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Lesbian Feminist Performances
of the Culture Wars

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Theater and Performance Studies

by

Lisa Sloan

2015

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Lesbian Feminist Performances
of the Culture Wars

by

Lisa Sloan

Doctor of Philosophy in Theater and Performance Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Sue-Ellen Case, Chair

This dissertation analyzes lesbian feminist performance in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s to critically interrogate how this period has been narrativized in histories of feminism. When considering the history of feminism in terms of decades, the 1970s are often idealized as feminism's zenith, while the 1980s and 1990s are marred by feminist in-fighting, rising conservatism on the national stage, and the culture wars. Clare Hemmings refers to this version of the history of feminism as a "loss" narrative which unwittingly serves those who would mark feminism as over.¹ This dissertation brings together performances that disrupt this loss narrative by advancing ideas that have been associated with 1970s lesbian feminism into the 1980s and 1990s, or by emphasizing common goals over divisive issues. These performances range from plays such as Shirlene Holmes's *A Lady and a Woman* to museum installations such

1. Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 4–5, 11.

as Kiss & Tell's *Drawing the Line*. Together, these works unsettle the loss narrative of the history of feminism by perpetuating lesbian feminist ideas, even in the face of conservative backlash.

This dissertation examines lesbian feminist performances that comment on feminist and LGBT issues of the 1980s and 1990s, with each chapter focusing on a different debate. Chapter 1 examines how the sex wars get taken up in lesbian feminist performances and museum installations while considering the perspectives of lesbians of color on questions of sexuality. Chapter 2 turns to issues of kinship and the figure of the lesbian child in performance, which lesbian feminists advanced in the face of conservative family values. Chapter 3 examines lesbian performances that reify the heteronormativity of national identity and considers how state heteronormativity manifests in state-funded arts contexts. Finally, Chapter 4 focuses on performances that extend a lesbian feminist anti-capitalist sensibility and commitment to community into the 1980s and 1990s. These performances address the issues of gentrification, homelessness and cuts to social services. By addressing these social issues and the lesbian feminist performances that respond to them, this dissertation looks back at 1980s and 1990s lesbian feminist ideas in order to inform contemporary feminist and LGBT movements.

The dissertation of Lisa Sloan is approved.

Sean Metzger

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2015

For my mother, Patti Sloan,
who always knew I would be an author,
and for my father, Dennis Sloan,
who is always on my team.

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Once the curtain goes up, of course, all errors in this work are mine.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation analyzes lesbian feminist performance in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s to critically interrogate how this period has been narrativized in histories of feminism. When considering the history of feminism in terms of decades, the 1970s are often idealized as feminism's zenith, while the 1980s and 1990s are marred by feminist in-fighting, rising conservatism on the national stage, and the culture wars. Clare Hemmings refers to this version of the history of feminism as a "loss" narrative, and notes that such narratives unwittingly serve those who would mark feminism as over.¹ This dissertation brings together performances that disrupt this loss narrative by advancing ideas that have been associated with 1970s lesbian feminism into the 1980s and 1990s, or by emphasizing common goals over divisive issues. These performances range from plays such as Shirlene Holmes's *A Lady and a Woman* to museum installations such as Kiss & Tell's *Drawing the Line*. Together, these works unsettle the loss narrative of the history of feminism by perpetuating lesbian feminist ideas, even in the face of conservative backlash.

This dissertation also adds to a growing number of works that combat queer theory's erasure of lesbian feminism. In an effort to define queer theory, scholars have sometimes set queer theory against feminism. Biddy Martin has observed "a tendency...to construct 'queerness' as a vanguard position that announces its newness and advance over against an apparently superseded and now anachronistic feminism with its emphasis on gender."² Here, Martin identifies a trend within queer theory to construct narratives that advance queerness at feminism's expense. Recently, lesbian feminist performance scholars Kate Davy and Sara

1. Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 4–5, 11.

2. Martin, "Sexualities without Genders," 104.

Warner have addressed this queer erasure of lesbian feminism in their respective works. Davy's *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers* considers the ways in which strains of lesbian feminism contributed to queer thought, even as queer thought eschewed lesbian feminism.³ Davy turns to the performances staged at the WOW Café in the 1980s and 1990s to recover lesbian subcultural production, thereby restoring some of queer thought's lesbian feminist heritage. Like Davy, in *Acts of Gaiety*, Warner works to excavate "innovative, radical, and sex positive" strains of lesbian feminism that queer thought has covered over.⁴ Warner challenges queer notions of the dowdy lesbian by attending to lesbian feminist political actions and performances that approach politics playfully. Warner turns to lesbian feminist acts of gaiety from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s to offer an alternative to the priorities of the contemporary "homoliberal"—that is, assimilationist—LGBT movement in the United States.⁵ My own project sustains Davy and Warner's celebration of lesbian feminist politics and performance as a countermove to queer erasure as well as Warner's critique of the contemporary homoliberal agenda in the United States by examining lesbian feminist performances staged in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. It is my hope that turning to these lesbian feminist performances of the 1980s and 1990s will inform contemporary activist agendas.

Though the 1980s and 1990s have been regarded as a difficult period for feminism, LGBT people, and the arts, as the dissertation makes clear, these years were also a boom time for lesbian feminist performance. The respective writings of Sue-Ellen Case, Jill Dolan, and Kate Davy illustrate that much of this artistic boom can be attributed to the women of the WOW Café.

3. Davy, *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers*, 18–19.

4. Warner, *Acts of Gaiety*, xviii.

5. *Ibid.*, xi.

In addition to the artists making lesbian feminist work at WOW, lesbian feminist artists such as Cherríe Moraga, the Kiss & Tell Collective, Phranc, Carolyn Gage and the No To Men theater troupe, and the women of More Fire! Productions were also creating new works. This dissertation examines lesbian feminist performances that comment on feminist and LGBT issues of the 1980s and 1990s, including the sex wars, alternative kinship structures, sexual citizenship, and critiques of capitalism, with each chapter focusing on a different debate.

This dissertation does not posit a deterministic relationship between social conditions and performance/art-making. Yet, the social conditions in the United States during this period not only provide a historical backdrop for these performances—they are also taken up by these performances, by which I mean that they explicitly articulate and comment upon the social conditions within which they were created. For example, Split Britches, in their play, *Lesbians Who Kill*, engages with the issue of violence against women, which was an important issue for feminists in the ‘80s and ‘90s in that the Reagan and Bush administrations repeatedly cut funding in this area.⁶ *Lesbians Who Kill* cites the crimes of Aileen Wuornos, popularly known as America’s first female—to which I would add lesbian—serial killer. By juxtaposing Wuornos’s crimes against campy quotations of film noir femme fatales, Split Britches highlights how violence against women is embedded in United States culture and feminist efforts to stop violence against women are perceived as man-hating and/or violence against men. As this example illustrates, the performances examined here are not neutral in their articulation of social conditions, but rather have a stake in the conditions that they address. Some, like the WOW collective’s play *Saint Joan of Avenue C*, offer a critique of existing social conditions from a

6. Schulman, *My American History*, 85–87.

lesbian feminist perspective; others, such as Sue Carney and Carolyn Gage's musical comedy *Amazon All Stars*, enact lesbian feminist alternatives to normative structures.

By re-staging and commenting upon social conditions, these performances participate in the culture wars, an ongoing struggle between liberal and conservative thought on social issues in the United States. In calling the culture wars "the struggle to define America," James Davison Hunter highlights the impact of these conflicts on the national imaginary.⁷ While the culture wars are associated with the 1980s and 1990s, lesbian feminists helped to usher in the culture wars during the 1970s by interrogating women's familial, erotic, and reproductive roles. Additionally, the conflicts that the culture wars refer to are ongoing. Writing in 2012, Gayle Rubin notes that "the culture wars have come roaring back, if indeed they ever went away."⁸ As the culture wars persist, looking back on lesbian feminist performances from the 1980s and 1990s may inform contemporary conflicts.

Performing Lesbian Identities

Many of the works this project examines perform explicitly lesbian identities. Indeed, this very charge motivated John Frohnmayer and the National Council on the Arts to rescind Holly Hughes's NEA grant in 1990. Much of Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw's work, sometimes created in collaboration with Deb Margolin and performed under the name Split Britches, unambiguously stages butch-femme desire. Even Reno, who does not always name herself as lesbian, takes off for Cuba with another woman at the end of the "Money Talks" episode of her

7. Hunter, *Culture Wars*.

8. Rubin, *Deviations*, 30.

Citizen Reno television program. I also employ the term “lesbian” because it was the identification term that was in use during the 1980s and 1990s.

I do not use the term “lesbian” lightly. As Sue-Ellen Case makes clear in *The Domain-Matrix*, charges of essentialism have rendered the terms “lesbian,” “identity,” and “performance” unfashionable.⁹ At the risk of becoming an unfashionable, dowdy lesbian, I take up the terms “lesbian” and “identity” in my dissertation project. The charges of essentialism leveled against these terms come from queer quarters. Robyn Wiegman identifies the turn away from identity as the initiation of queer theory, and marks this turn as queer theory’s point of departure from gender studies.¹⁰ The rise of queer theory has been historicized as an eschewing of feminism. For instance, in genealogies of queer theory, Gayle Rubin’s “Thinking Sex,” which promotes the study of sexuality in historical and social terms, is often cited as a turn against feminism.¹¹ Rubin refutes these accusations of antifeminism in “Blood Under the Bridge” when she explains that “antifeminism was not among my objectives [in “Thinking Sex”]. While the essay has sometimes been interpreted as a rejection of feminism, I saw it as completely within the best traditions of feminist discourse...”¹² Rubin goes on to clarify that while “Thinking Sex” distinguishes between gender and sexuality, gender and sexuality are connected.¹³ My dissertation project’s focus on lesbian performance necessitates an examination of both gender and sexuality. As Phranc narrates in her “Bulldagger Swagger” ditty,

9. Case, *Domain-Matrix*, 1–2.

10. Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, 96.

11. See *Ibid.* and Halley, *Split Decisions*, 38.

12. Rubin, “Blood under the Bridge,” 216.

13. *Ibid.*, 217–218.

I went to charm school, I got a degree
in full-fledged femininity
You know now, I'm not tryin' to be a man
I'm just-a bein' who I am
and that's a very very very butch lesbian¹⁴

Here, Phranc's lyrics relate gender and sexuality: Phranc's subcultural sexuality has not precluded her from having to learn dominant femininity. When Phranc announces her lesbian sexuality, she qualifies it with the gender adjective "butch." By mobilizing the term "lesbian," I call attention to the idea that thinking about sexuality does not necessarily require, as Janet Halley would have it, "taking a break from feminism."¹⁵

Along with this divide between feminism and queer theory, queer theory's anti-identitarian streak casts off of "that seemingly defunct figure, 'the lesbian.'"¹⁶ In *The Domain-Matrix*, Case carefully traces how "lesbian," which has been problematized as overly narrow and circumscribed, has been traded in for "queer," which is lauded for its inclusivity.¹⁷ Yet, the term "queer" is not beyond reproach. All too often, "queer" becomes a referent for "(white) gay man." José Muñoz has critiqued queer theory—especially anti-relational tracts—for not confronting issues of race. Muñoz writes that "all queers are not the stealth-universal-white-gay-man invoked in queer anti-relational formulations."¹⁸ Whereas Muñoz emphasizes queer's whiteness, I would also address queer's implied masculinity in a significant number of works in the field. My use of

14. Phranc, *Bulldagger Swagger*, 0:45–1:02.

15. Halley, *Split Decisions*, 30.

16. Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, 102.

17. Case, *Domain-Matrix*, 13.

18. Muñoz, "Cruising the Toilet," 363.

the term “lesbian” counters queer theory’s masculinist bias in that it specifically refers to women.¹⁹

In addition to the term “lesbian,” I take up the term “identity” in the dissertation. In “The Essence of the Triangle,” Teresa de Lauretis, whose work heavily influences Case’s, examines the divide between so-called “essentialism” and feminist poststructuralism that was developing at the time of her writing. She demonstrates that what gets labeled “essentialist” does not in fact propose a metaphysical, unalterable understanding of difference. To distance certain feminisms from these accusations of ontology or metaphysical difference, de Lauretis offers the idea of a “nominal” feminist essentialism, which emphasizes historical specificity.²⁰ When applied to the term “lesbian identity,” de Lauretis’s concept of nominal essence imbues the term with contingency (rather than certainty), as well as positionality and a historical location (rather than a claim to universality). This return to identity allows me to explore performances of lesbian identities as well as lesbian identities in performance.

According to Jill Dolan, this same notion of identity is staged in postmodern performance. She writes, “They [many artists working in postmodern performance] consider identity unstable and refracted, and the psyche as not quite the coherent, unified site of individuation that modernism once claimed and that traditional psychoanalysis once posed.”²¹ Performance emerges as one of the vehicles via which identities are constructed, as José Esteban Muñoz contends: “Performance is used...to, borrowing a phrase from George Lipsitz, ‘rehearse

19. Case, *Domain-Matrix*, 1.

20. de Lauretis, “The Essence of the Triangle,” 4–5.

21. Dolan, *Feminist Spectator*, 42.

identities' ..."²² Like Case and de Lauretis, Muñoz removes himself from debates that dismiss identity as essentialist. He writes, "...I understand the labor (and it is often, if not always, *work*) of making identity as a process that takes place at the point of collision of perspectives that some critics and theorists have understood as essentialist and constructivist."²³ Muñoz names performance as one of these processes of identity formation, and claims that minoritarian subjects cannot enter into majoritarian fictions of identity; rather, they must find other ways to build a sense of self. Muñoz proffers the term "disidentification" to distinguish minoritarian processes of identity formation from majoritarian processes. Disidentification is neither an identification nor a counteridentification; rather, disidentification is a vacillation between identification and counteridentification.²⁴ Disidentificatory representations are created by minoritarian subjects, often for minoritarian subjects.²⁵

Given the subcultural status of lesbian identities, lesbians have had to negotiate dominant culture in addition to the minoritized lesbian ghetto.²⁶ The subcultural status of lesbians in some ways necessitates a disidentificatory vacillation between dominant culture and lesbian subculture. One example of such a disidentificatory vacillation in performance is Dempsey and Millan's mockumentary video, *Lesbian National Parks and Services: A Force of Nature* (examined more fully in Chapter 3). In the video, Dempsey and Millan pose as Lesbian Rangers in Banff National Park, an important site in the pan-Canadian national imaginary, where they strive to protect

22. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 97.

23. *Ibid.*, 6.

24. *Ibid.*, 18–19.

25. *Ibid.*, 1.

26. Case, *Domain-Matrix*, 159.

“lesbian flora and fauna.” Dempsey and Millan’s performance is disidentificatory in that it asserts a lesbian subcultural presence within a normative national landscape. Disidentificatory negotiations also characterize much of the work that came out of the WOW Café in the 1980s and 1990s, which Davy describes as “a kind of communing with (Western) culture by way of hegemonic culture’s artifacts or products. . . . In appropriating a mass-culture image, they [WOW’s lesbian performers] fashion themselves a new one. . . .”²⁷

Davy’s work also raises important questions surrounding racialized identities in relation to lesbian performance. Though Muñoz associates disidentification chiefly with, as his subtitle announces, *Queers of Color*, he acknowledges that disidentificatory tactics may also be available to other subject positions.²⁸ Though “lesbian” all too often refers to only white lesbians, my dissertation is interested in performances by lesbians of color as well as white lesbians—who, as Kate Davy claims, are “ostensibly white,” but, due to their subcultural status, cannot access dominant white womanhood.²⁹ Socioeconomic status is one of the qualities that Davy names as barring some lesbians from accessing dominant white womanhood.³⁰ Sue-Ellen Case also situates lesbian identity as a classed critique of dominant culture.³¹ Such a critique is evident in two of More Fire! Productions’s plays, *Art Failures* and *Epstein on the Beach*. These works stage a critique of the capitalist process of gentrification from a lesbian feminist perspective. As

27. Davy, “Outing Whiteness,” 193.

28. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 5.

29. Davy, *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers*, 147.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Case, *Domain-Matrix*, 153.

these examples demonstrate, the term “lesbian” is always informed by other vectors of identity, such as race, gender, and class.

Performing a History of Lesbian Feminism

Since the dissertation focuses on a specific period of time—the 1980s and 1990s—I must attend to questions of periodization and historiography. In “The Criteria for Periodization in Theatre History,” Thomas Postlewait examines the varied approaches to periodization employed by theater historians. Postlewait defines periods, especially those conceived in terms of decades, as historical constructs that aid in the organization of information.³² Given the constructed nature of periods, my dissertation will render a particular picture of lesbian performance in the United States during the 1980s and the 1990s rather than provide a totalizing and definitive characterization of this period. Postlewait notes that theater historians tend to construct periods on the basis of either “social and political orders, economic forces, institutions, ideologies, and mentalities” or “formal styles, rules of art, conventions, thematics, iconographic motifs, semiotic codes and systems, and intertextuality.”³³ The dissertation explores various forms of performance, including theater, solo performance, museum installations, visual art, and performative political actions, and so while formal qualities are important to my analyses, my examination of lesbian feminist performance in the 1980s and 1990s is not based on formal elements. Rather, I examine performances that articulate and comment upon a particular set of social concerns and conditions—namely, the feminist sex wars, questions of kinship and kids, sexual citizenship, and capitalist developments. Notably, some of the performance examples

32. Postlewait, “Criteria for Periodization,” 299.

33. *Ibid.*, 306.

analyzed in the dissertation spill over and past the 1980s and 1990s in order to trace how these lesbian feminist ideas have persisted in performance. My selection of these issues is informed by lesbian feminist artistic and activist agendas.

In addition to periodization, another issue of historicization that must be attended to is the tendency to narrativize—that is, to write history “as a story.”³⁴ As Hayden White maintains, the narrativization of history constructs historical events as ontological and inevitable.³⁵ One way of avoiding narrativization is to “openly adopt[s] a perspective that looks out on the world and reports it.”³⁶ To resist narrativization, the dissertation considers sources and performances that foreground the maker’s positionality. As mentioned above, the performances I consider are all explicitly lesbian, crafted by (if not exclusively for) lesbians. Unlike narrativization, my dissertation project refuses closure in that many of the struggles that will be examined therein continue today: we continue to live in a country where tax breaks are consistently offered to the rich, LGBT art is censored, and women’s (sexual) pleasure is demonized.

The project both affirms and vexes a particular version of the history of feminism that Clare Hemmings refers to as a “loss” narrative.³⁷ In such narratives, the 1970s are remembered as something of a feminist golden age, while the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond are perceived as a period of impasse for feminism in the United States. In *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan/Bush Years*, journalist, novelist, and playwright Sarah Schulman advances such a narrative. As Schulman recounts,

34. White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” 7.

35. *Ibid.*, 8.

36. *Ibid.*, 7.

37. Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 4–5.

The seventies was still a time in America where it was possible to challenge traditional roles in general. ... The transformative influence of international freedom movements increasingly broadened radical feminism's visionary field. ... The political maturation of global and economic components of a social movement rooted, initially, in the private sphere, seemed imminent as feminism articulated its goal of rescuing the United States and the world from minority rule.³⁸

According to Schulman's account, feminism was poised to transform society, politics, and government in the United States during the seventies. Yet, this transformation never materialized.

According to journalist Susan Faludi, "...the last decade [the 1980s] has seen a powerful counterassault on women's rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women."³⁹ This conservative backlash against feminism disrupted the momentum of the seventies. Schulman attributes this unfulfilled feminism to Reaganism: "By the early eighties, feminism, as an activist grass-roots movement, was on the verge of collapse. Reaganism had severely disempowered our constituency."⁴⁰ Here, Schulman's words reveal a movement at a standstill—feminism at an impasse. As feminism splintered, many heterosexual feminists "were more able to assimilate while lesbians built a counterculture."⁴¹

Hemmings points out that such "loss" narratives as those offered by Schulman and Faludi unwittingly serve those who would mark feminism as over.⁴² My examination of lesbian feminist performance during this period works to mitigate this issue. As alluded to above, while this time

38. Schulman, *My American History*, 1.

39. Faludi, *Backlash*, 9–10.

40. Schulman, *My American History*, 4.

41. *Ibid.*, 5.

42. Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 11.

is regarded as a difficult one in the history of feminism, a wealth of lesbian feminist performance was staged during this same period. Lesbian feminist ideas and commitments that have been largely associated with the 1970s, such as criticism of heteropatriarchal kinship structures and a critique of capitalism, persist in these 1980s and 1990s performances. *Lesbian Feminist Performances of the Culture Wars* examines the performances created within the lesbian counterculture that Schulman identifies, and considers the ideas advanced by these performances in relation to contemporary feminist and LGBT movements.

By examining lesbian feminist performances that articulate and comment upon the social conditions in which they were created, I hope to trace an alternative and subcultural history—one that accounts for the place of the lesbian subculture in the American national imaginary, as well as the ways in which the lesbian subculture imagined itself—through performance. Accordingly, because performance is hailed as a strategy of memory making, and the “I” is installed as a representative identity, I turn to Joseph Roach’s *Cities of the Dead*. In *Cities of the Dead*, Roach offers performance as a vehicle for the production of history. While Roach’s notion of surrogation emphasizes forgetting or eliding certain histories through performance, Roach posits performance as an additional tool for the formation of imagined communities, and makes the important distinction that what is remembered and what is forgotten is dictated by hegemonic interests. Schulman registers this point with her insistence that “History has revisioned seventies feminism as either dominated by dogmatic and prudish lesbians or deeply homophobic.”⁴³ The gap between the media’s portrayal of feminism as “a movement of white middle-class women striving for success in the corporate world”⁴⁴ and the grass-roots movement that Schulman

43. Schulman, *My American History*, 1.

44. *Ibid.*, 4.

participated in is an example of the media's role in the surrogation of the feminist movement, transforming feminism's image in the United States' national imaginary.

Yet, as Diana Taylor illustrates in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, performance also has the capacity to preserve and remember.⁴⁵ Some of the performances that I will examine here consciously set out to represent what has not been represented in dominant culture, and take advantage of performance's potential for producing and encapsulating memory—especially in the face of state censorship. In contrast to Roach's relation of performance to forgetting, Taylor offers performance as a repository for cultural memory. For Taylor, performance is an “act of transfer...[that] works through doubling, replication, and proliferation.”⁴⁶ Elizabeth Freeman also argues for the examination of performance and other art works as an approach to historiography in *Time Binds*.⁴⁷ Freeman posits that examining art works provides access to “affective histories,” a term she borrows from Dipesh Chakrabarty.⁴⁸ She writes that producing affective histories “entails thinking that a bodily motion (a grasp, a clutch, a refusal to let go) might have something to do with knowing and making history—with continuities, contacts, and contradictions among past, present, and future—through both physical sensation and emotional response.”⁴⁹ While Freeman examines film and installation art, the dissertation follows through on the promise of the role of the body in the creation of affective histories by examining (mostly)

45. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 43, 46.

46. *Ibid.*, 46.

47. Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, xvii.

48. *Ibid.*, xxi.

49. *Ibid.*, xx.

live performance—albeit, through the study of archival footage of these performances.⁵⁰ Taylor asserts that the cultural memory that performance preserves and passes on—not to mention the bodies engaged in these performances—is always racialized and gendered⁵¹ I would add that cultural memory is also oriented in terms of sexuality, as demonstrated by Ann Cvetkovich, Lillian Faderman, and Sarah Schulman, who all explore lesbian cultural memory in their respective works. Additionally, archives such as the June Mazer Lesbian Archives and the Lesbian Herstory Archives are dedicated to preserving lesbian histories. This dissertation examines performances that construct an embodied lesbian history.

Many of the performances that I will be examining in the dissertation preserve histories that might have otherwise been erased. A number of these performances have encountered or had to negotiate censorship in various guises. Holly Hughes was silenced by the National Endowment for the Arts for some years, halting her writing and performance practices for a time after her solo performance grant was revoked in 1990. In her introduction to *Clit Notes*, Hughes reveals that during the height of the NEA controversy, “I couldn’t find a way to interrupt his [Jesse Helms’s] narrative to tell my side of the story. . . . Early in the first year I lose my voice. For two years I can’t write.”⁵² That said, many of these artists also use performance to articulate what otherwise might be kept silent. In *WORLD POWER SEX CONTROL*, Janice Perry uses her lesbian body to stage photographs from Robert Mapplethorpe’s *The Perfect Moment* for

50. Because I will be examining certain performances through the use of archival footage, I will have to account for the exigencies of documentary technology and negotiate the documenting gaze of the camera.

51. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 86, 94–95, 100.

52. Hughes, *Clit Notes*, 1996, 21–22.

audiences who were unable to attend the censored museum exhibit. Perry's solo show highlights performance's capacity to resist censorship.

Finally, as Postlewait prompts in "Theater Events and Their Political Contexts," theater historians must contextualize their object of study. Where theater is the event being studied, politics is the context.⁵³ Postlewait accuses his fellow theater historians of oversimplifying a performance's political implications as either subversive or conservative, often with the aid of cause-and-effect reasoning.⁵⁴ To counter this reductive argumentation, Postlewait provides a catalog of political factors that should be taken into account when doing theater history. This extensive catalog includes considering a work both as a text and in performance; examining the ways in which costumes, props, and gestures produce meaning; interrogating the politics of representation; locating a piece within or against performance traditions and sub-genres; relating a performance to nationalist and religious occurrences; examining the operating procedures and organizing principles of theater spaces and theater artists; interrogating a piece in relation to societal organization and cultural ideology; and considering reception.⁵⁵ While Postlewait issues a tall order, he also illustrates just how much evidence a theater historian has at her disposal. In the dissertation, I strive to account for these particularities in the performances I examine.

Chapter Breakdown

Since the dissertation examines performances that stage social issues, each chapter addresses a major social issue that lesbian feminists debated during the 1980s and 1990s.

53. Postlewait, "Theater Events and Their Political Contexts," 198.

54. *Ibid.*, 203, 205.

55. *Ibid.*, 208–217.

Lesbian feminist performance artist Holly Hughes names these four issues in a monologue from her one-woman show, *Preaching to the Perverted*. Hughes critiques the popular notion that children's asexual innocence must be carefully safeguarded. As this critique informs the issues examined in the dissertation, Hughes's monologue is worth quoting at length. She says,

You know, I don't actually hate kids, ... I hate they way they're used to wreck everything. You know, it's what's done in the name of kids that I hate, like there's this very popular law in New York City about shutting down the sex clubs and the strip joints, pushing the porno to the outer boroughs, and it's really popular. People say stuff like, I don't think children should have to see pornography on their way to school. Let's think about this: there is about 50 yards between my apartment in the East Village and the newsstand where I buy my monthly copy of *Honcho*—where I would be only too happy to buy some lesbian pornography if there were any lesbian pornography to buy, but is that the issue? No. So I just make due.

Okay, in this 50 yards, a little child would have to negotiate the detritus of gentrification, and they'd step over crack vials, and they'd probably look up and see banners floating across East Sixth Street saying things like, "Stop Killer Cops," "Rent Strike," "Save Our Gardens," and the child would be sounding out these simple words and it would be filling her with a certain sense of anxiety, so that she would stumble and trip on a couple homeless people who are inevitably laid out on the street wrapped in cardboard like someone's dinner they couldn't finish, and then they'd collide with a herd of schoolchildren who are unlucky enough to be going to a New York City Public School where they are more likely to be buried alive in asbestos than learn anything, because we are such a pro-child culture.⁵⁶

Performed in 1999, Hughes's description of this hypothetical scene in New York City serves as a microcosm of key national issues of the 1980s and 1990s. These issues are pornography and/as violence against women; family values notions of the child; and rising homelessness and cuts to social services. Additionally, as a whole, *Preaching to the Perverted* responds to the censorship of LGBT artists and art works in the United States.

The concern with pornography that Hughes mentions was bolstered by the feminist sex wars of the early 1980s. Chapter 1 examines how the debates of the sex wars get taken up in

56. Weaver, *Preaching to the Perverted*, 1:07:10–1:09:00.

lesbian feminist performances and museum installations. The sex wars pitted the issue of violence against women, with which certain feminist groups associated pornography, against women's sexual pleasure—especially in the forms of lesbian sadomasochism and butch-femme roles. Lesbian feminist theater and performance artists created works that served as alternative forums for the sex wars debate, such as the Kiss & Tell collective's *Drawing the Line* installation. Other works, such as Cherríe Moraga's *Giving Up the Ghost*, challenged the opposition of pleasure and danger by addressing the issue of violence against women while advocating for women's sexual pleasure. These performances merit examination in the face of contemporary conservative opposition to funding for the problem of violence against women as well as the persistence of puritanical attitudes toward women's sexual pleasure.

Chapter 2 turns to the concern for children's asexual innocence that Hughes articulates. Lesbian feminist activists interrogated what Hughes refers to as the United States's "pro-child culture," which imagines children as asexual or proto-heterosexual. During the 1980s and 1990s, lesbian feminist activists began to imagine and advocate for lesbian children. The Lesbian Avengers employed performative political actions to challenge normative notions of the child and posit the figure of the lesbian child. In addition to this attention to the child, lesbian feminists continued to imagine alternative kinship structures. Issues of kinship took on new urgency as family values proponents advanced the heteropatriarchal nuclear family unit as a bulwark against perceived social ills. While Split Britches's *Anniversary Waltz* and Shirlene Holmes's *A Lady and a Woman* stage critiques of heterosexual marriage from a lesbian feminist perspective, Sue Carney and Carolyn Gage's *Amazon All Stars* imagines sisterhood as a feminist kinship organizing principle. These performances serve as reminders that traditional marriage is just one

form of LGBT kinship as the issue of gay marriage continues to dominate the national conversation on LGBT rights in the United States.

Chapter 3 relates to Hughes's larger project in *Preaching to the Perverted* of speaking back against state censorship of LGBT artists and art works. Lesbians have historically had an uneasy relationship with the heteronormative state in the United States and Canada. This chapter examines lesbian performances that reify the heteronormativity of national identity, such as Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan's video *Lesbian National Parks and Services: A Force of Nature*. The chapter then goes on to examine how state heteronormativity manifests in arts contexts. The rise of family values in the United States (detailed in Chapter 2) spurred debates on what kinds of artists and art works should receive state funding. Drawing on anti-pornography feminism, conservative legislators decried lesbian and gay performances and films as obscene. The state defunded lesbian and gay artists and art works as well as spaces that supported lesbian and gay art on the basis that they did not promote the (heteronormative) values of the state. This defunding is tantamount to censorship in that it prevented many gay and lesbian works from being staged. Outside of the United States, American anti-pornography feminism proved influential in Canada, where the government redefined obscenity to include materials that were perceived to be harmful to women. Under this policy, many LGBT print materials were burned at the Canadian border. The dissertation examines the various strategies that performers used to speak back to or circumvent state censorship, such as Holly Hughes's *Preaching to the Perverted* and Janice Perry's *WORLD POWER SEX CONTROL*. The chapter also makes the case that, despite the development of homonormativity and homonationalism, opposition between lesbians and the state persists. The recent censorship of Alison Bechdel's graphic novel *Fun Home* and

the performance of the musical adaptation of *Fun Home* staged in response exemplify this continued opposition.

Finally, Chapter 4 refers to the issues of gentrification, homelessness, and cuts to social services that Hughes mentions in *Preaching to the Perverted*. By addressing these issues, lesbian feminist performers extend a lesbian feminist anti-capitalist sensibility and commitment to community—two items often associated with 1970s feminism—into the 1980s and 1990s. These works stage the efforts of community organizers fighting for affordable housing, as in *Saint Joan of Avenue C*, and of struggling artists, as in Split Britches’s *Upwardly Mobile Home* and the works of More Fire! Productions. Jennifer Miller’s Circus Amok troupe stages these lesbian feminist concerns with queer bodies in public spaces. Reno’s television and stage performances update the lesbian feminist critique of capitalism to address the financialization of the economy as well as the repercussions of the 2008 financial crisis. As income inequality continues to increase, these lesbian feminist performances continue to promote community over capitalist interests, and highlight the absence of these issues from the contemporary LGBT movement in the United States.

By addressing these social issues and the lesbian feminist performances that respond to them, this dissertation looks back at 1980s and 1990s lesbian feminist ideas in order to inform contemporary feminist and LGBT movements. This time period is worth reflecting on because, as Gayle Rubin writes,

We are still enmeshed in conflicts that have roots in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Much of the political conversation and social concern with issues such as pornography, sex work, civil equality for gay and lesbian citizens, transsexuality, AIDS prevention, sexual variation, women’s roles, and children’s sexuality occurs within frameworks that were constructed then and have been cultivated ever since.⁵⁷

57. Rubin, *Deviations*, 29.

While the issue of gay marriage has dominated the contemporary LGBT movement in the United States, the dissertation turns to lesbian feminist performance in the 1980s and 1990s to re-imagine contemporary political projects.

CHAPTER 1: STAGING THE SEX WARS

The sex wars of the late seventies and eighties have been a crucible for the feminist movement in the United States, as many feminists have noted.¹ The wars raged between organizations that regarded pornography, sadomasochism (S/M), and butch-femme role-playing as forms of violence against women and sex radical groups such as Samois and the Lesbian Sex Mafia (LSM), which regarded S/M and pornography—which they usually made by and for themselves—as potential sites of women’s sexual pleasure and fantasy. The anti-pornography feminist organizations such as Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW),² Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM) and Women Against Pornography (WAP) staged Take Back the Night marches, and worked to pass legislation that would regulate pornography, both in the United States and Canada.³ Alongside these efforts, anti-pornography feminists rejected lesbian S/M as an anti-feminist practice. The conflict between these groups played out in both activist and academic contexts. Feminist academics generally identify Barnard’s 1982 Scholar and Feminist IX conference, “Towards a Politics of Sexuality,” as the

1. For more on the sex wars’ impact on the feminist movement, see Basiliere, “Political Is Personal: Scholarly Manifestations of the Feminist Sex Wars”; Duggan, “Introduction”; Freccero, “Notes of a Post-Sex Wars Theorizer.” and Freccero, “Updating the Sex ‘Wars.’” At a talk entitled “‘Thinking Sex’ in 2012,” Gayle Rubin asserted that contemporary feminism has not recovered from the damage wrought by the sex wars Rubin, “‘Thinking Sex’ in 2012.”

2. WAVAW’s primary focus was images of women in print ads rather than pornography, but they sometimes compared these print ads to pornography. These comparisons imply an anti-pornography stance.

3. Anti-pornography feminists Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin collaborated on anti-pornography legislation for the city of Minneapolis in 1983. The Minneapolis mayor vetoed the legislation, but a similar ordinance was passed this same legislation was later adopted in Indianapolis in 1984. In Canada, the Supreme Court’s 1992 Butler decision cited MacKinnon’s definition of obscenity. The decision has been used to prosecute *Bad Attitude*, a lesbian S/M magazine, as well as LGBT bookstores. For sex radical accounts of the Butler decision, see Califia, “Among Us, Against Us: Right-Wing Feminism,” 107–8. and Duggan, “Introduction,” 9–10. Chapter Three takes up the issue of censorship in the Canadian context.

primary theater of these sex wars.⁴ This chapter considers lesbian performance and performativity in relation to these activist debates and scenarios as well as academic feminist events such as the Barnard conference. These debates constitute the performances of the sex wars.

Subsequent to these social performances of the issues, lesbian theatrical performances, films, and photography exhibits took up the debates. Collectively, these works can be perceived as a way of archiving the sex wars, engaging in the debates through performative, narrative, and visual strategies. Ranging from photo installations collected into publications to theatrical performances, the lesbian performatives that comprise this archive protest violence against women while maintaining a commitment to women's sexual pleasure. Such performances include Kiss & Tell's *Drawing the Line* photography exhibit, Split Britches's theater piece, *Lesbians Who Kill*, and the Troyano sisters' film, *Carmelita Tropicana: Your Kunst is your Waffen*.

Although many of the performances examined in this chapter are approximately twenty years old, and over thirty years have passed since the 1982 Barnard conference, the divisions wrought by the sex wars continue to haunt current feminist activism as well as aesthetic and critical discourses in the United States. As Ellen Willis put it during the debates, "I believe that as the sexuality debate goes, so goes feminism."⁵ In 2012, during a public conversation with Alice Echols and Ellen DuBois, Gayle Rubin, one of the major sex radical players in the debates, asserted that contemporary feminism has not recovered from the damage wrought by the sex

4. Love, "Diary of a Conference on Sexuality, 1982," 49; Basiliere, "Political Is Personal: Scholarly Manifestations of the Feminist Sex Wars," 2.

5. Alderfer, Jaker, and Nelson, *Diary of a Conference on Sexuality*, 72.

wars.⁶ Indeed, the specter of the sex wars continues to haunt recent activism around violence against women. Since the late seventies, women have marched through city streets to protest violence against women in the United States in Take Back the Night marches and rallies. In 2011, following the divisions initiated by the sex wars, SlutWalk emerged, combining a protest of violence against women with sex radicalism.

Like Take Back the Night marches, SlutWalk is concerned with ending sexual violence, but SlutWalk focuses specifically on issues of victim blaming and consent rather than survivor support. SlutWalk began in Toronto in response to local police officer Michael Sanguinetti's public statement that in order to avoid sexual assault, women should not dress like "sluts."⁷ Sanguinetti's statement represents a kind of pre-emptive victim blaming by implying that women's clothing somehow invites sexual assault.⁸ SlutWalk protests victim blaming like Sanguinetti's in cases of sexual assault by reclaiming the word "slut." From Toronto, SlutWalk has spread to the United States and around the world: marches have been staged in countries such as Honduras, Argentina, Brazil, the United Kingdom, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden, South Africa, Kyrgyzstan, India, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. Unlike Take Back the Night marches, which begin after dark, SlutWalks often occur in the daylight. Some protestors, many of them women, wear lingerie or "provocative" clothing as they march through

6. Rubin, "'Thinking Sex' in 2012."

7. Toronto, "WHY | SlutWalk Toronto," np.

8. Victim-blaming first came to national attention in relation to the 1984 New Bedford rape trials. A New Bedford woman was gang-raped on a pool table at Big Dan's bar while other patrons cheered the rapists on. During the ensuing trials, one defense attorney accused the victim of encouraging the assault. Members of the New Bedford community who sympathized with the perpetrators also blamed the victim for being out of the house and alone late at night. *The Accused*, the 1988 film starring Jodi Foster, dramatizes the case. According to Susan Faludi, audiences cheered during the rape scene—just as onlookers had cheered during the actual event.

city streets with protest signs (though this is by no means mandatory). Others wear clothes that they have been assaulted in, which they indicate on their signs. The signs carried by the protestors often focus on the issue of consent. At New York's 2011 SlutWalk, a topless lesbian, holding another woman's hand, held a sign aloft that exclaimed, "CONSENT MAKES ME WET!" (see fig 1.) Her sign encourages sexual consent by associating it with sexual arousal. By associating consent with sexual arousal, the sign rebuts the notion that consent disrupts sexual pleasure. Through her attire and her sign, she performs a sex-radical attitude, emphasizing sexual pleasure while maintaining a concern with consent. Other protestors challenge the assumed correlation between clothing and consent, with signs declaring "My clothes are *NOT* my CONSENT," and "STILL NOT 'ASKING FOR IT'" (see fig. 2). These declarations, when they appear alongside the protestors' attire, challenge the understanding of women's choice of clothing as a communication of sexual consent. The idea of clothing as consent constitutes one form of victim blaming in cases of sexual assault. Victims of sexual assault are often blamed for the assault if they wear "provocative" clothing, go out late at night, or engage in "promiscuous" sexual behavior.



Fig. 1.1. Protestors march in SlutWalkNY, 1 October 2011. Photo by David Shankbone.



Fig. 1.2. Protestors march in SlutWalkNY, 1 October 2011. Photo by David Shankbone.

The protestors' signs also perform sex-positive feminism: their signs problematize violence against women and victim-blaming in sexual assault cases while their attire asserts a woman's right to sexual pleasure. These SlutWalkers critique violence against women and the policing of women's sexualities simultaneously; SlutWalkers' critique, however, has its limitations. Criticism of SlutWalk echoes criticism of the sex wars debates. Like the sex wars, SlutWalk protests address sexual norms associated with white femininities. An open letter published on the Black Women's Blueprint blog and Facebook page points out that reclaiming the word "slut" is problematic for black women, who have been historically hypersexualized.⁹ Other critics echo anti-pornography criticisms of sex radical practices: some view SlutWalk as a performance of misogynistic femininity, with the scantily clad protestors objectifying themselves on the streets. SlutWalks and the discourse around them re-perform the debates of the sex wars by pitting violence against women against sexual pleasure.

While debates around women's sexuality continue to trouble feminist activism, dominant legislative practices continue to evidence disregard for violence against women. Legal protections designed to combat violence against women have again become vulnerable to right-wing politics. Recently, the Violence Against Women Act stalled in congress for a year and a half. Initially enacted in 1994, the act provides protections for victims of violence against women as well as training in this area to law enforcement officers and other related personnel. When the Violence Against Women Act expired in 2011, efforts to renew the act stalled in congress due to the GOP's refusal to include added protections for women who are LGBT, undocumented

9. "An Open Letter from Black Women to the SlutWalk." Notably, while Black Women's Blueprint problematized SlutWalks, the organization has staged a protest of sexual assault through performance. *Mother Tongue Monologues: For Black Girls and Stolen Women Reclaiming Our Bodies, Our Selves, Our Lives* was first performed in 2012. Its 2013 incarnation, *Mother Tongue Monologues for Lesbian Ancestral Wives and Revolutionary Women Speaking the Unspeakable*, focused on black queer sexualities.

immigrants, or Native American. While congress eventually passed the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act in February of 2013, the protections for marginalized women became a political football for a year and a half. Given the current cultural and legislative climate around women's sexuality in the US, it is worth reexamining performances that stage a critique of violence against women. This chapter examines the Barnard conference as a performance and how the debates staged there have been re-staged from lesbian perspectives. The chapter also attends to theatrical performances that shift the terms of the activist debates. Many of these performances, such as Cherríe Moraga's *Giving Up the Ghost* and Denise Uyehara's *Hello (Sex) Kitty: Mad Asian Bitch on Wheels* address instances of violence against women outside of a pornographic context and consider women of color sexualities, which went largely unexamined at Barnard.

The Sex Wars As/And Performance

The 1982 Barnard Conference staged an academic and activist feminist dialogue on sexuality.¹⁰ I choose the word “staged” here to position the conference as a live, one-time-only performance. As Sue-Ellen Case writes in *The Domain-Matrix*, conferences constitute an academic mode of performance, with presenters as performers and attendees as audience members.¹¹ While Case argues that all conference forms are performances of academic knowledge, the Barnard conference was especially charged due to the controversial nature of the subject matter at hand as well as pressures from anti-pornography feminists. The conference was supported with grant money from the Helena Rubinstein Foundation—which is somewhat ironic

10. Since its inception in 1974, the conference has sought to foster dialogue between feminism's academic and activist quarters.

11. Case, *Domain-Matrix*, 23–24.

for a movement that at one time considered wearing cosmetics as evidence of false consciousness—and brought together approximately 40 presenters and 800 attendees from around the United States and Canada. The presenters and workshop leaders included feminist scholars, activists, and community leaders. The conference schedule lists scholars Ellen DuBois and Linda Gordon, Hortense Spillers, and Alice Echols presenting three papers in the morning session, performing their scholarship for an audience of conference attendees. Following the morning session, conference-goers could choose between 18 workshops on a variety of subjects, including Shirley Kaplan’s “Sexuality and Creativity—A Theatre Workshop,” which emphasized a connection between bodies in performance and sexuality. These workshops were followed by the closing session, which featured Amber Hollibaugh presenting her “Desire for the Future” and poetry readings by Hattie Gossett, Cherríe Moraga, and Sharon Olds.

While the conference facilitated intense dialogue inside the college, anti-pornography feminists staged a protest outside Barnard’s gates at Broadway and 117th Street. On the day of the conference, WAP picketed outside of the college’s main gates so that conference attendees had to cross through WAP protestors to enter the college (see fig 3). The protestors displayed their political commitments by wearing t-shirts that read “For a Feminist Sexuality” on the front and “Against S/M” on the back. WAP also distributed leaflets attributed to the Coalition for a Feminist Sexuality and against Sadomasochism—an alliance composed of WAVAW, WAP, and New York Radical Feminists¹²—to conference attendees and passersby. These leaflets, titled “We Protest,” claimed that the conference promoted sex-radical feminism and excluded anti-pornography feminists.

12. While the leaflet was attributed to these three groups initially, WAP members produced its content. See Bronstein 305 for details on the leaflet’s authorship.



