a variety of levels that Fornes conveys within *The Conduct of Life*:

The increasingly violent subtexts of Fornes's plays reflect not only the reality of our increasingly violent world but also the more subtle violence to the human spirit that this physical violence does. The transformation of Fornes's characters' sexuality...describes a sensual deadening. In her more recent work many of Fornes's characters die at their drama's end, presumably because by that point in their dramatic and theatrical narratives their bodies are only shells. Fornes's dramas increasingly link sex to violence, not in order to moralize but, rather, to re-present, with impact, the extent of human powers. Fornes's images of the potential violence of role-playing do not strike me as cynical. To the contrary, they are her version of the honest truth meant to spur her audience to action. (Moroff 129-130)

Because the violent subtexts run rampant in *The Conduct of Life*, it is no surprise that one finds instances of not just domestic violence and rape, but even the rare and elusive female-enacted violence—potentially one of the first well-developed, fleshed out documentations of this trend post-third wave feminism.

Female-Enacted Violence in *The Conduct of Life*

The first instance of female-enacted violence in *The Conduct of Life* occurs in the fourth scene of the play, in which Olimpia is voicing her concerns about the state of the household to Leticia. Olimpia has just completed a ranting monologue in which she describes all of her household activities in order to explain to Leticia that she cannot interrupt Olimpia's order of the day or else the entire day will become unraveled. Then, Olimpia makes a case for new cookware.

LETICIA: Why do you want a steam pot?
OLIMPIA: It cooks faster.
LETICIA: How much is it?
OLIMPIA: Expensive.
LETICIA: How much?
OLIMPIA: Twenty.
LETICIA: Too expensive. (*Olimpia throws the silverware on the floor. Leticia turns her eyes up to the ceiling.*) Why do you want one more pot?
OLIMPIA: I don't have a steam pot.
LETICIA: A pressure cooker.
OLIMPIA: A pressure cooker.
LETICIA: You have too many pots. (*Olimpia goes to the kitchen and returns with an aluminum pan. She shows it to Leticia.*)
OLIMPIA: Look at this. (*Leticia looks at it.*)
LETICIA: What? (*Olimpia hits the pan against the back of a chair, breaking off a piece of the bottom.*)
OLIMPIA: It's no good. (Fornes, *The Conduct of Life* 72)

This is one of the brief moments of levity in *The Conduct of Life* and one of the few times that female-enacted violence is successfully used for comedic effect. This may be due to the fact that Olimpia is not attempting to attack Leticia, but rather focuses on the cookware as the target of her ire. Because Olimpia is also so matter-of-fact in her line delivery, this adds a layer of double entendre on the term “deadpan” comedy. In addition, Olimpia is attempting to subvert the master-servant relationship that is created by Leticia, which she successfully overthrows when Leticia eventually consents and gives her money to buy new cookware. Female-enacted violence in this circumstance is demonstrative and illustrative as support to an argument, which indicates that Olimpia may be more intelligent than she, or Fornes, choose to acknowledge.

The master-servant relationship between Leticia and Olimpia must be re-established, however, and is during the eighth scene of the play. Leticia has clearly designated Olimpia as her assistant to aid her in memorizing a series of political text, potentially to impress or woo Orlando or for her mysterious trip that she leaves for in the following scene.

Leticia stands left of the dining room table. She speaks words she has memorized. Olimpia sits to the left of the table. She holds a book close to her eyes. Her head moves from left to right along the written words as she mumbles the sound of imaginary words. She continues doing this through the rest of the scene.

LETICIA: The impact of war is felt particularly in the economic realm. The destruction of property, private as well as public may paralyze the country. Foreign investment is virtually ... *(To Olimpia.)* Is that right? *(Pause.)* Is that right!

OLIMPIA: Wait a moment. *(She continues mumbling and moving her head.)*

LETICIA: What for? *(Pause.)* You can't read. *(Pause.)* You can't read!

OLIMPIA: Wait a moment. *(She continues mumbling and moving her head.)*

LETICIA: *(Slapping the book off Olimpia's hand.)* Why are you pretending you can read? *(Olimpia slaps Leticia's hands. They slap each other's hands. Lights fade to black.)* *(Fornes, The Conduct of Life 76-77)*

Clearly frustrated with Olimpia's lie that she could read, Leticia gives a relatively light punishment of slapping the book out of Olimpia's hand rather than slapping or harming Olimpia directly. Clearly unsatisfied with this type of treatment, Olimpia slaps her hands back in retaliation. This reverts into a childish, immature game of slapping each other's hands to assert domination and authority when by the end of the scene, it is clear that neither have power over the other.

Undaunted by Leticia's lack of authority, Olimpia has lost all fear of standing up to the people she serves, and that includes Orlando. Attempting to calm and be motherly towards Nena, Olimpia engages Nena in a game of patty-cake. Orlando scolds her for doing this and in turn frightens Nena, who clings to Olimpia, the only person who has been kind to her since her capture.

OLIMPIA: She's not crazy! She's a baby!

ORLANDO: She's not a baby! She's crazy! You think she's a baby? She's older than you think! How old do you think she is—Don't tell me that.

OLIMPIA: She's sick. Don't you see she's sick? Let her cry! *(To Nena.)* Cry!

ORLANDO: You drive me crazy too with your ... *(He imitates her speech defect. She punches him repeatedly.)*

OLIMPIA: You drive me crazy! (*He pushes her off.*) You drive me crazy! You are a bastard! One day I'm going to kill you when you're asleep! I'm going to open you up and cut your entrails and feed them to the snakes. (*She tries to strangle him.*) I'm going to tear your heart out and feed it to the dogs! I'm going to cut your head open and have the cats eat your brain! (*Reaching for his fly.*) I'm going to cut your peepee and hang it on a tree and feed it to the birds!

ORLANDO: Get off me! I'm getting rid of you too! (*He starts to exit.*) I can't stand you!

OLIMPIA: Oh, yeah! I'm getting rid of you.

ORLANDO: I can't stand you!

