

Towards a Gestic Feminist Dramaturgy

A proposal for dissertation by

Shannon Kay Baley

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I. Prelude

A moment on a hot July day in Austin, Texas. I pass through the dense haze of incense and other more pungent smells of pot in the poorly disguised head shop, on my way to a rickety set of stairs in the back. At the top of the stairs is the tattoo artist, a serious looking young man whose body has become his canvas, serpents and gods and flowers blossoming from his neck to the tips of his fingers. He lays out a massage table, traces a pattern onto my ankle. When he begins, concentrating fiercely, I am struck by how deep the vibrations resonate in my bones. Whirring, jarring, stamping ink entering skin at a few thousand tiny openings per minute. I am afraid at first of the possibility of blood, pain, but then I begin to watch him draw the large, blue lotus upon my body, intricately laced with delicate pink, green, and yellow. I am struck dumb by the beauty, but am moved beyond words by something else. It is more than just art. It is a reminder of my body's sheer presence, my unceasing physicality – that I am mind and body, a difficult concept to remember when one lives – almost unceasingly – the life of the mind. I feel unutterably awake, alive, conscious of my performance of my spiritual/sexual/physical self in ways of which I am not ordinarily cognizant.

Another moment: the first read through of a graduate student directed laboratory production of Naomi Wallace's The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek. A classroom, fluorescent lights flickering above, chalkboards and the odds and ends of production: ladders, lighting equipment, gels, mysterious electronics, piles of extension cords. I sit, dutiful dramaturg, with paper and pen, waiting to record questions from the director or cast, to take notes for myself, to doodle as my mind drifts to other projects. Suddenly, my full attention is anchored to the room: the two

young actors who are reading the parts of Pace and Dalton have reached the scene in which Pace seduces Dalton at arms' length. She directs him to touch himself, and, through touching himself, touch her. At first I am surprised and faintly embarrassed at how thoroughly the young actor playing Dalton vocally embraces the scene, making all the sounds of arousal while seated, fairly still, in a folding metal chair, right next to me, his thin, wiry body twisting with the effort. My doodles cease as I begin to feel like a voyeur, a dirty old woman listening in on something ineffably intimate. Something else also happens: I am suddenly, supremely aware that I also have a body, one capable of pleasure and climax, a physical presence in a space where my mind usually has a habit of detaching itself in a complicated, crystalline dance of theory. I am aware of my conscious performances of femininity, my age, the sheer outline of my physical size, shocked awake from my mental calisthenics by Wallace's fascinating writing and the young actors' embodiment of her script. I am not so much turned on as woken up: to my own body and to my complicated, always fluid reception of performance as audience member, dramaturg, critic, and feminist. At the end of the scene Pace tells Dalton they are "somewhere else now." I am also somewhere else, somewhere between intellect and corporeality, between spectator and performer, between representation and reality.

As I attempt to think through my complex reactions to Wallace's play, I always return to the moment when Dalton reaches through himself to Pace, disrupting all notions of fixed gender, sexuality, reality, and representation. This moment insistently resonates on my memory, a tattoo-needle humming, imprinting the indelible ink of impulse and desire. Here then are the seeds of my project, a tattoo and simulated onstage masturbation, both surprising, unmentionable moments, moments in which the text and the performance takes us "somewhere

else,” a place where ephemeral ideas of desire and utopia and real, desiring, material bodies hang together in perfect symmetry, even if just for a moment.

II. Introduction

In Naomi Wallace’s *One Flea Spare* (1995), set in plague-ridden 17th Century London, a mad servant girl named Morse, an escaped conscripted sailor named Bunce, and an elderly and extremely wealthy couple named Sir William and Lady Darcy Snelgrave, are trapped in a quarantined house together. Forced into an involuntary confinement, they wait out the disease by wiping the walls with vinegar and engaging in emotional and physical torture, sometimes playful and sometimes deadly serious. Near the climax of the play, Darcy, who herself has been horribly scarred in a fire when she was much younger, asks to see Bunce’s wound, an unhealed hole in his side. Obliging, he takes her hand and guides her finger into the hole; she comments with wonder: “My finger. I’ve put my finger. Inside. It’s warm. (*Beat*) It feels like I’m inside you” (53). Afterwards Wallace’s stage direction dictates she “*looks at her hand as though it might have changed*” (54). The much younger Bunce then begins slowly, almost scientifically to explore Darcy’s body while relating the horrific details of life as a conscript in the Royal Navy, searching for places where Darcy can feel through the layers of scar tissue. Wallace juxtaposes Darcy’s slow sexual re-awakening and Bunce’s own digital penetration of her with his bleak, jarring narrative of a young man vomiting his “stomach into his own hands” and gulls whose wings “caught fire, so close did they circle the sinking masts” during a sea battle (55-56). In these actions, Wallace throws bodies and their easily transparent identity markers into sharp relief – their desire (sexual and communitarian), the inhuman demands of a capitalist state that relies upon the subjugation of the human body for its power, and a grotesque un-making of the

body's limits serving as a reminder of the body's insistent presence beyond the life of the text or of a production of *One Flea Spare*.

A similar moment occurs in Julie Jensen's *Two-Headed* (2000), a study of female friendship and alternative-history making in the lives of two 19th Century pioneer Mormon women. The play's protagonists, Hettie and Lavinia, alternatively the best of friends and the worst of enemies, do their best to survive fear, loneliness, isolation, wolf attacks, and the patriarchal vagaries of the Mormon church. In the first scene, the two girls try on silk underwear, ill-gotten gains from the Mountain Meadow Massacre, a scarcely-acknowledged event in the history of the Mormon church in which Mormon men, posing as Native Americans, murdered 127 Missouri settlers crossing through their lands. Laughing and joking at the racy potential of these colorful garments, which they theorize are worn by "women of the night" who have "love in every port," Lavinia and Hettie play at "sexing" and push their hands into the fronts of the camisoles, imagining the presence of the dead Missouri women's "bosoms" (28). Their play, however, stops abruptly, when Lavinia declares the garments are flecked with blood from the recent massacre, "blood of the damned" she intones (28). The girls' play-acting at sexual maturity, their playful desire coupled with the material traces of the murdered party, remembers, if just for a moment, the bodies of the anonymous settlers, gesturing to the real historical bodies of both Mormon pioneer women and the massacred settlers.

