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**& Scream & Holler: Feminism and the Performance of Anger in the  
American Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries**

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**& Scream & Holler: Feminism and the Performance of Anger in the  
American Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries**

**by**

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**Dissertation**

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“I’m not goin to be nice  
i will raise my voice  
& scream & holler  
& break things & race the engine  
& tell all yr secrets bout yrself to yr face  
& i will list in detail everyone of my wonderful lovers  
& their ways  
i will play oliver lake  
loud  
& i won’t be sorry for none of it”

– Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1975)

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# **& Scream & Holler: Feminism and the Performance of Anger in the American Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries**

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As defending anger and “angry feminists” have become central projects for feminist critique, highly visible, large-scale performances of anger – such as rallies, protests, and consciousness-raising seminars – have been assigned special significance and value within feminist studies of anger. Urging for a paradigmatic shift away from thinking of feminist anger primarily through large-scale, organized performances practices, *& Scream & Holler* generates a new model of feminist anger that recognizes how the feeling matters in private, quotidian acts. Returning to the category of feminist anger in the wake of the scholarly turn to trauma and mourning over the course of the last decade, *& Scream & Holler* theorizes what I term “everyday anger” in women’s literary culture: displays of anger narrated in drama, memoir, and fiction that unfold in the home or in domestic spaces, lack an immediate audience, and seem more hesitant than defiant. Accounting for the anger of communities of Black women, queer women, and women with psychiatric disabilities – women who might live in precarious conditions and who could risk experiencing violence if they articulate brash, open hostility or stage collective action – necessitates searching for ephemeral traces of anger that are coded and mediated. The writers I draw together approach anger ambivalently, challenging assumptions that expressing anger enables women to overcome the historical imperative to be passive.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Performing Everyday Anger

When I first listened to Le Tigre's EP *From The Desk of Mr. Lady* as a teenager, I remember having a rather awkward, improbable tangle of emotive responses to it. Released in 2001, the album is the sophomore effort from the feminist, queer punk group composed of Kathleen Hanna, formerly of the riot grrrl act Bikini Kill, Johanna Fateman, and JD Samson. What was especially electrifying to me about the album was the way that Hanna, Le Tigre's frontwoman, critiques misogyny, class inequality, and anti-Black violence in a vocal performance that is aggressive but unmistakably girlish. The song "Get Off the Internet," for example, cycles through a danceable drumbeat as Hanna coolly sings "It feels so 80s or early 90s to be political. Where are my friends?" In the chorus, Hanna rebukes feminists who cloister themselves inside surfing the web, and she urges her feminist friends to "meet [her] in the street" for protest. The album came out at a time when personal computers were becoming affordable enough for purchase by middle-class families, leading to widespread in-home Internet usage. Hanna screams the song's refrain – "Get off the Internet!" – in high-pitched, shrill tones that I've sung along to on more than a few occasions. Hanna articulated an anger I also felt: a shared desire to enact change in the contemporary landscape of American politics.

But as much as I blasted the album in my headphones, I also remember feeling ashamed that I was not a publicly brazen, seething, activist feminist like Hanna. Since my late teens, I've grappled with a bevy psychiatric illnesses – anxiety, panic attacks, PTSD, and

OCD that has been, at times, clinically “extreme”<sup>1</sup> – that have sometimes made leaving the house feel like a momentous challenge. The Internet has allowed me to connect with others who struggle with even the most basic daily tasks or who find the exterior world beyond their apartment emotionally or physically taxing to inhabit.<sup>2</sup> But when I was a teenager, I remember worrying that I wasn’t feminist enough because I was not “in the streets” as Hanna encouraged me to be. The joy I felt dancing alone in my room to the album’s poppy hooks mixed with the anger I was already feeling at social, economic, and political inequalities in the U.S., which in turn commingled with my shame at being too sick (too full of panic, too consumed by compulsive behavior) to march in the streets.<sup>3</sup>

In this dissertation, I trace an ambivalent relationship between feminism and anger that has accrued over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I argue that dominant strains of feminist thought and activism frequently associate the success of the feminist movement with highly public performances of anger, and that feminists often assign value to anger when it is expressed through explosive, heated, and loud performances on a public stage. Feminist scholars, such as the noted anthropologist Esther Newton, reference specific public performances when insisting on the usefulness of anger. For example, Newton suggests that feminism gained its foothold in the United States after the Women’s Liberation Movement picketed the 1968 Miss America Pageant (114). Likewise, Shulamith Firestone dreamt in the 1970s of a “smile boycott” – a mass protest in which feminists all

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<sup>1</sup> Clinicians rank the severity of a patient’s OCD on The Yale-Brown Obsessive-Compulsive Scale, which contains five tiers: “sub-clinical,” “mild,” “moderate,” “severe,” and “extreme.”

<sup>2</sup> Many individuals living with mentally illness refer to Christine Miserandino’s “Spoon Theory” to articulate the ways in which leaving the house can be difficult. Miserandino’s theory describes “how people with a long-term condition often have a limited amount of energy with which to tackle everyday life. Each expenditure of energy, or each activity undertaken, leads to less available energy for any subsequent activities. She likened each energy expenditure to a spoon; with a limited number of spoons in the bundle it is important to be aware of the effects of each activity” (Milne, Larkin, and Lloyd 15).

<sup>3</sup> Le Tigre’s song “Much Finer,” which was released on the album *Feminist Sweepstakes* just nine months after the debut of *From The Desk of Mr. Lady*, felt more familiar to me, with its lyrics: “Do you wanna stay in bed all day? Yeah! Do you remember feeling any other way? No!”

over the world would refuse to smile for others (90). Public displays of feminist rage like these are incredibly valuable, and if I were to compose a dissertation devoted entirely to defending feminist displays of anger from sexist and racist detractors, I feel my energies would be well spent. Feminist anger is a legitimate and natural response to the array of interlocking oppressions<sup>4</sup> within contemporary U.S. culture. Though many scholars have penned defenses of feminist anger, from Sara Ahmed's writing on the "feminist killjoy" in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) to Sue. J. Kim's exploration of how white anger is typically valorized over the anger felt by people of color in her text *On Anger* (2013), there is still much more to be said about the worth of expressing feminist rage.

My own project takes a different approach. As defending anger and "angry feminists" have become central projects for feminist critique, highly public, large-scale events – such as rallies, protests, and consciousness-raising seminars – have come to be the central focus of feminist studies of anger. For instance, Kim describes anger as a feeling that frequently arises in social and communal interactions, and she asserts that "anger is produced in the collective" and that "particularly strong political, ethical, and evaluative emotions like anger can create collectives" (46). Kim cites consciousness-raising groups as an example of anger's inherent sociality, and such groups have, indeed, created a space where women (historically, many of them white women) could profess their anger in face-to-face encounters with other women. But overt and visible performances of rage are not available to all women. I urge for a paradigm shift away from centering discourses on feminist anger exclusively around organized, collective action, or loud, heated demonstrations. Instead, I argue that a range of subtle expressions of anger are equally important to feminist politics. Anger can certainly be "communal, shared among members of groups with shared historical

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<sup>4</sup> I draw this notion of oppressions as interlocking social forces from the "Combahee River Collective Statement."

experiences” (Kim 92), but I also believe that anger can do productive work when it is performed in private, for even an audience of one – the performer herself.

What do such performances look like? How do we gain access to them if they occur behind closed doors? And what sort of political work do they perform? Such questions merit consideration since so many women risk violence for articulating their anger publicly. To express feminist anger, an act that I view as an inherently performative and embodied gesture, puts one’s physical corpus on the line. Embodiment, Judith Butler tells us, “implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence” (*Undoing Gender* 21). If, as Butler proposes, embodiment opens individuals to the possibility of being violently harmed by others, then feminist anger, as a feeling that carries performative, embodied contours, always negotiates threats of violence and harm. In what ways can women perform anger in hostile situations? How do we reclaim anger if the project of expressing anger is fraught?

For some women, performing anger is a straightforward and easily accessible task. But for other groups of women, the performance of anger can be accompanied by peril. For example, Audre Lorde has explained that the mobilization of Black feminist anger often incurs especially potent hostility. In the U.S., African-American women’s anger has regularly been deemed excessively “harsh” (Lorde, “Uses” 125) not only within dominant culture but also by white women in feminist spaces. bell hooks stresses that the widespread stigmatization of Black women’s anger leads to the legitimization of violence committed against Black women: by dismissing Black women’s anger, we “ignore the extent to which Black women are likely to be victimized” (*Feminist Theory* 15). Michelle Obama’s 2012 interview with TV personality Gayle King offers an illustrative example of the ways in which racism and sexism can work together to drive women’s expressions of anger underground. In 2012, the First Lady agreed to give an interview to King on CBS’s show *This Morning* in

order to dispel accusations that she was “an angry Black woman” (CBSNewsOnline). The label had dogged her for years: columnist Cal Thomas, for instance, deemed her an “angry Black woman” in June 14, 2008 interview with Fox News (Fox News), and in July 2008 *The New Yorker* magazine featured a cover that portrayed her as a cartoon caricature wearing military garb, sporting an afro, and holing a machine gun while her brows furrow unhappily (Blitt). In 2012, Jodi Kantor published her book *The Obamas*, which aimed to deliver an inside look at the marriage behind the Obama presidency, but included many detailed descriptions of Mrs. Obama as an unreasonably angry woman. In an instance where her husband’s staff made a series of blunders, Kantor writes that

Michelle was so angry she would barely speak to the advisers or her husband, ‘giving them only uninterested monosyllabic responses,’ as they attempted to cheer her up. (30)

The text includes many similarly unsympathetic descriptions of Mrs. Obama’s anger, characterizing her as someone not “tolerant” of “failure” (175), as a woman who causes “friction” (29) and as a “strident” (30) wife who makes everyone “afraid of her” (29).

In her interview with King, Obama projects tasteful calmness as she sits on an overstuffed armchair and wearing a muted, tan pencil skirt and blouse. In the first moments of the interview, King dives directly into the topic of the speculation surrounding Mrs. Obama’s anger:

If reading the book and you take out parts of the book, you would think Michelle Obama is angry, she’s unhappy, she feels burdened, she feels frustrated. Do you feel frustrated as the First Lady of the United States?

Obama enthusiastically responds that she “loves” her job as First Lady, and when King asks Obama how she deals with the “angry Black woman image,” and Obama responds, “I just try to be me” as she flashes a small smile and gives a quick shrug. Insisting on the complexities of her emotional life and the need to define her emotions in her own terms,

Obama ends the interview by posing a question: “Who can write about how I feel? Who, what third person can tell me how I feel? Or anybody for that matter?” This interview and the controversy surrounding Mrs. Obama’s purported anger reveal how the denigration of Black women’s anger can enable a public culture that allows for a First Lady of African descent in the White House but requires that she manifest decorous, heterosexual womanhood at all times.

The incredible frequency and intensity of the violence committed against women, and the deep stigmatization of the anger felt by Black women, queer women, and women with disabilities in particular, demands that attention be paid to anger’s more ephemeral registers and its “trace[s]”: “the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor” (Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* 65). In this dissertation, I articulate a theory of what I term everyday anger in feminist literary culture: displays of anger that are narrated in fiction, drama, and memoirs that unfold in the home or domestic spaces, lack an immediate audience, and seem more hesitant than defiant. These quotidian and veiled performances are, I argue, no less potent than highly visible activist practices. For example, Beneatha Younger performs her anger within the confines of her family’s cramped Chicago apartment in Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). After her brother, Walter, spends the money their mother had set aside for Beneatha’s college education on the down payment for a liquor store, Beneatha is understandably furious, and Hansberry’s stage directions indicate that she “hissingly” (137) recites a “monologue of insult” at him (138). But audiences see Beneatha articulate her anger to her brother within the confines of their living room: she is not marching in the streets, and she does not carry a picket sign. Even though the stage for Beneatha’s anger is a private, domestic space, the way she performs her anger inside the walls of her apartment shapes the way she will get to live her life outside of it. Advocating for herself through her expression of anger could impact her future career in medicine, since

her family controls the money that will potentially pay for her education. Both Mrs. Obama and Ms. Younger are disallowed from performing anger on a public stage. The First Lady must find a way to express her feelings in a situation where, if she were to reveal frustration with the way she's been caricatured by the national press, she would give her critics fodder to further smear her character. Similarly, Beneatha must explain her frustration to her family before she can have the kind of public life that she hopes for.

In this dissertation, I explore performances of anger that fly under the radar, that can be broached within a hostile public sphere, and that might not be widely seen or noticed. In doing so, I search for a counterpoint to the kind of anger that is lauded by widely-circulated feminist texts, such the film *She's Beautiful When She's Angry* – a 2014 documentary about the women's movement from 1966 to 1971. The film's trailer features shot after shot of women marching in the streets, shouting, carrying picket signs, and raising their fists high in the air while demanding available abortions, equal pay for equal work, and an end to rape culture (INTLFilmCircuit). While I don't dispute the incredible strides that can be made for women by engaging in public protest, I want to examine how feminist anger looks when it is not staged through sharp, overt disagreement, but instead emerges through slight movements and gestures, in intimate interpersonal interactions, or when there might not be an immediate audience present. According to Kim, viewing anger as an "individual," private, or personally-held feeling overlooks the "systematic" forces that create the "conditions that make people angry" (51). But I suspect that individualized or private performances of anger can help feminists survive in – if not always break free from – systems of oppression. And survival itself can be revolutionary: continuing to live in a hostile climate where one's life is regularly devalued is itself a defiant act.

The scenes of everyday anger that I survey in this dissertation are embedded in literary texts, from fiction and memoir to drama, film, and performance. Fiction,

performance texts, and autobiographical writing supplement public and widely-recognizable performances of rage: if a woman cannot take to the streets in order to shout, scream, or yell, she can describe through the written word the kinds of performances she might hope to stage. Through fiction, autobiographical literature, and performance a woman can also narrate, after the fact, a minor or hidden performance of anger that might have gone unrecognized when it initially took place.

Instances where anger emerges in silences, gaps, and textual lacuna can constitute a rich landscape of performance that contests the oppression of women. For example, a passage in Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1975) shows a woman's anger emerging through a lacuna, or gap. In a speech by the lady in blue, anger is deferred when the speaker refuses to articulate this feeling in the present-tense. The lady in blue recounts that she was angry in the past when she describes how her "temper came outta control" when she couldn't hear her favorite musician, Willie Colon, play in a club (26). A few scenes later, the lady in blue tells an inattentive lover that in the coming days and weeks she will grow angry: "i will raise my voice / & scream & holler" (68). Neither of these scenes depict the rage with present-tense verbs. Therefore, the choreopoem removes the anger spoken in these scenes by lady in blue from our temporal here-and-now.<sup>5</sup> This anger is displaced, deferred, and out of sight. Shange's text insists that to see anger we must not always expect the feeling to appear readily or assertively. We must anticipate anger's arrival or hear its echoes from the past. We must listen to gaps and silences to hear an anger that is too often suppressed by dominant culture.

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<sup>5</sup> Like all the ladies in *for colored girls*, the lady in blue is not a coherent figure or character. However, I do find it suggestive that many of the angry deferrals that are present in the choreopoem – details of being angry in the past or anticipating an anger to come – are spoken by the lady in blue.



## Messy and Multiple

The title of this dissertation is drawn from *for colored girls*, a text that, after its debut, was beset with criticism that it was too angry, and that the women it depicts reveal “a collective appetite for black male blood,” according to Robert Staples (26). Scholars such as Sandra Flowers defend Shange’s choreopoem, enumerating the moments in the play that reveal Shange’s “compassion for black men” (52).<sup>6</sup> While I share Flowers’ desire to catalogue the ways in which Shange sympathetically portrays her male characters, I also want to validate any anger articulated by Shange’s women. I am drawn, for instance, to a moment in the choreopoem where the lady in blue describes her frustrations through a list of accreting ampersands. In narrating her own anger, she offers a portrait of anger as a tangled collection of feelings, actions, and intentions.

In the poem “sorry,” the lady in blue rails against a lover who has mistreated her. Her lover – a person not explicitly gendered in the text – has consistently beat her “heart to death” and has only offered insincere apologies in recompense (67). The lady in blue decides to cut ties with this lover, and, in a speech explaining this decision, she describes how she’s going to proceed with her life now that this person will no longer be a part of it.

well  
i will not call  
i’m not goin to be nice  
i will raise my voice  
& scream & holler  
& break things & race the engine  
& tell all yr secrets about yrself to yr face  
& i will list in detail every one of my wonderful lovers  
& their ways  
i will play oliver lake  
loud  
& i won’t be sorry for none of it. (68)

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<sup>6</sup> Like Flowers, Neal Lester proposes that Shange only attacks “*some* black men” and does show sympathy to others (320).

In order to show compassion towards herself, the lady in blue must distance herself from the person who has hurt her. She plans to articulate her anger openly: she needs to leave off niceness, to “raise” her “voice” and “scream & holler” (68). Not a simple declarative statement – “I am angry” or “I will be angry” – the lady in blue’s language constructs her anger through a list of actions and feelings. To describe her anger to someone else, she gestures to a collection of disparate experiences, emotions, and goals. Her anger accretes components. The ampersands on the page show the lady in blue’s anger adding up upon itself, compounding rapidly. Five lines in a row begin with ampersands in this poem, forming a visual block of “and” symbols that leap off the page. She plans to “scream” and “holler” and “break things” and “race the engine” and reveal “secrets” and “love” and describe her “lovers” and refuse sorrow (68), which suggests that her anger is a multi-layered affective project. Like shale, a layered rock that acquires new surfaces and content over time, the lady in blue’s anger builds multiple strata on top of each other. The lady in blue feels anger as a collection of dissonant experiences: to be angry means to perform vocal dissent by “scream[ing]” and “holler[ing],” to enjoy the pleasure of taking a lover, and to dance to music (68). Anger, she insists, can be this “&” that, difficult “&” pleasurable.

Seeing anger as accretive and internally dissonant represents a departure from the way many feminist and queer thinkers have characterized anger in the twentieth century: as a direct, purposeful force that moves against injustice and mobilizes political action. Douglas Crimp’s 1989 essay “Mourning and Militancy” occupies a central place in these discussions of anger within feminist and queer studies. Engaging with what appears in Freud’s work to be an opposition between anger and grief, Crimp suggests that although AIDS activists have been discouraged from mourning and have, instead, been instructed to harness militant anger, holding onto both mourning and militancy more accurately reflects of the array of feelings that are and have been generated in response to the AIDS crisis. Crimp

speculates that the relentless drive to direct anger outwards – at homophobic politicians and policy-makers – can sometimes be a mechanism for “disavow[ing]” self-aggression: Crimp states that through anger and activism “we convince ourselves that we are making all the decisions we need to make” (18). While I don’t disagree with Crimp’s assessment of mourning as a difficult, conflicting process that appears much messier than straightforward displays of anger, I also find that anger can also be a difficult, conflicting, and messy emotion.

Crimp’s insistence on holding on to both “mourning *and* militancy” (18) – and I read militancy as a form of anger – suggests that both feelings are instrumental to coping with a large-scale traumas like the AIDS crisis. Central to Crimp’s formulation of anger, however, is the notion of anger as a force that mobilizes politics and works against “external” “violence” (17). This kind of characterization of anger as a mechanism that pushes back against injustice is evident in Sara Ahmed’s writing as well, when she stresses the value of anger as a force that propels feminist energy in opposition to injustice:

Feminism is shaped by what it is against, just as women’s bodies and lives may be shaped by histories of violence that bring them to a feminist consciousness. If feminism is an emotional as well as ethical and political response to what it is against, then what feminism is against cannot be seen as ‘exterior’ to feminism. Indeed, ‘what’ feminism is against is ‘what’ *gives feminist politics its edge*. (*Cultural Politics* 174)

Feminists can and do use anger to push back against the violences directed at women, as Ahmed writes: feminists who work to counteract discrimination yolk themselves to anger by remaining “compelled” by that which they are “against” (*Cultural Politics* 176). But this form of direct anger that can contest oppression, I argue, is one part of a larger collection of heterogeneous experiences and feelings that make up feminists’ relationship to anger. Anger can be both mobilizing and stultifying. Viewing anger as a polyvalent, multifaceted feeling that often gets fused onto other ways of feeling suggests that “against-ness” (*Cultural Politics*

174) might not be the most accurate direction in which to describe anger as moving. I am not arguing that anger never moves against social oppression and injustice. Anger has a long, documented history of facilitating feminist and queer activism by moving against specific social ills. But anger can also be hard to contain, harness, or properly direct.

To return to Crimp's articulation of anger, I am also curious: at what point does mourning definitively become militancy? Do we need them both, as Crimp insists, or are these feelings indistinguishable? Mourning and militancy: is there a difference? I want to remain attentive to the ways in which anger can be messy too, stagnating politics as much as it motivates. For example, in her memoir *Mean Little deaf Queer* (2009), anger regularly moves author Terry Galloway in and out of various social groups. As a deaf<sup>7</sup> woman, Galloway sometimes grows angry with oppressive conventions in dominant culture that stigmatize Deaf communities, and such anger draws her closer to her d/Deaf and disabled friends and loved ones. At other times, she realizes that she has internalized this oppression herself, and her anger has a hard time finding a direction in which to discharge: she is at once mad at dominant culture and mad at herself for buttressing its norms. Staying attuned to her anger allows Galloway to chart the difficulty she has in determining her membership in particular communities – whether they be communities of women or persons with disabilities. Galloway's memoir tells us that it can be difficult to determine where we should direct our anger given the shifting network of communities one can identify with or against, and given

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<sup>7</sup> I employ a lower-case “d” to refer to Galloway's deafness since she uses this stylization of the term in the title and body of her memoir. In *Deaf Subjects* (2009), Deaf studies scholar Brenda Jo Brueggemann turns to the University of Brighton's Student Services resources for a definition of capital “D” Deafness. This resource explains that Deafness refers to “people who are either born profoundly deaf or who become deaf at a very early age and who regard themselves as belonging to the Deaf community” (University of Brighton qtd. in Brueggemann 10). Capitalized, the term “Deaf” signals “pride in one's identity” and in the “cultural practices” of the Deaf community (Kafer 199). A lower-case “d” generally refers to a person who is “unable to hear or hard-of-hearing” but does not identify as culturally Deaf (Kafer 199). I use the stylization “d/Deaf” to refer to a group that includes both those who identify as culturally Deaf and those who are not culturally Deaf but who experience hearing loss. For an expanded discussion of the distinctions and relationship between the terms “Deaf” and “deaf,” see Brueggemann 9-15.

the ease with which we can unknowingly internalize sexism, racism, ableism, and homophobia. I seek a theory of anger that accounts for its perpetual fluctuation, and I propose we see anger as a force we cannot always predict or control. It is powerful, certainly, and it can be used to work against violence, but it can just as easily spring up in unpredictable forms, merge with other ways of feelings, or turn back on itself.

My dissertation returns to the category of anger in the wake of the scholarly turn to trauma and mourning over the course of the last two decades. In recent years, feminist and queer scholarship has taken up the category of trauma in order to think through literature by women and LGBT writers. Texts such as *An Archive of Feelings* (2003), *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (2002), and *Feeling Backward* (2007), among others, have revealed the importance of thinking through overwhelming personal and world-historical events within a canon of women's literature. In *An Archive of Feelings*, Cvetkovich's "turn to the negative" (Love 2) mines "trauma discourse" for its potential to forge connections between the private experience of "feeling bad" and "world historical events" (Cvetkovich 3). Because experiences of anger or frustration are often social and shared, Cvetkovich sees negative feelings as community-building resources. Cvetkovich's account of the "shared experience of the social" (286) resembles the methodological approach of Heather Love's *Feeling Backward*, a study of lesbian and gay literary history that suggests that feelings such as bitterness or despair can enable the LGBTQ community to identify with the pain of their predecessors.

I am interested in mining the canon of women's literature and performance for evidence of how anger continues to be productive to feminist politics, especially after the scholarly emphasis placed on trauma in the 1990s and early 2000s. I believe that representations of anger within literature and drama can facilitate thinking through the linkages between what might seem to be disparate types of feelings, such as a low feeling like depression and an animated one like anger. Anger can be a kind of feeling bad, as it is in

Split Britches's play *Lesbians Who Kill* (1996), where feeling angry at widespread sexualized violence leads two women to remain locked in their car, paralyzed with fear. But as Beneatha Younger demonstrates in *A Raisin in the Sun*, anger can be a kind of bitter agitation or it can be experienced, paradoxically, as a kind of happiness. In the final scene of Hansberry's play, Beneatha's anger with her brother seems to draw her both towards and away from her family at the same time as it provides a vehicle for her to become closer to her potential suitor, Joseph Asagai. After Beneatha's brother Walter gives away her college tuition money, she laments that he has hurt her deeply. In expressing this frustration to the man vying for her affections, she says she feels angry that she might not be able to become a doctor and "fix" what "ails" humanity (133). Her anger is deeply tied to her desire to help others, and after Asagai inquires about her dreams, she reveals that she had hopes of being able to "fix up the sick," but that now, upon reflection, she worries that she was merely being "child[ish]" in her aspirations (133). Anger makes Beneatha feel vulnerable, and Asagai, receptive to her fears and frustrations, not only comforts her but chooses this moment to propose that they marry. Beneatha's experience with anger reveals that feminists needn't abandon positive emotions such as happiness, joy, and love in order to be angry. Ahmed's work on the theory of the "feminist killjoy" usefully points out the ways anger politically benefits feminists, but her assertion that anger can critique the "limitations of happiness as a horizon of experience" doesn't speak to Beneatha's portrayal of rage (*Promise* 53). Though anger might initially appear to be a negative sentiment, the kind of anger that Beneatha feels shows how feminists can mobilize positive and negative sentiments conterminously; or, her narrative might reveal that such a binary doesn't benefit feminist affect theory at all.

The plays under consideration in this dissertation show anger moving from low registers such as frustration, despair, and resentment, to varieties of anger that are born of love and devotion, to peaceful experiences of dwelling with and meditating on anger. As

such, I propose that anger operates as a motile, moving, and changeable energy. Anger can move unpredictably, swerving and darting into unexpected places. For example, Sharon Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues* (2004) quickly jumps from the early twentieth century back in time to the Antebellum South in the U.S. in order to tell a story about the successful overthrow of a plantation by the people enslaved on its grounds. Anger propels the play into a different temporal moment and interweaves the past, present, and future, unsettling the firm temporal ground beneath readers' and audiences' feet. By zooming back in time in order to recount a story of anger at injustice, Bridgforth's work suggests that anger is a "dynamic" force – a "moving target" that shifts and changes (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 45).

Academic discussions of affect and of emotion are often messy, which is perhaps what draws me to them. Affects are often characterized as "preconscious" energies (Watkins 269): forces that are rooted in the body (Clough 2), have a great range of freedom, and can attach themselves to any object (Sedgwick 19). If affects are generally thought of as irreducible, emotions are not. Emotions, by contrast, are said to be constituted through the "inevitable interaction of affects with thoughts, ideas, beliefs, habits, instinct, and other affects" (Flatley 14). While affects are a type of "nonlinear complexity," emotions arise when affects get narrated through our "conscious states" (Clough 2). As these definitions suggest, the terms "affect" and "emotion" are frequently caught up in one another, and many theorists recognize the difficulty of pinning down specific, discrete rubrics for each term.

In my exploration of anger, I resist disarticulating "affects" from "emotions" or positioning them as solidly different phenomena. In the performance texts I read in this dissertation, anger sometimes appears as what typically gets thought of as an affect. In Bridgforth's performance novel *love conjure/blues*, for instance, anger is an inchoate force that gets transmitted across multiple generations of residents of a Southern town. Describing the

experiences of a community of African-Americans living in the U.S. around the turn of the century, one character suggests that:

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

The “violence” of this passage indexes the anger of Black Americans at deeply-ingrained systems of oppression, and Bridgforth’s work characterizes anger as a feeling that is embedded in histories of Black experience in the U.S. By framing anger as an inherited and preconscious feeling, Bridgforth’s performance novel posits anger as an affect, though we might often assume it to be an emotion. For example, Beneatha Younger’s anger at “assimilationist” (*Raisin* 81) politics in the U.S. seem to be the result of her education and readings with fellow student Joseph Asagai commingling with her desire for self-determination and self-expression, and her anger in this instance seems to be an emotion. Rather than situate anger concretely as an “affect” or an “emotion,” I search for the slippage between these two terms.

### **Low-Dominance Women, Angry Genealogies**

Anger has long been within the purview of feminist thought, and it would be difficult to overstate the pervasiveness of the hackneyed trope of the militant feminist within U.S. culture. According to Ednie Kaeh Garrison, the cliché of the “typical” straw feminist suggests that

teachers and students of Women’s Studies are ugly girls who have been ignored by men or, if they are not ‘ugly,’ are angry lesbians who have been sexually abused by men and are taking it out on society at large by training young women to reject men and traditional family values by becoming feminists and lesbians (as interchangeable identities). (26)



Likewise, Barbara Tomlinson's research into the trope of the angry feminist not only documents the widespread usage of this caricature, but also illustrates how the trope's pervasiveness puts "animosity – not argument – at the center of political discussions" about feminism, thereby "interpellating readers as *always already antifeminist*" (1). Tomlinson advises that even when feminists attempt to counter the notion that they are excessively angry, such contestations still respond "to the logic of the trope" and allow "antifeminists to set the terms of feminist discussion" (8).

While Tomlinson seeks strategies for moving "beyond" the angry feminist trope, others scholarly works such as *Feeling Women's Liberation* (2013), *Acts of Gaiety* (2012), and *The Promise of Happiness* expound on the productive political and social work feminists' rage can perform. Sara Warner's *Acts of Gaiety* examines how lesbian-feminist revenge narratives – what she terms "comedies of terror" – mobilize fantasies of angry violence in order to spoof the "compulsory rites and rituals of hetero- and homo-normativity" (29). While both Warner's and my own research uncover strategies for de-stabilizing the binary between positive and negative sentiments, I seek a theory of anger that accounts for its ambivalent, quiet expressions.

I argue that a logical binary contrasting activity and passivity has been mapped onto feminist anger within women's studies scholarship since the 1960s, with anger being seen as a feeling that allows women to become active agents, in control of their own lives. While identifying ways for women to attain agency is an important goal of feminist critique, I am concerned about where these theories leave women who struggle to seize control of their own lives. What would it look like to dismantle this active/passive binary that we have come to associate with displays of feminist anger? Can anger be passive, and can passivity ever be productive?

Betty Friedan's discussion of anger in *The Feminine Mystique*, a sociological text first published in 1963, has come, whether implicitly or explicitly, to set the terms of many scholarly and activist conversations about feminist anger.<sup>8</sup> In the 1960s, Friedan's writing found a receptive readership in U.S. white women who were frustrated with their role as a housewife. Friedan encourages these women to embrace their anger in order to escape what she views as the trap of domesticity. Following the conclusion of World War II, rapid suburbanization offered women the dream to

be perfect wives and mothers; their highest ambition to have five children and a beautiful house, their only fight to get and keep their husbands. They had no thought for the unfeminine problems of the world outside the home; they wanted the men to make the major decisions. They gloried in their role as women, and wrote proudly on the census blank: "Occupation: housewife." (18)

As bell hooks points out, Friedan's text, though popular among some women, conceptualizes women's oppression solely in terms of the experiences of middle- to upper-class white women.<sup>9</sup> Friedan's valorization of working women does not, hooks reminds, take into consideration the many women of color in the United States who have worked outside the home in order to make ends meet. Friedan exhorts women to abandon their search for the ideal of domestic bliss in order to find personal fulfillment. "Happiness," she cautions, "is not the same as the aliveness of being fully used" (359). These remarks underscore the importance of anger to feminist thought, while downplaying the relevance of positive affective positions like happiness and joy. Friedan contends that women who openly voice their anger will be able to break free mandated domestic labor. Drawing from psychological research performed thirty years earlier by Abraham H. Maslow – the scholar who is widely

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<sup>8</sup> Some scholars conjecture that feminism's second wave began in 1963, corresponding with the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* (Kimball 2). Of course, the demarcations between feminist waves are tenuous and provisional at best, and I mark the category only to point out the ways in which second wave feminism is often linked with anger in scholarly accounts of feminist history.