OLIMPIA: I can't stand you! (Fornes, *The Conduct of Life* 80-81)

By demeaning one of Olimpia's characteristics that is out of her control (her speech defect, which is only mentioned once in the stage directions prior to this), Orlando has pressed the proverbial button. It can be assumed that Olimpia has been tormented for her speech defect prior to Orlando's childish assault on her deficiencies, so it is not an unexpected response for her to attack Orlando. Olimpia then threatens acts of female-enacted violence such as murder, dismemberment, and feeding Orlando's body to animals. The severity of the acts of violence she threatens correlate to the amount of pain she suffers under his tyranny. While she is not in a position to act on them now (even though she does reach for his fly, she has nothing on her person with which to cut his penis off, indicating that it is a moment of rash, illogical thinking that is animalistic and instinctual in nature), she makes it clear that once she is in a position of power over him, she will make him suffer for his torture of her, Leticia, and most importantly Nena.

While there is one more act of female-enacted violence left in the play (Leticia shooting Orlando and killing him), there are many factors that lead up to this incident, which is why I have separated it into its own section including domestic violence and rape.

Domestic Violence and Rape

With the successes of the third wave of the feminist movement in the 1970s, domestic violence was catapulted into the public sphere of discussion and debate. While it had been discussed in art for quite some time (most notably, William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, which offers psychological torture and starvation as alternatives to beating one's wife), it was not until Maria Irene Fornes and Sam Shepard that it was examined with such a startling and stark reality.

In order to understand Leticia's final act of female-enacted violence in the play, Orlando's pervasive and perverted violence must be explored and analyzed in order to fully understand what circumstances led to Leticia shooting Orlando. Knowing that Orlando will later go on to commit domestic violence against Leticia, the most effective way to analyze Orlando's character would be from the perspective of a middle class domestic abuser rather than solely that of a rapist. In Dr. Suzan Weitzman's book *"Not to People Like Us": Hidden Abuse in Upscale Marriages*, Weitzman analyzes the upscale male abuser and finds that more often than not, they suffer from Narcissistic Personality Disorder:

According to the *DSM-IV*, a person with narcissistic personality disorder manifests 'a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy.' The narcissistic personality is a collage of arrogance and insecurity, grandiosity and self-doubt. But at first blush, being adored and feeling superior to others is vitally important to such a man's sense of self. To be diagnosed with this disorder a person must exhibit at least five of the following traits. He or she

- has a grandiose sense of self-importance
- is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love
- believes that he or she is 'special' and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions)
- requires excessive admiration

- has a sense of entitlement (unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations)
- is interpersonally exploitative (takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends)
- lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others
- is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her
- shows arrogant, haughty behavior or attitudes (Weitzman 138)

Without question, Orlando exhibits many of these symptoms. Orlando threatens to leave the military in the opening lines of the play if he does not receive a promotion and will overcome any obstacle in his way to achieve this. This indicates that he is preoccupied with his own success in the workplace, has a sense of entitlement because he feels that this position is owed to him, and threatens to exploit anyone (including his wife) in order to achieve his goals. Orlando lacks empathy towards any of the characters in the play, leaving him alone on an emotionally isolated island. He clearly feels that he is special or unique because he desires to only associate with higher ranking officers or higher class people and is willing to marry to get to that status. He ideally meets the criteria of a man with Narcissistic Personality Disorder, which is his primary source of exploitative motivation for his violent acts throughout *The Conduct of Life*.

The first instance the audience sees of Orlando's perversion is when Nena is kidnapped and brought to the warehouse in the very short third scene of the play.

Orlando enters the warehouse holding Nena close to him. She wears a gray over-large uniform. She is barefoot. She resists him. She is tearful and frightened, She pulls away and runs to the right wall. He follows her.

ORLANDO: *(Softly.)* You called me a snake.

NENA: No, I didn't. *(He tries to reach her. She pushes his hands away from her.)* I was kidding.—I swear I was kidding.

(He grabs her and pushes her against the wall. He pushes his pelvis against her. He moves to the chair dragging her with him. She crawls to the left, pushes the table aside and stands behind it. He walks around the table. She goes under it. He grabs her foot and

pulls her out toward the downstage side. He opens his fly and pushes his pelvis against her. Lights fade to black.) (Fornes, The Conduct of Life 70)

Orlando's only line, "You called me a snake," indicates that this kidnapping and rape may be retribution for Nena insulting him. This clearly plays into his grandiose self-importance by demonstrating arrogant and haughty behavior. In order to punish Nena for violating his sense of self-worth, he exploits her in the most vulgar way possible—by raping a twelve-year-old girl. He heightens this exploitation during the second rape in scene 7:

Nena and Orlando stand against the wall in the warehouse. She is fully dressed. He is bare-breasted. He pushes his pelvis against her gently. His lips touch her face as he speaks. The words are inaudible to the audience. On the table there is a tin plate with food and a tin cup with milk.

ORLANDO: Look this way. I'm going to do something to you. *(She makes a move away from him.)* Don't do that. Don't move away. *(As he slides his hand along her side.)* I just want to put my hand here like this. *(He puts his lips on her softly and speaks at the same time.)* Don't hold your lips so tight. Make them soft. Let them loose. So I can do this. *(She whimpers.)* Don't cry. I won't hurt you. This is all I'm going to do to you. Just hold your lips soft. Be nice. Be a nice girl. *(He pushes against her and reaches an orgasm. He remain motionless for a moment, then steps away from her still leaning his hand on the wall.)* Go eat. I brought you food. *(She goes to the table. He sits on the floor and watches her eat. She eats voraciously. She looks at the milk.)* Drink it. It's milk. It's good for you. *(She drinks the milk, then continues eating. Lights fade to black.) (Fornes, The Conduct of Life 76)*

This rape is more traumatizing than the first because Orlando is narrating the inner workings of his sick and sadistic pleasures that he gains from raping Nena. He then "rewards" Nena for being "good" during the rape by giving her food, completely lacking empathy for the trauma he just put Nena through.

Orlando's lack of empathy is even more apparent through his interactions with Leticia.

While there are only two physical altercations between Orlando and Leticia within the context of

the play, it is clear that he belittles her and demeans her and has done so for quite some time.