This dissertation will explicate a gestic feminist dramaturgy, a methodology for interacting dialogically with just such moments as I describe above. Drawing on feminist and performance theory as well as techniques of literary and semiotic analysis, a gestic feminist dramaturgy will examine the complicated issues of desire, gender, sexuality, class, and race that swirl and coalesce around textual bodies in the plays and performance texts of contemporary

feminist playwrights like Wallace, Jensen, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Sharon Bridgforth, as well as examining how these textual bodies expand, multiply, or contract in performance. This methodology acknowledges and works to make explicit the feminist politics implicit in such playwrights' work, as well as offering a means for feminist critics to engage with these plays' complicated use and re-writing of history, memory, and nationality. A methodology for reading and interacting with these plays as both texts and as artifacts for and of performance and production, gestic feminist dramaturgy will blend traditional methods of textual and performance criticism with more non-traditional methods of thick description, performance ethnography, and performative writing to illuminate the playtext, its production history, and the performances, bodies, histories, and spaces that haunt its textual existence and gesture towards its rich potentiality in future productions.

After formulating this new methodology, I will apply gestic feminist dramaturgy to a close investigation of such plays as *One Flea Spare*, *In the Heart of America*, and *Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* (Wallace), *Last-Lists of My Mad Mother*, *The Lost Vegas Series*, and *Two-Headed* (Jensen), *The America Play*, *In the Blood*, and *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (Parks), and *the bull jean stories*, *love conjure/blues*, and *con flama* (Bridgforth), plays and performance texts whose feminist politics and counter-historical poetics are uniquely suited to this kind of analysis. I will examine how Wallace, Parks, Bridgforth, and Jensen make use of feminist gestus in their own plays and performance texts, tracing the moments which “explain the play, but . . . also exceed the play” (Diamond 53) to show how these texts create counter-histories in which the past and the present coexist side-by-side through the use, abuse, and sometimes transgression of the sexual, explicit, and often erotically charged, human body. By developing and applying a methodology of gestic feminist criticism in this dissertation, I

hope to draw attention to feminist playwrights and theatre artists like Jensen and Bridgforth, who have been largely ignored by popular and academic criticism. In addition, I hope that a careful reading of the more popular (academically as well as professionally) Parks and her work via gestic feminist dramaturgy will help disentangle the often flattening, conflating critical reaction to her complex, powerful plays from her very public presence as a successful African-American prize-winning female playwright. Similarly, I hope applying a gestic feminist dramaturgy to Wallace's plays will help illumine the rich depths of her work, countering the more extreme virulence of her American critics, whose distaste for her outspoken blend of feminist and socialist politics has had a very real material result in limited productions staged of her work in the United States.

In my (re)positioning of these playwrights, this dissertation will demonstrate the activist potential of a gestic feminist dramaturgy, advocating for and on behalf of second and third generation American feminist playwrights and theatre artists like Wallace, Bridgforth, Parks, and Jensen. Gestic feminist dramaturgy's activism also encompasses its ability to reach beyond the page where textual criticism is usually confined, demonstrating models of transgression of patriarchal power systems in the act of critical reading and dramaturgy for reader, actor, director, spectator, dramaturg, and actor alike. A gestic feminist dramaturgy is, above all, a reflexive methodology; thus, this dissertation will explore ways for entering into dialogue with and about these plays and their authors, creating conversations that will open up discursive space rather than closing it off. A gestic feminist dramaturgy will contribute to the field of performance studies a unique and unprecedented blending of methodologies from such disparate disciplines as literature, theatre, history, and anthropology. It will offer a means of interacting with and theorizing playtexts as lovely, complicated, and excessive sites of significations in themselves, as

well as sites of potentiality, a place to glimpse their bursting, moving, and rich possibilities in production.

III. Gestic Feminist Dramaturgy: Outline of a Working Methodology

I draw my methodology from Bertolt Brecht's theories of an epic theatre, *Verfremdungseffekt*, and *gestus*, as well as from more contemporary feminist re-appropriations of Brechtian techniques, specifically Elin Diamond's theories of a gestic feminist criticism. Theatrical *gestus*, first proposed by playwright, poet, director, and theorist Bertolt Brecht in his 1930 essay "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre,"¹ is a gesture, word, action, or combination of all three which reveal the social and political messages of a play to its audience. For Brecht, social *gestus* was a crucial link between *Verfremdungseffekt* – or the alienation-effect – and historicization because of its ability to demonstrate the gap between what is represented and the historical, social, and political realities beyond the representation itself; *gestus*'s value, then, is in its visibility through performance, and its ability to gesture beyond performance into commentary. As Brecht writes in "On Gestic Music" (1957), a *gestus* is indeed a doing, a performative that is both linguistic and embodied: "A language is gestic when it is grounded in a gest and conveys particular attitudes adopted by the speaker towards other men" (104). Not all linguistic and embodied performatives and actions, however, are social *gestus*. Brecht provides an example of a man attempting to keep his balance on a slippery surface. This man's actions, Brecht argues, only become socially gestic "as soon as falling down would mean 'losing face'; in other words, losing one's market value" (104). Brecht's primary concern here, of course, is with a materialist analysis and criticism of the capitalist system, the man's "market value," as well as the ability of social *gestus* to reveal class inequities and ideologies. Brecht's use of pronouns is

telling; the agent of this action and producer of social commentary is, for Brecht, always assumed to be male, as is the spectator watching and receiving the social commentary.