Fig.1.3. “Women Against Pornography Protest at the Gates of Barnard College.” Photo by Morgan Gwenwald, courtesy of the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

Even before the picket line formed, there had been tensions between conference organizers and anti-pornography feminists. Conference organizers had intentionally not invited anti-pornography feminists to speak at the conference. As a group letter signed by conference organizers, presenters, attendees, and supporters states, some feminists felt that the issue of violence against women had come to obscure other issues related to sexuality, and the Scholar and the Feminist IX conference provided a forum in which to approach these other issues.¹³ According to Carole S. Vance, the conference’s Academic Coordinator, conference organizers wanted to address “the tension between sexual danger and sexual pleasure in feminist theory and in women’s lives during the past hundred years in Euro-America.”¹⁴ Many feminist activists and scholars were clearly eager to engage this topic: the conference was so well attended that there

13. Abelove et al., “The Barnard Conference,” 178.

14. Vance, *Pleasure and Danger*, 1992, xvi.

were not enough seats in Barnard's gymnasium during the morning session. Conference organizers eventually opened up the bleachers, and many women sat on the floor.

Anti-pornography feminists, though, were dismayed by the inclusion of sex radicals in the conference's line-up of speakers and workshop leaders, as well as the absence of anti-pornography feminists. As Vance recounts, anti-pornography feminists placed calls to local feminists as well as college officials to express their opposition to the conference.¹⁵ Amidst fears that the controversial subject matter of the conference would jeopardize Barnard's relationship with the Helena Rubinstein Foundation and future funding opportunities, Barnard's president, Ellen Futter, confiscated *Diary of a Conference on Sexuality*. The *Diary* documents the planning committee's activities leading up to the conference; organizers had planned on distributing the publication to attendees.¹⁶

Like the conference itself, the *Diary* stages a dialogue between conference organizers and conference attendees. The *Diary* gestures toward personal privacy while facilitating public discourse around women's sexuality, underscoring the radical feminist idea that the personal is political.¹⁷ The appearance of the booklet alludes to a personal diary: the front cover of the booklet mimics the front cover of a diary with an image of a lock on the side. The "key" to this lock is printed on the back cover. On the inside cover, a book label says "This diary belongs to," and invites the owner to write in her name, address, and telephone number. The act of writing in the conference *Diary* re-stages the girlhood practice of recording one's personal experiences in a

15. Ibid., 431.

16. Ibid., 432.

17. In an essay entitled "The Personal is Political," Carol Hanisch characterizes women's discussion of their personal experiences in consciousness-raising settings as a political act. She notes that C-R sessions were not concerned with solving individual problems, but focused instead on issues that effected group members collectively due to their status as women.

private notebook. Through the diary, the conference attendee may record her personal experience of the conference. Yet, the *Diary* is not just a space to record one's personal thoughts and feelings, but also a record of the conference planning committee's activities. The *Diary* includes a 1981 invitation to join the planning committee, selections from meeting minutes, personal reflections from committee members, the conference concept paper, and notes from presenters and workshop leaders. The printed words "Dear Diary" and the date appear above meeting minutes. The *Diary* facilitates dialogue by peppering the booklet with blank pages for conference attendees to use as they wish. Notably, the table of contents refers to them as "your pages."¹⁸ The booklet's last page leaves room for conference attendees to record the names, addresses, and phone numbers of the people they meet at the conference, encouraging attendees to continue the dialogue started by the conference and the *Diary*.

The conference book's diary format underlines the conference's function as a public dialogue about sexual practices, which have been traditionally constructed as private. Diaries often function as documents of desire, a space in which adolescent girls can record first crushes. The act of writing in one's diary constitutes a private ritual for adolescent girls. This ritual usually takes place in the intimate setting of one's bedroom, marking this practice as middle- or upper-class. Whether one writes while on the bed or at a desk, there must always be a convenient place to stash the diary should someone enter the room. When one has finished writing, the diary must be tucked away, out of sight from prying eyes. One photo from the conference diary depicts this very scene, with a teenaged girl lounging in bed next to her open diary, holding a pen.¹⁹ This photo and others accompany a "diary entry" in which the planning committee poses various

18. Alderfer, Jaker, and Nelson, *Diary of a Conference on Sexuality*, 3.

19. *Ibid.*, 7.

questions about sexuality. The layout for this entry stages the tension between sexuality as public and as private. The bottom corners of these pages are drawn to appear upturned, “revealing” photographs of women in bed. The images include a woman lying in satin sheets wearing elbow-length gloves and smoking a cigarette, the teenager and her diary, two women lying next to a man, an African American woman, and a woman lounging amidst an array of lesbian fiction, including the pulpy *Women’s Barracks* and *The Price of Salt*.²⁰ These photos “reveal” to the viewer what these women do in bed, or what turns them on—that is, it makes their private sexual practices public, and acknowledges both normative sexual behavior and non-normative sexual practices without commentary.

While the *Diary* encouraged critical thinking around all sexual practices, anti-pornography feminists enacted their rejection of lesbian S/M and butch-femme roles by picketing at Barnard. The “We Protest” leaflets distributed at the gates focuses much of its attack on lesbians, including lesbian S/M groups and the individuals who run them, as well as individuals who engage in butch-femme role-playing. The wording of the leaflet positions all of these people and practices as anti-feminist. The leaflet identifies Samois as an “organization of lesbian sadomasochists,” and claims that “Samois condemns feminists as ‘prudes’ and ‘moralists’.”²¹ By saying that Samois condemns feminists, the implication is that members of Samois are not feminists themselves. Rendering the Lesbian Sex Mafia guilty by association, the pamphlet describes the organization as “Samois’s New York City counterpart.”²² Gayle Rubin and Pat Califia were identified as members of Samois, while Dorothy Allison was identified as the

20. Ibid., 6–11.

21. Coalition for a Feminist Sexuality and Against Sadomasochism, “We Protest.”

22. Ibid.

founder of LSM. Though Amber Hollibaugh and Joan Nestle are not directly named in the leaflet, they are alluded to as “women who champion butch-femme sex roles,” and are faulted for being public allies of Samois.²³ In a review of the Barnard conference, Elizabeth Wilson remarks on the emphasis on lesbian S/M:

the focus on lesbian sado-masochism...deflects attention away from heterosexuality altogether. Maybe it lets heterosexual women off the hook in making lesbianism seem so outlandish that they feel absolved from engaging with it. Yet after all there is something arbitrary in this coupling of s/m with lesbianism. Where are the closet heterosexual feminist masochists?²⁴

As Wilson’s remarks imply, heterosexual S/M groups like Cardea did not seem to be a target for anti-porn feminists. At Barnard, lesbian S/M groups and individuals bore the brunt of the anti-porn attack.

The Lesbian Sex Mafia, a lesbian S/M organization, responded to anti-pornography feminists’ attacks on S/M and butch-femme roles by staging a speakout called OUTLAW WOMEN: A Speakout on “Politically Incorrect Sex.” The speakout took place on April 25th, 1982—the day after the Barnard conference—at the Millennium, a film workshop in New York’s East Village at 66 East 4th Street. (The WOW Café Theatre would move in across the street two years later. The Millennium building is now home to LaMama’s Ellen Stewart Theatre.) The speakout attempted to create coalition between women of color and white feminists. Organizers donated proceeds from the \$3.00 admission charge to the Kitchen Table Women of Color Press. The flier for the speakout also encouraged attendees to bring donations of material goods for the SWAPO Women’s Council on behalf of Dykes Against Racism Everywhere (DARE). Kitchen

23. Ibid.

24. Wilson, “The Context of ‘Between Pleasure and Danger’: The Barnard Conference on Sexuality,” 38–9.

Table editor Cherríe Moraga lauded the event as one where both women of color and white women could speak freely about their lived sexual experiences.²⁵ Given that the players in the pornography and S/M debates were mostly white women, the racial diversity of the speakout's participants stands out. Just the day before, at Barnard, Hortense Spillers critiqued the hegemonic feminist movement of the seventies and early eighties for failing to consider women of color's sexualities. Her highly influential paper, "Interstices: A Drama of Small Worlds," is the only contribution to *Pleasure and Danger* to focus expressly on black women. Spillers's essay highlights the absence of discourse around black women's sexualities not only in the mainstream feminist movement, but also in public discourse more generally.²⁶ Importantly, the LSM-sponsored speakout provided a forum for both women of color and white feminists to speak publicly about their practices and experiences.

In addition to speaking publicly about sexuality, many of the women at the speakout displayed their sexual identities as butch-femme and/or S/M lesbians through dress. Many women wore leather S/M apparel over their street clothes. Writing in *off our backs*, Fran Moira reports that "some women said they felt a bit peculiar about wearing their sexual garb in public, which included black leather pants with cut out crotches and rears (all worn over pants that day), low-cut negligee type tops, and studded neck and wrist straps."²⁷ Lesbian S/M dominated the *mise-en-scène*. According to Moira, "There were dildoes, rubber penises, and nipple clamps on display."²⁸ An LSM banner celebrating "Divine Decadence" hung over the microphone with

25. Moraga, "White Hands," 23.

26. Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Worlds," 74.

27. Moira, "Lesbian Sex Mafia ['1 S/m'] Speakout," 23.

28. *Ibid.*

which the speakers addressed the crowd. Joan Nestle showcased her femme identity by appearing in a white dress shirt with a black bowtie, hanging open to frame a lacy black negligee underneath. Standing before the crowd, Nestle confessed, “[I] never thought I would be doing political work in this outfit.”²⁹ Yet that was precisely the point: by wearing butch-femme or S/M drag in public and making their sexualities visible, speakout participants affirmed their right to sexual pleasure.

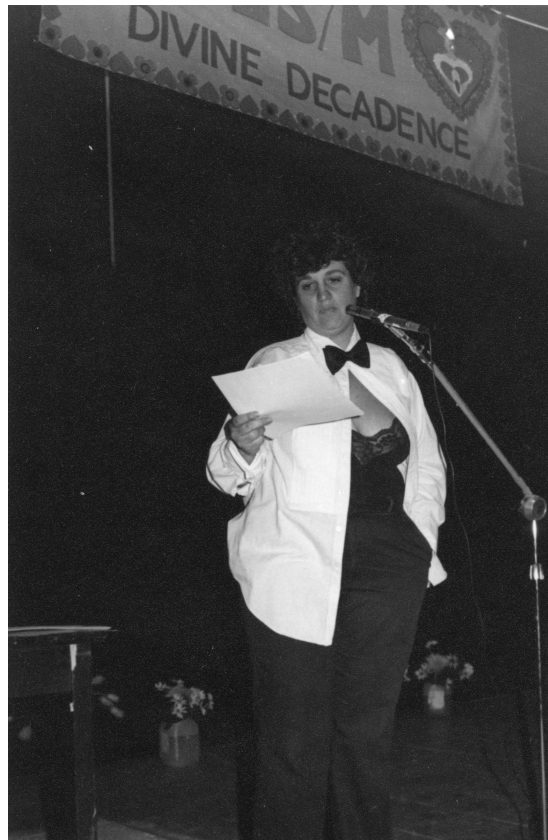


Fig.1.4. “Joan Nestle.” Joan Nestle at the Speakout on "Politically Incorrect Sex," 25 April 1982. Photo by Morgan Gwenwald, courtesy of the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

The speakout’s emphasis on S/M came as a surprise to some women of color participants, for the speakout’s focus had been described as “the everyday reality of our lives as women and

29. qtd. in *ibid.*

as sexual beings.”³⁰ The fliers advertising the event emphasize lesbian S/M: they featured a photo of a group of white women wearing leather outfits, some baring their breasts, all smiling for the camera. One woman reaches a gloved hand towards another’s vulva. According to Moraga, this image appeared after various speakers had already agreed to participate in the speakout. “Fact is,” writes Moraga in *off our backs*, “as sad as this might be, many of us, especially women of color, might have been reluctant to commit ourselves to public statements at an event that was being billed visually as an S/M event.”³¹ Some women of color felt that they could not risk being associated with S/M, for such a controversial association might impede their efforts to challenge racism within the feminist movement.

These concerns were not unfounded, given the ways in which S/M lesbians were being ostracized from the feminist movement beyond Barnard. Katherine Davis marks this problem in her 1981 contribution to *Coming to Power*: “Those of us [S/M lesbians] who have been actively working in the movement for many years are being labeled anti-feminist, mentally ill, or worse. Lines are being drawn and we find ourselves, quite unexpectedly, on the ‘other’ side. We are being cast out, denied. We become heretics.”³² As Davis’s words make clear, many lesbian S/M practitioners who had been active in the feminist movement were being pushed out. In 1986, four years after Barnard, criticism of lesbian S/M dominated the discourse at another academic conference, Mount Holyoke College’s “Feminism, Sexuality, and Power” symposium. While sex radical Gayle Rubin gave the keynote address, the following day, Janice Raymond asserted that

30. Moraga, “White Hands,” 23.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Davis, “Introduction,” 8.

lesbian S/M perpetuates oppressive social structures, and Julia Penelope added that lesbian S/M practitioners were unconcerned with sexual violence against women and children.³³

On the contrary, many S/M lesbians organized to protect survivors of violence against women, among other things. According to historian Margaret Hunt,

..the women who did ‘those things’ [lesbian S/M], some of whom I had known for years before they ‘came out’ as sadomasochists, seemed like everyday feminists in other respects. Some were involved in the shelter movement... Some worked in rape-crisis centers, some had been active for years in programs relating to low-income women, some were among the earliest feminists to push for women’s studies.³⁴

According to Hunt’s account above, many lesbian S/M practitioners worked in areas of the feminist movement that combatted violence against women; some members of Samois were even members of WAVPM.³⁵

Other lesbian sex radicals also organized to stop violence against women and remained critical of the pornography industry and its practices; but rather than working to eliminate pornography, some women set about making pornography of their own. In 1984, Amy Hoffman and Cindy Patton’s *Bad Attitude*, a porn magazine written by and for lesbians, hit the shelves in Boston. That same year, Nan Kinney, Deborah Sundahl, Myrna Elana, and Susie Bright published the first issue of lesbian sex magazine *On Our Backs* in San Francisco. Kinney and Sundahl, who were a couple at the time, met while organizing a Take Back the Night rally in Minneapolis. In 1985, Kinney extended her efforts beyond print media with Fatale Video, a lesbian porn production company and video distributor. These publications and companies

33. Hunt, “Report of a Conference on Feminism, Sexuality, and Power: The Elect Clash with the Perverse,” 86.

34. *Ibid.*, 83.

35. See Califia, “A Personal View of the History of the Lesbian S/M Community and Movement in San Francisco,” 255. and “Notes and Letters,” 599.

boldly proliferated pornography addressed to lesbians, even as anti-pornography feminists were working to ban pornography outright.

As anti-pornography feminists began to target S/M practices as a form of violence against women, organizations like Samois and LSM responded publicly. Samois defended their sexual practices in print by distributing leaflets at anti-S/M events such as WAVPM's 1980 forum on S/M³⁶ and by publishing *Coming to Power*, a collection of S/M pornography and articles, in 1981. Like *Diary of a Conference on Sexuality*, these publications served to further dialogue, and to engage people who could not be physically present at group meetings or actions. Many feminist bookstores refused to carry *Coming to Power* because their proprietors considered its material not only inappropriate, but also antithetical to feminist ideas about sexuality. Anti-pornography feminist organizations such as WAVPM attempted to censor *Coming to Power* by stealing the book off of store shelves. WAVPM also responded to the publication of *Coming to Power*³⁶ by producing a book of its own entitled *Against Sadomasochism*, which appeared in 1982. Additionally, anti-pornography and sex radical feminists continued these debates in the pages of *Feminist Review*, *Feminist Studies*, *Heresies*, *Signs*, and other feminist journals.

The sex wars rocked women's music festivals, too, with many festivals struggling to strike a balance between protecting survivors of violence against women as well as S/M practitioners. While some festivals such as Rhythmfest were explicitly accepting of S/M,³⁷ other festivals banned S/M practices outright. When S/M demonstrations were banned from the North East Women's Music Retreat in 1985, some attendees sported pro-S/M buttons in solidarity with S/M practitioners. The festival created a dedicated S/M camping area in 1991. At the Michigan

36. While the leaflets at Barnard attacked individual sex radical feminists, Samois's leaflets defended S/M.

37. Morris, *Eden Built by Eves: The Culture of Women's Music Festivals*, 165.

Womyn's Music Festival (MichFest), conflict around S/M and pornography erupted in 1984. When lesbian pornographers held auditions on the Land (as the festival area is known), leatherdykes came to the auditions in full leather regalia, complete with collars and whips. Soon after the auditions began, anti-porn lesbians arrived to protest. In response to the conflict, MichFest organizer Lisa Vogel banned visible S/M scenes and the making of pornography. Vogel's rule was hotly contested, with S/M activists resorting to rather creative tactics to make their position known: in 1990, a group of women hired a plane to drop flyers over the land detailing their critique of the anti-S/M rule. Unfortunately, most of the flyers missed the Land, falling on a nearby farm instead.³⁸ Vogel lifted the ban on S/M at MichFest in 1994.

Performing Sex Radical Feminism

Lesbian S/M and leather organizations created a network of women who were interested in S/M, worked to challenge the idea that S/M constituted violence against women, and taught women how to engage in S/M practices safely through performance and performative practices. Throughout the sex wars, lesbian sex radicals defended S/M practices by comparing them to theatrical performances. Jean Genet's *The Balcony* stages this very comparison: in the play, sex workers make extensive use of sets and costumes in addition to their performing bodies to stage their clients' fantasies. By representing these enactments of sexual fantasies on stage, Genet likens them to theater. Lesbian S/M practices involve performance and representation in that they center on scenarios which participants play out in costumes. As Patrick Califia explains, "the key word to understanding S/M is *fantasy*. The roles, dialogue, fetish costumes, and sexual activity are part of a drama or ritual. ... A sadomasochist is well aware that a role adopted during a scene

38. Kaplan, "Sex, Lies, and Heteropatriarchy: The S/M Debates at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival," 124.

is not appropriate during other interactions and that a fantasy role is not the sum total of her being.”³⁹ Califia reiterated the performative aspects of S/M in his testimony for the plaintiffs in *Little Sisters Bookstore and Art Emporium v. Canada (Minister of Justice)*, prompting the judge to note in his decision that “The plaintiffs established that sado-masochism is a theatrical, ritualistic practice....”⁴⁰ Susan Farr also compares S/M scenes to theatrical performance in “The Art of Discipline: Creating Erotic Dramas of Play and Power”:

While the essence of punishment play is eroticism, the structure of it is pure theater. After all, the one partner is not a master, the other a slave; the one is not pure command, the other pure obedience; the one is not really so fearsome and the other is not truly fearful. What is going on is a drama where the two principles...act at being master and slave, play at being fearsome and fearful.⁴¹

Farr emphasizes S/M scenes as performances, as consensual erotic play that is framed as such.

The above comparisons of S/M to theater speak to S/M’s fantasy frame, but fail to account for the negotiations and giving of consent that take place before an S/M scene can be enacted. Diana Taylor’s concept of a scenario accommodates these precursors while also acknowledging S/M’s theatricality. In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Taylor defines a scenario as “a paradigmatic setup that relies on supposedly live participants, structured around a schematic plot, with an intended [though adaptable] end. ... Theatricality makes that scenario alive and compelling.”⁴² S/M practitioners eroticize and enact scenarios of dominance and submission. Because scenarios encompass “setup and action,”⁴³ thinking of S/M as a scenario

39. Califia, “Feminism and Sadomasochism,” 31.

40. Arvay, “Macho Sluts and Little Sister’s: The Court Case,” 393.

41. Farr, “The Art of Discipline,” 187.

42. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 13.

43. *Ibid.*, 28.

necessitates a consideration of the negotiations and exchange of consent that precede the enactment of a scene. The particulars that must be negotiated include where and when the scenario will be enacted, what costumes and toys will be used (if any), what narrative will be played out, what physical acts will take place, and what physical acts are expressly forbidden. Detailed negotiations ensure that all parties grant informed consent before playing out a scenario. A passage from Califia's "Jessie," the first story in *Macho Sluts*, includes these negotiations. Here, the speaker describes her inculturation into S/M, facilitated by a dominatrix:

'...she made me an offer. ...She told me that if I would stay with her for about a month, as her slave, she would give me a taste of every technique she knew. At the end of that time, if I had performed satisfactorily, she would reward me with permanent cuffs and a collar. She also told me that when my training was complete, she would put me out, and I would never see her again.'

....

'It was crazy, and I loved it. I agreed at once. Most days, I went to work just the way I always had, but at night I went back to her house and entered this fantasy world where I was her slave and slept at the foot of her bed.'⁴⁴

This excerpt from Califia's text illustrates the negotiations for a long-term S/M arrangement: the dominatrix sets out terms and the speaker agrees to them. In this case, the dominatrix's house constitutes the frame of the scene: outside of the house, during the day, the speaker conducts business as usual; when she returns to the house, she "enter[s] this fantasy world" and performs the role she has consented to play. Through such negotiations, S/M practitioners develop a scenario through which they actively pursue consensual pleasure.

In addition to pre-scene negotiations, lesbian S/M practitioners engage in the performative practice of flagging to display their desires and to find potential sex partners. Flagging involves the display of color-coded handkerchiefs to signal what sexual practices one is interested in performing. Common among gay men in the 1970s, Samois introduced the practice

44. Califia, *Macho Sluts*, 90.

of flagging to lesbian S/M practitioners in 1978 by publishing a booklet called *What Color is Your Handkerchief?*. Flagging activates subcultural codes—in this case, the hankie code—to display desire on the body and involves wearing a handkerchief in one’s back pocket or tied around a belt loop. The color of one’s handkerchief indicates the particular practice one wants to engage in, and its placement shows what role one wishes to take on. While flagging does not constitute consent, this performative practice allows for S/M lesbians to identify and approach potential partners. Through flagging, S/M lesbians actively signal their desires to enact certain kinds of scenes or fantasies. By bringing interested parties together, flagging distances lesbian S/M practices from instances of violence against women.

Another characteristic that distinguishes lesbian S/M from violence against women is the concern for the pleasure and safety of all parties involved. To ensure that S/M acts are practiced safely, S/M practitioners conduct and attend educational performances in the form of workshops and demonstrations. Lesbian S/M practitioners provide or host demonstrations of specific techniques and practices. Demonstrators put themselves on display to teach their audiences how to perform a particular act in a skillful and controlled manner. These demonstrations may be semi-public, like those conducted at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, or staged for an invited audience, such as those held throughout the year by and for the LSM membership. In addition to demonstrations, LSM holds mandatory safety workshops for its members annually, and LSM members meet to discuss how to maintain psychological and emotional safety in S/M. These workshops and discussions ensure that LSM members have a thorough understanding of safety, consent, and confidentiality so that they can pursue pleasure safely. These educational performances are one more practice that separate lesbian S/M from violence against women.

The Clit Club, a lesbian party operated by women of color, also staged performances in the form of safe sex and S/M demonstrations in the early '90s. The Clit Club also provided a space for S/M dykes and other sex-positive women to engage in public sex. As co-founder Jocelyn Taylor recalls, “It wasn’t as if the things that took place in the Clit Club had never taken place before. ... But for a sexual location to actually come out—out as a place being called the Clit Club—had never been done.”⁴⁵ The public nature of the Clit, as it was affectionately referred to, sets it apart from other sex-positive spaces. Founded by Julie Tolentino and Jocelyn Taylor in New York during the summer of 1990, the Clit Club was a Friday night party first held at 432 West 14th Street. Upstairs, go-go girls danced and local artists such as DanceNoise staged impromptu performances. Downstairs, porn videos—made mostly, though not exclusively, by women-owned companies—played on a screen, and a darkly lit back room equipped with “all sorts of accoutrements, like shackles and safer sex stuff” was available for public sex (though women also had sex in the bathrooms and behind the bar).⁴⁶ Public sex may be considered a performance in itself. In the case of the Clit Club, the darkness of the backroom, the available props and toys, and the sounds of pornography comprise the *mise en scène*. The public aspect of sex in the Clit Club creates the potential for spectators or additional participants.

While the Clit Club crowd was mixed, the Clit Club served as a safe space for women of color to engage in sex-positive lesbian culture. Alice O’Malley’s photographs from the Clit in the early '90s feature both women of color and white women engaging in sex-positive culture. Some women wear lacy bras and bustiers while others are clad in leather uniforms from head to toe. According to Taylor, “At the Clit, fierce lesbian women acted out a variety of sexual

45. Thomas, “GOING PUBLIC: A Conversation with Lidell Jackson and Jocelyn Taylor,” 56.

46. *Ibid.*, 62.

postures. That was encouraged. I often walked around the bar with next to nothing on. I thought, ‘Something is so right here. I’m able to be a sexual Black woman in a way that I’ve never experienced before.’ I had gained a certain amount of ground in how I was able to celebrate my erotic power.”⁴⁷ Here, Taylor identifies the Clit Club as a space in which women of color can perform sex-positive lesbian sexuality. While the above examples separate S/M practices from violence against women, Taylor’s account of the Clit Club shows that sex-positive culture is not only not dangerous to women, but can also be liberating.

Anti-Pornography Activism and Acts of Looking

Anti-pornography feminists asserted that non-normative sexual practices such as lesbian S/M were antithetical to the feminist movement, and that practitioners of lesbian S/M labored under a false consciousness. At Barnard conference evidence, the Coalition for a Feminist Sexuality and against Sadomasochism characterized the production and consumption of pornography, S/M, and butch-femme role-playing as practices that are not consonant with feminism and constitute violence against women.⁴⁸ The groups associated with the leaflet, WAP, WAVAW, and NYRF, all participated in feminist activism against violence against women in the late 1960s and ‘70s. While these activists, who were mostly white women,⁴⁹ initially focused on anti-rape efforts, some began linking the consumption of pornography to rape and other violent crimes. As Robin Morgan—a former child actor and a member of radical feminist collectives New York Radical Women and W.I.T.C.H.—famously analogizes, “Pornography is

47. Taylor, “Testimony of a Naked Woman,” 225.

48. Dejanikus, “Charges of Exclusion & McCarthyism at Barnard Conference,” 5.

49. Gardner, “Racism and Pornography in the Women’s Movement.”

the theory, and rape the practice.”⁵⁰ In accordance with ascendant lesbian feminist notions of political correctness, these anti-pornography feminists rejected pornography, S/M, and butch-femme role-playing on the basis that such products and practices did not only clash with their concept of women’s sexuality, but also enacted violence against women.

If pornography constituted a form of violence against women, anti-porn feminists argued, then pornography needed to be eradicated. Accordingly, anti-pornography feminists focused on policing the act of looking at pornography. Feminist anti-pornography activist efforts often coalesced around attempts to censor certain representations of women’s bodies. In terms of performance, Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) on the west coast and Women Against Pornography (WAP) on the east coast, then-nascent activist groups, organized to protest screenings of *Snuff*, a pornographic film rumored to document a woman being murdered, in 1976. That same year, WAVAW opposed a Sunset Boulevard billboard advertisement for the Rolling Stones’s *Black and Blue* album. The billboard depicted a woman bound and bruised alongside the exclamation “I’m ‘Black and Blue’ from The Rolling Stones—and I love it!”⁵¹ In these instances, anti-porn feminists strove to prevent the act of looking at these materials.

Alternatively, anti-pornography feminists sometimes performed the act of looking—the very act that pornography encourages—in order to condemn pornography and other components of the sex industry. In the 1980s, Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM) gave tours of San Francisco’s red-light district. Similarly, WAP led tours of Times Square to expose the area’s thriving sex industry. Susan Brownmiller led two tours a week,

50. Morgan, “Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape,” 139.

51. According to historian Carolyn Bronstein, WAVAW leader Julia London’s reading of the image was influenced by Erving Goffman’s early work in performance studies.

guiding groups of women through live sex shows and sex shops. Arthur Lubow, writing for *People* magazine, reports that “[Brownmiller] introduces her charges to peep shows, leads them past magazines arranged by sexual specialty and explains the more exotic specimens. Leaving one bookstore, she calls out, ‘You should look at that before you go.’ Grimacing, the 14 women on the tour recoil from a row of plastic female sexual organs.”⁵² As Lubow’s account illustrates, Brownmiller encourages the women on the tour to perform the act of looking. While pornography encourages the act of looking for pleasure, Brownmiller and her anti-porn tourists looked with contempt. The anti-porn tours raise the question of who can look at porn, and for what purposes. That is, if looking at pornography makes men violent, why doesn’t it have the same effect on anti-porn activists and their audiences?

Drawing the Line on Lesbian S/M

In addition to these social performances of sex wars, these debates have been enacted in various modes of feminist theater and performance. Charlotte Canning provides an overview of feminist theater productions that protest violence against women in *Feminist Theaters in the U.S.A.*⁵³ Many of the works Canning includes in her analysis, which were performed between 1969 and 1986, position women as rape victims or potential rape victims. None of them are staged from an explicitly lesbian perspective—San Francisco troupe It’s Just a Stage changed its status from a “lesbian theater” to a “woman’s theater” when it staged its critique of violence against women, *The Mountain is Stirring*⁵⁴—and few of them position sex as a pleasurable act for

52. Lubow, “Susan Brownmiller Comes to Times Square Not to Peep but to Bleep in Her Anti-Porn Crusade,” 39.

53. Canning, *Feminist Theaters in the U.S.A.*, 159–76.

54. *Ibid.*, 171.

women. The '90s lesbian performances analyzed here, on the other hand, critique violence against women while enacting a sex radical lesbian feminism.

Canadian lesbian art collective Kiss & Tell's *Drawing the Line, an interactive photo event*, stages sex radical lesbian sexuality via tactics favored by anti-pornography feminists. US anti-pornography feminists' assertion that pornography constitutes violence against women was especially influential in Canada, where it became incorporated into anti-obscenity law. To campaign against S/M as a form of violence against women, anti-pornography activists often employed photos of S/M scenes. Carole S. Vance identifies "the anti-pornography slide show" as the "chief organizing device of the antiporn movement."⁵⁵ In a first-person account of watching such a slideshow, Paula Webster writes,

I remember seeing a slide show with about 30 images of predominantly heterosexual couples engaged in intercourse (genital and anal), bondage, and sadomasochism. There were shots of individual women, bound and gagged, pictures of female dominatrixes, assorted album covers, posters, clothing advertisements, as well as a handful of very jarring images of self-mutilation and the now-infamous Hustler photos of women arranged as food on a platter or put through a meat grinder.

Despite the lecturer's claim that all reactions to the slides were encouraged, each slide was interpreted to reveal its implicit pernicious meaning. . . . only one way of seeing was acceptable. Our "visual guide" invariably revealed the real or implied violence of the slide.⁵⁶

The slideshows constitute performances of anti-pornography feminism. Each organization featured record album artwork, billboards, fashion spreads and advertisements, pornography, and photographs of abused women's injuries. WAVAW, WAVPM, and WAP often drew on many of the same examples in their scripts, but each organization framed them differently due to different organizational goals: WAVAW is more concerned with

55. Vance, "More Danger, More Pleasure: A Decade After the Barnard Sexuality Conference," np.

56. Webster, "Pornography and Pleasure," 48.

advertisements than pornography; WAVPM and WAP, on the other hand, classify such images as pornographic. All three scripts link the images in the slide show to violence against women. WAVAW's account of the relationship between these images and violence against women is vague: the script warns that "these abusive images contribute to the real-life abuse of women."⁵⁷ WAVPM and WAP are more specific. WAVPM's script states that "We believe that these images promote violence against women by creating a climate wherein violence against women becomes more acceptable."⁵⁸ Similarly, WAP's script says that "pornography affects male behavior because it is so pervasive and increasingly socially acceptable, and contributes toward violence against women in real-life in the form of wife-battering, rape, sexual harassment, murder and child molestation."⁵⁹ These two organizations insist that representations of violence against women make actual violence against women tolerable.

The presentations were scripted from beginning to end. The scripts themselves indicate that the presenter was supposed to read directly from them during the slide show (though one cannot say to what degree presenters actually did so): WAVAW's 1983 script instructs the presenter to "introduce yourself before you start reading from the script."⁶⁰ The scripts often begin with a brief history of the particular organization that the presenter is associated with. WAVPM's script identifies the introduction as a key moment to drawing the audience in, noting that "it is better if you can become familiar with the following, so as to be able to address the

57. WAVAW, "WAVAW Slideshow Presentation," np.

58. WAVPM, "Script for Slideshow - Abusive Images of Women in Mass Media and Pornography," np.

59. WAP, "WAP Slideshow Script," np.

60. WAVAW, "WAVAW Slideshow Presentation," np.

audience directly rather than reading this.”⁶¹ During this introductory segment, WAP presenters invited audience participation throughout the presentation: WAP’s 1982 script says that “as we show the slides, please feel free to interject your own thoughts, feelings and observations.”⁶²

While it is difficult to tell if audience members did participate, if WAP presenters encouraged or facilitated such participation (or not), and how they handled audience feedback, the possibility of multiple interpretations is built into WAP’s script. WAVAW and WAVPM, on the other hand, discouraged audience members from interrupting the presentation. A January 1982 version of WAVAW’s script directs the presenter to “remind your audience to hold their questions or comments until the end of the presentation” before beginning the show.⁶³ WAVPM’s script notes that there will be “time for discussion...after the slideshow.”⁶⁴ By foreclosing audience interpretations of these images, or at least relegating them to after the presentation, WAVAW and WAVPM privilege the scripted interpretations of the images shown.

Despite such attempts to restrict interpretation of slide show images, not all spectators agreed with the scripted condemnations of these images offered by the presenters. As former anti-pornography activists, members of Kiss & Tell had all seen such slide shows.⁶⁵ Collective member Persimmon Blackbridge confesses that “I went to those [anti-pornography] meetings and kept my mouth shut when some of the bad pictures in the anti-porn slide shows turned me

61. WAVPM, “Script for Slideshow - Abusive Images of Women in Mass Media and Pornography,” np.

62. WAP, “WAP Slideshow Script,” np.

63. WAVAW, “Slideshow January 1982,” np.

64. WAVPM, “Script for Slideshow - Abusive Images of Women in Mass Media and Pornography,” np.

65. Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory*, 10.

on.”⁶⁶ Similarly, Susan Stewart, also a collective member, admits, “not only did I like looking at porn but I also made it.”⁶⁷ Like anti-pornography slide shows, Kiss & Tell’s *Drawing the Line* offers a collection of “bad pictures,” but does not impose an interpretation; rather, the exhibit invites spectators to comment on the photos. The exhibit features “100 photographs of lesbian sexuality, arranged from less to more controversial...[on] the walls.”⁶⁸ The photographs, taken by Susan Stewart and of Persimmon Blackbridge and Lizard Jones, depict lesbians engaging in a variety of sexual acts and poses, from women embracing and kissing to engaging in tit torture and flagellation to a woman sitting blindfolded, bound, and gagged. Anti-pornography slideshows included photos of heterosexual S/M scenes (see Webster above), which bolstered their portrayal of S/M as a practice in which men dominate and abuse women. Kiss & Tell’s photographs, on the other hand, depicted lesbian sex and S/M between two or more women. While the order of the photos situates them along a continuum of least to most transgressive, the artists do not offer pre-determined explanations from an appointed narrator, as anti-pornography slideshows did.

Rather Kiss & Tell invites spectators to share their responses openly—much like the Barnard Conference. The exhibit provides markers, with which “women are invited to write their reactions to the photographs directly on the walls.”⁶⁹ Men were directed to write their comments in a book that was located on a stand in the center of the room. By inviting women spectators to make their reactions public, Kiss & Tell’s *Drawing the line, an interactive photo event*, stages a

66. Ibid., 7.

67. Ibid., 13.

68. Kiss & Tell, *Drawing the Line*, np.

69. Ibid.

public dialogue between women on lesbian sexuality. A photograph of the exhibit in San Francisco shows a woman crouching to write on an empty patch of wall. While some of the exhibition's photographs are visible in this photo, the collection of comments around each is more impressive. Some comments include arrows pointing to specific elements of the a particular photo, while other comments include arrows pointing to other comments. One visitor drew a picture on the wall. Most of the comments appear to be written in English, but at least two are offered in French. Unlike the anti-pornography slideshows, which provide ready-made responses to images of pornography and S/M and discourage discussion, the exhibit facilitates a public dialogue between the artists and the women spectators, between the photos and the spectators, and among the spectators themselves.

By translating this performance into print, Kiss & Tell curates a transnational dialogue about lesbian sexuality. The interactive exhibit traveled to Vancouver, Toronto, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Sydney, and Melbourne between 1990 and 1991. After the exhibit toured, 40 of the 100 photos were collected into a postcard book called *Drawing the Line: Lesbian Sexual Politics on the Wall*. The back of each postcard features comments left by women who visited the photo exhibit. In some cases, the postcard reproduces comments left in response to each other from a single city; in others, the postcard gathers together comments from different cities, countries, or continents; and some postcards do both. One photo-cum-postcard depicts two women engaged in tribadism, one wearing a dress, boots, and stockings, the other wearing jeans and a dark shirt. The back of the postcard includes commentary from an enthusiastic Vancouver spectator, who writes, "Drive it in hard."⁷⁰ Another admonishes, "Sounds like sexism to me."⁷¹ A San Francisco

70. Ibid.

71. Ibid.

exchange inverts the Vancouver conversation: “Where are the lesbian feminists?” a San Francisco spectator wonders,⁷² suggesting that this sexual exchange as inconsistent with lesbian feminist politics. Another spectator disagrees, writing, “Lesbian feminists like to fuck hard.”⁷³ The comments on the back of the postcards reproduce segments of the dialogue initiated by the exhibit and place them in a transnational conversation—albeit one that was limited to English speakers.

The book’s postcard format continues to invite collaboration and dialogue, but also serves to document the exhibit. As the collective writes, “We chose the postcard format as the best way to extend the interactive nature of the show. You can put them on your walls or send them to your friends. You can change the order according to your preference. You can tear up the ones you hate. Workshop leaders can use them to facilitate discussion. Fortune tellers can use them for readings.”⁷⁴ Here, the collective encourages viewers to personalize the collection or to use the postcards to sustain dialogue, whether between friends, in a workshop setting, or with psychic energy. The members of the collective also address the last postcard to themselves, inviting viewers to share their thoughts about the exhibit directly with the artists. The existence of the book and this last postcard allow viewers to participate in this dialogue around lesbian sexuality even if they could not attend the exhibit. While the collected comments printed on the backs of the postcards create a dialogue across space, the book allows for a dialogue over time. The postcard addressed to Kiss & Tell was care of Press Gang Publishers, which closed its doors in 2002, so it is unlikely that this postcard would reach Kiss & Tell. The closure of the press also

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid.

makes the book somewhat difficult to find. Yet the book persists as a document of *Drawing the Line*, an interactive photo event, and continues to invite responses from present-day viewers.

Lesbian Femme-inist Fatales

While *Drawing the Line* stages a dialogue about lesbian S/M and feminism, Split Britches's 1992 play *Lesbians Who Kill* stages a sex-positive, butch-femme lesbian feminist protest of violence against women, bringing together the opposing positions established in the early '80s. The performers themselves represent these different positions: in the '70s, Lois Weaver had been a part of Spiderwoman, a feminist troupe, whereas Shaw had previously been attached to Hot Peaches, a gay drag troupe. Upon examining their production history in Split Britches, one can see that Weaver and Shaw's engagement with butch-femme role-playing increases over the course of the eighties and becomes a staple of their work by the nineties. In *Lesbians Who Kill*, Lois Weaver does not just perform lesbian femme feminism, but lesbian *femme fatale* feminism. Disidentificatory lesbian spectatorship has contributed to the development of a subcultural canon around the femme fatale. As Case notes, through word-of-mouth, lesbians have amassed a repertoire of representations of women who fight back "when they are 'done wrong' by men"—femmes fatales among them.⁷⁵ This lesbian attachment to the femme fatale is disidentificatory in that the heterosexual femme fatale is not readily accessible to lesbian viewers. As Richard Dyer makes clear in "Homosexuality in Film Noir," the dykes of film noir are not femmes fatales, but minor characters who are not glamorous or feminine.⁷⁶ By

75. Case, "Introduction," 32.

76. Dyer, "Postscript: Queers and Women in Film Noir," 126–27.

staging a campy quotation of the femme fatale, *Split Britches* participates in disidentificatory practices of lesbian spectatorship.

In addition to the femme fatale's lesbian significance, *Split Britches* mobilizes the femme fatale for lesbian feminist ends—to protest violence against women. The figure of the femme fatale is fitting for such an endeavor in that she is often subject to such violence. Even in *Lesbians Who Kill*, there is no sufficient refuge from violence for May (Weaver) and June (Shaw): the house they live in is hit by lightning regularly, so they take shelter in their car. Yet even the car is not a refuge, but a get-away car: radio bulletins announce that authorities are in search of two women driving a missing man's vehicle. Described as a blonde and a brunette—like May and June—the women are suspected of murdering several middle-aged white men in northern and central Florida. May and June fit the radio descriptions, and, as Lynda Hart contends, the medical attachment of misandry to lesbianism positions May and June as “always already guilty.”⁷⁷ These radio bulletins cite the crimes of Aileen Wuornos, a sex worker who, at the behest of her lesbian lover, confessed to killing seven would-be clients in self-defense. Wuornos was found guilty of first-degree murder, and sentenced to death by electric chair. To pass time in the car, May and June fantasize about committing murders like the ones the radio describes, targeting middle-aged white men.

Yet, femmes fatales are rarely remembered as victims of violence. As Janey Place contends, the femme fatale's sex appeal effaces her often tragic end.⁷⁸ *Split Britches* resists the erasure of the violence endured by the femme fatale not by toning down her feminine sex appeal, but by making her a vigilante: in *Lesbians Who Kill*, the lesbian femme fatale kills men for the

77. Hart, “Afterword: Zero Degree Deviancy--Lesbians Who Kill,” 156.

78. Place, “Women in Film Noir,” 48.

acts of violence they commit against women. She also identifies violence against women as a problem. During one of the noir-esque interrogation scenes that pepper the play, May says, “When you die by gunshot...there’s just a moment of surprise ... have you seen that on the faces of the people you’ve killed? They just look very, very surprised, and then that’s it! Well, the *men* look surprised; the women have come to expect it.”⁷⁹ Here, May points out that women have learned to anticipate experiencing violence at the hands of men, while men are always surprised when they themselves are subjected to violence. *Lesbians Who Kill* problematizes this culture in which violence against women is expected.

Split Britches’s mobilization of the femme fatale for a lesbian feminist protest of violence against women counters mainstream contemporary appearances of this figure, which journalist Susan Faludi identifies as part of a backlash against feminism. According to Faludi, whose writing represents a certain popularized feminist thinking in the period, the mainstream media published virulently anti-feminist items, while in Hollywood movies, television shows, and novels, “single, professional, and feminist women are humiliated, turned into harpies, or hit by nervous breakdowns: the wise ones recant their independent ways by the closing sequence.”⁸⁰ *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct* exemplify two such titles. In *Fatal Attraction*, Adriane Lyne’s 1987 thriller, Dan (Michael Douglas) strikes up an extramarital affair with Alex (Glenn Close), who refuses to let the affair end. *Basic Instinct*, a 1992 thriller by Paul Verhoeven follows an affair between a detective (Michael Douglas) and a bisexual novelist (Sharon Stone), who is also the prime suspect in the detective’s murder investigation. Film critic Chris Straayer

79. *Lesbians Who Kill*, 34:08–34:25.

80. Faludi, *Backlash*, 3.

has identified these films as neo-noir, and Close's and Stone's characters as femmes fatales.⁸¹

Faludi asserts that the representation of femmes fatales in these films reflects anti-feminist sentiments and a symbolic effort to penalize women who have been liberated by feminism.⁸²

Split Britches refuses this anti-feminist lesson by rendering the femme fatale a lesbian feminist vigilante in *Lesbians Who Kill*. May threatens all of the men in the audience with a gun, exclaiming, "All right, I've had enough! I want all you men on the right side of the room!"⁸³ She marches out into the house to sing the "Boogie Man" song, a soft rock power ballad turned screamo. As she sings, she vacillates between doe-eyed songstress and angry rock star. Here, the boogie man, who is usually invoked to get children to behave, is re-imagined as a violent man who preys on women. Through substitutions like "Army man, street man, / preacher man, relative man" and "the house of boogie man / the supreme boogie man," Split Britches implicates a range of men, including family members, community leaders, and government officials, in performing violence against women. Determined to hold the boogie men accountable for their actions, May warns that she's coming after them: she sings,

Your time is up, I'm warning you now
Your time is up, I'm warning you now
CROSS THE STREET

Don't go out in the dark
Don't jog in the park
Don't fuck, don't kiss
Don't carry a gun
Unless you want it used against you⁸⁴

81. Straayer, "Femme Fatale or Lesbian Femme: Bound in Sexual Différance," 153.

82. Faludi, *Backlash*, 125–26.

83. *Lesbians Who Kill*, 1:00:21–1:00:27.