<sup>9</sup> See: *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center*, especially chapter 1.

known for laying out a theory of humans' "hierarchy of needs" – Friedan claims that women who are more "dominant," that is, women who are "strong, spirited, and educated," enjoy more agency because of their ability to freely communicate their anger (318). She sees submissiveness as a failure to have "courage enough to show anger when it is necessary" (320). This account of anger equates its expression with dominance and activity, while submissiveness and passivity are linked to an inability to articulate anger.

Valerie Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto* (1967) and Radicalesbians's "The Woman-Identified Woman" – two feminist treatises written within a three-year span of each other – both construct charismatic portraits of angry feminists as liberated and gritty women, hell-bent on overturning patriarchal authority. Solanas's well-known essay imagines a woman who is "dominant, secure, self-confident, nasty, violent, selfish, independent, proud, thrill-seeking, free-wheeling, [and] arrogant," and who considers herself "fit to rule the universe" (25). Such women belong to SCUM, the "Society for Cutting Up Men." According to Solanas, SCUM are not "nice, passive, accepting, 'cultivated,' polite, dignified, subdued, dependent, scared, mindless, or insecure" women (25).

Even today, there are many violences continually enacted against U.S. women: according to a 2011 CDC report (Breiding et al.), 63.2% of women in the United States had experienced rape or sexual violence in their lifetimes. As such, the fantasy of a world dominated by "free-wheeling" "arrogant" and "nasty" women who do not fear men but, instead, revile them holds considerable allure. This language of activity and passivity also appears in Radicalesbians' assertion that "a lesbian" is the "rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion" (562). Anger, Radicalesbians claim, can enable a woman to be "a more complete and freer human being" (562). This figuration of anger suggests women "condens[e]" or contain this feeling and then push it outward; the word "explosion" connotes energy and action (562). By linking anger to personal freedom Radicalesbians align

themselves with Friedan's 1963 assessment of anger as a road out of passivity. While Solanas's and Radicalesbians's manifestos validate female aggressiveness in a culture that demands women to be passive and demure, I desire a theory of anger that acknowledges women who are scared or insecure. That is: do we have to be fearless to be feminist?

Within the twentieth century, feminists have mobilized anger in order to articulate feelings of "powerlessness," to marshal activist organizations, and to bind nascent "women's culture" (Kimball 10, 3). Alongside print publications extolling the use-value of anger, the practice of organizing consciousness-raising (CR) sessions encouraged women to appreciate the frustrations of other feminists. As CR activities gained popularity, feminists noted they felt more "sensitive" to their own "anger at sexists" and aware of their "hostility" toward men (123). Lillian Faderman's study of twentieth-century U.S. lesbian history suggests that these CR sessions fueled an "angry militance" in "lesbian-feminism" during the 1970s (300, 235). Faderman asserts that, affectively, the lesbian-feminist movement crystallized around "a rhetoric of rage" that was bolstered by women's realization that "they had much to be furious about" (235).

Friedan's 1997 re-assessment of *The Feminine Mystique*, "Metamorphosis: Two Generations Later," describes the U.S. feminist movement as a linear journey from passivity to activity and quiescence to anger. The feminist movement represents, to Friedan:

an explosion of women's pent-up anger and rage against the put-downs they had to accept when they were completely dependent on men, the rage they took out on their own bodies and covertly on husbands and kids. That rage fueled the first battles of the women's movement. (489)

Again, rage is figured as an antidote to norms of feminine passivity, and Friedan hypothesizes that this anger has "subsided with each advance woman made toward her own empowerment, her full personhood, freedom" (21). Friedan constructs a linear teleology where women's anger gradually diminishes over time, and this chronology meets resistance

with a play such as *Lesbians Who Kill*. Only five years separate the first premiere of Split Britches's play from the publication of "Metamorphosis," yet the drama does not evince a lessening of feminist anger (its protagonists are definitely pissed off). Additionally, Split Britches's rejection of plot in favor non-narrative absurdism suggests that linear temporality might be incompatible with expressions of feminist anger. Anger can recur and linger in feminist organizing and thought, just as anger might not liberate all women.

This equation between women's anger and agency has been problematized by many Black feminist scholars, who point out that pathological stereotypes portray Black women as always already "aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy" (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 123).<sup>10</sup> Popular culture controls Black women by denigrating their rage, thereby putting such "women in their place" (123). The term "bitch" is designed to silence the anger of Black women, asserts Patricia Hill Collins, and this representation can shape the way that many Black women feel comfortable expressing their rage (*Black Sexual Politics* 123).

Ahmed's recent work on the figure of the "feminist killjoy" posits a clear connection between writers such as Audre Lorde and the abiding significance of anger in feminist and queer theory. Ahmed's assertion that feminist genealogies have always been bound up with the feeling of unhappiness explicitly extends critiques made by Lorde and Friedan (50): she asks twenty-first century feminists to understand the "limitations of happiness as a horizon of experience" (*Promise* 53). Happiness, she explains, often undergirds conformity and the mandate to orient one's self around normative social values, and for white women in particular, happiness can knit itself to domesticity, passivity, and the role of blissful housewifery. Anger better serves the feminist movement, according to Ahmed, because it contains the potential to break from normative social goods. When a feminist "speak[s] out

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<sup>10</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Sexual Politics*, especially chapter 4, for a discussion of the controlling images applied to Black women's anger.

about their unhappiness,” she refuses to participate in homogenizing social structures that oppress women and minorities (60). Ahmed’s theorization of the “feminist killjoy” has been instrumental in helping me organize my own thoughts on the future of feminist anger, especially her suggestion that it can be powerful to affirm the “myth that feminists kill joy because they are joyless” (*Promise* 53, 66). Claiming that embracing the negativity and anger often presumed in feminist speech offers the benefit of a broader range of opportunities for women’s lives, Ahmed remarks that if women are typically expected to find happiness in normative social goods, then to express anger is to find ways of living outside normativity (*Promise* 59). By refusing to be made happy by normative goods, feminists forge a close relationship with “negativity” and “expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy” (*Promise* 66, 65). Jack Halberstam has also suggested that anger benefits feminism for its ability to “complicate an assumed relationship between women and passivity” (“Imagined” 199). Within this angry genealogy I sketch, several implicit conclusions recur: that anger is linked to agency, that passivity is something to overcome, and that activity and passivity are opposing forces.

However, the plays I consider in this dissertation suggest that anger does not always enable women to become “freer human beings” (Radicalesbians 562). In *Lesbians Who Kill*, for instance, protagonists May and June are cooped up in their car because their anger at the violence directed at women combines with their fear of coming to harm. To borrow Radicalesbian’s metaphor of explosion, May and June’s anger could be seen to ignite (they grow angry at patterns of gendered violence) but does not detonate since they do not do anything with their rage. Split Britches’s play forces audiences to ponder what happens to anger when its fuse sputters and shorts out. May and June do not enact the radical sort of anger Solanas assigns to SCUM either. They are passive (hiding in their car), scared (May buries her face in June’s lap when lightening strikes overhead), and insecure (June needs

reassurance that May does not want to leave her). May and June might not be trying to “rule the universe,” but they are accomplishing something that can be incredibly difficult: they are surviving (Solanas 25).

Are passivity or vulnerability strictly undesirable states to inhabit? As Anne-Lise François demonstrates in her theory of “recessive action,” the “self-quieting, recessive speech acts and hardly emitted announcements or reports on self” staged by female characters in literature after 1800 question the “unambiguous good[s] of articulation and expression” through “frankness, directness, transparency, or self-expression” (xvi). An ambivalently deployed anger can, likewise, enable women to critique racism, sexism, and homophobia as it conceals and covers over the speaking subject in order to protect her from violence. I see Beneatha Younger’s anger at the white Clybourne Park Association in *A Raisin in the Sun* as this sort of recessive anger: when representatives from the white neighborhood visit her family, using threats in order to convince her family to not move into a house in their community, Beneatha’s anger emerges through covert, snide remarks that even the members of her family do not initially recognize. To frankly express herself would risk escalating the situation with the white homeowner’s association. But her anger is not strictly absent either: her anger speaks, but it speaks quietly and almost secretly.

Lisa Duggan’s work on “bad sentiments” helps me think about the ways in which anger can be ambiguous and sluggish, instead of the kind of explosive, energizing force it is sometimes made out to be in feminist scholarship. In her contribution to the 2009 *Women & Performance* roundtable “Hope and Hopelessness,” Duggan argues that anger can function as an antidote to complacency and assimilationist politics. “Bad sentiments,” she says, can “lead us out of the ossified structures that constrain us” (279). Duggan suggests that negative sentiments such as depression, anger, or despair can be put to use countering hegemonic social forces, such as “alienated labor and the gendered family” (279). Duggan wonders

whether such a strategy can actually generate “energetic revolutionary force,” but she does favor a continual negotiation between hope and hopelessness over the “complacency” of happiness (280). Here, Duggan places anger alongside slow and murky affects, such as depression and despair. However, rather than doubting the value of bad sentiments that do not liberate us, I suggest that the stubborn tenacity of an anger that lingers and simmers can help women *keep going* in a cultural climate beset with everyday injustices. Even if anger does not ignite “energetic revolutionary force” (Duggan 279) it can still sustain us to wait for a time when explosive rage can be made manifest.

At the same time, I am resistant to frameworks that ask feminists to leave off happiness in order to take up anger. One of the “ephemeral” strands of anger that I seek to tease out in this dissertation is the representation of anger as a happy, communal affect. Within contemporary circles of young feminists, for example, joyfully affirming and reclaiming the trope of the angry feminist has become a popular discursive strategy. The craft exchange website *Etsy* has seen rapidly increasing numbers of feminists making and selling DIY “feminist killjoy” jewelry in homage to Sara Ahmed’s theorization of “killing joy as a world making project.”<sup>11</sup> These items often feature bright colors, cheerful designs, and cheeky imagery that appears on necklaces, buttons, earrings, or other personal items that can be worn or affixed to bags and backpacks.

A search for “feminist killjoy” in *Etsy* turns up several hundred results – from handmade “feminist killjoy” buttons to hats, pendants, and patches. I once came across a necklace that was especially memorable to me: for sale in a shop called “WickedQueer,” this necklace was comprised of a gold chain bearing a small, one-inch pendant that read “feminist killjoy” in neon pink, see-through acrylic lettering. The words “feminist killjoy”

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<sup>11</sup> “Killing joy as a world making project” is the tagline of Ahmed’s personal website: <http://feministkilljoys.com>.



were written in a dripping, oozing, goo-like font.<sup>12</sup> I've seen this necklace shared and reposted countless times in circles of online feminist groups. Such an object suggests that feminist anger can be tongue-in-cheek, self-conscious, colorful, and silly. The popularity of these handmade items contests media and journalistic proclamations that announce the "death of feminism." Estelle Freedman suggests that journalists and pundits have posited the "death of feminism" since the 1960s, and she speculates that "perhaps these writers notice feminism only during periods of mass public protest and overlook its quieter and more pervasive forms" (10). Though I would not characterize this hot-pink, neon necklace as a "quiet" pronouncement of feminist anger, it is not an example of mass or public protest either. It is a "loud" item in some ways: it is day-glo pink and evokes the lettering one might see on a poster for a horror movie. But, in other ways, the necklace is quiet and personal. It features a small charm that can be worn around the neck, and it is a handmade item, created by one person to sell to another individually. The wearer can display the necklace as much as they might want, but the charm can be hidden or tucked out of sight if needed. As an "angry object," this necklace implicitly dismantles the binary of activity and passivity that has been used to think through feminist rage.

That the version of feminist anger performed by this necklace, and the other texts I draw together in this dissertation, can be articulated in private does not necessarily mean it colludes with neoliberal systems of power that often work to privatize public goods. This necklace is a purchasable commercial product: it risks giving the impression that it's possible to consume our way out of oppression. But the handmade and DIY economy through which *Etsy* operates is distinctly outside of the realm of the corporate. A woman purchasing this "Feminist Killjoy" necklace would be giving her money to another woman, presumably

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<sup>12</sup> As of this writing, the object I am describing can still be viewed on the WickedQueer *Etsy* page.

– a woman who had hand-crafted the jewelry. Moreover, my turn to the private is an attempt to reckon with the way in which public life can be inaccessible for feminists with disabilities. Micro-interventions, like wearing a “Feminist Killjoy” necklace, can lead to more cumulative displays of rage.

Thinking about anger performed in private spaces is crucially necessary since the violence of the public sphere always, in some ways, seeps into home spaces. For example, Beneatha must perform her anger in private when the white representative of the homeowner’s association her family hopes to join comes into her family’s apartment to threaten them. The homeowner’s association representative, Carl Lindner, hopes that by intimidating the Youngers by threatening them with violence that they will not move into his all-white neighborhood, Clybourne Park. His actions reveal that private spaces are never truly protected from public violence, and that the task of eradicating racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism will have to be performed in fleeting, one-on-one encounters and within intimate, private settings.

The popularity of “feminist killjoy” ephemera in online spaces illustrates that feminists are still cultivating a relationship to anger, and that feminists have not grown quiet or complacent after the twenty-first century. This dissertation constructs a long arc of angry feminist performance. Beginning with dramas of the 1950s and reaching as far forward as 2010, I construct a long arc of angry feminist theater, undoing assumptions that feminism became dormant and apolitical after the 1970s or, alternately, that the genesis of feminist anger occurred with the advent of consciousness-raising seminars in the 1960s and 70s. Beginning my dissertation with a study of *A Raisin in the Sun*, first performed in 1959, allows me to think about how Lorraine Hansberry articulates a version of feminist anger that is rooted the social and cultural context of the 1950s. What’s more, the narrative movement between the Antebellum and post-Reconstruction eras that occurs in Sharon Bridgforth’s *love*

*conjure/blues* suggests that considerations of anger in the twentieth century need to account for articulations of anger in the nineteenth century and beyond. For example, in my first chapter I consider the resemblances between Beneatha Younger and Sojourner Truth, whose 1851 speech “Ain’t I A Woman” seems to me an important performance of anger that speaks to the texts I examine in this dissertation. Delivered at the Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio, Truth’s speech castigated both Southern abolitionist groups and Northern women’s rights groups for their failure to recognize the needs of Black women in their activism. That Truth’s performance of anger in the 1850s connects so readily with anger articulated in the 1950s and even 2010s reveals that in order to fully contend with recent articulations of feminist rage we must mine feminist histories for articulations of anger that occurred before 1960.

### **Towards an Angry Young Women’s Theater**

For me, theater and anger have always been intertwined. The natural “rhythms” of performance – the patterns of “gathering/performing/dispersing” described by Richard Schechner (176) – play out when feminists express their rage. Even a woman articulating anger during her everyday life can draw the attention of others and gather an audience of one or a few, performing anger in order to direct attention to specific political and social oppressions. Commonly recognized angry performances such as loud speech, rolling eyes,<sup>13</sup> or sighing heavily constitute embodied performances.

For an example of the deep conceptual linkages between theatricality and feminist anger that I see, we might look at an episode from the ninth season of the popular television show *Friends*, “The One With The Soap Opera Party.” The episode’s sub-plot revolves around Chandler Bing, the bumbling businessman of the ensemble cast, attending a fictional

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<sup>13</sup> In a blog post titled “Feminist Complaint,” Ahmed posits the equation “Rolling eyes = feminist pedagogy.”

one-woman show titled *Why Don't You Like Me: A Bitter Woman's Journey Through Life*. Chandler's roommate, Joey, has tricked him into going to the play in order to get him out of their apartment for the evening so that Joey can throw a party. Viewers of *Friends* follow Chandler to the theater where a woman, played by character actress Alex Borstein, takes to the stage in order to rant about the difficulties of her life. She is attired in black pants, a black shirt, and a black suit jacket, and her hair is short, cropped, and likewise black. After the house lights drop, the actress screams the play's aforementioned title at the audience, and then she belts out the title of the play's first act: "Chapter 1: My First Period." Towards the middle of the performance, the eponymous bitter woman asks the audience if they'd like an intermission. Chandler stage whispers "Oh yes, God," and the performer shoots back: "Well you're not gonna get one! Because in life there are no intermissions, people! Now, Chapter 7: Divorce Is A Four Letter Word." The performer promptly runs into the audience, points a finger at Chandler, and yells, "How could he leave me?" Chandler jokes, "I don't know, you seem lovely!" and canned laughter rolls behind an image of Chandler looking awkward and repulsed. For the writers of *Friends*, a show that enjoyed massive popularity at the end of the twentieth century, representing contemporary theater means representing women's solo performance. Moreover, solo performance calls to mind the figure of an angry, unlovable feminist.

I've seen this episode rerun countless times on late-night syndication, and it certainly does not offer a sympathetic portrait of feminist anger. The humorless woman onstage evokes the stereotype of the "feminist killjoy" that Ahmed theorizes. Such women "do not place their hopes for happiness in the right things" and simultaneously "speak out about their unhappiness with the very obligation to be made happy by such things" (*Promise* 59-60). Ahmed explores what it might mean to "take this figure of the feminist killjoy seriously" (*Promise* 66) and accept the associations between feminism and unhappiness. Taking on these

negative stereotypes can do productive work for feminists, according to Ahmed. Building from Ahmed's premise, I ask: what might it mean to take seriously the linkages between theatre genres, performance, and feminist anger that we see evidenced in this particular episode of *Friends*? To do so would reveal the unique potential of theater to enable feminist critique and would show how feminist rage frequently carries performative, embodied characteristics.

I believe that to speak of feminist anger is to invoke the category of performance, and to be an angry feminist is to be always in the process of enacting a theatrical event. For example, Andrea Juno and V. Vale productively examine feminist anger through the framework of performance genres in their co-edited volume of *Re/Search*, titled *Angry Women* (1991). In order to explore feminist rage, Vale and Juno interview a host of performance artists including Karen Finley, Kathy Acker, and Sapphire, suggesting that these women critically distill a new feminist "consciousness" that "integrate[s] political action, cutting-edge theory, linguistic reconstruction, adventurous sexuality, humor, spirituality, and art toward the dream of a society of justice" (4). On the cover of the volume, a picture of Medusa stares back at readers. Vale and Juno propose that her "rage, embodied by seething snakes that turned men into stone," serves as an "appropriate" representation of women's culture in the 1990s (5). Her gaze also constitutes a kind of performative utterance, in the Austinian sense of this term: though Medusa need not speak in order to transform men into cold stone, her stare does not "report" or "describe" anything and, instead, engages in the "doing of an action" (5).

Performance genres have enabled many national discussions about women's anger in the United States from the mid twentieth century to the present, such as when Karen Finley and Holly Hughes lost their National Endowment for the Arts funding in the 1990s, thereby sparking the NEA Four debates. After President George Bush Sr. recommended rescinding

governmental support for four performance artists whose work had been approved for financial support by NEA peer reviewers, NEA chairman John Frohnmayer stripped Hughes and Finley of their funding (R. Meyer). The defunded artists sued Frohnmayer, and their case – *Finley v. NEA* – was brought before the Supreme Court (R. Meyer). Both Finley and Hughes’ performance styles are notable for their creative use of anger. Fellow NEA Four target Tim Miller calls Finley “an angry feminist” (173), and Hughes’ work at the WOW Café has blended anger, humor, feminist critique, and biting jokes. In the instance of Hughes and Finley’s work, two women theater artists often known for their angry performance became figureheads in a nine-year national debate about LGBT and feminist politics, the arts, and alterity. According to *Village Voice* theater critic C. Carr, the world of performance art was a creative space that was “uniquely exploited” by far right critics during the culture wars of the ‘90s. “Here were skilled professionals making highly charged imagery the right-wingers could take out of context,” Carr remarks (294). Since these performances were occurring in in small, out-of-the-way clubs, spaces “most Americans weren’t privy to,” conservative critics could target them and “lie” about them “with impunity” (294). In the instance of Hughes and Finley, women’s angry performances were the site through which conservative critics battled with artists about the value of political theater.

Individual dramas have also served as forums for debates about women’s anger on a national scale, as when Shange’s *for colored girls* became ground zero for a national conversation about Black feminist anger in 1979 after Staples published his essay “The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists” in the March/April issue of *The Black Scholar*. Staples seizes on the popularity of Shange’s choreopoem in order to criticize what he sees as excessive anger on the part of Black women throughout the United States. Advocating for heightened public awareness about the struggles faced by many Black men, Staples uses Shange’s work as evidence of “why so many Black men feel their manhood,

more accurately their feeling of self-respect” being “threatened by Black women” (26). According to Staples, not only does Shange’s text portray a pathological strain of feminist anger, but this anger is also emblematic of the anger supposedly held by all Black women. Following the publication of Staples’ article, many artists and scholars defended Shange’s drama. Some critics outlined the ways that the women of *for colored girls* reject anger, such as Neal Lester. In the summer of 1979, *The Black Scholar* featured a special issue on this “Black Sexism Debate,” including a rebuttal by Audre Lorde that criticizes Staples for positioning the rage of Black men as “more legitimate than the rage of Black women” (“Disease” 17). The journal “solicit[ed] comments from leading artists and intellectuals of the era, as well as from the larger reading audience” (McGill 120). Shange’s drama provided the catalyst for and the forum through which these debates about Black women’s anger occurred, suggesting the centrality of theatrical genres to discussions of women’s rage.

Despite the correlations between feminist anger and theatrical genres that Juno and Vale identify, some scholars have written anger out of American women’s theatrical traditions. As recently as 2007, *The Columbia Encyclopedia of Modern Drama* asserts that “no female equivalent” of the Angry Young Men playwrights – a group of twentieth-century male dramatists who mobilize anger in order to critique political and social ills – exists (Sierz 47). The Angry Young Men (AYM) playwrights emerged in Britain’s theater scene following the West End premier of John Osborne’s play *Look Back In Anger* in 1956. Often writing “kitchen-sink” dramas set in working-class domestic spaces, these playwrights used theater as a forum for critiquing injustice (Sierz 47). The influence of the Angry Young Men reached all the way to the U.S., where *A Raisin in the Sun*’s Walter Lee Younger was deemed an American counterpart to the British AYM playwrights by theater critics (Cassidy). According to Aleks Sierz, by the end of the summer in 1956 “newspaper journalists were using the

AYM label to describe almost anyone who was loudly critical of what was then called “The Establishment” (47).

Anyone, that is, except women. Sierz suggests that no movement of Angry Young Women playwrights ever emerged because of the way misogyny circulated in the writing of the AYM (47). “Anger, in the cultural imagination of the late 1950s,” writes Sierz, “was a man’s business” (47). The anger represented in 1950s Anglophone theater by men might have contained a strong dose of misogyny, but does the misogyny of the Angry Young Men playwrights bar us from identifying a lineage of theater by and about angry women? To dismiss entirely the possibility of an angry women’s theater seems, to me, to redouble the misogyny Sierz recognizes in the AYM playwrights’ work.

Several scholars have made important strides to undermine claims that there exists no lineage of angry women’s theater. Michelene Wandor critiques the assumption that “women write domestic plays and men write political plays” (36) – a binary that reinforces the assumption that male playwrights pen dramas that are inherently more angry than women. Susan Bennett has revealed how theater critics estimate women’s anger as comparatively less intense than men’s: Ann Jellicoe was often seen as “a second-ranking angry” by theater critics (43), while Lesley Storm was said to be “not angry enough” (50). Bennett urges for reading women playwrights as “differently” angry – not better or worse, more or less angry than their male counterparts (49). I argue that Beneatha Younger is especially poised to be considered a female counterpart to the AYM tradition. Given that her brother Walter is read as an American counterpart to the British AYM figures, we ought to take seriously Hansberry’s stage directions that characterize Beneatha as just “as slim and intense as her brother” and full of “vengeance” (*Raisin* 35). Closely reading histories of women’s dramatic literature alongside feminist scholarship on anger reveals a fundamentally reciprocal relationship between theater, theatricality, and the idea of an angry woman. Many



public conversations about women's anger that have taken place in the U.S. – evidenced by the controversy surrounding Michelle Obama's purported anger that I discussed earlier – consider the feeling's performed contours, including women's facial expressions, posture, wardrobe choices, gestures, voice, and speech. Since theater genres and individual plays have served as forums for many debates about women's anger in the U.S., scholarly histories of women's anger must therefore take performance genres into consideration in order to adequately account for the history of this particular emotion's transmission in the United States. The performance genres that I invoke here encompass theater, dramas, and plays as well as moments of public performance. These texts suggest that private performances of rage, public expressions of activist anger, and theatrical renderings of feminist rage come together to constitute an archive of angry feminist performance.

### **Feminism, Race, and Anger**

Audre Lorde's essay "The Uses of Anger" has been perhaps the most central text to my thinking while writing this dissertation. The essay appears in the influential volume *Sister/Outsider* (1984), a collection of Lorde's essays, but Lorde originally presented the text as the keynote address at the 1981 National Women's Studies Association Conference in Storrs, Connecticut. The text's performative origins are, I argue, specifically important to understanding its theoretical contributions. The "powerful" "energy" that Lorde ascribes to feminist anger (127) might be her own embodied rendition of this feeling – her act of standing and addressing a roomful of women scholars, her performance of using her breath and voice to speak her rage. Despite anger's status as a feeling that is, according to Lorde, "loaded with information and energy" (127), the raced nature of women's anger in the United States encompasses a history of white women dismissing Black women's anger by deeming it too "harsh" to hear (126). The actions of white feminists make it specifically

difficult for Black feminists to articulate anger as an “appropriate reaction” to societal oppressions such as racism or sexism (129).

To adequately discuss the history of feminist anger in the United States, I must call attention to the ways in which Black women’s anger has been stigmatized not only within dominant culture but within dominant forms of feminist thought and activism as well. In 1970, scholar Michelle Wallace wrote of the “myth of the superwoman” – a cultural ideology that paints Black women as pathologically aggressive and strong. Wallace explains the ways in which Black women are caricatured as angry even when they are not upset or enraged. Many white feminists have participated in caricaturing Black women as inherently angry, especially when Black women speak up about discrimination within the feminist movement. bell hooks, for instance, explains that upon the initial publication of her text *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), she received a fair amount of praise as well as criticism that the text was a work of “merciless dissection” (xiii). hooks attests that “mainstream feminists simply ignored this work and any other feminist theory that was perceived as ‘too critical’” (xiii). hooks also testifies to receiving “anger and hostility” when she has brought up white women’s oversights on the issue of race (13). “Attempts by white feminists to silence black women are rarely written about,” hooks reminds, and “all too often” these encounters “have taken place in conference rooms, classrooms, or the privacy of cozy living-room settings, where one lone black woman faces the racist hostility of a group of white women” (13).

For example, hooks writes of a graduate seminar on feminist theory that she once attended where the

reading list that had writings by white women and men and one black man, but no material by or about black, Native American Indian, Hispanic, or Asian women. When I criticized this oversight, white women directed an anger and hostility at me that was so intense I found it difficult to attend the class. When I suggested that the purpose of this collective anger was to create an atmosphere in which it would be

psychologically unbearable for me to speak in class discussions or even attend class, I was told that they were not angry. I was the one who was angry. (14)

hooks' analysis reveals a fantasmic projection of anger from white women onto Black women. White women who feel angry when their racial privilege is exposed ascribe their anger, instead, to the Black women who have pointed it out in the first place. In such an interaction, a white woman's anger is rendered invisible – she denies being angry while attributing this anger to a woman of color who has not (necessarily) articulated anger at all. That this act of attributing anger to Black women occurs without their consent marks the interaction as violent. Anger can be an instrument of violence, even when wielded by women. Exposing negative sentiments, therefore, doesn't always liberate feminists, and hooks' remarks suggest that, in many ways, the speaking of anger is a privilege.

My dissertation draws together creative works authored by Black U.S. women and white U.S. women. Such an approach to the scrutiny of anger in literary texts by women reveals the uneasy history of feminism's relationship to anger, wherein white women use their anger against Black women, ascribe anger to Black women who speak out about injustice, and dismiss Black women's anger as "too harsh" (Lorde, "Uses" 126). Moreover, as a white scholar, I cannot fully erase the racial privilege I bring to my study of feminist rage and of Black women's literary texts. I have chosen to centrally engage with Black feminist thought in this dissertation since, I believe, to theorize anger performed by women in private or in ephemeral registers in response to legacies of violence and oppression necessitates discussing Black women's experiences. My goal has been to listen attentively to the contributions of Black women scholars' intellectual work, especially since I – as a white woman whose disability is typically thought of as invisible, meaning I can frequently "pass" as non-disabled – am generally able to speak my rage without fearing being hurt, censured, or, if protesting, imprisoned by police.

I argue that scholarly conversations about feminist anger and race are important to consider in order to adequately theorize the way that anger transmits across categories of disability and sexuality as well. For example, Wallace's remarks on the "myth of the superwoman" reveals insights into anger, race, and psychiatric disability. Because she feared the "angry" label, Wallace writes that she found herself less likely to speak up in situations where she was being hurt (95). Psychological studies indicate that Black women are one-third as likely as white women to seek mental health treatment when they are in distress (Alvidrez), and are less likely to receive a mental health diagnosis than a white woman, according to a Surgeon General's recent report (U.S. Department). To think about feminist anger in the U.S. necessitates considering race, disability, gender, and sexuality together.

### **Chapter Descriptions**

The texts that make up the body of angry women's theater I trace re-interpret and re-describe anger in unexpected ways, imagining it as a feeling that inspires playfulness; as a force that confines and terrifies; as a practice of religious worship; or, as a performance of productive insanity. Examining these plays' engagement with pernicious cultural tropes that stigmatize women's anger, such as the figure of the angry Black woman and of the angry, violent madwoman, *& Scream & Holler* looks at how feminist anger shapes and is shaped by race, sexuality, and disability.

The first chapter of this dissertation considers the extent to which Lorraine Hansberry's well-known realist drama *A Raisin in the Sun* can be considered realistic at all, showing how Beneatha Younger's anger breaks the realist framework of this seminal kitchen-sink drama. Since the play's debut in 1959, scholars and theater critics have hailed Walter Lee Younger as an American Angry Young Man, centering their analysis of the drama's anger around Walter Lee's rage. In Chapter 1, "Signifying When Vexed: Mutable Anger, Affective Lines of Flight, and *A Raisin in the Sun*," I assert that his sister Beneatha's

frustrations are central to understanding the overall narrative of anger in Hansberry's drama, especially given stage directions that describe Beneatha as equally "slim and intense as her brother" (35). I suggest that Beneatha represents part of a potential lineage of Angry Young Women in American drama. Beneatha's anger quickly shifts in and out of different registers of anger at will, frequently moving from dry sarcasm to articulate fury and bitter resignation within the span of a few lines of dialogue. As a consequence, her interlocutors often have difficulty discerning whether she's actually upset or merely being flippant. Beneatha's anger, therefore, defies the sort of categorization on which Michel Foucault says disciplinary power thrives. I argue that Beneatha enacts Patricia Hill Collins's theory that Black feminism works best when embracing epistemologies of fluidity and flexibility, because, in Collins's words "a moving target is harder to hit" (*Black Feminist Thought* 45).

Chapter 2, "Anger Without Future" reveals how Split Britches's play *Lesbians Who Kill* contests widely-held claims in feminist scholarship and activism that expressing anger enables women to overcome the social imperative to be passive. While the play alludes to the possibility that its two protagonists, May and June, might have savagely murdered a string of offstage male characters, the drama juxtaposes this unconfirmed female-to-male physical violence with literal, onstage depictions of female-to-female emotional violence. The play offers a bleak portrait of two self-professed angry women who do not triumphantly assert their anger at patriarchal authority, as many scholars contend, but instead grow hostile with each other the longer they are trapped together in the confined space of their car. Inflected with negativity, the play's articulation of anger aligns with theories of queer anti-sociality in equal measure to prosex feminisms, two theoretical traditions that are not often seen as commensurate. May and June's anger, therefore, figuratively dramatizes feminism and queer theory as an awkward pair, much like the drama's two protagonists who are immured in a

small, claustrophobic space together, and reveals the limitations of many white women's expressions of anger in the context of post-1970s feminist activism.