Feminist theatre artists have long since appropriated Brecht's *gestus* as a technique of revealing the performativity not only of class, but also of gender and sexuality and the horizons of representation.² Brecht's theories of the distancing, defamiliarizing *Verfremdungseffekt*, of the acting techniques of "not . . . but," and of social *gestus* have been extremely useful for feminists and queer theorists in distancing and exposing the constrictive codes and behaviors imposed by the heterosexist binary gender system. As Judith Butler points out, compulsory heterosexuality is an all-too familiar system of power regulated, imposed, and, perhaps more importantly, rendered invisible by the tacit "cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with 'natural' appearances and 'natural' heterosexual dispositions" (Butler 275).³ As Brecht's slipping actor can demonstrate with his or her performance, social *gestus* can reveal that which has been made invisible; a fall can signify merely a fall, but it can also gesture to something far broader, something more slippery and complex than physical humor, or the general, unspecified degradation (or exaltation) of the human body contained in a pratfall. So too can the performance of gender, through interruptions in its "sustained social performance[s]," defamiliarize and gesture to both the "social fiction" of a true/real "psychological interiority" as well as the systems of power that work to familiarize us into the complacency of a confining, heterosexist society (Butler 279). Feminists and feminist theater artists, in their efforts to expose, defamiliarize, and unbalance patriarchal systems of power in their work, thus regularly draw from Brecht's theories and techniques to keep their spectators and readers on their toes and to lay bare our many daily assumptions about truth, reality, sex, gender, desire, and representation.

Elin Diamond, in *Unmaking Mimesis* (1997), employs just such feminist, Brechtian theories and techniques in her careful analysis and deconstruction of theatrical mimesis, melodrama, hysteria, realism, and feminist performance.⁴ In *Unmaking Mimesis*, Diamond presents a particularly insightful interpretation of how the strangely copasetic relationship between feminism and Brechtian theory and theatre – more a “fellow-traveling” than a whole-sale endorsement (Diamond 54) – emerged through a shared desire to explode realism’s stranglehold on theatre and its subsequent “containment of differences” (44), whether those differences be class- or gender-based. In laying out the parameters of a *gestic* feminist criticism, Diamond defines Brechtian *gestus* as a “gesture, a word, an action, a tableau, by which, separately or in a series, the social attitudes encoded in the playtext become visible to the spectator” (52). Feminist *gestus*, like Brechtian *gestus*, is thus a delicate balance of action and meaning, a “highly complicated and contradictory” process that cannot be entirely contained by “single” words or ideas but depends upon the skill of the performer to “emphasize the entire complex” of ideas and ideologies inherent in the *gestus* (Brecht qtd. in Diamond 53).

Echoing Butler, Diamond also highlights how Brechtian social *gestus* can help the feminist critic/spectator to understand gender as ideology, to recognize it as a “system of beliefs and behavior mapped across the bodies of women and men which reinforces the social status quo” rather than as something fixed or irrevocable (Diamond 47). For Diamond, feminist *gestus* is the primary tool in allowing a space in the theatre for a female – and feminist – spectator, who, as a “reader of a complex sign system, cannot consume or reduce the object of her vision to a monolithic projection of the self” (53). Feminist *gestus* and feminist *gestic* criticism assists in the project of “ruin[ing] the scopic regime of the perspectival realist stage,” and opening up a “provisional, indeterminate, nonauthoritative” space for a distanced, distinctly alive and

empowered spectator, and, even more importantly, an actor who is “free” to gaze back at her audience (Diamond 53-54).⁵ Gestic feminist criticism, to paraphrase Diamond, allows the reader/spectator to engage dialogically rather than masterfully with the playtext before them, to “see” as a “transformative act of cognition,” to witness the “possibilities emerging of another reality, what is not there, but could be” (145). A gestic feminist criticism is thus a profoundly optimistic, utopian enterprise, invested in an ongoing excavation of how theatre and performance can help us imagine a (potentially feminist) utopia.⁶

Whereas Diamond’s gestic feminist criticism emphasizes the roles of the actor and the distanced feminist spectator or critic as the primary modes of receiving and interpreting feminist *gestus* and gestic feminist performance, I propose a gestic feminist *dramaturgy*, a methodology of reading and responding to feminist performance that is similarly utopian and optimistic, but which explodes and expands Diamond’s more traditional actor/spectator binary. A gestic feminist dramaturgy is, in some ways, dramaturgical in the old-fashioned sense of the word; rather than referring to a specific profession, role, or person, gestic feminist dramaturgy primarily refers to a way of reading, a means of illuminating and describing the dramaturgy, dramatic structure, or conventions unique to a playtext, playwright, or performance (Proehl “Images” 124). A gestic feminist dramaturgy provides a set of tools for locating moments of feminist *gestus* in playtexts like those contained in *One Flea Spare*’s digital penetrations or in *Two-Headed*’s momentary re-membering of the dead Missouri settlers in which the limits of the gendered, sexed body are made fluid, transparent, or dissolve almost entirely. In addition, like Brecht’s social *gestus* and Diamond’s feminist *gestus*, it also gestures towards, illuminates, and enters into conversation with the entire range of social, political, and economic imaginaries that hover just beyond the playtext or performance.

Perhaps most importantly, a gestic feminist dramaturgy expands the practice of textual criticism into an active, rich, three-dimensional, and decidedly embodied *doing*, whether this doing be centered in traditional production-dramaturgy or outside the actual and rhetorical space of theatre itself.⁷ Like Diamond's feminist spectator, who is ideally located in a Brechtian-like, smoky, half-lit theatre, lingering over the prospect of "pleasurable identification" (Diamond 53), the practitioner of feminist gestic dramaturgy is similarly (and pleasurably) located in semidarkness, a space and a mode of being that is much like that which the production dramaturg inhabits, a hovering just "behind and off to one side" of the text and the performance (Proehl 126). Pulling from the rich – and often contested – history and practices of dramaturgy, a gestic feminist dramaturgy thus informs and expands textual criticism with its desire to know a playtext other than just as text, as well as a historical artifact rife with the hauntings of its influences and previous – and future – performances.

IV. Research Question and Methodology

How can a gestic feminist dramaturgy be applied to these particular feminist playtexts as a method of expanding and extending traditional text- and performance-based criticism into an embodied, historicized praxis?