84. *Ibid.*, 1:10:05–1:10:45.

May uses these advisements, usually addressed to women, to threaten men. By turning these warnings around on men, May highlights white men's freedom of movement relative to women's. While these advisements are meant to keep women safe from harm, Weaver emphasizes the limits they impose on women's behavior by musically accenting the word "don't." May's line, "Don't go out in the dark," cites the notion that women should remain in the family home after dusk. May's next line, "Don't jog in the park," refers to the Central Park Jogger case: in April of 1989, Trisha Meili was raped and brutally beaten in Central Park, where she regularly jogged at night. As in Meili's case, women are often blamed for bringing attacks on themselves if they do not behave according to these rules of conduct. Many wondered why Meili had been jogging in the park alone after dark. *The Daily News* even ran a headline that reads, "Why Jog at Night?"⁸⁵ Conventional wisdom dictates that women who go out alone at night risk sexual assault—good girls don't go out alone after dark. The "Boogie Man" song highlights the behavioral norms associated with rape culture: constraints on women's behavior are justified as protective measures, and victim-blaming occurs if a woman deviates from this behavior.

Split Britches's challenge to these limits on women's behavior aligns with eighties and nineties feminist politics. As Carole S. Vance observes in "Pleasure and Danger," "Beyond the actual physical or psychological harm done to victims of sexual violence, the threat of sexual attack served as a powerful reminder of male privilege, constraining women's movement and behavior." These constraints have "restricted [female desire] to zones protected and privileged in the culture: traditional marriage and the nuclear family. ... Gross and public departures from 'good' woman status, such as lesbianism, promiscuity, or non-traditional heterosexuality, still

85. Chancer, "Gender, Class and Race in Three High Profile Crimes: The Cases of New Bedford, Central Park and Bensonhurst."

invite—and are thought to justify—violation.”⁸⁶ Here, Vance identifies sexual violence as a mode of regulating women’s behavior. Since the 1970s, feminist activists have worked to challenge the limits on women’s behavior brought about by the threat of sexual violence. Take Back the Night marches, part demonstration against sexual violence and part vigil for its victims, became a popular feminist tactic. These events, which take place after dark, defy the notion that women should not be outside of the family home at night. They are usually comprised of candlelight vigils, marches, rallies, and speak outs. Take Back the Night rallies are now standard at many colleges and universities in the United States.

Unlike Take Back the Night’s peaceful resistance, *Lesbians Who Kill* resists violence against women by staging a revenge fantasy. May and June reverse the dominant social script by turning violence back on men from a feminine position. While (white) femininity has been associated with non-threatening passivity and docility since the Victorian era (at least), the femme fatale’s femininity is what makes her so dangerous. Throughout *Lesbians Who Kill*, May performs a series of interrogations. She perches atop the back seat of the car and answers the questions of an absent detective. Playing the femme fatale, May works her excess of femininity before the authorities. Her bodily carriage, voice, and speeches are all hyper-feminine. In the first interrogation, May sits with one leg crossed neatly over the other and her breasts thrust forward, flaunting the curves of her body. May flirts her way through the second interrogation: she likens the interstate to a body, and gestures to a vein in her thigh as a road, being sure to show plenty of leg. In typical noir fashion, May uses her feminine wiles to try to escape arrest. According to Mary Ann Doane, excessive femininity makes the femme fatale a threatening figure. She notes that feminine excess is “aligned with the femme fatale, and...is necessarily regarded by men as

86. Vance, “Pleasure and Danger,” 1992.

evil incarnate,” since femmes fatales can potentially use their femininity “in order to evade the word and the law.”⁸⁷ The femme fatale’s sexuality and her excess of femininity are what make her so slippery: armed with her feminine wiles, she can get away with murder.

By staging the femme fatale as vigilante, *Split Britches* performs a femme resistance to violence against women. The emphasis on femme-ininity is reinforced by the absence of a butch fatale. Shaw performs butch masculinity in her portrayal of June, sitting in the driver’s seat in a button-down shirt and slacks with her knees splayed. But June must assume the character of the femme fatale to murder. May and June make a game out of pretending to kill men. To play, June must don femme drag and perform femininity. Her costume cites Angelica Houston’s portrayal of Lilly Dillon, the ruthless swindler on the run from the law in *Grifters*. She wears a white women’s business suit, a white, curly-haired wig, and dark sunglasses. Frank Sinatra’s “It Was a Very Good Year” accompanies June’s seduction-cum-murder, for the singer is her mark. She says coolly to the microphone stand, which stands in for Frank, “I’m gonna kill you in self-defense.”⁸⁸ Her voice is soft and breathy. She caresses the microphone cord almost tenderly, and unwraps it from around her hand as she makes her imaginary target dance with her. This combination of feminine seduction and murder, which is antithetical to western constructions of femininity, is what makes the femme fatale so menacing.

By channeling their resistance to violence against women through the femme fatale, *Split Britches* challenges the gendering of violent acts as masculine. *Split Britches* uses citation and camp humor to highlight the ways in which qualities such as non-violence and passivity have been feminized by cultural and anti-pornography feminism. Andrea Dworkin writes, “The legend

87. Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, 26.

88. *Lesbians Who Kill*, 46:11.

of male violence is the most celebrated legend of mankind and from it emerges the character of man: he is dangerous.”⁸⁹ By characterizing men as violent, Dworkin implies that women are not violent, but peaceful. Cultural feminism perpetuated an image of woman as nurturing and peaceful, as evidenced in the writings of Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich, and others. Shaw and Weaver upset this characterization of femininity by staging a quotation of *Deception*, which stars Bette Davis and Claude Rains: a flame appears in the dark as Shaw/Rains lights a cigarette, and the lights come up on her smoking in a velvet jacket and an ascot tie. Weaver slowly rises up from behind the chair, clad in a long, high-necked black dress. Dialogue from *Deception*’s murder scene plays over the sound system, and Weaver and Shaw lip-synch along to the voices of Davis and Rains with grandiose, overly dramatic gestures. When Weaver/Davis draws a gun from a pocket in her dress, Shaw/Rains asks, “What in heaven’s name have you got there?” The image of a woman with a gun is incongruous with dominant constructions of femininity, which emphasize woman’s inherent peacefulness and passivity. May/Davis brandishes the gun about as she explains that it is for her protection. Shaw/Rains does not view Weaver/Davis as a threat, but rather orders her to “Give me that nonsensical object”—nonsensical because it is in the hands of a woman. When Weaver/Davis refuses, Shaw/Rains declares, “You don’t intimidate me.” Weaver/Davis shoots, but Shaw/Rains is dismissive of her even in death, calling her a fool before dying with a dramatic flourish, both physical and musical. Aghast that she has just committed murder, Weaver/Davis’s eyes grow large with shock as she looks at the smoking gun. She panics, flailing her arms, putting her hand over her mouth, and spinning in circles before touching Shaw/Rains to make sure he’s really dead. While the melodramatic scene is earnest in

89. Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, 16.

Deception, Weaver and Shaw's comedic recreation of it, hilarious in its excess, highlights the ways in which white femininity is thought of as antithetical to violence.

Lesbians Who Kill rejects inherently passive, non-violent femininity by performing quotations of two musical numbers, "I Shot Mr. Lee" and "Blame it on the Bossa Nova." A feminine woman has killed a man in both numbers, which Split Britches foregrounds by having the femme Weaver sing the lead voice and the butch Shaw provide back-up vocals. In both numbers, the upbeat pop music underscores the violence of the murders by contrast, and the innocence of 1950s and '60s songstresses is replaced with the murderous femme fatale. In "Blame it on the Bossa Nova," a 1963 dance song sung by Eydie Gorme, a woman recounts how she met and fell in love with a young man while dancing the Bossa Nova. The song refers to the Bossa Nova as "the dance of love," exoticizing and sexualizing the Brazilian dance. As the narrator sings, after being brought together by the Bossa Nova, the couple goes on to marry and start a family. While Split Britches's treatment of the song does not comment on the appropriation and exocitization of the Brazilian cultural form, it does intervene in the heterofamilial narrative. When Weaver sings about meeting her beau at the dance, her arms, swaying in time to the music, mimic a loving embrace. But when Weaver gets to the line "And then I knew / I'd never let him go," her arms change to a stranglehold. The call-and-response chorus—"Oh was it the moon? / No, no, the bossa nova"—becomes an interrogation, with Shaw assuming the role of detective, recording Weaver's answers. As Weaver explains, "Blame it on the Bossa Nova, the dance of love," she draws a gun out from underneath one of the car seats. Weaver's rendition of the song changes a tale of courtship and marriage to one of murder. Accordingly, Weaver adds a new verse to the song, singing,

Now I'm sad to say how it came to be

That our love died, and so did he
And if people ask how it came about
I'm gonna say to them without a doubt
Blame it on the Bossa Nova⁹⁰

With Weaver dancing about with gun in hand and answering to Shaw's detective, there is little doubt about how her husband met his untimely end. Unlike *Deception*, in which Weaver/Davis is shocked at her own ability to commit murder, in "Blame it on the Bossa Nova," Weaver brazenly flaunts her crime before the detective. The femme fatale in The Bobbettes' "I Shot Mr. Lee" is similarly capable. As Weaver and Shaw bounce along to the doo-wop beat, they sing the matter-of-fact confession, "One, two, three, I shot Mr. Lee / Three, four, five, I got tired of his jive."⁹¹ As Weaver and Shaw sing in the car, Shaw mimes driving and they both bounce and sway with bumps in the road. They are presumably fleeing the scene of the song's titular crime. In contrast with Rains's character in *Deception*, who does not take a woman with a gun seriously, Mr. Lee "hollered help, help, / Murder, police / The girl's after me with a gun!"⁹² Here, a woman with a gun is perceived as a threat. As the song progresses, Weaver pulls four guns from various hiding places in the car, which she and Shaw point at the audience at the song's end. Clearly, these women know how to handle guns and aren't afraid to use them.

Furthermore, Split Britches's use of butch and femme roles in *Lesbians Who Kill* renders it a sex radical critique of violence against women. While anti-pornography feminists protested violence against women, they did not condone butch-femme role-playing. The anti-pornography "We Protest" leaflets distributed outside of Barnard claims that "women who champion butch-femme sex roles...[deny] that these roles have any relation to the male-female sex roles that are

90. *Lesbians Who Kill*, 36:30–37:10.

91. *Ibid.*, 1:25:42–1:25:56.

92. *Ibid.*, 1:27:35–1:27:45.

the psychological foundation of patriarchy.”⁹³ This statement implies that butch-femme roles recreate heterosexuality and thus serve patriarchal interests. This anti-pornography dismissal of butch-femme role-playing has its roots in lesbian-feminism. In the seventies, lesbian-feminists emphasized living as a “woman-identified woman.” This term, coined by Radicalesbians in the early seventies, refers to an effort to define women in relation to each other rather than in relation to men.⁹⁴ Lesbian-feminists rejected butch-femme dress codes and sexual practices because they were not consonant with the figure of the woman-identified woman. According to their thinking, butches exercised masculine power over femmes, who suffered from a kind of false consciousness. Femme Lois Weaver, one of WOW’s founders, recalls being judged by feminist fans for applying street make-up after a performance. She recounts, “For the first time I understood that feminists thought that I was one of those misguided women who needed to be saved.”⁹⁵ Determined to eject masculine power from women’s sexual practices, lesbian-feminists rejected butch-femme role-playing and advanced a sexuality that was grounded in mutual pleasure. These lesbian-feminist standards of political correctness often alienated butches and femmes from the feminist movement, or closeted them within the movement.

Split Britches participated in a larger group of women artists who challenged these lesbian-feminist notions of femininity and enacted a sex radical feminism at Women’s One World (WOW). Located in New York City, WOW is a woman’s theater collective that grew out of two festivals organized by Pamela Camhe, Jordy Mark, Peggy Shaw, and Lois Weaver. WOW women enact a sex radical feminism by staging work that eroticizes gender polarity and drag

93. Coalition for a Feminist Sexuality and Against Sadoomasochism, “We Protest,” 2.

94. Radicalesbians, “Woman-Identified Woman.”

95. Davy, *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers*, 51.

while operating as a feminist collective.⁹⁶ WOW's blend of feminism and butch-femme desire goes against the grain of the lesbian-feminist politics that dominated the seventies and would influence anti-pornography feminism. Kate Davy marks this difference in *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers*:

The festivals embraced features antithetical to the preponderant feminist sensibility coming out of the 1970s—cross-dressed and sexually explicit performances, festival-goers who showed up dressed to kill (nary a Birkenstock sandal or flannel shirt among them), and the erotically charged atmosphere that permeated nearly every dimension of the festivals.⁹⁷

As Davy attests above, the WOW festivals do not conform to antipornography feminists' standards of sexuality, but performed a sex radical feminism.

Luchando Siempre Unidas

Turning to performances by lesbians of color may help to displace the centrality of the Barnard conference in the history of feminist debates on sexuality. The conference did little to address women of color's sexualities, as Hortense Spillers made plain in the paper she delivered there. If Barnard is continually installed at the center of these debates, women of color continue to be elided in the ways Spillers describes. This section of the chapter turns to the plays and performances of Cherríe Moraga, Carmelita Tropicana, and Denise Uyehara to highlight queer women of color's perspectives on the issue of violence against women.⁹⁸

Chicana poet and playwright Cherríe Moraga has been vocal about women of color's sexualities in her art as well as in her criticism. As noted above, Moraga was present at Barnard

96. For a more thorough account of feminism at WOW, see Case and Davy.

97. Davy, *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers*, 160.

98. I turn to the word "queer" here so as not to erase Uyehara's bisexuality.

and the events that followed: she performed her poetry at the Barnard conference, and attended the LSM Speakout in her capacity as a Kitchen Table editor. In “A Long Line of Vendidas,” an essay published in 1983, after the Barnard conference, Moraga attributes the disconnect between anti-pornography feminism and women of color to anti-pornography feminism’s refusal to engage with the material. She writes, “The tactics of the anti-pornography movement are largely symbolic and theoretical in nature. . . . It is not that pornography is not a concern to many women of color. But the anti-materialist approach of this movement makes little sense in the lives of poor and Third World women.”⁹⁹ Here, Moraga contrasts anti-pornography feminism’s discursive concerns with women of color’s material concerns. Moraga’s account of women of color feminist organizing around issues of rape and violence against women reflects the emphasis on material concerns. She describes “a ten-year grassroots feminist movement where women of color, including lesbians of color (certainly in the minority and most assuredly encountering “feminist” racism) have been actively involved in . . . battered women’s shelters, [and] rape crisis centers . . .”¹⁰⁰ The history of such women of color grassroots organizing and perspectives on the issue of violence against women is obscured by the continual focus on the Barnard conference and anti-pornography feminism.

WOW performer Carmelita Tropicana’s 1994 short film, *Your Kunst is Your Waffin*, stages a protest of violence against women and emphasizes material concerns over representational concerns in the way Moraga describes. Co-written by sisters Ela Troyano and Alina Troyano and directed by Ela Troyano, the film focuses on a day in the life of Carmelita Tropicana—a high-femme performance artist persona played by Alina Troyano. Over the course

99. Moraga, “A Long Line of Vendidas,” 128–29.

100. *Ibid.*, 106.

of the film, Carmelita performs at a nightclub, gets mugged on the way home, and spends a few hours in jail with her mugger after participating in a pro-choice political action. José Muñoz has examined the film as a performance of queer Latina disidentification.¹⁰¹ My analysis will mine the Troyano sisters' film for its representations of violence against women, which focus on material acts rather than pornographic representations, and consider how the film departs from anti-pornography narratives of violence against women.

Your Kunst is Your Waffen revises lesbian feminist narratives of violence against women that position men as the culprits. Much of the discourse around violence against women imagines perpetrators as men: as Andrea Dworkin asserts, in a patriarchal society, “He [the male] does not merely name women weak; he mutilates the female body, binds it up so that it cannot move freely, ...keeps it caged and stunned because he has named women weak.”¹⁰² According to the system that Dworkin outlines here, men prey on women. Similarly, Susan Brownmiller defines rape as “a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear.”¹⁰³ Here, Brownmiller positions men as aggressors and women as victims. In the United States especially, scenarios of violence against women cast men of color as attackers and white women as victims.¹⁰⁴ The Troyano sisters' film challenges the notion that all perpetrators of violence against women are men by featuring a white woman as the attacker. While the incident in the film is a mugging rather than a sexual assault, a woman is attacked while walking alone at night. Early in the film, lesbian activist and performance artist Carmelita walks through New

101. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 119–141.

102. Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, 18.

103. Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 15.

104. For more on the racialization of rape, see *Ibid.*, 210.

York's Loisaída¹⁰⁵ after dark, returning to her apartment after an evening performance. Various sights and sounds indicate that this neighborhood is not safe to walk through at night: she passes a trash can fire and graffitied pay phones and storefront security gates. As the camera tilts to Carmelita's bright red pumps pounding the pavement, a second pair of shoes follows Carmelita home. Just as Carmelita goes to unlock the door to her building, her pursuant attacks her. While Carmelita successfully defends herself, she is stabbed in the hand. The next day, Carmelita explains to friend and fellow activist Orchidia that this is the third time she's been mugged. Later in the film, when Carmelita, Orchidia, and Sophia, Carmelita's sister, go to jail after a pro-abortion political action, they share a cell with Dee, who Carmelita recognizes as her mugger. That Carmelita's mugger is a woman rather than a man revises narratives of violence against women that imagine all attackers as men.

Yet, even when women commit acts of violence against other women, men remain at the root of the problem. When Sophia insists that Dee is a criminal, Dee replies, "You'd like to wipe me out, wouldn't you? You're like every stinkin' person I know: my drunken father, the CO [corrections officer], the goddamn pimp!"¹⁰⁶ Here, with the expression "wipe me out," Dee implies that the men she refers to would have preferred her dead. Dee represents a growing population of women in the criminal justice system. According to a Special Report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the number of women in state prisons grew by 75% between 1986 and 1991.¹⁰⁷ That same document reports that "more than 4 in every 10 women reported that

105. Loisaída is a Spanglish term for New York's Lower East Side, an area that has been home to a sizeable Latino presence since the 1950s.

106. Troyano, *Carmelita Tropicana*, 14:13–14:22.

107. Snell, "Women in Prison," 2.

they had been abused at least once before their current admission to prison,”¹⁰⁸ and women prisoners who had been abused were more likely to have been convicted of a violent offense.¹⁰⁹ While it is unclear if Dee was abused or not, it is clear that men have failed her. Dee only finds a sense of stability in prison, among other women: while serving time for selling drugs, Dee is adopted by a Puerto Rican gang called the Sandungueras.¹¹⁰ While the men in Dee’s life have wished her dead, women have helped her to survive.

The film’s next representation of violence against women situates the problem as a transnational one. In the jail cell, Carmelita confesses, “I used to think it was just us Latins who suffered from a more violent history, *una vida ensangrentada* [a bloodstained life].”¹¹¹ The “more violent history” that Carmelita refers to encompasses the Spanish colonization of Latin America, the killing of indigenous people, the importation of slaves from Africa, and wars of independence, as well as criminal offenses. With the above speech, though, Carmelita recognizes that others have a violent family history, and goes on to refer to her and Sophia’s family history: “It happened in our family, to our great-aunt Cukita,” she tells Sophia.¹¹² The film cuts to a black and white silent film sequence that depicts Cukita’s story, played out by the four principal actors, with two appearing in drag to play men. The sequence’s opening shot depicts Cukita (Daza-Paris) in a Cuban courtyard, fanning herself in a rocking chair. A man in a suit (Iobst) enters, gives Cukita money, and pats her on the head. Another man (Troyano) follows with a bag of

108. Ibid., 5.

109. Ibid., 6.

110. Troyano, *Carmelita Tropicana*, 17:53.

111. Ibid., 18:00–18:06.

112. Ibid., 18:06–18:10.

groceries, but drops a yam by Cukita's rocking chair. As he bends to pick up the yam, he cannot take his eyes off of Cukita. He is clearly infatuated with her, but she avoids his stare by looking downwards. After the man in the suit dies suddenly, the other man approaches the mourning Cukita, who looks surprised to see him. He falls to his knees before her, pushes her dress up, and sobs as he runs his hands along Cukita's stockinged thighs, creating a run. The film then cuts to a newspaper, which reads, "Un ingeniero electricista se suicidó después de dar muerte a la mujer de la que se había enamorado ciegamente" (translated for English-speaking viewers as "Engineer commits suicide after killing the woman he had fallen in love with").¹¹³ The headline is acted out in the next shot: the man dips a frightened Cukita backwards and shoots her three times before shooting himself. The murder-suicide ensures that if this man can't have Cukita, no one else can. Back in the prison cell, the women are not surprised by Cukita's fate. Orchidia shakes her head and says, "Always the same." Carmelita sums up the story, saying, "*Amor y violencia* [love and violence]." Dee adds, "*Prisioneras del amor* [women prisoners of love]."¹¹⁴ As in *Lesbians Who Kill*, Carmelita and her friends live in a world where violence against women is expected.

To change these conditions, women must work together across difference—a message delivered via a campy performance of a Mexican ranchera called "*Prisioneras del Amor*." Bopping to the music, the four principals sing of their plight as "prisioneras del amor, prisioneras de la vida." While the women are indeed imprisoned at this point in the film, the refrain bemoans women's place in history and society; in the verses, however, the women decide to take action to change their lot. They sing,

Cambiaremos estas lágrimas y este llanto/We'll exchange our tears and sobs

113. Ibid., 19:56.

114. Ibid., 20:27–20:41.

Por fuerza, músculo, y sudor/for strength, muscle, and sweat
Luchando siempre unidas/united in the struggle
Abriéndonos las puertas/opening doors for each other
Para no ser más/so we'll never be again
Prisioneras del amor/women prisoners of love¹¹⁵

The lyrics here emphasize banding together with other women to change their situation.

Accordingly, the women are dressed for battle: for the musical number, Carmelita wears a camouflage peasant dress, while the others wear fatigues, silver sparkle bras, and combat boots. For the final refrain, the women cling to the bars and sing out to the spectators, and the subtitles invite the spectators to “SING ALONG” in solidarity.¹¹⁶ While the sex wars divided feminists in the United States over the question of what constitutes violence against women, Carmelita Tropicana imagines women uniting to stop violence against women and to challenge patriarchal social structures.

While *Your Kunst Is Your Waffien* envisions women working together across differences, Cherrie Moraga's *Giving Up the Ghost* and Denise Uyehara's *Hello (Sex) Kitty: Mad Asian Bitch on Wheels* address the issue of sexual violence in relation to communities of color. Moraga's play, *Giving Up the Ghost*, addresses the issue violence against women from a Chicana lesbian perspective. First staged in 1987 and subsequently revised, the play centers around a Chicana lesbian named Marisa, who confronts her “ghosts”—that is, Corky, Marisa's teenage self, and Amalia, Marisa's former lover. The play blends Corky's childhood stories with Marisa and Amalia's accounts of their relationship. The characters present their stories, which are spoken sometimes in English, sometimes in Spanish, directly to the audience. Moraga highlights the audience's role as witnesses by including the audience in the list of characters as “THE PEOPLE,

115. Ibid., 21:30–22:00.

116. Ibid., 23:10.

those viewing the performance or reading the play.”¹¹⁷ In *The Wounded Heart*, Yarbrow-Bejarano examines *Giving Up the Ghost* in relation to the concerns of feminists of color as well as Chicano cultural figures such as La Malinche. My reading here considers Moraga’s play in relation to the largely white debates of the feminist sex wars.

At the top of the show, the young Corky represents every anti-pornography feminist’s nightmare: Corky and her friend Arturo frequented the movies, where they would see representations of violence against women, and make up their own violent movie plots. Corky describes one such imagined film plot:

one was where we'd be out in the desert
'n' we'd capture these chicks 'n' hold 'em up for ransom
we'd string 'em up 'n' make 'em take their clothes off
"strip" we'd say to the wall all cool-like funny ... now when I think about how little I was
at the time
and a girl but in my mind I was big 'n' tough 'n' a dude
in my mind I had all their freedom
the freedom to see a girl kina
the way you see
an animal you know? like imagining
they got a difernt set
of blood vessels or somet'ing like so
when you mess with 'em
it don' affect 'em the way it do you¹¹⁸

In this plotline, Corky and Arturo take women as hostages and make them strip naked. Through viewing popular movies and imagining her own movie plots, Corky begins to see women differently, as less than human. Anti-pornography feminists argued that pornography and representations of violence against women were influential in precisely this way. According to the script from a Women Against Pornography slideshow, “Women Against Pornography

117. Moraga, *Giving up the Ghost*, 2.

118. *Ibid.*, 4.

believes that pornography affects male behavior because it is so pervasive and increasingly socially acceptable, and contributes toward violence against women in real-life in the form of wife-battering, rape, sexual harassment, murder and child molestation.”¹¹⁹ For anti-pornography feminists, the consumption of images of violence against women causes men to reproduce that violence against women in everyday life. Since Corky imagines herself as the men she watches on screen, according to the anti-pornography perspective, she may enact such violence against women.

Giving Up the Ghost both fulfills and vexes this anti-pornography narrative. Corky goes on to narrate a memory in which she and Arturo make a younger neighbor girl take her clothes off so that they can see her “little fuchi fachi.”¹²⁰ While Corky is ambivalent about the idea, she gets the little girl to follow her into the shed and takes down the girl’s underpants. When Arturo touches the little girl, however, Corky pushes him away and pulls up the little girl’s shorts. The boy Arturo conforms to the anti-pornography narrative here by touching the little girl, but Corky resists the narrative by stopping Arturo. As an adult, Marisa is a butch lesbian. In anti-pornography terms, butch-femme roles repeat “the male-female sex roles that are the psychological foundation of patriarchy.”¹²¹ Marisa’s relationship with Amalia does not adhere to this dynamic in that the couple sees each other on Amalia’s terms, and Amalia, the femme, is sexually dominant in their relationship.¹²² These elements of *Giving Up the Ghost* trouble the

119. WAP, “WAP Slideshow Script,” np.

120. Moraga, *Giving up the Ghost*, 7.

121. Coalition for a Feminist Sexuality and Against Sadomasochism, “We Protest,” 2.

122. Moraga, *Giving up the Ghost*, 24, 26.

anti-pornography narrative in which exposure to images of violence against women leads to enacting violence against women.

In addition to refusing the inevitability of anti-pornography narratives, *Giving Up the Ghost* breaks the silence around sexual assault in Chicano communities. In “Queer Aztlán,” Moraga draws attention to the marginalization of issues related to gender and sexuality in the Chicano movement:

In the name of this ‘culturally correct’ familia, certain topics were censored in both cultural and political spheres as not ‘socially relevant’ to Chicanos and typically not sanctioned in the Mexican household. These issues included female sexuality generally and male homosexuality and lesbianism specifically, as well as incest and violence against women—all of which are still relevant between the sheets and within the walls of many Chicano families.¹²³

Moraga highlights the silence around the problems of incest and violence against women, as well as women’s sexuality, in the Chicano movement. *Giving Up the Ghost* intervenes in this cultural censorship by bringing these issues to the fore. In the third act, Marisa and her younger self, Corky, tell of being raped by a school janitor when she was twelve years old. According to the stage directions for this scene, “MARISA enters. Her posture is noticeably more guarded than in the previous scene. The music fades. There is a pause as MARISA scans the faces of THE PEOPLE.”¹²⁴ The ensuing silence and Marisa’s eye contact with the audience focuses the audience’s attention on her. When Marisa goes on to speak, she reveals, “Got raped once. When I was a kid. Taken me a long [time] to say that was exactly what happened, but that was exactly what happened.”¹²⁵ Before Corky goes on to detail the assault, she tells the audience, “Norma

123. Moraga, “Queer Aztlán: The Re-Formation of Chicano Tribe,” 157–58.

124. Moraga, *Giving up the Ghost*, 31.

125. *Ibid.*

[her cousin, with whom Corky had a sexual relationship] was the only one I ever told.”¹²⁶ This line refers to the silence around sexual assault even as Corky breaks this silence by recounting the traumatic event for the audience. *Giving Up the Ghost* addresses the silence in Chicano communities around the issue of sexual assault by staging an account of sexual assault from a Chicana perspective.

Bisexual performance artist Denise Uyehara’s solo performance, *Hello (Sex) Kitty: Mad Asian Bitch on Wheels*, similarly considers the issues of women’s sexuality and sexual violence from a woman of color perspective. She performs monologues that discuss different aspects of Asian American women’s sexuality from different characters’ perspectives. These characters include the Vegetable Girl, an innocent, Hello Kitty-clutching college student who falls in love with her white teaching assistant, who “likes [her] because [she’s] Japanese.”¹²⁷ She tells the audience that the two staged a tea ceremony at the teaching assistant’s house, with the Vegetable Girl serving the tea to her white date. Following this speech, the Vegetable Girl becomes the Mad Kabuki Woman, who is enraged at the Vegetable Girl for perpetuating the stereotype of the “little geisha” or “China doll”—¹²⁸that is, the stereotype of the subservient Asian/American woman. Uyehara also performs the character of the Asian Guy, who, in his desire for heroic representations of Asian masculinity, is insensitive to the representation of Asian women. Between these character monologues, “The Woman” narrates sexual encounters and fantasies. As Uyehara makes clear, “The Woman (the performer) plays herself.”¹²⁹

126. Ibid., 32.

127. Uyehara, “Hello (Sex) Kitty: Mad Asian Bitch on Wheels,” 387.

128. Ibid., 388.

129. Ibid., 380.

Given that Uyehara identifies as bisexual, her work does not fit easily into a study of lesbian performance. Uyehara has encountered this issue of categorization as a performer applying for festivals. She addresses this issue in *Hello (Sex) Kitty* by opening the performance with a voiceover of a phone call from the artistic director of a women's performance art festival. While the artistic director admires Uyehara's talent, she says, "but we just can't seem to fit you into our festival this year... Your work just doesn't seem to...fit."¹³⁰ The artistic director cannot find space for Uyehara on the festival program, but not because the festival program is full: the artistic director goes on to say, "But we were wondering—because we do have one spot open in our festival—...do you by any chance know any Asian lesbian stand-up comedians?"¹³¹ The implication here is that Uyehara does not fit because of her bisexuality. Uyehara humorously responds to this instance by opening for her own performance, posing as a lesbian stand-up performer called DykeAsia. Rather than repeat the exclusion of the performance art festival, I include Uyehara's work in this study because *Hello (Sex) Kitty* addresses sexual encounters with women as well as men.

Like Split Britches's *Lesbians Who Kill*, Uyehara's performance embraces sexual pleasure while addressing the issue of violence against women. In a scene called "The Best Friend," Uyehara bookends an account of sexual assault with an account of consensual sex. The Woman describes having sex with an Asian male friend, now a lover: "*in the bedroom*

*in the bedroom we make love
the bed swells with our movements
the bedsheets are angels touching our skin*¹³²

130. Ibid., 383.

131. Ibid.

132. Ibid., 396.

.....
*We become familiar, as lovers do,
so we have a deeper understanding*

This description characterizes their lovemaking as consensual and pleasurable, as an act that brings The Woman and her lover closer together. The Woman follows this account with the story of a different lover, also an Asian man. Of this second lover, The Woman says, “*we had become familiar / but there was no deeper understanding,*” revising the language she used earlier to contrast this lover from her previous one.¹³³ The Woman says, “*we are making love—,*” but she differentiates this experience from that with the previous lover by following with “*having sex.*”¹³⁴ What begins as a consensual act becomes an assault, motivated by the man’s fear that The Woman will leave him. She says:

*he pins me to the bed
he says (as if forcing someone down) don’t tell me about leaving
his body says: (thrust on each line)
you are mine
you are mine
you are mine
you are mine
I think: (arms up, as if pinned down) this is not role playing, this is real, this is serious*¹³⁵

Here, The Woman’s second lover rapes her, attempting to possess her with each thrust. The Woman distinguishes this act of sexual violence from S/M role playing, which implies that she does not view role playing as an act of sexual violence. When The Woman tells her lover to stop, he responds by hitting her. After giving this account, The Woman returns to her best friend/lover. Though the couple argues, The Woman characterizes this relationship as a non-violent one,

133. Ibid.

134. Ibid., 397.

135. Ibid.

saying “*He has never touched me like this (fist to her face), only like this (caress) / I have never touched him like this (fist), only like this (caress).*”¹³⁶ By structuring the narrative so that the assault is bookended by a discussion of a non-violent lover, Uyehara resists equating the act of having sex with men with violence. Her discussion of sexual violence is enveloped by a discussion of sexual pleasure.

Hello (Sex) Kitty considers the racial dynamics of the assault described above. Both The Woman and her attacker are Asian American. The Woman says to the audience, “I never thought it would be between me and my own kind,”¹³⁷ She perceives the assault as a breach of racial solidarity. But, inversely, speaking out about being raped by another Asian American may be perceived by others as a betrayal of racial solidarity. Facing upstage, The Woman says, “*The community says, there is no violence in our house. / So what’s it going to be? are you going to be a feminist or a person of color? / But what if I am a woman?*”¹³⁸ This speech points out that the issue of violence against women is obscured in Asian American communities, and that women of color are often asked to make a choice between racial and gender solidarity. Spectators sometimes reiterated this idea in response to her performance: in Maine, a Korean American man implied that *Hello (Sex) Kitty* did not take up Asian themes. Pondering this issue, Uyehara writes, “Well, isn’t domestic violence an Asian issue? Isn’t being bisexual an Asian issue? Isn’t understanding how you, your black neighbor, your Latina friend who swing-dances, and that Chinese-Philippina butch dyke poet, are complex creatures—isn’t that an Asian issue? It is for

136. Ibid., 400.

137. Ibid., 398.

138. Ibid., 399.

me.”¹³⁹ Uyehara and Moraga’s works stage the need for a feminism that addresses women of color’s needs as well as for anti-racist movements to address be more attentive to issues that are important to women and LGBTQ people.

The Barnard conference and anti-pornography feminism loom large in many histories of feminism. Indeed, anti-pornography feminism haunts the second and third chapters of this volume, as it was taken up by the New Right and the Canadian legal system and deployed in particular ways against lesbians. But the focus on the Barnard conference and anti-pornography feminism in histories of feminism obscures women of color’s perspectives on issues of sexuality. These perspectives are staged in the plays and performances of *Carmelita Tropicana*, *Cherrie Moraga*, and *Denise Uyehara*, as described above, but more work needs to be done to highlight women of color’s voices in this area. Without this history, social actions like SlutWalk will continue to ignore the concerns of women of color around the issue of sexuality.

139. Ibid.

CHAPTER 2: LESBIAN KINSHIP AND LESBIAN KIDS

The critical interrogation of the terms and practices of the nuclear family unit fueled the feminist movement in the United States during the 1960s and '70s. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, encouraged women to question their roles in the nuclear family, where they served as wives, mothers, and homemakers. During the late 1960s and the '70s, lesbian feminists rejected the perceived 'father knows best' heteropatriarchal hierarchical organization of the nuclear family. Instead, they experimented with new collective models of living and working together, forming new notions of kinship structures. Yet, in recent years, the dominant focus of the LGBT movement in the United States has been on the legalization of gay marriage at the expense of these earlier lesbian feminist efforts.¹ This post-DOMA marriage strategy returns the social imaginary of lesbian relationships to the structure of the nuclear family, relegating other kinship formations to the background. A re-examination of lesbian feminist alternative kinship structures may help to revise LGBT advocacy priorities by challenging, once more, the hierarchical structures inherent in the organization of the nuclear family. This chapter examines how the family unit has been used against the formation of lesbian identities and associations, as well as lesbian feminist resistances against those violent acts. The chapter also describes how lesbian feminist artists and activists such as the Lesbian Avengers, Sharon Bridgforth, Split Britches, Carolyn Gage and her No To Men theater group, and others performed critiques of the nuclear family as well as feminist and lesbian experimental kinship alternatives, bringing feminist ideas largely associated with the 1970s forward into the 1980s, '90s, and beyond.

1. Warner, *Acts of Gaiety*.

Lesbian identity has sometimes been conceived of as one that is antithetical to the identities composed by the organization of the nuclear family unit. John D’Emilio argues that the formation of homosexual identity was not possible until the development of wage labor in the United States afforded people the opportunity to create a life for themselves away from the heterosexual family unit.² D’Emilio writes, “Only when *individuals* began to make their living through wage labor, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity—an identity based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on attraction to one’s own sex.”³ That is, the formation of lesbian identity in the United States was contingent on women leaving the heterosexual nuclear family unit.

What D’Emilio does not address are the terms on which people with same-sex desires, enabled by economic shifts, left the family unit. Throughout the twentieth century, many lesbians and gay men were forced out of the family home—a practice that continues today. In *Clit Notes*, Holly Hughes tells of her then-girlfriend’s expulsion from her childhood home in the 1970s:

...she was shut out that night she came home, sixteen years old, hair cut off, wearing a bow tie, and a new name.

Threatened to do it [come out] for months. She’d been dragging around that Jill Johnston book for years. Nobody should have been surprised.

But now she comes home to find the door locked.

A mistake.

That’s what she thinks at first, but when the key always hidden under the flowerpot is missing, she looks up. Sees her brother’s watching her from inside the dark house that was, until a few minutes ago, her home.⁴

2. D’Emilio, “Capitalism and Gay Identity.”

3. *Ibid.*, 470.

4. Hughes, “Clit Notes,” 1996, 206.

Here, the newly-out teenager is cast out of the heterosexual nuclear family. She finds herself locked out of the house she grew up in. That her brother does not let her inside underscores her excision from the family unit as well as the family home. Her now-visible lesbian sexuality, evidenced by her close-cropped hair and her bow tie, effectively shuts her out of the house and out of the family unit.⁵

Even more disturbing was the practice of the family forcing homosexuals into psychiatric treatment or mental institutions when their sexuality became known.⁶ In the documentary *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives*, Whitey recalls being sent to psychiatric treatment to cure her lesbian desires. She says, “Going to the psychiatrist was gonna solve all my problems, and I would be fine, and my mother would, you know, be happy, everything would be okay.”⁷ Whitey viewed treatment as a way to please her mother, who was distraught over Whitey’s lesbianism. Whitey later left home for Greenwich Village. Her father later found her there, and sent her to King’s County Hospital for psychiatric treatment. Whitey’s parents institutionalized Whitey repeatedly until she landed in a state hospital, where she spent most of her teenage years. As Whitey recalls,

I went back and forth, into King's County and out of King's County, because my mother kept sending me back. So I was sent from King's County to a state hospital, which was an entirely different number. And I went willingly, because, you know—I thought, well, okay, this way I'll, you know, get intensive care or whatever, which of course was, in retrospect was really funny, because the whole time I was there I saw a doctor maybe two or three times, in four years. . . . It was a horrible, horrible experience. I saw things in there that anybody who hadn't been through a state hospital at that particular time, in the

5. These adornments constitute a transgression against gender, which have historically been markers of lesbian sexuality. See Smith-Rosenberg, “The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870-1936.”

6. Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 133.

7. Mariposa Film Group et al., *Word Is out: Stories of Some of Our Lives*, 20:00–20:30.

fifties, would probably never, never—couldn't allow themselves to believe could happen in this country. But it was. It was, like, you know, a horror movie. I would like to think it doesn't happen anymore, but I don't know.⁸

According to Nanette K. Gartrell, “treatment modalities [for lesbianism] ranged from psychoanalysis and hypnotherapy to involuntary hospitalization, electroshock, and lobotomy.”⁹ These treatments aimed to cure homosexuals of their same-sex desires and to recuperate them to heterosexuality, rendering the medical establishment complicit in the reproduction of the family unit.

While the practice of treating lesbianism as a disorder is no longer widely accepted—homosexuality was removed from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973—some families still place LGBT family members into conversion or reparative therapy in an effort to inculcate heterosexuality. Jamie Babbit’s 1999 film *But I’m a Cheerleader* satirizes conversion therapy. In the film, high school cheerleader Megan (Natasha Lyonne) envisions her fellow cheerleaders’ bouncing breasts and tumbling toesches while making out with her football player boyfriend. Megan decorates her locker with photos of swimsuit models, and a Melissa Etheridge poster hangs in her room. Concerned about these “homosexual tendencies,” Megan’s family and friends stage an intervention in the domestic space of the living room. Mike (RuPaul Charles) represents True Directions, a gay rehabilitation program that Mike himself has graduated from, and facilitates the intervention. Megan’s father starts the conversation by saying, “Megan, we love you. We all love you, and lately we’ve become concerned about certain behaviors. We’re afraid you’re being influenced by a way of thinking”—he struggles to find the words—“an unnatural—” Cutting him off, Megan’s mother gets to the point, saying, “Honey, we

8. Ibid., 38:57–41:42.

9. Zimmerman, “Lesbian Histories and Cultures,” 611.

think you're a"—her voice changes to a whisper—"lesbian." Mike, wearing a t-shirt that says "Straight is Great," explains his own rehabilitation experience: "I myself was once a gay. Now I'm an ex-gay, Megan. I work for a place called True Directions, who help people like yourself learn to understand the reasons behind homosexual tendencies, and how to heal them." Megan's mother describes True Directions as "rehab—like Homosexuals Anonymous." Megan defiantly declares, "There is *no way* I'm going," but the film cuts to the next scene, with Megan in the back of the family station wagon, her parents driving her to True Directions.¹⁰ While Megan does not feel that there is anything wrong with her, her parents send her to True Directions to be reoriented towards heteropatriarchal heteronormativity—the "true direction" that the program's name refers to. Megan falls in love with a fellow student at True Directions, and the couple flees the facility together at the end of the film; many women and men who have undergone conversion therapy, however, are not so resilient.

Along with familial exclusion and punishment of lesbians and gay men, during the eighties and nineties, the New Right and the Religious Right sustained the division between lesbian and gay people and the white, middle class family unit on moral and religious grounds. This active division continues into the present, vociferous in its discourse and activism against same-sex marriage. Its roots lie in the 1970s formation of the New Right, which refers to a group of conservative politicians who used grassroots organizing to further a socially conservative Republican agenda.¹¹ Virginia Armstrong, National Chairman of Court Watch Project—a program of Phyllis Schlafly's conservative Eagle Forum interest group—defines the New Right as "a loose, voluntary coalition of groups...united in their objective of reasserting traditional

10. Babbit, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, 8:13.

11. Meagher, "Remembering the New Right: Political Strategy and the Building of the GOP Coalition," 5.

Judeo-Christian principles as the underpinning of American government and politics.”¹² The New Right mobilized Catholic anti-abortion groups and recruited Christian evangelicals into the Republican party—forging the Religious Right—in addition to bringing social issues like homosexuality to the fore in the GOP.

Influenced by the New Right, the Religious Right gained momentum in the eighties and nineties, and advanced what they termed “family values” to protect the nuclear family unit, which they perceived as threatened. Accordingly, this conjunction of religion with state politics set itself in opposition to people who lived outside of the nuclear family structure, such as lesbians and gay men and single mothers, who were often perceived as African American.¹³ “Family values” is a somewhat nebulous term, often bandied about without definition. One might cobble together a definition of “family values,” as well as its implications for lesbians and gay men, by examining several speeches given at the 1992 Republican National Convention in Houston, Texas—a prime example of political theater. In their respective addresses to the television audience and the crowds packed into the Astrodome, then-Vice President Dan Quayle, television evangelist and Christian Right leader Pat Robertson, and former White House Communications Director, television personality, and political commentator Pat Buchanan all utilize the term “family values.” In his acceptance speech for the Vice Presidency, Quayle describes his small-town Indiana childhood. He recalls, “I had an upbringing like many in my generation—a life built around family, public school, Little League, basketball and church on Sunday. . . . Our people were strong, and we believed in the traditional values of middle America. Marilyn and I have tried to teach our children these values, like faith in God, love of family, and

12. qtd. in *ibid.*, 7.

13. Perry, “Family Values, Race, Feminism and Public Policy,” 345.

appreciation of freedom.”¹⁴ Quayle advocates for a heteropatriarchal, Judeo-Christian social order as the foundation of his platform to hold national office, thus tying civil liberties to fundamentalist Christian beliefs. When Quayle mentions his family, the camera cuts to a shot of his wife and children, who form a picture of the perfect white, middle-class, loving family, sitting attentively with their hands folded in their laps. The spectators clap and cheer. After discussing his wife’s annual charity event, Quayle declares, “Like so many Americans, for me, family comes first. When family values are undermined, our country suffers. All too often, parents struggle to instill character in their sons and daughters—only to see their values belittled and their beliefs mocked by those who look down on America.”¹⁵ Here, Quayle uses “family values” as shorthand for the heteropatriarchal, Judeo-Christian social order espoused by Christian fundamentalists. His words suggest, though, that these “family values” are under attack. The camera again cuts to Quayle’s children as Quayle says, “Americans try to raise their children to understand right and wrong—only to be told that every so-called ‘lifestyle alternative’ is morally equivalent. That is wrong.”¹⁶ Quayle’s rhetoric sets the ‘life-style alternative,’ which may be read as LGBT lives, against family values, which he positions as morally superior. The live audience—including Quayle’s children—responds with enthusiastic applause.