Examining Sharon Bridgforth's performance novel *love conjure/blues* alongside contemporary Yoruba spiritual texts, Chapter 3, "Feeling Simultaneously: Anger as Yoruba Altar-Making in Sharon Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues*," illuminates the correspondence between anger and religious transcendence. This chapter focuses on a specific sub-plot in Bridgforth's text in which a conjure woman named Isadora, who lives in the Antebellum south, uses her power to seek justice for a community of persons enslaved by a brutal plantation master. The narrative framework of Bridgforth's text only allows this performance of anger to emerge through a scene depicting the creation of a Yoruba ancestor altar. Through the work of altar-maintenance, the conjure woman's descendants are allowed to hear her story and experience her rage alongside the spiritual transcendence that accompanies altar construction and worship. I contend that *love conjure/blues* asks readers and viewers to imagine anger as a type of altar: requiring regular maintenance and care, indelibly connected to religiosity, and difficult, both physically and emotionally, to wield. This chapter proposes that Bridgforth's dramaturgy links Yoruba-based spirituality with the aesthetic of theatrical jazz in order to offer a theory of affect in itself. If traditions of theatrical jazz, in which Bridgforth's drama participates, demand that audiences open themselves to seeing and hearing many things onstage at once, I argue that Bridgforth asks audiences to *feel* multiple things at once.

While scholars and theater critics typically take playwright Terry Galloway's d/Deafness as a starting point when studying her memoir *Mean Little deaf Queer*, I foreground Galloway's relationship to her diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia in Chapter 4, "Tangles of Resentment: Anger's Accessibility, Againstness, and Terry Galloway's Me(a)taphors of Madness." Madness studies scholars have long attested to the use of performance genres,

from 1800 to the present in Europe and the Americas, to put persons with mental illness on display for dominant culture to consume, scrutinize, and stigmatize. I argue that Galloway's autobiographical writing embraces the fraught associations between performance and madness. Close reading three scenes of informal performance that are narrated in her memoir, I show how Galloway dramatizes her schizophrenia for a wide range of audiences in order to build community. Through a series of what I call "productive conflations," Galloway purposefully collapses the distinctions between her violent feminist anger and her mental illness; between her embodied sense of schizophrenia and her history of performing onstage; and between her hearing loss and what she identifies as her neurological or mental disabilities. Drawing from Elizabeth Grosz's understanding of embodiment as a type of Möbius strip, with no inside and no outside, this chapter shows how Galloway demands her readers consider whether her various disabilities can ever be parsed from one another. Galloway situates her feminist anger as a form of productive insanity, refusing to disarticulate her psychiatric disability from her furious politics. Tracing feminist scholarship's use of mental illness as a metaphor for feminist rebellion, I show how Galloway's memoir imbricates the metaphor of feminism-as-madness with bio-psychiatric understandings of mental illness.

## CHAPTER 1

### Signifying When Vexed: Mutable Anger, Affective Lines of Flight, and *A Raisin in the Sun*

His sister BENEATHA enters. She is about twenty, as slim and intense as her brother.

– Stage Directions, *A Raisin in the Sun* Act I, Scene i

You see! You never understood that there is more than one kind of feeling which can exist between a man and a woman—or, at least, there should be.

– Beneatha Younger, *A Raisin in the Sun*, Act I, Scene ii

#### Crimson Fury

When John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* premiered at London's Royal Court Theater in 1956, its depiction of one working-class man's rage at contemporary bourgeois affluence and Britain's welfare state led theater critics to posit an entire category of angry theater. So potent was the play's representation of anger that when Royal Court press officer George Fearon coined the phrase "angry young man" to describe not only the play's protagonist, Jimmy Porter, but also its playwright (Lacey 20), the term was taken up by theater critics to describe a literary movement of "Angry Young Men" including dramatists and fiction writers such as Kingsley Amis, Colin Wilson, and John Braine.<sup>14</sup> To invoke the subject of anger in the context of twentieth-century theater will inevitably call to mind these British writers. So, when Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* premiered at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in New York City in 1959, its angry protagonist Walter Lee Younger was quickly deemed an Angry Young Man as well: writing for the Chicago Daily Tribune, Claudia Cassidy's review of *Raisin* calls Walter Lee "the angry young man who happens to be a Negro."

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to point out, however, that "nearly every author called an Angry Young Man vociferously rejected the term" (Kalliney 44).



*Raisin*'s status as a piece of realistic theater, coupled with Walter Lee's intense anger at the economic disparities he faces, have led scholars to situate Hansberry's drama as an "Angry Young Men's" play – that is, a kitchen-sink drama written during the middle of the twentieth century in which the struggles and dissatisfactions of a working-class family are dramatized through the conventions of theatrical realism and a "well-made play" structure.<sup>15</sup> The grouping of playwrights that literary historians and theater critics refer to as the Angry Young Men are generally associated with Great Britain and are epitomized by dramatists such as John Osborne and Arnold Wesker, whose plays enjoyed runs at London's Royal Court Theatre during the 1950s. *Raisin* is often framed as an American counterpart to this British dramatic tradition. Harilaos Stecopoulos, for example, names Walter Lee the "angry young man of [Hansberry's] play" in a 2011 essay, as does Toby Young in a 2005 theater review in *The Spectator*.<sup>16</sup>

Walter Lee's frustrations have anchored scholarly discussions of the representation of anger in *A Raisin in the Sun* since the play's initial performance. Walter Lee, a father and husband hoping to become a successful business owner in fulfillment his conception of the American dream, rages against a deeply racist, classist system that leaves his family struggling to attain financial security. In his 1974 consideration of the play, Robert J. Willis remarks

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<sup>15</sup> Susan Rusinko defines the well-made play as a drama that "consist[s] of three Aristotelian principles – hero, crisis and the unities of time, place, and action. Heroes, although superior to others in breeding or nobility of mind, are like others in their possession of a character flaw. The crisis is that point in the play of highest plot complication, a point at which the fortunes of the hero take a turn for the better or the worse. The three unities consist of time, place, and action: a twenty-four hour span within which the action occurs, one locale, and one main action without distracting subplots" (184). According to W. B. Worthen, the well-made play form was "popularized in the nineteenth century, especially in France" and its "plot usually turns on the revelation of a secret and includes a character who explains and moralizes the action of the play to others; the plot is often relentlessly coincidental, even mechanically so" (1191). Rusinko advises that "by the middle of the twentieth century," the term "well-made play" had become "strongly pejorative on the English stage" (184).

<sup>16</sup> For more scholarly works that read *Raisin* as an Angry Young Man's play, see: Smith 317; and C. Jones 182.

that Walter Lee “more clearly represents” the “frustrations, despair, and anger” of “the emerging Black consciousness” in the 1950s than do the play’s other characters (213). Margaret Wilkerson states in her 1983 assessment of *Raisin* that Walter Lee’s “restless, hungry, angry” demeanor positions him as the “symbolic father of the aggressive, articulate Black characters who will stride the boards in the 1960s” (“Introduction” 11-12). Wilkerson enumerates the positive social and political work performed by Hansberry’s other characters: she sees Mama, Walter Lee’s mother, undoing the harmful, stereotyped image of the Mammy, just as she shows how the young intellectual Joseph Asagai translates the Younger family’s “personal...struggle” to a global context (“Introduction” 10-11). But it is Walter, in her view, who uniquely mobilizes anger to “transcend his victimhood” (“Introduction” 11).<sup>17</sup>

Sidney Poitier, who originated the role of Walter Lee on Broadway, was very explicit about his belief that Walter Lee’s plot drives the action of Hansberry’s play, and he even grew upset with those who did not share his opinion. In his autobiography *This Life* (1980), Poitier reveals that he and Hansberry were at times not “on speaking terms” because he felt the play “should unfold from the point of view of the son, Walter Lee” (234). As an ensemble drama, *Raisin* allows each living member of the Younger family to give voice to their own thoughts and feelings, but Poitier alleges that Walter Lee’s emotional tumult predominates (or should predominate) in the play’s storyline.

Within the last five years, a number of critical appraisals of *A Raisin in the Sun* have devoted significant attention to the important function of Walter Lee’s anger in the play’s narrative. Henry D. Miller’s 2011 reading of *Raisin* names Walter Lee “as the central focus in

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<sup>17</sup> Several other scholars writing during the 1980s join Wilkerson and Willis in articulating the singular potency of Walter Lee’s anger. See: Washington 111, Cheney 69.

the play” (167), though he advises that by the play’s ending there has been a “subtle shift of focus from Walter Lee” to “his mother” (170). Writing in 2010, Michelle Y. Gordon claims that Walter Lee “prophetically gives voice” (119) to the frustrations that Hansberry saw among the Black families living on Chicago’s South Side during her own lifetime. Like Gordon and Miller, I recognize the significance of Walter Lee’s frustrations. The rage that he expresses is a testament to the brutal impact of the systemic race and class discrimination faced by Black Americans, and Walter Lee’s feelings echo Hansberry’s own anger at “the oppression of blacks” in the U.S. (Brown-Guillory 66).

Hansberry acknowledged the British Angry Young Men playwrights as a referent for her own anger at the widespread anti-Black racism in the U.S. In a 1959 speech given at Roosevelt University in Chicago, Hansberry spoke of the pertinence of these plays by male, British dramatists to her understanding of contemporary social and political life as an African-American. The denial of “equal opportunity in the most basic aspects of American life – housing, employment, [and] franchise” (“May 12” 95) to Black Americans had generated a natural and justified mood of rage, according to Hansberry. Describing a meeting of Black writers that she’d recently attended, Hansberry says:

I should like to say that I had the opportunity to meet with and address a congress of Negro writers in New York City some months ago, and, for those of you who are familiar with the expression of angry young men, as applied to English writers, you can no doubt appreciate it if I tell you that the present mood of Negro writers right here in the United States approaches what can best be described as – *crimson fury*. (“May 12” 94)

In her speech, Hansberry compares Walter Lee’s anger to the anger held by other prominent male figures in American theater, including Willy Loman of *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and Chance Wayne of *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), and she asserts that Walter Lee’s frustrations are

“his culture’s frustrations,” reflecting the pervasive oppression of Black Americans (“May 12” 96). Her remarks outline a tradition of male characters on the American stage who embody a widespread cultural “mood” of “emotional fatigue, political disenchantment, and intellectual cynicism” (“May 12” 90), and she places Walter Lee within this tradition.<sup>18</sup>

Hansberry spoke again of the Angry Young Men in a speech delivered on March 1st, 1959, just two weeks before *Raisin* was to open on Broadway. Addressing a group of Black writers at a conference organized by the American Society of African Culture, Hansberry invokes the Angry Young Men in order to criticize the American Beat writers, who she felt articulated a type of anger that was directionless and therefore not valuable. “Perhaps [the Beats] are angry young men,” she says, but “insofar as they do not make it clear with whom or *at what* are they angry, they can be said only to add bedlam to this already chaotic house” (“The Negro Writer” 6-7). Hansberry’s remarks indicate that the Angry Young Men were indeed present in her thoughts in the weeks and months leading up to *Raisin*’s first production. She also specifies that she places conditions on how angry theater can be politically useful. Anger must not embrace nihilism, or “nothingism” (“The Negro Writer” 6), but must, instead, be directed at clearly-articulated political injustices.

In this chapter, I suggest that *A Raisin in the Sun* simultaneously appropriates and subverts the formal qualities of the anger associated with the realist dramas penned by Britain’s Angry Young Men. The anger represented in *A Raisin in the Sun* resembles but does not straightforwardly reproduce the anger associated with this group of male, British playwrights. Hansberry’s two 1959 speeches that I have just mentioned reveal that she was aware of these writers and that their work informed her own. But I argue that she

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<sup>18</sup> Hansberry does contrast the ways in which Walter Lee and Willy Loman respond to their anger. While both characters are frustrated with their circumstances, Willy Loman’s choice to commit suicide indicates that “he thought and thinks of *himself* as a failure” (“May 12” 93). However, although Hansberry “cannot promise” that “Walter Lee Younger is a happy man at the end of Act III,” she does “know that he knows that he is not a failure” (“May 12” 93).

simultaneously mobilizes and revises this theatrical genre. Into a dramatic form popularized by white, male, and often deeply misogynist playwrights, Hansberry inserts her own Black feminist politics and crafts an “Angry” play that challenges the gendered conventions of “Angry Young Men’s” theater. *A Raisin in the Sun* re-works the conventions associated with the dramas by Britain’s Angry Young Men by articulating a type of anger that does not solely belong to a “Man” or even to an “Angry Young Woman.” If the AYM has come to signify in critical discourse both the angry male characters that audiences see onstage as well as the male writers who author their dialogue, then *Raisin*, with its female playwright, can be seen as indistinguishably both an Angry Young Man’s and an Angry Young Woman’s play. I do not believe that scholars are mistaken to identify Walter as an AYM figure, but the fact that his angry dialogue is the result of the work of a woman writer indicates that Hansberry’s drama must be considered an Angry Young Woman’s play in equal measure.

Not only does *Raisin* give voice to a woman playwright’s “crimson fury” (“May 12” 94) through an AYM character, but the play also gives Walter Lee a female double – at least in terms of his anger – in his sister Beneatha. In her Roosevelt University speech, Hansberry indicates that she sees Walter Lee as “the pivotal character of *A Raisin in the Sun*” (“May 12” 92). But in the play’s stage directions, Hansberry likens Walter’s anger to Beneatha’s. Upon her first entrance, Beneatha is described in a lengthy paragraph of stage directions as equally “as slim and intense as her brother,” and as full of “vengeance” (35). The play itself is bookended with Beneatha’s anger. In Act I, the stage directions indicate she “drily” mocks her brother when she tells him that he resembles one of the corpses she dissects in her college biology classes. In this exchange, the stage directions describe her as “gaining in sharpness and impatience” (36). She exits yelling at her brother in the play’s final scene as well. Beneatha and Walter Lee leave the stage fighting over her marriage prospects, and the stage directions indicate that she speaks “angrily, precisely as in the first scene of the play”

(150). The pair exit together, “yelling at each other vigorously,” and the stage directions specify that Walter Lee and Beneatha’s anger is “loud and real” until they are so far away that they can no longer be heard by the audience and their “voices diminish” (150). Throughout the play, Walter Lee’s anger is matched and mirrored by that of his sister. Anger, in *A Raisin in the Sun*, emerges through a shifting gendered framework, where a woman playwright’s fury is embedded in the speech of an easily recognizable AYM character who shares the stage with an angry female double.

Because the anger represented in *A Raisin in the Sun* evinces an unstable gendered ground, the play therefore defies the conceptual apparatuses of racist systems of power within the United States that have long refused gender to Black persons. Under chattel slavery, the widespread sexual abuse and “degradation” of Black individuals by white Americans “took place in a field of violent epistemic debasement” that characterized Black individuals as not sexually “violable,” as “pulsating libidos, living for sexual encounters” (Richardson 8). Black persons living in the U.S. have therefore been historically positioned as illegibly gendered, “unknowable under the schema of a two-gender system” (Richardson 8). According to Matt Richardson, “for Black people to claim gender at all is brave given the array of violences enacted physically and epistemologically to strip us from gendered being” (9). Richardson enumerates that Black writers who break with normative gender conventions and articulate “creative interpretations” and “assemblage[s]” of gender performance are doubly brave by practicing a “dizzying audacity and flagrant noncompliance within the terms of [Black] dehumanization” (9). I see Hansberry enacting such a “dizzying audacity and flagrant noncompliance” (Richardson 9) of racist systems of epistemology by reworking the traditions of this male, misogynist British theater tradition in order to articulate a type of anger that is not stably gendered male or female.

While the numerous discussions of men's anger in twentieth-century Angolphone theater have been instrumental in shedding light on contemporary economic and racial inequalities, I am interested in the anger expressed by the female characters who tread the modern stage. The anger felt by Ruth, Mama, and Beneatha have, to a large degree, been overshadowed by Walter Lee's anger in critical discourse on *A Raisin in the Sun*. In particular, it is curious that more attention has not been paid to Beneatha's anger, especially given Hansberry's stage directions that equate her anger to her brother's. If scholars can agree that Walter Lee's anger influenced the direction of American theater to come and exposes the rage felt by many working-class African-Americans in the United States, then Beneatha, as his angry doppelganger, deserves serious consideration.

Scholars have remained largely mum on the subject of Beneatha's anger. For example, in an essay in which she devotes several paragraphs to praising Walter's anger, Wilkerson lauds Beneatha's college aspirations and remarks that Beneatha is "disappointed" in her brother's "pettiness, ignorance, and foolishness" ("Sighted Eyes" 10) after he loses the family's insurance money, but does not expound on the significance of Beneatha's anger. I concur with Wilkerson's characterization of Walter as a man whose "materialism" "crumbles before his reaffirmation of traditional values of pride and selfhood" ("Sighted Eyes" 10). But Walter's opportunity to grow as a character – to learn the dangers of being romanced by material affluence – has come at the expense of Beneatha's educational aspirations. I firmly believe that Walter is worthy of his sister's love, support, and even her forgiveness, but I can completely understand the "disappointment" that Beneatha feels at the end of the play (Wilkerson, "Sighted Eyes" 10). Her anger functions like a beacon, pointing out the lingering inequalities that are not resolved by the time of the play's dénouement.

Adrienne Rich suggests that Hansberry's own anger is more evident in the speeches she delivered, in her published essays, and in her unpublished works that have been collected

and edited by the executor of her literary estate, Robert Nemiroff. Hansberry's anger is less apparent, she believes, in her plays. Rich laments that *Raisin* marginalizes Beneatha, Ruth, and Lena's storylines within its overall plot,<sup>19</sup> but she asserts that these female characters do "flash at moments" with "anger" (18). Some scholars see Beneatha as complicated and enigmatic: Steven Carter suggests that Hansberry's stage directions for Beneatha are "necessarily more complex" than those for the play's other characters (32). I am drawn to Carter's use of the term "complex." Indeed – I would characterize the stage directions that Hansberry attaches to Beneatha's dialogue as nuanced and deft. Given that Hansberry's stage directions for Beneatha are often devoted to creatively describing the specific contours of Beneatha's anger – whether "feminine vengeance" (63) or sarcasm spoken "drily" (38) – I suggest that Beneatha's anger is "complex" in nature, and that its purpose is to help her navigate within a deeply hostile environment. Beneatha is censored by her family for being too angry, as when Ruth asks her to "be a little sweeter" to her brother (39), and she is discriminated against by the white Clybourne Park community for simply existing, all while she struggles to fulfill her dream of becoming a doctor at a time when there were very few Black women doctors.

Audre Lorde has attested to the challenges of performing and claiming anger as a Black woman in a society in which Black women are always seen to possess an inherent "harshness" ("Uses" 126). Likewise, Patricia Hill Collins explains that the cultural legacy of the stereotype of the "angry Black women," a trope that controls and demeans Black women by depicting them as "aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy," not only pathologizes Black women's anger but also legitimizes any violence performed against them (*Black Sexual Politics* 123). At the same time, Lorde testifies to the positive potential of anger to undo oppression.

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<sup>19</sup> Rachelle Gold offers a similar claim that Beneatha is "not a primary plot-mover" in the play (2).



Beneatha speaks “with fury” and “sharpness” (37, 36), according to the stage directions, when her brother attempts to dissuade her from becoming a doctor because he thinks it’s not an appropriate career for a woman to pursue. By opposing her brother’s argument with “sharpness” and “fury” (36, 37), Beneatha insists on the importance of articulating anger in order to “transform difference through insight into power” (Lorde, “Uses” 131).

Beneatha’s family criticizes her for being too angry, and they exhort her to be more conventionally pleasant. When her sister-in-law Ruth asks her “Bennie, why you always gotta be pickin’ on your brother? Can’t you be a little sweeter sometimes?” (39), she requests that Beneatha curtail her performance of anger. In the historical moment in which Hansberry’s play was initially performed, Black women faced an incredible amount of pressure to not appear too angry in order to avoid seeming to fulfill the stereotype of being an “angry Black woman.”<sup>20</sup> Written just six years before Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965) was to emerge in the United States, Hansberry’s drama testifies to the racist, sexist ideology that a domineering “matriarchal structure” was “crushing” Black men and Black families (Moynihan 29). Wallace refers to this ideology as the “myth of the superwoman”: “It made me cringe,” Wallace writes,

To hear men refer to me as “strong,” because I knew they were referring to the historical me, the monolithic me – the invincible black woman who made their penises shrivel up into their bellies, who reminded them they had no power to control their own destinies, much less hers, who made them loathe and want to destroy that woman. (95)

Wallace explains that the specter of Black women’s pathological strength – which she connects to the image of Black women being overly “angry” (95) – forces her to downplay and deny any strength or anger she has or might have ever had. “Never realizing how imaginary my ‘strength’ really was,” she explains, “I swore never to use it” (95). Chided by

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<sup>20</sup> This is not to say that such pressures have abated in the present day. Indeed, they are still very pervasive.

her family for openly performing her anger, Beneatha is implicitly accused of being too strong and of fulfilling the mythological role of the “superwoman” who oppresses Black men. I argue for the importance of validating any anger that Beneatha expresses in *A Raisin in the Sun*, especially in light of scholarship that denigrates her anger as “petulant and argumentative” (Gold 13). I also insist that Beneatha is not a stereotypical “angry Black woman.” Beneatha is not “invincible” (Wallace 95), and she does not symbolically or literally castrate men with her rage. Beneatha is a human who experiences the full range of human emotions: she feels tenderly toward her suitor Joseph Asagai, expresses vulnerability when Asagai critiques the way she styles her hair, and is excited about the possibility of moving to Africa at the end of the play. She also is a young woman who, like her brother, feels frustrated because of the limitations the world places on her life’s possibilities.

Beneatha’s anger becomes more important to the overall narrative of anger in *A Raisin in the Sun* when we consider that Hansberry has commented that Beneatha represents an autobiographical younger version of herself (Robertson). When Hansberry wrote Beneatha Younger into existence she created a character with many life experiences similar to her own. During Lorraine Hansberry’s lifetime, her family moved into a predominantly white neighborhood, like the Youngers, and encountered anti-Black racism so hostile that the surrounding white community threw a brick through the their living room window. Like Beneatha, Hansberry was a bright student, attending at the University of Wisconsin and the New School for Social Research. Furthermore, the two women share a commitment to social justice and working towards racial and gender equality in the U.S. Hansberry would begin writing *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1956, and it premiered in 1959 to much critical acclaim. The play was a first many times over: it was the first play by an African-American woman to be produced on Broadway, and Hansberry was the first Black playwright to win the Circle

Award for Best Play from the New York Drama Critics. Both Beneatha and Hansberry demonstrate an energetic devotion to progressive politics and high achievement.

I assert that giving more scholarly attention to Beneatha's anger can invigorate contemporary discussions of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Many of the play's characteristics that link it to kitchen sink realism – the genre of realism frequently used by AYM playwrights – have also earned the play a reputation for being clunky, out-of-fashion, or no longer cutting-edge for twenty-first-century audiences. Ann Cheney, for example, praises the “innovative ideas and themes” in Hansberry's drama, but she describes the form of the play as “rather traditional” (58).

But far from being traditional or simple, Beneatha's anger is characterized by its fluidity. She readily expresses anger at her family members, at hegemonic white culture, and even at the roaches that live in her apartment building. She also evinces frustration that others don't appreciate her complex ways of feeling, such as when she tells Asagai that he doesn't understand that “more than one kind of feeling” should exist between lovers (63). If her family assails her for being too angry, Beneatha's rapid shifts in and out of different registers of expressing herself seem to confuse them. After she announces that she has plans to learn how to play the guitar, her mother's initial response is to question the extent to which Beneatha understands herself: “Lord, child, don't you know what to do with yourself?” she asks (47). It becomes clear, however, that to some extent Mama doesn't understand Beneatha. While Beneatha says she enjoys “experiment[ing] with different forms of expression,” Mama dismisses Beneatha's artistic experimentation as “flitt[ing] so from one thing to another” (47). The fact that Beneatha so quickly slips in and out of different forms of expression does not make sense to her mother.

Beneatha's anger is strategically mutable as well, flitting between different forms of expression. In the play's first scene, the stage directions track the quick shifts in her different

modes of articulating anger during an argument with her brother: she begins “drily,” “gain[s] in sharpness and impatience,” develops “a sharpness all her own,” yells “with fury,” and finally returns to mocking her brother “underbreath” (38). Each time she gives voice to her anger, she changes its outward presentation. As a consequence of Beneatha’s performance of shifting, changeable anger, her disagreement with Walter Lee ends with him misunderstanding her. Walter complains that he is the misunderstood one in the family, and Beneatha quietly jokes that it’s because he’s “a nut” (38). Walter misses her jab, however, and he has to ask: “Who’s a nut?” (38). In this scene, Beneatha is continually reworking and revising her performance of anger, and the result is that her brother does not understand the meaning of her speech.

Many of Beneatha’s scenes in the play loop back around to anger, but the feeling is never expressed in the same way twice. In Act I she must vehemently defend herself to Asagai when he accuses her of being “assimilationist” for choosing to straighten her hair (63). Her protest in this instance is forceful: “I am not an assimilationist!” (63). Just a few moments later, she bitterly derides his misogyny when he claims that all American women are alike, and she “angrily” laughs at him, according to the stage directions, for laughing at her (64). Beneatha’s emotional presentation in this scene is equal parts courtship and a performance of what the stage directions call “feminine vengeance” (63). Asagai’s responses indicate that he never fully understands the complexities of her emotions. From his point of view, there only needs to be “one kind of feeling” between lovers in order for them to know they are well-matched (63). He explains that he cares for her very deeply, but she insists that their courtship is fraught with misunderstandings. If he believes that the feeling of love, on its own “should be enough” to fulfill a woman, Beneatha knows that such a premise is simplistic, and she tells him that “that’s what it says in all the novels that men write” (64). She turns on him then, saying she’s “not interested in being someone’s little episode in

America” (64). Beneatha laughs at his reductive understanding of desire, and viewers are able to see that Beneatha experiences a range of feelings for Asagai including desire, care, combativeness, and befuddlement. She also admires him for bringing her “the colorful robes of a Nigerian woman” (61), given her desire to learn more about her “identity” (62). Her anger is performed differently every time she expresses it in her dialogue with Asagai, and she insists in the scene that the miscommunications between herself and Asagai are affective ones: he fails to appreciate the complexity of her emotions. If he doesn’t need much time to “know what” he “feels” for her, she needs a good deal more time to process her own nuanced feelings (61).

Beneatha’s proposal that it is important to appreciate that “more than one kind of feeling” should exist between lovers can be extended to help us understand the complexity of her anger. That is: anger can operate as “more than one kind of feeling.” In this scene, her anger is at once an expression of “feminine vengeance,” an act of fierce joking when she “angrily” taunts Asagai with a “Yuk, yuk, yuk!”, and a “wheeling, passionate” defense of self-possession (63, 64). For Beneatha, anger is a feeling that is always multiple and multi-dimensional, having “more than one kind” of expression (63). Her reminder to Asagai that the “novels that men write” do not appreciate the complexities of women’s emotions indicates that the multi-dimensional type of anger that Beneatha acts out on stage is unique to women and especially, I argue, to feminists. Beneatha reveals that to be a feminist is to be, figuratively, always in the process of filtering one’s anger through a kind of prism. Anger at sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism shatters and refracts Beneatha’s anger into a spectrum of different, though conglomerated and attached, feelings.

The complexity of Beneatha’s anger offers her a kind of strategic protection. Her meaning perpetually slips out of her listener’s grasp as she speaks “angrily” (64), and I propose that Beneatha’s anger can be characterized as an elusive, slippery, and evasive mode

of engaging with the world around her. Her family criticizes her for being too angry and too serious, but her rapid shifts in and out of different modes of expressing anger confuse them. As Asagai's responses to her indicate, he never fully understands her either. Beneatha articulates her anger by engaging in acts of play. Her mutable anger "flits" about, emerging more readily in scenes when she is teasing her brother and becoming veiled when she is poking fun at the white representative of the Clybourne Park association. Such a method of alternately presenting and covering over her anger offers her a way to survive in a cultural context in which she is constantly assailed. Just as she flits from one extra-curricular activity to another – playing the guitar, riding horses, and taking acting lessons – she plays with different modes of giving voice to her anger. For Beneatha, performing anger means flitting around and playing, making jokes, and having fun.

Beneatha's anger becomes even more shifting and mutable when we consider how *A Raisin in the Sun* mobilizes the form of kitchen-sink realism. As with any literary text, *Raisin's* use of genre comes to bear on how the play transmits affect. But the project of theatrical realism appears to be especially bound up in the transmissibility of emotion. Oscar Brockett and Robert J. Ball's discussion of theatrical realism, for instance, links the rise of the genre with Freud's increasingly popular research into psychology during the twentieth century (147). Freud, who illustrated the ways in which "socialization" impacts humans' "desires and urges," lays the groundwork for a type of theater that constructs human behavior "in terms of natural cause and effect rather than notions of Providence or of other unverifiable influences" (Brockett and Ball 146-147). Realistic theater purports to represent feelings that have identifiable roots in specific events and social structures, so Beneatha's anger is legible to audiences to the extent that it presents a 'natural' rendering of the causes of her rage. In documenting Hansberry's experiences in Chicago's South Side in the 1950s, *Raisin* is real: we see the family's cramped two-bedroom apartment and shared bathroom, their pest problem,

and their weekly cleaning rituals. We can see the sources of Beneatha's anger: her brother's sexism, oppressive white culture, and the foreclosure of the possibility of becoming a doctor.

But some scholars, such as Paul Carter Harrison, have suggested that *Raisin* might not present a fully realistic portrait of Black life in the United States during the 1950s. Harrison contends that the play's neatly resolved ending – while adhering to the conventions expected of a well-made play – present an unrealistic fantasy of racial integration (202). Scholars who theorize theatrical realism, like J.L. Styan, have also questioned the extent to which the genre can be said to stably exist at all. Styan asserts that realism has a troubled relationship with 'truth' or 'reality.' The generic conventions of theatrical realism shape Beneatha's performance of anger, and the complex nature of the play's engagement with the type of realism deployed by AYM playwrights complicates the way that audiences access her emotional expression. The realism of the play resembles the kitchen-sink dramas authored by the Angry Young Men playwrights of 1950s England, and Hansberry's explicit reference to these writers in her speech at Roosevelt University establishes a direct link between their work and *Raisin*. But *Raisin* resembles and differs from the AYM playwrights in equal measure. The mobility, flexibility, and fluidity of Beneatha's performance of anger is mirrored in the play's engagement with the formal elements of realism associated with the work of AYM playwrights. *Raisin* is constantly moving closer to and farther away from the conventions of AYM kitchen-sink realism as the drama unfolds.

In order to contextualize Beneatha's constantly changing anger, I appeal to two theoretical lenses that envision mobility and flexibility as useful social and political modes of engagement. Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s well-known account of signifyin(g) provides a way to re-read the formal qualities of *A Raisin in the Sun* as re-working and playing with the form of AYM realism. Instead of viewing the play as straightforwardly using kitchen-sink realism,

Gates's theory of signification illuminates the ways in which Hansberry invokes and subverts this realistic form.