Leticia states in the second scene of *The Conduct of Life*:

He told me that he didn't love me, and that his sole relationship to me was simply a marital one. What he means is that I am to keep this house, and he is to provide for it. That's what he said. That explains why he treats me the way he treats me. I never understood why he did, but now it's clear. He doesn't love me. I thought he loved me and that he stayed with me because he loved me and that's why I didn't understand his behavior. But now I know, because he told me that he sees me as a person who runs the house. I never understood that because I would have never—if he said, 'Would you marry me to run my house even if I don't love you.' I would have never—I would have never believed what I was hearing. I would have never believed that these words were coming out of his mouth. Because I loved him. (Fornes, *The Conduct of Life* 69)

The type of relationship that Leticia describes is not uncommon among those who are in real upscale relationships with domestic violence. The first instance of violence does not often occur until after vows have been exchanged or during the engagement (Weitzman 81). According to Weitzman:

...the majority of the husbands expected their wives to be obedient and to fit into a certain wifely template of looks, behavior, and style 'appropriate' to the lifestyle the man was leading... In some cases, the men repeatedly impressed upon their wives that they were 'bought and paid for.' (15)

Orlando asserts that he did not say anything that Leticia just claimed (another quality of an abuser) and that he only said that she was not going to be his monetary heir because she would be irresponsible with his money. This backwards psychology reinforces the idea that Leticia is "bought and paid for" because Leticia is now stuck in this situation with no viable way out.

By believing that she has made her bed and must now sleep in it, the abused woman rallies her inner resources to be tough and rise to a difficult occasion... The self-justification of making one's bed is defensive in that it diverts a woman's attention from the heart of the problem—she is being abused and doesn't deserve such treatment—and reinforces the belief that she should have known better. It implies that she has the fortitude to make do and 'stick with' her original decision, which she made based on what she knew about her future husband at the time. (Weitzman 99)

Leticia may feel this desire to “stick with it” even more than other women who are victims of upscale abuse because she is older than her abuser. She may consider herself to be “past her prime” or “damaged goods” at this point in her life and that she feels the need to take care of her abuser. This is most evident in the first instance of domestic violence that occurs between Leticia and Orlando:

Orlando is sleeping on the dining room table. The telephone rings. He speaks as someone having a nightmare.

ORLANDO: Ah! Ah! Ah! Get off me! Get off! I said get off! (*Leticia enters.*)

LETICIA: (*Going to him.*) Orlando! What’s the matter! What are you doing here!

ORLANDO: Get off me! Ah! Ah! Ah! Get off me!

LETICIA: Why are you sleeping here! On the table. (*Holding him close to her.*) Wake up.

ORLANDO: Let go of me. (*He slaps her hands as she tries to reach him.*) Get away from me. (*He goes to the floor on his knees and staggers to the telephone.*) Yes. Yes, it’s me.—You did?—So?—It’s true then that’s the name? —Yes, sure. —Thanks.—Sure. (*He hangs up the receiver. He turns to look at Leticia. Lights fade to black.*) (Fornes, *The Conduct of Life* 86)

In this particular instance of domestic violence, Orlando is attempting to distance himself from and simultaneously victimizing the woman who is trying to comfort him. While on the surface this seems like odd behavior, this has psychological meaning for abusers:

The victim may represent a powerful persecutory mother figure to the violent partner, whose separateness is a constant reminder that she may abandon him at any moment. It is as though the victim’s sensitive understanding that her partner’s violence stems from his own deprivation, and that he confuses her with other powerful and withholding women in his life, further prevents her from leaving him. The defence [sic] of identification is important here because those women who could identify with this deprivation may find it hardest to ‘disappoint their partners’ as to do so would be to recreate their own experiences of abandonment and rejection. (Motz 223)

This motherly figure is only enhanced in Leticia, who is ten years his senior. She cannot leave him or else she would let him down and fail Orlando as a wife and companion. She knows he is disturbed and tormented by the violent acts he sees in the streets and in his line of work, so

leaving him would only add to his stress. Leaving would not help, but further harm her abuser. A popular theory among psychologists is that women stay in abusive relationships because of learned helplessness. This was derived from Martin Seligman's experiments on rats in which some could evade electric shocks to receive food, some faced shocks that were inescapable, and others faced no shocks at all to receive their food. The ones that learned evasion techniques would utilize them when the shock was given, but the rats whose shocks were inescapable eventually stopped trying to escape their cage and accept their fate, even when shocks were no longer given (Weitzman 49). This theory suggests that humans will become submissive when subjugated to repeated, inescapable torture (like victims of domestic violence). This, however, is not how Leticia behaves. Leticia still has a fire within her that makes it even more likely that she is a victim of upscale domestic violence rather than low-income or other variations of domestic violence:

I have found that the upscale abused wife is not a victim of learned helplessness. Rather, she makes specific decisions along the path to be involved in the abusive marriage, including silent strategizing as she chooses to stay or leave the marriage. Nor does the upscale abused wife experience the classic cycle of violence, replete with the honeymoon stage, in which the husband courts his wife to seek her forgiveness...the man of means actually does little to seek his wife's forgiveness after a violent episode. Further, the upscale abused wife voices more attachment to her *lifestyle* than the traumatic bonding with her abusive mate. And very few of the abused women I have met over the years experienced abuse in their childhoods or witnessed it between their parents. In fact, it is this *lack* of experience with violence, rage, and abuse that makes this woman even more overwhelmed and unclear about how to cope with something so alien to her and the people in her universe. (Weitzman 15)

Because Leticia has had limited experience with Orlando's violent behavior, she tries to become caretaker for her abuser rather than staying away. She has no other ideas of what to do to make the situation better. All she wants to do is appease him.

Leticia and Orlando's upscale violent relationship comes to a head during the final scene of the play, in which Orlando pays the ultimate price for his abusive actions towards Leticia and

Nena:

ORLANDO: Are you ashamed?

LETICIA: Yes. I am ashamed!

ORLANDO: What of . . . ? What of . . . ? –I want you to tell us—about your lover.

LETICIA: I don't have a lover. *(He grabs her by the hair. Olimpia holds on to Nena and hides her face. Nena covers her face.)*

ORLANDO: You have a lover.

LETICIA: That's a lie.

ORLANDO: *(Moving closer to her.)* It's not a lie. *(To Leticia.)* Come on tell us. *(He pulls harder.)* What's his name? *(She emits a sound of pain. He pulls harder, leans toward her and speaks in a low tone.)* What's his name?

LETICIA: Albertico. *(He takes a moment to release her.)*

ORLANDO: Tell us about it. *(There is silence. He pulls her hair.)*

LETICIA: All right. *(He releases her.)*

ORLANDO: What's his name?