Similarly, Robertson uses the term “family values” to refer to a Judeo-Christian set of morals perpetuated by the heteropatriarchal family unit. He associates the family unit with the values of the nation state as he lauds Republican incumbent George H. W. Bush and demonizes Democratic nominee Bill Clinton. Standing before a blue backdrop with white stars, Robertson

14. Quayle, “Dan Quayle’s Republican National Convention Address,” 4:00–4:37.

15. *Ibid.*, 5:50–6:19.

16. *Ibid.*, 6:19–6:33.

says, “George Bush’s vision for America...is one of faith in God, strong families, freedom, individual initiative, and free enterprise.”¹⁷ Like Quayle, Robertson associates American families—here, identified as a central component of Bush’s platform—with the Judeo-Christian God. On the other hand, Robertson denounces Clinton’s agenda. He says, “When Bill Clinton talks about family values, I don’t believe he’s talking about either families or values. He is talking about a radical plan to destroy the traditional family.”¹⁸ Much like Quayle, Robertson cites the notion of a “traditional family”—which may be understood as the heteropatriarchal nuclear family unit—and notes its vulnerability to liberal politics. Robertson also criticizes Clinton for his pro-choice policies,¹⁹ as well as for “want[ing] to repeal the ban on homosexuals in the military and appoint homosexuals to his administration.”²⁰ The crowd “boos” in agreement with Robertson’s anti-LGBT, anti-abortion position.

Like Robertson, Buchanan praises Bush as “a defender of right-to-life, and lifelong champion of the Judeo-Christian values and beliefs upon which America was founded.”²¹ Buchanan also shares Robertson’s objections to Clinton’s pro-choice and pro-LGBT policies. He declares that “a militant leader of the homosexual rights movement could rise at that same [Democratic national] convention and say, ‘Bill Clinton and Al Gore represent the most pro-lesbian and pro-gay ticket in history.’ And so they do.”²² The crowd “boos” in disapproval.

17. “1992 Republican National Convention: Day 3,” 34:20–34:35.

18. *Ibid.*, 37:35–37:50.

19. *Ibid.*, 35:20.

20. *Ibid.*, 36:25–36:32.

21. Buchanan, “Republican National Convention Address | Video | C-SPAN.org,” 15:10–15:20.

22. *Ibid.*, 16:05–16:25.

Buchanan goes on to say, “Elect me, and you get two for the price of one, Mr. Clinton says of his lawyer-spouse.”²³ The crowd “boos” again, rejecting the notion that a woman might occupy a leadership role in the federal government. Buchanan speaks of Hillary Clinton’s critiques of the institutions of marriage and family with disgust.²⁴ After labeling Hillary Clinton a radical feminist, Buchanan says, “The agenda Clinton & Clinton would impose on America—abortion on demand, ...homosexual rights, ...—that’s change, all right. But that’s not the kind of change America wants. It’s not the kind of change America needs. And it’s not the kind of change we can tolerate in a nation that we still call God’s country.”²⁵ Here, Buchanan places abortion rights and lesbian and gay rights in opposition to Judeo-Christian values, which he aligns with the nation.

Collectively, Quayle’s, Robertson’s, and Buchanan’s political performances at the RNC provide a sense of what the term “family values” stands for and against. “Family values” refers to the idea that living within the reproductive nuclear family unit—and the heterosexual marriage that forms its foundation—promotes a fundamentalist Judeo-Christian morality, which helps to preserve the social order. This nuclear family unit is distinctly heteropatriarchal, with men acting as providers and women acting as homemakers and caretakers. Notably, this familial arrangement is most accessible to white, middle-class Americans. Speaking less than a fortnight after the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, then-Vice President Dan Quayle says that he is going to speak about poverty among African Americans. Instead, he discusses the declining marriage rate among African Americans and the increasing percentage of children born out of wedlock to

23. *Ibid.*, 16:47–16:53.

24. *Ibid.*, 17:20.

25. *Ibid.*, 18:00–16:25.

African American mothers. Quayle calls these conditions a “social breakdown,” which he attributes to “decades of changes in social mores.”²⁶ Quayle downplays the history of slavery and the corresponding destruction of African American families.²⁷

The continuity of the nuclear family structure and its corresponding values, the Religious Right claims, are promoted through heterosexual reproduction and parenting. As Dan Quayle explains, “It is from parents that children learn how to behave in society. It is from parents, above all, that children come to understand values and themselves as men and women, mothers and fathers.”²⁸ This logic assumes that all children will grow up to become heterosexuals who will marry and bear children, imparting to them the same Judeo-Christian values that they were raised with. Accordingly, family values proponents oppose abortion, which terminates pregnancy, and lesbian and gay rights (to say nothing of bisexual and trans people), and sex radical practices, which are not procreative sexual acts. In the words of black feminist poet, academic, and activist Cheryl Clarke, “Homosexuality is viewed as a threat to the continued existence of the heterosexual family, because homosexual unions do not, in and of themselves, produce offspring.”²⁹

This conservative family values logic has been taken up in queer quarters. In *No Future*, queer theorist Lee Edelman pushes the opposition of LGBT people and children to its extreme conclusion by asserting that the conditions of “reproductive futurism”—in which the protection of children forms the basis of the political—maintain heterosexual privilege and position

26. Quayle, “The ‘Murphy Brown’ Speech,” n.p.

27. Perry, “Family Values, Race, Feminism and Public Policy,” 347–351.

28. Quayle, “The ‘Murphy Brown’ Speech.”

29. Clarke, “The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community,” 193.

queerness against the protection of children.³⁰ Against reproductive futurism, Edelman offers a queer ethics, practiced by the figure of the “sinthomosexual,”³¹ that is anti-child insofar as it rejects dominant kinship structures and reproductive futurity. *No Future* pays little attention to women and lesbians, despite Edelman’s assertion that his work responds to bombings of an abortion clinic and a gay and lesbian nightclub by Christian fundamentalists in 1997.³² Whereas Edelman bolsters family values logic by emphasizing the opposition between LGBT subjects and children, lesbian activists and artists in the 1980s and '90s challenged family values logic by positing the figure of the lesbian child.

“I was a Lesbian Child”

Writing in the early '90s, lesbian writer and activist Sarah Schulman performatively declares, “I was a lesbian child,” and asks, “does society have a responsibility to lesbian and gay children?”³³ Schulman’s declaration runs counter to contemporary Western notions of childhood by extending sexuality and non-normative desires to children. As radical feminist Shulamith Firestone points out in *The Dialectic of Sex*, sexuality has been separated out from childhood since the Enlightenment. Firestone writes, “The concept of childhood dictated that children were a species different not just in age, but in kind, from adults. An ideology was developed to prove this, fancy tractates written about the innocence of children..., with a resulting belief that

30. Edelman, *No Future*, 2.

31. *Ibid.*, 39.

32. *Ibid.*, 15. See Jennifer Doyle’s “Blind Spots and Failed Performance: Abortion, Feminism, and Queer Theory” for a consideration of feminism, abortion, and queerness. Edelman’s work has also been critiqued in terms of race by José Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia*.

33. Schulman, “Delusions of Gender,” 256.

children were asexual....”³⁴ Firestone makes clear that the association of innocence and asexuality with children has been constructed through discourse rather than biologically determined. By asserting that she was a child with sexuality and specifically lesbian, Schulman challenges this dominant construction of children as innocent and asexual. Schulman’s words also precipitate Kathryn Bond Stockton’s study *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. According to Stockton, “this queer child, whatever its conscious grasp of itself, has not been able to present itself according to the category ‘gay’ or ‘homosexual’—categories culturally deemed too adult, since they are sexual, though we do presume every child to be straight.”³⁵ Here, Stockton makes the important distinction that though children are thought to be asexual, it is assumed that they will become heterosexuals upon reaching adulthood. Schulman presents the possibility that some children will grow up to become lesbians and gay men.

By associating children with lesbian and gay sexualities, Schulman challenges the family values logic that was gaining traction in the United States during the ‘80s and ‘90s. As Stockton notes, “they [Americans who espouse family values] do not imagine there are children who are queer.”³⁶ Rather, family values logic places children and LGBT adults in opposition. As sex radical lesbian feminist Gayle Rubin observes, “Adults who deviate too much from conventional standards of sexual conduct are often denied contact with the young... Members of the teaching professions are closely monitored for signs of sexual misconduct. ... In some cases, a teacher

34. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 86–87. Firestone notes that this notion of innocence is classed. Robin Bernstein discusses childhood innocence in terms of race in *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood in Black and White*.

35. Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, 6.

36. *Ibid.*, 3.

may be fired merely because an unconventional lifestyle becomes known to school officials.”³⁷ As Rubin implies, the opposition between children and LGBT adults becomes apparent when these populations come into direct contact with each other, as in educational settings. LGBT adults are often considered to be a threat to children. Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* (1934) stages this dynamic: when a boarding school student (falsely) accuses her teachers of being in a lesbian relationship, parents respond by pulling their children out of the school. Such a response implies that lesbians are not fit to be around children. The perceived opposition between children and LGBT adults has played out offstage, too. Carolyn Gage, a lesbian playwright and founder of No To Men, a radical feminist theater group in Oregon, dealt with this issue while working as a teaching artist in Portland. When a student asked Gage about her sexuality, Gage came out to her students. Afterwards, “an observer [was] placed in the classroom, the insinuation being that, as an ‘out’ lesbian, [Gage] was probably capable of all kinds of other unsavory boundary transgressions.”³⁸ After the term ended, Gage was not re-hired. In this incident, family values logic prevailed: because Gage’s lesbianism was regarded as a sexual perversion, the school board decided that she should not be around children without supervision. Such actions are motivated by the fear that exposure to LGBT adults might taint children’s asexual innocence, or that LGBT adults will recruit proto-heterosexual children into homosexual lifestyles. By barring LGBT adults from the classroom, the education system maintains children’s proto-heterosexual status, thereby extending the family unit.

Gage’s artistic collaborator, Sue Carney, similarly faced a threat to her livelihood due to the moral precept that LGBT adults should not have contact with children. Carney worked as a

37. Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 161.

38. Gage, “Thrown Out,” 2.

teaching artist in Oregon public schools when No To Men’s production of *Amazon All Stars*, a musical about a lesbian softball team that Carney wrote the music for, opened. As Gage sardonically recounts,

It seems that the principal of the Mae Richardson Elementary School was perusing the local paper when an article about this lesbian musical caught her eye. Realizing with horror that the composer and musical director of this debauched show [*Amazon All Stars*] had just been hired to teach her [students] about Renaissance instruments, this vigilant administrator swung into action. She contacted the local arts council, who contacted [Carney]. . . .the arts council told [Carney] that the contract was being cancelled specifically because of Sarah’s association with the lesbian musical.³⁹

Carney was dismissed from her post as a teaching artist when her attachment to a lesbian musical—which the school principle interpreted as evidence that Carney was a lesbian—became known. By firing Carney, the principal and the arts council adhered to a family values logic, which insists on sheltering innocent, asexual children from LGBT adults. Carney responded by seeking legal recourse with the help of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). No legal protections for LGBT educators existed in Oregon at the time—and this case would not fight for them. The case was tried in terms of Freedom of Association, emphasizing Carney’s attachment to a lesbian musical rather than her lesbian sexuality. In fact, according to Gage, “Sarah was coached on techniques for deflecting the media’s inevitable curiosity about her personal life. She was not to ‘out’ herself.”⁴⁰ By focusing on freedom of association rather than sexuality, the case did little to advance the rights of LGBT educators. After 3 months, all parties reached a settlement.

Oregon conservatives changed tack a few years later, targeting their homophobia toward the curriculum rather than individual teachers with Oregon’s Ballot Measure No. 9. The measure,

39. Ibid., 1–2.

40. Ibid., 3.

which sought to amend the state’s constitution so that the government would “discourage” and not recognize homosexuality,⁴¹ was proposed in 1992 by the Oregon Citizens Alliance—a former affiliate of the Christian Coalition, founded by family values champion Pat Robertson. Undergirded by the moral imperative to protect children from LGBT subjects, Measure No. 9 focused on Oregon’s public schools. According to Oregon’s 1992 Voter’s Guide,

The amendment would require state, regional and local governments and their subdivisions, including specifically the State Department of Higher education and the public schools, to assist in setting a standard for Oregon youth that recognizes homosexuality, pedophilia, sadism and masochism as abnormal, wrong, unnatural and perverse. In addition, the standard would recognize that homosexuality, pedophilia, sadism and masochism are to be discouraged and avoided.⁴²

The measure characterizes homosexuality, along with pedophilia and S/M practices, as amoral, and tasks public schools, among other institutions, with the propagation of this notion. The measure safeguards the heteronormative nuclear family by mandating public schools to actively condemn non-normative sexualities. While the measure was ultimately defeated, its attempted implementation illustrates the ways in which the education system furthers the heteronormative nuclear family unit.

Family values conservatives work to preserve the primacy of the heteronormative nuclear family unit by preventing children from learning about LGBT families and subjects. As in Oregon, public schools became an ideological battleground around families, children, and LGBT people when New York City’s Board of Education introduced the “Children of the Rainbow” curriculum for first-graders in 1992. While the titular “rainbow” refers to the curriculum’s multicultural emphasis, controversy ensued over the specter of another rainbow, that of LGBT

41. Kieisling, “Voters’ Pamphlet,” 93.

42. Ibid.

pride. Queens's District 24 school board refused to implement the curriculum because it mentioned lesbians and gay men. Mary Cummins, leader of the District 24 school board, "denounced the curriculum as promoting sodomy."⁴³ Notably, the LGBT content in question appeared in a section on kinship, threatening the primacy of the heteronormative nuclear family unit: according to a *New York Times* report, "...among [the curriculum's] 443 pages are three, in a section on families, that urge teachers to include references to gay men and lesbians."⁴⁴ Additionally, the curriculum recommended three children's books for classroom use that represent LGBT families: *Heather Has Two Mommies*, *Daddy's Roommate*, and *Gloria Goes to Gay Pride*. The curriculum's directives concerning LGBT families include the following excerpts:

- Children of lesbian-gay parents may have limited experience with male-female parental situations; if there is no representation of their lives in the classroom, they may suddenly be made to feel different.
- Children growing up in heterosexually headed families may be experiencing contact with lesbians-gays for the first time.
- Teachers of first-graders have an opportunity to give children a healthy sense of identity at an early age. Classes should include references to lesbians and gays in all curricular areas and should avoid exclusionary practices by presuming a person's sexual orientation, reinforcing stereotypes, or speaking of lesbians-gays as 'they' or the 'other.'
- The issues surrounding family may be very sensitive for children. Teachers should be aware of varied family structures, including two-parent or single-parent households, gay or lesbian parents, divorced parents, adoptive parents and guardians or adoptive parents.
- Children must be taught to acknowledge the positive aspects of each type of household and the importance of love and care in family living.⁴⁵

43. Barbanel, "Under 'Rainbow,' a War: When Politics, Morals and Learning Mix," A34.

44. Myers, "How a 'Rainbow Curriculum' Turned Into Fighting Words," E.6.

45. The Associated Press, "'Children of the Rainbow': Curriculum Guide Excerpts," 10A.

These directives deprivilege the heteropatriarchal family unit by acknowledging a multitude of alternative family structures, including lesbian and gay couples with children. These items also posit the existence of lesbian and gay children by discouraging the assumption that all children will grow up to become heterosexuals.

The Lesbian Avengers, a direct action group devoted to increasing lesbian visibility, conducted a performative political action in support of the “Children of the Rainbow” curriculum. This action challenges the family values thinking that seeks to shelter children from LGBT subjects by staging direct interactions between lesbians and children. Recalling the action, Schulman, a founding member of the Avengers, writes, “We [the Lesbian Avengers] were willing to confront the greatest taboo in the culture—homosexuals in the school yard.”⁴⁶ On September 9, 1992—the first day of the new school year—the Avengers marched through Middle Village, in the heart of District 24, until they reached the school yard of Public School 087. There, Avengers distributed lavender balloons to children entering the school that encouraged them to “Ask About Lesbian Lives” in their classrooms. A small marching band provided musical accompaniment for the event. Their song selection challenged the division between lesbians and children. The bandleader introduced the children’s song “You Are My Sunshine” as “a lesbian polka,”⁴⁷ and the band played “We Are Family,” Sister Sledge’s paean to sisterhood, which had become a gay anthem. These songs attached lesbian significance to children and family. As Schulman writes, “...every child who attended school that day heard the word ‘lesbian’... It certainly forced the teachers to discuss the existence of lesbians, regardless of what restrictions had been placed on them by Mary Cummins, the bigoted chair of the local

46. Schulman, “Delusions of Gender,” 281.

47. Baus and Friedrich, *Lesbian Avengers Eat Fire, Too*, 2:39.

school board.”⁴⁸ By staging this political action at an elementary school, the Lesbian Avengers brought children into direct contact with lesbians, thereby defying opponents of the “Children of the Rainbow” curriculum and family values conservatives.

This same action also posits the figure of the lesbian child. Reinforcing Schulman’s writings (discussed above), some demonstrators wore t-shirts declaring, “I was a LESBIAN child.” Two posters related to the Queens action also refer to lesbian children. One poster declares, “HOMOPHOBIA IS NOT A FAMILY VALUE.” It features a group of young children, most of them smiling for the camera. Two of the girl’s faces are circled, and each is labeled a “LESBIAN STUDENT.” By identifying two of the children in the photo as lesbians, the poster resists the opposition of children and LGBT subjects. Another poster by Carrie Moyer depicts a Lesbian Avenger superhero figure under the words “THE LESBIAN AVENGERS ARE COMING TO MAKE THE WORLD SAFE FOR BABY DYKES EVERYWHERE.” Like family values conservatives, the poster insists that children must be protected, but the poster imagines children as lesbian rather than future heterosexuals. At a follow-up action, the Avengers chanted the question, “2-4-6-8, how do you know the kids are straight?” to challenge the assumption that all children are heterosexual.

48. Schulman, “Delusions of Gender,” 281.

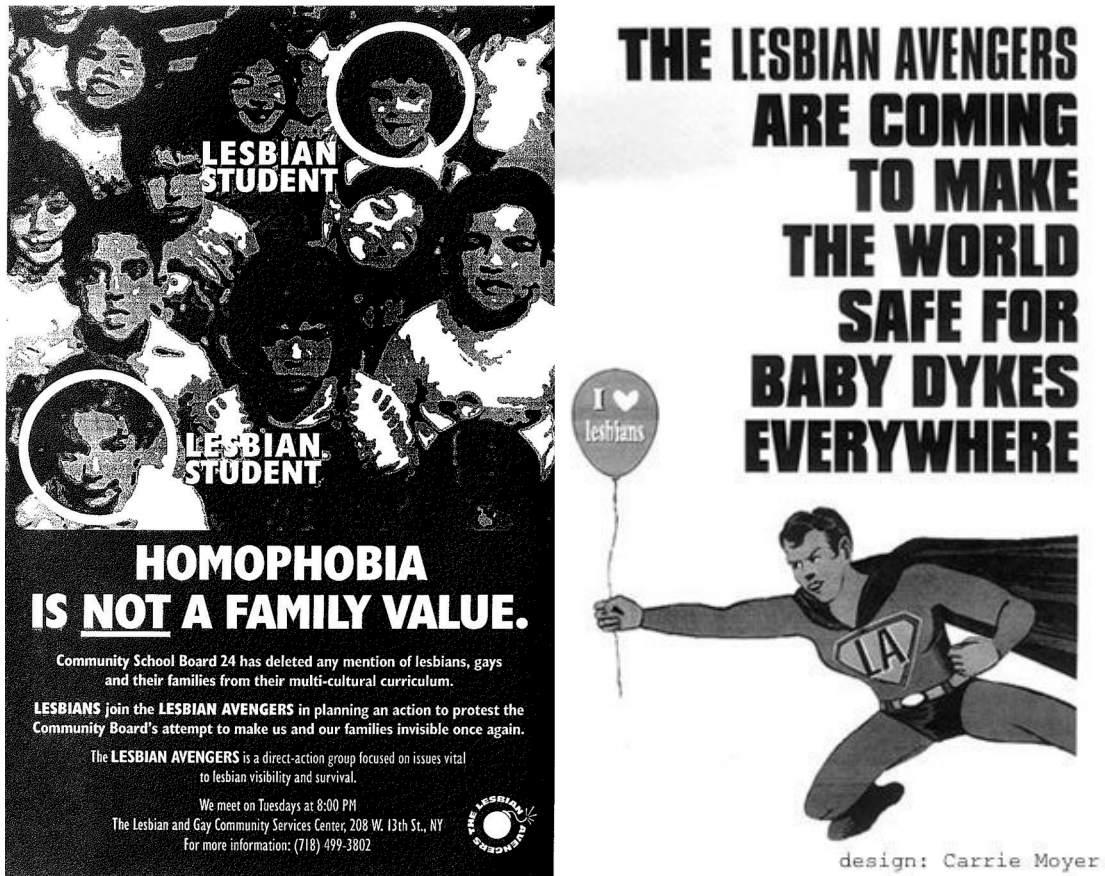


Fig. 2.1. Lesbian Avengers posters, 1992. "Baby Dykes" poster by Carrie Moyer.

Lesbian performers also challenged the dominant conception of children as sexless, or at least proto-heterosexual, by presenting the figure of the lesbian child in solo performances. David Román and Holly Hughes identify a “boom” in solo shows by LGBT performers in the late eighties and early nineties.⁴⁹ Many of these performances are constructed as autobiographies—that is, the performer speaks in the first person about lived experience, regardless of its veracity. The content of many of these performances includes a history of the performer’s family relations and childhood experiences. In lesbian solo performance from this period, which includes works by Holly Hughes, Peggy Shaw, and Marga Gomez, as well as

49. Hughes and Román, “O Solo Homo: An Introductory Conversation,” 1–2.

Shawna Dempsey and Lori Millan, performers often tell of childhood lesbian desires, or highlight early indicators of their future lesbianism. Lisa Kron and Jeanine Tresori bring this trend into the present day with *Fun Home*, a musical adaptation of Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir of the same name.

These theatrical iterations of the lesbian child challenge the notion that children are asexual or proto-heterosexual by portraying children as sexual beings with lesbian desire. In *Clit Notes*, Holly Hughes's 1996 solo piece, Hughes identifies her childhood self as a lesbian child by recalling her first crush. While Meg Christian had a crush on her gym teacher, Hughes preferred her social studies instructor. *Clit Notes* opens with Hughes asking, "The first time I was in love with another woman? Actually, she was a woman; I was just thirteen."⁵⁰ By contrasting her own age with her teacher's adult status of "woman," Hughes highlights the fact that she was a child at the time of this first lesbian love. Hughes goes on to describe her desire for her teacher, saying, "Sometimes I'd be in class, and I'd think: 'Her mouth! It's a magnet. I am going to kiss her, and there's nothing anybody can do to stop me!'"⁵¹ Hughes also reports being "so inspired by her [teacher's] lectures that I'd go into a trance and start removing articles of clothing. Once I took my panty hose off in class. I have no memory of taking them off. But there they were! Down on the floor in an incriminating taupe heap."⁵² In contrast to the purity associated with dominant notions of childhood, the thirteen year-old Hughes expresses an attraction to and a desire for sexual contact with her teacher in the form of a kiss. Hughes's attraction to her teacher is so strong that she unconsciously removes her panty hose—which is akin to taking off one's

50. Hughes, "Clit Notes," 1996, 185.

51. *Ibid.*, 186.

52. *Ibid.*

underwear—in public. The thirteen year-old Hughes’s desire for her teacher constitutes her as a lesbian child rather than a proto-heterosexual.

Just as the normative child is thought to guarantee heteronormative reproductive futurity, the lesbian child promises a lesbian futurity. In *Growing Up Suite I* (1994), a solo performance written by Canadians Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan and performed by Dempsey, Dempsey narrates her experiences about growing up as a lesbian. At the top of the monologue, Dempsey establishes a lesbian perspective when she says, “I know just what turns me on: / Girls.”⁵³ Dempsey goes on to describe an instance of lesbian sexual desire she had at the age of five. She says,

Though what turned me on then [as a five year-old]
...
Was the Eaton’s catalogue
Ten pages of ladies wearing
Lingerie...⁵⁴

Here, Dempsey tells of her childhood attraction to the lingerie models in the Eaton’s catalog. Dempsey characterizes this childhood lesbian attraction as both tender and sexual. She says,

[...] though my thoughts were dirty
They were not without love
The first love of my life being Winter, page 117.
I didn’t know if I wanted to be her
Staring off into middle distance
So beautiful, so blank
Or if I wanted to be her undoing
The one to take the straps down from her shoulders
The row of hooks from their eyes
Teeth of the zipper unfurling.

53. Dempsey and Millan, “Growing Up,” 1.

54. Ibid.

I just knew that I wanted her, Winter, page 117
In 1968, in Scarborough
My small chubby hands touching the paper
Of the Eaton's catalogue
Knowing how good she'd feel
Not knowing exactly what I would do with her
But assuming she
So calm and so underdressed
Would have an idea or two
And that eventually
In another fifteen years or so
Together, we could figure it out.⁵⁵

In this speech, Dempsey describes her love for one particular lingerie model, Winter, as well as her sexual desire for Winter. As a five-year-old, Dempsey imagines the act of undressing Winter. While this constitutes an adult act by normative standards, Dempsey's description of her "small chubby hands" highlights the fact that she is a child in this story. The story identifies Dempsey as a lesbian child rather than a proto-heterosexual, and imbues the child with sexual desire.

Dempsey preserves childhood innocence to a degree here in her childhood self's ignorance of specific sexual acts, and by delaying those sexual acts "another fifteen years or so." Yet, this deferment also constitutes lesbian futurity—that is, a break with reproductive futurity, which ensures the continuance of the heteronormative nuclear family unit.

Various social pressures work to prevent lesbian futurity and protect reproductive futurity, signaling to the lesbian child that her desires are socially unacceptable. In *Faith and Dancing*, Weaver's Faith persona recalls hearing the word "lesbian" for the first time as a ten-year-old: "...I looked up the word 'lesbian' after I heard two boys spelling it out behind me in a voice that made me realize it must be something unlawful."⁵⁶ In *Clit Notes*, Hughes describes what she would do to keep herself from kissing her social studies teacher: she says, "I just throw myself to

55. Ibid., 1–2.

56. Weaver, *Faith and Dancing*, 10:56–11:21.

the ground and writhe around, hoping people would think I was merely epileptic. A little foaming at the mouth is better than having people think you're queer. . . . I began to think there was something the matter with me."⁵⁷ The thirteen year-old Hughes understood that her lesbian desires were considered to be a problem, and performed seizures during social studies class to cover up her lesbian desires. In the 1993 solo show *Marga Gomez Is Pretty, Witty, and Gay*, Latina comedian Marga Gomez describes identifying as a lesbian at the age of eleven. José Muñoz cites this performance as an instance of disidentification.⁵⁸ I will attend to this performance as an example of the lesbian child. In the piece, Gomez describes watching an episode of David Susskind's *Open End* featuring closeted lesbian truck drivers. Like Hughes, the eleven year-old Gomez knows to hide her lesbian identification. Gomez says, "I sat next to my mother on the sofa. I made sure to put that homophobic expression on my face. So my mother wouldn't think I was mesmerized by the lady homosexuals and riveted to every word that fell from their lips."⁵⁹ Here, Gomez performs homophobia to hide her lesbian identification from her mother.

In some instances, members of the lesbian child's nuclear family police her proto-lesbian desires in an effort to reform her as proto-heterosexual. As Peggy Shaw relates in *You're Just Like My Father*, "She [Shaw's mother] caught me at the kitchen table at five years old, drawing a picture of a woman tied to a tree with her hands behind her and her breasts were naked, and I drew a woman kissing her breasts."⁶⁰ Shaw's mother took her child's depiction of one woman

57. Hughes, "Clit Notes," 1996, 186.

58. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 1–4.

59. qtd. in *ibid.*

60. Shaw, "You're Just Like My Father," 185.

kissing another's naked breasts as evidence of Shaw's lesbian desire. Shaw goes on to say, "My mother watched me closely from then on and made sure I didn't have girlfriends for too long or stay over at their houses. She said I'd go to hell if I didn't get married."⁶¹ Shaw's mother responds to her lesbian child's desires by steering Shaw towards heterosexuality and the reproduction of the nuclear family unit. She increases parental supervision, limits Shaw's contact with other girls, and threatens damnation if Shaw does not pursue heterosexual marriage in the future.

Lesbian feminist representations of lesbian children continue to the present day, contesting dominant conceptions of the child. In *Fun Home*, lesbian cartoonist Alison Bechdel's 2006 autobiographical graphic novel, Bechdel relates her father's struggle with his sexuality to her own growing up and coming out as a lesbian. Throughout the portions of *Fun Home* that depict Bechdel's childhood, Alison's father struggles to get his daughter to adopt feminine attire. Bechdel's captions characterize these instances as an early indicator of her lesbianism. These passages lead up to Bechdel's first lesbian identification at the age of five. Her father takes her out to lunch, and a butch woman stops into the restaurant to make a delivery. In the panel, the young Bechdel watches the woman from the booth she shares with her father. The caption reads, "I didn't know there were women who wore men's clothes and had men's haircuts. But like a traveler in a foreign country who runs into someone from home—someone they've never spoken to, but know by sight—I recognized her with a surge of joy."⁶² While the sight of the butch woman is a revelation, it is also an instance of lesbian identification. Bechdel's identification does not go unnoticed by her father: in the following panel, Bechdel's father asks her, "Is that

61. Ibid.

62. Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 118.

what you want to look like?”⁶³ Her father clearly disapproves of her fascination with the butch delivery woman. In the following tier, Bechdel answers “no,” but does not avert her eyes from the woman. Outside of the restaurant, with her father leading her away by the hand, Bechdel continues to look back toward the woman. The caption reads, “. . .the vision of the truck-driving bulldyke sustained me through the years.”⁶⁴ Despite her father’s disapproval, Bechdel identifies as a lesbian child.

Lisa Kron (of the Five Lesbian Brothers) and Jeanine Tesori’s musical adaptation of *Fun Home* stages this and other moments from Bechdel’s graphic memoir. Unlike most of the examples discussed above, in which adult lesbians recount their lesbian childhoods, in *Fun Home*, a child actress (Sydney Lucas) plays the character of the lesbian child (Small Alison). The musical devotes a song to Bechdel’s cross-gender identification called “Al for Short.” In “Al for Short,” Small Alison (the young Bechdel, played by Sydney Lucas) re-names herself “Al,” a masculine name—before reluctantly adding the “-ison,” and insisting on being called “Al for short.” Al adopts a tough-guy persona, marked musically by short, sharp phrases, and lowers her voice. She imagines herself as a hero, which is traditionally a male role. In her fantasy, Al is a vigilante who roams the streets of Paris in a Mustang Convertible and rescues a woman from her male attacker. The woman Al rescues—which Al voices in saccharine feminine tones and a French accent—rides off into the sunset with Al in the convertible. By adopting the name Al and placing herself in a masculine role, the young Alison engages in cross-gender identification, which has historically been understood as an indicator of lesbianism.⁶⁵

63. Ibid.

64. Ibid., 119.

65. Smith-Rosenberg, “The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870-1936.”

Later in the show, Small Alison continues to perform the figure of the lesbian child with a song about her initial lesbian identification called “Ring of Keys.” As the music begins, Alison, the show’s adult narrator, recalls, “You [Alison’s father] didn’t notice her at first, but I saw her the moment she walked in. . . . She was an old-school butch.”⁶⁶ Small Alison stands downstage, her body facing toward the audience. She looks out over the spectators, where she presumably sees the butch delivery woman. Small Alison sings, “Someone just came in the door, like no one I ever saw before.”⁶⁷ The child Alison admires by the butch woman’s attire and the way she carries herself. She sings,

Your swagger and your bearing
And the just-right clothes you’re wearing
Your short hair and your dungarees and your lace-up boots
And your keys, oh, your ring of keys⁶⁸

Here, Alison’s admiration progresses from the butch woman’s comportment to how well her clothes suit her to the titular “Ring of Keys”—that signature butch accessory. The young Alison identifies with the old-school butch. She sings, “It’s probably conceited to say, / But I think we’re alike in a certain way.”⁶⁹ Feeling a connection between herself and this woman, Alison sings:

Do you feel my heart saying ‘Hi’?
In this whole luncheonette, why am I the only one
Who sees you’re beautiful?
No—I mean handsome!⁷⁰

66. Malone and Lucas, *Ring of Keys*, 0–0:13.

67. *Ibid.*, 0:13–0:20.

68. *Ibid.*, 0:35–0:59.

69. *Ibid.*, 1:19–1:25.

70. *Ibid.*, 1:55–2:18.

Alison notices that she is alone in her admiration of and identification with this woman. But this isolation does not deter her for, at the end of the song, Alison asserts, “I know you, / I know you, / I know you.”⁷¹

The lesbian feminist insistence on the figure of the lesbian child in *Fun Home* and the other performances and protests described above challenges the reproductive futurity associated with the heteropatriarchal nuclear family. If a lesbian child grows into a lesbian adult, she will not participate in heterosexual marriage—the moral touchstone of family values thinking—and will engage in nonprocreative sex. If she elects to have or adopt children of her own, she may not instill family values in those children because she is not enacting them herself. The remainder of this chapter focuses on the ways in which adult lesbians create alternatives to or otherwise challenge family values thinking.

(Anti-)Feminism and the Family

The New Right’s family values that the figure of the lesbian child challenges has been historicized as a backlash against earlier feminist critiques of the nuclear family. Writing in 1989, Ellen Willis identifies the rise of the Christian Right, which “mobiliz[ed] on the premise that feminism was undermining the family and with it society’s moral underpinnings,” as an indicator of radical feminism’s effectiveness.⁷² Similarly, journalist Susan Faludi identifies a backlash against feminism in the United States during the 1980s and ‘90s, and posits the New Right as the well-spring of this anti-feminist backlash. According to Faludi, the leaders of the New Right were among the first to criticize the women’s movement for “dismantling the traditional familial

71. *Ibid.*, 2:43–2:55.

72. Willis, “Foreword,” xi.

support system.”⁷³ That is, the New Right accused feminist thinkers and activists of destroying the nuclear family unit.

These conservative accusations against feminists often reinforced the myth that all feminists are man-hating lesbians out to destroy traditional family structures. During the ‘80s, in the words of artist Jackie Brookner, “Feminism was seen as an evil threat to this haloed security [of Reaganism]—to the security of the family as an institution, to the mating of men and women, and to the jobs of women, already underpaid. ...feminism, in the public mind, ...got frozen in a stop-action photo of a furious, man-hating harpy ready to cut the balls off anything in sight.”⁷⁴ As Brookner’s words illustrate, feminists were perceived as misandrous, castrating women out to destroy the nuclear family unit. New Right rhetoric supports Brookner’s point. In a 1992 fundraising letter written in support of STOP E.R.A., television evangelist and Christian Right leader Pat Robertson asserted that the feminist agenda “is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.”⁷⁵ For Robertson, feminism encourages women to dissolve the dominant family unit by exiting heterosexual marriage and committing infanticide. Here, lesbianism constitutes the grand finale in a succession of feminist sins against the family. Both Brookner’s description of feminism’s reputation and Robertson’s anti-feminist remarks conflate feminism with lesbianism and position both feminism and lesbianism in opposition to the dominant heteropatriarchal unit.

73. Faludi, *Backlash*, 242.

74. Brookner, “Feminism and Students of the ‘80s and ‘90s,” 11.

75. qtd. in “ROBERTSON LETTER ATTACKS FEMINISTS,” A16.

While Robertson's above account of the feminist agenda may be exaggerated, according to Ellen Willis, "radical feminism did exactly what its opponents accuse it of: it played a key role in subverting traditional values and destabilizing the family."⁷⁶ From the late 1960s through the 1970s, many feminist activists and thinkers advanced critiques of the heteropatriarchal nuclear family unit. Betty Friedan wrote of American women's unhappiness in their roles as wives and mothers within the nuclear family unit in *The Feminine Mystique*. In the late '60s and early '70s, radical feminists took on the issues of the nuclear family unit and marriage. In *The Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone asserts that the nuclear family, an example of what she terms "the biological family—the basic reproductive unit of male/female/infant," "is an inherently unequal power distribution."⁷⁷ Journaling about a friend's wedding in 1975, African American feminist Beverly Smith emphasizes the uneven power dynamics associated with heterosexual marriage. Writing about a friend about to get married, Smith observes, "She'll be H.'s chattel from now on. It occurred to me that celebrating a marriage is like celebrating being sold into slavery. ... He will try to make her into his slave, his child, in short, his wife."⁷⁸ Here, Smith makes clear that within heterosexual marriage, husbands outrank their wives. Considered collectively, these feminist critiques of heteropatriarchal kinship structures focus on the ways in which women are disempowered within these structures.

Alongside these critiques, many feminists experimented with alternative, non-hierarchical kinship systems and structures. Some feminists advanced sisterhood as a non-hierarchical alternative to the nuclear family unit. In the feminist movement, sisterhood refers to

76. Willis, "Foreword," xi.

77. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 9.

78. Smith, "The Wedding," 166–67.

solidarity between women. “Sisterhood is powerful” was a popular slogan in the movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The phrase has been attributed to Kathie Sarachild, who included it in an anti-war pamphlet in 1968. In 1969, the Redstockings, a radical feminist group based in New York, featured the slogan on a pin. Robin Morgan published an anthology of second-wave feminist writings called *Sisterhood is Powerful* in 1970. The term “sister,” or its foreign language equivalent, can be found in a variety of feminist rhetoric from the 1970s and beyond: the Combahee River Collective refers to other black feminists as “sisters”; the Radicalesbians collective uses “sister” to refer to other women in the feminist movement in their “Woman Identified Woman” leaflet; and Gloria Anzaldúa frequently addresses her readers as “hermanas.” In these instances and others, the term “sister” appeals to solidarity among women, or among a particular group of women.

Lesbian feminists, often ejected from dominant kinship formations due to their non-normative sexuality, formed a variety of kinship structures of their own. Many lesbian feminists celebrated a turn away from heteropatriarchal social relations and a turn towards relationships with other women. Lesbian feminist definitions of “lesbian” often emphasize solidarity among women. According to radical feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson, “It is the commitment, by choice, full time, of one woman to others of her class, that is called lesbianism.”⁷⁹ Atkinson’s definition calls for solidarity among women above all else. In “Lesbians in Revolt,” Charlotte Bunch of The Furies Collective defines a lesbian as “a woman whose sense of self and energies, including sexual energies, center around women—she is woman identified. The woman-identified woman commits herself to other women for political, emotional, physical, and economic support.

79. *Amazon Odyssey*, 132.

Women are important to her.”⁸⁰ In Bunch’s writing, other women replace the nuclear family as the woman-identified woman’s primary support network. The Furies Collective practiced this kinship among women in its most extreme form—that is, lesbian separatism. Lesbian separatists aim to live out their feminist ideals by removing themselves from patriarchal culture and contact with men to forge a new feminist culture with other women. In addition to these full-time separatist efforts, lesbian communities have historically created ghettoized sites in order to gather with other lesbians, such as the lesbian bar, feminist coffee houses, and the lesbian softball team. Sue-Ellen Case identifies these sites as lesbian spaces in “Making Butch.”⁸¹ In 1990, Carolyn Gage and Sue Carney’s *Amazon All Stars* musical staged and celebrated these alternative lesbian kinship structures and sites.

Staging Sisterhood in No To Men’s *Amazon All Stars*

Carolyn Gage and Sue Carney’s *Amazon All Stars*, a 1990 musical about a lesbian softball team called the Desert Hearts, advances the lesbian feminist kinship principle of sisterhood as an alternative to the male-dominated hierarchy of the heterosexual nuclear family unit. The softball team’s name, the Desert Hearts, signals that the musical will present a lesbian alternative to the heterosexual nuclear family unit: the team takes its name from Donna Deitch’s 1985 film, an adaptation of Jane Rule’s 1964 novel, *Desert of the Heart*. Deitch’s film focuses on a passionate affair between Vivian Bell (Helen Shaver), a professor at Columbia, and Cay Rivvers (Patricia Charbonneau), who works at a Nevada casino. The break-up of the nuclear family unit incites the action of the film. At the start of the film, Vivian arrives in Nevada, eager

80. Bunch, “Lesbians in Revolt,” 30.

81. Case, “Making Butch,” 17, 21, 22.

to dissolve her marriage of twelve years. She lodges at Frances Parkers's divorce ranch, which houses women for six weeks so that they can establish residency in Nevada to take advantage of the state's divorce laws, and exit heterosexual marriage—the basis of the nuclear family unit. Frances (Audra Lindley) herself has cultivated alternative family bonds: she lived with her son's father for 10 years, though he was married to another woman, and, in addition to caring for her biological son, Frances looks after Cay. By the film's end, Vivian and Cay will potentially form an alternative kinship structure together in New York: while Cay is unsure about leaving Nevada, Vivian convinces her to ride the train to the next stop so that they can try to negotiate a life together. Like *Desert Hearts*, *Amazon All Stars* is invested in lesbian kinship principles and formations outside of the nuclear family unit. These kinship formations create lesbian community and further lesbian feminist values rather than heteronormative ones.

In the musical *Amazon All Stars*, the lesbian softball team functions as an extrafamilial kinship formation that, unlike the nuclear family unit, prioritizes relationships between women. For the members of the Desert Hearts, forming relationships with other lesbians serves as a primary motive for playing softball. The Desert Hearts highlight their desire to connect with other lesbians through softball in the number, "Come Out for the Team." In this context, the refrain "Come out for the team" refers to joining the softball team as well as coming out as a lesbian. At the top of the song, team manager Hitch explains that newcomer Jan is "a lesbian. One of the reasons why she wants to join the team is so she can meet other lesbians."⁸² Slide, who plays second base, answers, "Why else does anybody play softball?"⁸³ Here, *Amazon All Stars* indexes the sport's rich lesbian history in the United States. According to Susan K. Cahn,

82. Gage, *All Stars*, 1990, 9:52–9:56.

83. Gage, "All Stars," 1996, 11.

the emergence of the figure of the mannish lesbian in the late 1920s and early 1930s began to cast lesbian aspersions on women athletes.⁸⁴ By the 1950s, Cahn writes, “the fear of lesbianism was greatest where a sport had a particularly masculine image,” such as softball and basketball.⁸⁵ Stereotypes aside, lesbians were and are involved in women’s sports. “From at least the 1940s on,” Cahn writes, “sport provided space for lesbian activity and social networks and served as a path into lesbian culture for young lesbians coming out and searching for companions and community.”⁸⁶ Cahn’s writing attests to the importance of softball teams and other sports teams in the formation of lesbian kinship and community.

Amazon All Stars celebrates softball as a lodestar of lesbian community in the verses of “Come Out for the Team.” The members of the Desert Hearts identify joining the softball team as a way to cultivate friendly and romantic relationships with other lesbians—that is, they sing about the softball team as a lesbian kinship structure. For the devout and closeted Gloria, for instance, playing softball with the Desert Hearts provides a vital connection to other lesbians that is unavailable to her in traditional kinship structures or community settings. She sings,

I was sittin’ in the church one day.
I was kneelin’ in the stall.
I closed my eyes and said a prayer—
The answer came, ‘play ball!’

I didn’t know a single girl—
If you know what I mean,
But in my heart I knew that day
I’d come out for the team!⁸⁷

84. Cahn, “From the ‘Muscle Moll’ to the ‘Butch’ Ballplayer,” 349.

85. *Ibid.*, 355.

86. *Ibid.*, 357.

87. Gage, *All Stars*, 1990, 11:17–11:30.

Playing softball provides lesbian kinship for Gloria, a need that other community spaces—in this case, the church—cannot accommodate. To fulfill her desire to connect with other lesbians, Gloria joins the Desert Hearts.