Bringing Collins's theory of dynamism, as it relates to a mode of Black feminist epistemology and political organizing, into conversation with Gates's theory of signifyin(g) helps me understand the kind of affective movement that Beneatha performs, especially given her status as an outsider-within figure. Collins suggests that contemporary Black feminist politics and thought must constantly be evolving and changing in order to combat systems of injustice that likewise evolve and change over time. Black feminists, she claims, have historically deployed "dynamic" political thought, since she sees so many Black feminists moving between multiple social spaces. She asserts that "many Black female intellectuals have made creative use of their 'outsider within' status to produce innovative Black feminist thought" ("Social Construction" 771). An outsider-within, Collins explains, is someone who is placed in "social locations or border spaces marking the boundaries between groups of unequal power" (*Black Feminist Thought* 320). Reflecting the mobility and changeability of her anger, Beneatha continually moves between different social and disciplinary spaces. She is an outsider-within on many levels: she is a member of the Younger family, but the first one to go to college. She dates George Murchison and easily converses with him, but his interactions with her family indicate that on some level she will always be outside his world of wealth and privilege. The flexibility that Collins ascribes to Black feminist thought and political organizing can, I argue, explain the movement that Beneatha performs with regards to her affect.

By putting Gates's and Collins's theories together I will track both the formal complexities of Hansberry's play and the motility of Beneatha's anger. How are Beneatha and the text itself shifting and signifyin(g) together? Using flexibility as an analytical lens to examine *A Raisin in the Sun* also adds new dimensions to prevailing accounts of anger in



affect theory. In *Raisin*, Beneatha performs her anger by engaging in play, which suggests that anger needn't always be experienced as negative emotion. Instead, Beneatha uses anger to find ways to feel good. As a character who has not enjoyed much scholarly attention – and considering that the attention she does receive is frequently involved in the project of denigrating her rage – Beneatha asks us to take anger seriously and to envision anger as a project that requires its speaker to refashion the feeling anew each time it is uttered for others. What is the significance of moving, playing, and bending? When, and how, is anger slippery, elusive, and mutable, and what are the consequences of such an affective performance?

### **More Than One Kind of Feeling**

Anger features prominently in the affective performance Beneatha delivers during the action of *A Raisin in the Sun*, but her anger spins out in different directions and takes a variety of forms. In most instances, her anger shifts into a new register depending on who she's talking to. When Carl Lindner attempts to dissuade the Younger family from moving into the white Clyborne Park neighborhood, Beneatha is the first to recognize his intentions, and she responds with dry sarcasm. The stage directions indicate she is “watching the man carefully” and that she “appreciates” his full intent – that is, she realizes that he wants to buy their compliance and allow Clyborne Park to perpetuate its de facto segregation (115). Lindner opens his appeal with a description of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association:

It is one of these community organizations set up to look after – oh, you know, things like block upkeep and special projects and we also have what we call our New Neighbors Orientation Committee... (115)

She plays along with Lindner's line of reasoning: “Yes – and what do they do?” (115). When he gestures to “special community problems,” she pointedly asks him “Yes – and what are

some of those?” (115), knowing very well that he is referring to the community’s desire to remain exclusively white. Feigning ignorance enables Beneatha to slip her anger into the conversation with Lindner, and the anger emerges as “dry” sarcasm (115). Audiences might get a chuckle, albeit bleak, out of the way she plays with Lindner, but her frustrations and upset feelings peek through her deadpan humor. Beneatha strategically deploys her anger in this scene: it is not presented in full view for anyone to observe, and it is not expressed overtly or openly.

Beneatha’s performance of anger therefore stands in contrast to the way scholars and activists traditionally understand the performance of feminist anger. For example, when Betty Friedan served as the first president of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in the 1960s, she encouraged NOW activists to gather groups of women who would articulate rage and discontentedness through visible protests: writing to local chapter offices of NOW in 1967, she recommended leaders “try and get as many NOW members and sympathizers as you can to take part in” public “protests” (qtd. in Gilmore 40). Friedan stressed that NOW activism would be successful when it displayed anger in a fashion that was “clearly visible,” “dramatic,” and when it “coincide[s] with other NOW demonstrations across the country” (qtd. in Gilmore 40).

Beneatha employs none of the strategies that Friedan recommends. She is not engaged in a public display of her anger – since her interactions with Lindner occur in the space of her family’s living room – and her anger is not even necessarily dramatic in this scene. The performance occurs on the spot, is improvised, and unfolds in a domestic space; her anger is not transmitted on the streets or in a coordinated effort with groups of other women. Beneatha’s anger is even occasionally veiled. But in employing these strategies, she is able to perform her anger in a hostile context. Articulating her rage in this fashion lets her

push back, on a personal level, against the impact of the racism and sexism she experiences in her day-to-day life.

For those who recognize her performance of anger and can discern it emerging through the cracks in her politeness, Beneatha can be seen to covertly critique Lindner's racism. But in a tense moment of interaction, in which Beneatha's family are facing the threat of physical harm – Lindner arguably threatens the Youngers with violence when he suggests that “some elements” of the neighborhood will get “awful worked up” if the Youngers move in (119) – her anger must be tactfully deployed, recognizable to those who share her politics and invisible to those who would hurt her. Her anger is, by necessity, simultaneously visible and invisible, present and absent. In a reversal that covers over his own threats to the Younger family, Lindner claims that the Youngers are “threaten[ing]” *his* neighborhood association by moving in (119). The Youngers demonstrate no animosity upon meeting Lindner, greeting him “amiably” (114) according to the stage directions, and they simply ask him to leave when he reveals the true reason for his visit. However, the family is accused of being angry by the white community leader. Their anger is pre-emptively disallowed by the white neighborhood who wields power in this scenario. To openly give voice to anger would arguably risk Lindner escalating his threats. Beneatha's anger, in response, operates as what José Muñoz has called “ephemera”: a “performance” that is “meant to be interacted with by those in its epistemological sphere – while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate” its “possibility” (“Ephemera” 6). Beneatha's anger is poised to slip out of reach if she fears for her safety. It is there but not there, apparent but disappearing.

In order for Beneatha to express her anger, she must always be in the process of modulating and re-working it within the strictures of her given situation. As the stage directions indicate, Beneatha speaks with “a sharpness all her own,” which suggests that

anger is a feeling that she must tailor and personalize (36). With her brother Walter Lee, she responds with loud derision when he asserts that she leeches off his money. In the first scene of the play, after Walter Lee claims that he has made “sacrifices” for her and that she has not done anything in return “for the family,” Beneatha follows him across their living room floor on her knees yelling in mock apology “FORGIVE ME, FORGIVE ME!” (37). Conversely, her suitor George Murchison inspires earnest and didactic rage because of his “splendid ignorance” about West African history (81). With her other potential suitor, Joseph Asagai, she imbricates humor with anger as a way to negotiate his expectations of her femininity. When he claims that romantic love on its own should be fulfilling “for a woman,” she rails at his misogyny and imitates laughter in order to undermine his position (63). “That’s funny as hell, huh!” she says as she chuckles falsely and, according to the stage directions, “angrily”: “Yuk, yuk, yuk!” (64). In her interactions with Asagi, anger emerges through laughter and humor.

Anger is stably present throughout Beneatha’s emotional performance in the play. But in addition to being consistent and present, it is also constantly moving and changing, such as in the argument with her brother in Act I in which she regularly modulates its intensity, volume, and level of comedic intent. Affect theorists have recognized the movement that affects can generate in a feeling subject. Ahmed, for example, suggests that affects are propulsive forces: “We move toward and away from objects through how we are affected by them” (*Promise* 24). For feminists, I argue, anger compels a uniquely intense, rapid kind of fluctuation and movement. Beneatha is able to move closer to those people she is invested in, but she is also able to take herself far away from those persons, places, and events that would (or could) do her harm with an especially quick burst of speed. Her anger does not simply move – it moves quickly and strategically. She can drop her anger from a loud, protesting form of opposition to a quiet, barely-heard “underbreath” taunt in the span

of a few lines of dialogue (38). If affects move us nearer or farther away from objects, persons, and events, then we must consider *how* affects make us move. Movement can occur in many different fashions: we can walk slowly, trot at a quick jog, or run with haste. Reading the stage directions that describe Beneatha's anger indicates that anger's movement is quick and speedy, deft and lightning-fast.

The shifting qualities of Beneatha's anger, as it swings from a low register like sarcasm into intense hostility, are quickly-executed movements. Her anger is, in this way, rhizomatic, after Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualization of the rhizome as a kind of affective system. Her anger is not a stable "structure," but instead represents a "multiplicity" of different forces that are continually "underg[oi]ng metamorphosis" and "chang[ing] in nature" (23). Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the rhizome, as an affective concept, impels "lines of flight" (23), and Beneatha seems to be sketching out for herself different paths and directions in which she might move. She is angry at her brother for not supporting her desire to be a doctor, which moves her both toward and away from him, since she loves and cares for him as a family member but does not appreciate his display of sexism. In muttering her anger under her breath during one of their fights, she also gives herself the opportunity to flee the situation if needed. She can deny her anger or deny having *been* angry if her family becomes too upset with her. And since others – Asagai, her brother, her mother – have a hard time understanding the complexity of her feelings or the intent behind her angry speech, her dynamic, mobile anger allows her to elude literal and figurative capture. Others cannot locate her anger, cannot determine its position. They have a hard time discerning what she's feeling, so she can easily slip out of their reach if she needs to. As soon as the characters around her begin to grasp her meaning, her emotional position abruptly shifts into a new register. She performs a sort of Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle of affect: we

can determine her relative emotional location, but her family's attempts to map her affect only result in her moving further out of reach.

In the final scene of the play, Beneatha's anger with her brother seems to draw her both towards and away from her family, at the same time as it provides her a vehicle through which to become closer to Asagai. At this moment in the play, Walter has given away Beneatha's college money and has jeopardized her future as a doctor. She laments "bitterly" that he has hurt her deeply, and she expresses anger that because her educational future is uncertain she will not be able to "fix" what "ails" humanity – whether it is broken bones or the "Great Sore of Colonialism" (133). It is her anger, however, that prompts Beneatha to intimately reveal part of her past to Asagai. She reveals that when she was a child she wanted to be able to "fix up the sick, you know – and make them whole again" (132). Her bitter anger with Walter, here, gives way to nostalgia for her childhood ambitions and intimacy with Asagai, in whom she confides this part of her life.

Her anger must speak with many voices in order for it to be expressible. The practice of shifting her anger into new registers and modulating it again and again responds to the devaluation of her anger by her friends and family. In the aforementioned scene with Asagai, the stage directions state he is "laughing aloud at her" as he tells her that she is "the most serious little thing" he has ever seen (62). Like Ruth, who asks her if she can't "be a little sweeter sometimes" (39), Asagai presumes anger in Beneatha's speech and does not indicate that he appreciates it. If those around her expect her anger and pathologize it, Beneatha responds by re-creating her anger anew each time it is spoken. The feeling is not stable, nor is it expressed the same way twice. By constantly changing her tactics in the way she performs her anger, she makes it difficult for others to form expectations about the way she will perform her emotions in the future. Since others' assessment of her affect have generally been negative, by making it difficult for others to predict what kind of feelings she will

perform in the future she makes it difficult for them to pre-emptively judge her emotions negatively.

Beneatha plays with language and she toys with others' assumptions of how she ought to act. After the representative from the Clybourne Park neighborhood association threatens the Younger family, she is the first to report this harassment to her mother. In the midst of this very tense situation – we learned a few scenes earlier that Black families have been regularly bombed in the Chicago area – Beneatha chooses to make her family laugh. She “folds her arms saucily” and says that the white neighbors are “sure going to be glad” to meet the Youngers (120). Her joking makes her family “giggle” despite the dangerous path laid before them (120). In this instance, her anger at Lindner’s racism enables a moment of shared revelry. Ahmed has suggested that feminist anger is often stigmatized because of the way it “spoils’ the happiness of others”: the “feminist killjoy” is “a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness” (*Promise* 65). But Beneatha proves that despite the challenges associated with articulating this feeling, feminist anger can at times allow others to convene around anger as a mode of feeling pleasure and happiness. Beneatha’s performance, here, is indistinguishably both happy and angry.

Frequently, anger gives Beneatha an opportunity to play. Beneatha’s second suitor, George Murchison, explicitly marks her behavior as silly when he sees her outfitted in traditional Nigerian clothes. On the evening he invites Beneatha to go out to the theater with him, he deems her choice of visibly non-Western clothing unacceptable because of how playful it appears to him. “Look honey,” he condescends, “we’re going *to* the theatre - we’re not going to be *in* it...so go change, huh?” (81). He marks her sartorial choices as silly, and, fundamentally, as an act of theatre. Beneatha is frequently linked to child-like play: she describes her ambition to be a doctor as a “child’s way of seeing things” (133) and the stage directions indicate she makes “childish” hand gestures when asking Asagai for her present

(61). Her choice to wear the Nigerian robes that Asagai brings her, though she adds to the ensemble an “ornate oriental fan, mistakenly more like Butterfly than any Nigerian that ever was” (76), is indelibly linked to her anger at “dominant” and “*oppressive* culture” (81).

Beneatha’s anger constantly slips in between different registers, and consequently, the other characters in the play have a difficult time discerning the contours of her anger. Her friends and family cannot locate her affective position, and they at once view her as *too* angry and *too* silly. Asagai offers running commentary on Beneatha’s purported humorlessness, such as when he tells her she is “so very serious” (62). Similarly, Walter claims she worries about race too much and he characterizes her as unfailingly perturbed: “Damn, even the N double A C P takes a holiday sometimes!” (113). Simultaneously, and in counterpoint to their remarks about her anger, the Younger family criticizes Beneatha for being frivolous and silly. When Mama asks Beneatha why she takes up and later abandons acting lessons, horseback riding lessons, and guitar lessons, she inquires why Beneatha “has to flit from one thing to another?” (47). The word “flit” demonstrates Mama’s opinion that Beneatha’s hobbies lack serious commitment. Similarly, George belittles her experimentation with Nigerian clothing as silly. Her emotional presentation is constantly under attack, but her friends and family cannot articulate a definite account of what precisely upsets them about her mood. Just as her affect slips in and out of various shades of anger, the Younger family’s criticism is fraught with slippage.

Beneatha’s anger speaks with many voices, and she remains attuned to the polyvocality of not only her own feelings, but of others’ feelings and intentions. When Lindner proposes to pay the Youngers to stay in their apartment instead of moving into his neighborhood, Hansberry’s stage directions indicate that Beneatha senses the emotional complexity of the situation more clearly than her relatives do. Lindner says he’s dropped by their house as “a sort of welcoming committee,” in hopes of giving the family “the



lowdown” on how his neighborhood runs (115). Initially, Walter and Ruth do not recognize the complex mixture of politeness and hostility that motivates his visit, but Beneatha does. After he names himself the chairman of the welcoming committee, she eyes him “carefully” and she scrutinizes him “with an appreciation of [his] two meanings, which escape” her family (115). Lindner’s threat to the Youngers comes in the guise of good-neighborliness, and Beneatha is the first to fathom out his complicated affective performance. She is deeply aware of the ways in which anger can rest on a knife-edge, only precariously separated from other feelings. Her own anger seems structured by “two meanings,” too, and she usually infuses her rage with levity or sarcasm (115). Though, while Lindner’s double-voiced anger works to reinforce systems of oppression, Beneatha’s provides a survival strategy, which I will unpack in more detail later.

Critical literature has acknowledged Beneatha’s anger, but scholars often read her rage as an indicator of her selfishness and moral failing. Sometimes her anger is seen as merely a less potent version of her brother Walter’s (Willis 213). Other critics deem her argumentativeness “petulant,” “juvenile,” and divisive to the Younger family unit (Gold 13, Rosenthal). Because she enters the play’s action angrily in Act I and leaves similarly furious at the play’s conclusion, she is said to “not progress and develop” as a character (Gold 13). Beneatha learns about Black nationalism from her suitor Joseph Asagai, but scholars frame the inspiration he offers as insincerity on her part. Because Beneatha adopts Asagai’s political views, her anger is said to be borrowed and not “authentic” (Matthews 563). These critics wonder if her political anger “might just be another identity she is trying on for size” (Matthews 563). Because she expresses frustration at her brother for attempting to dictate who she’ll marry, she is deemed “spoiled and indulgent” (Gold 13). Other scholars take Mama at her word when she criticizes Beneatha for “flitting” from one extra-curricular activity to another, and they read her “flightiness” as evidence of “social immaturity” and of

being “monstrously selfish” (Matthews 574, Carter 62). Carter has proposed that the decision to depict Beneatha “squandering” the family’s money represents Hansberry’s “one serious artistic misstep” (62). It is not uncommon for academics to leverage moral critiques against Beneatha’s anger. Her performance of rage, whether serious or playful, is linked to a discussion of her personal scruples.

In contrast to these scholars, I see Beneatha’s anger as a natural and justified response to the racism, sexism, and class discrimination that she encounters. That she develops her anger at assimilationist politics through conversations with Asagai does not mitigate the authenticity of her rage. Political critique is never created in a vacuum, and I think it is a stretch to compare her interest in playing the guitar – which she only mentions in passing – to her knowledge of African cultural heritage and her frustration with the widespread marginalization of African and African-American cultural traditions in the United States. Judging from the scene in which she “defiantly” lectures George Murchison about “our Great West African Heritage” (81), her expertise on the subject is great, including familiarity with the Ashanti’s early development of surgical procedures, to poetry in the Bantu language, and artistic production in Bénin. George’s outcry at the beginning of Beneatha’s lecture – “Oh, dear, dear, dear! Here we go!” (81) – suggests that Beneatha has been expressing her anger on this subject long before Asagai mentions the word “assimilationist” to her in Act I (63).

Moreover, I disagree with Gold’s evaluation of Beneatha’s anger as “petulant” and “juvenile” (13).<sup>21</sup> I join bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Patricia Hill Collins, among many other scholars, in validating Black feminist anger as useful and warranted. “Many African

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<sup>21</sup> At the very least, if Beneatha is behaving petulantly, then Walter is as well: he taunts his wife about all that is “wrong with the colored woman in this world” (34) and insists to his sister that instead of her college aspirations she ought to “get married and be quiet” (38).

Americans,” writes hooks, “feel uncontrollable rage when we encounter white supremacist aggression. That rage is not pathological” (*Killing Rage* 26). Beneatha’s anger at George when he asserts that her “heritage is nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts” (81) represents her refusal to participate in his denigration of African cultural heritage. By voicing her anger at her brother when he belittles her career goals, Beneatha is “learning to express anger” for personal “growth” (Lorde, “Uses” 124).

Beneatha’s performance of anger might not be in line with expectations that feminist anger be public, organized, and highly visible when performed. Her anger unfolds in the domestic space of her living room. It is not the result of a coordinated effort – such as Firestone’s smile boycott or Newton’s picket-line – but instead emerges on an everyday basis in small-scale interactions with her friends and family. Beneatha sketches out another way for feminists to perform anger – in private, fleeting interactions, and in minor, out-of-the-way scenes.

### **Feeling Realism**

The vehicle for Beneatha’s constantly changing performance of anger is the genre of kitchen-sink realism. At a basic level, realist dramas purport to deliver a “faithful rendering of existence without biased impositions on the part of its creators” (Demastes x) and *A Raisin in the Sun* renders events from Hansberry’s own life onstage. As a child, Hansberry’s family moved into a home in a predominantly white neighborhood of Chicago and faced considerable anti-Black violence as a result, which some credit as the “genesis” of *Raisin* (Cheney ix):

In May 1937, Carl A. Hansberry bought and took occupancy of an apartment house on a white block of Rhodes Avenue. The property lay within a zone that had been restricted by the Woodlawn Property Owners’ Association. In June, neighbors greeted the Hansberrys with a rock through a front window and a request to vacate the premises. (S. Meyer 56)

The white homeowners' association also sued Carl Hansberry and the resulting court case, *Hansberry v. Lee* (1940), was brought before the Illinois Supreme Court, which sided with the white homeowners. Hansberry appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which “ruled that Hansberry had a right to occupy the building” (S. Meyer 56).

Scholars who read *Raisin* as an AYM drama situate the play within the tradition of kitchen-sink realism. British AYM plays depict “sometimes with raw realism, the everyday lives of ordinary people in a struggle against powerlessness” and often center around the anger of a male protagonist who grapples with “the injustice[s]” that limit his “upward mobility” (Dornan 452). AYM plays, such as *Look Back in Anger*, are framed as kitchen-sink dramas because of the way they represent working-class life in “domestic settings” – that is, they frequently unfold around a kitchen sink (Dornan 452). According to Bennett, “the ‘angry’ have come to stand in for theatre history in Britain in the 1950s” (42). And though primarily a British phenomenon, kitchen-sink theater was transposed into American contexts by theater critics like Claudia Cassidy, who links Walter Lee Younger’s working-class rage with the frustrations of *Look Back in Anger*’s Jimmy Porter. *Raisin* reproduces elements associated with British kitchen-sink plays: it depicts Walter’s “struggle against powerlessness” and his preoccupation with “upward mobility,” and the play is set inside a “domestic” space (Dornan 452).

According to Cheney, *Raisin*’s mobilization of the “traditional” form of the well-made play sometimes earns it a reputation for being “simplistic” (57). Writing in 1984, Cheney remarks that “today some black critics feel that *Raisin* is a play whose time has passed” because of its “traditional form” and its “halting treatment of race relations” (57). Even when it premiered in 1959, *Raisin* was called “old-fashioned” by prominent director and theater critic Harold Clurman: “Miss Hansberry,” writes Clurman,

simply wants to say what she has seen and experienced, because to her these things are sufficiently important in themselves. This is what I mean when I call her play “old-fashioned.” (385)

Cheney speculates that Hansberry used the “traditional form of the well-made play,” “observing the unities of action, place, and time,” in order to deliver “innovative ideas and themes” to Broadway audiences (57-58). In contrast to Cheney and Clurman, who view Hansberry’s use of kitchen-sink realism as a “traditional” framework for the play’s “innovative” content, I suggest that *Raisin*’s use of realism is quite innovative. Specifically, I argue that giving more scholarly attention to Beneatha’s anger can invigorate contemporary discussions of *A Raisin in the Sun*, given that the inclusion of her anger within an “Angry Young Man’s” play de-stabilizes the gendered conventions of 1950s kitchen-sink realism.

*Raisin* is certainly a realistic play, in that it depicts circumstances that resemble Hansberry’s own lived experiences. But I argue that *Raisin* simultaneously invokes and subverts the kitchen-sink realism often used by prominent AYM playwrights, moving with and against this conventional form. Using anger as an analytical lens to study the play, it is easy to identify connections between Hansberry’s drama and the work of British Angry Young Men such as Osborne and Wesker. But Hansberry also defies conventions attached to AYM theater by highlighting women’s issues. Beneatha is outspoken about her ambition to become a doctor and not a nurse, as her brother believes she should. She also continually insists that the insurance check belongs to her as much as it belongs to him, since Big Walter was her father too. And the drama shows Lena, Walter’s mother, and Ruth, his wife, directly discussing the merits and costs of keeping or terminating Ruth’s pregnancy.

*Raisin* defies the conventions associated with the kitchen sink dramas of the AYM playwrights by giving its angry male protagonist an angry female double who also “struggle[s] against powerlessness” within a “domestic setting” (Dornan 452). For example, the other characters of *A Raisin in the Sun* recurrently remark on the similarity between Beneatha and

her brother Walter's anger. In Act II, Ruth asks Beneatha "Why must you and your brother make an argument out of everything people say?" after Beneatha criticizes Black Americans who adopt "assimilationist" attitudes toward white culture (81). Ruth's comparison between Walter and Beneatha's anger is mirrored in the stage directions, for upon Beneatha's first entrance she is said to be "as slim and intense as her brother" (35). Their mother, Mama, makes a remark similar to Ruth after Beneatha and Walter fight in Act I. She laments: "My children and they tempers" (40). Throughout the play, Walter and Beneatha's anger are read as equivalent by the cast of ensemble characters. Carter has discussed the similarities between Walter and Beneatha: he asserts that the brother and sister pair share a dream of pan-Africanism, egoism, and similar reactions to the loss of their family's insurance money (61-62). However, Carter does not mention their anger as a point of commonality. Because of the presence of Beneatha's anger *Raisin*, and its correspondence with Walter's anger, I propose that it can be productive to read Beneatha – and by extension Hansberry – as taking part in a tradition of Angry Young Women's theater.

Though I believe that the explicit correspondences between Walter and Beneatha's anger invite scholars to consider the possibility of seeing Hansberry as an "Angry Young Woman" playwright, it's not uncommon for scholars to suggest that there simply were no Angry Young Women plays or playwrights. For example, Aleks Sierz claims that although female playwrights like Shelagh Delaney and Ann Jellicoe participated in the phenomenon of "kitchen-sink" drama, "no female counterpart" to the AYM tradition ever emerged (47). While "social anger [...] found commercial viability" in 1950s Anglophone theater, critics and scholars place "very few women" within the rubric of "angry" theater (Bennett 39). Wandor explains that "while the kitchen sink may have been either literally or figuratively on stage" in kitchen-sink dramas of the 1950s, the genre "very rarely gave rise to a narrative built round the woman one might expect to see working at it" (42). Bennett offers a number

of hypotheses for why female playwrights aren't typically read alongside (or into) the tradition of angry men's theater. According to Bennett, Lesley Storm is sometimes seen as "not angry enough," while the widespread popularity of Enid Bagnold's plays meant her writing was viewed as merely entertainment and therefore "formulaic" and "uninteresting" (50, 43).

The tactic of reading the work of a woman playwright within or alongside a tradition of male theater has its risks: feminist theorists have stressed the importance of studying women writers on their own terms instead of placing them within pre-existing, male-dominated categories. Audre Lorde's recommendation that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" ("Master's Tools" 110) easily applies here: kitchen-sink drama is a theatrical form associated with misogynist, white, male playwrights – it is a "tool" of "the master," and therefore is unlikely to "dismantle" white privilege or male privilege. But I assert that Hansberry does not straightforwardly use "the master's tools" – instead, she appropriates and re-works the shape of the "tools" to her own liking.

By positing a tradition of Angry Young Women's theater in this dissertation – a tradition that includes playwrights such as Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, Sharon Bridgforth, and Terry Galloway – I contest the de-valuation of women's anger at racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia, and I theorize a wider definition of what counts as anger. Bennett points out that white women playwrights such as Storm and Bagnold are sometimes not considered "angry enough" (50) to be included within traditions of "Angry Young" theater, and I insist that scholars must consider women's anger "enough" on its own, no matter the intensity of its manifestation. Black women playwrights such as Hansberry contend with criticism for being too angry by virtue of pervasive tropes about "angry Black women." That Hansberry faced, or was aware of, this force in her lifetime is evident in the exchange when Ruth asks Beneatha to leave off her anger and "be a little sweeter" (39) and Walter

encourages her to “be quiet” (38). Constructing, legitimizing, and finding the value in a tradition of Angry Young Women’s theater that includes Black women’s dramas resists the social imperative for Black women to silence their anger. The tradition of Angry Young Women’s theater that I construct includes plays that deploy some version of linear realism, such as *A Raisin in the Sun*, but it also includes non-linear works such as *love conjure/blues* and *Lesbians Who Kill*. The variety of manifestations of anger in these plays, and their varied generic forms, suggest that anger can take many forms and still be legibly, potently useful and present.

In 1959, the use of kitchen-sink realism would have been complicated for Black playwrights, and the genre itself was surrounded by a complicated matrix of critique. Realism was heavily criticized by notable white theater artists of the 1950s. Avant-garde playwrights working within the tradition of the Theater of the Absurd, such as Samuel Beckett, favored non-realistic theatrical forms or veered towards the surreal. By the time of *Raisin*’s first production, strict psychological realism was often dismissed as passé, conventional, or old hat. In a 1959 article in the *Village Voice*, Hansberry postulates that white “ultra-sophisticates” only “cooly [sic]” received her drama because of its turn away from absurdism (“Willy Loman” 7). According to Mark Hodin, white playwrights writing after WWII often appropriated Black experiences in order to represent “universal abstractions,” to romanticize “the black criminal as an existentialist hero,” or to “symbolize absurdity” broadly (Hodin 743). So, for Hansberry and for

other African American dramatists working in the postwar period, the realist form could also be an intervention within a contemporary cultural formation, a means to defy and resist the appropriation of black experience by an art scene they considered to be white, European, and potentially racist. (Hodin 743-744)

Mike Sell concurs with Hodin that the theatrical avant-garde of the 1950s had earned a reputation for being “elitist, Eurocentric, imperialist, and racist” (760). Though Hodin and



Sell link experimental theatrical forms with white avant-garde artists, it is important to point out that Black playwrights such as Amiri Baraka and Adrienne Kennedy were experimenting with form during this period as well, and Hanberry herself even penned the non-linear, experimental *What Use Are Flowers?* (1969).

Black feminist scholars, such as Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, have pointed out associations between theatrical realism and hegemonic, white theater traditions. The work of prominent Black theater artists in the U.S. “tends toward linear realism” (O. Jones, “Cast” 598). Because of the dominance of realism, non-realistic, non-linear or multi-generic dramas often get overlooked in historical accounts of African-American drama (O. Jones, “Cast” 598). Jones asserts that the genre of psychological realism is fraught with “oppressive conventions” that buttress more overt systems of racial oppression (O. Jones, “Making Language” 91, 92). While highly problematic, realistic theater still enjoys widespread use “within the context of ‘Black theater’” (O. Jones, “Cast” 598).

Though *A Raisin in the Sun* can be read as a traditional well-made play,<sup>22</sup> a genre tied to realism, some scholars interrogate its status as strictly realistic. According to Harrison, *Raisin*’s happy ending presents an unrealistic fantasy of racial integration. Harrison deems the play’s resolution “inappropriate” since a Black family moving into a white community in the 1950s would not likely dismantle white oppression (202). Wondering why Hansberry ends her play with a seemingly tidy, uplifting conclusion, Harrison hypothesizes that perhaps the playwright hoped to accomplish with her drama “what reality could never achieve” (202). “Hansberry,” he writes, “could not have been so naïve as to think that the modality of white oppression could be broken because of a Black family’s integration into a white

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<sup>22</sup> George Bernard Shaw defines the well-made play as a tightly-constructed three act drama in which “you had...an exposition in the first act, a situation in the second, [and] an unraveling in the third” (213). Realist playwrights of the nineteenth century drew from these “techniques of careful construction and preparation of effects” (Carlson 216).

neighborhood” (202). For Harrison, though *Raisin* deploys elements of theatrical realism, the play represents a profoundly *unrealistic* series of events given the historical context. Similarly, Hodin claims that traces of absurdity mar Hansberry’s “socialist realism” (743). According to Hodin, the “unresolved” narratives of the female characters, such as those of Beneatha and Ruth, undermine the neat resolution of Walter’s storyline at the end of the play (745). Beneatha remains despairing of human decency despite Asagai’s encouragement, and Ruth must leave the stage to express the “scream that seems to be rising in her” after her family fails to comprehend the difficulty of her decision to get an abortion (59). That the plot sets up these conflicts but never resolves them “haunts” Walters linear progress from disempowered working man to authoritative homeowner, according to Hodin, and therefore “disrupts the play’s realist structure” (745). Gordon suggests that the happy ending represents the only way Hansberry could tell this particular story while still “keeping it real,” while others, such as Wilkerson, see “highly symbolic, nonrealistic actions” at work in the narrative (Gordon 130; Wilkerson, “Sighted Eyes” 11). The widespread doubt that critics and scholars have expressed about the play’s happy ending<sup>23</sup> imply that, at the very least, *Raisin* does not straightforwardly reproduce the kind of realism associated with kitchen-sink dramas of the 1950s, which often end with the “satisfying resolution” of a “well-made play” (Knowles 75).

Some scholars have postulated that realistic drama is never fully separable from non-realistic drama. J.L. Styan’s foundational *The Elements of Drama* (1960) leverages the interpretive abilities of theatrical audiences to trouble the boundaries between realistic and non-realistic theater. Both types of theater enable audience members to compare their own lived experiences to the actions depicted onstage, meaning viewers constantly scrutinize the

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<sup>23</sup> For a productive discussion of the play’s conclusion, as well as a summary of critics’ reaction to it, see Gordon 130-131.

believability of any theatrical work before them. Any play will “have a measure of departure from, yet a likeness to, a real standard of behavior that we, the contemporary audience, set” (Styan 235). “There is no essential difference,” Styan remarks, “between an artificial and a realistic play. In both types the audience is busy, whether consciously or not, making personal comparisons with what it sees and hears on the stage” (235). Styan places realism on a perpetually fluctuating spectrum determined by an individual audience member’s evaluation of a particular action or set of actions. William Demastes concurs with Styan, asserting that realism is never an “either/or proposition” (xi). Instead, he envisions a “sliding scale” of realism, with each purportedly realistic play constantly slipping into and out of what seems true or accurate (xi). Authentic realism, therefore, remains constantly out of reach, is always moving, and is always in play.