LETICIA: Albertico.

ORLANDO: Go on. *(Pause.)* Sit up! *(She does.)* Albertico what?

LETICIA: Estevez. *(Orlando sits next to her.)*

ORLANDO: Go on. *(Silence.)* When did you first meet him?

LETICIA: At . . . I ..

ORLANDO: *(He grabs her by the hair.)* In my office.

LETICIA: Yes.

ORLANDO: Don't lie. –When?

LETICIA: You know when.

ORLANDO: When! *(Silence.)* How did you meet him?

LETICIA: You introduced him to me. *(He lets her go.)*

ORLANDO: What else? *(Silence.)* Who is he?

LETICIA: He's a lieutenant.

ORLANDO: *(He stands.)* When did you meet with him?

LETICIA: Last week.

ORLANDO: When!

LETICIA: Last week.

ORLANDO: When!

LETICIA: Last week. I said last week.

ORLANDO: Where did you meet him?

LETICIA: ...In a house of rendez-vous...

ORLANDO: How did you arrange it?

LETICIA: ...I wrote to him...!

ORLANDO: Did he approach you?

LETICIA: No.

ORLANDO: Did he!
LETICIA: No.
ORLANDO: *(He grabs her hair again.)* He did! How!
LETICIA: I approached him.
ORLANDO: How!
LETICIA: *(Aggressively.)* I looked at him! I looked at him! I looked at him! *(He lets her go.)*
ORLANDO: When did you look at him?
LETICIA: Please stop...!
ORLANDO: Where! When!
LETICIA: In your office!
ORLANDO: When?
LETICIA: I asked him to meet me!
ORLANDO: What did he say?
LETICIA: *(Aggressively.)* He walked away. He walked away! He walked away! I asked him to meet me.
ORLANDO: What was he like?
LETICIA: ...Oh...
ORLANDO: Was he tender? Was he tender to you!

(She doesn't answer. He puts his hand inside her blouse. She lets out an excruciating scream. He lets her go and walks to the right of the dining room. She goes to the telephone table, opens the drawer, takes a gun and shoots Orlando. Orlando falls dead. Nena runs to downstage of the table. Leticia is disconcerted, then puts the revolver in Nena's hand and steps away from her.)

LETICIA: Please...

(Nena is in a state of terror and numb acceptance. She looks at the gun. Then, up. The lights fade.) (Fornes, *The Conduct of Life* 87-88)

There is much to unpack from this final exchange at the end of *The Conduct of Life*. The first examination on this sequence of events is Orlando's role as the domestic abuser. Having Narcissistic Personality Disorder is a good frame to understand the psychological inner workings of what makes Orlando tick, but *how* he inflicts his abuse is even more telling of the kind of person he is:

Neil S. Jacobson and John M. Gottman, both at the University of Washington, skillfully incorporated fluctuations in male heart rates during abusive incidents into the development of a typology of batterer personalities. They suggest that abusive men can be divided into two groups—'Cobras' and 'Pit Bulls.' Men from both camps are violent

toward their wife, but their physiological responses are different. The Cobra's heartbeat slows prior to his attack; he becomes calm and deliberate before striking, just as a snake seems to. This gives his prey little advance warning of the venom that is to come... Cobras comprise 20 percent of batterers. In fact, 50 percent of all antisocial personalities are vagal reactors and usually report violence in their families of origin. These men were the most vicious toward their mate. The Pit Bull, on the other hand, shows his rage incrementally. As with the growling and snarling of an attack dog before it lunges at its victim, this batterer's heartbeat accelerates prior to the assault. His physiology matches his demeanor—he becomes excited and agitated, his eyes widen, his face flushes with rage. There is some warning to the woman who will be the object of his temper. My experience to date has been that upscale batterers fall into both categories. (Weitzman 135)

Because Orlando is executing torture methods on Leticia to find out if she has a lover and there is no warning prior to the attack (such as stage directions to indicate any sympathetic nervous reactions in line with a “fight or flight” response), it is likely that Orlando is a Cobra abuser rather than a Pit Bull abuser. He is calculating and strategizing until the perfect moment to strike, rather than being riled up into the state of a frenzied attack. He then calculates when would be the best time to let his “prey” (Leticia) go in order to catch her off guard and strike again. But Orlando is not a Cobra abuser just for the female characters in the play; he is one to the audience as well:

The death of Orlando, an army lieutenant whose military success has coincided with his mastery of torturing political prisoners, may be punishment not only for the abuse that characterizes each of his human encounters throughout *The Conduct of Life* (1985) but also for his abuse of the theater. He commandeers the theatrical space he shares with the other characters, forces Nena, his stolen child-mistress, into one space and denies Leticia, his wife, access there. He is a brutal director, deliberately thwarting Leticia's smallest actions, ridiculing and humiliating her. His acting is pompous and arrogant, scene stealing, and he is killed just short of showstopping altogether. The political use Orlando makes of the theater comes down to force; both his audience and fellow players are captive. (Moroff 95)

By abusing the audience in addition to the characters within the play, Orlando commits the most severe violation of the “boundaries” of theatre, which costs him his life.

As with many elements in Maria Irene Fornes plays, not everything is crystalline when it comes to plot, so some narratives have to be explored in multiple ways. One question that has been raised is whether or not Leticia actually has a lover or if Orlando is creating this idea of a lover (again, another characteristic of an abuser) in order to torture her. If Leticia actually had a lover, Leticia would be much more likely to leave the situation she is presently in. She would likely be treated better by “Albertico” and would have no qualms about leaving Orlando even though she loves him. It is far more likely that Orlando is making this “Albertico” up in order to abuse Leticia:

Orlando imposes a narrative on Leticia; he wants to believe that she has a lover, presumably so that he can justify his violence. And, in order, ironically, to waylay that violence. Leticia narrates an imaginary affair with Orlando’s prompting. Their confrontation is purely dishonest, obviously enacted for the sake of the audience rather than for the sake of any resolution between the two characters. This is metatheater at its finest; the two consciously engage in theatrical production, playing fully the role of actors but with no pretense toward the truth. (Moroff 110)

By blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, Orlando has completely perverted Leticia’s idea of what is normal or acceptable in society. For that, he pays with his life.