Lesbian softball teams like the Desert Hearts were sometimes connected to another site of lesbian community, the lesbian bar. Lesbian historian Lillian Faderman writes that lesbian bars began to sponsor softball teams in the 1950s and '60s, and that softball players often frequented the bars to celebrate their victories or to commiserate after a loss.⁸⁸ Maud's, the San Francisco lesbian bar, sponsored a softball team known as the Maudettes into the 1980s. In the documentary film *Last Call at Maud's*, Maud's bartender and softball player Joann Shirley talks about softball's role in helping lesbians locate community. Shirley explains, "People would get into town and they'd want to know where to meet women. ... They'd just say, 'Where is the softball field? Where do the girls play softball?' And they'd go to the games and follow the girls afterwards."⁸⁹ Bar sponsorship of lesbian sports teams continued into the seventies and eighties, when gays and lesbians began to form athletic leagues of their own. In *Amazon All Stars*, the Desert Hearts play for an all-lesbian league called the Lavender League.

Amazon All Stars stages the link between lesbian softball teams and the bars as sites of lesbian community. The scenes of the play mostly move between the team locker room and a bar called the Rubyfruit Bar and Grill, where members of the Desert Hearts gather after softball practice. The bar shares a name with Rita Mae Brown's lesbian bildungsroman, *Rubyfruit Jungle*. The bar's name identifies it as a lesbian space for those with subcultural knowledge. The

88. Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 161.

89. qtd. in Poirier, *Last Call at Maud's*, 39:35–40:00.

“Rubyfruit Bar and Grill” number further characterizes the bar as a lesbian space. The bartender (who also functions as the emcee for the evening) sings,

When it’s five, five o’clock
Then it’s time, time to stop
She takes off her sweater
She puts on the leather
For the Rubyfruit
Rubyfruit Bar and Grill⁹⁰

The lyrics set the Rubyfruit in opposition to the normative world, represented here by the workplace. While the lesbian barfly must wear office-appropriate attire in the workplace, when the workday ends, she changes out of her office attire and dresses for the Rubyfruit. The other verses similarly use clothing to emphasize a woman’s transformation as she moves from heterosexual spaces to the lesbian space of the Rubyfruit. The bartender sings, “She takes off her linen suit / She puts on the cowboy boots,” and, “She writes him a note good-bye / Walks out with his coat and tie.”⁹¹ These lines refer to a lesbian penchant for cowboy boots and a larger history of butch women wearing men’s clothes, respectively. The costumes worn by some of the women onstage reflect the styles that the bartender sings about. The bartender herself wears a leather vest and pants, and a butch bar patron wears a man’s suit. As the bartender sings about lesbians dressing for the bar, a butch and femme couple dances downstage, the butch spinning and dipping the femme. As the number comes to a close, members of the Desert Hearts team enter the bar fresh from practice. At the bar, the teammates flirt and fight with each other, furthering or fraying the friendships and romantic pursuits that started on the field.

90. Gage, *All Stars*, 1990, 34:35–35:00.

91. *Ibid.*, 35:08–35:15, 35:30–35:38.

Against the backdrop of the lesbian spaces of the softball locker room and the bar, *Amazon All Stars* stages the potential for the lesbian softball team to practice a lesbian feminist set of values. At the top of the show, the Desert Hearts are divided by a conflict in values. Players such as Ursula and Leona espouse traditional (patriarchal) values insofar as they prioritize competition—that is, winning softball games and competing for the league pennant. Team manager Hitch, on the other hand, would prefer to nurture her players' interests and have fun. The question of who should play shortstop highlights the team's differences over these values. Ursula and Leona are frustrated with Ruth, the current shortstop whose alcoholism has made her an unreliable player. When an experienced shortstop named Jan joins the team, Ursula and Leona hope that Jan will replace Ruth. This change in the line-up would better the team's chances of winning, and could propel them towards the league pennant. But Hitch is reluctant to ask Ruth to give up playing shortstop. When catcher Leona presses Hitch to put Ruth in right field, Hitch says, "I don't know, Leona. It just seems like lesbians have it hard enough everywhere else. When we get together to play softball, maybe it's more important to let people do what they want."⁹² When Leona declares that she would prefer to play on a winning team, Hitch replies, "But that's what the whole straight world is about—winning. Isn't there a place where people can just do what they do and enjoy it, without always getting criticized and judged about it?"⁹³ Here, Hitch characterizes winning as a heteropatriarchal principle. She questions the value of winning and its accompanying culture of criticism. She ponders the value of supporting one another and striving for happiness instead.

92. Gage, "All Stars," 1996, 37.

93. Ibid.

The show aligns Hitch's values with the lesbian feminist ideal of sisterhood, which emphasizes bonds between women as a non-hierarchical alternative to the nuclear family unit. The emphasis on sisterhood is most apparent in one of Kelly's fantasy sequences, which function as a coping mechanism for living in a patriarchal society—team manager Hitch implies that Kelly is a survivor of violence against women. While Kelly may be disempowered in the patriarchal order of her everyday life, she plays the hero in her feminist fantasy life. As the team debates over whether Ruth should continue as shortstop, the locker room scene is interrupted by Kelly's fantasy. The stage goes dark as the opening theme from *Star Trek* plays. The lights come up on a *Star Trek*-inspired fantasy sequence that takes place aboard the Starship Intercourse. The all-women crew needs "Dr. Kellinka" to save them from an attack by an enemy ship. The enemy ship sends the following messages: "Surrender yourselves. You are completely under my power. You must give yourselves up. It is useless to resist. You must obey my commands."⁹⁴ Given the implied hierarchy and violent nature of the messages, the captain determines that "we have encountered...a rare specimen left over from the Gender Wars five hundred years ago. ... It's a man."⁹⁵ To escape this man, who is intent on destroying the SS Intercourse with nuclear missiles, Dr. Kellinka must help the crew make the jump to Sisterspace.

Sisterspace represents the lesbian feminist ideal of sisterhood, as well as a separatist sanctuary after the crew's dangerous encounter with a man. As one crew member declares, "The men have never been able to penetrate Sisterspace."⁹⁶ In contrast to the man's threats, Sisterspace provides the crew food and shelter with a domestic flare: once in Sisterspace, the

94. Gage, *All Stars*, 1990, 1:12:27–1:12:35.

95. *Ibid.*, 1:12:41–1:12:50.

96. *Ibid.*, 1:13:47.

ship's communication screen reads, "Make yourselves at home. There's pie in the fridge. And don't forget to wipe your shoes."⁹⁷ A celebratory number promotes sisterhood as a feminist kinship principle and advances a separatist vision of a world without men. The captain invites the band to join them on stage, and the women form a circle facing the audience. Lesbian feminists favor the circle because it is considered to be a non-hierarchical shape: a circle has no clear beginning and end, and distributes power evenly. The women forming the circle then start the "Sisterspace" number. Two musicians beat hand drums and another bangs a tambourine while the other women dance and sway. The first verse exalts women: the captain sings out to the audience,

We are women,
We are beautiful—
Women strong and free!
We are women,
We are wonderful—
Wonderful you and wonderful me!⁹⁸

The repetition of the collective subject "we" emphasizes the importance of sisterhood. Musically, the song's chorus enacts sisterhood by having the women join voices in a round. This sisterhood flourishes in a separatist space. The song continues with, "Sisterspace, sisterspace / How grand it will be / When the men are all gone / and the world will be free,"⁹⁹ and, "Sisterspace, sisterspace / Peace in the land / When the men are all gone / We'll stand hand in hand and sway."¹⁰⁰ The

97. Ibid., 1:14:13–1:14:20.

98. Ibid., 1:14:45–1:14:55.

99. Ibid., 1:15:05–1:15:15.

100. Ibid., 1:15:16–1:15:31.

song advances a vision of women living in a world without men so that they can enjoy peace and freedom.

For many women, the practice of lesbian separatism referred to in “Sisterspace” constitutes a feminist alternative to heteropatriarchal social structures, including the nuclear family unit. Several performing members of No To Men—the troupe that staged *Amazon All Stars*—and a significant portion of No To Men’s audiences practiced lesbian separatism, living in their own “Sisterspace” of Oregon’s women’s lands. In southern Oregon, women experimented with new ways to live and work together on women’s lands such as WomanShare, OWL (Oregon Women’s Land) Farm, Rootworks, and Rainbow’s End. Many of these women had previously lived in other intentional communities as part of the back-to-the-land movement, but founded or sought out women’s lands to put their lesbian feminist ideals into practice. These women’s lands, some privately owned and others collectively owned, were built and maintained by women, and often served as artistic hubs. Lesbian visual artist, photographer, and writer Tee Corinne lived and made work in Oregon, and often hosted meetings of the Southern Oregon Women Writers’ Group, Gourmet Eating Society and Chorus—of which *Amazon All Stars* book writer and lyricist Carolyn Gage was a member—at her home.¹⁰¹ The women who live in these communities practice separatism in their everyday lives.

The theater group who staged *Amazon All Stars*, No To Men, also practiced separatism, and strove to practice the sisterhood modeled in the musical. Founded by Carolyn Gage in southern Oregon in 1988, No To Men was an all-women’s radical feminist community theater group that espoused sisterhood as a feminist form of kinship. This ideal of sisterhood is central to Gage’s vision for No To Men: Gage writes, “My theatre...named men as the problem and suggested that

101. Gage, “Hidden Treasure.”

women should learn to fight back [against the patriarchy] and to love each other.”¹⁰² The group enacted Gage’s women-centered vision by staging work that was by, for, and about women. No To Men produced numerous original works by Gage as well as plays such as Susan Glaspell’s *Trifles*, Mary Shaw’s suffrage play *The Parrot Cage*, and J.M. Barrie’s *The Twelve Pound Look*, a play about a woman who seeks a divorce and her own income. (A production of Holly Hughes’s *Dress Suits to Hire* had been planned for July of 1988, but was canceled.) While the group welcomed heterosexual and lesbian women alike, according to Gage, heterosexual women “invariably dropped out, usually by the second week of rehearsals, which is when they would begin to perceive a covert lesbian agenda behind the production.”¹⁰³

While No To Men welcomed all women to join the group, as the group’s name implies, men were not welcome to join or see the group’s stage productions. No To Men practiced separatism to nurture women’s interests and talents. Gage cautions that “Separatism is not an end in itself, but a means to an end.”¹⁰⁴ In “No Dobermans Allowed: A Dramatic Argument for Separatist Theatre,” Gage details what a separatist woman’s theater makes possible. This document served as No To Men’s manifesto, and was a national finalist in The Playwrights’ Center’s 2003 Manifesto Competition. The manifesto explores the hypothetical situation of building a theater in a town that’s being attacked by vicious dobermans—an allegory for men’s dominance over and violence against women. The goals of the theatre are to provide not only respite from the dobermans, but to advance a critique of the dobermans. After the allegory, Gage provides the following addendum:

102. Gage, “Missing Lesbian Theatre,” 4.

103. *Ibid.*, 3.

104. Gage, “Dobermans,” np.

A women's theatre, that is, a theatre for women which serves our interests, has a special obligation to exclude men, both from the cast and from the audience. Removing men, like compliance with fire codes, not only guarantees the safety of the women in the audience, but frees us from conditions which might give rise to concerns about our safety, concerns which will distract us and detract from our experience of the performance.¹⁰⁵

Here, Gage identifies separatism as a necessary component of a theatre that strives to advance women's interests.

In addition to staging lesbian feminist sisterhood and separatism, *Amazon All Stars* contrasts these modes of kinship with the demands of heteropatriarchy. Another of Kelly's fantasies illustrates how heteropatriarchal values interrupt or prevent bonds between women. In this fantasy sequence, Kelly is a famous softball player who has been fatally struck in the head by a softball. As she lays on her deathbed, women who have wronged Kelly over the course of her life—including Kelly's girlhood friend and Kelly's mother—come to apologize for their hurtful actions. When Kelly's girlhood friend Mary comes to Kelly's side, Kelly recalls, "I remember a girl named Mary Richland, but after she started dating boys, she didn't have time for me anymore."¹⁰⁶ Mary prioritized romantic pursuits with young men over her relationship with Kelly. Mary's pursuit of a heterosexual romantic partnership—the basis of heteropatriarchal kinship structures—destroyed the young women's friendship. In the fantasy scene, Mary regrets letting her relationship with Kelly deteriorate. She sobs, "Being your friend was the only bright spot in a life which has been a weary trail of broken promises, betrayed hopes, and blighted prospects. ... You've been a better friend to me than any boy could ever be. I'm so sorry, I didn't see that then. If it's any comfort, my entire life is ruined."¹⁰⁷ In retrospect, Mary regrets not

105. Ibid.

106. Gage, *All Stars*, 1990, 1:51:15.

107. Ibid., 1:51:20–55.

prioritizing her friendship with Kelly. After Mary leaves, Kelly's mother arrives. When Kelly's mother tells Kelly how proud she is of her, Kelly says, "Really? I thought you always wanted grandchildren."¹⁰⁸ Kelly's surprise indicates that Kelly's refusal to enter into a heterosexual relationship and bear children had come between herself and her mother. In Kelly's fantasy, though, her lesbianism brings herself and her mother closer together. At Kelly's bedside, her mother confesses, "All I ever dreamed of was having you grow up to be strong and athletic, and wear very, very short hair and date other nice girls. ... [The fact that you're a lesbian] is the answer to my prayers!"¹⁰⁹ As in the interaction between Kelly and Mary, the demands of heteronormativity drive women apart, but Kelly's fantasy repairs relationships between women.

The emphasis on relationships between women in *Amazon All Stars* advances lesbian feminist forms of kinship and community. These lesbian feminist kinship structures encourage women to prioritize and care for each other, a radical proposal in a society where women are expected to support the men in their lives, even over and above themselves, as wives, mothers, and sisters. Other lesbian performances from this period interrogate a woman's role in traditional, heteropatriarchal marriage.

Criticizing Marriage and the "Wife" Role

This section examines lesbian feminist critiques of and alternatives to heterosexual marriage—the foundation of the heteropatriarchal nuclear family—by exploring how those issues were staged in Shirlene Holmes's play *A Lady and a Woman*, Sharon Bridgforth's solo piece *no mo blues* and its performative audio adaptation, *the bull-jean stories*, and Split

108. Ibid., 1:52:23.

109. Ibid., 1:52:25.

Britches's *Anniversary Waltz* performance. While criticism of the institution of marriage is largely remembered as a white, middle-class woman's issue, Holmes's and Bridgforth's works stage lesbian alternatives to heterosexual marriage in African American contexts.

Sharon Bridgforth's *no mo blues* and *the bull-jean stories* critique heterosexual marital roles. These pieces perform the same material in different forms: *no mo blues* is a one-woman show performed live by Sonja Parks, while *the bull-jean stories* revises and expands the text of *no mo blues* in print and as an audio recording performed by Bridgforth. The material in *no mo blues* and *the bull-jean stories* centers around bull-jean, a butch lesbian character who circulates through much of Bridgforth's oeuvre. These materials offer a loose narrative of bull-jean's life in an African American community in rural 1920s Mississippi, cobbled together from stories told by the women in that community. I will focus on bull-jean's efforts to find a woman to settle down with.

no mo blues challenges the primacy of the romantic couple. The various storytellers, all performed and embodied by Parks, each narrate a failed romantic relationship of bull-jean's. At the end of the performance, bull-jean decides to stop pursuing a romantic partner. She says,

no mo
sleeping with sorrow in
a empty bed no mo
longing what cain't
be filled/no mo
yo-last-visit-ghost give
me haint'd heart/cain't
get drunk enough mind scarred i ain't chasing the blues

no mo
it's time
i
settle down with me!¹¹⁰

110. Bridgforth, "No Mo Blues," 51–52.

Here, bull-jean declares her refusal to suffer more heartache. She catalogs the feelings of sadness, loneliness, and emptiness that have come of her pursuit of romantic love. After re-asserting her refusal of these feelings, bull-jean decides that she does not need to be in a couple, that she is enough for herself.

the bull-jean stories revises this aspect of bull-jean’s life, re-focusing the critique on the role of the wife in heteropatriarchal marriage arrangements. In *the bull-jean stories*, bull-jean does not refuse to pursue coupledness. After a series of failed relationships, bull-jean takes up with a woman named mina. bull-jean wants to commit to a long-term partnership with mina, but as the speaker explains, “bull-jean can’t capture mina, mina got to want to come stay.”¹¹¹ When bull-jean asks mina to be her wife, mina says,

why you trying to call me yo wife bull-jean
wife
what do that mean anyway?
i been called wife befo
turned my whole life ova to the concept/to
obey to have forever till death...
.....
look likwife
is a word folk use when they want
license to control you...¹¹²

Here, mina rejects the role of wife, deromanticizing the term and expounding on its problematic implications. mina highlights a wife’s status as subservient to and property of her husband. The word “license” emphasizes the ways in which the law imposes this lesser status on legally married women. mina refuses to be bull-jean’s wife. Whereas wifehood demands a marital commitment until death, mina pledges to stay “*long as its right*,” and invites bull-jean to refer to

111. Bridgforth, *Bull-Jean and Mina Stay*, 1:52–1:58.

112. Bridgforth, *Bull-Jean Stories*.

her as “yo wo ’mn.”¹¹³ bull-jean accepts this, and the women enter into a partnership rather than a traditional marriage.

Shirlene Holmes’s *A Lady and a Woman* similarly comments on marriage and wifhood in an African American context. Written in 1990, *A Lady and a Woman* follows the development of a lesbian romance between two African American women living in the south during the late 19th century. The play progresses episodically, with each scene advancing the romantic relationship between Biddie Higgins, a butch hog cutter, and Miss Flora Divine, an innkeeper and a folk healer. In the play’s opening scene, Biddie, captivated by Miss Flora, probes to find out if Miss Flora is married. When Biddie asks after Miss Flora’s husband, Miss Flora replies, “A friend once told me that ‘marriage is one of them institutions for the insane.’”¹¹⁴ Here, Miss Flora is openly critical of the institution of heterosexual marriage. She goes on to explain that she was once married, but she threw out her husband after he became abusive towards her.

A Lady and a Woman stages Miss Flora and Biddie’s lesbian marriage as an alternative to the institution of heterosexual marriage. Biddie’s proposal to Miss Flora departs from the script and staging of a traditional marriage proposal. Biddie does not propose on bended knee to a standing Miss Flora. When Biddie asks, “Miss Flora, will you marry me?” both women are on their hands and knees, for they have been scrubbing the floors. In this scene and others, the women share the burden of domestic labor. This arrangement already distinguishes the women from heteropatriarchal couples in which domestic labor falls solely to the wife and not her husband. Miss Flora does not reply to Biddie’s proposal with a “yes” or “no” answer, but asks in return, “For how long?” Biddie presents Miss Flora with a bone ring to mark their commitment,

113. Ibid.

114. Holmes, “A Lady and a Woman,” 187.

and refers to her as a bride. Miss Flora asks, “Who’s the husband?,” but Biddie refuses that title, explaining that “He’s the one you threw out the door.”¹¹⁵ In refusing the title of husband, Biddie differentiates herself from Miss Flora’s husband, and implies that her marriage with Miss Flora will be different from Miss Flora’s previous abusive marriage.

Later, the women perform a marriage ceremony to enact their commitment to one another. Their marriage ceremony similarly differs from the heterosexual marriage script. Biddie says, “All I want to say is ‘I do’ and kiss you like everybody else,” but Miss Flora replies, “We ain’t like everybody else.”¹¹⁶ This exchange marks their departure from the institution of heterosexual marriage. Miss Flora and Biddie’s ceremony takes the form of a prayer to God, with no preacher and no witnesses present. Whereas traditional vows emphasize fidelity and permanence, Miss Flora and Biddie’s prayer emphasizes love and care for one another. Miss Flora speaks of the love between her and Biddie as sustenance. She says, “make our love and faith the power / and turn that into something / for us to live on.”¹¹⁷ Biddie says, “Let us be good to one another.”¹¹⁸ The women’s marriage prayer asks God to help the women continue to love and care for each other.

Unlike traditional marriage ceremonies, neither woman is given away; rather, the women pledge themselves to one another freely. Traditional marriage ceremonies ritualize a man’s possession of a woman: the bride’s father escorts her down the aisle and gives her to her new

115. Ibid., 207.

116. Ibid., 212.

117. Ibid., 211.

118. Ibid.

husband in marriage. Miss Flora, on the other hand, refuses to be referred to as a possession in the following exchange:

BIDDIE: ... You supposed to protect what is yours.
MISS FLORA: I ain't yours.
BIDDIE: Then whose are you?
MISS FLORA: I'm my own, but you welcome to share.
BIDDIE: But we belong to each other.
MISS FLORA: We belong with each other.¹¹⁹

Here, Miss Flora distinguishes her marital attachment to Biddie from a sense of possession and ownership. While heterosexual marriage has a history of coverture, in which a man gains control of his wife's assets, and currently guarantees shared property rights, Miss Flora and Biddie's marriage does not entail ownership of one's spouse or her property.

Holmes's *A Lady and a Woman* and Bridgforth's *no mo blues* and *the bull-jean stories* stage lesbian alternatives to the heterosexual couple and the expectations associated with heterosexual wifhood in an African American context. These works advance a critique that has largely been characterized or historicized as white from African American perspectives. The characters in these works highlight the uneven power dynamics associated with heteropatriarchal marriage through dialogue. Refusing to practice these problematic power dynamics in their own relationships, they perform alternatives to heterosexual marriage and wifhood.

Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, on the other hand, perform a critique of heterosexual marriage and wifhood through an excessive performance of heterosexual marriage rituals in *The Anniversary Waltz*. The series of skits and monologues that constitute the show stages a critique of the institution of marriage alongside a celebration of Shaw and Weaver's romantic and working relationships. The opening of the show sets up marriage as a heterosexual institution.

119. Ibid., 213.

The Tammy Wynette and George Jones 1972 duet “The Ceremony” plays as the spectators take their seats. The song intersperses the spoken lines of a Christian wedding ceremony between a man and a woman with Wynette and Jones singing vows of love and fidelity to each other. The song is the show’s first of many references to failed marriages: Wynette and Jones both left existing marriages to be with each other, and their own marriage would famously end in divorce six years later (though they would continue to collaborate artistically). After the song, the silhouette of what appears to be a giant wedding cake topper—a woman in a bridal gown standing alongside a man in a tuxedo—can be seen onstage. The lights come up to reveal not a heterosexual couple, but Weaver in the wedding gown and Shaw in the suit. The butch-femme couple standing in for the heterosexual couple draws attention to marriage as a heterosexual institution.

Weaver and Shaw go on to highlight the sentimentality attached to marriage rituals in the United States. Weaver and Shaw perform a stagey rendition of “The Anniversary Song,” in which the singer recalls his wedding. Holding each other while cheating their bodies out toward the audience, Weaver and Shaw sing the schmaltzy waltz lyrics, “Oh, how we danced on the night we were wed / We vowed our true love, though a word wasn’t said.”¹²⁰ As the music continues, they enact the opening events of a wedding reception: they perform a “first dance,” with dramatic, swooping dips and spins. They come out of the dance to hold a few poses, smiling like a happy couple on their wedding day. The spotlight blinks with each pose, suggesting a wedding photographer’s camera flashes. Weaver and Shaw create the image of the perfect happy couple.

120. Weaver and Shaw, *The Anniversary Waltz*, 2:15.

But Weaver and Shaw do not sustain this image of the mawkishly happy couple for long. Shaw and Weaver critique the institution of marriage by performing a failing marriage. Tensions between Shaw and Weaver grow as the show progresses. After the “photos,” Weaver announces to the spectators that it’s the couple’s ten-year anniversary, addressing them as guests. As Weaver welcomes her guests and tells them how happy she and Shaw are together, Shaw keeps chiming in. Weaver becomes visibly flustered by Shaw’s interruptions, but regains composure by plastering a smile on her face. Weaver covers her frustration by touching Shaw’s arm and saying, “She’s my other half!” Shaw replies with a dig, “Your better half,” in a saccharine tone. Later in the show, Shaw accuses Weaver of trying to end their relationship. Weaver tries to reassure Shaw that she isn’t going anywhere, but Shaw isn’t soothed. Weaver suggests doing the domestic labor of washing dishes to distract Shaw. “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feeling” plays as the couple begins their chore, underlining the tensions that follow. Shaw keeps trying to embrace Weaver, but Weaver pushes Shaw away, preferring to do the dishes. Though Shaw is wounded by Weaver’s rejection, she joins her in a dishwashing routine that dramatizes the deterioration of their relationship. Femme Weaver wears a pink apron and rubber gloves and washes her dishes in a pink basin with a pink washcloth. The butch Shaw’s dishwashing accessories, on the other hand, are blue. At the top of the routine, the women are totally in synch—they put their gloves on and wash and dry each dish with the exact same movements. But as the routine progresses, Weaver becomes critical of Shaw’s cleaning, and Shaw splashes Weaver. The women are openly frustrated with each other by the end of the song. They are no longer the happy couple portrayed earlier in the show.

Shaw and Weaver further their critique of marriage by performing bits about extramarital affairs. Here, Weaver and Shaw highlight the ways in which marriage assumes monogamy by

performing instances of non-monogamy. They lip-synch a scene from the 1958 film adaptation of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, with Shaw playing Maggie in a purple gown and Weaver playing Maggie's husband Brick in a suit. Shaw/Maggie tries to seduce the indifferent Weaver/Brick. Weaver/Brick not only rejects Shaw/Maggie's advances, but also tells her to take a lover. Weaver and Shaw follow the *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* scene with Nichols and May's "Adultery" skit. Shaw introduces the skit by saying, "We'd like to say a few words about adultery: it's coming back."¹²¹ They then depict three different adulterous couples: an American couple, wracked with guilt over their infidelity but determined to use the room they paid for; a polite English couple who are more passionate about their clothes than each other; and a French couple who make do with each other because they've forgotten to bring the third party along. These skits emphasize that monogamy is not the only way to practice marriage and intimacy, and suggest a whole other range of ways of being together and forming a family.

These representations of lesbian couples and lesbian feminist kinship structures and communities from the 1980s and '90s present a multitude of alternatives to heteropatriarchal kinship structures. These performances critique heteropatriarchal notions of family and marriage while imagining the values and relationships that other forms of kinship might make possible. While the contemporary LGBT movement focuses on extending marriage rights to lesbian and gay couples, little has been done to address forms of kinship that do not fit the marriage mold. These performances serve as reminders that traditional marriage is just one form of LGBT kinship, and that the contemporary movement might turn its attention towards alternative kinship structures.

121. Ibid., 31:31.

CHAPTER 3: CENSORSHIP IN THE NOT-SO-LESBIAN NATION

When lesbian folksinger Phranc introduces herself to her live audiences, she says, “I’m Phranc, with a P-H and a hard C, and I’m just your typical all-American Jewish lesbian folksinger.” The phrase presents a humorous contradiction in terms: given the heteronormative Puritan values of the United States, there is nothing “all-American” about identifying as a Jewish lesbian. If the term “all-American” is generally understood to refer to a hetero/sexist, white, middle-class ideal of wholesomeness—the very thing for which the proponents of “family values” (discussed in the previous chapter) express nostalgia—then this introduction evokes anything but. Phranc’s disidentification with normative ethnic and sexual codes is suggestive of many grassroots lesbian performances throughout the 1980s and ‘90s that explored the tensions between national, lesbian, and ethnic identities. Some performances highlighted the state’s assumption of heteronormativity while others challenged state-sanctioned homophobia, expressed largely through the censorship of lesbian and gay artists and works.

While, in this dissertation, I focus on the relationship between lesbian identifications and those invoked by national identificatory mechanisms in the 1980s and 1990s, a long history of state heterosexism in the United States ensconced in the legal code has set the stage for the culture wars of this period as well as the performances mounted in response. As far back as the colonial period, anti-sodomy laws prohibited sex acts largely between men, with at least two documented cases concerning sex between women.¹ The surveillance of sexual acts spread to morality-based social movements in the late nineteenth century that began a legal legacy of regulating “obscene” materials, a censorship practice that continues today.² In the 1950s, state

1. Rupp, *A Desired Past*, 27–28.

2. Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 138–39.

opposition to lesbians and gays took on still another dimension. Government officials and everyday citizens alike perceived homosexuals as threats to national security, resulting in an anti-homosexual panic and a purge of (suspected) lesbian and gay government employees that have collectively been termed “the lavender scare.”³ In the 1960s, homosexuality was against the law in some way, shape, or form in all states, with the exception of Illinois.⁴

With the emergence of the gay and women’s liberation movements, some lesbians and gay men took up this division between homosexuals and the state. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, gay liberationists positioned themselves against the state with the popular chant, “2-4-6-8, smash the church, smash the state!” After the feminist and LGBT gains of the 1970s, moral panic ensued in the 1980s and ‘90s over the perceived disintegration of family values (as the previous chapter details), ushering in the culture wars. Family values proponents sought to reaffirm the heteronormativity of the state by promoting all-American values and the nuclear family unit.

In arts contexts, efforts to preserve the heteronormativity of the state manifested as battles over government-funded lesbian and gay artists and art works. Conservative legislators such as Jesse Helms denounced lesbian and gay works as “pornographic” or “obscene”—labels that had gained political currency during the feminist sex wars (discussed in Chapter 1), when anti-pornography feminists found themselves in an unholy alliance with the Religious Right and embarked on a censorship crusade. American anti-pornography efforts have had a transnational impact: Catherine MacKinnon’s anti-pornography legal theory proved pivotal in Canada’s Butler decision, which updated obscenity laws to include material deemed harmful to women. This purportedly feminist decision resulted in Canadian customs censoring LGBT materials, often

3. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*.

4. Wolf, “Stonewall,” np.

burning books and magazines rather than allowing them to enter the country.⁵ Feminist anti-pornography legislation was less successful in the United States: an ordinance declaring that pornography violated women's rights was adopted in Minneapolis, Indianapolis, and Bellingham, Washington, but in each instance, the ordinance was repealed or struck down in court. Even so, the feminist anti-porn stance that pornography was harmful to women persisted in the rhetoric of the Republican Party,⁶ bolstered by the Meese Report, which linked the act of viewing pornography to acts of violence. While pornography and its effects were considered in heterosexist terms in the Meese Report and elsewhere, conservative legislators began applying the terms "pornographic" and "obscene" to federally funded representations of lesbian and gay sex acts in performance, art, and film. Opposition to lesbian and gay artists and content, fueled by conservative allegations of obscenity, prompted various forms of censorship, including the closing of shows and exhibits, the withdrawal of federal funding, and the denial of applications for federal funding.

This chapter will examine lesbian performances that respond to these instances of state-sanctioned homophobia in US and Canadian contexts. Holly Hughes's *Preaching to the Perverted* addresses, parodically, the withdrawal of federal funding for her work and the resulting lawsuit. Janice Perry's *WORLD POWER SEX CONTROL* enacts performance's potential to speak against and even circumvent state censorship. The Kiss & Tell Collective's *True Inversions* comments on state censorship practices. Alongside these performed responses to state censorship, I will also consider lesbian performances and imagery that emphasize and critique the heteronormativity of national identity in the United States and Canada, like Shawna

5. Califia, "Among Us, Against Us: Right-Wing Feminism," 107.

6. Republican Party, "Republican Party Platforms: Republican Party Platform of 1984."

Dempsey and Lorri Millan's video, *Lesbian National Parks and Services: A Force of Nature*. As this chapter will detail, the state advanced its opposition to lesbian and gay subjects by refusing to fund lesbian and gay artists and art works.

Today, this historical division between lesbians and the state has, to an extent, been superseded: under the banner of multiculturalism, an assimilated lesbian and gay population is becoming more visible in politics and public life in the United States, producing what Lisa Duggan calls "homonormativity."⁷ Jasbir Puar considers homonormativity in a national context, coining the term "homonationalism" to denote lesbian and gay assimilation to heteronormative ideals and thus national projects.⁸ As Puar details, homonationalism entails folding white lesbian and gay subjects into the nation, a process that often depends on the repudiation of queers of color. While Duggan and Puar's respective works focus on the United States, Canada has its own history of homonormativity and homonationalism. In the current climate of increasing homonormativity and homonationalism, it is important to retain a critical position. Whereas Puar offers the terrorist assemblage as an alternative to homonationalism, I offer the state-resistant lesbian performer.

Highlighting Heteronormativity, or the Not-So-Lesbian Nation

As conservatives sought to revive an all-American national identity in the 1980s and '90s, Phranc's musical performances highlighted the heteronormativity of that identity. As cited above, Phranc introduces herself at live performances as the "typical all-American Jewish lesbian folksinger," setting the entire concert within that context. Phranc stages the tension between the

7. Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*, 62, 68.

8. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*.

lesbian and wholesome, “all-American” heteronormative identity in her campy cover of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s “I Enjoy Being a Girl.” In its original context in the musical *Flower Drum Song*, “I Enjoy Being a Girl” celebrates Linda Low’s westernized femininity and heterosexuality as her successful assimilation into an all-American national identity. The song’s exaltation of heterosexuality is apparent from the start. In the *Flower Drum Song* film, strains of “I Enjoy Being a Girl” begin to play when Linda Low (Nancy Kwan) gets a phone call from Wang Ta, who asks her for a date. Ms. Low accepts, and sings “I Enjoy Being a Girl” as she gets ready. The song’s lyrics describe the joy Linda takes in performing heterosexual femininity. As Linda preens and poses in front of the mirror, admiring herself, she sings,

I adore being dressed in something frilly
When my date comes to get me at my place.
Out I go with my Joe or John or Billy,
Like a filly who is ready for the race!⁹

She goes on to describe the thrills of heterosexual flirting: when men admire her looks, she “just lap[s] it up like honey,”¹⁰ and when they whistle in appreciation of her bikini-clad body, she’s “happy to know the whistle’s meant for me [her].”¹¹ Linda’s performance of normative femininity is addressed to heterosexual men, rendering it consistent with heteronormative American identity.

While Kwan’s 1961 film performance of “I Enjoy Being a Girl” celebrates heteronormativity as American, Phranc’s performance of “I Enjoy Being a Girl” is critical of heteronormativity. Phranc’s performance is vastly different from Kwan’s in that the lyrics do not

9. *I Enjoy Being A Girl Flower Drum Song Movie*, 1:10–1:26.

10. *Ibid.*, 1:45–2:02.

11. *Ibid.*, 3:59–4:17.

correspond with Phranc's image. As illustrated above, "I Enjoy Being a Girl" is a paean to heteronormative femininity, and a glorification of Linda Low's successful citation of the norms of American femininity. Phranc's performance of "I Enjoy Being a Girl" enacts just the opposite: rather than reinforcing Phranc's femininity, her rendition of the song foregrounds her failure to fulfill feminine norms. Whereas Linda Low is the picture of femininity, Phranc is far from it. Phranc's butch masculinity, made legible via her combination of flattop haircut, turtleneck sweaters, and combat boots, lends the lyric "I am proud that my silhouette is curvy" an ironic significance.¹² Similarly, Phranc is openly lesbian, as she announces at the top of all of her live appearances, so she's not going out "with my [her] Joe or John or Billy."¹³ When performing the song live, Phranc throws tampons bearing the song's title on them to her audience. Here, Phranc's addition to the Rogers and Hammerstein tune draws attention to the link between biology and gender that naturalizes femininity for female bodies. While the hourglass shape of the ideal female body is linked to femininity in the *Flower Drum Song* film, Phranc's distribution of tampons plays on menstruation as a guarantor of femininity. This choice is ironic in that in the United States, menstruation is considered an inconvenience rather than something to be enjoyed (as is evidenced by many a tampon commercial).

Phranc's arrangement of the Rogers and Hammerstein tune further emphasizes her distance from Kwan's performance in the 1961 *Flower Drum Song* film. Whereas the film dub sits in the key of D major, with notes ranging from A3 to C# 5, Phranc's rendition is in F major, and sits in a much lower range than the film version, with notes ranging from C3 to E4. Phranc's rendition of "I Enjoy Being a Girl" is decidedly lower than the film dub of the song. In fact, most

12. Phranc, *I Enjoy Being a Girl*, 0:12–0:16.

13. *Ibid.*, 0:30–0:35.

of Phranc's songs sit in the same range as the film dub of "I Enjoy Being a Girl." As a result of Phranc's choice of a lower key, she sings in a deep voice rather than her usual lighter timbre, lending her voice a more masculine sound that counters the song's emphasis on femininity. Similarly, the instrumentation that Phranc employs in her recording of "I Enjoy Being a Girl" foregrounds her campy quotation. Phranc usually accompanies herself on acoustic guitar, which provides a naturalized sound as opposed to the artifice of the synthesizer in "I Enjoy Being a Girl." Phranc also employs synthesizers in her cover of Van Heusen and Burke's "Moonlight Becomes You"—another chestnut from the American songbook.¹⁴ In addition to being a departure from Phranc's usual acoustic stylings, in both "I Enjoy Being a Girl" and "Moonlight Becomes You," Phranc's use of synthesizers stands in marked contrast from the traditionally lush orchestrations, supplied by musicians playing acoustic instruments, of these standards. While Phranc's quotation of "I Enjoy Being a Girl" recalls Nancy Kwan's performance as Linda Low in the 1961 *Flower Drum Song* film, Phranc's performance of the Rodgers and Hammerstein tune imbues it with new meaning, ironically re-performing Kwan's earnest citation of feminine norms in order to assert Phranc's distance from normative heterosexual femininity.

Along with her choice of masculine fashion and her ironic citation of heteronormative song texts, Phranc's album covers are designed to vex the heteronormativity of American identity. On the covers of her albums *I Enjoy Being a Girl* and *Milkman*, Phranc parodies all-American images. The *I Enjoy Being a Girl* cover depicts Phranc wearing her signature flattop haircut and a red turtleneck, holding a glass of milk. The image is reminiscent of the all-American 1950s. As food columnist Mark Bittman declares, "Drinking Milk is as American as

14. . The other two songs in which Phranc is accompanied by synthesizers are "Individuality" and "Toy Time." They are also used as a distancing mechanism here, but are unrelated to the American songbook.

Mom and apple pie."¹⁵ By posing with a glass of milk, Phranc recalls the boy children of 1950s television, such as Beaver and Wally Cleaver or David and Ricky Nelson, who could often be seen drinking milk at the family table. This cross-gender identification queers the image of normative American boyhood. Phranc offers more milk imagery on the cover of her *Milkman* album, which features a picture of Phranc dressed as a milkman, holding a carrier full of glass bottles. The milkman delivered milk, the all-American beverage, door-to-door. The milkman's access to the home when the man of the house was working prompted the old joke about questionable paternity—that a child might look more like the milkman than his father. By appearing as a milkman on the cover of the *Milkman* album, Phranc disrupts this heteronormative arrangement by positioning herself as the lesbian lover of the fifties housewife.

Like Phranc's album art, the lesbian public art duo Dyke Action Machine! (DAM!) uses images to highlight the heteronormativity of the state. DAM! is comprised of painter Carrie Moyer and photographer Sue Schaffner, and sprang up out of the anti-assimilationist Queer Nation. DAM!'s 1998 poster *Lesbian Americans: Don't Sell Out!* is an emphatic statement against assimilation to American heteronormativity. 5,000 of DAM!'s *Lesbian Americans* posters were wheatpasted around downtown New York. The poster discourages lesbians from buying into pinkwashing marketing schemes. Yet, the poster's design also renders it a commentary on lesbians and American identity. The poster is a quotation of patriotic World War II propaganda posters, employing national symbols—in this case, the red and white stripes of the American flag—while urging viewers to take a particular course of action. The poster appeals to “LESBIAN AMERICANS” in large blue letters—consistent with the color scheme of the flag—and, in red script, urges them, “Don't sell out!” The “LESBIAN AMERICANS” the poster hails

15. Bittman, “Got Milk?”

are depicted in black and white, leaning on a wooden split rail fence that is surrounded by grass, with their faithful canine companion. The women, two of them white and one of them African American, are butch in their gender presentation: the first wears overalls, the second a workman's uniform, and the third wears an open button-down shirt with a white undershirt. The positioning of the women at the center of the poster against a red and white flag-like background associates them with American national identity. As with Phranc's introduction, the poster highlights the heteronormativity of American identity by contrast. The formation of the Women's Army Corps in the 1940s—the period that the style of the poster refers to—began a history of lesbians in the military, but lesbians in the service had to remain closeted or risk being discharged. Lesbians in and out of the military have never been celebrated as American heroes. By depicting lesbians against a backdrop reminiscent of the American flag, the poster underscores the heteronormativity of American identity.

These works emphasize the heteronormativity of national identity in the United States in a general sense. Like the United States, the Canadian state has a long history of homophobic legislation and of advancing a heteronormative notion of citizenship.¹⁶ The next section will address *Lesbian National Parks and Services: A Force of Nature*, a video that challenges heteronormativity in a Canadian context.

Eager Beavers: Staging State Heteronormativity in *Lesbian National Parks and Services: A Force of Nature*

In *Lesbian National Parks and Services: A Force of Nature*, Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan use camp humor to interrogate heteronormative Pan-Canadian associations of nationalism

16. For a review of this history, see Rankin, "Sexualities and National Identities: Re-Imagining Queer Nationalism" p. 180.

with the natural, emphasizing the wilderness landscape. The natural plays an important role in Canadian nationalism. Here, I invoke two senses of the term “natural”—“occurring in, or part of, the environment; inherent in the form of an organism, etc.” and “a normal feature or attribute.”¹⁷ Canadian nationalism’s emphasis on the natural environment is evidenced by Canada’s national symbols: a maple leaf is depicted on the Canadian flag and appears on the Canadian penny; the beaver became an official emblem of Canada in 1975 and appears on the Canadian nickel; the caribou, polar bear, and loon appear on the quarter, two-dollar coin, and one-dollar coin, respectively. Nature is palpably present in Canada’s national symbols. bj wray highlights the centrality of nature to Canada’s national identity in “The Elephant, the Mouse, and the Lesbian National Park Rangers”:

I hardly need remark upon the prestigious role ascribed to this so-called “wilderness” in the making of a Canadian national identity. Margaret Atwood's highly influential 1972 thematic guide to Canadian literature, aptly entitled *Survival*, informs readers that “[t]he central symbol for Canada...is undoubtedly survival.... For early explorers and settlers, it meant bare survival in the face of 'hostile' elements.... For French Canada after the English took over it became cultural survival.... And in English Canada now while the Americans are taking over it is acquiring a similar meaning.”¹⁸

wray gestures towards the long history of the association between Canadian national identity and the natural world. By way of Atwood, wray traces how the Canadian emphasis on survival in the natural world has continued to influence Canada’s national identity.

Pan-Canadian nationalism’s emphasis on the wilderness privileges Canada’s national parks in the Canadian imaginary. As bj wray asserts in her discussion of Dempsey and Milan's *Lesbian National Parks and Services (LNPS)* performances, “The ‘naturalness’ of national and sexual identifications is taken to task by Dempsey’s and Millan’s parodic invasion of a

17. “Natural, Adj. and Adv.”

18. wray, “The Elephant, the Mouse, and the Lesbian National Park Rangers,” 165.

significant site of Canadian nationalism, Banff National Park. ... [Banff] acts, within an international and Canadian imaginary, as a tangible marker of Canadian geography and, more importantly, of Canadian identity.”¹⁹ While Banff National Park is a nature preserve, the site is also at the locus of the Canadian national imaginary. Dempsey and Millan access the nexus of state-sponsored nationalism and the natural in their *LNPS* performances by entering into Banff National Park and staging a quotation of the Park Wardens.

Lesbian National Parks and Services: A Force of Nature is a mockumentary video based on Dempsey and Millan’s *LNPS* performances, in which Dempsey and Millan don Lesbian Ranger uniforms and install themselves in Canada’s Banff National Park. In this wilderness setting, Rangers Dempsey and Millan dispense information about lesbian flora and fauna to tourists and set up a Lesbian Ranger recruitment station. In addition to the 1997 Banff performances, Dempsey and Millan also staged *LNPS* performances at the Sydney Gay/Lesbian Mardi Gras and the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. The video—*A Force of Nature*—incorporates some footage from Dempsey and Millan’s tenure at Banff. That said, the video is not merely a document of Dempsey and Millan’s *LNPS* performances, but a mockumentary in its own right, comprised largely of material produced specifically for *A Force of Nature*. The video employs techniques reminiscent of informational videos and wildlife documentaries. The camera’s gaze is primarily observational, with an authoritative male narrator guiding the viewer through the footage. The Lesbian Rangers, played by Dempsey and Millan, sometimes address the camera directly to provide information about the Rangers and their efforts. The video also includes brief interviews with Eager Beavers—that is, Lesbian Rangers in training. Hokey, synthesized theme music peppers the video throughout. The video is divided into segments that

19. Ibid.

focus on the various aspects of being a Lesbian Ranger, including wildlife stewardship, field research, law enforcement, training, and recruitment. The Lesbian Rangers perform all of these duties with a lesbian twist.