Hansberry herself saw theatrical realism as a genre that depicts “not only what is, but what is possible” (*To Be Young* 228), leading Wilkerson to deem Hansberry’s a “heightened realism” (“Introduction” 12). Beneatha’s anger, like the events that take place in *A Raisin in the Sun*, is real. But her anger and the form of the play are constantly shifting and changing. Her anger is re-made anew, improvised fresh, every time it is spoken. It is also not legible for certain audiences – like Lindner, when he visits the Younger family in their apartment – but it is still real and present. Hansberry’s statement that realism is not what “is” but what “is possible” suggests that while white oppression has not been dismantled during her, or even my, lifetime, it is “possible” for it to be dismantled in the future. In this way, the happy ending of the play is possible – is real – though it does not comport with a definition of “realism” that would depend on reproducing what currently “is.”

*A Raisin in the Sun* meets up with many of the conventions associated with the kitchen-sink genre of realism used by many AYM playwrights. The play takes place in a working-class household, and it depicts the rage of a male protagonist who aspires toward

upward mobility. It seems to contain an uplifting ending in the third act that resolves the conflict in the previous two, which is evident in Mama's assertion that the family has found "a rainbow after the rain" (151). The play adheres to the unities of time, place, and action: the timeline of the plot does not exceed 24 hours, it has one united setting, and the narrative contains a resolution, at least on some level. The family does move out of their cramped apartment into a bigger home.

But *Raisin* diverges from the conventions of AYM kitchen-sink realism in equal measure. As Hodin points out, though the family moves into their new home at the end of the play, many of the female characters' plotlines remain unresolved. Walter, for example, has spent the money that Mama earmarked for Beneatha's education, and Ruth never does express the "scream that seems to be rising in her" that she "suppress[es]" in Act I (59). Beneatha's anger is seen as an especially forceful interruption to the realism – conventionally understood – of the play, which suggests that she represents a good vantage point from which to interrogate *Raisin*'s realistic status. After Walter loses the family's money because of a risky investment, Beneatha angrily complains to Asagai about her brother's actions and opines of the "ails" of "mankind" (133). Critics have called the ensuing philosophical argument between Beneatha and Asagai "distracting," "verbose," and "out of place in this realistic piece of theatre" (Lerner).<sup>24</sup> Their heady conversation digresses into a drawn-out theoretical discussion about humanity's progress, the possibility of toppling Colonialist institutions, and whether one ought to theorize time in a linear or cyclical fashion. In addition to viewing their discussion as "marginal to the main theme of the play," critics and

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<sup>24</sup> Wilkerson argues that this scene is central to the plot of the play; but, at the same time, her analysis does not affirm the realism of the scene. She asserts that Beneatha and Asagai's conversation "heightens the philosophical questions implicit in the Youngers' struggle," which suggests that the scene importantly underlines the intellectual stakes of the play but does so by veering away from realism, instead showing the characters to be "symbolic" representatives of philosophical concepts (Wilkerson, "Anniversary" 451).

scholars have raised doubts about whether this moment in the text is too dense and filled with philosophical prose to be ‘real’ (Lerner 2).

As I have demonstrated, Beneatha’s anger is continually in play, shifting quickly in and out of multiple registers, and her family and friends struggle to locate her affective position. *Raisin*’s engagement with the genre of kitchen-sink realism, as it is deployed by AYM playwrights, seems continually in play too, alternately aligning with and breaking away from this generic form. If theatrical realism would have been an especially fraught literary form for Black playwrights of Hansberry’s generation – criticized by members of the white avant-garde, associated with oppressive social conventions, but seen by many Black artists as a potent tool for resisting the “abstraction” of Black experiences in absurdist drama by white writers – a play that never settles into conventional kitchen-sink realism would allow a playwright to craft a drama capable of social critique that could also succeed in the commercial space of Broadway performance. Hansberry’s text plays with realism, but scholars point out that it also eludes realism in its unresolved absurdity and its disregard for some of the realities of racial politics in 1959. Both Beneatha’s anger and the generic properties of *A Raisin in the Sun* are defined by their movement and mutability. The instability of the play’s realism suggests that Beneatha’s anger emerges as doubly slippery and elusive. It moves with the fluctuating form of the play’s realism. It is an unstable feeling represented on an unstable ground.

### **A Moving Target**

*A Raisin in the Sun* is a play that plays. The text riffs on the formal qualities of Angry Young Men’s theater but never straightforwardly replicates this genre. Rather, *Raisin* self-consciously mobilizes realistic theatrical genres in order to play on and with them. This sort of repetition with a difference resembles Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s characterization of signifyin(g). This trope of Black artistic production employs formal revision, wherein “[o]ne

writer repeats another's structure by one of several means, including a fairly exact repetition of a given narrative or rhetorical structure, filled with a ludicrous or incongruent content" (693). Hansberry's play mirrors some of the characteristics associated with AYM theater, as I have just demonstrated, but while repeating the dominant formal structures associated with this style of realism, the text is filled with the sort of "incongruous" content Gates claims is a hallmark of signification (693).

The play's kitchen-sink realism is especially filled with "incongruous content," scholars claim, during the scene in Act III in which Beneatha and Asagai debate her wavering faith in humankind (Gates 693). This scene doesn't seem to fit within the realist framework of the play and confirms that *Raisin* doesn't simply deploy the realism used by AYM playwrights but, instead, signifies on it. Asagai and Beneatha share their philosophical exchange during Act III of the play – the act in which, typically, a "well-made play would have a swift dénouement" (Cohn 166). But rather than resolving conflict, the third act of *Raisin* opens up more uncertainties for Beneatha. She sees her brother Walter as one in a line of "crooks and thieves and just plain idiots who will come into power and steal and plunder the same as before" (133-134), and she laments to Asagai that she cannot see an end point to this kind of human corruption. She asks him, with frustration, "And where does it end?" (134). Such a remark seems particularly relevant given its placement in the third act of a well-made play. It invites the reader or audience member to reflect on the upcoming end of the play itself. But, phrased as a question, Beneatha's anger has no end in sight. "End?" Asagai replies, "Who even spoke of an end?" (134). The Angry Young Woman of Hansberry's play will, apparently, have no respite from her frustrations. Unlike Jimmy Porter, who ends the third act of *Look Back in Anger* by promising Alison that he will be "soppy" as he comforts her in her moment of exhaustion (96), Beneatha's anger does not diminish at the end of the play. She screams at her brother: "I look at you and I see the final triumph of stupidity in the

world!” (138). It is unclear how she will finance her medical schooling, and so the audience is never given an indication of whether or not she will enact her dream of becoming a doctor.

The play employs the “structure” of linear realism in that it is set in a social context that Hansberry would have been deeply familiar with. It also demonstrates that human actions arise from “cause and effect” – a hallmark of linear realism (Brockett and Ball 147). However, the content of this particular scene in which Beneatha angrily articulates her political viewpoint fills the form of the play with “incongruous content,” and “fails to coincide” (Gates 693) with the conventions of kitchen-sink realism by digressing into what scholars have called an unrealistic meditation on theory. She is an Angry Young Woman – her anger resembles the Angry Young Man’s rage in this particular drama – but her anger is never resolved within the play. By reading the play as a performance of signifyin(g), we could see Hansberry’s text as an act of revision. It engages in “repeating a form and then inverting it through a process of variation” (Gates 694).

If we see *Raisin* as a “signifyin(g)” text, then Hansberry herself emerges as a trickster figure. Like the mythical “archetypal signifiers” – the Signifying Monkey or Esu-Elegbara of Nigeria – she is a “mediator” between various literary forms (Gates 687). She deftly navigates her drama closer towards and farther away from a traditionally white, male-dominated theatrical form, repeating and undermining its conventions. Gates describes how the trickster

dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language [...] repeating and simultaneously reversing in one deft, discursive act. (Gates 686)

*Raisin* tropes on a contemporary realistic form, situating Hansberry as one who “dwells at the margins” of this theatrical traditions (Gates 686). She is at the margins of New York’s commercial theater scene, as she is the first Black woman to have authored a play produced

on Broadway. And she demonstrates that she feels outside the theatrical avant-garde in her comment that the elites snubbed her for employing the genre of realism. Hansberry negotiates between the literary traditions she moves outside and within. She is also far removed from the other plays included in this dissertation. Though I situate *Raisin* as a play that enacts the kind of private, ambivalent, and everyday registers of anger that I see at work in post-1970s feminist literature and drama, its position in the 1950s makes it “outside” the canon of dramas I read in this study. Beneatha’s sometimes-veiled performance of anger within a domestic setting anticipates the coming articulations of feminist anger after the 1970s, already working on revising and re-thinking what it means to be an angry feminist.

Just as Hansberry seems to “[dwell] at the margins of discourse,” so too does Beneatha (Gates 686). Beneatha’s use of anger is equally as fluctuating as Hansberry’s use of realistic theater. I read Beneatha as Hansberry’s mouthpiece in the play, and Hansberry has stated that when she wrote *Raisin*, Beneatha represented “me eight years ago” (Robertson).<sup>25</sup> Both women emerge as trickster figures in the spirit of Gates’s characterization of the Signifying Monkey or Esu-Elegbara. Hansberry slips in and out of AYM realism in much the same way as Beneatha weaves deftly in and out of different registers of anger. Gates tells us that signifyin(g) trickster figures are often located at the “margins” of various communities, and Beneatha embodies such a liminality (Gates 686). Some critics see her as a marginal figure within the play itself and claim that her plotline is a minor one (Hodin 745). She also circulates within multiple social spaces. For instance, Beneatha has much in common with the rest the Younger family, but she is the first to earn a college degree. This education especially separates her from her brother, and he doesn’t understand why she can’t work as a nurse instead of a doctor. Furthermore, she is the only female of the Younger household

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<sup>25</sup> Several academic accounts of *A Raisin in the Sun* discuss the extent to which Beneatha functions as Hansberry’s alter ego. For instance, see: Cheney 60, Matthews 574, and Gold 4.



who isn't invested in the institution of marriage. Her storyline ends without her "making a serious commitment to anyone or anything except her dream of becoming a doctor" (Brown-Guillory 235). She is separated from Ruth and Mama in her ambivalence towards marriage, but all three women share lived experiences by virtue of being working-class Black women. Furthermore, as a Black woman, Beneatha would have been an outsider in the medical profession. Though she would certainly enjoy some degree of social and financial privilege because of her career, and though her remarks indicate that she feels comfortable in college, the medical field was overwhelmingly white and male-dominated in 1959.<sup>26</sup> She is at the margins of several social spaces and travels through them in her everyday life.

Beneatha and Hansberry are poised as outsiders-within on multiple levels, and they shuttle between various social, class, and gendered spaces. Because she is an outsider-within, and because she tropes and plays on language, Gates's theorization of signifyin(g) offers many benefits to a reading of Beneatha Younger and of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Indeed, he gestures to the ways in which signifyin(g) can serve as a uniquely helpful "vehicle of liberation" for women (692). Like Bridgforth, who imbricates anger with spiritual peace and placid calm, Hansberry's Angry Young Woman shows how anger can be experienced as a pleasurable feeling as well – Beneatha giggles with her family when she is upset at Lindner's proposal, and she makes jokes at her brother when he attempts to put her in her place. Signifyin(g) on AYM anger, Beneatha revises what "counts" as anger – opening it up to include a performance of play.

Collins asserts that Black feminist thought works best as a scholarly and political rubric when it remains dynamic, always moving and always reactive to change. She looks to

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<sup>26</sup> As of 1950, less than 5% of physicians and surgeons were African-American, and over 80% of physicians and surgeons were white (Duffy 53-54). Women were also a minority group among doctors in the 1950s. Because of the commonly held belief that women would "not continue to practice after marriage," medical schools often placed quotas on the number of admitted female students (Duffy 51). Women made up roughly 5% of any given matriculating class of medical students in the U.S. through 1959 (Duffy 51).

Sojourner Truth as a paradigmatic example of Black feminist intellectuals as figurative and literal travellers. By examining biographical details of Sojourner Truth's life, Collins tabulates some of the ways this historical figure might have benefited from mobility. As someone who moved "among multiple communities," Truth was better able to see multiple perspectives beyond her own (*Fighting Words* 230). Born into slavery but emancipated in 1827, Truth was familiar with slavery as well as freedom. Truth spoke only Dutch when she was sold to an English-speaking slave owner, so she understood the difficulty of linguistic difference as well as the experience of being bilingual. During her lifetime she also lived in both rural and urban parts of New York (Collins, *Fighting Words* 230). For Collins, Truth epitomizes the outsider-within figure since she traveled "through multiple outsider-within locations" (*Fighting Words* 230). By choosing the name "Sojourner" for herself she suggests that "specialization and movement were both required in legitimating truth claims" (*Fighting Words* 231).

By using Truth's life as a jumping off point, Collins explores the value of movement as a conceptual apparatus. Truth's shifting status within multiple political and social circles allowed her to balance multiple sets of perspectives. Collins suggests that Black feminists employ flexibility and dynamism when they engage in coalition work, de-segregate homogenous social spaces, and stimulate creativity. She encourages Black feminist thinkers to embrace epistemologies of "fluidity, movement, and flexibility" in order to work towards social justice (*Fighting Words* 233). Beneatha's elusive, changeable anger lines up with the flexibility that Collins counsels, and she moves in between multiple spaces, like Truth.

Owing to the instability of her anger, and the frequent difficulty of pinning down whether she is sternly upset or being flippant, Beneatha's anger defies the sort of categorization on which disciplinary power thrives. In his theorization of institutional discipline, Michel Foucault illuminates the ways in which it operates through hierarchization,

segregation, and containment. Power operates by “partitioning,” “distributing individuals in a space in which one might isolate them and map them” (Foucault 143, 144). If, as Foucault suggests, dominant power structures operate by pinning people down or fixing them in static forms, then to remain mobile as Beneatha does would allow her to resist these controlling mechanisms. Collins suggests that using of flexibility as a mode of political and social engagement can undermine the disciplinary power structures that Foucault describes. A strategy of perpetual movement enables Beneatha to avoid becoming “predictable,” which might make a political strategy “decreasingly effective” (*Fighting Words* 194). She is an ideal candidate to implement the flexibility that Collins envisions working successfully against dominant power since she is an outsider-within in multiple communities. The shifting nature of *Raisin*’s engagement with the form associated with the dramas by AYM playwrights redoubles the movement and flexibility inherent in Beneatha’s narrative. She is a flexible character in a flexible text, and she moves with her anger as Hansberry moves with theatrical form.

As a young, college-educated intellectual, Beneatha traverses through multiple disciplinary spaces as well. Collins characterizes Black feminist intellectuals as quintessential travelers because of the demand to continually shift between multiple communities. Black feminist academics are simultaneously “located in and moving through” myriad positions both within the academy and in their everyday lives (*Fighting Words* 232-233). Such that she traverses multiple “positions within the metaphoric disciplinary space as well as within actual academic disciplines” in addition to navigating “former home communities” versus traditionally “White and/or male academic disciplines,” Beneatha must practice flexibility in order to negotiate the demands of higher education (*Fighting Words* 233). Her anger, which rests on the knife-edge between fury and humor and quickly slips in and out of serious and

non-serious registers, is linked to her survival as an intellectual since both train her in the practice of remaining dynamic.

By envisioning anger as a deeply polyvocal feeling we can see that Beneatha does not simply amount to a divisive daughter or a petulant young scholar. Rather, she uses malleable anger to survive in a political atmosphere thoroughly saturated with racism, sexism, Colonialism, and class inequities. That women characters have been not generally been included in scholarly discussions of “Angry Young” theater indicates that women’s anger has been conceptually subordinated to men’s. Reading *Raisin* as a signifyin(g) play, or as a text that takes advantage of flexibility and dynamism, we can see that Beneatha’s anger moves with the form of the play. Beneatha deploys her anger while “remaining dynamic” – a strategy that makes it difficult for her family members to discern her emotional position since, in Collins’s words, “a moving target is harder to hit” (*Black Feminist Thought* 45).

Beneatha has been the subject of renewed artistic and creative attention within recent years. Kwame Kwei-Armah’s new play *Beneatha’s Place* premiered at Baltimore’s Center Stage theater in 2013, playing in repertory with Bruce Norris’s 2011 drama *Clybourne Park*. Kwei-Armah’s play tracks Beneatha’s life after the ending of *Raisin*: she marries Asagai and moves to Nigeria, becomes a well-respected social anthropologist and professor at an American university, and must contend with faculty who insist on the importance of bringing “Critical Whiteness Studies” into the academy (Marks). Accompanying the premier of Kwei-Armah’s drama is a series of short videos, collectively titled “I AM BENEATHA.” These documentary clips show prominent Black women leaders of the Baltimore community speaking about their successes. In a particularly memorable video, Baltimore mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake admits to being a “mouthy adolescent” in her youth, and she goes on to praise her mother for helping her achieve her political ambitions. As with all the other videos, Rawlings-Blake’s monologue ends with her stating “I am Beneatha.” Beneatha’s

anger is never given and endpoint in Hansberry's text, and Kwei-Armah's video project takes up Beneatha's polyvocal, malleable anger in the context of post-2000 feminist culture. I have argued throughout this chapter that Beneatha's quickly changing, sometimes veiled, performance of anger is no less capable of performing political work because of the way it unfolds in a closed, private, domestic setting. The "I AM BENEATHA" videos and Kwei-Armah's drama point to the continued relevance of Beneatha's everyday labors of anger in the present day.

## CHAPTER 2

### Anger Without Future

Estragon: Well, shall we go?

Vladimir: Yes, let's go.

They do not move.

– *Waiting for Godot*

I'd love to watch her really kill somebody.

– June, *Lesbians Who Kill*

And true, sometimes it seems that anger alone keeps me alive; it burns with a bright and undiminished flame. Yet anger, like guilt, is an incomplete form of human knowledge. More useful than hatred, but still limited. Anger is useful to help clarify our differences, but in the long run, strength that is bred by anger alone is a blind force which *cannot create the future*.

– Audre Lorde, “Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger” (emphasis added)

At the end of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), the play's protagonists Didi and Gogo sit next to one another and agree to depart from where they're currently resting. However, according to Beckett's stage directions, the two do not summon the energy to actually move along. The final moments of Split Britches's play *Lesbians Who Kill* finds its two protagonists, May and June, in a similar position. Split Britches is the feminist theater collective founded in New York City in 1980 by a trio of women – Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, and Deb Margolin – that Sue-Ellen Case has explained “defined the issues and terms of academic writing on lesbian theater, butch-femme role playing, feminist mimesis, and the spectacle of desire” (1). In *Lesbians Who Kill*, Shaw and Weaver portray two lovers who plot to kill a string of men. But like the inert Didi and Gogo, by the end of the drama May and June haven't committed any of the violence about which they fantasize. In the final moments of the play, June breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience directly,

lamenting that she wishes May would “really kill somebody” and that she’d get to watch (223).

Owing to its provocative title – *Lesbians Who Kill* – Split Britches’s drama invokes the trope of the “angry lesbian”: a clichéd image of an unfriendly, harsh, man-hating woman-identified-woman. Though stereotyped and pathologized in popular culture, the associations between lesbians and anger have proved productive for some lesbian-feminist groups, such as the short-lived but influential second wave group Radicalesbians. Formed ten years prior to Split Britches, Radicalesbians defined their politics through a shared rage “condensed to the point of explosion” (584). Such a formulation of affective politics suggests that “anger, if acknowledged, will redirect women’s energies toward themselves and facilitate a radical reworking of society” (Warner, “Terror” 20). As Sara Warner has pointed out, the angry liberationist politics and isolationist tactics practiced by some second wave lesbian-feminist groups such as Radicalesbians did not always help them achieve their vision for a better future. Looking back on 1970s radicalism a little over forty years later, Warner cautions that though anger can prove “inevitable” as well as “essential” to feminist activism, when not balanced with “harmony” it can turn women into “rage slaves – a terror not just to gods and men, but to themselves” (“Terror” 33).

Anger can do, and has done, a great deal to energize feminist activism and scholarship. Anger can illuminate injustices and hone feminist critique by identifying that which feminists are against.<sup>27</sup> Anger can be an invigorating force, sparking a relentless drive to speak, to march, to rally, to work *towards* something better. I witnessed such an energy firsthand in 2013, when thousands of Texas women flooded the state capitol in Austin in

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<sup>27</sup> This notion of anger as an “againstness” I borrow from Sara Ahmed, who asserts that feminism “involves a reading of the response of anger: it moves from anger into an interpretation of that which one is against, whereby associations or connections are made between the object of anger and broader patterns or structures” (*Cultural Politics* 176).

order to protest legislation that would restrict access to abortion and contraceptive services in the state. In the preceding chapter, I argued that this kind of energized anger that is often associated with mass protests can also operate on a micro-level, in private interactions and in veiled, enigmatic interpersonal encounters.

In this chapter I make a different sort of argument: that anger, even when balanced with harmony, doesn't always lead feminist into a better future or help women become active agents, "empowered" – a word we've often heard attached to feminist praxis after 2000 – to take control of their own lives. *Split Britches* explore what happens to lesbian-feminist anger when it is placed in the kind of desolate, isolated setting that Beckett depicts with bleak irony in *Godot*. The actresses' whiteness undoubtedly shapes their depiction of anger: while still contested, the anger of white feminists has found some degree of acceptance within the United States. May and June explore an anger that does not offer them more agency. The fact that *Split Britches* can stage this kind of anger seems related to the fact that, as white women, they already enjoy some degree of privilege.

Though May and June spin dreamy fantasies about slaughtering men, they are stuck in a closed space: the play is set within the confines of May and June's car, which the women never leave. According to the introductory stage directions:

The play takes place in a car parked outside the house of May and June somewhere in the southern United States during a thunder-storm. The set consists of a front and back seat of a car placed on stage as if the car was still intact. (186)

Such descriptive details invite a consideration of anger that looks at *where* and *in what context* the feeling is performed. Stuck inside the cab of their car, angry revenge fantasies help May and June survive in – but not break free from – systems of oppression.

In her notes that accompany the first published edition of the play, Case asserts that *Lesbians Who Kill* expresses the "gender anger" of the play's authors (30). Such anger is



readily apparent in the characters' bloodlust for sexist men, in their shouting matches with each other, and in the threats they make to male audience members. But *Lesbians Who Kill* swerves from glorifying feminist anger, revealing instead the terrifying dimensions of being an angry woman. The instigating force behind the play's plot is, tellingly, the women's fear of coming to harm. A thunder storm threatens to strike May and June's house, which has led the women to take refuge in their car since its rubber tires will keep them from "getting fried" (186).

Watching a performance of *Lesbians Who Kill* staged at Santa Fe's club Exile in 1994 – the filmed footage of which is now hosted online through NYU's Hemispheric Institute Video Archive – reveals the degree to which the storm scares May, who is played by Lois Weaver. In one scene of the play, when a particularly fierce bolt of lightning strikes, May flings herself down and clings to June – played by Peggy Shaw – while burying her face in the other's lap. May's anxious demeanor situates the killing rage indicated by the play's title alongside a host of other bad feelings including fear, claustrophobia, stagnancy, and passivity.

Split Britches' drama juxtaposes the possibility of female-to-male physical violence with a literal, on-stage depictions of female-to-female emotional violence. Audiences never see May and June harness their rage to kill men, marking feminist violence as only ever a tentative or a hypothetical fantasy. As May and June's fear crescendos, they become hostile with each other. In Lynda Hart's 1992 review of the play, she characterizes May and June's performance of anger as an act of bravery:

'lesbians' have historically been the site where women's aggression has been displaced, contained, and reified. Lesbian-feminists have tended to disassociate themselves from this violence. *Lesbians Who Kill* dares to claim it. ("*Lesbians Who Kill*" 515)

Staging anger in the midst of this difficult history, *Split Britches* are daring. For queer women to merely continue existing in violent contexts – violence that I suggest the play alludes to through the lightening that threatens to kill May and June – can be an act of bravery. But to the degree that *Split Britches* never confirm the homicidal tendencies of the play’s protagonists, I argue that *Lesbians Who Kill* invokes anger reluctantly. The play seems not so much a “dar[ing]” reclamation of feminist anger as a hesitant engagement with the fantasy of angry retribution.

With the car serving as the meeting place for May and June’s array of mixed feelings for one another – feelings that include fear, anger, amusement, and eroticism – the play represents interpersonal togetherness as always already awkward. May and June have found safety in their car, but confinement takes its toll on them. They threaten to destroy the other’s personal property and even kill each other, revealing how violence can seep into the close relationships between women. *Lesbians Who Kill* dramatizes the experience of sharing anger with another person – with a fellow feminist. May and June express their shared anger in the context of a protective haven. However, caught, stalled, and stuck on itself, their mutually-felt anger leads the women to become trapped. As such, *Split Britches*’ play can be read as a meditation on the feminist practice of crafting safe spaces. According to bell hooks:

In the early years of contemporary feminist movement, solidarity between women was often equated with the formation of “safe” spaces where groups of presumably like-minded women could come together, sharing ideas and experiences without fear of silencing or rigorous challenges. (*Outlaw Culture* 76)

Shaw and Weaver take audiences inside May and June’s safe space – an arena that serves as a refuge for the women. The car has ensured their survival, but at the same time it has become a breeding ground for hostility. Their car is, in May’s words, a “TORTURE CHAMBER” (199), mixing pleasure with aggressiveness, and intimacy with self-loathing. While Shaw and Weaver have indicated in interviews that the play’s title references their own desire to

intimidate men,<sup>28</sup> the fact that the title does not indicate the object of the titular *Lesbians'* aggression throws such violence into question. The play is named *Lesbians Who Kill*, but audiences are not told who is being *Killed*. May and June fantasize about killing men as much as they fantasize about killing each other. The play could justifiably be called *Lesbians Who Kill (Men)* or *Lesbians Who Kill (Each Other)*. Exposing the problems that can mar feminists' use of safe spaces as a protective strategy – even as they take up this tradition – Shaw and Weaver's performance reveals how some feminists of the 1980s and 90s find themselves simultaneously drawn to and dissatisfied with feminisms of the 1970s.

*Lesbians Who Kill* invites feminists to consider the ways in which anger, a feeling sometimes hailed for its energizing potential and ability to mobilize activism, might not always invigorate feminist organizing. In this chapter, I ask: what would it mean to explore the bleaker qualities of May and June's feminist anger, instead of viewing anger as primarily a bold, defiant denouncement of misogyny and homophobia?

May and June are physically stagnant: they do not go anywhere in their car. Their anger does not seem to go anywhere either. They do not evince hope for a better future, and they do not put their anger into the service of enacting change in the world. The pessimism that characterizes May and June's shared anger evokes the portrait of togetherness found in the theories of queer antisociality, such as those offered in the writing of Leo Bersani, and in Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant's recent articulation of the category of the "nonsovereign": "the encounter with what exceeds and undoes the subject's fantasmic sovereignty" (2). Edelman's earlier work in *No Future* (2004) has insisted on the inherent violence attached to sex and pleasure, and Edelman asserts that queerness harnesses the death drive in order to figure as "the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (9). To read such

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<sup>28</sup> See: Shaw, Peggy, and Lois Weaver. "May Interviews June." *Movement Research Performance Journal* 3 (1991): 4-5. Print.

negativity into Shaw and Weaver's performance would complicate the play's assumed relationship to feminist thought, given some feminists' critique of the scholarly tradition of queer antisociality. Portraying anger as a feeling linked to passivity and resignation, *Lesbians Who Kill* does not necessarily provide an optimistic portrait of feminist rage. Split Britches stage feminist anger but continually invokes this feeling in a way that resembles queer antisociality, therefore offering a place to think about the relationship between feminism and queer theory. More specifically, the play frames these two intellectual traditions as an awkward pair, just like May and June – working together, but often incompatible. *Lesbians Who Kill* shows how ideas commonly attributed to a predominantly white, gay male branch of scholarship can be arrived at from prosex lesbian feminisms.

By looking at *Lesbians Who Kill* as a case study, I evaluate the bleak and negative dimensions of the feminist anger, demonstrating how Split Britches' drama connects anger and fear in order to drive May and June into a kind of difficult togetherness. The play's plotlessness evokes two canonically-recognized twentieth-century dramas that also stage enclosure and confinement – Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* (1944) and Beckett's *Godot*. By looking at the connections between these works, I trace Split Britches' representation of a type of anger without a future – an anger that doesn't go anywhere or look forward to anything. Finally, I show how May and June's anger at patriarchal culture confines them, rendering them passive instead of offering a path to liberation. Close reading the play helps me explore the ways in which anger can be terrifying and difficult to experience. Anger, in *Lesbians Who Kill*, is a force that can quell feminism, suggesting that negative sentiments cannot always be easily recuperated to enrich feminist politics.

### **In Your Dreams**

Originally produced in 1992 at The Club at La Mama E.T.C. in New York City, *Lesbians Who Kill* stages the tumultuous relationship between two lovers – May and June.

Save for a single scene in which May exits the vehicle in a huff, the play takes place entirely within the women's car. June tells the audience in her opening monologue that because the women's house attracts lightning, they retreat to their car in order to avoid getting struck. The women sit in, climb thorough, and eventually have sex in the car. At times their conversations are intimate: they play word-association games and spin wistful fantasies about killing male travelers. Other times they fight viciously, threatening to destroy each other's personal property or get a divorce – though it's unclear whether they are married.

May and June are literally killing time, waiting for a lightning storm to pass, but context clues in the play suggest they might also be killing men. The car's radio occasionally punctuates the women's dialogue, broadcasting news that police are searching for two anonymous women who have murdered a string of men. Though audiences see May and June wield a gun and discuss killing men, the play never offers solid evidence that May and June have committed the homicides mentioned on the radio. These two plot elements – hiding from the lightning and possibly murdering several men – are the closest the play comes to narrative. Split Britches' dramaturgy generally avoids linear storytelling, and Weaver has remarked that the group is more interested in exploring "the details of women's lives and their relationships with other women" than in recounting a "narrative" (qtd. in Aston and Harris 103). By paying attention to detail, Split Britches link together disjointed "moments" that do not progress through rising and falling action (Weaver, qtd. in Aston and Harris 103). *Lesbians Who Kill* is in keeping with Split Britches' proclivity for non-linear drama: it is a play that "explicitly states it wants to take place 'in your dreams'" (Hart and Phelan 278). The plotless structure of the play shapes the contours of May and June's killing anger – their rage is articulated through disjointed "moments" and fragments in time that do not progress or precipitate to decisive action.

The meandering fragments of May and June's interactions juxtapose female-to-male physical violence with female-to-female emotional (and sometimes physical) violence. One scene shows May threatening to shoot male audience members as she yells "I want all you men on the right side of the room!" (210). But *Lesbians Who Kill* intimates that feminists' anger at misogyny can tip over into forms of squabbling anger directed at feminist allies with remarkable ease. Waiting out the storm, May and June entertain themselves playing games and talking, but they quickly become frustrated with each other. While playing a guessing game, their conversation devolves into hostile bickering. June criticizes May, saying "Hurry up! I'm losing the thread of the whole thing [...] You're not getting anywhere" (207-208). May retorts "If you don't like the way I play I'm not going to play," and eventually the women resort to child-like "Is not," "Is too!" sniping (208). The play's title, coupled with the radio bulletins, hints that the drama will depict May and June hurting men, and it certainly does illustrate feminists' aggressive anger at patriarchal culture. But a supplementary theme reveals how women often pit their anger against other women. At the same time, the play frames feminist retribution at men as an unrealized fantasy. Never confirming the homicidal tendencies of its protagonists, *Lesbians Who Kill* shows that May and June are afraid to take hold of their anger because of the potential danger that might accompany such a gesture.