The next major examination of this violent sequence is Leticia’s female-enacted violent actions that lead to the murder of her husband. She is a battered woman that becomes a murderer in the process; clearly there has to be psychological baggage there that may have triggered her actions. One of the primary issues that Leticia may have is that she may not identify herself as an abused wife:

...many affluent abused wives...don’t identify with the media-generated portrait of the ‘battered woman.’ And since they don’t have words or images to put to their experience, they come to perceive that their torment lacks validity-as if it never really happened, or it wasn’t all that bad, or it wasn’t really ‘abusive.’ This diminishment, in turn, feeds their ability to compartmentalize the experience-until the mistreatment spirals out of control and reaches wildly dangerous levels that they are no longer able to keep secret or deny. (Weitzman 18)

Leticia has constantly compartmentalized her treatment throughout the course of the show and has blamed herself for Orlando's actions and behavior. She has felt that she was not "good enough" for Orlando and was emotionally tortured by him. There is no way for her to relate to the stereotypical media-portrayed image of a "battered woman" because the battery has a late onset. As a result, "Leticia acts emotionally. She kills Orlando. Not because he has betrayed her, but because he attacks her physically. When he does, she shoots him" (Savran, "Maria Irene Fornes" 69). But why does Leticia take such a drastic step in the final moments of *The Conduct of Life*?

Studies indicate that the presence of certain factors in the situations of battered women who killed distinguished them from those who did not go on to kill. These included the abuser's threats to kill, the abuser's alcohol abuse, the presence of a firearm or weapon in the house, and the woman's perception of experiencing severe psychological abuse. These seemed to be more important factors than the escalation and severity of violent incidents. This lends support to the notion that what is most important in determining what makes women kill their abusive partners is their own perception of the situation and their subjective experience of humiliation, degradation, isolation and terror imposed on them by their partners. (Mutz 236)

Leticia's perception of this instance of domestic violence is far worse than any she has experienced so far because no one has been there to witness it. When she has been subjugated to verbal abuse, it usually is when she and Orlando are alone or in the presence of one other individual (Alejo and Olimpia, respectively). In this final instance, Leticia is publicly groped in front of both Olimpia and Nena, the child who is being raped by Leticia's husband. This is the ultimate form of humiliation, degradation, and terror that Orlando has imposed yet. At least, that is what Leticia perceives it to be. In addition, she has a firearm in the house unbeknownst to anyone else who lives there, so in her state of gross humiliation, Leticia uses it as retribution for her torture.

The notion of woman as killer is one which is abhorrent to cherished beliefs about femininity. The fact that women are more likely to kill within the family than to kill a

stranger contributes to the horror and bewilderment which surrounds female homicides. In considering women who kill, psychodynamic questions emerge. These include the question of what is actually being split off and killed off through the murder, in terms of the killer's fantasy. Addressing unconscious issues in killing requires an understanding of how killing can be the enactment of a primitive defence [sic] mechanism whereby an aspect of the self, threatened with annihilation, retaliates through murder. The act of killing may be experienced as a temporary escape from this danger and may appear to ensure psychic survival. This apparent solution is short-lived, however, and the internal dangers return; the initial euphoria recedes and depression threatens. (Motz 217)

Leticia's crashing euphoria from killing her abuser is apparent from the final sequence of the scene:

...Leticia is disconcerted, then puts the revolver in Nena's hand and steps away from her.)

LETICIA: Please...

(Nena is in a state of terror and numb acceptance. She looks at the gun. Then, up. The lights fade.) (Fornes, *The Conduct of Life* 88)

This is where criticism and analysis of Fornes' *The Conduct of Life* takes another divide. Some academics and critics interpret Leticia's actions as a plea for Nena to shoot Leticia for what

Leticia has done:

All through the play [Leticia] has reached out toward the other, toward the possibility of a life other than this one: but between her and Nena—that other life's living embodiment—there has been no contact. A single gesture toward Nena, a word to her even, could have done it: not only change life for Nena, but for Leticia as well. It hasn't happened...But at the very end of the play she does notice her; she reaches out to Nena, and she does make contact: She gives her the gun. She does not give the gun to Olimpia, the belligerent, outspoken servant; she gives it to Nena, the one who is the least powerful, the most sensitive, the most hurt. And addressing Nena for the first time in the play—*seeing* her for the first time in the play—she says, 'Please...' Please release me from this. Please take this most potent symbol of masculine power and use it, to release me from this. It is not a gesture of empowerment; by handing the gun to Nena, Leticia is looking for a way out of her own pain. She is using Nena, in the same way that Orlando did. Leticia still cannot see the other, even when it is standing frightened and trembling in front of her. Or rather, she cannot see it for what it is in itself, but only for how she can use it. The other has no use for guns. As a result of Leticia's action, the other is doomed—just as Nena is doomed. (Wooden 74)

This argument is quite compelling knowing the spiraling depression Leticia may fall into after killing Orlando. She gives agency to the one person who has been violated the most—Nena—in order to give Nena a chance to punish Orlando by proxy of Leticia. In her moment of greatest sadness and pain, Leticia attempts to empower Nena to move forward with her life. This argument is also supported by the suicidal feelings that battered women who kill their husbands feel:

It is worth considering why the women's suicidal feelings should be an important factor in those women who went on to kill their partners. The link between suicidal and homicidal feelings has been well documented, particularly in the psychoanalytical literature (Hyatt-Williams 1998; Zachary, 1997): the act of killing another person can be seen as a projection of murderous feelings which may be directed against an internal object, a part of the self. For women whose sense of self has been deeply disturbed, by their early experiences or by the traumatization of living with a violent partner, or both, the intensification of feelings of self-loathing, fear, helplessness and worthlessness is highly probable. (Motz 237)

If such a strong link exists between suicidal and homicidal thoughts and actions, it would be likely that Leticia would want to die after killing Orlando. This is the favored point of view among scholars and critics of this particular work. What is curious, however, is why she puts the gun in Nena's hand if Leticia has such strong feelings of "self-loathing, fear, helplessness, and worthlessness" instead of putting the gun to her own head and killing herself (Motz 237). This is where the alternate narrative of the intended ending of *The Conduct of Life* comes into play.