A Force of Nature's campy mockumentary form provides the vehicle for Dempsey and Millan's lesbian feminist commentary. José Esteban Muñoz emphasizes camp's dual capacity to enact and comment on dominant ideology.²⁰ In *A Force of Nature*, Dempsey and Millan use camp to highlight lesbians' vexed relationship to dominant Canadian notions of nationalism and the natural. Dominant Pan-Canadian nationalism is predicated on a naturalized, heteronormative nuclear family. Canada's naturalization of heteronormative kinship structures posits homosexual subjects as unnatural and excludes them from the national imaginary. By staging themselves as quotations of Banff's Park Wardens, Dempsey and Millan promote lesbian visibility in a national context. When *A Force of Nature* was made, Park Wardens were responsible for law enforcement and ecosystem management within the vast expanses of Canada's national parks.²¹ Indeed, the video's title plays on the Wardens' function, with "force of nature" simultaneously referring to nature as an unstoppable power and to the Wardens as a police organization with jurisdiction in the natural setting of the parks. In light of Banff's place in Canada's national imaginary, Park Wardens are stewards not just of Banff National Park, but also of Canadian national identity. By performing quotations of Parks Canada's Park Wardens in *A Force of Nature*, Dempsey and Millan intervene at the intersection of nationalism and the natural.

Dempsey and Millan stage the Lesbian Rangers as quotations of Parks Canada's Park Wardens. In the video, the Lesbian Rangers are made visible as such through their uniforms.

20. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 119.

21. In 2009, the Park Wardens' role was restricted to law enforcement.

These uniforms at once identify and differentiate Dempsey and Millan from the Park Wardens that patrol Banff National Park. One particular moment in the video capitalizes on the humor of the Lesbian Rangers' similarities to and differences from the Park Wardens, a brief shot in which Dempsey and Millan, decked out in their Lesbian Ranger uniforms, are seen chatting with Banff's legitimate Park Wardens (see Figure 1). The resemblance of Dempsey and Millan's uniforms to those of the Park Wardens identifies the Rangers with the Wardens. The Rangers' hats, shirts, and belts all clearly echo the Wardens' uniforms. And yet, the Rangers' uniforms are not an exact copy of the Wardens' uniforms. Unlike the Wardens, who wear full-length pants, the Rangers wear shorts. While the Wardens' pants do not match their shirts, the Rangers' uniforms are all one color. Though both the Wardens and the Rangers wear utility belts, the contents of their utility belts differ. Similarly, both the Wardens and Rangers wear various patches of similar shapes and sizes, but the Rangers' insignia differs from that of the Wardens. The Lesbian Rangers' uniforms echo those of the Park Wardens; that is, in camp fashion, the Rangers' uniforms at once replicate and depart from the Wardens' uniforms. By performing the Lesbian Rangers as a quotation of Parks Canada's Park Wardens, Dempsey and Millan both invoke and make space to comment upon dominant Canadian nationalism from a lesbian feminist perspective.



Fig. 3.1. Lesbian Park Rangers Millan and Dempsey interface with Parks Canada Park Wardens in Banff National Park. Image from Dempsey and Millan's *Lesbian National Parks and Services: A Force of Nature*.

Historically, lesbian subjects have had a vexed relationship with the Canadian state. As L. Pauline Rankin points out in “Sexualities and National Identities: Re-imagining Queer Nationalism,” dominant Canadian nationalism relies on a naturalized, heteronormative conception of a nuclear family.²² Rankin notes that Canadian “employment rights, education rights, health care rights, civil rights and censorship are all designed to safeguard the sanctity of

22. Rankin, “Sexualities and National Identities: Re-Imagining Queer Nationalism,” 3.

the ‘national family’,²³ and that state-sponsored Canadian nationalism is predicated on naturalized heterosexuality.²⁴ Canadian nationalism’s emphasis on the naturalness of heterosexual kinship structures posits homosexual subjects as unnatural. A small sampling of homophobic rhetoric in Canada from the 1990s and early 2000s (when Dempsey and Millan were working on *LNPS* and *A Force of Nature*) advances this conception of homosexual subjects as unnatural. One hand-out from a July 1994 rally for People Against Queering Canada reads, “The only tie which binds homosexuals together is their unnatural sexual practice....”²⁵ In September of that same year, Member of Parliament Roseanne Skoke responded to the idea of tolerance for homosexuality by saying, “We’re talking about imposing upon and insisting that all Canadians condone what is in my opinion immoral and unnatural”; and in 2003, academic Margaret Somerville described homosexuality as “unnatural” in two different court cases. Characterizing homosexuality as unnatural in these ways reinforces the binary thinking that associates heterosexuality with the natural. This characterization of heterosexuality as natural gives heterosexuals a special purchase on Canadian nationalism, which is constructed in relation to the “natural” Canadian wilderness.

As the Lesbian Rangers, Dempsey and Millan promote lesbian visibility in the natural and national context of Banff and contest the naturalization of heterosexuality. In *A Force of Nature*, Ranger Millan turns to the camera and urges the audience to “Take a moment from your busy day to question the heterosexual model. Ask yourself, ‘What is nature?’ and ‘What is

23. Ibid., 4.

24. Ibid.

25. qtd. in Faulkner, “Homophobic Hate Propaganda in Canada.”;

natural?”²⁶ Here, Millan challenges heterosexist notions of the natural. In place of these heterosexist notions of the natural, Dempsey and Millan offer lesbian notions of the natural. According to the narrator, the Lesbian Rangers were created in response to “official indifference” to lesbian populations, and their mission is to “service and protect the lesbian wild.”²⁷ Here, Dempsey and Millan assert a lesbian presence in the natural environment. The term “official indifference” implies that the state has ignored lesbian nature. Dempsey and Millan, on the other hand, are devoted to tending to and calling public attention to it. Dempsey and Millan enact this devotion to lesbian nature by performing duties of lesbian wildlife stewardship. In the “Base Camp” segment, Dempsey and Millan are seen taking samples from a stream, photographing a bee on a flower, installing a sign that says “Keep Out: Nesting Lesbians,” and examining beaver tracks. By showing the Rangers interacting with the natural world, these shots use irony to denaturalize dominant Canadian concepts of what’s natural.

Dempsey and Millan destabilize dominant heterosexist notions of the natural in both the environmental and the normative senses and reorient these notions toward lesbian bodies. This is best illustrated in *A Force of Nature*’s “In-Depth Research” segment, Dempsey and Millan’s send-up of the wildlife documentary’s emphasis on mating. The Lesbian Rangers venture out into the field to record information about lesbian mating behaviors. According to the narrator, “Rangers Dempsey and Millan have learned that, to study lesbians, one must seek out their natural habitats. This intrepid team has become expert at tracking, and has discovered lesbian watering holes in the most desolate of environments.” While the narration here is reminiscent of that found in a wildlife documentary, this is the only segment in the video in which the Lesbian

26. Dempsey and Millan, *Lesbian National Parks and Services: A Force of Nature*, p, 12:52–12:58.

27. *Ibid.*, 1:20, 1:36.

Rangers go indoors—that is, out of the natural landscape of Banff and into Ms. Purdy’s Women’s Bar of Winnipeg, Manitoba. At Ms. Purdy’s, Rangers Dempsey and Millan, clipboards in hand, observe women dancing, drinking, and playing pool (see Figure 2). The Rangers occasionally take their eyes off of the lesbians before them to offer an explanation of lesbian behavior to the mockumentary’s audience.



Fig. 3.2. Ranger Dempsey takes notes while a lesbian specimen demonstrates her skills at the pool table. Image from Dempsey and Millan’s *Lesbian National Parks and Services: A Force of Nature*.

In this segment, Dempsey and Millan focus on lesbian seduction rather than the extension of naturalized heteronormative kinship structures and family values. The Rangers examine lesbian nightlife as a precursor to sexual activity. The narrator clarifies this when he cautions, “Remember, lesbians can be dangerous when mating, and hate to be interrupted.”²⁸ While the rangers are observing the patrons of Ms. Purdy’s, they are slowly but surely seduced by the lesbian mating rituals being performed: two lesbians dancing suggestively before them

28. Ibid., 14:49–14:55.

eventually engage Rangers Dempsey and Millan on the dance floor, despite the Rangers' best attempts to remain objective. Millan has to douse herself with water to regain her senses and pull Dempsey away. While *A Force of Nature* inserts a visible lesbian presence into the natural and national landscape of Banff, this visibility is not predicated on the replication of naturalized heteronormative kinship structures.

In fact, Dempsey and Millan portray lesbianism as a turn away from traditional heteronormative kinship structures while playing on the misguided notion that lesbians can turn heterosexual women gay. As the narrator notes, the Rangers "leave no stone or lesbian unturned."²⁹ The Rangers bump into a heterosexual couple while patrolling the beach, and, after the Rangers explain what Lesbian National Parks and Services is, the man asks if he can join. The Rangers politely tell him that the training process is rigorous, and that men rarely join the force. The woman, after leafing through the brochure that Millan has handed her, says, "I should join."³⁰ Her partner, who disapproves, leads her away by the hand, but she keeps turning back to gaze at the Rangers. A few shots later, the woman reads through the Lesbian National Parks and Services brochure while lounging on the sand. Her partner is nowhere to be seen. Looking into the camera, she says, "I just think they're so courageous. I mean, they talk about things I've never even thought about. It's as if I'm seeing the world through brand new eyes."³¹ This woman's encounter with the Lesbian Rangers prompts her to exit her heterosexual relationship and changes her perspective on the world from heterosexual to lesbian. The Rangers later save this same woman from drowning at the beach; after the Rangers perform mouth-to-mouth and

29. Ibid., 12:23.

30. Ibid., 17:33.

31. Ibid., 18:06.

chest compressions, she is restored, and looks lovingly into their eyes. In the “Recruitment” segment that follows, this same woman appears as a Junior Lesbian Ranger in an “Eager Beaver” t-shirt (see Figure 3). She confesses to the camera, “Well, at first I was sort of nervous about it [becoming a Lesbian Ranger], but once I’d made up my mind to try, it came so naturally!”³² Here, *A Force of Nature* intentionally plays into fears that lesbians can convert heterosexual women to their “unnatural” ways—a move underscored by the new recruit’s declaration that lesbian behavior came naturally to her.



Fig. 3.3. From Lesbian Ranger Rescue to Lesbian Ranger Recruit. Images from Dempsey and Millan’s *Lesbian National Parks and Services: A Force of Nature*.

While dominant Canadian nationalism posits lesbianism as unnatural in that it departs from naturalized heteronormative kinship structures, *A Force of Nature* associates lesbianism with the natural, and thus, the national. Dempsey and Millan’s video derives its humor from the ironic association of lesbianism with the natural and the national—ironic because lesbians have historically been viewed as *unnatural* and have a vexed history as national subjects. Thus, *A Force of Nature* underscores the lesbian’s outlaw status even as it posits lesbians as citizens.

32. Ibid., 22:11.

In the 1980s and '90s, state censorship of LGBT representations and performances reinforced the lesbian's outlaw status in the United States and Canada. The next section addresses specific instances of state censorship and how lesbian artists used performance to respond.

Dykes versus Decency: Fighting Against Censorship in the Culture Wars

Holly Hughes and Janice Perry respectively staged solo performances in response to several controversies around censorship by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in its funding structures and the creative works of LGBT artists. In this period, alongside a larger effort to eliminate the NEA altogether, conservative politicians objected to many of the artists and art works that had received NEA funding. Many—though not all—of these artists identified as LGBT and discussed or depicted LGBT sexualities openly in their work. Work by lesbian artists, especially those including depictions of lesbian sex, that had been funded by federal dollars came under fire. In June of 1990, the NEA rescinded lesbian performance artist Holly Hughes's solo performance grant, along with those of three other solo performance artists (who became known collectively as the NEA 4), because her work dealt with lesbian themes. In 1995, Highways, an LGBT performance space in Los Angeles founded by Tim Miller, one of the NEA 4, drew ire from the socially conservative American Family Association for its annual festival, Ecce Lesbo/Ecce Homo. The festival featured work by the Purple Moon Dance Company that focused on lesbians of color, as well as a performance by Latina stand-up comedian Marga Gomez. The festival brochure promises that Gomez will address “her favorite subjects: pain, regret, self pity, doom, and sex with Newt Gingrich's mother.”³³ Donald Wildman asserted that

33. Inquirer Wire Services, “House Fights Off Effort To Further Slash Arts Budget.”

the festival “promotes” homosexuality. NEA Chair Jane Alexander defended the grant decision, but Representative Cliff Stearns of Florida cited the festival in his efforts to slash the NEA’s budget. Though Stearns’s particular amendment did not pass, the NEA’s budget was cut.

Conservative legislators and leaders of right-wing organizations particularly honed in on representations of lesbian sex. Legislators decried the NEA for funding Cheryl Dunye’s film *The Watermelon Woman*, characterizing the film’s brief sex scene between an African American woman and a white woman as pornographic. In her review of the film for a Philadelphia paper, Jeanine DeLombard had included a parenthetical note that reads, “don’t miss the hottest dyke sex scene ever recorded on celluloid.” DeLombard has since defended the remark as a reference to the lack of lesbian representation in film,³⁴ but Michigan Representative Pete Hoekstra, one of the film’s principal detractors, cited DeLombard’s words to argue that funding *The Watermelon Woman* was an inappropriate use of federal funds. (Film distributor First Run Features did not shy away from this controversy, but instead used DeLombard’s phrase as a marketing tool.) Conservatives also objected to the NEA’s funding of Women Make Movies, a non-profit organization that sponsored Dunye’s grant application, for distributing films such as *Blood Sisters*, a documentary about lesbian S/M practitioners. Like *The Watermelon Woman*, conservatives described *Blood Sisters* as pornographic.

Many artists staged responses to these federal actions. Hughes’s and Perry’s solo performances provide lesbian feminist perspectives on these events and highlight the ways in which the state censors LGBT artists and representations. Hughes narrates her defunding from her perspective in *Preaching to the Perverted* (1999). In *WORLD POWER SEX CONTROL* (1992), lesbian performance artist Janice Perry comments on the social conservatism

34. DeLombard, “Watermelon Woman,” np.

undergirding the NEA's actions. She narrates and intervenes in Jesse Helms's efforts to censor the work of gay photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. These performances question the state's anti-LGBT censorship practices and advocate for the spectator's right to make informed decisions about what kinds of art and performances they view. The NEA controversies that Hughes and Perry comment on highlight the ways in which LGBT subjects are pitted against the state. In February of 1990, Holly Hughes was recommended for a solo performance grant from the NEA, but the grant was rescinded in June. Anxiety around Hughes's lesbian sexuality, which she discusses openly in her work, factored into the decision to revoke her grant—this despite the fact that, the year before, the Downtown Art Co. had secured an NEA grant of \$7,000 for Hughes to make new work. John Frohnmayer, then chair of the NEA, advised the National Council on the Arts that “Holly Hughes is a lesbian and her work is very heavily of that genre. That is what is going to be in the press if you fund it.”³⁵ Along with Hughes, three other performance artists—feminist performance artist Karen Finley, gay performance artist John Fleck, and gay performance artist Tim Miller—had their funding rescinded. Collectively, these artists have been referred to as the NEA 4. In that same month, Congress passed the “decency clause,” which states that

(1) artistic excellence and artistic merit are the criteria by which applications are judged, taking into consideration general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public; and (2) applications are consistent with the purposes of this section. Such regulations and procedures shall clearly indicate that obscenity is without artistic merit, is not protected speech, and shall not be funded. Projects, productions, workshops, and programs that are determined to be obscene are prohibited from receiving financial assistance under this subchapter from the National Endowment for the Arts.³⁶

35. Carr, “Timeline of NEA 4 Evens,” np.

36. *20 USC § 954 - National Endowment for the Arts.*

This language sets up an opposition between “the diverse beliefs and values of the American public” and obscenity. As art historian Richard Meyer points out, the decency clause does not offer a definition of obscenity or “general standards of decency,” but may be read as a surrogate of the 1989 Helms Amendment.³⁷ The Helms Amendment, which was in effect when Hughes applied for funding, dictated that no NEA funds “may be used to promote, disseminate, or produce obscene or indecent materials, including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homo-eroticism, the exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts.”³⁸ When the decency clause is read as a surrogate of the Helms Amendment, it becomes clear that the clause’s ambiguous catch-all “general standards of decency” excludes works that deal with “homo-eroticism.” Thus “homo-eroticism” is considered indecent and does not adhere to national values. Media coverage of the NEA 4 similarly placed LGBT sexuality and the nation in opposition. In *The U.S. News and World Report*, David Gergen writes that the NEA 4 “want to engage in wanton destruction of a nation’s values, and they expect that same nation to pay their bills.”³⁹ The discourse surrounding the respective works of the NEA 4 demonstrates a perceived rift between the values of the state and those of feminists and LGBT people. The NEA 4 pursued legal recourse against the NEA. While their grants were restored, the NEA 4 amended their suit to contest the decency clause, but the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the NEA in 1998.

Having lost the courtroom drama, Hughes staged her version of these events in a solo show called *Preaching to the Perverted*, directed by Lois Weaver. The show’s opening sequence introduces the controversy around Hughes’s work and the NEA 4. The following voiceover plays

37. Meyer, ““Have You Heard the One about the Lesbian Who Goes to the Supreme Court?,”” 550.

38. Helms, *Helms Amendment Nos. 420 and 421*, np.

39. Gergen, “Who Should Pay for Porn?,”” 80.

over the sound system: “You tried to force it on us. You are flaunting your contempt for the decency of the American people. There’s enough filth in our land without the government funding it. How did people like Holly Hughes get into the arts business anyway?” This speech aggregates the conservative opposition to Hughes’s work, that her performances are improper and un-American, and therefore do not merit state funding. The next sound cue is a pre-show announcement. A man’s voice intones, “Tonight, we are pleased to present Holly Hughes in *Preaching to the Perverted*. Miss Hughes is the author of several performance pieces, but is no doubt best known as one of the NEA 4.” As Hughes coaxes a large cardboard box onto the stage, the announcement skips like a broken record, repeating the words “NEA 4” over and over again. Hughes pauses from her task and looks around to find the source of the sound. Reaching into the cardboard box, she pulls out a gun, aims at the speaker, covers one ear, and fires. As the stage goes dark, the endless loop of “NEA 4” is silenced. The gunshot is metonymic of Hughes’s impetus in *Preaching to the Perverted*: through this performance, Hughes is firing back at the NEA and the state.

Before sharing the details of her own case, Hughes provides some historical context. She says to the audience, “I’d planned on starting the story at the beginning, but I’ve decided that’s too late.” Hughes situates her own case within a pattern of state censorship, including the state’s removal of David Avalos’s “San Diego Donkey Cart,” a sculpture that showed the arrest of an undocumented worker by an immigration official; CBS’s cutting a scene from *The New Adventures of Mighty Mouse* after Donald Wildmon’s accusation that the clip depicted Mighty Mouse using cocaine; the Chicago’s City Council’s passage of an ordinance banning flag desecration in response to Dread Scott Tyler’s *What is the Proper Way to Display the US Flag?* installation, which required spectators to step on the United States flag if they wished to leave a

comment for the artist. By providing this catalog of art controversies from the mid- and late 1980s, Hughes gives a sense that the state, as well as family values proponents, had developed a strategy of suppressing art works that did not align with a perceived set of national values.

Hughes interrupts her list to linger on the topic of the flag, which, along with its colors, will become an important design motif in the show. Clutching a bouquet of small American flags to her chest, Hughes recounts the ritual of raising the US flag at her family's cabin. The family handled the flag with care, making sure "she never touched the ground" as they unfolded it.⁴⁰ Hughes relishes the ritual treatment of the flag: "There were lots of rules about the flag that made no sense," she explains to the audience, "but that didn't keep me from enjoying following them. Sun couldn't set on her, rain couldn't fall on her, she could never touch the ground."⁴¹ Hughes's reverence for the flag runs counter to media portrayals of Hughes as anti-American—portrayals that Hughes plays into when she says, "I loved our flag, but maybe I loved the rules more, or the space between the rules and my desire to break them, to fuck it all up—to get up in the middle of the night, take off all my clothes, to see what I looked like wrapped up in a tight and sexy stars and stripes, to see what she looked like when I got her wet."⁴² In this speech, Hughes discloses a penchant for transgression. While she takes pleasure in the traditional procedures associated with the flag, Hughes's desire to bring the flag into contact with her naked body transgresses those practices and sexualizes the flag. By using feminine pronouns to refer to the flag and employing slang terms that refer to female sexual arousal, Hughes describes a lesbian sexual encounter with the national standard. This coming together of lesbian sexuality and the state is precisely what

40. Weaver, *Preaching to the Perverted*, 4:32.

41. *Ibid.*, 5:20–5:30.

42. *Ibid.*, 5:42–6:09.

conservatives find unacceptable about Hughes and her work.⁴³ But Hughes does not realize her desire for close contact with the flag. Hughes goes on to say, “Instead, I asked my sister to help me rescue the flag.”⁴⁴ Together, they carefully take down the flag and put it away. Hughes does not act on her transgressive desire for the flag, but rather continues to treat the flag with reverence. Here, Hughes counters conservative characterizations of her as un-American.

Hughes continues to use the iconography of the United States flag to refer to the censorious actions of the state. Still holding her bouquet of flags, Hughes resumes her list of state-censored art and performance. As she reports these events to the audience, standing in a cardboard box, she “reads” them off of various red, white, and blue decorations: she reads out news of the de-funding of *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, an exhibit responding to the AIDS crisis, off of a string of triangle pennants with stars and stripes. Casting the pennants aside, Hughes reaches into the box and pulls out a streamer with red, white, and blue stripes. Pulling the streamer through her hands, Hughes reads out the arrests of museum director Dennis Barrie and 2 Live Crew, the names of Annie Sprinkle, Carlos Gutierrez-Solana, and Helms’s audit of past NEA grant recipients before discarding the streamer. Hughes continues on like this, pulling red, white, and blue decorations, confetti, glitter, and flags from the box for each controversial event. Her delivery of the list becomes frenzied, increasing in speed and lessening in detail until the stage is littered with red, white, and blue refuse. This disarray of flags and patriotic

43. The behavior Hughes describes here is depicted in the publicity images for *Preaching to the Perverted*. Hughes can be seen on the show’s postcard holding an American flag over her nearly naked body. As Richard Meyer writes, using the flag in this way “recalls (and wittily responds to) the public accusation that her performance art...constituted an assault on American values.”[□] Meyer, ““Have You Heard the One about the Lesbian Who Goes to the Supreme Court?”” 544.

44. Weaver, *Preaching to the Perverted*, 6:14–6:09.

decorations remain on the floor of the stage—exactly where Hughes refused to let the flag fall as a girl—throughout the show so that the state is always in the background of Hughes’s performance.

From atop this floor of flags, Hughes emphasizes the heteronormativity of the state. Taking the audience on an imaginary tour of the Supreme Court Building, with red, white and blue Fodor’s guide in hand, Hughes steps through and around the flags on the floor before she says,

It [the Supreme Court Building] appears to be made of marble, but marble turns pink in the rain, and this is not the effect the court was interested in. They wanted something that would stay cold and white no matter what... The builders used bricks of ice cream. ... The type of ice cream used in the construction of the United States Supreme Court is a type commonly referred to as vanilla. This is misleading because there is nothing vanilla about this ice cream. It has no flavor, it is merely white.⁴⁵

The colors and materials Hughes discusses in relation to the Supreme Court building are telling. The color pink is associated with both femininity and homosexuality. Pink has been the dominant color of girls’ clothing and toys since the 1940s. The pink triangle, reclaimed from the badges that marked male homosexual prisoners in Nazi concentration camps, has become a symbol of LGBT rights. These associations make marble and its pinkening property inappropriate for the Supreme Court Building, since these populations are not the ideal subjects of the state. The building material Hughes identifies, vanilla ice cream, recalls the term vanilla sex, or “traditional” monogamous, kinkless intercourse—the kind of sex practiced by the state’s ideal heterosexual subjects.

Whereas Hughes marks the state’s investment in heteronormativity, others would keep questions of sexuality out of the NEA debates. *Preaching to the Perverted* includes these voices

45. Ibid., 17:10–18:05.

in a segment on the media's discourse around the NEA controversies. In this segment, the flag becomes Hughes's backdrop: two grids of red, white, and blue lights arranged in the shape of US flags hang upstage of Hughes. The grids light up and there is a spotlight on Hughes, who stands between the flags on an otherwise dark stage. A series of critiques of the NEA and, implicitly, Hughes's work play over the sound system: the audience hears Christopher Reeve's description of "a few grants" as "deeply offensive" and "mistakes," and David Gergen's insistence that the work of Hughes and others stand in opposition to the values of the state. Hughes, framed by the two flags, looks increasingly uncomfortable. She crosses her arms over her body in a defensive posture as a series of male voices declare, "The real issue is the first amendment. The real issue is preserving the endowment. The real issue is winning this case. The real issue is grassroots organizing. Let's not talk about homophobia, because this is not about homophobia. This is not about censorship. This is not about sex."⁴⁶ Even as this opinion is given voice, it is undone by the image of Hughes's lesbian body standing between the two grids suggesting the flag.

Hughes's performance counters the sense that sexuality is unrelated to the NEA controversies. She illustrates how the notion of "decency"—the word at the center of the NEA 4's Supreme Court Case—rejects queers and affirms heterosexual couples as the state's ideal sexual subjects. As she narrates the events of the oral arguments at the Supreme Court, Hughes sits on the floor of the stage, surrounded by the discarded US flags and decorations. Hughes explains,

The government has to explain how they can take into consideration general standards of decency without violating the first amendment. Now you have to understand that the reason we got to the Supreme Court in the first place is because we've all decided to pretend we don't know what the word 'decency' means, that the word decency is vague

46. Ibid., 41:48–42:04.

and unclear, that we've all decided to pretend that the word decency is not a big pink neon sign flashing, 'No queers, no queers, no queers, no queers!'⁴⁷

Hughes emphasizes the phrase “no queers” by raising the pitch of her voice and by opening and closing her hands to suggest flashing neon. The word “decency” has a history of being used to police non-normative sexuality. Irish playwright Oscar Wilde was convicted of “gross indecency,” a charge used to police homosexual activity when sodomy could not be proven,⁴⁸ just over 100 years before *National Endowment for the Arts et al. v. Finley et al.*⁴⁹ Hughes’s position among the flags during this speech underscores decency as a value of the state. While the case proceeds because both sides act as if the meaning of the word ‘decency’ is in question, Hughes highlights the word’s anti-queer force.

Hughes underscores the notion that decency stands for heteronormativity when she describes how the NEA screens for decency. Hughes says, “They find people who are considered to be decent, and they put those people on the NEA panels, and, well, decent people can only make decent decisions.”⁵⁰ During this speech, Hughes has pulled on a red apron with white stars on it—the uniform of the 1950s homemaker, the paragon of heteronormative family values, bearing the colors and iconography of the state. Hughes comes down from the stage to sit on the apron and pose the question, “How does the government decide who is decent? ... I think they

47. *Ibid.*, 1:00:00–1:01:19.

48. Kaplan, *Sodom on the Thames*, 192.

49. A “gross indecency” statute, adopted in 1903, remains on the books in the state of Michigan as of this writing. Its scope was narrowed in 1994 so that it does not apply to “consensual sex between competent adults in a non-commercial and private setting.” Serra, “COMMENT: Michigan’s Gross Indecency Law.”

50. Weaver, *Preaching to the Perverted*, 1:01:30–1:01:48.

use my mother's method: they check the underwear."⁵¹ She then threatens to conduct an underwear check on the spectators. Approaching a man in the front row, Hughes explains:

Now you're very lucky this is not a federally funded performance art piece because I'd be asking you to drop your pants—actually everybody would have to take off their clothes. I'd start with you, and I'd have to make sure that you had underwear—no drip-dry candidates need apply to the NEA—and it should be natural fibers, preferably white, and no holes, no stains, no saggy waistband. And, you know, maybe you could get away with a tasteful little pattern, but no slogans! No 'I can't believe I ate the whole thing,' nothing like that! And it's gotta be appropriate, you know what that means? No lacy thongs on men, no boxer shorts on women.⁵²

With no identifiable state process for monitoring decency, Hughes offers the underwear check. Hughes's underwear checks play on the motherly advice to always wear clean underwear and makes plain the normalizing force of that advice: only certain kinds of underwear are acceptable. The underwear checks also recall city and state sumptuary laws requiring that people wear at least three gender-appropriate articles of clothing in public. These laws have historically been used to target LGBT people. By offering the underwear check as an assurance of decency, Hughes exposes the contradictory logic of decency. As Meyer writes, in the wake of Hughes's defunding in 1990, the media erroneously reported that Hughes's performances included nudity.⁵³ While the thought of Hughes performing naked is considered indecent, Hughes's spectators are expected to take off their clothes to prove their decency. Hughes's red apron with the white stars underscores that these are state issues.

The constant presence of the icon of the US flag in Hughes's performance underscores the tension between LGBT subjects and the state. Hughes elaborates on this tension when

51. Ibid., 1:02:12–1:02:30.

52. Ibid., 1:02:30–1:02:30.

53. Meyer, "'Have You Heard the One about the Lesbian Who Goes to the Supreme Court?'" 546.

describing the opening events of a WNBA game held to benefit “some sort of progressive queer cause.” Hughes recounts the following:

Everyone’s sitting around waiting for the game to start, and this voice comes on the loudspeaker: “All rise for the national anthem.” And they do. They do. This group of very progressive gay people stands up and starts singing the goddamn “Star-Spangled Banner,” and I think, What are we doing? What are we doing? [She points upstage to the lights arranged in the shape of the American flag.] That is not your flag. That is not your flag. You don’t have to sing that song, you don’t have to salute the flag.⁵⁴

Hughes questions this display of nationalism, a popular opening ritual at sporting events, performed uncritically by a group of LGBT people—a population whose existence goes against America’s conservative values, as Hughes’s experience with the NEA and the American court system illustrates. By negating acts of patriotism performed by LGBT people, Hughes stresses the opposition between LGBT subjects and the state.

As Meyer has argued, Hughes’s performance of *Preaching to the Perverted* and her essays in *Clit Notes*, a collection of Hughes’s plays and performance scripts, highlights performance’s potential to speak against and even circumvent censorship.⁵⁵ The one-woman show *WORLD POWER SEX CONTROL*, written and performed by Janice Perry (also known as GAL), similarly emphasizes performance’s capacity to resist censorship. Like Hughes, Perry is an alumna of the WOW Café. Based in Vermont, Perry has performed in the United States, Germany, the Netherlands, and South Africa. Perry’s performances are largely comprised of comedic monologues, songs, and dances, and often employ over-the-top costumes and props. In *WORLD POWER SEX CONTROL*, staged in the wake of the NEA controversies of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Perry engages the topic of state censorship of LGBT artists and art works.

54. Weaver, *Preaching to the Perverted*, 1:29:07–1:29:45.

55. Meyer, ““Have You Heard the One about the Lesbian Who Goes to the Supreme Court?” 544.

Perry defies state censorship by staging a discussion of state censorship practices. In her comedic monologues, Perry offers direct commentary on the NEA's practices and Senator Jesse Helms's role in the NEA controversies of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Notably, Perry offers this commentary from a lesbian feminist perspective that is critical of the nation. At the top of the show, holding a yellow ribbon aloft, Perry identifies the display of yellow ribbons as a patriotic practice.⁵⁶ In the early 1990s, concurrent with Perry's performance of *WORLD POWER SEX CONTROL*, many Americans displayed yellow ribbons to demonstrate their support for American troops fighting in the Gulf. The yellow ribbon had previously been used to welcome American soldiers returning home from the Vietnam War. Perry asks the audience, "Do you still have these [yellow ribbons] on your trees, here in Johnson? ... Because we still have these on our trees in Ferrisburgh, because *we are Americans!*"⁵⁷ Perry waves the ribbon around, emphasizing this last phrase. Perry associates the display of the yellow ribbon with being an American. She mentions the proliferation of these ribbons in her hometown of Ferrisburgh, Vermont, but also notes that she does not display yellow ribbons on her property. "Every tree in Ferrisburgh has one of these—okay, maybe not every tree, okay—like, maybe not my tree," Perry confesses, looking down at her hands.⁵⁸ Given Perry's earlier identification of displaying yellow ribbons as a nationalistic practice and the ribbon's association with war, Perry's refusal to display a ribbon continues a feminist tradition of pacifism and implies that she does not identify as a national subject.

56. In the early 1990s, concurrent with Perry's performance of *WORLD POWER SEX CONTROL*, many Americans displayed yellow ribbons to demonstrate their support for American troops fighting in the Gulf. Yellow ribbons had previously been displayed in the United States during the Iran hostage crisis.

57. Perry, "WORLD POWER SEX CONTROL," 2:15–2:30.

58. *Ibid.*, 3:00–3:10.

In addition to this implied criticism of the nation, Perry critiques nationalist ideals in a song called "Welcome to America." Perry, who often performs in Germany, introduces the song by noting that people often ask her if she is "afraid of a United Germany." Perry replies, "No, I am afraid of a United States."⁵⁹ She then begins snapping rhythmically, and launches into the song. Perry sings,

Welcome to America
Land of the brave
Welcome to America
Home of the free
Welcome to America
You better behave here
Welcome to America
You better look like me
Here in America, it's the American dream
Welcome to America
Everybody's got a job here
Welcome to America
Everybody's got a car
Welcome to America
Everybody's got a home here
Welcome to America
You can go really far
Here in America, it's the American dream
.....
Welcome to America
Everybody's rich here
Welcome to America
Where we live without fear
Welcome to America
Nobody's hungry here
Welcome to America
And nobody's black and nobody's queer
Here in America, it's the American dream⁶⁰

59. Ibid., 32:02–32:08.

60. Ibid., 32:20–33:34.

With this song, Perry describes the promise of America as well as the limits of that promise. Perry characterizes America as the “land of the brave” and the “home of the free,” a place where people work and live in prosperity and freedom. Yet, Perry also points out the racial and sexual limits of these conditions when she sings, “You better look like me” and “And nobody’s black and nobody’s queer.” At the end of the song, she repeats “Welcome to America,” choking on the word “America.” The song emphasizes the limits of national belonging in the United States. These segments of Perry's performance position Perry as critical of nationalism and national ideals.

Perry also engages the topic of state censorship from this critical perspective. While conservative attitudes motivated the policing of many LGBT artists and art works, Perry seemingly accommodates moral conservatism by warning the audience about words that she will say and acts that she will perform that may be potentially offensive. Perry says, “Well, fuck the war, anyway. I did say ‘fuck.’ I said ‘fuck’ earlier but I don’t think you noticed. And I will be saying this word ‘fuck’ again this evening. So, if you are sitting there and you are thinking, ‘Uh oh, I do not want to hear a very beautiful woman say this word “fuck”,’ then you should leave now—but don’t be confused, you will not get your money back.”⁶¹ Perry moves from declaring her feminist anti-war position to a commentary on her use of the word “fuck.” Rather than giving in to conservative attitudes by not performing material that fails to meet the state's moral standards, Perry provides a disclaimer about the content of her performance. The disclaimer relieves Perry from adhering to the state's morally conservative artistic standards and protects the money she makes from ticket sales. Furthermore, by making it clear that the audience's attendance at her performance is voluntary, and that audience members are free to leave if they

61. *Ibid.*, 6:43–7:14.

anticipate that they will find Perry's performance offensive, Perry instantiates her spectators as arbiters of artistic morality.

Perry's warnings appear to be a concession to the state's morally conservative artistic standards: by warning her audience about the content of her performance, Perry acknowledges that her performance does not meet the state's standards of decency. Yet, Perry's warnings augment the potentially offensive content of her performances: they describe the potentially offensive speech or act that she will go on to perform later. By commenting on her use of the word 'fuck,' for instance, Perry in fact uses the word more frequently. The context of the warning renders these additional offenses acceptable—that is, Perry says and does potentially offensive things in the act of identifying these words and actions as potentially offensive.

Perry goes on to narrate instances of state censorship—namely, Senator Jesse Helms's efforts to revoke state funding from the NEA 4. As Perry tells it,

Orrin Hatch and Jesse Helms are best friends, and they heard that the National Endowment of the Arts were paying artists to say this word “fuck” onstage. Did you know about that? Do you know about the National Endowment for the Arts? This is what this is: the United States government wanted to give money to artists, but they didn't have time, and so they said, “Well, let's just appropriate an amount of money that we will give to artists, and we'll just have this group of white heterosexual men decide which artists will get the money.” And that is what is called the National Endowment for the Arts. So all the artists in the United States, like, 527,000 artists, write to the National Endowment for the Arts, and they say, “Dear Sirs, Please send me money. Love, Janice Perry.” A letter, something like that. And then these guys, the NEA, they read all of the letters and then they decide which four artists will each receive \$20. Now what happened was, Jesse Helms and Orrin Hatch heard that some of the artists that had received the \$20 were saying this word “fuck” onstage. And this meant that the United States government was paying for obscenity. [Here, Perry shrinks her face up in disgust.] Not only that—some of these artists were doing “fuck” onstage. And this meant that the United States government was paying for obscenity and pornography! Some of these artists were homosexuals. [Perry spits out this last word and twists her face into an expression of disgust, even sticking her tongue out a little bit.] This meant that the United States government was paying for obscenity, pornography, and homosexuality. [Perry sticks her tongue out again.] And they wanted each artist who was to receive the \$20 to sign a paper that would say, “I will not say or do ‘fuck’ onstage.” That's what they wanted—they

wanted the artists to sign a paper saying, “If I receive your \$20, I will not say ‘fuck’ onstage.” And I was thinking, I never wanted to say “fuck” onstage! I never heard this word “fuck” until Jesse Helms told me about it!⁶²

Perry’s narrative critiques various facets of the NEA, from the paltry sum awarded to artists to the lack of diversity among members of the Arts Council. Perry’s version of events also demonstrates the leaps in logic that conservatives made as they decried the NEA 4 and their work. Many legislators had never seen the works in question, and based their opposition to these works on hearsay and the identity of the artists rather than their performances. Like the language of the decency clause (discussed above), Perry’s story of the NEA 4 highlights the opposition of LGBT subjects and the nation.

Perry inverts the distribution of power and funding surrounding the censorship of LGBT artists and art works. Again, at first glance, Perry seems to comply with conservatives. Unlike the NEA 4, Perry declares her willingness to take an anti-obscenity pledge in exchange for funding. Perry explains:

I would be willing to sign a paper saying that I would not say “fuck” onstage... I would do that for only \$5,000 a year. Doesn’t this seem remarkably inexpensive? For only \$5,000 a year, I would not say “fuck” onstage. For \$10,000 a year, I would not say “fuck you.” [Here, Perry sticks her middle finger in to the air.] For only \$15,000 a year, I would not say “fuck me.” For only \$20,000 a year, I would not say that I want to watch you fuck her. For \$25,000 a year, I would not say that I want you to watch me fuck her! So I was thinking, why don’t they just tell me exactly what it is that they don’t want me to say, and I will tell them how much it will cost for me not to say it.⁶³

As with Perry’s warnings, Perry performs these obscene phrases and gestures in the very instance of promising not to use them. Here, Perry reverses the terms of the NEA’s anti-obscenity pledge. Rather than signing the pledge as a condition of getting an NEA grant, Perry demands specific

62. Ibid., 14:50–16:30.

63. Ibid., 17:21–18:39.

amounts of money for not using certain obscene phrases and gestures. The more obscene a phrase is, the higher Perry's price is for not using it. Here, Perry carries morally conservative ideas about art and public funding to an extreme conclusion, one that would financially benefit rather than punish LGBT artists.

Perry goes on to highlight the provincialism of conservative notions of decency and obscenity. She narrates Jesse Helms's efforts to censor Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs.

According to Perry,

Senator Jesse Helms—you remember him—the senator from North Carolina became totally obsessed with the photographs of a man named Robert Mapplethorpe. Perhaps you heard about this. These were photographs of naked men! Jesse Helms became totally obsessed with these photographs of naked men by Robert Mapplethorpe. I mean, okay—can you imagine this? An artist making pictures of naked men? [Perry yells these words and makes puking sounds.] It's disgusting! [She resumes her narrator tone.] And I thought, Well, it's a good thing that Jesse Helms has never been to Italy, because there are pictures of naked men everywhere in Italy. [Perry's voice gets louder and she talks faster as she proceeds.] Everywhere you go in Italy, there is nothing but pictures of naked men. Not only do they have pictures of naked men, but they also have statues of naked men up on pedestals, so if you're walking down the street, you get a big schlong right in your face! And I thought, Jesse Helms would die in Italy! And then I thought, Hey, good idea, send Jesse to Italy.⁶⁴

Here, Perry performs Helms's disgust with Mapplethorpe's work in order to make fun of it. She highlights Helms's prudishness by discussing the plethora of art depicting naked men in Italy, a country highly regarded for its long history of art and culture. Rather than appreciating Italy's fine art, Perry says, the prudish Helms would find it offensive.

In addition to Helms's prudishness, Perry goes on to highlight his homophobia. Again, homosexuality is pitted against a conservative sense of national morals and values. She continues:

64. *Ibid.*, 55:18–56:20.

Anyway, Jesse Helms became totally obsessed with these photographs of naked men by Robert Mapplethorpe. And what bothered him was that Robert Mapplethorpe was one of the four artists who had received \$20 from the National Endowment for the Arts. And he knew that Robert Mapplethorpe was a homosexual. [Perry chokes on the ‘h.’] This meant if a homosexual man is making photographs of naked men, then these pictures must be pornography. [Perry chokes on the ‘h’ and spits out the ‘p.’] I mean, if he had been a heterosexual man making pictures of naked men, that would’ve been okay, or if he’d been a heterosexual woman making pictures of naked men, that would be okay, or if he’d been a heterosexual woman making pictures of naked women, that would’ve been okay, or—well, actually, no, that wouldn’t have been okay. But the thing is, ... that Jesse Helms knew that Robert Mapplethorpe was a homosexual man, he was making pictures of naked men, then these must be homosexual pornographic photographs. [Again, Perry aspirates the words ‘homosexual’ and ‘pornographic.’] And this meant that the United States government was once again paying for pornography.⁶⁵

Here, Perry characterizes Helms as homophobic with her pronunciation of “homosexual.” She chokes on the “h,” as if just saying the word disgusts her. Perry then describes how Jesse Helms’s homophobia influenced his demonization of Mapplethorpe and his work: according to Helms, because Robert Mapplethorpe was a gay man depicting naked men in his art, Mapplethorpe’s art must be pornographic. Perry emphasizes Helms’s logic by contrast, listing all of the other configurations of artist identities and subjects that Helms might consider acceptable. These contrasts emphasize that it is Mapplethorpe’s homosexuality that renders his work problematic for Helms.

Yet, for all of Helms’s objections to Mapplethorpe’s work, Perry points out that his efforts to censor these photographs only made them more visible, and even resulted in Helms obtaining a private collection of Mapplethorpe’s work. She says,

And Jesse Helms became totally obsessed with these photographs of naked men, and what he did was, he got his own collection of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe in a book—this is true—he got his own collection which he kept in his desk in his office so that anytime anyone would come to visit Jesse Helms, he would open the drawer of his desk, he would take out the book, and he would say, ‘Do you wanna see something really disgusting?’ [Perry sticks out her tongue and scowls, imitating Helms leafing through the

65. Ibid., 56:20–57:18.

pages of the book.] ‘Look at this one. I HATE THIS ONE THE MOST!’ [Perry resumes her narrator persona.] In fact, Jesse Helms showed these photographs to more people than Robert Mapplethorpe ever did.⁶⁶

Here, Perry characterizes Helms’s disgust at Mapplethorpe’s photographs as a kind of fascination. Perry’s narrative of Helms’s crusade against Mapplethorpe also highlights what art historian Richard Meyer refers to as “the central contradictions of censorship—namely, its compulsion to reproduce and distribute the allegedly ‘indecent’ images it seeks to suppress.”⁶⁷ Perry highlights this contradiction—that in Helms’s attempt to keep other people from seeing Mapplethorpe’s work, Jesse Helms grants himself personal access to the photographs, and shows his personal collection of these photographs to more people than would have seen them otherwise.

In addition to narrating Helms’s censorship of Mapplethorpe’s work, Perry resists Helms’s censorship by doing her part to make Mapplethorpe’s work visible to a larger public. As Perry tells it, “Jesse Helms tried to make it illegal to show these photographs of naked men by Robert Mapplethorpe because they would be pornography, and so what happened was every time a museum or a gallery wanted to show these photographs of naked men by Robert Mapplethorpe, they always ran the risk of the police coming and closing the exhibit.”⁶⁸ Fortunately, Perry got to see the photographs for herself at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts. She explains, “I wanted to see them [Mapplethorpe’s photographs] because I wanted to decide for myself, is it obscenity, is it art, you know, do I care? You know, I wanted to make that choice myself.”⁶⁹ Again, Perry

66. *Ibid.*, 57:20–57:59.