My research question first assumes that the physics and poetics of the plays of Wallace, Parks, Jensen, and Bridgforth are ideally suited for this kind of analysis, playtexts that themselves exceed the category of text (Proehl "Silence" 26). Playtexts like *One Flea Spare*, *Two-Headed*, *The America Play*, and *con flama* are perhaps better defined as "word operas," works that function as "road map[s] for sonic creation" rather than fixed typescript, frozen by time and stage directions into a single, stratified document (Bridgforth "Scripts").⁸ These playtexts share a common bond in their feminist commitment to unseating fixed ideas of gender,

race, class, or sexuality, as well as a shared plundering of Brechtian structuring techniques (such as social *gestus* and *Verfremdungseffekt*) to achieve such an unseating. These plays also share non-linear structures in which the past and present exist in a continuum, or a palimpsest, rather than in a straight continuous line, marching to an inevitable, Aristotelian conclusion. In plays such as *Death of the Last Black Man . . .* and *Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, which are themselves ghost-stories, time actually stops, reverses itself, and replays with a difference; in proclaiming the audience and world “Hold it. Hold it. Hold it. Hold it. Hold it. Hold it.” at the end of the play (*Death* 279), Parks ceases linear time altogether.

Characters in *The America Play*, *Last Lists*, *One Flea Spare*, and *con flama*, also shape time and space with their rich, complicated language, which is densely – and sometimes starkly – poetic. Indeed, language itself is excessive in these plays, overflowing with meanings difficult to fully trace in a close-reading. In some of these plays, particularly in the work of Parks, the signified separates from the signifier altogether, and language, itself hopelessly colonizing and patriarchal, is remade.⁹ Semiotic methodologies, such as those proposed by Roland Barthes in “From Work to Text” and “The Death of the Author,” will thus be useful in understanding how these plays’ language and structure are active processes in themselves rather than just products, and how a gestic feminist dramaturgy can pleasurably activate, play with, and receive these meanings. In addition, Marvin Carlson’s semiotic analyses of how theatres themselves make meaning in *Theatre Semiotics* (1990), and how past performances continually haunt the present in *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as a Memory Machine* (2001), will assist me by providing models for unraveling some of the more complicated uses of structure and language in these playtexts, as well as in examining how production history continues to haunt the present – and future – of each of these plays.

My research question also assumes that traditional methods of textual and performance analysis – such as close reading, semiotic and/or play analysis, production history, and interviews – are somehow incomplete in addressing these plays. A gestic feminist dramaturgy thus must also look to methodologies not normally associated with play analysis, the first of which is thick description, drawn from the work of anthropologist and ethnographer Clifford Geertz. A thick description is a “microscopic” analysis of culture (Geertz “Thick” 11); since an ethnographer is almost always an outsider in the culture she studies, thick description can provide a way *in*, a way of “find[ing] one’s feet” in the culture (or texts) being examined (“Thick” 27). Its aim, as Geertz asserts, is not to become too overwhelmed in the details of a culture, or to make wild claims based solely on “specks of behavior” or “flecks” of culture (“Thick” 6), but to “draw” large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts: to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by *engaging them exactly with complex specifics* (“Thick” 28, emphasis mine).¹⁰ In ethnographic research, thick description thus contributes a nuanced, historicized, highly specific, and carefully layered three-dimensional portrait of a moment in time, allowing outsiders entree into the text that results, and allowing insiders – upon which the thick description is built – space and respect for their experiences. I propose extending this process of making meaning meaningful via thick description to playtexts themselves as an ideal methodology for outsiders – such as critics, actors, spectators, directors, etc. – to examine closely the “flecks” of culture and meaning that swirl in and around playtexts – the insider realm of character and playwright.

Along with thick description, ethnography itself also provides a set of non-traditional methodologies for writing about feminist plays like those of Parks, Wallace, Jensen, and Bridgforth, whose primary thematic concerns are the mysteries, abuses, and limits of the material

body, its gender(s), and its sexuality(s). Dwight Conquergood defines ethnography as an “*embodied practice*”; whereas thick description’s virtue is in a careful attention to details, ethnography’s virtue is in its “sensuous way of knowing” (“Rethinking” 180). As Conquergood notes, the emphasis in ethnography on experiential, embodied knowledge allows ethnographers to dissolve the “mind-body, reason-emotion, objective-subjective” hierarchies of knowing popularized in academic disciplines by St. Augustine and subsequently enforced by patriarchal authority (“Rethinking” 180). More importantly, by emphasizing comprehension seated in the sensual and the passionate, embodied knowledge also explodes the “masculine-feminine” hierarchy of knowledge, long a primary goal of feminism(s) and feminist theatre artists. Ethnography, in its most effective form, is also dialogic, staging a conversation with a culture rather than just gathering data. It is thus a deeply “moral” act, its ethical dimensions perhaps more readily apparent than other modes of scholarship since it depends upon “empathic performance” on the part of the ethnographer (Conquergood “Moral” 2).

Performance ethnography, in which the ethnographer performs their experience of a culture rather than (or in addition to) writing it down, is also an excellent methodology for thinking through an ethical, embodied gestic feminist dramaturgy. Performance ethnography provides a way for ethnographers and performers to escape “safe aestheticism,” since it restricts performance from “retreat[ing] into . . . art for art’s sake” and demands performance (and scholarship) be brought “out into the public world where ethical judgment can be at it” (Conquergood “Moral” 2). Joni Jones makes a similar point in her article “Performance Ethnography: The Role of Embodiment in Cultural Authenticity,” in which she describes a performance installation she created based on her research in Nigeria on the Yoruba deity Osun. This installation focused on audience participation with the goal of helping audiences explore

their own “bodily knowing”; in addition, Jones’s installation consciously staged ethnography in a way that shared knowledge of a culture as well as “puzzl[ed] through the ethical and political dilemmas of fieldwork and representation” (7). Citing Conquergood, Jones notes that this kind of scholarly work is invaluable in moving towards “commitment rather than detachment, respect rather than selfishness, dialogue rather than exhibitionism, mutuality rather than infatuation” (11). Performance ethnography then, perhaps even more than its written counterpart, stages a respectful dialogue with its subject.¹¹