Fornes went so far as to amend the closing stage directions of *Conduct* in a second printed edition, so as to clarify that – when her central character Leticia hands the gun with which she has just shot...Orlando to...Nena – she is hoping not that Nena will mercifully shoot her too. But that she will take the blame. Hardly an act of solidarity: Fornes' women are far too complex to be so simply labelled. (Bottoms, "Maria Irene Fornes: Playwriting as Resistance" 294-295)

What exact amendments were made Bottoms does not mention, but it is an interesting narrative to explore nonetheless. If Leticia puts the gun in Nena's hand for this reason, it is under the belief that Leticia would not be set free for the crime that she has just committed. Nena,

however, has a stronger and more compelling argument of being kidnapped, tortured, and repeatedly raped. This narrative, in Leticia's eyes, has a higher probability of being written off as self-defense in the eyes of the law than a battered woman "snapping" under the domination of her husband. In 1985, the year this play was produced, this was likely the case. With the amendment allowing battered woman's syndrome as a legal defense not passing until 1992, battered women who killed their abusers had no hope of being acquitted of their crimes. There was no question: they committed murder. The reason why was kept from the juries. Nena's defense of kidnapping, torture, and rape would likely render anyone to write off the case as self-defense and nothing more; the case would likely never go to court, especially if Olimpia and Leticia supported her claims.

There is no question that the women in Maria Irene Fornes' *The Conduct of Life* are highly complex, and their complexities are only highlighted by the violence surrounding them and the violence they commit.

Leticia has internalized the system of violence that has co-opted her to such an extent that she becomes, like Shakespeare's Othello, both victim and victimizer, both actor and spectator. But, unlike Othello, Leticia does not succeed in providing closure to her own story. And both Nena and Olimpia will survive these stage events. Through their status Fornes communicates a remarkable message of hope, tentative as it is: the violence may no longer be perpetuated. The spectator in the audience who can visualize his or her role as parallel to Olimpia's, or even Nena's, rather than Mona's or Alejo's, can become accomplice not as the spectator of Latin American violence is but, rather, as Olimpia is an accomplice in the redemption of Nena or as both Olimpia and Nena may be in the redemption of Leticia. The spectator needs to recognize him- or herself as actor as well. (Moroff 111)

Fornes uses these women, the acts of violence they commit, and the acts of violence committed against them to urge the audience to see that this type of behavior is no longer acceptable.

Violence can no longer be perpetuated in our society. Intervention must be taken. Domestic violence has returned to the forefront of the media in the wake of the Ray Rice scandal, sadly

demonstrating that almost thirty years after Fornes' call to action was performed, society still has a great deal of work to do.

COMPARING VIOLENCE WRITTEN BY A MALE AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHT

To further examine the web of female-enacted violence, I juxtapose the violent acts within the three works previously discussed against violent acts in a play written by a white male American playwright. While this thesis does focus on plays written by minority American women, plays written by male playwrights have historically been more commercially successful. Additionally, the male perspective of violence has often been influenced by the heteronormative perspective of violence manifested by our heteronormative society, therefore it most closely exemplifies what audiences expect when it comes to theatrical violence. The examination of this work alongside the previous works, may illuminate gender differences in terms of frequency, severity and expression of violence.

For this comparison, I chose Tracy Letts' *August: Osage County*. This particular work has received significant critical acclaim as well as the Pulitzer Prize in 2008 and Tony Award for Best Play in the same year. It was the first non-musical to tour nationally since Terrance McNally's *Master Class* in 1996 and was so successful that it was recently adapted to film starring Meryl Streep as the pill-popping matriarch, Violet. Most importantly, *August: Osage County* is a three-act epic containing several instances of violence with each instance having some similarity to those already explored in this thesis, making it an excellent comparison work for the male perspective of female-enacted violence.

Female-Enacted Violence in *August: Osage County*

Johnna: The Stealth Cheyenne

Johnna Monevata is one of only three characters in Letts' epic that is not blood-related to the Weston clan. In the opening scene of the play, Johnna is hired by Beverly Weston to take care of Violet thereby solidifying that Violet will be taken care of once he commits suicide. Ever the unspoken presence in the household, Johnna prepares the meals, watches the Weston family fight during them and is the listening ear to young Jean, who reveals her parents' marital problems to Johnna while offering to smoke marijuana with her. Johnna's act of violence occurs towards the end of the second act of *August: Osage County*, when Jean and Steve, Jean's aunt's fiancé, have returned from smoking marijuana and Steve attempts to seduce the fourteen-year-old:

JEAN: Hey...

STEVE: Shhh...

(Moaning, heavy breathing from Steve, in the dark. The overhead light clicks on. Johnna stands in the dining-room entryway, brandishing a cast-iron skillet. Jean and Steve, clothes in disarray, separate.)

JEAN: Oh my God ...

STEVE: Ho, fuck!

(Johnna approaches Steve.)

Hold up there, lady, you don't know what you're—

(Johnna swings the skillet, barely missing Steve's nose.)

Hey, goddamn it, careful—

(He reaches for the skillet. She swings again and smacks his knuckles.)

Ow, goddamn—!

(He grimaces, holds his hand in pain. She wades in with a strong swing and connects squarely with his forehead. Steve goes down. Johnna stands above him, arm cocked, watching for a recovery, but he does not attempt it. (Letts 117)

This is the most original act of violence that Letts creates within the context of the play. Johnna defends the honor of the family and the chastity of a teenager she is not related to because she likely feels it is her duty to do so. Enacting violence to prevent the molestation of a child is a widely accepted justification for violent action, which often makes this moment comedic and justified in performance by the audience's perception. Johnna also uses a non-traditional weapon—a frying pan—to heighten the comedy of the moment. This kind of stealthy, silent attack has not been seen in any of the other plays examined in this document. The closest parallel that can be drawn to this act of female-enacted violence would be Hester beating Jabber to death in *In the Blood* as the attack seemingly comes out of nowhere, but Steve is not Johnna's child nor is he beaten to death, just beaten to the point of stopping the molestation. This instance is also too dissimilar to compare to Leticia and Orlando's final confrontation in *The Conduct of Life* as Leticia's act of violence was used as a defensive response to a brutal attack on her person, whereas Johnna was not the one being attacked. Finally, while the act draws virtually no similarities to Young Jean Lee's *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* the comedic tone in a dramatic situation is similar.