67. Meyer, ““Have You Heard the One about the Lesbian Who Goes to the Supreme Court?”” 550.

68. Perry, “WORLD POWER SEX CONTROL,” 58:26–58:42.

69. *Ibid.*, 59:02–59:11.

emphasizes the viewer's ability to distinguish between art and obscenity, as well as the viewer's ability to disengage, rather than the government's authority. Upon seeing the photographs, Perry feels the urge to share them with other people so that they can also form their own opinions about Mapplethorpe's work.

While Perry cannot show the actual photographs, she performs them for the audience. Before she begins, Perry gives another one of her warnings about potentially offensive content. She says, "If you think you would not like to see these photographs, you should leave now, or"—Perry enacts the other option by closing her eyes, putting her fingers in her ears, and humming—"okay? So, would you like to see these photographs?"⁷⁰ Members of the audience respond with a resounding "Yes!" Perry, who is wearing a black tube dress, fishnet stockings, and red pumps, accessorizes for her performance of Mapplethorpe's controversial photographs. She straps a rubbery chestplate with rippling muscles over her torso before strapping on an oversized red dildo (which, in high femme style, matches her shoes and her earrings). Perry checks in with the audience once more, asking, "Are you ready to see the photographs from Robert Mapplethorpe?" Again, the audience says "Yes!"⁷¹ Perry strikes her first pose, lunging her right leg forward and extending her right arm. She holds the pose for a few seconds before breaking out of it to ask the audience, "Do you find that offensive?"⁷² The audience laughs. Perry strikes her next pose, looking out and over, shifting her weight onto her left leg, and extending her left arm. After holding that pose for a few seconds, she moves into the next one, a quotation of Mapplethorpe's "Dan S." photo. Perry turns her body upstage and looks out at the audience over her right

70. Ibid., 1:00:50–1:01:05.

71. Ibid., 1:02:10–1:02:14.

72. Ibid., 1:02:27–1:02:30.

shoulder. The red dildo hangs down past the hem of her dress. Moving into the next pose, Perry squats down and rests her elbow on her knee, with the red dildo protruding out into space. As she goes into the next pose, Perry says, “There was one that I really didn’t understand.”⁷³ She walks over to a table, situated stage right, and places the red dildo on top of it, looking out at the audience. In this segment, Perry (hilariously) resists state censorship of Mapplethorpe’s photographs by enacting them. While Perry’s live re-creations are humorous quotations rather than sincere replicas, they gesture towards making censored material visible to the public.

Perry closes her show by addressing the issue of public funding in relation to the performance she is in the act of giving.⁷⁴ After singing a love song to her audience, Perry announces that the song was her final number, but goes on to say that she will do “an extra number. . . . And this extra number is extra—it’s free.”⁷⁵ Perry describes this extra performance as “an openly erotic, homosexual”—she chokes on the “h”—“uncensored, pornographic story.”⁷⁶ Before beginning the story, Perry again gives the audience an out, saying,

So if you think that you would not like to hear an openly erotic, homosexual, pornographic, obscene, uncensored erotic story, you should leave now and we won’t think any less of you. And perhaps you’re saying—[here, Perry raises her voice and performs outraged conservative]—“Wait a minute! I didn’t pay to come here and see an openly erotic, uncensored, obscene, homosexual, pornographic, homosexual, uncensored, openly erotic, pornographic story!” [Perry resumes her own persona.] And you would be right. You didn’t pay because this part is extra. This is free. Johnson State College did not pay for this. This is my little present to you, because I love you!⁷⁷

73. Ibid., 1:02:58.

74. The footage of *WORLD POWER SEX CONTROL* that I had access to documented a performance at Johnson State College, so the question of state funding is especially pertinent.

75. Perry, “WORLD POWER SEX CONTROL,” 1:15:51–1:16:07.

76. Ibid., 1:16:13–1:16:23.

77. Ibid., 1:16:24–1:17:14.

Here, Perry describes the content of the final segment of her performance and gives spectators the option of watching the performance or leaving. As with Perry's other warnings throughout the performance, this warning emphasizes the viewer's choice to engage or disengage with art. Additionally, Perry skirts the issue of obscenity and state funding by establishing the caveat that she offers this segment of the performance free of charge. That is, Perry is able to present this homosexual, pornographic, obscene, erotic story without fear of censorship because by offering the story for free, she is not being compensated by the state for telling it.

Performing Against Censorship in the Canadian Context

Canada's censorship laws have been used to keep LGBT materials out of the country, and to prosecute distributors of LGBT materials. Customs censorship has been a state practice since the nineteenth century.⁷⁸ Before 1985, the customs law made it legal to seize materials deemed "immoral and indecent."⁷⁹ As anti-pornography feminists linked pornography to the oppression of women, pornography was increasingly seized at the border. When gay and lesbian liberation brought on the increased production of LGBT print materials, including pornography, these materials were also seized. After 1985, the legal language changed, swapping out "immoral and indecent" for "obscenity," with representations of anal sex being specifically identified as obscene in Canada's legal code.⁸⁰ Criminal law has regulated the distribution of obscene material in Canada since the late nineteenth century, but changed how obscenity was to be determined with the Butler decision. The Butler decision imported a feminist anti-pornography viewpoint

78. Cossman, "Censor, Resist, Repeat," 48.

79. *Ibid.*, 49.

80. *Ibid.*, 49–50.

into Canadian legal code, deeming obscene materials thought to cause harm to women. This definition was culled from a legal brief offered by American anti-pornography feminist Catharine MacKinnon, who had intervened in the case as part of her work with LEAF, a Canadian women's legal association.

Though the anti-porn arguments offered to the court in the Butler case viewed pornography in strictly heterosexual terms,⁸¹ the decision had a negative impact for LGBT print materials and bookstores. The decision Among the numerous LGBT publications that Canadian customs seized was the American lesbian sex magazine *Bad Attitudes* in 1992. Glad Day Bookstore, which had ordered the magazines, was charged with obscenity. In an example of what Brenda Cossman describes as “heteroswitching,” the court re-imagined the lesbian S/M stories in *Bad Attitude* as heterosexual in order to argue that they were harmful to women and, under Butler, obscene.⁸² This strategy is not so different from the one LEAF employed in the Butler case, using gay S/M pornography to argue that pornography was harmful to women.⁸³ Yet, as Pat Califia has pointed out, while homosexual pornography was subject to censorship, heterosexual pornography continued to proliferate in Canada during this time.⁸⁴

In response to state censorship of LGBT materials, the Kiss & Tell collective staged *True Inversions*, a multi-media event comprised of storytelling, vignettes, short scenes, photography, and video. The performance took place as part of a series called “Much Sense: Erotics and Life” at the Banff Centre for the Arts. Like Kiss & Tell's other works, *True Inversions* focuses on

81. Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory*, 81–82.

82. Cossman, “Censor, Resist, Repeat,” 55.

83. Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory*, 86.

84. Califia, “Among Us, Against Us: Right-Wing Feminism,” 109.

lesbian sexual practices. A video by Lorna Boschman that was included in *True Inversions* addresses the issue of state censorship directly. The video shows a series of lesbian sex acts, but these acts are promptly blocked from view by a “CENSORED” stamp. As B.J. Wray points out, Boschman uses the stamp to censor herself before the state can intervene.⁸⁵

Despite Boschman’s self-censorship, Alberta conservatives found the performance highly objectionable. As in the NEA controversies in the United States, the discourse in the press around *True Inversions* focused on how the production was funded. The Banff Centre, where the event took place, receives millions of dollars in funding from its home province of Alberta. The Walter Phillips Gallery, the extension of Banff where *True Inversions* was performed, also received funding from the province.⁸⁶ The Kiss & Tell collective had also received federal funding. When the *Alberta Report* magazine’s piece on *True Inversions* and state funding featured a cartoon implying minister of culture and multiculturalism Doug Main’s approval of the show, Main responded with a letter to the editor. Main admonished the paper for conflating what gets funded with his personal taste. In his efforts to reinforce this distinction, Main writes, “By the way, I think the event and its line-up of performances was disgusting. I wasn’t asked to provide any special specific funding for this event. If I had been asked I would have said ‘No!’”⁸⁷ By asserting his distaste for *True Inversions*, Main validated conservative objections to the piece. The *Alberta Report* piece and Main’s response generated so much buzz that Ken Kowalski, the Deputy Premier of Alberta felt compelled to comment on *True Inversions*, saying, “I most definitely do not endorse this. It’s totally inappropriate.” Kowalski used the discourse

85. wray, “Imagining Lesbian Citizenship: A Kiss & Tell Affair,” 41.

86. This and the preceding *True Inversion* funding information can be found in Filax, *Queer Youth in the Province of the “Severely Normal,”* 130.

87. Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 111.

around *True Inversions* as a springboard towards preventing state-sponsored arts venues from bringing in LGBT performances.⁸⁸ As members of Kiss & Tell have argued, the *Alberta Report* article that had fuelled the controversy, written by Rick Bell, is a less-than-accurate representation of *True Inversions*⁸⁹, but its effects have been far-reaching.

The Threat of Censorship Continues

These instances of censorship in the United States and Canada happened over twenty years ago, and with the mainstream LGBT movement focusing on gay marriage, the issue of censorship has not been at the top of the agenda for some time now. Yet state censorship of LGBT art continues today. In the summer of 2013, the College of Charleston distributed *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir, to faculty and incoming students as part of its College Reads! Program, and planned to bring Bechdel to speak at the college. Conservative Christian organizations such as the Palmetto Family Council objected to the college's inclusion of *Fun Home* on the basis that state funding was used to purchase the books, which they consider pornographic. According to the Palmetto Family Council's webpage, "*Fun Home* features pen and ink sketches so explicit that if the book were classified as a movie it would be rated NC-17. In fact, were it not a literary work, it could come close to violating state law."⁹⁰ South Carolina Representative Garry R. Smith, who got involved in the controversy after being contacted by the parent of a perspective College of Charleston Student, also objected to the college's distribution of the graphic memoir. Smith describes the book as "purely promotion of a [lesbian] lifestyle"

88. Kiss & Tell, *Her Tongue on My Theory*, 61.

89. *Ibid.*, 59–74.

90. Smith, "Someone Is out of Touch with Reality... - Palmetto Family Life."

and states that it “graphically shows lesbian acts.”⁹¹ The drawings that these quotes refer to, which depict the young Bechdel engaging in oral sex with her college girlfriend, take up two of the graphic memoir’s 232 pages. When the College of Charleston did not remove the book from the College Reads! Program, Smith responded by moving to cut the school’s budget by \$52,000—the approximate cost of purchasing the books and Bechdel’s visit to the college.⁹² In addition to these budget cuts, Representative Mac Toole proposed legislation that would restrict the budgets of public colleges who included objectionable content on their syllabi. According to one report,

The House is expected to consider a budget amendment Tuesday that would have the state set aside \$1 million from each public college’s state money until they ban using “pornographic content” in classes and requiring any students to take a class that includes a nude model.

The amendment from state Rep. Mac Toole, R-Lexington, does not define “pornographic content.” He said most people understand the definition.

Toole’s amendment also would require colleges to start courses on the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights before the money is released.⁹³

While Toole ultimately withdrew this proposal, the state eventually pursued a similar course. Instead of cutting college funds, the state re-allocated the money, mandating that it be spent on classes that focus on the country’s founding documents. Like the Helms Amendment, Toole’s proposal does not offer a definition of what it legislates—in this case, “pornographic content.” Notably, the legislation also offers a nationalist moral corrective to the use of pornographic content by mandating courses on American values as represented by the United States

91. qtd. in Piepmeier, “Upstate Republican Wants to Punish CofC for Urging Students to Read Award-Winning Book | Feminism, Y’all | Charleston City Paper,” np.

92. An additional \$17,142 was cut from the University of South Carolina, Upstate’s budget, effectively penalizing that campus for distributing an anthology of LGBT radio broadcasts. An effort to restore these campuses’ funds was defeated in March of 2014.

93. Shain, “COLUMBIA, SC,” np.

Constitution and Bill of Rights. The state offers the same corrective by re-allocating the funds used to purchase Bechdel's book to create courses on the founding documents. Toole's proposal and the legislators responsible for the state budget change rehearse the conservative stance in the NEA controversies of the late '80s/early '90s nearly 25 years later.

In solidarity with the College of Charleston, the cast and creators of *Fun Home*, a Pulitzer-nominated musical adaptation of Bechdel's memoir, staged a concert version of the musical and provided a forum for dialogue about Bechdel's work in the form of post-show discussions in April of 2014. Judy Kuhn, who plays Bechdel's mother in the musical, says, "We want to stand up for the school and for people who believed that this book is worth reading."⁹⁴ These performances of *Fun Home* resisted the state's punitive actions towards the College of Charleston by staging an adaptation of the material that the state had found objectionable. Students joined this effort by staging protests against the budget cuts on the same day. Notably, these performances were not funded with state monies: held off-campus at the Memminger Auditorium in downtown Charleston, the *Fun Home* event was paid for with private funds, including the Coastal Community Foundation's Sam and Regina Greene fund⁹⁵ Tickets were \$15.00 each, and the cast performed for no pay.⁹⁶ The concert stagings were attended by 1500 spectators, and invigorated the local community. According to one report, "The crowd rose in a standing ovation before the show even began."⁹⁷ As Bechdel told one reporter, the performances

94. Healy, "Cast of 'Fun Home' Heading to South Carolina Amid Dispute Over Book."

95. Ibid., np., Reach, "Special Performance of 'Fun Home' after the Book Costs Charleston College Its Funding," np.

96. Margolin, "College of Charleston Protests with Gay-Themed Play 'Fun Home.'"

97. Helderman, "S.C. College's Production Highlights Political Battle between Lawmakers, Public Universities."

were something of a balm “to the kids and to the faculty of that beleaguered school. People were really happy that we were there—some had come from other schools three to five hours away.”⁹⁸

These events serve as a reminder that the state remains hostile to LGBT artists and representations of LGBT practices and lives. The conservative notion that LGBT people and practices are antithetical to the state persists. Yet, they also demonstrate the ways in which performance can challenge state censorship. By participating in these debates through performance and engagement with their audiences, Hughes, Perry, Kiss & Tell, and the cast and creators of *Fun Home* activate performance as a way to circumvent and speak back to state censorship.

98. qtd. in Thomas, “Alison Bechdel on a Very Special Performance of the Fun Home Musical,” np.

CHAPTER 4: PERFORMING COMMUNITY OVER CAPITALISM

The previous chapter's focus on state funding for lesbian theater and performance brings economic concerns to the fore: how do lesbian feminist artists fund their work and support themselves? How did the economic shifts of the 1980s and '90s impact lesbian feminist performance? How did the lesbian feminist emphasis on collective cooperation fare during the "Me" decade? Collectives became popular among lesbian feminists in the 1970s as an alternative to capitalist business models, which many lesbian feminists viewed as oppressive. Rather than being oriented around profit or competition, collectives often strive for cooperation and community. By the 1980s, though, some girls were living in a material(ist) world: Sue-Ellen Case and Dana Heller respectively have characterized this period as one in which queer commodification crushed the lesbian feminist anti-capitalist commitments of the 1970s.¹ Lesbian feminist performers, on the other hand, have largely been associated with community and collectivity, even into the 1980s. This is in no small part due to the critical attention that feminist theater critics such as Case, Davy, Diamond, and Dolan have lavished on the WOW Café, which has operated as a collective since the early 1980s. This chapter examines lesbian feminist economies of performance in the 1980s and '90s as well as lesbian feminist performances at WOW and elsewhere that directly address economic issues. As capitalist interests displaced low-income populations and transformed the geography of Manhattan, lesbian feminist artists voiced their opposition to these changes in performances such as the WOW Café's *Saint Joan of Avenue C*, Split Britches's *Upwardly Mobile Home*, and More Fire! Productions's *Art Failures* and *Epstein on the Beach*. More Fire! indicts the East Village art scene, which it characterizes as lesbo-phobic and misogynist, for attracting real estate developers to the area. Bringing the

1. Case, "Retro-Future"; Devoney Looser and E. Ann Kaplan, "The Anxiety of Affluence: Movements, Markets, and Lesbian Feminist Generation(s)."

lesbian feminist critique of gentrification forward to 2009, Split Britches's play *Lost Lounge* offers collective memory as a counterforce to the destructive, homogenizing force of gentrification. In addition to this emphasis on gentrification, other lesbian performers addressed the changing distribution of wealth in the United States and the financialization of the economy. Circus Amok's *Money Amok* circus performance uses queer bodies to stage shifts in economic conditions in the United States. Reno's *Money Talks* performance provides a crash course in financial literacy and facilitates dialogue about the economy after the financial crisis of 2008.

These performances from the 1980s, '90s, and beyond extend earlier lesbian feminist critiques of capitalism. While liberal feminism sought to expand employment opportunities for women in existing capitalist structures, more radical women viewed the overthrow of capitalism as an important complement to ending sexism. In "Lesbians in Revolt," Charlotte Bunch, a member of the Furies collective, asserts that "Lesbianism threatens male supremacy at its core. When politically conscious and organized, it is central to destroying our sexist, racist, capitalist, imperialist system."² Bunch positions lesbianism against sexism foremost, but she also associates lesbianism with other radical "anti" positions, including anti-capitalism. For Bunch, sexism precedes other forms of oppression—a view shared by the Redstockings in their manifesto³—so lesbian feminism rejects other forms of oppression as vestiges of male domination.⁴ Other lesbian feminists took a more intersectional view. The Combahee River Collective, an African American lesbian feminist collective whose members included Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier, were determined to confront oppression on multiple fronts.

2. Bunch, "Lesbians in Revolt," 29.

3. Redstockings, "Redstockings Manifesto," 534.

4. Bunch, "Lesbians in Revolt," 32–33.

In “A Black Feminist Statement,” the collective writes, “...we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are *interlocking*. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.”⁵ The Combahee River Collective identifies these four kinds of oppression as concerns of black feminism and asserts that they are not separate concerns, but interconnected issues. The collective’s statement is expressly anti-capitalist:

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe the work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation.⁶

Here, the collective assumes a socialist posture, but provides a caveat—that socialism alone cannot address the multiple, interconnected vectors of oppression that the collective has previously identified and positioned themselves against. Against capitalism, the Combahee River Collective emphasizes the collective.

Collective models of business and artistic collaboration were one way that lesbian feminists enacted anti-capitalist commitments. Collectives brought women together to create a feminist culture, but also created a feminist economy that challenged capitalist notions of ownership and individual profit. Many of these collectives also emphasized accessibility, keeping prices low to ensure that women from all socioeconomic brackets could afford to attend events or purchase collectively produced items. The WOW Café is one example of lesbian

5. Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” 210.

6. *Ibid.*, 213.

feminist collective principles in a theater context. As a collective, WOW has no single owner and that decisions are made by consensus. There is no membership fee associated with joining WOW; rather, as Kate Davy details, the collective “operate[s] on the basis of shared labor and giving something back to the space.”⁷ WOW continues to structure itself as a collective to this day. WOW’s webpage offers the following invitation: “Any woman and/or transgender person is invited to come to our weekly meetings... You are immediately a member of the collective!”⁸ In addition to WOW, ’80s and ’90s women’s art collectives include More Fire! Productions, art duo Dyke Action Machine (DAM, discussed in chapter 3), the No to Men theater group (whose work is detailed in the previous chapter), and Kiss and Tell (whose work is discussed in chapters 1 and 3). WOW is one of the few lesbian feminist collectives to survive this period: economic pressures contributed to the dissolution of More Fire! Productions and No to Men. In addition to WOW’s anti-capitalist collective structure, many performances staged at the WOW Café prioritize community over capitalist interests in their content.

Rejecting Gentrification on the Lower East Side

The WOW Café’s production of *Saint Joan of Avenue C* demonstrates the collective’s commitment to community: as Davy details in *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers*, WOW created the piece collectively, and any woman who showed up was allowed, even encouraged, to participate, regardless of ability or previous theater experience.⁹ According to Davy, this policy resulted in an “uneven” script and some bad acting, but provided an opportunity for performers

7. Davy, *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers*, 104.

8. Jen Abrams, “Get Involved!” np.

9. Davy, *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers*, 148–53.

to gain experience.¹⁰ *Saint Joan* also provided a vehicle for women living on Manhattan's Lower East Side to comment on the changes that were taking place in their community due to gentrification.

Gentrification constitutes one process by which capitalist interests, which are associated with individual gain, disrupt community. Sarah Schulman defines gentrification as "a concrete replacement process. Physically it is an urban phenomena: the removal of communities of diverse classes, ethnicities, races, sexualities, languages, and points of view from the central neighborhoods of cities, and their replacement by more homogenized groups. With this comes the destruction of culture and relationship..."¹¹ Schulman's definition was informed by the transformation of Manhattan's Lower East Side. Latina lesbian performance personality Carmelita Tropicana attests to the diversity of the Lower East Side in the opening of the film *Your Kunst is Your Waffan*. Performing on a nightclub stage, Carmelita says, "Loisaida is the place to be, that's right. It is multi-cultural, multi-generational, *mucho* multi, multi-lingual. And like myself, you gotta be multi-lingual. I am very good with the tongue. As a matter of fact, the first language I pick up when I come to New York is Jewish!"¹² This introduction marks the Lower East Side as Jewish, Latino, and lesbian, and characterizes the area as heterogeneous. Capitalist real estate development spurred gentrification on the Lower East Side, which was rechristened the East Village to attract tenants from higher socioeconomic strata. In accordance with Schulman's definition of gentrification, this redevelopment prompted the displacement of

10. Ibid., 151–52.

11. Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind*, 14.

12. Troyano, *Carmelita Tropicana*, 0:00–0:18.

local residents, including the area's Jewish, Latino, and lesbian and gay populations and brought an influx of "yuppie scum," as some locals called the new arrivals, into the area.

One of the factors that had attracted real estate developers to the area was the arts scene that had taken root there. Many artists moved to the Lower East Side in the 1970s, where they were able to rent commercial loft spaces in which they lived and worked. The trendiness of the resulting arts scene was a contributing factor to skyrocketing rents, and many of the artists who had made the area popular got priced out. These changes impacted the WOW Café, Split Britches, and More Fire! Productions, who incorporated commentary on gentrification and decreasing upward mobility into the content of their work.

WOW's *Saint Joan of Avenue C* stages a lesbian feminist response to gentrification. The pressures of gentrification had forced the collective to relocate in the mid-1980s: the group had been renting a storefront on East 11th Street, but rent hikes forced the collective to find space elsewhere. Journalist Kate Walter describes the transformation of the block WOW used to call home: in addition to WOW, the street "originally housed a bakery and a veteran's club. Three years later, there were eight galleries on that block."¹³ As Walter's observation illustrates, the burgeoning Lower East Side art scene pushed out local businesses and community centers, including WOW itself.

Saint Joan was the first play to be staged at WOW's new East 4th Street location. As the title indicates, the play adapts Bertolt Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, but also employs material from Doris Lessing's novel, *The Memoirs of a Survivor*. In Lessing's novel, the narrator details an apocalyptic urban landscape that she views from her window, a dystopia created by government inattention. The conditions detailed in Lessing's novel, spurred by a mass exodus to

13. Walter, "Endangered East Village: Gentrification Threatens Lesbian Artists' Last Hold-Out," 37.

the suburbs, could easily be mapped onto Manhattan's Lower East Side. Passages from *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, delivered by a woman referred to as SURVIVOR in the script, are used to punctuate the adaptation of Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*. In Brecht's play, itself an anti-capitalist adaptation of the story of Joan of Arc, Joan Dark of the Black Straw Hats mission advocates for Chicago's stockyard workers, who are being exploited by meat tycoon and model capitalist Pierpont Mauler. Several leaders in the meat industry offer to pay the Black Straw Hats's overdue rent in exchange for Joan's silence, but Joan refuses the offer, arguing that these men's business practices perpetuate the conditions of poverty. For her refusal, Joan is expelled from the Black Straw Hats, and goes to the stockyards to live among the disenfranchised workers. Meanwhile, meat boss Mauler and Snyder, the head of the mission, form an alliance, with Mauler paying the mission's expenses and Snyder's Black Straw Hats pacifying the stockyard workers with hot soup. Sick and starving, Joan dies without enacting the change she envisions, and capitalism, in collusion with the church, triumphs.

WOW's *Saint Joan of Avenue C* maintains the anti-capitalist sentiment of Brecht's *Saint Joan*, but relocates the action to New York's Lower East Side, where the titular Avenue C is, to address the issue of gentrification. The Joan Dark character, played by Alina Troyano (otherwise known as her performance persona, Carmelita Tropicana), is reimagined as Juanita Loisaída, a city employee who becomes an advocate for those displaced by gentrification. Though Juanita is also sometimes called Joan in the script, she is a Latina heroine. As Davy notes, the choice to recreate the Saint Joan character as a Latina woman means that a largely white cast of characters turns against a Latina heroine, a racial dynamic that was not addressed in the play.¹⁴ That said, positioning a Latina woman as the heroine of *Saint Joan of Avenue C* marks the Lower East Side,

14. Davy, *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers*, 153.

or Loisaida, as a Latino neighborhood.¹⁵ Additionally, the character of Juanita Loisaida may be a composite of community leaders living on the Lower East Side, including Margarita López, a lesbian Puerto Rican immigrant who led community efforts around affordable housing on the Lower East Side;¹⁶ Nilda Pimentel, a lesbian of Puerto Rican descent who served on the Lower East Side's School District 1; and Blanca Irizarry, a woman of Puerto Rican descent who advocated for affordable housing on the Lower East Side. The program for the 1985 performance of *Saint Joan of Avenue C* thanks López by name, and dedicates the production “to all the community workers fighting for the Lower East Side,” like López, Irizarry, and Pimentel.¹⁷ This dedication sustains the lesbian feminist investment in community rather than capitalism.

The plot of *Saint Joan of Avenue C* similarly puts community before capitalism. The play stages Juanita Loisaida's campaign for affordable housing in the face of private real estate development, which is protected by the city. Margarita López speaks to the alliance between the city and private real estate interests in an interview with Sarah Schulman for *Womanews*. López says, “This [gentrification] started a long time ago when the city government and private enterprise decided that they wanted to have it [the Lower East Side] for the rich people.”¹⁸ Consistent with López's view, Juanita Loisaida's adversary in *Saint Joan of Avenue C* is Donna Trumpet, a female stand-in for New York real estate mogul Donald Trump. Donna Trumpet has complete influence over Juanita Loisaida's boss, a city official. In one scene, the boss asks for

15. The area has been a Latino population center since the 1940s.

16. López continued to represent anti-gentrification interests as a member of Community Board 3 (which includes the Lower East Side), a councilwoman representing the Lower East Side, and a Member of the Board of the New York City Housing Authority.

17. “St. Joan of Avenue C (program).”

18. López, interview.

Juanita's assistance on four community-oriented projects, including a new childcare center, the hiring of a bilingual teacher, a homesteading program, and a lunch program for senior citizens. Donna Trumpet's minions, the Trump Chorus, appear after Juanita's boss's request, laughing maniacally as they declare, "No more daycare. No more bilingual education. No more emergency services. No more theaters. No more women's shelters. No more bodegas!"¹⁹ The Trump Chorus not only poo-poos the boss's progressive projects, but also commands the boss to cut city services and the arts. At the Trump Chorus's bidding, Juanita's boss cancels the projects. The Trump Chorus then calls for "More Food Emporiums! Bigger expense accounts! More big expensive private schools! More high-rise condominiums!"²⁰ The Trump Chorus pushes for gourmet supermarkets, corporate bloat, and pricey condos, which real estate developers preferred to rent-controlled apartment buildings. This scene dramatizes the perception that New York's city government protects private interests rather than the interests of the people.

In contrast to the city's advancement of private interests in this scene, Juanita represents the interests of the community she lives in. Juanita, a life-long lesbian resident of the Lower East Side, is a reluctant advocate for the neighborhood. She says, "I've lived here all my life. I've just learned to block out the sirens, the screaming, the bums in the street. I've just learned to step over people without pitying them enough to stop."²¹ Juanita has coped with the living conditions of the Lower East Side through a practiced indifference. Three women appear to Juanita to transform her from indifferent resident to community leader: Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz (played by Ana Maria Simo, a founder of *Medusa's Revenge*), the woman-loving poet and nun;

19. Margolin et al., "St. Joan of Avenue C," 9.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 13.

Katherine Le Sainte (played by Lisa Kron of the Five Lesbian Brothers), a version of St. Catherine, who, having pledged her chastity to Christ, chose to die rather than wed; and Future, who speaks of Juanita's destiny to lead the people of the Lower East Side in Tarot terms. The three visions tell Juanita Loisaída that she will "restore that Office [the Mayor's] to one of the people, not of the landlords. There will be housing for the people."²² While Juanita has previously ignored the problems of violence and homelessness in her neighborhood, after the three visions come to her, she tells her mother, "I am going to give the city back to the people."²³ Juanita Loisaída stands in for the community leaders fighting gentrification on the Lower East Side.

In addition to its focus on gentrification, *Saint Joan of Avenue C* addresses attitudes toward the poor. This attention to attitudes toward the poor is adapted from *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, which asserts that the living conditions of the poor and the homeless are created by capitalism and the businesspeople who practice it. In Brecht's play, Mauler and his associates justify their exploitative business practices by insisting on the "baseness of the poor."²⁴ Joan rebuts this logic when she says, "But how you harness / Their baseness! How you exploit it! Don't you see how their baseness thrives on misfortune?"²⁵ Joan speaks to the ways in which Mauler's business practices create a social dynamic in which individual workers watch out for their own best interests rather than the interests of the larger community. Adapting Brecht's narrative to the Lower East Side in the 1980s, *Saint Joan of Avenue C* focuses its critique on

22. Ibid., 12.

23. Ibid., 14.

24. Brecht, *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, 3.1:39.

25. Ibid., 3.1:29.

Republican attitudes toward the poor. As the Reagan administration slashed welfare and other forms of public assistance, Reagan perpetuated the notion that people receiving public assistance—especially people of color—were taking advantage of these programs. The figure of the “welfare queen” exemplifies this thinking. *Saint Joan of Avenue C* rejects this notion by giving examples of people in need. In her appeal to get the mayor to join her cause, Juanita says, “You know that people are living in the streets with rats, you know that old people have no heat, that they’re freezing and starving; that there are no services anymore.”²⁶ In *Saint Joan of Avenue C*, these social problems are a product of real estate interests and a lack of social services. The Street Chorus includes a young woman who was removed from her apartment for being a lesbian; a woman who lived in a building that burned down, but who could not turn to social services because they had been cut; and an urban homesteader whose building was sold out from under her homesteader’s association by the city. These women have suffered from the disregard of landlords and the city, including the lack of a social safety net.

Saint Joan of Avenue C contrasts the conditions of the poor with the lives of the rich, who have been unaffected by these changes. While the members of the Street Chorus struggle to make a living by offering cleaning services or selling water, the Mayor blows bubbles in his office, and his mother takes Agnes, the Mayor’s wife, shopping for fine clothes. This contrast between the struggle of the poor and the comfort of the dominant class is emphasized in the play by the inclusion of a passage from *The Memoirs of a Survivor*. The Survivor says, “...there was a level of our society which managed to live as if nothing much was happening. ... So everything fell to pieces while still, as always, the administrators lived cushioned against the worst—for to admit that it was happening was to admit themselves useless, admit the extra security they

26. Margolin et al., “St. Joan of Avenue C,” 26.

enjoyed was theft and not payment for services rendered.”²⁷ When considered in relation to gentrification, this passage gives the sense that the wealthy are shielded from the negative effects of gentrification.

Juanita Loisaida, on the other hand, is not so fortunate. Though she achieves some progress and halts one of Donna Trumpet’s real estate development projects through an alliance with the mayor, Trumpet uses her government connections to stage a legal case regarding Juanita’s sanity. Between her conversations with the three visions, whom no one else can see, and her lesbianism, Juanita is deemed insane by the court and is committed to a mental hospital. As in *Saint Joan of Avenue C*, gentrification on Manhattan’s Lower East Side did not wane in the 1980s, and even expanded to other areas of New York City. Despite gentrification’s progression, the women of WOW continued to examine the issue through performance.

Before *Saint Joan of Avenue C*, two of WOW’s founders, Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw, and their Split Britches collaborator Deb Margolin took on the issue of gentrification on the Lower East Side, as well as increasing homelessness and decreasing upward mobility, with their 1984 play *Upwardly Mobile Home*. A flyer for the fall 1984 WOW Café production describes the piece as “their own marathon survival of the 80’s [sic] Depression.” In the play, an impoverished group of performers who function as a makeshift family struggle to survive. Off stage, collaborator Lost Petal has been living on the Brooklyn Bridge for six weeks, competing to win a new mobile home for the group so that they can perform around the country. On stage, Mom, Tammy, and LeVine camp out under the bridge to provide for Lost Petal while attempting to stage a performance that is commercially viable.

27. Ibid., 21A.

The play's title refers to not only the mobile home that the group hopes to win, but also the socioeconomic conditions of the 1980s. During this time, the potential for upward mobility shrank for middle and working class populations and cuts in housing subsidies contributed to an increase in homelessness. *Upwardly Mobile Home* is dedicated to the people affected by these socioeconomic changes. In the program notes for one of the WOW productions, the show is "dedicated to survivors of all depressions; people living under bridges; in boxcars and doorways; to the homeless; to the people who can no longer afford to use pay phones; to everyone who finds it easier to make money waiting tables than to apply for a grant; to the cracked building on East 3rd Street; to all the ways that art grows out through the cracks of poverty and need."²⁸ The increase in the conditions this dedication describes is often attributed to the fiscal policies of the Reagan administration.

Upwardly Mobile Home stages a response to Reagan and his administration's fiscal policies. As one flyer from an early production presented by the Smith College Lesbian Alliance reads, "*Upwardly Mobile Home*, set in 1986, examines the potential outcome of Reagan's 'Four More Years'. . . (Don't forget, Reagan is the man who said that all homeless people are homeless by choice!)"²⁹ While the show was first staged in 1984, the action of the play takes place in 1986 (though this temporal setting fell away as Split Britches continued to perform the play after 1986). This setting in the then-near future positions *Upwardly Mobile Home* as a pre-emptive response to Ronald Reagan's re-election. The parenthetical note refers to remarks that Reagan made during a televised interview on *Good Morning America* in January of 1984. Responding to the characterization of his attitude toward the homeless as callous, Reagan said,

28. "Upwardly Mobile Home."

29. "SPLIT BRITCHES THEATRE COMPANY."

“We have found in this country, and maybe we’re more aware of it now, is one problem that we’ve had, even in the best of times, and that is the people who are sleeping on the grates, the homeless who are homeless, you might say, by choice.”³⁰ Flyers and programs from an early WOW Café production continue to respond to Reagan, goading him to address the issues of poverty and homelessness. The flyer, which advertises the play as “a work in progress,” reproduces an image of a social action from the Great Depression: men and women gathered on Wall Street with signs urging FDR not to give in to corporate pressures to cut the Works Progress Administration’s funds.³¹ The *Upwardly Mobile Home* program replaces the text of the protest signs with details about the production. This imagery draws a parallel between the socioeconomic conditions of the Great Depression and the changes ushered in by Reaganomics. The program depicts the two women from the image with the original text of their signs. One woman’s sign declares, “Mr. President: There’s plenty for all.” The other sign says, “Dare solve the crime of modern poverty.”³² These program images redirect the women’s protest signs, originally addressed to FDR, to Reagan, and bring socioeconomic issues into focus.

Upwardly Mobile Home explores these national concerns in the context of Manhattan’s Lower East Side. The play’s opening highlights the changing landscape of the neighborhood: at the top of the show, LeVine, played by Deb Margolin, reads out a real estate advertisement for a co-op at Bleecker Court. The artsy location is the ad’s primary selling point. LeVine reads, “You’re two blocks from the Public Theatre, right near the Strand Bookstore and Tower Records; up from the art galleries in SoHo, down from the Bottom Line and just east of

30. *Homeless by Choice*, 0:00–0:16.

31. This image was printed in the June 1983 issue of *Esquire*.

32. “Upwardly Mobile Home.”

Washington Square Park and Balducci's. . . . At Bleecker Court, for the first time, the artist and the investor in you will finally agree on something."³³ This very ad ran in *The New York Times* when Bleecker Court became a housing co-op in 1984. The Bleecker Court buildings, constructed in 1930 as tenements and warehouses, were converted to luxury apartments that continue to fetch high prices today. The ad names businesses that highlight lower Manhattan's commercial transformation: the non-profit Public and the independent Strand neighbor Tower, the corporate retail giant. The drug dealers and derelicts of Washington Square Park stand in contrast to Balducci's, a premium grocery store where many Lower East Side residents could not afford to shop. Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*, a play about AIDS and activism, quotes the price of Balducci's gourmet ice cream at \$18 a pint. Later in *Upwardly Mobile Home*, Tammy (Weaver) says of a former apartment, "It used to be a warehouse and now it's TriBeCa,"³⁴ referring to the area's transformation from industrial center to trendy residential area. These lines speak to the ways in which gentrification has changed the landscape of the Lower East Side.

The situation of LeVine and her fellow performers, Mom (Shaw) and Tammy (Weaver), stands in contrast to the influx of wealth in the East Village: the performers can barely afford to buy coffee at Burger King,³⁵ which could be had for \$0.25 a cup. To make ends meet, LeVine works as a telephone surveyor and Tammy sells knickknacks on the street, but the troupe's goal is to make its living by performing. To that end, LeVine pushes the troupe to make work that (she thinks) will sell. Their efforts include a strained rendition of *West Side Story*'s "America" number in Yiddish, , and a production of *The Shanghai Gesture*, a play by John Colton that

33. Margolin, Shaw, and Weaver, "Mobile Home," 88–89.

34. *Ibid.*, 99.

35. Margolin, Shaw, and Weaver, "Mobile Home."

launched Florence Reed's career in the 1930s.³⁶ Mom is reluctant to perform this last piece on the basis that it is "racist and sexist."³⁷ Indeed, while *The Shanghai Gesture* has been described as "a survivor version of *Madame Butterfly*,"³⁸ the play trades the stereotype of the helpless Asian woman for the vengeful dragon lady, embodied in the character of Mother God Damn. In *Upwardly Mobile Home*, LeVine responds to Mom's protestations about performing *The Shanghai Gesture* by drawing out one of the play's few redeeming qualities, saying to Mom, "You've got to admire that...—a woman [Mother God Damn] making it on her own in the twenties in a play."³⁹ Mother God Damn, like the artists in *Upwardly Mobile Home*, is a survivor. But the troupe will not survive in New York. Despite LeVine's insistence, the troupe's performance of *The Shanghai Gesture* is not profitable. Lost Petal abandons her spot in the bridge contest to settle down with a woman who lives in a top-of-the-line co-op like Bleeker Court. Priced out of the East Village, with no production prospects and no chance of winning a mobile home by the play's end, the women decide to leave New York and head to New Orleans, where they will try to make a living working in the local arts scene. The artists can no longer afford to make a home in the neighborhood that they have added value to.

Upwardly Mobile Home's concern with material conditions is not isolated to the starving artist characters on stage. Between rehearsals for *The Shanghai Gesture*, Mom delivers a monologue that asks the audience to consider the economics of making and seeing theater. She says:

36. Case, "Introduction," 23.

37. Margolin, Shaw, and Weaver, "Mobile Home," 92.

38. Sommer, "The Shanghai Gesture, a Curtainup off-off Broadway Review."

39. Margolin, Shaw, and Weaver, "Mobile Home," 95.

You have paid to see me. You will not get your money back. Your money does not pay me for my work. I work always. What circle do you move in? Do you have a bed to sleep in? And food? And a toilet? Do your friends? Do you have a need to share your life with others? Tell stories? Do you get paid for your stories? Do you get paid what you're worth for what you do? Am I worth five dollars?

Do you want more room to watch me? A bigger theater, more comfortable seats? Are you willing to pay for that or do you want to pay for a more comfortable show? I am a mother, a good mother, are you willing to pay to see a good lesbian mother?

My legs feel long and keep getting in my way. Do you want to see my legs? That's very expensive. I don't know if you have enough money to pay to see a good lesbian mother's legs.⁴⁰

By assigning a view of her legs a high monetary value, Mom revalues the usually devalued lesbian theater artist. As a whole, this speech reminds the audience that their access to this performance is part of a monetary exchange. Mom asks spectators to take stock of their material comforts in their daily lives as well as in the theater. That Mom approaches this topic by questioning the audience underscores that not everyone can answer "yes" to these queries—for instance, those residents of the Lower East Side who have been displaced by gentrification. Mom questions what it is that spectators are paying for when they attend a show—the comfort of a plush theater seat, or the comfort of having one's ideas and views confirmed at the theater. Split Britches and the women of WOW deny audiences this second comfort by confronting the issue of gentrification in their community head-on.

Like WOW and Split Britches, More Fire! Productions created pieces from a lesbian perspective that challenged New York's changing artistic and economic landscapes. More Fire! was co-founded in 1980 by visual artist Robin Epstein and actress Dorothy Cantwell. Friends since college, Epstein and Cantwell worked together waiting tables in Brooklyn and Manhattan. Their waitressing experiences provided fodder for their first play, *As the Burger Broils*. The

40. Ibid., 99.

piece premiered in October of 1980 at P.S. 122, and was the first full-length performance to be staged at the experimental East Village venue. The group subsequently staged most of its works at University of the Streets, an organization that advocates and provides space for little-known artists, but also appeared at the 1981 Women's One World Festival, the WOW Café's predecessor, and the Performing Garage, a lower Manhattan hub for experimental work. Cantwell co-wrote the collective's next two plays, *The Exorcism of Cheryl*, which considered women's feelings of self-defeat, and *Junk Love*, an exploration of hetero- and homosexual obsessions with romantic love, before leaving the group to pursue other performance opportunities. Over the years, More Fire! collaborators included lesbian performance artist Holly Hughes; Jennifer Miller, the founder of the queer Circus Amok; Deb Margolin of Split Britches; and Stephanie Doba, an artist and arts administrator.

After Cantwell's departure, Epstein began to collaborate with lesbian activist, journalist, and novelist Sarah Schulman. With Schulman co-authoring playscripts with Epstein, More Fire! Productions began making work that commented more overtly on social conditions. Two of the works that Schulman and Epstein co-wrote and performed in, *Art Failures* and *Epstein on the Beach*, problematize the gentrification of New York's East Village. In the satiric *Art Failures*, Epstein and Schulman play two lesbian stand-up comics—quotations of themselves named Robin and Sarah—struggling to break into New York's trendy downtown art scene. Shirley, Robin's neurotic girlfriend, wishes Robin would just get a real job, but Robin and Sarah refuse to be “art failures,” and are determined to fight misogyny and lesbo-phobia in the East Village art world. As Epstein recalls, “The art world was not a woman's world, and my work with Sarah

Schulman focused on that fact.”⁴¹ In *Art Failures*, Robin and Sarah shop around their play, a lesbian take-off on Harvey Fierstein’s Tony-award-winning play *Torch Song Trilogy*, to downtown theaters that foster new work, including La MaMa and The Public. The work is well-received, but the artistic associates are uninterested in producing a lesbian play. One artistic associate declares, “I love your work and I’d love to change it. Don’t you have any European gay men in your group?”⁴² The next says, “Listen girls, I love your work, but we just need to make a few changes. First, we’ll turn the gay women into gay men.”⁴³ Sure enough, work written and/or directed by men dominated these theaters’ offerings in the early 1980s, and work by gay men, like Fierstein’s *Torch Song Trilogy*, garnered critical acclaim.

Epstein and Schulman extended the opportunity for critique to their audiences, which often included other lesbian theater artists. During the first run of the production in December of 1983, Robin appeals to the audience to ask Erika Munk, critic and editor at the *Village Voice*, to review *Art Failures*. During the play’s second run in April of 1984, Robin campaigns for an Obie award, a prize given by the *Voice* that honors Off-Broadway theater and performance. Sarah even distributed stamped postcards addressed to Munk for spectators to send in. Robin’s appeals are an extension of the play’s satire of the East Village art scene rather than a sincere plea for critical attention, for *Art Failures* characterizes trendy downtown performance as vacuous and apolitical. In the play, a successful performance artist friend advises Sarah and Robin that they “should have sixty people running in doing pedestrian movements. Use NYU students, they will do anything. And you’ve got to have music and video. Right now it’s too cerebral, it’s too idea-

41. Epstein and Cantwell, “More Fire! Productions in the East Village: A Talk by Robin Epstein and Dorothy Cantwell at the Modern Language Association in Philadelphia,” 12.