### **Vicious Histories**

Historicizing (or herstoricizing) *Lesbians Who Kill* during the its original performance in the early 1980s allows me to triangulate the play within the affective histories that have been told about two feminist spaces: the Barnard Scholar and Feminist IX conference and the early years of WOW performance culture in New York. Placing these two events alongside Shaw and Weaver's performance reveals new insights into the painful aspects of both feeling and expressing anger in the context of trying to build collective feminist momentum.

Split Britches emerged as a discrete theater troupe in 1981 on the heels of the successful first Women's One World (WOW) theater festival (Case 6). Prior to the formation of Split Britches, Shaw and Weaver worked with Spiderwoman theater, a feminist performance group dedicated to exploring the intersections of gender, race, and indigeneity. Along with Deb Margolin, Shaw and Weaver authored their first play, titled *Split Britches*, in 1980 – a piece that recounts a fictionalized version of the lives of two of Weaver's aunts who lived in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. Completing this play left the trio with a sense that they had become their own, separate ensemble (Case 6).

From their position in New York's theater scene, the group critiqued many of the prevailing conventions in feminist and lesbian-feminist politics. The official formation of Split Britches in 1981 coincided with the crescendo of the feminist sex wars – the series of polarizing debates that spanned more than a decade, in which feminists struggled over the status of sex, power, and pornography in not only the feminist movement but in American legal policy as well. Nan D. Hunter describes a “core” ten-year chronology of the Sex Wars:

from the founding of Women Against Violence Against Women in 1976, to the peak intensity generated by the adoption of Andrea Dworkin's and Catharine MacKinnon's censorial law in 1984, to the denouement in 1986, when the Supreme Court ruled that law unconstitutional. (16)

Split Britches formed within a year of the now-famous conference “The Scholar and the Feminist IX: Towards a Politics of Sexuality,” also known as the “Barnard Sex Conference” of 1982. At its outset, the conference was organized to explore, according to Gayle Rubin, the way in which “sexuality is for women both a means of pleasure and a source of danger” (21-22). The conference theme angered some antipornography feminist activists, who protested and condemned the conference for uncritically promoting pornography. In their dissenting arguments, many of which have come to be remembered as especially vitriolic,

antiporn feminists declared pornography, at its most basic form, to be “inherently misogynist” “vicious” “antiwoman propaganda” (Rubin 28).

Antiporn feminists of the 1980s, led by thinkers such as Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, proposed that power imbalances within sexual relationships constitute violence, even when consensual. Recommending unhooking power from sex, antiporn feminists explicitly rebuked BDSM sexual practices, all forms of pornography, and butch/femme coupling. The antiporn critique of butch- and femme-identified lesbians hinged on the belief that by performing highly stylized masculinities and femininities, butch/femme couples reinscribe the unequal power structures arising from heteronormativity. “Butch/femme coupling was perceived not only as perpetuating sexism,” says Kate Davy, “but as its very emblem” (55). Antiporn feminists saw “any exchange of power in the practice of sex, whether consensual or not” as “synonymous with abusive, sexist, even violent sex” (Davy 55, 54).

By openly identifying as a butch/femme couple in the early 1980s, and by exploring these gender roles in their on-stage work, Shaw and Weaver implicitly respond to these debates by advocating for butch- and femme-identified lesbians. Their creative work insists that butch and femme lesbians do not merely reproduce heteronormativity but, rather, critique such a system and “assign” it “new meanings” (Dolan, *Feminist Spectator* 77). Split Britches’ prosex dramaturgy foregrounds lesbian sexuality and implicitly subverts the heteronormativity of western theater that has “historically reigned in the form of the male gaze” by putting lesbian desire at the center of their performance practice (Dolan, *Feminist Spectator* 68). While antiporn feminists like MacKinnon and Dworkin hoped to disarticulate violence from sex, Split Britches’ drama promotes sexual fantasy, even if politically “taboo” (Dolan, *Feminist Spectator* 68, 76).



Retrospective accounts of the sex wars frequently comment on the anger of this moment in feminist history: Rubin, for instance, describes the sex wars as an “acrimonious” (15) and “volcanic” (16) series of debates. Her reflections on the Barnard conference twenty-seven years after its occurrence are worth quoting at length here for their account of deep wells of hostility – even verbal and psychological feminist-on-feminist violence – that were unleashed around the time of the Barnard conference:

Some antipornography advocates preferred to resort to ad feminem attacks and character assassination rather than to debate substantive issues. They attempted to excommunicate from the feminist movement anyone who disagreed with them, and they aggressively sabotaged events that did not adhere to the antiporn party line. Their conduct left a bitter legacy for feminism. Like many others involved in the sex wars, I was thoroughly traumatized by the breakdown of feminist civility and the venomous treatment to which dissenters from the antiporn orthodoxy were routinely subjected. (16)

Staged almost exactly ten years after the events surrounding the Barnard conference and explicitly invoking subject matters that were debated at the Barnard events, *Lesbians Who Kill* offers a meta-commentary on the nature of the anger performed within the sex wars. An incredibly powerful force, feminist anger proves capable of both “widening” the “horizons” for women’s futures (Ahmed, *Promise* 69) and narrowing these horizons as well. According to Split Britches, when May and June do not put their anger at men to use, threatening one another simply because they *can*, the women constrain one another, demonstrating the painful and often harmful strains of anger that can attend feminist thought and activism when women do not deploy their anger with precision and care.

Split Britches began garnering attention in the early 1980s for their work within the feminist theater scene revolving around New York’s WOW Café. Scholars have lauded WOW Café performance for promoting comedy at a time when women’s theater was said to be humorless, serious, and staid, and Split Britches are named as a central player in what some see as a turn to humor within women’s theater. Davy describes the women’s

movement in the 1970s as “so fraught that women found little reason to laugh” and “a dreary state of affairs” (28). The 1970s are sometimes circumscribed as a discrete ten-year period in which gaiety became scarce in lesbian-feminist theater, when performance practitioners are said to have privileged the experiences of “women loving women,” assigning special value to “gentler, non-violent, nurturing” feelings (Menard 187). Playwright Jane Chambers decries what she saw as a vacuum of good feelings in women’s theater of the ‘70s. In a 1981 article in the *Advocate*, Chambers describes the 1970s as a “decade-long depression” for feminists. Davy recalls a “vivid sense” that a “grim mood” permeated the women’s movement of the 1970s and states that women of this decade had “all but forgotten to laugh” (17). Chambers praises WOW for its emphasis on allowing women to “laug[h] again”: at WOW, according to Chambers, “women are smiling and singing and telling jokes.” *Lesbians Who Kill* points to an additional range of feelings that were also explored at WOW: in its pessimism about feminist anger, the play reveals how WOW culture could blend comedy with dreary feelings.

Just as some have associated WOW performance with humor and revelry, Hart proposes that *Lesbians Who Kill* plays May and June’s status as potential murderers “for all of its subversive humor” (*Fatal Women* xiii). In her review of the 1992 premiere of the play, *Village Voice* theater critic Francine Russo writes that whether May and June wield guns “to kill dick is doubtful, but they do slay the crowd with laughs” (106). *Lesbians Who Kill* certainly does offer laughs. During some moments of the performance at Santa Fe’s Club Exile, Weaver plays up May’s fear of the overhead lightning for laughs, doing a campy rendition her character’s trepidation. But by burying her face in June’s neck and making fearful sighs, Weaver foregrounds her character’s apprehension. For a play that is regularly described as a comedy, *Lesbians Who Kill* devotes a considerable amount of time to highlighting the

characters' fear, allowing the twin experiences of laughing and feeling apprehensive to emerge side-by-side.

### **Don't Carry a Gun Unless You Want It Used Against You**

*Lesbians Who Kill* explores the idea of women lashing out at men with physical force, and in doing so it indexes a host of popular Hollywood films from the 1990s that also portray violent women. According to Jack Halberstam, female revenge fantasies complicating the "assumed relationship between women and passivity" ("Imagined" 199) became popular in the 1990s, with films such as Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and Paul Verhoeven's *Basic Instinct* (1992) epitomizing this trend. Moreover, another New York-based feminist theater group contemporary to Split Britches also took up the issue of women committing violence against men. A year after *Lesbians Who Kill*'s first production in 1992, WOW-based troupe The Five Lesbian Brothers staged *The Secretaries* (1993), a comedy about a group of homicidal secretaries who ritualistically slaughter men from the surrounding community once a month (during their periods).<sup>29</sup> Likewise, in 1998, Staceyann Chin added "Dykepoem" to her repertoire of performance poetry, a work that begins with the line "I killed a man today." *Lesbians Who Kill* and *The Secretaries* evince remarkable similarities in their representation of what Hart calls "fatal women" (*Fatal Women* 1) and Warner deems "comedies of terrors" (144): both plays draw from an archive of Hollywood and mass-culture texts in order to spin tales of feminist violence. Split Britches' play relies heavily on film noir conventions, and the Five Lesbian Brothers's work cites many career-girl movies including *9 to 5* (1980) and *Working Girl* (1988). Furthermore, both plays recuperate women demonized by American popular culture. Deb Margolin's attention to Aileen

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<sup>29</sup> There is much to say about the correspondences between the angers displayed in *The Secretaries* and *Lesbians Who Kill*. Both dramas depict angry women shut up in confined spaces: while May and June are trapped in their car, the Five Lesbian Brothers' titular *Secretaries* are enclosed in offices and bedrooms. The Brothers have also remarked that their drama is intended as a pessimistic portrayal of feminist collective spaces, examining "the ways in which women" themselves can serve as "the enforcers of sexism" (119).

Wuornos's murders informed her initial draft of *Lesbians Who Kill*, while Dominique Dibbell of the Five Lesbian Brothers mentions a motivating interest in the murderous all-girl motorcycle gangs popularized in B-movies such as *Devils on Wheels* (1968) and *Chopper Chicks in Zombie Town* (1989) (Case 29, Angelos et al. 118). The increasing interest in violent women, which Halberstam identifies in American film, has a counterpart in feminist theater of the same decade, pointing to a preoccupation with feminist anger and violence within WOW culture.

*Lesbians Who Kill* engages the trope of women as perpetrators, rather than victims, of violence. Halberstam suggests that feminist revenge fantasies, such as the one told in Split Britches's play, hold the power to "transforms the symbolic function of the feminine within popular narratives," thereby challenging "the hegemonic insistence upon the linking of might and right under the sign of masculinity" ("Imagined Violence" 191). According to Halberstam, enactments of "imagined violence" through film or theater can "challenge white powerful heterosexual masculinity and create a cultural coalition of postmodern terror" ("Imagined" 199).

*Lesbians Who Kill* offers an imagining of imagined violence. Instead of telling a fictional story about women slaughtering men, it portrays two women imagining themselves inside such a fictitious scenario. As much as it dramatizes women's desire to retaliate against institutionalized misogyny, *Lesbians Who Kill* continually insists that the types of feminist revenge fantasies Halberstam theorizes have their origins in the feeling of fear. May and June flee their house because it attracts lightning, and they escape to safety in the confines of their car. The play's minimal narrative framework establishes the women's fear of electrocution as a precondition that gives rise to their anger. In the 1994 Santa Fe Performance, Shaw and Weaver continually loop their performance of "gender anger" (Case 30) back around to fear. Sometimes this fear is ham-handed and campy, and at other times it feels deadly serious, but

the play constantly reminds its audience that May and June's anger is made possible because the two women are afraid.

After June explains at the beginning of the play why she and May have retreated from their house, the stage fades to black, plunging performers and audience members into total darkness. A voice transmitted through the car's radio describes an ominous scene:

Someone sinister may be at work on the highways of North Florida. So far the trail is eight victims long, each signpost along the way a bullet-riddled body of a middle-aged white man. A Citrus County man, missing since June, might be victim number nine. Investigators are looking for two women seen driving the missing man's car. (186)

Though the bulletin purports to protect listeners such as May and June by alerting them to potential harm, it never offers any tangible measures that listeners can take to protect themselves. The report suggests that a nameless person "may" be committing murders across the county, but the bulletin does not provide any concrete description of the perpetrator beyond calling them a "someone" who "may" or may not be dangerous (186). The performative effect of the announcement is to instill paranoia. May and June are especially at risk for being harmed – that is, arrested, captured by the police, or suspected of murder – simply by virtue of being in a car. Since the two suspects are said to be women "driving the missing man's car," May and June become potential targets of a statewide manhunt (186). Their situation is ironic: they seek protection in their car, but finding refuge from the lightening storm places the women into a yet another dangerous position. The audience members of the Santa Fe performance grow momentarily quiet during this scene. While Shaw and Weaver coax laughter out theatergoers during other moments in the performance, the radio bulletin described above induces icy silence.

Roughly halfway through the play, May sings a solo number that she addresses to someone she calls the "Boogie Man." The song's lyrics betray May's internalized fear of

coming to harm. Using generic second-person pronouns, May addresses the song directly to the Boogie Man, a fictional man she says is “complicit” with many violent, oppressive forms of institutional power (214-215). May sings this song alone, without June, on a darkly lit stage. As the lights begin to come up, she looks pensive and afraid, her eyebrows knit and her mouth slightly open. She shifts her eyes left to right, as if she’s looking for someone hiding in the darkness. Singing to the Boogie Man directly, she asks “Are you out there in the dark, behind a tree, with your axe, your chainsaw, your knife or your gun?” (214). By the end of the song May threatens the Boogie Man with retaliatory violence: “Your time is up, I’m warning you now,” she exclaims (215). But Weaver’s darting glances indicate the character’s awareness that she’s in danger, though the audience never directly sees the Boogie Man that May is afraid of. In lyrics that evoke the precautions frequently given to women that purportedly help them to prevent getting raped, May instructs the Boogie Man: “Don’t go out in the dark, don’t jog in the park” (215). Using such language to scare, or try to scare, the Boogie Man suggests that these supposedly protective measures that women are advised to take are, in themselves, hostile and threatening.

Weaver’s performance layers fear onto the hostility of May’s claims that she’ll come after the Boogie Man. As she threatens to “turn in” the Boogie Man, she looks side to side fearfully, and her anxious facial expressions and seeking glances suggest that her brazen attitude is laced with uncertainty. May’s performance points to a kind of feminist anger that can be enacted by women and girls who are afraid, who might not feel conventionally “empowered” as we might expect feminists to be, but who are no less angry than feminists who perform sharp, straightforward dissent when they are upset.

The Boogie Man of the song is positioned as a representative of male power and authority. “Who put you in charge,” May asks:

Who made you the boss  
Who made you the king  
The pres  
The vice pres  
The senate  
The house of boogie man  
The supreme boogie man. (215)

May indicates that the Boogie Man is violent, or potentially violent, since he uses weapons such as knives, guns, and chainsaws (214). The Boogie Man “connect[s] sex and death” and “fuck[s] what’s dead” (214). May plainly admits she’s afraid of his capability to harm her. The Boogie Man hides “in the dark, behind a tree” (214). Though May realizes that there’s “there’s nothing there in the dark / that’s not in the light,” she confesses: “that’s what scares me” (214). May’s lyrics suggest that even those places that we might expect to be safe, figuratively represented by the phrase “in the light” (215), can be equally as dangerous as those places that are “in the dark” and therefore are seemingly perilous and unsafe (215).

Using song in order to represent May’s amalgamated fear and anger makes these feelings portable. Songs, especially in cabaret acts or in musical theater, contain hooks and melodies, and May’s song is no exception. Audiences can walk out of the theater singing the song to themselves. Performatively instilling her feelings of fearful anger in the audience, May’s song transmits her ambivalent, not necessarily straightforward experience of anger outwards.

When May sings to the “Boogie Man,” she reveals she is aware that her safety is imperiled. She fears a man who waits for her “out there in the dark, behind a tree” (214). Considered alongside Halberstam’s reading of revenge fantasies that center around acts of violence committed by women and minorities, May’s performance does less work to undermine the symbolic regime of violent male authority than we might expect it to. Her threats of revenge are rooted in a deeper fear of being a victim of violence, and she never takes steps beyond singing of her anger to dismantle the Boogie Man’s power. May’s threats

might not necessarily “complicate an assumed relationship between women and passivity or feminism and pacifism” (Halberstam, “Imagined” 199). Burnt out, scared, at the end of her rope – May turns to song to cope with the scraping dread of being a woman in a world riddled with violence against women. This pessimistic portrait of feminist anger doesn’t offer any practical plans for advancing feminist activism. May’s fantasy is just that – a fantasy. For all that she rails against the Boogie Man, her threats never amount to action.

May concludes the song with a powerful warning: “Don’t carry a gun / Unless you want it used against you / Unless you want it used against you” (215). This threat at the end of the song could be read as a moment of overcoming, with May planning to dismantle the Boogie Man’s patriarchal authority. May says she wants to make *him* feel scared, hoping to teach *him* how it feels to live with constant fear. However, May threatens the Boogie Man with a gun, an object that, within the context of *Lesbians Who Kill*, is always of dubious power. Audiences see May and June brandish a gun several times throughout the play, but the drama’s driving conceit is the uncertainty that May and June have actually committed murder. The guns of *Lesbians Who Kill* are never definitively shown to protect May and June, and it’s never clear if they’ve ever shot anyone. Theirs is performance of anger that is built on uncertain ground, and they prove that their anger is more connected to vulnerability and uncertainty than to either comedy or defiance.

May’s warning to the Boogie Man could apply to herself as well. Advising a representative of white, male power structures to not carry a weapon he wouldn’t wanted used against him, May is simultaneously giving advice to herself, since she is seen wielding a gun during the play. May’s advice, here, is suggestive when considered alongside Audre Lorde’s explanation that within the feminist movement of the U.S., many white women “ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness” (117) and therefore overlook the specific oppressions experienced by Black woman (112). Looking at May’s warning that one ought to



be careful when taking up a gun within the larger context of the play itself, in which she brandishes a gun on several occasions, reveals that to some degree May has seized for herself a tool of white male power. May's cautionary rhetoric hints at Lorde's insistence that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." From her position as a white feminist, Weaver's character warns that it will not be possible to successfully dismantle patriarchal power if white women simply re-use the tools it has generated.

### **Difficult Togetherness, Torture Chambers**

Sue-Ellen Case describes May and June as socially isolated (32), and indeed, the women's car represents a space for women only, or a safe space for two particular women. The car forces the pair into uncomfortable cohabitation where they fight bitterly and even threaten to end their relationship. May and June's closeness is ambivalent, intimate, and frustrating. This difficult togetherness is especially evident in a scene where the women sing a duet of Francis Lai's song "A Man and a Woman." Though May and June sing together several times during the play, the concept of togetherness – singing together, sleeping together, living together – receives pointed attention during their rendition of Lai's song. As in the instance of May's Boogie Man tune, song becomes the site where the two women meditate on their ambivalence towards anger. But unlike the Boogie Man song, "A Man and a Woman" is a famous number and offers audiences an opportunity to hum along to themselves. Audience members can therefore participate in May and June's claustrophobic hostility – the play's ambivalent anger, dramatized as occurring within a closed space, is performatively projected outwards to others through the infectiousness of popular music.

Invoking a well-known song about "A Man and a Woman" within the context of a play about lesbian violence spoofs the conventions of heterosexual romance. Given the dynamics of butch and femme sexuality that Shaw and Weaver regularly perform in their theatrical practice, the inclusion of Lai's song in their play responds to claims by antiporn

feminists that butch/femme relationships merely “replicate heterosexuality” (Kubala 684). Singing the song in the context of a play called *Lesbians Who Kill*, Shaw and Weaver remind us that they are decidedly *not* “A Man and A Woman.” Just as they repeat the song with a difference, they are repeating heterosexual pairing with a difference.

As much as May and June’s performance sends up heterosexual romance, it spoofs feminists’ unproblematic belief that anger is uniformly a liberatory feeling when expressed openly. The use of the song to dramatize May and June’s rancorous relationship suggests Split Britches are revising and commenting on a string of conventional forms – expectations attached to heterosexual romance, popular music, notions of togetherness, and, I argue feminist anger.

Originally titled “Un Homme et Une Femme” after the French film of the same name, “A Man and a Woman” describes two lovers spending time together in the evening. May and June perform this duet following a scene in which staging choices visually imply that the women have just had sex. The lights come up to show May lying on top of June, with June’s pants “around her ankles,” according to the stage directions (194). May delivers a monologue about the heat of the evening and the heat of feeling her hands on (and in) her lover. After this monologue, a smooth jazz piano tune with a bossa nova beat begins to play in the theater, and the women dance in their seats with apparent amusement. Holding cigarettes and waving their hands back and forth, synchronized, they sing along with a recorded version of Lai’s tune. However, May and June’s “ba-da-da-da-das” are much coarser than the original version. Their performance weds the sexual intimacy of May’s monologue with their perhaps-too-loud, perhaps-too-clumsy iteration of Lai’s song.

After a few bars of music, May improbably produces a champagne bottle with balloons tied to its neck, and June finds glasses stashed underneath the car’s front seat,

which they drink from. They link their arms with some awkwardness and begin to sing again, imitating a stereotypical French accent:

When hearts are passing in the night, in the rushing night;  
I see two lovers in the night, in the lonely night;  
They take a chance that in the light, in the morning light  
They'll be together...so much in love. (196)

Though their arms are intertwined for the first verse, they unhook themselves from each other when they reach the line "They'll be together." May shoots June a disgusted look, as if constant companionship has begun to annoy her. Their sentimentality turns to revulsion.

Their contempt for each other grows when, during an instrumental interlude, May reveals to June that she's taken another lover. June says she's "perfectly fine" with May's affair, but when they resume singing, they scream their "ba-da-da-da-das" into each other's faces (197). Using their cigarettes, they pop the balloons they're holding. After June sings the word "together," May begins to mimic her, making hilarious, childish expressions. The clichéd sentimentality of "A Man and a Woman," a song that the stage directions deem "stereotypically romantic," quickly devolves from amicable togetherness into loathing (196).

Though May and June seek protection together and are at times tender with each other, their love is constantly in dynamic interaction with aggressiveness. They have become a convenient outlet for each other's anger. These twinned modes of intimacy – comfort and the frustration that can accompany familiarity – feed the women's fighting. Eventually, June rages at May for being unfaithful, screaming "You wanna fight?!" (197). June admits she only wants to fight because she cares for May, saying "But I love you" (196). Being cooped up leads to the potential of "splitting up" (196). The anger they might otherwise unleash at the men they purport to kill gets aimed at each other, and not in the service of dismantling systems of oppression. In the play, ambivalence and the messy interaction between anger, intimacy, and disgust is choreographed – played out physically and sung through song.

Giving May and June the opportunity to explore themselves in a context “free of surveillance by more powerful groups” (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 121-122), their car is a safe space – a venue where they can gather and, escaping patriarchal society, “join to plan revolutionary action” (Shugar 15). Their safe space provides a kind of intellectual and emotional freedom – it represents a “space where exploratory discourse is possible, where one is able to make mistakes knowing the opportunity to correct them exists” (Palczewski 172) – and it also provides physical protection. Staying in the car is quite literally saving May and June’s lives on several different levels: it protects them against the possibility of electrocution by lightning and electrocution in the electric chair, if they were to be caught by the police and convicted of murder. If sitting in the car makes them the target of police attention, it could also potentially free May and June since they could theoretically drive away to escape. In a social and political context in which women are especially vulnerable to psychological and physical violence at the hands of men, escaping to safety can be a crucial survival strategy.

The workings of feminist safe spaces, however, have not been without flaws. Women-only spaces that exclude men rely on gender dichotomies, eliding the experiences of non-binary or gender-nonconforming individuals. Black feminists have also offered critiques of safe spaces that became dominated with white women’s voices. While intentioned to allow “groups of presumably like-minded women” to “come together, sharing ideas and experiences without fear of silencing or rigorous challenges,” safe spaces became, according to bell hooks, venues where it was “common for individual dissenting voices to be silenced by the collective demand for harmony” (*Outlaw Culture* 76).

By locking themselves inside their car, evading the lightning storm, May and June craft a shelter that excludes men but leaves them vulnerable to each other. May and June have achieved physical protection – they will not be struck by lightning – but being forced

to secure safety from violence inside a small car they become cramped and trapped. The play throws into question the belief that within women's only spaces, "women" will "not harm one another as they had been harmed in male-dominated, mainstream society" (Shugar 15).

May and June have found safety in their car, but confinement takes its toll on them. Their shared time is anything but harmonious: they threaten to destroy the other's personal property or even kill each other, revealing how violence can seep into the close relationships between women. The space of the car, literalized on stage, theatrically comments on the confined nature that women's-only safe spaces can take on if feminists are not attentive to the way that violence can permeate collective harmony. The car itself is not big, and May and June are visibly cramped inside of it. Being in the car is, at times, pleasurable for them – being in close proximity to someone can yield emotional and physical intimacy. But such closeness can also be suffocating.

May and June's interactions highlight the unique combination of violence and comfort that Black feminist critics such as Bernice Johnson Reagon have connected with feminist safe spaces. Having created what Reagon calls a "barred room" in her essay "Coalitional Politics: Turning A Century," May and June find that a "woman's only" space puts them in danger (358). Not only does the play highlight the racism that Johnson remarks can structure white feminist safe spaces – all the women in May and June's safe space are white – their "barred room" highlights their location as individuals marginalized by dominant culture. Explains Reagon:

There is no chance that you can survive by staying inside the barred room. That will not be tolerated. The door of the room will just be painted red and then when those who call the shots get ready to clean house, they have easy access to you. (358)

Just as Reagon suggests that isolationism gives dominant culture an easy way to find and eliminate difference, May and June's car serves as a red flag for police whose mission is to

hunt for women ensconced in a car. The kind of critique Split Britches' play leverages against white feminist isolationism follows the lead of Black feminist critics who emphasize that safe spaces sometimes harm not only those who are excluded from them, but also the women who inhabit the "barred rooms" themselves. Though women's-only spaces are sometimes crucially necessary, Reagon's remarks and Split Britches' drama insist that feminists cannot grow complacent with their safety in these venues.

The forced togetherness the women share becomes doubly uncomfortable since they are confined in a *small* car, which the women describe as a restrictive space that both protects and traps them. During a heated argument in which the lovers threaten to end their relationship, June demands that May leave the car. May exit the vehicle, furious, but she turns back during her triumphant exeunt, saying "I just wanted one last look...at the TORTURE CHAMBER" (199). Their fight is ham-handed and exaggerated – the line elicits laughs from the Santa Fe audience – but it is still full of painful barbs. The car externalizes the claustrophobia May feels in her relationship with June. Despite her frustrations, May returns shortly after the fight, and June jokes about how unhappy she is in the relationship: "There's one person in this car who's making me miserable" she quips, "and it's not me!" (198). Her conjugal dissatisfaction is routed through the car, which contains the person who's making her miserable and keeps them in close proximity. June wearily asks May "how much longer" they must stay in the car, and May responds, "As long as it takes" (188). Exterior forces of violence in May and June's world have no discernable end.

The cramped cab of the car is mirrored in an imagery of confined spaces that permeate the play. May, for instance, works as a nurse, and she recalls being sexually harassed by her boss, a doctor. He corners her in a women's restroom, a physically closed-off space that would normally provide respite to women. May recounts the story of her boss's attack three times to June, telling her that the doctor "followed" her into the ladies'

room: “I could hear his footsteps coming up behind me. I turned around and there he was!” (213). Restrooms – spaces that have closed-off walls and doors to provide privacy – evoke confinement, and the doctor coming “up behind her” only further compresses her personal space (213). Referencing a bathroom in particular as a space that encloses May and traps her also evokes the critiques of women’s only spaces (including a place such as a women’s bathroom) as historically exclusionary towards trans women.<sup>30</sup>

At another point in the play, June describes having a dream in which May is chased and killed by the figure of death (189). “Once I dreamt she was dying,” June recalls, and though she doesn’t remember the precise details of the dream, she does know May was dying because she was trapped. She muses to herself that in the dream May had “a problem, like when a sleeper gets tangled up in the bed sheet” (189). June imagines May bound up by a “tortuous” force, and she indicates that May’s confinement might have easily been solved by “just waking up” (189). However, May dies in the dream because she is swaddled too closely in her own sheets. The confinement that is literally rendered onstage through May and June’s interment in their car is evoked figuratively through descriptions of women’s bathrooms and tangled sheets.

The imagery of physical confinement that circulates in *Lesbians Who Kill* dramatizes the “containment” of feminist anger in lesbian identity. Lesbians have historically been associated with aggressiveness and dangerous anger within U.S. popular culture, and this connection is frequently rendered through the metaphor of confinement. Female anger is said to be symbolically “contained” within lesbian identity. According to Hart, women have historically been “constructed as the nonviolent gender,” but lesbian women have “been the site where women’s aggression has been displaced, contained, and reified” (“*Lesbians*” 515).

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<sup>30</sup> “Using the ‘wrong’ bathroom for one’s perceived gender,” Alison Kafer explains, “can lead to harassment, arrest, and violence” (155).

Lesbians are the subject of an oppressive stereotype that reads female same-sex desire as inherently violent and aggressive, and Hart's use of the term "contained" indicates that lesbian identity serves as the place where women's anger gets housed and kept.<sup>31</sup> *Lesbians Who Kill* literalizes the confinement Hart associates with lesbian identity and anger. Lesbian identity gets constructed as a site where feminist anger is housed, enclosed, and cordoned off, just as May and June are confined.

### **The One Where Nothing Happens**

*Lesbians Who Kill* resembles two canonical dramas from the middle of the twentieth century: Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>32</sup> In all of these plays, a small, ensemble cast of two or three characters find themselves stuck in a desolate no-place, and over the course of these plays nothing happens. Placing Split Britches' play alongside these canonical works suggests that feminist anger can be experienced as a kind of passivity and stagnancy – an anger without a future. May and June sit in their car for the duration of the play but, ironically, go nowhere. As a play that strategically avoids plot, the inertia of the automobile reifies the lack of rising and falling action in the drama. This absence of a traditional plot within a play about feminist anger suggests that Split Britches

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<sup>31</sup> Legal scholar Belinda Morrissey's discussion of women and violence evinces a similar use of the rhetoric of "containment." Surveying legal and popular cultural narratives surrounding female murderers, Morrissey shows how the heteropatriarchal myth of women as a more non-violent gender makes women seem particularly menacing when they do commit violence. "When women commit murder," she explains, "their abjection is even more extreme than that of men who do the same" (2). The "fear of women, of their power to generate life and to take it away, runs deep in male-dominated societies [...] reminding us that where creativity is located so too is destructiveness" (Morrissey 2). Morrissey's analysis of these cultural discourses concludes by proving how a "need to contain and limit the threat posed by" violent women is "paramount in legal discourses" (2). Given the "seamless fit between lesbianism and antisocial aggression" that circulates in stock narratives about lesbian identity, lesbianism becomes the place where violent anger is contained in a society full of anxiety about female murderers (Morrissey 117).

<sup>32</sup> Geraldine Harris compares the tandem performance of *Godot*'s protagonists Didi and Gogo with the "double act" of May and June featured in *Lesbians Who Kill* (219). Furthermore, in a 1995 interview with Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan, Deborah Margolin reveals that she harbors a personal fantasy of "being taken to the theater" to see a Beckett play, though she fails to recall the title of the play she wishes to view (Hart and Phelan 271). She refers to the Beckett play simply as "the one where nothing happened," and it can be inferred that Margolin has *Godot* in mind (qtd. in Hart and Phelan 271).



are exploring what happens to anger when it is not dynamic or mobile. Scholars have compared *Godot* and *Lesbians Who Kill*, but these readings primarily attend to the plays' duos: Didi and Gogo, May and June. Comparisons between *Lesbians Who Kill* and *Godot* could also, I argue, illuminate the immobility of May and June's anger. *Lesbians Who Kill*'s plotlessness, read in context with *Godot*'s similar lack of plot, frames feminist anger as a stagnant force.