Barbara: Breaking Bottles, Babies, and Plates

Throughout *August: Osage County*, there is one common link within the Weston clan for violence: Barbara Fordham is always involved. The eldest daughter of the three, Barbara is enduring the most stress; she deposes the family matriarch and attempts to break Violet of her drug habit, she is struggling with the fact that her husband is leaving her for one of his college students, her daughter is a pot-smoking fourteen-year-old with loose morals, her sister Ivy is unwittingly in love with her half-brother – a secret that only Barbara and the young man's

mother carry. Her father's suicide has caused all of these factors to spiral and collide into each other. Considering the circumstances, the violence that Barbara enacts is relatively tame. The first act of violence in the entire play is committed by Barbara and occurs at the dinner table at the end of Act One:

BARBARA: You're a drug addict.

VIOLET: That is the truth! That's what I'm getting at! I, everybody listen ... I am a drug addict. I am addicted to drugs, pills, 'specially downers. *(Pulls a bottle of pills from her pocket, holds them up)* Y'see these little blue babies? These are my best fucking friends and they never let me down. Try to get 'em away from me and I'll eat you alive.

BARBARA: Gimme those goddamn pills—

VIOLET: I'll eat you alive, girl!

(Barbara lunges at the bottle of pills. She and Violet wrestle with it. Bill and Ivy try to restrain Barbara. Mattie Fae tries to restrain Violet. Others rise, ad-lib.)

STEVE: Holy shit—

IVY: Barbara, stop it!—

CHARLIE: Hey, now, c'mon!—

KAREN: Oh God—

(Violet wins, wrests the pills away from Barbara. Bill pulls Barbara back into her seat. Violet shakes the pill bottle, taunting Barbara. Barbara snaps, screams, lunges again, grabs Violet by the hair, pulls her up, toppling chairs. They crash through the house, pursued by the family.)

Pandemonium. Screaming. Barbara strangles Violet. With great effort, Bill and Charlie pry the two women apart. Mattie Fae and Johnna rush to Violet, tend to her.)

VIOLET *(Crying)*: Goddamn you ... goddamn you, Barb...

BARBARA: SHUT UP! (Letts 96-97)

Knowing that her mother has relapsed and is addicted to painkillers again, Barbara realizes that the only way to end the chaos that her mother is creating mere hours after Beverly's funeral is to eliminate the drug addiction. Barbara's act of violence is one that is committed out of love and with the hope of salvation for Violet, another unique quality of Letts' violence within the play. The closest parallel of violence within the female playwrights' works can be found in Parks' *In*

the Blood. Towards the end of *In the Blood*, Hester and Reverend D struggle when Hester questions why Reverend D no longer likes her and why he will not take accountability for his son, Baby. Reverend D viciously twists Hester's arm after Hester has attempted to attack him with her Billy club. In *August: Osage County*, Hester's Billy club becomes Violet's pill bottle, and Barbara becomes Reverend D, who tries to twist Violet back into reality and shake her out of fantasy.

The next two instances of female-enacted violence committed by Barbara transpire immediately after Johnna has assaulted Steve with the frying pan:

BARBARA: Johnna, what's going on?

JOHNNA: He was messing with Jean. So I tuned him up.

BARBARA: "Messing with," what do you mean, "messing with"?

BILL: What...what's that mean?

JOHNNA: He was kissing her and grabbing her.

(This information settles in ...

Then Barbara attacks Steve, who has by now gotten to his feet. Ad-libs. Karen gets between them. Bill grabs Barbara from behind, tries to pull her away. Ad-libs.)

BARBARA: I'll murder you, you prick!

BILL *(To Karen)*: Get him out of here!

STEVE: I didn't do anything!—

JEAN: Mom, stop it!

KAREN: Settle down!—

BILL: Get back in the living room!—

BARBARA: You know how old that girl is?!

STEVE *(To Jean)*: Tell them I didn't do anything!—

BARBARA: She's fourteen years old!—

JEAN: Mom!

STEVE: She said she was fifteen!

BARBARA: Are you out of your goddamn mind?

KAREN: Barbara, just back off!

(Karen manages to push Steve out of the dining room, into the living room. (Letts 118-119)

Barbara's violent reaction as a mother who is in the presence of someone who has attempted to molest her daughter seems justified. However, this violent response is more likely to emerge from a male than a female, often making this moment comedic. Again, Letts juxtaposes comedic tone with a dramatic situation that is so horrifyingly realistic that an audience might not know quite how to react. This technique is also seen in the feud between Orlando and Olimpia in Fornes' *The Conduct of Life*. Orlando scolds Olimpia for attempting to coddle Nena, the child he is molesting, and in return, Olimpia unleashes her rage; she threatens (and attempts, albeit poorly) to castrate Orlando for the pain and suffering he is inflicting upon Nena, similar to Barbara threatening to murder Steve. Both women are acting as protectorates of children being victimized by men and resort to violence to do so, even though both attempts fail to reverse the damage already done.

After failing to protect her daughter from her attacker, Barbara then unleashes her ire onto her daughter, Jean:

JEAN: Look at you two, you're both so ridiculous. It's no big deal, nothing happened.

BILL: We're concerned about you.

JEAN: No, you're not. You just want to know who to punish.

BARBARA: Stop it—

JEAN: You can't tell the difference between the good guys and the bad guys, so you want me to sort it all out for you—

BARBARA: You know what, skip the lecture. Just tell me what he did!

JEAN: He didn't do anything! Even if he did, what's the big deal?

BILL: The big deal, Jean, is that you're fourteen years old.

JEAN: Which is only a few years younger than you like 'em.

(Barbara slaps Jean; Jean bursts into tears.)

I hate you!

BARBARA: Yeah, I hate you too, you little freak!

(Jean tries to exit. Bill grabs her.)

BILL! Jean—

JEAN: Let me go!

(Jean pulls free, runs off.)

BILL *(To Barbara)*: What's the matter with you?

(Bill exits, pursuing Jean.) (Letts 120)

As this is an act of unrestrained discipline, it is not unlikely that Barbara is reenacting the discipline she received as a child on Jean. This clearly mirrors Hester disciplining her children, specifically Bully, in Parks' *In the Blood*. When Bully begins to "snitch" on her brother Jabber but refuses to tell the whole story, Hester "pops" her in the back of the head to discipline her. The mother-daughter dynamic between Barbara and Jean is no different, only Jean is being disciplined for running her mouth too much. Oddly enough, this act of female-enacted violence is the closest tie that can be made between *August: Osage County* and *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*. Early in Lee's work, the three Koreans discuss sex and sexuality, and one of the Koreans reveals that she has slept with her teacher even though she is only thirteen years old. To discipline her for being a prostitute, one of the other Korean girls slaps her on the butt. While Jean is not sleeping with her teacher, her professor father Bill is sleeping with his students, and Jean is slapped across the face for promiscuity with an older man (Steve).