42. Epstein and Schulman, “Failures,” 26.

43. *Ibid.*, 28.

oriented. ... The point is to...be entertaining, get an attractive package. Slides, video collaborations, special effects, glossy paper.”⁴⁴ Here, Epstein and Schulman poke fun at fads in early ‘80s performance art, characterizing it as superficial.

Against this characterization of performance art, Epstein and Schulman position their own work as community-oriented. The same performance artist refers to Robin and Sarah as “prisoners of the lesbo-ghetto,” a joke that recurs in *Epstein on the Beach*.⁴⁵ If Epstein and Schulman were indeed prisoners of the lesbo ghetto, they were happy to be lifers. While the *Voice* was ambivalent about *Art Failures*, the play garnered glowing reviews in LGBT publications such as the *New York Native* and the *Gay Community News*, the feminist *Womanews*, and local magazine the *East Village Eye*. *Art Failures* spectators were also enthusiastic: many used the *Art Failures* postcards to echo the play’s insistence that more attention be paid to lesbian work. One woman, identifying herself as “a sister,” wrote, “It’s time lesbian artists got a break. Enough of Harvey Fierstein and those screaming queens—give some honest dykes a break!” Another woman wrote, “Dear Erika, You really should come to see *Art Failures*! ... Support work by [women] and lesbians.” One spectator urged, “Give them a chance! Girls should get something.” Another audience member wrote, “Liked it, silly, good—let’s see more lesbians in shows not written, directed, etc. by men.”⁴⁶ While *More Fire!*’s work was not highly regarded in theater circles, the group was a vital part of the East Village’s lesbian subculture in the 1980s, creating lesbian representation that East Village lesbians were clearly eager for.

44. *Ibid.*, 34.

45. *Ibid.*, 33.

46. “*More Fire!* Postcards.”

The play's commentary on gentrification extends *More Fire!*'s commitment to community, focusing on how gentrification impacts long-time residents of developing areas. Robin and Sarah's comedy routines offer a biting critique of the economic strain caused to low-income populations by gentrification. Attempting to sell their comedic talents, Robin and Sarah pitch a television commercial to a used car salesman over the phone. The commercial promises to ease financial hardship. Robin says,

Listen, Little Man, times are hard. You can't keep up with the house payments, Con Ed repossessed your air conditioner, and everything's out of reach. You can't afford to get away even though that's just what you need. Well I, Jerry D [the used car salesman], have the solutions to all your problems. Get rid of the mortgage, get rid of Con Edison, screw the MTA and move into your own Automotive Living Quarters. Yes, now you can travel, sleep, read, listen to music, and get away from all of it in our compact home, work, and vacation complex for the '80s.⁴⁷

Like the co-op advertisement in Split Britches's *Upwardly Mobile Home*, the commercial promotes a "have it all" lifestyle, but the commercial addresses those who can't afford such a lifestyle. This tension reflects the unevenness of economic gain during the 1980s: while the wealthy benefited from a robust stock market, poorer classes suffered from stagnant wages and shrinking social services. In New York City, increased income disparity contributed to a rise in the homeless population. Robin and Sarah's commercial indexes this rise by encouraging people to escape financial hardship by buying a used car to live in.

The characters Robin and Sarah are directly affected by these economic and social changes in *Art Failures*. Sarah, displaced by gentrification, lives in Tompkins Square Park, a known resting place for New York City's homeless population during the 1980s. Five years after Epstein and Schulman staged *Art Failures*, a tent city developed there in protest of gentrification even as pricey condominiums like the Christodora House—which had at one time been a

47. Epstein and Schulman, "Failures," 7.

settlement house for new immigrants from Eastern Europe—grew up around the park’s perimeter. In *Art Failures*, gentrification not only displaces Sarah from her home, but also threatens Robin’s waitressing job at the Kiev. The Kiev references a Ukrainian diner on 7th Street and 2nd Avenue, and indexes the Lower East Side’s history as an Eastern European neighborhood. Robin begins to fear for her job when a real estate agent expresses interest in buying the restaurant and turning it into a gay men’s sushi bar. She explains, “We love finding these rundown ethnic neighborhoods and bringing in some upward mobility. Already the community is proliferating with co-ops, croissant shops and shoe boutiques. Now take those projects over on Avenue D. They would make ideal luxury co-ops. People will pay anything for a river view. ... Why, it’s going to be another SoHo.”⁴⁸ These lines highlight how gentrification pushes out low-income populations to construct residential and commercial properties for the wealthy. The agent’s vision of a second SoHo underscores the threat of gentrification. In the late 1970s, artists flocked to the flagging industrial area for its lofts, and the art scene that developed there attracted developers, who built some of the most expensive apartment units in the city.

More Fire!’s critique of East Village gentrification continues in *Epstein on the Beach*, a play on the title of the postmodern opera, *Einstein on the Beach*.⁴⁹ Rising rents have pushed Robin out of the East Village to Brighton Beach, where she has given up her artistic endeavors and opened a knish stand. While Robin has given up on having a career in the art world, everyone around her is chasing fame: Robin’s twin sister, a successful comedian named Jennifer, steals not only Robin’s jokes but also her girlfriend; Robin’s girlfriend, Irene, a struggling actress who once longed to play Ánya in Chekhov’s *A Cherry Orchard*, is seduced by Jennifer’s fortune

48. Ibid., 15–17.

49. The script attributes the play’s title to lesbian performance artist Holly Hughes.

and fame; even Robin's mother, Flo, starts a phony self-help program, hoping to cash in big. Only Frieda Katz (Sarah Schulman), a fellow former East Village resident and a customer at Robin's knish stand, is disinterested in becoming famous. Robin describes Frieda as "the last surviving member of the Jewish Socialist Workers' League."⁵⁰ Frieda can often be seen clutching a copy of *Workers Vanguard*, a bi-weekly Marxist newspaper, and peppers her dialogue with references to Marxist thinkers and ideas. Her presence on stage indexes the East Village's history as a center of Jewish socialism and the labor movement during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sarah Schulman details women's role in this history in an article published in *The Tribe of Dina*, an anthology on Jewish women for the lesbian literary journal *Sinister Wisdom*, a year after playing Frieda in *Epstein on the Beach*.⁵¹

Despite the East Village's socialist history, capitalist interests transformed the area in the 1980s, as *Epstein on the Beach* highlights. Robin and Frieda cite gentrification as the primary motivation for their exodus from the East Village to Brighton Beach. Robin says, "When the sushi bars came [to the East Village], I ignored them. When the straight people came, I turned the other cheek. When the galleries came, I shed a tear. And when they opened Steve's Ice Cream on Second Avenue, I moved to Brooklyn."⁵² The arrival of Steve's Ice Cream exemplifies the changes taking place in the East Village when *Art Failures* and *Epstein on the Beach* were performed. In 1984, Steve's Ice Cream set up shop where the Orchidia restaurant had stood for nearly thirty years. The restaurant served Italian and Ukrainian food, and had been a popular gathering place for Ukrainian-Americans and visiting Ukrainians. A rent hike—from \$950 to

50. Epstein and Schulman, "Epstein on the Beach," 7.

51. Schulman, "Radical Jewish Women's History."

52. Epstein and Schulman, "Epstein on the Beach," 13–14.

\$5,000 a month—prompted the Orchidia’s owners to close the restaurant rather than raise their prices to make up the difference.⁵³ Community efforts to save the Orchidia included circulating petitions, reaching out to legislators, and picketing outside of the landlord’s home in protest of the exorbitant rise in rent. Robin’s speech signals that these and other developments in the East Village that the real estate agent portended in *Art Failures* have materialized in *Epstein on the Beach*: trendy restaurants have replaced local ethnic eateries, heterosexuals have pushed out the LGBT population, galleries have proliferated, and gourmet foodie franchises abound. Frieda similarly mourns for the East Village. She says, “I used to have such a nice life. I had an apartment in the East Village. . . . Four years I worked to save that apartment. And then one day, I opened the window and the neighborhood was gone. Everywhere you looked galleries, galleries. So I took a look. Didn’t understand a thing. I asked myself, how could something that kicks people out of their homes be art?”⁵⁴ Frieda speaks to the East Village’s changed landscape, now colonized by the art world.

The play’s ending reinforces the critique of gentrification by staging a quotation of Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov dramatizes changing social conditions subsequent to the emancipation of the serfs in Russia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Ranyévskayas, an aristocratic family, have mismanaged their estate. Lopákhin, a former peasant, suggests building a new source of revenue in the cherry orchard—summer homes for the emerging middle class. When the Ranyévskayas fail to act, Lopákhin purchases the estate at auction and implements the plan for summer homes himself. In the final scene, as the Ranyévskayas prepare to leave for the train, the sounds of the cherry trees

53. Carroll and Maurice, “New York Day by Day,” B3.

54. Epstein and Schulman, “Epstein on the Beach,” 26.

being chopped down can be heard. Ánya, the family's youngest daughter, asks Lopákhin to halt the destruction of the cherry orchard until they have left. These plot developments stage the larger socioeconomic shifts taking place at the time, namely the fall of the aristocracy and increasing social mobility for the peasant class. *Epstein on the Beach* dramatizes shifts in the opposite direction: for the poor, social services and opportunities for upward mobility decreased, while the stock market and real estate development opportunities increased the wealth of the wealthy. Like Lopákhin in *The Cherry Orchard*, Robin and Frieda aim to re-purpose land in order to turn a profit. For all of their criticism of gentrification and celebrity culture, Robin and Frieda succumb to both by the play's end: after being mistaken for Jennifer, Robin signs a movie deal and becomes a major star, with Frieda acting as her manager. Frieda encourages Robin to pursue real estate development. She says, "Ra, I think we should find a peaceful, happy, quiet, ethnically-balanced little community and completely destroy it with useless and tacky development."⁵⁵ Robin chooses Brighton Beach. In the final scene, the characters gather at the knish stand in Brighton Beach. Robin announces a revised real estate venture: she has bought a theater in the East Village—in performance, she names the theater they are working in, The University of the Streets—and plans to convert the building into condominiums, which she will sell "at mammoth prices."⁵⁶ As Robin and Frieda leave for the D train, just as the Ranyévskayas left for the train in *The Cherry Orchard*, Robin declares that she will burn the knish stand, since the insurance money will net more profits than renting condos. This act, which some New York landlords engaged in if their buildings could not attract a certain class of tenant, is analogous to chopping down the titular cherry orchard in Chekhov's famous play. A bum on the street (who,

55. *Ibid.*, 27.

56. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

in a comedic plot twist turns out to be Robin and Jennifer's absent father) tries to remind the women of their former convictions, but the women ignore him and leave for the train to Manhattan. In the end, the bum is a parallel to the old servant Firs, who, amidst the redistribution of wealth and property, has been forgotten—much like the populations that have been displaced by gentrification and development in the East Village.

Unlike their characters, Epstein and Schulman did not change their stance on the issue of gentrification. More Fire!'s operating procedures and production values reflect Over the nine years that More Fire! staged plays, Epstein funded the group's projects on tips from her waitressing jobs. Epstein practiced a feminine economy, stretching a limited budget a long way. Epstein's economy is evident in the production designs of *Art Failures* and *Epstein on the Beach*: the shows employ hand-painted backdrops and handmade props crafted by Epstein. Epstein rented rehearsal and performance space at University of the Streets for \$15 a night, and ticket prices for More Fire! shows ranged from \$5 to \$8. Notably, Epstein was even able to pay the actors, who were a mix of amateurs and professionals, from her waitress earnings. Epstein's economy is remarkable in comparison to the unbridled spending of her male contemporaries: the cost of Brooklyn Academy of Music's 1984 revival of Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach*, the abstract opera that *Epstein on the Beach* is titled after, totaled \$1 million, with tickets costing up to \$45.⁵⁷

in addition to problematizing gentrification in their plays, they participated in marches and rallies against gentrification. Schulman also addresses the redevelopment of Manhattan in her novels. In *People in Trouble*, Manhattan real estate is in short supply, so developer Ronald Horne—a quotation of Donald Trump—fills in the land on the West Side. On this reclamation

57. Rockwell, "With '84 a Success, Next Wave Plans Key Events," C13.

site, Horne builds Downtown City, a stand-in for Battery Park City's combination of waterfront condominiums and franchises. She has also authored a non-fiction tome on the subject entitled *Gentrification of the Mind*, in which she links gentrification to the AIDS crisis as well as a growing sense of passivity. Even as Schulman and Epstein railed against the gentrification of the East Village, both onstage and off, that very issue would bring about the end of More Fire! Productions. By the late 1980s, with rents increasing for both housing and rehearsal/performance space in the East Village, Epstein could no longer afford to make work independently, and More Fire! disbanded.

While performance may not impede gentrification—indeed, as More Fire!'s work makes plain, it may spur gentrification on—performance has served as an important mechanism for remembering a location as it was before being transformed by an influx of wealth. Peggy Phelan and others have emphasized performance's ephemeral quality, but Diana Taylor has asserted performance's capacity to preserve and remember. Performances that imagine neighborhoods and locations before redevelopment enact performance's memorial capacity. Nearly 25 years after performing *Upwardly Mobile Home*, Split Britches returns to the issue of gentrification in Manhattan with *Lost Lounge* (2009). While proponents of gentrification and redevelopment offer narratives of growth and progress, Split Britches's *Lost Lounge* stages the loss of local character that these transitions entail. The titular lost lounge refers to the Tahitian Lanai, which Weaver describes as

“a tiny little place on Waikiki Beach, squeezed in between a Hyatt and Hilton. It was a great place, where all the outsiders would come, and the hotel entertainers would come after their shows. There was a piano and they would sing. It was a gathering, and we [Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw] knew it wasn't going to last very long, because it was prime real estate. And in fact, it didn't; they knocked it down and built a big hotel.”⁵⁸

58. Murrin, “Stage Notes: The Lost Lounge.”

Whereas the piano bar at the Tahitian Lanai served as a gathering place for Waikiki locals, the hotel that took its place caters to tourists. *Lost Lounge* marks similar changes in the landscape of the Lower East Side, where local haunts were demolished in order to build condominiums and chain stores—and where Weaver and Shaw lived for many years. During the show, Weaver claims that the neighborhood has changed so much that she must count her steps to keep from getting lost. She says, “I walked down Bowery, I turned right on Bond, and I did not know where I was.”⁵⁹ This long-time denizen of the Lower East Side finds herself unable to recognize her own neighborhood. She finds her way by remembering what used to be there before redevelopment so drastically altered the landscape.

The media components employed in *Lost Lounge*, which include projection and sound, emphasize the destructive force of these processes rather than the generative. As Weaver and Shaw perform a series of lounge acts, many of them quotations of bits by Louis Prima and Keely Smith, Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca, and Mike Nichols and Elaine May, their routines are disrupted by the sounds of construction work. Since the show must go on, Weaver and Shaw continue to perform despite the noisy drills, hammers, saws, and explosions, much like “the last holdouts—both the people and the places people gather to face or fend off encroaching cultural extinction” that the show is dedicated to.⁶⁰ The projections similarly refer to the destruction and reconstruction taking place on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. A projection appears on the upstage wall—a dark crack against the white walls of the basement at Dixon Place (where *Lost*

59. Split Britches, “Lost Lounge.”

60.

Lounge premiered). As the show progresses, the crack widens to reveal a crane and wrecking ball alongside a building covered in overgrown brush. Another projection shows a film clip from Pierre Granier-Deferre's *Le Chat*, which focuses on the relationship of an aging couple, a typesetter and a former circus performer. The small house the couple shares is in a neighborhood where homes are being knocked down to make way for urban sprawl—a situation not dissimilar to that of Manhattan's Lower East Side. *Lost Lounge* incorporates one of *Le Chat*'s demolition scenes, in which a wrecking ball swings slowly through the air and into a building, producing a cloud of dust and crumbling debris. As on the Lower East Side, the existing landscape is being demolished.

While the show addresses loss, it also engages the audience in collective remembering. Before the show begins, Shaw circulates with spectators, asking them what New York places and people they miss and recording their answers on slips of paper. Weaver and Shaw put their series of routines on hold to read the spectators' answers aloud. In the two performances I have seen live, many answers produced verbal responses from the audience from people who remember that same place. This segment of the performance produces a collective tribute to sites lost to real estate interests. This act of collective remembering memorializes the Bowery as it was before reconstruction and redevelopment displaced communities and changed the landscape of the area. Even as real estate development continues to change the landscape, this aspect of the performance acts as a counterforce to the destruction of gentrification.

Critiquing Capitalist Processes

While gentrification has clearly been an important issue for lesbian feminist artists, it is certainly not the only element of capitalism that lesbian feminist artists have addressed in

performance. Jennifer Miller, who had performed in *More Fire!*'s *Epstein on the Beach*, continued to critique capitalism in her work with Circus Amok. Founded by Miller in 1989, Circus Amok is a queer circus performance group that stages circus and theatrical productions in outdoor public spaces around New York City. Miller acts as Circus Amok's ringmaster, and her opening speech underscores Circus Amok's queer perspective at the start of each performance. Rather than repeating the standard opener, "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, children of all ages," Miller says, "Ladies, gentlemen, boys, girls, and the rest of us." This last phrase makes room for those who queer normative gender roles, such as Miller herself: as a woman with a beard who usually delivers this line in an evening gown, Miller does not fit easily into the gender binary. Alongside this queer perspective, Circus Amok's organizational structure and sustained commitment to public engagement characterize the group as anti-capitalist and community-oriented. Circus Amok operates as a non-profit organization, and is funded by public and private grants as well as private donations. This non-profit structure allows the group to compensate performers for their labor while keeping Circus Amok performances free and accessible to the public.

In addition to Circus Amok's anti-capitalist structure, the content of the group's performances engage socioeconomic issues from a queer, anti-capitalist perspective. *Money Amok*, which was performed in parks and other public spaces in New York City during the summer of 1996, directly addresses socioeconomic issues. According to the program, the *Money Amok* performance was created collectively by the Circus Amok troupe, with additional writing by Sarah Schulman (whose insights on gentrification were examined above) and Steve Friedman. At that time, the troupe included inter-medial dancer Cathy Weis and dancer Scott Heron. *Money Amok* was performed at Manhattan's Riverside and Tompkins Square parks; Brooklyn's

Washington Plaza, and Fort Greene, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Prospect parks; Harlem's Black United Fund Community Garden; and the Bronx's Bathgate Success Garden and Van Cortlandt Park. The demographics of the neighborhoods in which these sites are found varies greatly: while Riverside Park is located on Manhattan's white and wealthy upper west side, Fort Greene Park is in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, a black enclave that underwent gentrification in the 1990s. This analysis will focus on the June 8th performance at the Black United Fund Community Garden, whose audience consisted mainly of black women and children.⁶¹

The *Money Amok* performance opens with the entrance of the band, which plays as they march in from the street. The show begins with a stilts routine, followed by Miller's opener (discussed above) and a charivari that introduces the performers and the subject matter. As the performers, which include Scott Heron and Roderick Murray in dresses, flip, tumble, and juggle around the circus ring, two women dance with giant dollar sign cut-outs and another performer carries an oversized dollar bill across the stage. These props introduce money as the subject of the performance. The end of the charivari makes the performance's stance clear. As the performers leave the stage, one of the roustabouts, wearing a hound's mask, lingers. The hound has a seat in the ring and unfolds a newspaper. As he reads, the spectators can see the downstage side of the paper, which reads, "SHARE THE WEALTH" in large block letters. In 1934, populist senator Huey Long introduced "Share Our Wealth, a proposal to restructure the tax code in such a way that would cap personal fortunes and redistribute wealth to the impoverished."⁶² *Money Amok* addresses the distribution of wealth and other pressing socioeconomic issues of the 1990s.

61. Miller, *Money Amok*.

62. Long, "Share Our Wealth."

The “Chairs of Death” routine uses the bodies of the circus performers to illustrate the distribution of wealth in the United States. As the performers bring the chairs into the circus ring, they juggle and balance them in various formations before assembling the chairs into a straight line and taking a seat. An announcer declares, “Ladies and gentlemen, we now present for you a human graph, a statistical tableau vivant. As we look back over the past twenty years, we bring you a daring and dazzling didactic depiction of the deadly dance of the dollar.”⁶³ The announcer adds that the chairs represent the wealth of the United States, and the performers represent the population of the United States. Together, the arrangement of chairs and bodies depicts the distribution of wealth in the United States at various times. The announcer starts with the year 1975: one performer stretches out across five chairs, representing the ten percent of the population with 50 percent of the wealth, kicking the other performers out of their chairs as she slides down. The other nine performers, or 90 percent of the population, share the other five chairs, or 50 percent of the wealth, by sitting on each other’s laps. Musical accompaniment underscores the contrast between these two groups, with the full-bodied brass section playing as the “wealthy” body takes up space and the diminutive slide whistle chirping as the other bodies share less space. Jumping to 1995, the announcer explains that one percent of the population has 40 percent of the wealth, nine percent has 30 percent, ten percent has ten percent, and eighty percent of the population owns 20 percent of the wealth. The lounging performer divides herself into one and nine percent by extending her sleeve across four chairs and laying across three. The next performer occupies one seat. The remaining eight performers manage to share two chairs between them by balancing on top of each other. In this routine, the Circus Amok translate the

63. Miller, *Money Amok*, 15:40–16:02.

fiscal economy into an economy of space to stage the changing distribution of wealth in the United States.

The next bit, written by Sarah Schulman,⁶⁴ challenges one of the core ideas of capitalism, as well as the American Dream—that through hard work, one can achieve upward mobility and material comfort. Karen Sherman and Jennifer Miller stand on stools and wear black robes, bookending three performers on the ground wearing white robes. Together, they sing a ditty that celebrates a strong work ethic: “Sleep a lot, eat a lot, rushin’ like crazy / Run a lot, do a lot, never be lazy.”⁶⁵ From atop her stool, Sherman yells out in a gruff voice, “Work harder to get ahead, work harder to get ahead! Harder, harder, harder!”⁶⁶ Her refrain refers to the promise of capitalism, that hard work will be rewarded. As she—the boss—shouts, the people in the white robes—that is, the workers—begin to run in place. They cry, “We’re working, we’re working, we’re not getting ahead!”⁶⁷ These actions demystify the promise of capitalism: despite all of their hard work—in this case, running—the workers do not get ahead, but remain in the same place. Miller then introduces the issue of taxation: as the workers start running again, Miller, standing on the stool opposite the boss, tells the workers that their taxes have been raised not to improve government services, but to make up for tax breaks for their wealthy boss. One of the workers, Sarah Johnson, points to the boss as she cries out, “Why should we waste our lives paying taxes to support a creepy rich guy like him?”⁶⁸ When the workers point out that the wealthy boss

64. Sussman, “A Queer Circus: Amok in New York,” 269.

65. Miller, *Money Amok*, 20:00–20:20.

66. *Ibid.*, 20:20–20:25.

67. *Ibid.*, 20:30–20:35.

68. *Ibid.*, 22:20–22:27.

should be paying more, the boss replies, “Who’s gonna make me?”⁶⁹ The workers begin to parrot the question, appealing to the spectators and their voting power. The “Up Your Loop Holes” act again stresses this theme. Scott Heron, Tanya Gagné, and Karen Sherman perform circus acts to raise the issue of corporate loopholes. Standing on stools, Heron and Gagné circle hula hoops around their arms, necks, waists, and ankles. On the ground, in the center of the ring, Sherman twirls a lasso. Together, they say, “Loopholes! Break the tragic cycle of corporate dependence on government handouts.”⁷⁰ As an electric guitar plays a lively tune, Heron and Gagné rattle off the names of corporations and the millions of dollars of government funds they receive. Together, these acts question the current tax code, which they portray as a help to corporations rather than everyday people.

Another act, “The Safety Net,” takes on the fraying of the social safety net—that is, federal programs designed to protect vulnerable populations such as the poor, the elderly, and the disabled. Ringmaster Miller wears an oversized top hat with stars and stripes that is reminiscent of Uncle Sam. Large, shiny dollar signs adorn her jacket on the front and back. As the troupe assembles set pieces and props, Miller introduces the act, saying, “And now, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, you see before you an old, familiar friend: the safety net. I’ve gathered together a group of America’s finest flyers to give you a demonstration of life with and without the safety net in modern America.”⁷¹ The troupe has set up a trampoline and a mat with a sign reading “SAFETY NET” in big block letters sitting in front of it. This “SAFETY NET” refers to the social safety net: attached to the edges of the big “SAFETY NET” sign are smaller

69. *Ibid.*, 22:47–22:52.

70. *Ibid.*, 32:54–33:10.

71. *Ibid.*, 26:15–26:40.

signs that name elements of the social safety net, such as Medicare and food stamps. The troupe members are all trying to get to the social safety net. Their costumes correspond to different jobs and professions, including a waiter, a factory worker, a chef, a doctor, and a businesswoman. One at a time, members of the troupe jump onto the trampoline and flip, leap, and turn before landing on the “SAFETY NET” mat. As they cycle through, two performers hold a sign upstage that provides captions for the action, and the band plays a jaunty polka. As the troupe members perform their jumps, the tempo of the music accelerates, and the captions become more urgent, changing from “lah dee dah” to “Getting Behind” to “HURRY!” The performers’ jumps get closer together until the performers eventually land on top of each other and fall in a heap. In response to this pile-up, the caption shows the Yiddish lamentation, “OY YOY YOY.”

After the performers recover, the difficulty of the act increases: one performer moves the trampoline further from the “SAFETY NET” mat, and Miller inserts obstacles such as a giant paper carrot on a stick, which the performers must jump over; two red hoops for performers to jump through; and even Miller herself—or, her tall Uncle Sam hat. The performers must clear these obstacles to reach the “SAFETY NET” mat. These more difficult acrobatic elements correspond to changes in the social safety net in the United States. In the 1930s, the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was established as an entitlement program, making benefits available to all who qualified. In the 1960s, work incentives were introduced to encourage welfare recipients to work. In the 1970s and ‘80s, reforms spearheaded by the Reagan administration shifted the welfare system towards a “workfare” model, in which welfare recipients must work in order to receive their benefits.⁷² In the 1990s, GOP members of Congress moved further away from previous entitlement models and pushed to decentralize the

72. Nightingale and Holcomb, “Social Safety Nets in the United States - Briefing Book.”

welfare system and slash funding, shrinking the social safety net. Miller addresses these issues when she says, “All right, you might have seen this act before, but never have you seen it performed without the aid of the safety net! ... Can they do it? Can we survive without the safety net?”⁷³ The performers take the sign and the mat out of the ring, leaving only the trampoline. After a drumroll, one troupe member launches a dummy into the air from the trampoline. The dummy’s landing on the floor of the ring is captioned with a “SPLAT!!!” sign. This serves as a less-than-subtle demonstration of the dangers of destroying the social safety net. President Clinton signed a version of these GOP efforts—the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act—into law, ending the AFDC program and instituting Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a “workfare” program with a limited budget, work requirements, and time limitations. This change in the welfare system took place in the summer of 1996—just after the public performances of *Money Amok*.

While Circus Amok! performs in the public space of New York City’s parks each summer, comedian Reno engages the public by sitting out on the loading dock of the TriBeCa building she’s lived in since 1982. Reno is an alumna of the WOW Café and Lilith, a San Francisco-based women’s theater collective, who now performs mostly as a solo artist, conceptualizing, writing, and performing her own material. Reno’s practice of “lounging on a loading dock deep in banker country with a leopard-print dog bed [occupied by Reno’s dog, Lucy] and a cold one...brings people out of themselves and into a conversation.”⁷⁴ Reno considers this act of reclaiming public space—which takes on increasing importance in the wake

73. Miller, *Money Amok*, 29:50–30:13.

74. Green, “The Dining Room Takes to the Streets,” 1.

of gentrification—as a form of invisible theater.⁷⁵ From her downtown perch, Reno engages with neighbors and passersby, including the financiers traveling to and from their offices, many of which sit just southwest of Reno’s TriBeCa neighborhood.

Reno employs a similar mode of community engagement in a reality television series called *Citizen Reno*. Filmed in late 2000, the show aired on Bravo in the spring of 2001. Reno describes the show as a “‘non-fiction’ sitcom” in which she investigates a variety of topics by talking to people in and around her community of TriBeCa. Some footage plays in situ, while other clips are shown on a series of monitors in Reno’s office. The topics of the show’s episodes include “Science,” “Civilization,” “Conformity,” and “Money.” *Citizen Reno* examines these issues in the context of Reno’s community and models a practice of active community engagement. In the show’s opening, Reno directly addresses the camera as she explains the show’s premise: “We’re going to be finding things out about the things that piss us off,” she says.⁷⁶ A short montage follows, showing Reno intervening in various situations: she tells a driver to move his car; challenges an interlocutor to be more truthful; and confronts another driver about leaving his dog in the car. After these clips, Reno again appears onscreen. Resuming her explanation, she says, “Why? So we can do something about them, because we have to.”⁷⁷ The sequence closes with Reno on the left side of the screen declaring, “Citizen Reno—open up, I’m coming in there!” and footage of her taking action on the right-hand side.⁷⁸ In this sequence, Reno invokes community by appealing to the collective “we” and “us” comprised by herself and

75. *Ibid.*, 2.

76. Brandeis, *Money (1 of 3)*, 1:40.

77. *Ibid.*, 1:45–1:48.

78. *Ibid.*, 1:49–1:52.

the television audience. Reno advances a sense of dutiful participation at the conclusion of the opening sequence, when she asserts that “we have to [do something].” The footage of Reno intervening in certain situations demonstrates that she does not just stage debate, but follows through with direct action.

In the “Money” episode of *Citizen Reno*, Reno updates lesbian-feminist economic critique to address the financialization of the economy. Reno’s reality show inquiry into the financial arena is staged in response to other forms of public discourse—namely, the news media. At the top of the “Money” episode, Reno, presumably in a home workspace, has several television sets on at once showing different programs. She notices that all of the different television screens are showing financial news, which provides the impetus for the topic of the show. Reno wonders, “How many people does that affect? Well, it affects all of us, but what I mean is, how many people actually trade on the New York Stock Exchange, or any stock exchange?”⁷⁹ Here, Reno understands that the stock market impacts people’s everyday lives, but she is more interested in how everyday people relate to or participate in the stock market.

By asking this question, Reno addresses the financialization of the economy. The term “financialization” refers to “an increase in the size, scope, and power of the financial sector—the people and firms that manage money and underwrite stocks, bonds, derivatives, and other securities—relative to the rest of the economy.”⁸⁰ The process of financialization, which has accelerated since the early 1980s, can be thought of as a structural change in the capitalist economy of the United States. According to a 2013 study, the financialization of the economy is linked to “reducing labor’s share of income, increasing top executives’ share of compensation,

79. *Ibid.*, 0:50–1:02.

80. Konczal, “Frenzied Financialization.”

and increasing earnings dispersion among workers.”⁸¹ While lesbian-feminist groups such as the Combahee River Collective reject capitalism due to the conviction that labor should benefit the laborers rather than the bosses, a financialized capitalist economy furthers capitalist inequalities, augmenting the aspects of capitalism that lesbian-feminists find problematic.

Reno sets out to discuss the financialization of the economy with various people in and around her neighborhood of TriBeCa—which neighbors the World Trade Center and the World Financial Center, and is a short walk from Wall Street and the New York Stock Exchange. Reno first stops in at Fred and Mary Parvin’s Hudson Street newsstand, which has served as a center of community in TriBeCa for several decades.⁸² Reno opens her mail while chatting with Mary, and is surprised to receive a check for \$5,329.88. After leaving the newsstand, Reno shares her excitement over this windfall with strangers on the subway, many of whom congratulate her. These segments demonstrate Reno’s ability and willingness to engage with the people around her. While Reno is celebrating a personal success rather than making a political commentary in this instance, she approaches a wide range of people, including men, women, people of color, and two police officers. Her approach to community engagement is democratic, unlike the benefits of the financialization process.

81. Lin, Ken-Hou and Tomaskovic-Devey, “Financialization and U.S. Income Inequality, 1970-2008,” 1285.

82. A *Travel and Leisure* article identifies the Parvins as “two early pioneers who were also considered the unofficial mayors of TriBeCa. Fred & Mary’s, as it was known, was a compulsory stop on every resident’s daily rounds, if not to buy the newspaper, then to...[listen] to Mary rant about George W. Bush, and, later, the tragedy of 9/11” Betts, “Touring New York’s Most Dynamic Neighborhoods,” np.. A *New York Observer* article memorializing Mary Parvin after her death in 2006 characterizes Parvin as “one of [TriBeCa’s] most beloved citizens,” and notes that “with her loss, the city had edged another giant step away from a certain way of life which valued intelligence, passionate argument and unquestioned friendship” Ratner, “Long Live Mary of Tribeca,” np..

As she moves through the city, Reno stages a public discourse about private financial arrangements. Reno asks her acquaintances in and around TriBeCa if they hold stocks or not. Back at her office, Reno plays footage from a visit to the hairdresser's on her multiple monitors. The footage starts in the middle of a conversation that is presumably about retirement. When Reno asks her hairdresser if he will work forever, he responds by saying that he's invested in the stock market, much to Reno's surprise. The hairdresser explains that the stock market "was off the hook for like, five or six years," to which Reno replies, "You hear about it, but I don't do anything about it—I think you have to have disposable income."⁸³ Here, Reno points out that socioeconomic divisions and limited monetary resources prevent certain people from investing in the stock market. Later in the program, Reno speaks of this divide in the context of her family. "My parents, forget about it, they never would have invested in the stock market. It was, like, for rich people," Reno says, emphasizing the us/them division between her parents and the financially well-off by gesturing off to the side. "They invested, not us, we didn't do that."⁸⁴ Reno's own recent windfall, however, introduces the question of what she should do with the money—that is, whether she should buy stock for the very first time, or take her money elsewhere.

By exploring her investment options in the context of the television episode, Reno offers the audience a crash course in financial literacy. She has banker David Hsaio over for a meal and asks him about what the bank does with her money. Reno offers a hypothetical scenario in which she deposits a dollar in the bank; the bank then uses that money to make loans for \$0.80 and \$1.00. Because of the interest that the banks charge on loans, the hypothetical situation shakes

83. Brandeis, *Money (1 of 3)*, 5:15–5:27.

84. Brandeis, *Money (2 of 3)*, 2:52–2:59.

out so that “In a year, you’ve made a whole dollar on my dollar, and I get 3.5%. What is the passbook?” “It’s 2,” Hsiao replies—less than Reno thought. “It’s 2? No, I thought 3.25 was ridiculous! You’ve got 2 dollars now and I only have 2 cents! Where’s my 98 cents? How come we don’t go halvsie on that? I’m lending the bank money, is that not right?”⁸⁵ By discussing this hypothetical situation, Reno clarifies one of the ways in which banks make money, even as she questions the unequal partnership between herself and the bank.

As Reno continues her investigation, she becomes increasingly frustrated with the lack of transparency and accessibility around money and finances. The audience sees additional footage of Hsiao’s visit with Reno on her television monitors. David rattles off several types of growth and income funds, speaking in financial jargon. On the monitor, Reno says, “Oh my God, David, I have none of this stuff, and it makes my head spin.”⁸⁶ The picture cuts to Reno sitting in her office, where she says, “I cannot believe that they would understand this, the general public, because it’s not for them—us—to understand. It is a hype-phony language.”⁸⁷ Reno’s use of the word “us” aligns her with the average citizen (if one can say there is such a thing). Reno visits the American Stock Exchange, which ends up furthering her point about the inaccessibility of the financial world. Reno takes a tour of the American Stock Exchange, tagging along with a group of schoolchildren. In spite of his non-specialist audience, the tour guide speaks in financial jargon. While he offers brief explanations for each term he uses, the sheer amount of jargon is overwhelming. Reno asks the tour guide some questions and provides commentary as the tour proceeds through the stock exchange, but she and her crew are eventually asked to leave. While

85. *Ibid.*, 0:57–1:19.

86. *Ibid.*, 1:19–1:43.

87. *Ibid.*, 1:43–1:54.

the exact reasons for their dismissal remain unclear, the show includes a shot of Reno heading down the escalator with the caption “Kicked out for talking in class” at the bottom of the screen.⁸⁸ It seems that Reno’s questions and comments have gotten her into trouble.

In the course of her investigation, Reno problematizes financialized capitalism by highlighting the ways in which money, or the desire for it, prioritizes personal gain over the well-being of a community. As she leaves her apartment building with her small dog, Lucy, she stops to check her mail and says the following into a tape recorder: “This is what the show is gonna be about. I’m gonna just do a show on how the whole world is going into this new religion called Money.”⁸⁹ By calling money a “new religion,” Reno gestures towards the notion that people devote themselves to money above all else. This theme recurs mid-way through the episode when Reno talks with stockbroker David Garfinkel. The scene starts in the middle of their conversation, with Reno talking about the growing disparity between socioeconomic classes. Garfinkel refuses the notion of civic responsibility in a global context when he says, “I cannot improve the lot of the billions in India.”⁹⁰ Reno challenges him on this, after which the scene continues to play on the monitors in Reno’s office. Garfinkel insists that “that’s the brutal reality of capitalism,” to which Reno replies, “Then let’s bring back the social safety net.”⁹¹ The audience is not privy to Garfinkel’s response because the show cuts to the next segment, but one can assume that Garfinkel will continue to prioritize capital over a sense of civic responsibility.

88. *Ibid.*, 2:42.

89. *Ibid.*, 2:00–2:11.

90. *Ibid.*, 3:05–3:10.

91. *Ibid.*, 3:33–3:37.

The show continues to put community and corporations in opposition to each other in a nightmare sequence. As Reno snoozes in her office, presumably having fallen asleep there, a voice—her own—calls to her, “Hey, hey you!” The shot cuts to one of Reno’s monitors, where Reno herself poses as a financial news reporter, with a stock ticker running along the bottom of the screen and shots of the *Charging Bull* sculpture at Bowling Green in the upper right-hand corner. She reports that “all the major financial indicators are up, the Dow Jones is up, the NASDAQ is up, we are up, we are all up. Nothing is down, everything is up, up, up.”⁹² Smiling, reporter Reno continues with, “The barn market went through the roof today when it was announced that pedestrian misdemeanors, or jaywalking, was raised to two years in order to enhance the prison labor pool. Although communism may be dead, the watch-word for the financial markets this year is ‘labor’—child labor, cheap labor, slave labor, prison labor, women in labor, labor.”⁹³ Here, Reno highlights the implementation of unfair labor practices as one strategy corporations use to increase their profit margins. In this nightmare sequence, corporate interests trump human interests, throwing over republican ideas of citizenship for neoliberal ones.

Reno, on the other hand, advances and tries to model a republican sense of civic responsibility and engagement in public life against the individualism of financialized capitalism. After Reno’s conversation with Garfinkel, the show cuts to Reno sitting at her desk. She says, “It’s just not a way that you should spend your life. . . . I mean, it’s just—you’re not *involved*”—she emphasizes this word by stretching it out slightly—“in anything other than creating more cash!”⁹⁴ The order of these segments contrasts capitalism’s emphasis on individual gain with

92. Brandeis, *Money (3 of 3)*, 1:51–2:07.

93. *Ibid.*, 2:08–2:30.

94. Brandeis, *Money (2 of 3)*, 3:37–3:50.

Reno's sense of community. Reno is critical of the capitalistic notion of pursuing profit for its own sake, and she juxtaposes this pursuit with being "involved." Reno's use of the word "involved" here implies some form of participation in civic or political life, or in one's community. Reno recognizes the ways in which capitalism limits community engagement. Sitting down to explore online stock trading with local bartender Leonard Spencer in her office, Reno articulates this double bind. She says, "If I do not check it out, I'm screwing myself over. If I check it out, I'm screwing myself over because I'm one of humanity."⁹⁵ Reno would rather support her community than a corporation, and while Spencer walks Reno through the process of trading—simultaneously providing a crash-course for the television viewer—ultimately, Reno can't bring herself to participate in the capitalist financial sector. Instead, she decides to spend her \$5,000 on a trip to socialist Cuba.

Reno continues to address the financial sphere in a series of live performances called *Money Talks with Citizen Reno*. The series began after the stock market crash in 2008, and continued with performances in 2010, 2011, and 2013. Reno began performing *Money Talks* at the New York Theatre Workshop, and performed the show on a weekly basis at Dixon Place in subsequent years. While *Money Talks*, like *Citizen Reno*, addresses the general population, strangely enough, Reno has also staged *Money Talks with Citizen Reno* in Martha's Vineyard, the affluent summer vacation destination. The *Money Talks* performances are divided into two components, starting with Reno's comedic monologues and moving to a *Citizen Reno*-style conversation with financial experts.

Whereas the content of the *Citizen Reno* episodes is fixed, the live performance format of *Money Talks with Citizen Reno* and the improvisatory nature of some of Reno's monologues

95. Ibid., 3:52–4:00.

gives Reno the flexibility to update her commentary in response to developing events and breaking news. During the 2010 run of *Money Talks* at Dixon Place, Reno chose to address a different topic than the 2008 stock market crash and its repercussions—the 2010 elections. This “special report performance” was called *Reno: T-Bags, the 2010 Elections, Late Blooming: A DEEEE-BRIEFING*. Someone in the Democratic Party recognized the potential for Reno’s performances to inspire Democratic support in its spectators, for at one point, the show was associated with one of President Barack Obama’s election campaigns.⁹⁶ An event page at “Organizing for Action,” an organization that supports President Barack Obama’s initiatives, relates Reno’s *Money Talks* performances directly to President Obama’s policy plans. The webpage reads, “Getting real financial regulatory reform over the finish line is an important part of President Obama’s agenda. . . . Reno will share her piercing wit and keen observations with you. It’s the most fun you can have while contemplating one of the key national issues of our time.”⁹⁷ Here, Organizing for Action emphasizes the potential for Reno’s performance to raise important political issues.

Reno’s *Money Talks* monologues at once explain and comment on what caused the crash. In her 2008 performance in Martha’s Vineyard, she identifies the role of banks and bankers in the crisis. She declares, “The dude who runs the bank is supposed to tell you what’s what. And he knows I got \$2,300 in the bank, so when he says, ‘That means you should buy a \$560,000 house’”—Reno shrugs and makes a face as if to say, why not?⁹⁸ As in *Citizen Reno*, corporate types do not escape Reno’s ire. Reno compares her own financial philosophy to the denizens of

96. “MONEY TALKS with Citizen Reno,” np.

97. Ibid.

98. *Money Talks 1/2*, 0:24–0:40.

Wall Street in the following hypothetical situation: “Someone has a buck and they want to buy a ten-dollar company. Well, you know, wait until you have ten dollars, asshole. . . . Or maybe even twenty dollars so you keep ten. But no, see, because he’s not gonna ruin his life, ‘cause he only has a buck in it. Whoever lent him the nine extra dollars, they’re gonna”—she growls—“they’re gonna get screwed.”⁹⁹ Here, Reno lays out the financial procedures that contributed to the 2008 crash while drawing attention to how ridiculous these procedures seem to the everyday citizen. Reno goes on to criticize the government’s bail out of financial institutions in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. As Reno says, “I’m not over this Socialism for Wall Street/Debtor’s Prison for the rest of us crap.”¹⁰⁰

Reno continues her efforts to inform the public about what’s going on around them in *Money Talks* by inviting financial experts to join her for an on-stage interview. Unlike the *Citizen Reno* interviews, these stage interviews are live and unedited. According to a 2010 announcement, Reno’s interlocutors have included “several Nobel Economists as well as a former Chief Financial Officer of the world’s second largest bank.”¹⁰¹ Nobel Laureate Robert Solow joined Reno in Martha’s Vineyard in 2008. She asked Solow to respond to assertions that had been made in the news media, including the promise that the market would correct itself as well as economist Paul Krugman’s rebuttal to that idea. Like Reno’s narrative of the 2008 crash, Solow’s explanations were straightforward and tailored to the layperson.

By addressing the layperson, Reno’s *Money Talks* performances, along with the other performances examined in this chapter, advance a lesbian feminist investment in “the people”—

99. *Ibid.*, 2:27–2:51.

100. Haas, “GO Magazine - RENO: Tbags and the 2010 Elections.”

101. Rice, “Money Talks With Citizen Reno – Back at Dixon Place Tonight | The Lo-Down : News from the Lower East Side,” np.

that is, in community rather than capitalist interests. While this anti-capitalist position is associated with 1970s lesbian feminism, and has fallen away from the mainstream LGBT movement in the United States, lesbian theater and performance artists have maintained this position to the present day. As income inequality continues to increase, these performances encourage people to be critical of capitalism and to invest in communities.

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