A gestic feminist dramaturgy of feminist playtexts can greatly benefit by pulling from ethnography’s and performance ethnography’s commitment to an embodied, empathic, sensuous knowledge, as well as a consciousness of the ethical and moral dilemmas inherent in cultural – or textual – analysis. Ethnographic techniques also allow the gestic feminist dramaturg to engage in a conversation with a text as a participant-observer, much like how an ethnographer will cultivate a careful insider-outsider relationship with the cultures they study. Rather than reducing the playtext to colonizing and sometimes disfiguring analysis, a gestic feminist dramaturgy making conscious use of ethnographic techniques is especially useful in engaging with playtexts like Parks’ *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* or Bridgforth’s *the bull jean stories* which deal with racism, sexism, homophobia, legacies of colonialism, and slavery. By treating a playtext like a culture, applied ethnographic techniques, in other words, allow space for the embodied presence of the gestic feminist dramaturg in and around the text she studies. These techniques thus provide a means to interact with the culture of the text that freely acknowledges the potentially racist traps inherent in an Anglo-American, white, middle-class feminist critic engaging with work outside her (my) realm of immediate experience. Here postcolonial methodologies of approaching complicated issues of race, racism,

and colonizing impulses, such as those forwarded in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) will be helpful in better understanding how hybrid voices and identities pervade these plays and resist easy identification or reconstruction through traditional textual criticism.¹²

Playtexts like *Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, *Two-Headed*, and *the bull-jean stories* hinge on ideas of desire and desiring bodies; a gestic feminist dramaturgy thus must be able to explore theatrical desire as both a psychoanalytic phenomenon and as a result of material reality. Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked* (1993) and *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memory* (1997) provide excellent frameworks for understanding post-Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts of desire in theatrical contexts. For Phelan, desire in performance is always indicative of a mourning or a loss, an attempt to fill in the "affective outline" of theatre's ephemeral bodies that are lost to us as soon as the performance is concluded but whom we still "long to hold" (*Mourning* 3). Connecting queer studies with a Foucauldian analysis of the rise of perspectival painting, the excavation of the Rose theatre, and fictional, incapacitated dancers, Phelan creates a theory of desire that connects theatre with longing and with the real and imaginative bodies that die (*Mourning* 4). Although also consumed with the question of performance and desire, Rebecca Schneider takes a different tactic in *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997). In *The Explicit Body*, Schneider shows how theatrical desire is produced; its secret is similar to the one Marx exposed in commodity capitalism, that to continue its "insatiable" circulation, desire must appear as "unmarked, as 'human nature'" (5). Like gender in the Butler-Brecht-Diamond system, a structure of desire, onstage and off, depends on a tacit acceptance of what is normal (i.e. heteronormative) in order to keep endlessly reproducing itself. Schneider also points out that

desire itself is feminized, its scopic object always the female body (5-6).¹³ Schneider's analysis of how explicit female (and feminist) body performers like Annie Sprinkle and Carolee Schneeman unfold and peel away at the layers of signification on and around their bodies to expose "not an originary, true, or redemptive body" but instead the "sedimented layers of signification themselves," provides an extremely helpful methodology for thinking through how a gestic feminist dramaturgy can help expose how Parks, Wallace, Bridgforth, and Jensen also peel away heteronormative ideas of desire and representation in their playtexts.

Both Schneider and Phelan also provide excellent models of how performative writing may be employed productively as a methodology for understanding desire and performance, and which, I propose, can also be used productively by a gestic feminist dramaturgy.¹⁴ Performative writing, as defined by Della Pollock, is an enormously useful model in considering how the act of writing itself can be an affective, "material practice" (75). Pollock's taxonomy of performative writing, as "evocative," "metonymic," "subjective," "nervous," "citational," and "consequential" (80-94) offers an excellent methodology for thinking about how a gestic feminist criticism can be a *doing*, a means for moving beyond the "axis of impossible and/or regressive reference" and into "new modes of subjectivity and even referentiality" (Pollock 76). Performative writing helps gestic feminist dramaturgy avoid the trap of conflating analysis with the object of analysis, instead supplying an ideal methodology for celebrating, amplifying, and interrogating the "urgent call of the difference" between the two (Phelan *Mourning* 11-12).

V. Literature Review

The sources available on Jensen, Parks, Bridgforth, and Wallace mostly exist in the form of interviews and reviews of their plays. For Bridgforth, whose performance texts have been published by small, local presses (such as *the bull jean stories*, published by Red Bone Press in

Austin, Texas), or not at all (*con flama, love conjure/blues*), critical engagement with her work, in popular or academic presses is next to none. I read this lack of secondary sources not as a indicator of mediocrity or lack of quality in Bridgforth's work, but as a sign of how easily artists like Bridgforth, who are committed to long-term community-based work, can escape critical attention, flying under the radar of even the most well-meaning feminist critic, academic or reviewer. Because Bridgforth's career has been focused in a profoundly activist making and doing of theatre in her local communities of queer women of color (particularly in her company Root Wm'yn Theatre, which disbanded in the mid-1990s), she has focused less on publication. I strongly suspect that Bridgforth's doubly marginalized presence as a lesbian and an African-American artist also contributes to her erasure even by the most conscientious theatre/performance critics and historians who seek to expand the canon of feminist performance and theatre by drawing attention to the work of women of color.