Violence Towards Objects

Barbara is not the only Weston woman to exhibit violent behavior, however. In the famous "Eat the Fish" scene, other Weston women join in, but unleash their anger on objects rather than people:

IVY: Barbara, stop it!

BARBARA: Eat your fish.

IVY: Barbara!

BARBARA: Eat your fish.

VIOLET: Barbara, quiet now--

IVY: Mom, please, this is important—
BARBARA: Eatyourfisheatyourfisheatyourfish—

(Ivy hurls her plate of food, smashes it.)

What the fuck—
IVY: I have something to say!
BARBARA: Are we breaking shit?

(Barbara takes a vase from the sideboard, smashes it.)

‘Cause I can break shit—

(Violet throws her plate, smashes it.)

See, we can all break shit.
IVY: Charles and I—
BARBARA: You don’t want to break shit with *me*, muthah-fuckah!
IVY: Charles and I—
BARBARA: Johnna? Little spill in here! (Letts 132)

This is the final instance of violence within *August: Osage County* and is the most unexpected. Ivy, the meekest of the three sisters, is the first to smash a plate, catching the more volatile Barbara and Violet off-guard. In a desperate attempt to divert conversation away from Ivy revealing that she and Little Charles are in love, Barbara continues the cycle of violence that Ivy has started. Violet appears to throw her plate because it seems like a “fun” thing to do in the moment, again adding comedy to a tense, climactic moment. This familiar bickering echoes Olimpia and Leticia arguing over new kitchen supplies in *The Conduct of Life*. Often, when objects are used as the victim instead of people, it delivers highly comedic moments in otherwise tragic and dramatic plays.

While Letts’ *August: Osage County* has been oft-compared to Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* due to their autobiographical and naturalistic tendencies, it is odd that the violence that the women exhibit in Letts’ play are more likely to be used for comedic effect rather than dramatic effect. Violence is inherently dramatic and traumatic, so it is odd that the

violent circumstances to not be portrayed considering this is a naturalistic work. In the works of Fornes and Parks, the female-enacted violence is almost exclusively dramatic. Lee's female-enacted violence has a mix of both: the suicide sequence and the slapping video are serious yet have comedic or jovial background music, which is stylistically closer to Letts, but not nearly as commercially successful.

Why do the violent women in Letts' work have mass appeal? Because their circumstances are relatable to a wide demographic. Everyone can relate to a dysfunctional family, but few theatre patrons feel they can relate to an African American homeless woman with five bastard children, a self-hating Korean American, or an abused Latina housewife whose husband is a child molester. Knowing also that a majority of theatre patrons are white, it is an uphill battle for narratives about minorities to be wildly successful unless a satisfying, uplifting catharsis is achieved. None of these plays provide the desired catharsis, but *August: Osage County* ties up loose ends in ways that leave the audience more satisfied than the other three plays and examines a white family rather than a minority. The audience's foundational beliefs are not profoundly shifted or rocked, therefore maintaining a status quo of what "appropriate" or "justified" violence means in a heteronormative society.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have compared and contrasted many facets of female-enacted violence. The cultural background of each playwright seems to have an effect on the way they approach and portray female-enacted violence in their script. For Suzan-Lori Parks' *In the Blood*, the female-enacted violence exists to force the audience to reflect upon their opinions toward destitute African Americans in our society. She particularly charges the audience to explore whether or not their personal view has led to any oppressive behavior toward African Americans who are poor. In *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*, Young Jean Lee distances the audience and forces them to contemplate identity politics as well as question the nature and definition of oppression. Maria Irene Fornes' *The Conduct of Life* uses female-enacted violence as a call to action to end the cycle of violence that women endure from men and inflict on each other. Rather than using violence as a didactic tool, Tracy Letts' *August: Osage County* highlights how female-enacted violence can be used for comedic effect. He demonstrates that no matter the tone of the delivery of the violent act, the long term effect is still as destructive.

Violence is innate in us regardless of background, but cultural upbringing may influence how that violence is expressed. Each of these plays are only singular representatives of large bodies of work, so it would be purely speculative to extrapolate and apply these rules to the entire bodies of work of these subcultural divides. With further research, however, it would be curious to explore how these cultural markers apply to the rest of these cultural canons. Through the plays examined in this thesis, Parks is suggesting that African American female-enacted violence may emerge from deplorable circumstances that have roots in poverty, homelessness, and child neglect. Lee's version of Asian American female-enacted violence, by comparison, seems to be more self-inflicted. Fornes may be proposing that Latin American female-enacted

violence appears to be in response enacted upon the women, so their violence is more societally “justified” than the Asian American and African American female-enacted violence. The scope is even narrower as these are all from female playwrights’ perspectives, which all use a dramatic or tragicomic tone with the violence. In contrast, the white, male, heteronormative playwright’s perspective given by Tracy Letts yields wily women who use violence for comedic effect and often take out their aggression on inanimate objects.

The weapons utilized across these plays are not as varied as the reasons they are used. All of the plays use hand-to-hand combat in some way, which is the most intimate form of violence one can commit. A Billy club is utilized in *In the Blood*, which is closer to the first primitive weaponry ever developed by humans. *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* only pantomimes more violent weapons such as katana blades. Firearms, the most recent theatrical development, make an appearance in the eldest of the four plays analyzed: *The Conduct of Life*. Comedic found weaponry is the operating mode for *August: Osage County*, which includes weapons such as dinner plates full of catfish and frying pans.

Violence is ever present in our culture and growing in all aspects of media, so there is a need now more than ever to research violent work in theatre. From this thesis, it is clear that my fight instructor at Michigan State was misguided; women can easily be the aggressors in theatre—they are not solely victims. As the female aggressor’s perspective is often one that is overlooked, it is essential that more research is done on how these types of characters impact theatre. This is only a small indent into a new field of theatre research, but it is one that will continue to grow and develop in the wake of the fourth wave of the feminist movement.

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