*Godot* stages the interactions between two men – Didi and Gogo – as they wait for a mysterious individual known only as Godot to appear. Just as Godot never comes to Didi and Gogo, May and June wait in vain for the lightning storm to end. Both dramas meditate on the process of waiting, showing the pairs passing time by making jokes, sitting lazily, and arguing. Margolin, one of *Lesbians Who Kill*'s three authors,<sup>33</sup> admits a personal fondness for Beckett and the play he wrote “where nothing happened” (qtd. In Hart and Phelan 271). Margolin's descriptor of Beckett's play easily applies to *Lesbians Who Kill*: “nothing” much happens in it. Unlike Beckett, Weaver and Shaw eschew linearity because they hope to create woman-centric theater. Their drama, like “a lot of other women's work,” differs from “traditional theater, or ‘men's theater,’” because Split Britches do not rely on plot (“May Interviews June” 5). Their performances rarely have an “event or climax around which a story is woven” (“May Interviews June” 5) since they feel plot evokes the conventions of Western theater, a tradition dominated by white men. The well-made play genre, which predominated in British and American theater until the twentieth century, relies on a formulaic plot structure, including “a clear beginning of the action, a series of climaxes and surprise, and the winding down, or ‘denouement’” (Saddik 18). Giving up plot enables Split Britches to distance themselves from this dramatic form.

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<sup>33</sup> Margolin came up with the idea for Split Britches to create a play about two lesbians who might or might not be serial killers, and she authored many of the scenes in which May and June play games to pass time (Case 31).

*Lesbians Who Kill* also evinces similarities to Sartre's 1944 existentialist drama *No Exit*. In both of these dramas, the presence of others produces grueling torment. *No Exit* presents three characters who are stuck in hell, though Sartre's hell is a modestly appointed room that traps the play's protagonists. As in *Godot*, there is little plot in *No Exit*. The widely known thesis of Sartre's play – "Hell is other people" – is evocative when read alongside Split Britches' drama. Often misread as a claim that mere togetherness is awful, Sartre intended the statement "Hell is other people" to suggest that hell can be a form of togetherness "if our relations with others are twisted or corrupted" (qtd. in Contat 99). A feminist hell, then, might be a space in which allies articulate their anger carelessly, expressing rage but failing to put it towards a larger project of liberating women from systems of oppression.

As a script that foregrounds Split Britches' "gender anger," *Lesbians Who Kill* delivers this feminist rage through the machinations of absurdism and non-linearity. According to Alisa Solomon, the plotlessness of many Split Britches plays arises out of the group's decision to foreground lesbian sexuality. Since lesbian desire is always a "given" in their plays, Split Britches not only obviate the heterosexual male gaze, but they also free themselves from the need to use lesbian sexuality as a secret to be "disclosed" (Solomon 156). The ascendancy of the male gaze in Western theater often situates women onstage as targets of heterosexual men's desire, but within the context of the WOW Café and Split Britches's dramaturgy, this male gaze is rendered unnecessary. Lesbian sexuality does not need to be divulged as a "surprise" given Shaw and Weaver's vocal support of prosex lesbian feminism and butch/femme sexuality (Solomon 156). *Lesbians Who Kill* does not require a "central agon" or conflict at all (Solomon 156).

By abandoning linear narrative, Split Britches enable an embodied performance of plotless feminist anger. This stagnancy is confirmed in the last lines of the performance,

which shows that May and June's anger never finds a fulfilling outlet. After fantasizing about murdering two men driving pickup trucks, June breaks the fourth wall and tells the audience that her dreams have gone unrealized. She wishes she could see May "really kill somebody" (223). Though both women simmer with furious energy, their anger never finds release – but June does indicate that such a release is still her ultimate goal. Just like the lightening that will never be able to discharge into the women as long as they stay in their car with its rubber tires, May and June's are "parked outside" their house and their anger is stalled (186).

*Lesbians Who Kill* shows May and June expressing their anger, but the play suggests that expressing feminist rage is not enough on its own to make the feeling do anything or go anywhere. As such, the play does not present anger as an always-reliable tool for mobilizing feminist politics. In Hart's 1992 review of the original production, she suggests that when May sings her "Boogie Man" song, expressing her anger "freezes" May "in time" (517). In this song, where she threatens to overturn institutionalized misogyny, May is transported to a temporal no-place where time does not move forward. Hart's sense that the play contributes to lesbian-feminist thought by reclaiming anger, "putting the historical displacement of violence onto lesbians into lesbians' own hands and keeping their guns loaded," meets resistance with the frozen status of May's angry Boogie Man song (*Fatal Women* xiii). The comparisons between *Lesbians Who Kill* and *Godot* are certainly apt, but Hart's remark about May being frozen in time intimates that May might also resemble Winnie from Beckett's play *Happy Days* (1961). Stuck in the ground up to her neck, Winnie is immobile for the entire play. *Lesbians Who Kill* does not offer a wholly adulatory performance of anger, though it does contain moments of joy. Rather, it outlines anger's limits, showing how angry feelings can generate vulnerability and stagnancy if trapped in exclusionary, isolated spaces.

May and June readily show their anger to each other, just as Shaw and Weaver show their characters' anger to American audiences. In doing so, *Lesbians Who Kill* invites a

consideration of how the free expression of anger affects women. As Betty Friedan illustrates in *The Feminine Mystique*, anger can sometimes undo a perceived history of female passivity, with women who “show anger” becoming more active agents in their own lives (320). May and June express their anger freely, which Friedan indicates might make them less passive, but *Lesbians Who Kill* seems to demure from linking anger with agency.

Audiences do not see May and June direct their anger at any men, other than those they imaginatively confront who are not present onstage. Moreover, neither woman experiences the pent up frustrations attached to compulsory housewifery that Friedan indicates traps women in the U.S. Explicitly situated outside their house, May and June prove that not all women who experience repressed anger are confined by domestic labor. While Friedan’s account of anger connects this feeling to courage and strength, Split Britches’ dramaturgy recognizes the linkages between anger, fear, and vulnerability. Shaw and Weaver’s performance does not confirm that negative sentiments can enable political change. For May and June, articulating anger at each other helps them achieve catharsis, and in doing so it offers them a way to continue surviving in a dangerous climate in which they are literally being hunted by the state. But it does not liberate them.

### **Towards a Lesbian-Feminist Theory of Antirelationality**

Instead of construing anger as tried-and-true tool for mobilizing feminist politics, *Lesbians Who Kill* places feminist anger alongside feelings of despair, frustration, and passivity. In doing so, this bleak portrait of anger diverges from many feminist defenses of anger and, I argue, readily meets up with theories of queer antirelationality. Leo Bersani’s “Is the Rectum a Grave?” (1987) and Lee Edelman’s *No Future*, two works that have come to be emblematic of the antisocial thesis in queer theory, outline the ways in which queer subjects can threaten the social order and actively deploy the kind of negative sentiments performed by May and June in *Lesbians Who Kill*. For Edelman in particular, queerness challenges

“reproductive futurity” by resisting a linear telos: rather than finding value in linear narrative, a framework in which “meaning succeeds in revealing itself – *as itself* – through time,” queerness refuses “meaning’s eventual realization” over time and “comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form” (4). May and June’s plotless performance of anger, therefore, challenges normative valuations of futurity by refusing to participate in moving their anger *towards* anything.

At the same time, feminists and queer theorists of color have pointed out the ways in which Bersani and Edelman’s analysis overlooks nuances of gender, race, and class difference (Muñoz, qtd. in Caserio et al. 825). Halberstam has served as one such critic of queer negativity as it is articulated by Bersani and Edelman, and Halberstam calls for a theory of antisociality that attends to the negative sentiments belonging to women and queers of color.

In the *PMLA* roundtable on the anti-social thesis, Halberstam demands that queer antisociality encompass more than just a “gay male archive” (824). Attention to “dyke anger, anaticolonial despair, racial rage, counterhegemonic violence, [and] punk pugilism,” Halberstam proposes, might enable a theory of queer negativity that does not obscure difference. I contend that Split Britches begin to sketch out such a theory with *Lesbians Who Kill* (824). The text does not explicitly address racial difference,<sup>34</sup> but it does explore the correspondences between “dyke anger” and antisociality (Halberstam, qtd. in Caserio et al. 824). The group arrives at many of the same conclusions as Bersani and Edelman from a vantage point rooted in lesbian-feminist critique.

May and June’s romantic and sexual relationship also evokes the discussion of mastery and self-shattering present in Bersani’s “Is the Rectum a Grave?” At the end of the

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<sup>34</sup> As I noted earlier, *Lesbians Who Kill* offers a critique of feminist safe spaces that resembles the kinds of criticisms made by Black feminists, but the group does not acknowledge or cite any Black feminists.

play, the women express a desire for nothingness when May asks June if she can “cover” May in a white sheet and “divide” her “by zero” (222-223):

May: [Y]ou can divide me by zero...

June: Can I?

May: Yes...cover me in white...

June: Can I cover you in white?

May: Yes, please...

June And lay you to rest?

May: Yes, please... (223)

The intimacy of covering one's partner in a sheet, an image with erotic undertones, is wedded to the self-shattering of “divid[ing] by zero,” a mathematical formulation that erases and destroys. The difficult togetherness that they experience, both caring for and hurting one another, evokes Bersani's suggestion that sex has nothing “to do with community or love,” but instead is characterized as “anticommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving” (215). Bersani arrives at this configuration of sex through reading antipornography feminists such as MacKinnon and Dworkin, describing their work as refusing to “prettify” or “romanticize” sex (215).

Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman articulate a theory of antisociality that has feminist contours in thinking about the “unbearable” qualities of sex (*Sex* vii). Sex, while sometimes providing “the prospect of discovering new ways of being and of being in the world,” also can raise “the possibility of confronting our limit in ourselves or in another, of being inundated psychically or emotionally” (*Sex* vii). Berlant, in particular, works toward reformulating what scholars typically think of as antisociality into a theory of being “socially awkward,” a framework that emphasizes the degree to which

subjects are not usually shocked to discover their incoherence or the incoherence of the world; they often find it comic, feel a little ashamed of it, or are interested in it, excited by it, and exhausted by it too, by the constant pressure to adjust that is at the heart of being nonsovereign, subjected to the inconstancy and contingency that they discover in and around themselves. (6)

Berlant's articulation of the non-sovereign, of a kind of awkwardness in being together that comes as no surprise to anyone, is clearly present in May and June's desire to be together sexually while simultaneously sharing the same awkward space of a small automobile. They are undone by one another, "divide[d]... by zero" (23) by each other, and such a possibility of self-negation thrills June, who asks May "Please?" repeatedly if she can enact such intimate self-erasure with her (223). Theirs is a difficult togetherness, but they wield this ability to undo each other gently. They ask for permission.

Lesbian sexual pleasure and the feelings of self-shattering are centrally connected in *Lesbians Who Kill*, insisting that sexual gratification and pain are deeply connected for women, and that prosex lesbian-feminism, by meeting up with theories of antirelationality articulated through readings of a gay male canon of literature, meet up with antiporn feminism. These three theoretical traditions become unlikely bedfellows – or carfellows – in *Lesbians Who Kill*.

Bersani aligns antirelationality with the work of antiporn feminists like Dworkin and MacKinnon, asserting that both theoretical perspectives recognize an inherent violence in sexuality. According to Bersani, antiporn feminists show that "pornography eroticizes – and thereby celebrates – the violence of inequality itself" (213). In doing so, Bersani insists that sexuality itself always risks "self-dismissal, of losing sight of the self" (222). Likewise, Shaw and Weaver's prosex drama dismisses the fantasy of complete self-mastery and looks forward to "absolutely nothing" (Edelman 5): May and June wait for an indeterminable amount of time in their car and can only leave it when the threat of violence (from the lightening, from the police, from men) is over. Since there's no end in sight to these three threats, the pair must wait. Split Britches' alinear, dream-like vision of May and June's world, in which "nothing happens" (Margolin qtd. in Hart and Phelan 271) does not so much refuse futurity entirely as it shows the two women "try[ing] to make do and to flourish in the awkward, riven, unequal, untimely, and interesting" world around them that is rife with

“structural subordinations” (Berlant, qtd. in Berlant and Edelman 116). They must wait “as long as it takes” for the storm(s) to pass (*Lesbians Who Kill* 188). A lesbian-feminist theory of antisociality, such as the one performed in *Lesbians Who Kill*, suggests that looking forward to nothing can build feminist community as much as it drives feminists apart. The antisocial anger expressed by May and June offers a survival strategy – it helps them get by. But as May and June never achieve a better, safer world to live in during the course of the play’s action, even as they hint that they want it to come about (June wishes she could watch May “really” threaten men with violence) their antirelationality must only ever be temporary (223). At some point, May and June will need to leave their car, if only to eat. Anger “keeps [them] alive,” but it “cannot create the future” (Lorde, “Eye to Eye” 152). Their antirelational lesbian-feminist anger looks forward to nothing, but only for now.

Togetherness is only ever fraught for Shaw and Weaver’s characters. They explore the difficulty of feeling bad in a group, of expressing anger to allies, and of crafting and maintaining safe spaces. As I have just demonstrated, the play works with and against both feminist thought and queer antirelational theory. Seen not as a daring reclamation of anger, the play argues instead that feminists must handle their anger with extreme care, as the feeling is often difficult and potentially harmful to wield. The play depicts supposedly different strains of feminist thought as awkward sisters, and feminism and queer theory as awkward allies. The play puts feminists’ reclamation of bad feelings into conversation with queer antirelationality, showing that “‘Feminism’ and ‘queer theory’ are an awkward pair” (Weed viii). Such a reading of these two theoretical traditions is not new: in the anthology *Feminism and Queer Theory* (1997), Elizabeth Weed writes that these two bodies of thought have “quite different historical formations,” insisting that there is “no simple correspondence” between them (viii). Writes Weed:



To say that feminism and queer theory share commonalities and affiliations is not to say they are easily commensurable. In fact, they are clearly presented here as something of an unmatched pair. (Weed vii)

Thinking about the uncomfortable way these two intellectual traditions meet up helps us think through the meeting between bodies in *Lesbians Who Kill*. The play stages several instances of bodies coming together: May and June's togetherness, Shaw and Weaver's 'real life' relationship, and the meeting between audiences and performers that occurs in any theatrical event. The play ultimately shows how fear and anger are constantly being negotiated in such relationships, and that intimacy is only ever provisional and achieved through incredible labor. If "the meeting of feminism and queer theory a strange one" (Weed viii), May and June's meeting is stranger still since they must cope with the embodied realities of occupying a small, cramped space while trying to find a balance between their anger and their attempts to survive the storm overhead.

Split Britches' play offers a series of disjointed moments that foreground feminist anger while critiquing the frequently exclusionary consequences of expressing this feeling in a confined space. This theory of affect, and of the social, shows pleasure and pain, anger and resignation, to be coterminous. May and June's anger seems natural and necessary, but it doesn't automatically lead them into a better future. The car, in which their anger is confined, does offer some strategic benefits, but it also isolates. Feminist safe spaces therefore can be seen as simultaneously communal *and* anti-relational. May and June play out on stage the way in which being together is not easy, can be hard and scary, but is nonetheless necessary. When we are together – are angry together – expressing our bad feelings can be painful and difficult, and it doesn't always make things better.

Reading *Lesbians Who Kill* in 2015 can provide insights into images of killing rage for contemporary feminists. Revisiting and revising some received wisdom about anger from 1970s feminism, the play recuperates feminist retribution and violence only warily and

imbues anger with fear and pain. Split Britches therefore urge women – especially white women – to be cautious as they deploy anger.

Revenge fantasies continue to be prevalent within feminist subcultures, evidenced by the popularity of texts such as Kelly Sue DeConnick's comic series *Pretty Deadly* (2013) or Mariel Clayton's photography collection "The Oakville Ladies Society Presents: The Gentlewomens Sociopathic Syllabary."<sup>35</sup> DeConnick's comic chronicles the actions of Death's daughter, a girl named Ginny, who seeks vengeance against unjust men. Clayton's "Syllabary" is a morbid photography project in which elaborate dioramas depict Barbie slaughtering Ken in a variety of gruesome scenarios. As angry texts like these continue to permeate feminist culture, feminists will need to examine how, and in what ways, such stories help enact a better future for women, even as they provide a crucial cathartic outlet for feminist rage.

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<sup>35</sup> Clayton's "Syllabary" can be viewed on her website: <[www.thephotographymarielclayton.com](http://www.thephotographymarielclayton.com)>.

## CHAPTER 3

### Feeling Simultaneously: Anger as Yoruba Altar-Making in Sharon Bridgforth's *love conjure/blues*

“the past the present the future the living and the dead co-exist together / at the  
same time / in a weave of dreams”  
— *love conjure/blues*

Sharon Bridgforth's performance novel *love conjure/blues*, first published in 2004 but staged as early as 1999, is composed of interlocking stories recounting the lives of a community of Black, queer-identified individuals living in the rural American south around the turn of the century. However, *love conjure/blues* does not only take place in the specific temporal moment of the early 1900s. Folding the past and the future into the characters' experience of the now, Bridgforth's performance novel allows ancestors to speak to their descendants, and *vice-versa*. As Bridgforth explains in the front matter of the published volume of the performance novel, her text explores how African-Americans “transmit the stories of our survival” across generations, transcending linear chronology in the process: “the past the present the future the living and the dead / co-exist together / at the same time / in a weave of dreams / Prayers / Love expressed” (*love conjure/blues* vii).

At the heart of the performance novel, the narrative jumps from the early 1900s back in time to the Antebellum south, recounting the story of a powerful conjure woman – an African-American historical figure who might variously serve as a community's “root worker, fortune-teller, midwife, herbalist, two-head doctor, [and] spiritual medium” or who is “gifted with verbal and/or visual communication with the invisible world” (K. Martin 2) – who brings a local slave owner to justice. The conjure woman of Bridgforth's performance novel, named Isadora, punishes this slave owner for his brutality toward the people he owns, and she subsequently frees the community of African-Americans living on his plantation. To

bring about this redress, Isadora harnesses the power of the wind to fling the slave master against the ground over and over again. The master, in a fit of rage, had severed the fingers of one enslaved man who wouldn't obey his demands, and Isadora tricks the master into eating the severed fingers as punishment. Isadora also kills all of the plantation overseers, saying they will come back as slaves in their next life.

The performance novel, a literary genre of the Bridgforth's own creation, is published as printed text "meant to be sounded out while read" (O. Jones, "Making Holy" xvii). A performance novel incorporates prose, poetry, and dramatic elements, and is "not meant to be theater / concert / an opera / or staged reading" but can encompass all these things (Bridgforth, *love conjure/blues* vii). Within the context of the overall *love conjure/blues* performance novel, Isadora's story is a sub-plot. *love conjure/blues* primarily attends to the individuals who frequent a local juke joint – a type of venue Matt Richardson describes as a "small, out-of-the-way club usually built by hand or barely kept from falling apart with love and prayers" that fosters the creation of "Black families, communities, bodies, and desires" outside of dominant "gendered and sexual norms" (84) – in the early twentieth century. This return to a prior era in a distinctly queer rural space offers an antidote, according to Scott Herring, to the "metronormative prejudices" (142) that stigmatize ruralism within late twentieth-century queer culture. These stories of bettye's juke joint are told from the point of view of a woman named cat. cat intersperses her tales about bettye's, "the best blues inn in the country" (8), with personal details about her spiritual communion with her living and deceased elders.

cat is able to speak with her ancestors, in part, because she maintains an ancestor altar. Within Yoruba religious traditions, cultivating a strong relationship with one's ancestors allows generations of living and dead relatives to "assist and support" in the supplicant's daily life (Correal 1). Jones has explicitly linked Bridgforth's drama to Yoruba

religious traditions, explaining that Bridgforth's stories constitute an *itan* – a Yoruba concept for the enactment of “the story of a people or town” that links “the living with ancestors and divinities across spatial and temporal dimensions, moving back to retrieve lineage lessons and forward to cast a vision of what might be” (“Making Holy” xviii). Bridgforth herself was initiated into the Yoruba religion, though Ana-Maurine Lara has noted that “by January 2009, Bridgforth had left” the religion (39).

By tending to her altar, cat solidifies her connection to her ancestors, which is in keeping with Yoruba religious practice. According to initiated Yoruba-Lukumi priestess Tobe Melora Correal, “the most essential tool for growing communication” between a person and their ancestors is the maintenance of an “ancestral shrine” (Correal 63). cat's religious practices allow her to receive regular visits from the spirits of her still-living elder relatives, named big pa, uncle daddy, and ma dear, who ask her to perform regular tasks in the service of maintaining her personal altar (*love conjure/blues* 15). Previous scholarly readings of *love conjure/blues*, such as Richardson's, have productively focused on the “spiritual epistemology” that blossoms in the juke joint (85). In particular, Richardson reveals how the juke joint represents “an interstitial space where the physical and spiritual worlds meet” (85). I propose that the public “communal practices of ceremony” (Richardson 85) and spiritual transcendence in the juke joint exist alongside private moments of spiritual practice in *love conjure/blues*, such as cat's communion with her ancestors within the space of her bedroom.

Sometimes personal and constructed in a home closet or room, sometimes public and communal, ancestor altars kept in accordance with West African-based Yoruba religious tradition foster communication between the physical and spiritual worlds. These sacred spaces – examples of what M. Jacqui Alexander terms the metaphorical and literal “crossings” (290) that structure the cosmologies of the African Diaspora – provide a physical location for connecting living supplicants with deceased elders. In thus enabling an

exchange between the living and the dead, Yoruba altars “overthrow time,” according to Robert Farris Thompson (26), interweaving what would be considered disparate moments in a chronological understanding of history and time.

Building from the premise that altars unravel linear temporality, Bridgforth’s dramaturgy imagines the affective and emotional ramifications of ancestor altars’ capacity to “overthrow time” (Thompson 26). Specifically, the dramatization of altar creation in *love conjure/blues* positions these sacred spaces as affective conduits that commingle multiple histories of intense feeling. For Yoruba practitioners in the Americas, bringing ancestral voices into one’s present life often means contending with the horrors that family members endured in the Middle Passage and New World slave economy during the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. For example, Correal notes “as an African-American woman, I cannot remember my Black ancestors without looking squarely at the atrocity of slavery” (100). The “crossings” staged in Bridgforth’s text represent an understanding of time as palimpsestic. According to Alexander, a palimpsestic framework of temporality holds on to the “historical specificity” of individual moments in time while acknowledging that the past – the “then and there” – can show up in the “here and now” (191, 192). If a palimpsest is “a parchment that has been inscribed two or three times, the previous text having been imperfectly erased and remaining therefore still partly visible,” then approaching history as a palimpsest would acknowledge the ways that the past continues to inflect the present. Correal’s remarks about reckoning with the genocide of American slavery, and the difficulty of feeling this “atrocity” (Alexander 100) suggest that one ramification of palimpsestic time is the layering of affective structures experienced during various moments in history on top of one another.

cat’s ancestors offer her the story of Isadora’s resistance to white supremacist authority, but before doing so they check to see if she has constructed her altar to big paw, uncle daddy, and ma-dear’s satisfaction. cat remarks that her living elders “started talking” to

her “in her dreams” (14), recounting to her the histories of her family from generations long ago. “you better listen good,” they implore her, “we telling you something / you hear” (14). Before these stories emerge within the framework of the *love conjure/blues* narrative, however, big paw, uncle daddy, and ma-dear ask cat:

is you done emptied de water from under de  
bed / shredded da paper / dumped de  
dirt / blow’d out de candle / make room for de new dream’n? (15)

Once cat responds that she has done all these things, her relatives instruct her to “set the candle in the east window” and to “circle earth around the bed” (15). We can read cat’s interactions with her ancestors as representative of altar construction by comparing the literary text with writing on Yoruba spiritual practice. According to Baba Ifa Karade, a supplicant can use an altar to “se[t] the proper atmosphere for prayer,” a task that “is duly important,” by using “candles, incense, bowls of water and fruits” (49). The work of preparing an altar – an embodied performance of labor and spiritual commitment – “provide[s] the spiritual essence that usually envelopes a place of prayer or reverence” (49). cat’s actions in the performance novel are evocative of Karade’s recommendations for altar creation: she keeps clean water and candles, and she treats her bedroom altar as a sacred space. Performing these tasks allows cat to hear about the lives of her elders who perished during slavery, fought against it, or escaped. Eventually, cat’s ancestors enable her to access the story about Isadora’s victory over the “ole marsa” (50).

cat’s labor, performed within the confines of her bedroom, is decidedly not public. By performing spiritual work alone in her own private room, cat’s work of altar-creation mediates and transmits an account of an important historical event. The quotidian labors of dumping out dirt, sweeping, maintaining candles, and replenishing water allow a narrative of highly public, visible, angry resistance to emerge within the *love conjure/blues* narrative.

Individually-practiced spiritual rituals and the public performance of angry retribution are thus intertwined.

Unlike in the previous chapter, where the fantasy of feminist anger works to stall and stagnate feminist politics, never bringing about a better future for women, Isadora's performance of anger is productive: through reckoning with the slave owner, she frees an entire community of people. Though Isadora's story occupies only a few pages within *love conjure/blues*, the effects of her actions ripple into the future and shape rest of the action in Bridgforth's text. cat is a descendant of the members of the freed community – a community that Isadora continues to impact as her power is handed down, along with her name, for generations (56). The framing of Isadora's story suggests that private moments of feeling or expressing anger might go unnoticed by many – cat's friends do not see her tend to the altar or bear witness to Isadora's wrath – but make possible the public expression of anger that can be put to use to craft a more just world.

The *love conjure/blues* performance novel was later adapted into a multimedia art piece called the *love conjure/blues Text Installation*, which premiered at the Off Center in Austin, Texas in 2007. The *Text Installation* incorporates several filmed scenes from the performance novel along with live performance, dance, sound, narration, and interaction between the audience and performers. The filmed scenes depict, either literally or figuratively, stories from the performance novel. As described by Bridgforth, the filmed portions of the *Text Installation* are “installed on three LARGE screens” that surround the audience (“*Text Installation*”). Bridgforth tried “as much as possible to create a circular environment for the screens, the performer, and the audience to co-exist in” (“*Text Installation*”). When coming to see the performance of the *Text Installation*, Bridgforth insists that “audience members become witness/participants” in the creation of the work (“*Text Installation*”).



One of the scenes adapted to film for the *Text Installation* is Isadora's storyline. The filmed adaptation, called the "Altar Film," does not literally depict Isadora's actions onscreen. In the "Altar Film," a spoken account of Isadora bringing the slave owner to justice is layered onto a scene visually depicting a woman building an altar in a forest clearing. The *love conjure/blues* "Altar Film" aurally imparts Isadora's story of anger while allowing audiences to visually witness the woman's work of constructing her altar. While watching the "Altar Film," viewers observe the woman layering two adjacent chairs with dried flowers, jugs of water, jewelry, and other items. The audio portion of the film presents two voices telling Isadora's story. One narrative can be seen and not heard, while the other can be heard but not seen. Combined, the aural and visual narratives in the "Altar Film" reveal that the experience of anger is inflected with the calm that accompanies spiritual reflection. Layering a story of trans-generational trauma on top of the peaceful representation of a woman's performance of altar worship, Bridgforth's "Altar Film" refuses to separate psychic woundedness from joyful reverence. Isadora's anger constellates grief and pain but also pleasure, happiness, and spiritual calm.

Richardson states that *love conjure/blues*'s spiritual epistemology, developed through an exploration of the "crossroads between the material world and the spirit world" (86), enables its depiction of "the South as a Black queer space" (85). The work of altar-making is one practice that makes up the performance novel's spiritual epistemology – its attention to the "crossroads" between the earthly and the divine (Richardson 86). Altars are centrally present in *love conjure/blues*, both in its print form and in the "Altar Film," and in these instances the altars are created by a woman and a feminine-presenting person who, though not explicitly gendered in the "Altar Film," I refer to with she/her pronouns for the purposes of this chapter. Feminist scholar Kay Turner has remarked that the practice of altar-keeping, especially within the home, is a uniquely female practice. I believe that *love conjure/blues*'s

representation of spiritual practice, specifically the labor of altar-keeping, can be read as not only queer, as Richardson demonstrates, but also as feminist. By considering *love conjure/blues*'s representations of altar-construction and angry redress alongside a body of Black feminist writing on anger, I propose that Bridgforth's performance novel imagines anger at systems of oppression as a type of spiritual practice.

Moreover, I argue that the structuring conceit of the *love conjure/blues* "Altar Film," in which an altar serves as the medium that allows a narrative of Black resistance to white oppression to emerge, has suggestive implications for the film's representation of affect and emotion: since the altar represented in the film houses a variety of different objects – a bowl, some food, and flowers, just to name a few – does the heterogeneity of the altar's contents come to bear on the film's performance of anger, and if so, how? If the woman building the altar continually returns to it in order to perform care and maintenance, then is rage also an emotion that demands patient attention? Furthermore, the visual tone of the film is meditative, and the woman constructs the altar with slow purposefulness. Can fury, too, be meditative or serene?

Depicting Black feminist anger through a non-linear performance of ritual, Bridgforth's "Altar Film" participates in the tradition of theatrical jazz, an American performance practice that adapts to the stage tenants of musical jazz and West African aesthetics, according to Jones (O. Jones "Cast" 599). Theatrical jazz performances readily layer multiple sequences of action and narrative on stage, privileging simultaneity of sound, movement, and visuals. In my reading of Bridgforth's "Altar Film" and the *love conjure/blues* performance novel, I trace how the jazz aesthetic – a uniquely Black avant-garde performance tradition – comes to bear on the film's performance of feminist anger. I assert that the jazz aesthetic tenet to "imagine more than one event, sound, or idea at a time" (O. Jones, *Experiments* 6) operates as a theory of affect in and of itself. The disparate theatrical

elements placed alongside one another in the “Altar Film” – a ritualized performance of worship and a narrative of anger at injustice, respectively – overlap and coexist. The film gestures to the possibility that affective experiences can be similarly layered and multi-leveled. Bridgforth’s “Altar Film” invokes anger as a feeling significant to Black feminist politics and puts the feeling on display through the imagery of a collection – a gathering of multiple affects, feelings, and emotions layered on top of one another. The “Altar Film” asks viewers to be perceptive of the ways anger can be productive while sedimented – unchanged, layered, dense, and stratified – alongside an array of mixed feelings.

### **“Violence Boils in the Blood”**

Isadora’s fury – her deep rage at watching the master “cut and burn and starve and sell and kill” (52) – represents a source of power for her, an “arsenal” that is “useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being” (Lorde, “Uses” 127). Desiring justice enables Isadora to engage supernatural as well as earthly forces of energy, as she harness the wind and the dust to punish the master. In connecting Isadora’s rage to spiritual power and authority – a power rooted in love and benevolence toward the enslaved community she frees – Bridgforth’s performance novel refutes the longstanding pathologization of Black women’s anger. While the tenacious cultural image of the “Angry Black Woman” “depicts Black women as aggressive, loud, rude, and pushy” in order to “demonize” them and “put women in their place” (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 123), Bridgforth’s characterization of Isadora resists this “controlling image”<sup>36</sup> (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 76) by enumerating the positive cultural, social, and political work that Isadora’s anger performs. Isadora’s anger undoes a history of oppression. By expressing her

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<sup>36</sup> Patricia Hill Collins explains that “controlling images” are “stereotypical images of Black womanhood” that operate “as part of a generalized ideology of domination” whereby “elite groups” “manipulate ideas about Black womanhood” (*Black Feminist Thought* 76). Controlling images work to “make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (*Black Feminist Thought* 77).

anger, an act linked to the spiritual divine, Isadora allows the Black inhabitants of a plantation to “walk off” its “grounds” and be “free / for a long time now” (53). Additionally, Bridgforth’s text creates a space where Isadora is allowed to express her rage on her own terms. If dominant culture portrays Black women as “confrontational and actively aggressive” (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 123) in order to “justify U.S. Black women’s oppression” (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 76), Isadora articulates her anger for herself in order to counter Black oppression.