Julie Jensen's work has also, for the most part, flown under the radar of critical engagement, feminist or otherwise. Like Bridgforth, Jensen's work draws from her own local communities in Utah and Nevada, as well as her identity as a lesbian and as an ex-Mormon. Although meeting with some success in regional theatre productions, national presses tend to dismiss her work as too regional, or to revel voyeuristically in Jensen's peek into the oddities of local-color in the Western United States. This voyeuristic glee is particularly evident in the tone of British reviews of the July 1998 production of *The Lost Vegas Series* at the Riverside theatre. These critics focus on the play's – and, by extension, Jensen's – provinciality, calling the show “droll” (Cavendish), a “neon-and-desert picaresque” (Nightingale), or “a mildly amusing travelogue through the tackier side of American iconography” (Curtis). Little critical reception exists of Jensen's other work, except for a few scattered reviews of the New York production of

Two-Headed in 2000, and as yet no academic criticism exists for her work. Perhaps because of Jensen's position as the former head of playwriting at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, her current residency with the Salt Lake Theatre Acting Company, and recent awards she's won, Jensen's presence in the American theatre registers more clearly than Bridgforth's, particularly in several interviews published in *American Theatre* (1997), and *The Dramatist* (2001).

A significant body of interviews and reviews exists for Naomi Wallace, also contributing to her more visible presence in the American theatre. Wallace, an outspoken and articulate writer and speaker, has had multiple interviews published in such anthologies as *Rage and Reason: Women Playwrights on Playwriting* (1997), in *Women Who Write Plays: Interviews with American Dramatists* (2001), and in *Tony Kushner in Conversation* (1998), a selection of interviews with and of Tony Kushner, long one of Wallace's primary mentors. In these interviews, as well as interviews published in *American Theatre* in conjunction with the publication of some of her scripts (notably *The Retreating World* in 2003), Wallace makes ample use of the interview format to voice her opinions about her identity as a political (specifically socialist) writer, her ideas of history and class warfare in the United States, and her interest in the concomitant relationship between capitalism and the destruction of the human body's sensual capacities. Wallace's interviews, thus, work as a fascinating archive, providing insight into her process as an artist, her identity as a feminist, and her ideas about the relationship of art – specifically theatre and poetry – and politics. Unlike Jensen and Bridgforth, Wallace's plays and poetry have received considerable critical attention in trade publications like *The New York Times*, the *New York* magazine, and *American Theatre*, as well as in more academic presses like *Theatre Journal*. Unlike the work of Jensen and Bridgforth, who thus far have received no scholarly attention, Wallace's work is the subject of several M.A. and M.F.A. theses on *One*

Flea Spare, and of one academic article by Claudia Barnett, “Dialectic and the Drama of Naomi Wallace,” which situates Wallace’s plays in the context of her regional, southern identity.

Interestingly, neither the theses nor Barnett’s article makes any mention of feminism or feminist politics in Wallace’s plays, preferring instead to read her plays via psychoanalysis or Marxist criticism.

In stark contrast with Wallace, Jensen, and Bridgforth, an embarrassment of riches exists in the literature for Suzan-Lori Parks and her work in the form of interviews, reviews, scholarly articles, books, and dissertation/theses. The first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 2002 (for *Topdog/Underdog*, her most “realistic” play to date), Parks’ plays have received much critical attention and production since her arrival on the American theatre scene in the early 1990s. Well-known theatre critics and theorists, from Robert Brustein to Joseph Roach to Steven Drukman, have dissected her revolutionary use of language and theatrical conventions, making genealogical connections between her “unearthing” plays and the philosopher Wittgenstein (Drukman 56), absurdist playwright Samuel Beckett (Roach), and Richard Foreman and Gertrude Stein (Brustein). A smaller percentage of scholarly attention to Parks’ plays, however, carefully interrogates her work in the context of an African-American theatre history, except, perhaps, in tracing the obvious similarities between Parks’ style and the surrealist theatre of Adrienne Kennedy. Indeed, although acknowledging Parks’ playtexts use revolutionary and unconventional “language as a means of establishing the place of blacks in recorded history,” Robert Brustein praises Parks for being a playwright with “more on her mind than race” (“What do Women Playwrights Want?”). As with the critical work that exists on Wallace, and despite her frequent forays into de-centering heteronormative ideals of desire, sexuality, gender, and race, Parks’ playtexts are rarely identified as feminist or as participating in

any kind of black feminist tradition by the scholars who approach her work. Notable exceptions include Yvette Louis' article investigating the presence of the Black female body in *The Death of the Last Black Man . . .*, and Antonia Rodriguez-Gago's article on feminist history-making in Parks' plays, "Re-Creating Herstory: Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus*." Jean Young's article "The re-objectification and re-commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*," takes a different feminist approach to Parks' *Venus*, conducting a full-frontal attack on what Young perceives as Parks' exploitation and sexual objectification of the historical Baartman in her play, and her reification of a "perverse imperial mind set" in the name of good theatre (699).

VI. Chapter Outline

Chapter One of my proposed dissertation will introduce my argument regarding gestic feminist dramaturgy, particularly for reading and interacting with the work of contemporary feminist playwrights and theatre artists Wallace, Parks, Jensen, and Bridgforth. This chapter will outline my theory of a gestic feminist dramaturgy, both as an extension of Elin Diamond's Brechtian and feminist textual criticism, and as an embodied, activist, and performative working methodology. It will trace Brecht's genealogy in the American theatre, from scattered performances of his plays in the 1930s and 1940s, to a rewriting of his theories as humanist by 1960s countercultural theatre artists, to feminist re-appropriation of his theories since the 1970s. This chapter will also provide production history and context for each of the playwrights and plays studied in subsequent chapters, presenting a historiography of the near-present.

Chapter Two, "Apocalypse and Utopia: Feminist Gestus and the Utopian Performative," will use feminist *gestus* to glimpse Jill Dolan's theories of the utopian performative at work. This chapter will employ a gestic feminist dramaturgy in explicating theories of desire, such as those articulated by Peggy Phelan and Rebecca Schneider, as well as

interrogating how the sexual, explicit, and desiring body is employed as a means of glimpsing a feminist utopia – and its antithesis, apocalypse – in Wallace’s *One Flea Spare* and *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, as well as in Parks’ *Death of the Last Black Man . . .* and *In the Blood*, and in Bridgforth’s *the bull jean stories* and *love conjure/blues*.

Chapter Three, “A Different America: Feminist Gestus and Counter-Memory” will explore how a gestic feminist dramaturgy can be used to think through how feminist plays like Parks’ *The America Play* and *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, as well as Jensen’s *Two-Headed*, Bridgforth’s *con flama* and Wallace’s *Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* and *In the Heart of America* re-member official histories and ideas of America by creating what Rebecca Schneider calls “counter-memories.” This chapter will specifically examine how these plays employ a complex, non-linear structure, and, in some cases, a jazz aesthetic, to side-step fixed national narratives and to trace and make visible previously invisible, unofficial histories.

Chapter Four, “Activism and Gestic Feminist Dramaturgy” will explore the activist potential inherent in gestic feminist dramaturgy as well as in plays such as Parks’ *Death of the Last Black Man*, *In the Blood*, Wallace’s *In the Heart of America*, and Bridgforth’s *con flama* and *the bull-jean stories*. This chapter will examine how each of these playtexts create a politically-engaged feminist and activist counter-text, as well as how these counter-texts have been explored (or ignored) in production. This chapter will also explore Bridgforth’s work as a community-based artist, her devising work, and her insistence on the presence of artist, spectator, and critic in such community-based ventures as The Austin Project, all of which, I will argue, can also be read as an application of gestic feminist dramaturgy.

Chapter Six will present my conclusions, as well as questions about how a gestic feminist dramaturgy may be productively applied to other plays, other contexts.

VII. Notes

¹ Martin Esslin remarks that Brecht borrowed the term “*gestisch*” from 18th Century German dramaturg Gotthold Lessing who separated “*gestisch*” as something distinct from “*Geste*,” or gesture proper. As many critics have noted, Brecht also shamelessly borrowed from, among others, his frequent musical collaborator Kurt Weill, whose use of the term “*gestisch*” in his essay “Uber den gestischen Charakter der Musik” in March 1929 predates Brecht’s coining of the term. Esslin writes in his notes to “The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre”: “‘*Gestus*,’ of which ‘*gestisch*’ is the adjective, means both gist and gesture; an attitude or a single aspect of an attitude, expressible in words or actions” (42).

² The history of the transmission of Brecht’s plays and theories of theatre is a fascinating project yet to be fully addressed by theatre scholars or devotees of Brecht. Although Brecht lived and worked in the United States from 1941-1947, his plays did not receive much attention or production until the 1950s, when Broadway scored a hit with a tamed-down version of *Three-Penny Opera*, and in the 1960s, when alternative theatres like the Living Theatre and the San Francisco Mime Troupe began to stage his plays as part of their repertoire, having first, along with Eric Bentley, safely reinscribed Brecht’s theories as humanist rather than as communist (see Eric Bentley’s *Bentley on Brecht*). This genealogy is of particular interest to my project since many feminist theatre artists emerged in the 1970s after having worked with alternative theatre groups like San Francisco Mime, the Open Theatre, and the Living Theatre.

³ Citing Foucault, Butler notes that oppressive, heteronormative gender systems also contribute to other forms of oppression. She writes: “the association of a natural sex with a discrete gender and with an ostensibly natural ‘attraction’ to the opposing sex/gender is an unnatural conjunction of cultural constructs in the service of reproductive interests” (275).

⁴ Diamond’s *Unmaking Mimesis* is important to my study not only as a methodological foundation, but also as a model of how to frame a wide-range of feminist theatre artists in one critical study. In *Unmaking Mimesis*, Diamond divides her book into three sections, “Unmaking Mimesis,” in which she conducts a historicized reading of female hysteria and the rise of theatrical realism, “Feminist Gestic Criticism,” in which she conducts readings of playwrights Aphra Behn and Caryl Churchill as feminist *gestus* architects extraordinaire, and “Performance and Temporality,” in which she links the complicated interplay between identification and mimesis to the theatre of Adrienne Kennedy and Peggy Shaw. Although the subjects of each of her sections (and, indeed, the sections themselves) seem to be wide-ranging, Diamond brilliantly links all with her “inquiry” into the “possibilities of a feminist mimesis” (ii).

⁵ Diamond is undoubtedly indebted to Jill Dolan’s *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1991), in which Dolan deconstructs the assumed spectator position – white, male, middle-class, and heterosexual – in the “illusionistic theatre tradition” which has “dominated American theatrical practice” for the past century (1). In this deconstruction, Dolan uncovers the ideological assumptions implicit in this assumed spectatorship and theorizes the possibilities of a feminist – and ultimately lesbian – spectatorship, one which consciously and pleasurably reads against the grain of the heterosexism of representational theatre. Like Diamond, Dolan makes productive

use of Brecht's theories of social *gestus*, alienation, and historicization in her study, particularly the Brechtian acting technique of "not . . . but" as seen in Peggy Shaw's conscious stepping out of the representational frame in performance; this stepping out, Dolan notes, allows Shaw to "comment on the convention of the theatrical gaze" and to draw the audience into an awareness of their own, often desiring, "act of looking" (115).

⁶ Because of their continual insistence on transgressing "constrictive social scripts," their re-membering of the dead, the invisible, or the forgotten, feminist theatre artists like Wallace, Bridgforth, Jensen, and Parks serve as ideal models to read through the lens of a feminist gestic dramaturgy and to search for what Jill Dolan calls the "utopian performative," a *doing* made communal by the presence of the audience that gestures to "better ways to be together as human beings" ("Utopia" 457). The utopian performative is not only something that happens on stage, propelled forcefully into being by the virtuosity of actors and directors, playwrights and dramaturgs, designers and technicians, but a collaborative, "intersubjective," and affective event occurring between all people present at a performance, a distinctly social, public process that models democracy as a "participatory forum" as much as it models what a more just, equitable world might *feel* like (456). Indeed, unlike many definitions of a utopia in which all rests in a perfect stasis bordering on fascism, Dolan's utopian performative is anything but static, popping into and out of existence as quickly and as ephemerally as performance – and *gestus* – itself. A gestic feminist dramaturgy is a means both of isolating and analyzing utopian performatives in such plays as *One Flea Spare* and *Two-Headed*, as well as enacting the potential of the utopian performative in production.

⁷ Here I find Geoffrey Proehl's definition of a textually-based dramaturgical practice that is inextricably imbricated with production helpful in defining a gestic feminist dramaturgy. He writes:

Dramaturgy – that deep, often personal, even idiosyncratic understanding of the forms and rhythms crucial to a play as written and performed – is, however, inseparable from theatre making, whether or not the word itself is ever used. It is impossible to eliminate dramaturgy whether we think of it as a play's poetics or its physics, its nuts and bolts or its flesh and blood. ("Dramaturgy" 27)

⁸ In her practice, Sharon Bridgforth is very careful to indicate her "word operas" – like *con flama*, *blood pudding*, and *love conjure/blues* – are sites of collaboration instead of frozen, or fixed texts for production. Drawing from Audre Lourde's techniques of "bio mythography," Bridgforth allows space for "performers" as well as "collaborators" to explore "the personal / to articulate and examine the space between and connecting autobiography and mythology / memory" when grappling with the complicated interplay of desire, race, sexuality, gender, memory, and family in her playtexts ("Scripts"). Her "road maps" are thus a lovely and productive model for a dialogic gestic feminist dramaturgy that eschews the sonorous monologues most traditional textual criticism stages with its object of interest.

⁹ In her remaking of language, Parks carefully crafts syntax and typography, her plays functioning as visual poetry as well as aural blueprints for production – I'm thinking here of the architectural "spells" she includes in such plays as *Venus* and *In the Blood*, in which the repetition of a character's name indicates an elongated and heightened rest. Another excellent

example of Parks' remaking of language can be found in the "choruses" of *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*. Each chorus is a re-membering of the unrecorded histories of African-American experience; in the second chorus the Biblical character Ham, the historian of the cast, steps forward to tell the story of creation: "She goned begotten One who in turn begotten Ours. Ours laughed one day uhlood in from thuh sound hittin thuh air smakity sprung up I, you, n He, She, It" (269). This playful genealogy, a grammatical declension that renders the invisible visible, transforms gradually into the deadening patter of a salesman at auction: "SOLD! allyall⁹ not tuh be confused w/allus¹² joined w/allthem³ in from that union comed froth wasshisname²¹ SOLD" (274). Here Parks makes chilling use of superscript to echo the dollar value for each slave as they are "SOLD" off the auction block.

¹⁰ As an example of the values of thick description in ethnography and anthropology, Geertz provides a fascinating anecdote from Gilbert Ryle of the intrigues and deaths surrounding a complicated sheep-stealing-plot in central Morocco in 1912. Geertz quotes Ryle's story verbatim, pointing out how "extraordinarily 'thick'" the "raw" story is before it becomes flattened out by the intervening scholarly voice of anthropology (9). Thick description thus allows ethnographers and anthropologists to avoid the trap of flattening out the thick vitality of stories themselves, or of "explicating explications" (9).

¹¹ Although there is certainly no one-to-one correlation between the immense, unbounded, and ultimately unknowable complexity of an entire culture and the confines of a playtext, whose textual or performative existence is contained spatially and temporally, I do see a productive relationship between ethnography (performance or textual) and a gestic feminist dramaturgy, a way not just of gleaning useful techniques from ethnography (performance or otherwise) but of actually conducting an ethnography of a play. A gestic feminist dramaturg's immersion in a playtext is much like that of an ethnographer in the culture she wishes to understand better. I envision a gestic feminist dramaturg cultivating an (often playful) imaginative participant-observer relationship with the playtext she studies, much like the imaginative work that goes into the long, arduous process of rehearsal, during which text and participants, from dramaturg to director to actor to designer, must cohabitate in order to be able to (re)create the play's live culture afresh in each performance.

¹² Also helpful in reading Parks' and Bridgforth's work through the lens of a gestic feminist dramaturgy are "theories of the flesh," what Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa call the epistemologies of a "life lived," or what bell hooks might call the "homeplace," a site of resistance and struggle for liberation for African-American women in the face of overwhelming repression, as well as a place to honor the "extraordinary in the ordinary" (hooks et. al. qtd. in Madison 319). In addition, theories of a jazz aesthetic as developed by Bridgforth and her longtime collaborators Joni Jones, Laurie Carlos, and Daniel Alexander Jones will be enormously useful in illuminating how African-American playwrights like Bridgforth and Parks draw upon the aesthetics, rhythms, lexicon, and philosophies of jazz and blues in their plays and performance texts.

¹³ Here Schneider refers to a common theme in Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism in which the feminine is identified with "lack," specifically the lack of the phallus. Feminists have thus argued that Lacan and his followers "define a representational system in which women can only

be positioned as the fetishized ‘Other.’ Lacking the phallus, and thus access to the Symbolic order, they are denied subjectivity. Thus, women cannot be represented – only ‘woman,’ a construct of male desire, can be” (Solomon 11). However, as Alisa Solomon observes in “Re-dressing the Canon,” there is a way out of this bind in (distinctly Brechtian) performance:

On stage, however, ‘woman’ may be *represented*, but at the same time a living, breathing woman can be *presented*. And most important, it’s possible for her to comment on the character or image she represents, that is, to make those quotation marks around “woman” visible. In semiotic terms, she can widen the distance between signifier and signified by calling attention to that gap. (11)

¹⁴ Phelan states in her introduction to *Mourning Sex* that her use of performative writing is strategic. Rather than “describing the performance event in ‘direct signification,’” a task she finds impossible to accomplish and “not terrifically interesting,” Phelan instead wishes her writing to “enact the affective force of the performative event again, as it plays itself out in an ongoing temporality made vivid by the psychic process of distortion (repression, fantasy, and the general hubbub of the individual and collective unconscious), and made narrow by the muscular force of political repression in all its mutative violence” (11-12). I also foresee a gestic feminist dramaturgy making use of performative writing not as a means to better “describe” a performance, but to re-activate the “affective force” of a performative event.

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