While Isadora’s narrative of resistance frames Black women’s anger as a liberating force, other moments in *love conjure/blues* portray anger ambivalently – as a feeling that can both empower and harm the person who feels angry. An early passage in *love conjure/blues* suggests that African-Americans are “borned to violence”

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

Anger, a “violence” that “boils in the blood,” is not a feeling purposefully chosen by Black Americans living in the United States. Nonetheless, *love conjure/blues* suggests the feeling protects persons who have survived extreme institutional violence and genocide. These remarks position anger as a protective as well as destructive force. Though it enables “fighting” resistance, anger can also “claim” the feeling subject (4), and it also represents a feeling that was not necessarily chosen to be felt in the first place – since it is directed against violent systems of oppression.

This passage acknowledges that at times it can become difficult to depart from anger or to set it aside, especially in the face of oppressive social forces. In identifying the ways in

which anger can be a pre-existing element of the world for some Black Americans – arising in response to histories of colonialism and genocide – Bridgforth’s text positions anger as a feeling that lingers. Further emphasizing anger as a feeling to be endured over long stretches of time, the “Altar Film” imagines anger through a performance of durational, ritual labor. Situating rage as a long-term physical task, one caught up in the work of spiritual reverence, the film asks audiences to consider the political and emotional ramifications of seeing anger as a feeling that sticks around. Bridgforth’s account of anger investigates what it means to live with difficult, unpleasant sentiments within the context of Black feminist thought and activism.

Bridgforth’s other artistic works grapple with anger in a similarly evocative fashion. For example, in *Experiments in a Jazz Aesthetic* (2010), Bridgforth contrasts the “bitter[ness]” of anger with “self-Love” (13). Anger receives a similar portrayal in her performance novel the *bull-jean stories* (1998), in which the “bitta” protagonist unleashes her fury on a manipulative lover, only to fall into despair later (54). However, it is anger that propels the title character, bull-jean, to rescue herself from the destructive relationship in the first place. The idea that anger can offer salvation as well as self-destruction is also manifest in *love conjure/blues* when “anger” drives one character, bitty, to protect her lover peachy from an abusive partner (3). Despite the protection that bitty’s anger affords peachy and herself, Bridgforth’s text indicates that anger has “claimed bitty” and “poisoned” her (4).

These portraits of anger follow the jazz aesthetic tenet to “‘imagine more than one event, sound, or idea at a time” (O. Jones, *Experiments* 6). *love conjure/blues* deftly integrates many seemingly disparate portrayals of anger. At times the feeling empowers and protects Bridgforth’s characters, while at other moments it represents a stumbling block to accepting and loving one’s self. Since *love conjure/blues* integrates these varying representations of feminist rage, it demonstrates the ways in which individual emotions, specifically anger, can

be themselves diverse and variegated. Within Bridgforth's body of work, divergent experiences with one individual feeling co-exist and overlap. Bridgforth has explained how the concept of layering is central to her work within theatrical jazz, which is informed not only by music, the "layering of breath and singing," but also by her everyday experiences in her mother's kitchen growing up:

I kind of go back to my mother's kitchen as a kid where there's a party, there's singin' and dancin', the food is cookin', there's laughter and cryin', and all kinds of things are happening at the same time, and great stories are being told [...] It's jazz theater, there will always be multiple layers of things. (qtd. in González 227)

The "party" that Bridgforth recalls in her mother's kitchen is present in the opening moments of *love conjure/blues*, which speaks of food – "cool water," "coconut cake cookies," and "honey" – and a party: "it's a party it's a party it's a party / in my dreams" (1). Bridgforth's comments in her interview with Anita González, quoted above, tie the jazz aesthetic to the quotidian, feminized, interior space of a kitchen. The layering of various theatrical elements resembles, to Bridgforth, the kitchen belonging to her mother. As I will explain later, Isadora's performance of anger unfolds in the space of kitchen – though not a warm, nurturing kitchen such as Bridgforth's mother's. Appealing to the image of a woman's kitchen to unpack her conception of the theatrical jazz aesthetic, Bridgforth links the multiple and layered experiences of sound, feeling, movement, and story to women's unique lived experiences.

### **"Placed my Prayers on Parchment": Reading the Performance Novel**

The *love conjure/blues* performance novel invites a consideration of altar-making practices through the interactions between cat and the spirits of her still-living, though elder, family members. When cat first introduces these characters in the performance novel, they are in the process of asking her to perform a series of chores. While visiting their younger relative in her dreams, the spirits of big pa, uncle daddy, and ma dear ask cat to empty dirty

water “from under de bed,” dump out “dirt” and blow out a candle she keeps (15). They instruct her to write her “prayers on parchment paper surrounded by water” (15). Each of cat’s actions facilitates her engagement with the world of the spirits. The “earth” around her bed, for instance, can indicate the graphic separation of “the world of the spirits [...] from the world of the living” (Correal 67). Once cat has performed these tasks satisfactorily, uncle daddy indicates that cat has facilitated a link between the world of the living and the dead. A rush of text follows his pronouncement, “here they come now,” and cat is united with her lineage of ancestors who have passed on (15). Deceased relatives introduce themselves to cat and narrate accounts of their life:

i am he that was king/captured sold and shipped for selling *i am she whose tongue they took so as not to tell* i am he made to walk chained next to a wagon cross state lines *i am she who lived in the woods/ leader of the ones that fought* i am he that scouted getaway time *i am the runner through the corn* i am the seer in the night. (15)

One of the voices cat hears after she’s introduced to her ancestors is a person who repeatedly makes a “gaga gaga gaga/ga” sound (15). We learn later that the sound is a vocal rendition of a drum sound. One of cat’s ancestors, who was “captured and sold” into slavery (15) plays the drums, which angers the master of his plantation. It is this man, the drummer, who calls Isadora to his aid to help free the community of people living on the plantation he inhabits. The drummer’s vocalizing allows Isadora to draw upon the wind and earth to enact her punishment.

The spirits of cat’s living elders eventually allow her to hear the story of the drummer’s life (52), as he forcefully retaliates against the man named as his slave master with the help of the conjure woman Isadora. Before being offered the story of the drummer and Isadora’s fury, however, cat is required to perform the physical work of preparing her altar. That cat hears these stories after she creates her altar implies that it enables her listen to the “call of the collective voice of the ancestors” for guidance (Olomo 85). The work of altar

creation, therefore, mediates and is implicitly linked to the performance novel's narrative of anger.

Within traditions of Yoruba spirituality, an *egun* altar provides a space for devotees to connect with ancestors; or, alternatively, an altar can allow the supplicant to reach out to the Orisha ("angelic emanations of the Creator"), Orunmila ("The prophet of the Yoruba Religion"), and Oludumare ("God") (Karade 47, 117-118). cat's altar falls into the former category, as it offers her a physical location for performing prayer and meditation to her elders. In contrast to the physical space where May and June articulate their anger in *Lesbians Who Kill* – within their car – cat's altar serves as the space that receives and transmits a story of anger, showing that anger can be tied to a single, unmoving space but still serve to do productive work if this anger is handled with care, labored with, and worked on. While May and June's car is static, cat continually moves within the space of her bedroom, performing labor and chores to clean and maintain her altar.

The variety of prayers cat performs are, according to Karade, "for the purification and elevation of base human qualities. The highest form of prayer is that of the devotee asking for nothing except transcendence and protection from negating forces" (47). An altar sets the tone of one's prayer, and the contents of a personal altar concretize a worshipper's spiritual commitment. Correal explains "one important function of the *egun* shrine is to provide a sacred physical area for remembering those spirits whose lives were brutalized by some form of atrocity, such as slavery or genocide" (64). In the performance novel's text, cat's altar enables her access to the history of the drummer, her ancestor, who was physically and psychologically tortured in the Antebellum slave economy. cat learns that her ancestor built drums by hand and played the instruments night and day, which infuriated his master. Alarmed by the volume of the drumming, the master would seize the drums and beat cat's ancestor (50). Undeterred, the drummer continually fashioned new instruments after his



drums were taken. The drummer's story opens with a description of this pattern of violence, repeated twice:

they took his drum  
he make another.  
they took his drum  
he make another. (50)

The cycle of drumming and punishment climaxes when the plantation master severs the ancestor's fingers in an attempt to permanently stop his drumming. The "ole" master "take he thumb," and "toss in / jar / like for pickling" (50). After each individual finger is taken by the master, the drummer persistently returns to his instrument to play, which angers the master even more. The master escalates his violence and eventually takes all of the ancestor's fingers, "till none left" (50). The master then places the fingers in a "seal jar...on kitchen table where many have / to pass"; this punishment is designed to force the drummer to "remember" his "place" (50).

The drummer's grief and anger are made manifest through percussive sound within Bridgforth's poetic text. The drum itself creates a non-verbal transmission of angry resistance. After the drummer has no fingers left, he re-creates the drum's beats with his voice, a "ba ba ba / gagaga gagaga ga" sound (51). His body becoming an instrument, he deploys an anger that is at once musical and defiant. The drummer draws on his own righteous fury in order to seek justice. In the middle of the night he beckons to Isadora, the conjure woman (52). Angry and eager for justice, Isadora uses the power of the wind to punish the master. Isadora's gusts toss the master in the air wildly, and drop him on the ground: "wind lift marsa high up drop him down / isadora still / watch / lift bam lift bam" (52). Her punishment does not stop with this physical torment, and she later feeds the drummer's severed fingers to the plantation master. She also kills the plantation overseers and decrees that they will come back as slaves in their next life (53).

Invoking a performance of drumming specifically, *love conjure/blues* meditates on how white authority figures and systems of power have censured African-American drumming – both within cultural and religious practices – in order to vilify African diasporic women. According to Maha Marouan, “African diaspora religious and cultural ceremonies of drumming and dancing” have “evoked extreme reactions from white authorities” (10). These performances have been viewed as “barbaric and lacking in decorum” (10), and, within the context of slavery, African diasporic religious and spiritual practices “provoked fear of poisoning and slave revolts” (9). Marouan explains that the pathological associations drawn between drumming and a lack of decorum have been used to reinforce “the stereotype of the morally corrupt and sexually deviant black woman” (10). Drumming, a contested cultural performance for African-Americans, is doubly contested for women.

Isadora, therefore, responds to the drummer’s call and implicitly rebukes the cultural stigmatization of drumming as a practice of Afro-diasporic religion and culture. She also rejects the vilification of women who participate in such practices. Specifically, Isadora answers the drummer’s request in order to dismantle systems of white power. Reversing the traditional linkages between Black women’s bodies and moral corruption or “sexual devian[ce],” the drummer and Isadora’s sequence reveals instead the moral corruption of the white slave owner and overseers (Marouan 10). Representing Isadora as an “angry spirit,” *love conjure/blues* “challenge[s] the image” of women as “passive” which prevails in “Christian Mariology” (Marouan 11).

However, while some feminist thinkers, such as Friedan, have attributed the historic mandate for women to be passive to longstanding associations between women and domesticity, Bridgforth rejects women’s passivity through an angry scene staged in a domestic space. Bridgforth’s text specifies that Isadora stages her retribution the kitchen of the plantation house. The evening that the drummer calls to Isadora for aid, the master runs

“scared” “through the house run in kitchen trying to run out the back door to stop that drum” (51). In the kitchen, the master meets Isadora. He “can’t get out the door / in kitchen by table ole marsa / he gun and whip and more overseers stuck” (52). Isadora has trapped the master and the overseers in the space of the kitchen, where she will show them that she has put the drummer’s severed fingers in the lunch that the master has just eaten. Her anger, in addition to being otherworldly and supernatural, is staged within the domestic space of the kitchen.

The master’s household is a space of violence itself. It is a place where enslaved Black persons have been forced to labor, and it is the location where the drummer’s fingers are kept on display – on the kitchen table – to suppress the enslaved community living on the plantation. Bridgforth’s text shows how domestic spaces can foster oppression, and Isadora stages her intervention within the domestic space of the master’s kitchen. Moreover, Isadora’s anger is partially performed covertly. She secretly taints the master’s lunch with the drummer’s flesh – a hidden act that allows the quotidian to be a site of feminist anger and resistance. Just as the kitchen table becomes a stage where threats of anti-Black violence are promulgated, Isadora’s resistance to its authority is performed indoors, out of public sight, but the impact of her actions are far-reaching.

Isadora and the drummer’s shared anger is not separated, within *love conjure/blues*, from joy, reverence, and freedom. cat’s altar memorializes the spirit of her ancestor and enables her to bear witness to his suffering; but, the scene simultaneously illustrates Isadora and the drummer’s anger, positing a deep connection between Isadora’s fury and cat’s spiritual transcendence. The story of anger in *love conjure/blues* proves that it is in dialogue with familial closeness and tenderness, and the cluster of emotional experiences shown in this particular scene are not juxtaposed against each other. Rather, different affects flow

smoothly into one another, and peacefully co-exist. Bridgforth is content to let positive and negative affects exist alongside each other.

### **Watching the “Altar Film”**

An altar becomes the explicit focus of the *Text Installation*’s “Altar Film.” I was not in Austin to see this original performance; when the *Text Installation* premiered I was living just down highway 290 in Houston, Texas. After first encountering Bridgforth’s work, reading *the bull-jean stories*, I scoured the internet for information about her other projects. It didn’t take long before I ran across a series of videos that Bridgforth had produced for the *Text Installation* and posted on her personal website. I repeatedly watched these short clips while hunched over my 15-inch computer screen. The *love conjure/blues* narrative has undergone many transformations in its life: though originating as print text, the work has been adapted to embodied performance, multimedia installation, and it has produced a collection of short films archived on Bridgforth’s website.

I cannot speak definitively about the live audience’s response to the 2007 performance of the *Text Installation*. Though, while living in Austin I’ve been fortunate to witness other performances directed, written, or conducted by Bridgforth, all at various stages of completion. In the spring of 2009, I took part in a “Finding Voice” writing workshop<sup>37</sup> lead by Bridgforth. Later, in 2010, I attended and participated in an improvised performance piece she composed for UT’s department of Theater and Dance within the context of a graduate seminar: “Performing Black Feminisms,” led by Omi Osun Joni L. Jones. As Bridgforth was honing her script for *Ring/Shout*, she offered two staged readings of the work that I attended in February of 2010 and 2011. When I saw these performances, they both featured Florinda Bryant as the lead actress, and Bridgforth actively incorporated

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<sup>37</sup> Bridgforth’s guided writing workshops aid participants in “the process of giving voice to the personal: identity-culture-memory-family histories-dreams to articulate and examine the socio-political realities of their lives” (“Finding Voice”).

the audience as a spoken chorus.<sup>38</sup> Like *love conjure/blues*, *Ring/Shout* depicts the lives of members of Black, queer community in the rural American south.

Despite having been absent from the original *Text Installation* performance, its various iterations as print and visual text allow me to access the material after the fact. In reading the “Altar Film” from this context, I am scrutinizing its traces, or as José Muñoz puts it, studying this performance’s “ephemera”: “the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor...needed to stand against the harsh lights of mainstream visibility and the potential tyranny of the fact” (*Cruising* 65). Accessing the “Altar Film” on the internet, I encountered this short film as its own, independent text: anyone with access to a computer and a web connection can view the film. The collection of *love conjure/blues* texts triangulate print text, live performance, and electronic/digital genres. The digital traces of *love conjure/blues* demand that scholars account not only for the place of live embodiment in performance, but digital/virtual/residual embodiment as well.

The “Altar Film” directs our gaze to a brightly lit outdoor space featuring lush grass in the foreground, trees in the background, and wind evidenced by its movement through the grass and trees. The video opens to show a woman standing over two white, high-backed chairs in the video’s foreground. The woman, played by Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, is a slender African-American woman with long, braided hair. Behind her, the trees cast a shadow, and the rustling leaves make the scene feel pleasant and peaceful. In the black and white video, the performer fades in and out of view. While one image of the woman might slowly come into focus, another is usually fading out of sight. This visual technique often produces two images of the woman in different states of opacity. The woman wears all white, including a

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<sup>38</sup> To view an excerpt of this performance, see Bridgforth’s *YouTube* page (“*Ring Shout* excerpt”).

long, billowy white dress over loose white pants. Her feet are bare. The wind blows through her clothing, causing it to billow and ripple.

The film is 5 minutes and 42 seconds long. During this time, two narratives develop alongside each other. The film's audio offers the story of Isadora and the drummer, recounting their story aurally. This text is taken directly from the *love conjure/blues* performance novel. Two voices narrate this story, but we never see these speakers depicted visually in the film. According to Bridgforth's *YouTube* posting of the film, theater artist Laurie Carlos and Bridgforth read the text that comprises the audio portion of the "Altar Film." Though Bridgforth and Carlos narrate the same text, their speech is not in sync. One speaker begins the story, saying "they took his drum / he make another," (50), while the second speaker's entrance begins slightly afterwards. The two speakers intermittently speed up and slow down their recitation. The effect is both cacophonous and harmonious, since the two performers use soft, warm, vocal tones while their spoken words alternately mesh, compete, or overlap. Affectively, the combined visual images and sounds are tranquil. Watching the softly fluttering leaves, and listening to the voices almost hum, almost sing, feels restful and restorative.

The "Altar Film" adheres to the principles of the jazz aesthetic. Jones defines theatrical jazz as a movement beginning in the 1970s, centered in Harlem, that fuses "music/sound, dance/movement and the spoken word" ("Cast" 599). Theatrical jazz translates many conventions from musical jazz onto the stage, including "improvisation, process over product, ensemble synthesis, [and] solo virtuosity" (O. Jones, "Cast" 599). This performance style also privileges simultaneity, and "polyphony and multivocality are mandatory" (O. Jones, *Experiments* 6). According to Jones, the simultaneity often found in jazz performance might seem like "competition," "synthesis," "chaos," or all of the above (O. Jones, *Experiments* 6). By intertwining multiple speaking voices and layering this sound

onto the visual image of Jones's multiplying body, Bridgforth engages the jazz precept to embrace simultaneity. At times during the audio performance the two voices speak in unison, especially at the end of the film, when they utter "free / for a long time now" in sync with each other (53). For many other parts of the audio the speakers' words don't mesh: one voice reads from an early portion of the text while the other performer intones another passage further along. The voices are peaceful and smooth, making the audio track seem serene.

The warm vocal tones contrast with the emotional tenor of the spoken text. The drummer and Isadora's actions are violent, as are the incredibly brutal actions of the master that are referenced in the text. The spoken text employs onomatopoeia in order to describe the master's body repeatedly slamming against the ground as the wind hurtles him through the air: "lift bam lift bam" (53). The overseers, meanwhile, are "dead dead dead" (53). The text recounts the master's actions, saying he would regularly "cut and burn and starve and sell and kill" enslaved Black individuals (52). This stark portrait of the African-American genocide in the nineteenth century does not shy away from articulating the suffering endured by slave laborers, and the spoken text redoubles this violence onto the bodies of the white master and overseers. Their vocal performance is calm and smooth, and combined with the image of a sunny forest clearing, the film evokes feelings of peace and harmony. At the same time, the narrative heard by listeners evinces horror and grief.

While Carlos and Bridgforth perform the spoken text, viewers watch the image of the woman building her altar outside in the sun. Her act of altar-making becomes the centerpiece of the film's embodied elements. Viewers of the film are asked to meditate on her construction of a personal altar, a task which requires the use of her whole body – her arms carry, her legs propel her, and she bends and lifts different items onto the altar setting. By focusing the audience's gaze on this physical act, which is layered onto Bridgforth and

Carlos' peaceful narration, the film avoids visually rendering the suffering endured by the Black Americans that is described in the *love conjure/blues* narrative. Literally depicting such violence against Black bodies on screen would risk spectacularizing the drummer and the enslaved laborers' pain. Given the types of performance that were regularly used in the American slave trade, such as the auction block and the coffle, the project of understanding "the crimes of slavery" demands we understand how these crimes were "not only witnessed by staged" (Hartman 17). The common abolitionist tactic of bringing Black suffering "near" white audiences relied on an "identification through suffering," an exploitative tactic that ultimately "confirms the spectral character of suffering and the inability to witness the captive's pain" (Hartman 20). In Bridgforth's "Altar Film," the performance of altar-making reveals the drummer and Isadora's pain through healing embodied labor, and the film offers audiences the image of a Black woman's corporeal practice of worship instead of a literal depiction of suffering.

The woman in the "Altar Film" does not interact with the film's disembodied narrators, and we, as audience members, are given no indication that she hears the audio. In the film, she builds an altar by continually moving on- and off-screen. Each time she returns on-screen she carries a new object to place on the altar. She is not rushed in this task. At the beginning of the film, she cleans the two chairs that serve as the altar, wiping off their surface with her hand. Then, she arranges objects on and around the chairs. First, she brings a bowl with unknown contents, placing it on the front of the left chair, moving it around a few times, until she finally sets it on the back of the chair. She brings what appears to be a plate of food and puts it on the surface of the right chair, and then she hangs dried flowers from the back of the same chair. By the end of the video, the chairs' surfaces are covered in objects including a bracelet, liquid (possibly alcohol) in a vial, and a large container of flowers. The woman also places a large glass jug of crystal-clear water at the foot of the



chairs. Periodically, after placing an object on the altar, the woman will adjust it or move it. She also regularly stands back to survey the altar's composition. At the end of the video, the woman enters the video frame and walks behind the two chairs. She holds a fan. While cooling herself with the fan, she surveys the altar and rests one foot on the back of a chair. She holds the chair-back with her free hand and stands behind the composed altar fanning herself.

Jones' performance reinforces the meditative quality of the film's setting, as well as the audio's relaxed pacing. She is calm but purposeful in her composition of the altar. The film's serene qualities contrast with the emotional valence of the drummer's story. Just as in the text of the performance novel, Bridgforth's "Altar Film" fuses anger with spirituality. Viewers simultaneously watch Jones's altar construction unfold and aurally witness Isadora and the drummer's powerful retaliation. Bridgforth and Carlos' mellifluous vocalization of the drummer's storyline echoes the serenity of the visual setting. The peaceful dimensions of the video speak to the "love and respect" that Jones's character offers to her ancestors by remembering them through altar worship (Correal 64). Ancestors who suffered during their own lifetime might "be experiencing difficulty finding peace in the spirit world," says Correal, and the type of labor that Jones's character performs is "elevatory in nature" and can "provide some help to these spirits" (64). Audiences cannot separate the drummer's anger from the redemptive spiritual work performed by the woman onscreen. The film is indistinguishably both a comforting meditation on the connection to one's ancestors and a performance of witnessing the atrocities of slavery. By visually showing audience members the altar, Bridgforth deepens the ties between spiritual transcendence and violent anger.

### **Texture**

Visually representing the objects placed on the performer's altar, the "Altar Film" allows viewers to watch Jones' character hold and touch the contents that she places on it.

We can discern if these items are hard or soft, thick or thin, rough or smooth, etc. By watching the woman handle each individual object, viewers witness her acquainting herself with each object's tactile qualities. The audience watches her touch the smooth chair-tops with the flat of her palm, shake the hard vial full of liquid, and twiddle the rough but delicate string holding a bunch of dried flowers. Observing the performer feel each object in turn, viewers vicariously experience their tactility.

This connection between *feeling* as cutaneous contact and *feeling* as an affective experience has been significantly explored by Eve Sedgwick, who reads both sensory touch and emotion as “irreducibly phenomenological” experiences (21). Her text *Touching Feeling* posits a dynamic relationship between tactility and emotion, and she suggests that “a particular intimacy seems to subsist between textures and emotions” (17). As an example of this phenomenon, she cites the “too obvious” connection between sexual drive and the desire for cutaneous contact (17).

Texture is important to my own discussion of affect since the layering of objects onto and alongside the woman's altar resembles the emotional layers that accrue in both the *love conjure/blues* performance novel and “Altar Film.” Just as Bridgforth builds the experiences of violence, anger, spirituality, communion, joy, and sorrow onto one another, there is a similar fashioning of textural layers in the film's depiction of altar maintenance. We can see multiple layers of feeling evinced in the video: cat's grief over the drummer's torture, anger on the part of Isadora, and contemplative patience issuing from Jones' performance. Like the objects represented in the “Altar Film's” tableau, these feelings are both discreet and coterminous. They sit peacefully alongside each other, cohabitating, but never fully amalgamating.

In her 2007 review of the *love conjure/blues Text Installation's* premier, Austin-based poet Abe Louise Young analyzes the performance's depiction of affect and she concludes

that Bridgforth's work creatively imbricates a number of disparate feelings. She contends that the "Altar Film" "modulates the rhythm and intensity" of the drummer's textual narrative by layering "soothing" visual imagery on top of the sequence depicting Isadora's violent actions. Young's review emphasizes that divergent affective experiences co-exist within the performance. "For every drop into despair," she indicates, "Bridgforth's stories build a ladder to spiritual redemption" (Young). In the "Altar Film," peace, anger, hatred, spirituality, and joy are mutually inclusive emotions.

Furthermore, Bridgforth's video demonstrates that altar-making is a embodied performance of labor that requires great amounts of endurance and patience. Yoruba scholars and practitioners recommend that a personal altar be curated and maintained over a long period of time. Correal explains that by tending to a personal *egun* shrine on a daily basis, we can let "our ancestors know we want a deeper connection with them and invit[e] them into the fabric of our daily lives" (63). The work of maintaining an altar is laborious, though, and Correal specifies that an altar must be tended to on a daily basis. "Cultivating a soulful connection with" ancestor spirits "requires our full commitment, focused attention, hard work and consistent care" (Correal 60).<sup>39</sup> According to Correal, care for one's altar must be done on a "daily" basis (60), including activities such as sharing food with one's ancestors, cleaning the altar, and adding or rearranging the altar's contents. Scholar Kay Turner's conversations with Haitian-American Vodou priestess Alourdes "Mama Lola" Macena Margaux Kowalski suggest a similar connection between altar worship and the performance of labor: a "relationship with the Divine" is only accomplished for Mama Lola by the "daily continuity" of "homage and care" for her altar (131).<sup>40</sup> Of course, Vodou

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<sup>39</sup> Kay Turner makes a similar claim in her survey of American women's altar-making traditions, *Beautiful Necessity* (1999).

<sup>40</sup> Mama Lola performs different types of work each day of the week on her altar to Vodou spirit Ezili Dantò, the "foremost Mother goddess in the Vodou pantheon," including spilling rum, lighting incense, and offering

represents a separate spiritual tradition than Yoruba: originating with the Fon people of Benin, Vodou principles sometimes intersect with Yoruba (Correal 3).

In the *Text Installation*'s "Altar Film," we see the performer carefully craft her altar over a period of more than 5 minutes. By employing an *egun* shrine in order to represent Isadora and the drummer's righteous fury in response to legacies of racism, Bridgforth's text suggests one can grapple with anger through durational labor, performed over long stretches of time. The performer in the *Text Installation* constructs her altar meticulously, and though she leaves the video's frame at times, she always returns to continue caring for her altar. If *love conjure/blues* routes the experience of anger through the woman's personal altar, then the drawn-out, laborious work that she puts into the composition of her altar is also applied to her relationship with her anger. She lives with her anger on a regular basis, learning to meditated on it and work with it. It receives her attention and she feels – physically as well as emotionally – its texture(s).

Thinking about anger specifically is especially helpful to considering, or re-considering, the affective histories that have been told about American feminist movements. Ahmed, for instance, has productively shown how expressing anger can reveal the pain that gets hidden by dominant imperatives for minority groups to appear "happy" and "adjusted" to oppressive social and political systems (79). Enacting her anger in front of the plantation master, Isadora performs the kind of revelation of unhappiness that Ahmed theorizes: she refuses to "adjust" herself to the master's violence.

But Isadora and cat also reveal that the experience of feeling freedom – the project of feeling happy of one's own accord and on one's own terms – can come about as a result of performances of anger. The experience of freedom is, for the drummer especially, hard-

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specific water brought from Florida (Turner 54). She follows a "regular procedure of greeting, offering, and addressing" Ezili Dantò through the altar (Turner 131).

won. After Isadora punishes the master and frees the people he had enslaved, this community of people is “free,” and will continue to be “free” for a “long time” (53). The costs of Isadora and the drummer’s performance of angry resistance is great – the drummer, for instance, is tortured and permanently disfigured. The freedom that the community of formerly enslaved people feel as a result of Isadora’s actions gets expressed in the speakers’ voices in the “Altar Film.” Though grief and sadness are undeniably present at this moment towards the end of the film, the two speakers say “free / for a long time now” almost in sync with one another, and their emotional performance feels relaxed, unburdened, and reverent. In this moment, expressing anger exposes the violence and sadness that have been concealed by dominant apparatuses of power as well as it uncovers joy. Rather than cordon off anger from joy or happiness, Bridgforth’s “Altar Film” identifies the way that anger can be inflected *with* joy. The film shows that when happiness flies in the face of oppressive social forces, performing happiness with anger can be just as subversive as performing rage on its own.

The “Altar Film” refuses to dichotomize the relationship between anger and happiness, suggesting that spiritual practice enables the characters to completely imbricate their anger with reverence and joy. Explicitly narrating the characters’ relationship to their own mixed feelings, the “Altar Film” stages restoration, revealing how one supplicant copes with a lineage of traumatic experience that, in this instance, is born from the history of American slavery. This short film, when read alongside Bridgforth’s original performance novel, presents a theory of feminist affect that considers how spiritual practice is caught up in the experience of anger.

### **Theories of Transformation and Temporality**

What is anger’s temporality? How do we understand the relationship between feeling and time? How do feelings shape, and how are they shaped by, understandings of time –

chronological, linear, palimpsestic, or otherwise? Bridgforth's drama implicitly broaches such questions by employing a temporality in which "the past the present the future the living and the dead co-exist together" (vii) in order to tell the story of cat's coterminous communion with her ancestors and witnessing of Isadora's performance of rage.

Ana-Maurine Lara has explained that Bridgforth's dramatic practice explores how memories live in the body. For example, Bridgforth's trip to Nigeria in 2006 revealed to her how, even though this physical space was not a home for her, she still felt it as a homeland in her blood. This realization translates into her theatrical work and "speaks to the (im)material dimensions of memory: how the body recalls experiences 'never-not-yet-lived' but fully imagined; how memory locates itself in the blood" (Lara 36). Formulating memories of lived experiences as preconscious memories, Bridgforth articulates a theory of affect that resists distinctions between "affect" and "emotion." Typically, affects are understood as preconscious energies, while emotions exist as the result of these affects' interactions with social forces and political events. Bridgforth's understanding that memory can be located "in the blood" (Lara 36) suggests that histories and social experiences are preconscious. Anger, then, can function as both an affect and as an emotion. cat inherits the angers of her ancestors – these memories can reside in her body before they are each made conscious to her. Isadora's story is passed along to cat in *love conjure/blues* – the younger woman gets to experience Isadora's anger a generation after the fact. In this way, Isadora's anger is sedimented, embedded in cat's memory.

Theorists such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks have insisted on the importance of anger to Black feminist thought and activism. One of the ways in which Lorde and hooks theorize anger is by thinking of the feeling through metaphors of transformation or change. hooks, for example, asks feminists to think of anger not as an "end in itself" (*Feminist Theory* 66). In her text *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks offers an extended critique of the

anger than can accumulate between groups of feminists from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and she asserts that anger is productive for feminists because it allows allies to “face each other in hostile confrontation and struggle beyond the hostility to understanding” (66). Deeming anger, or “hostility,” “as an end in itself...a useless activity,” she states that feminist allies can push past anger in order to discover “greater clarity and understanding” (*Feminist Theory* 66). hooks explains that movement and transformation can aid feminists in putting anger to work in order to achieve “growth”: feminists can “move beyond,” “change”, or “wor[k] through” anger in order to translate it into political action (*Feminist Theory* 65-66).

Much like hooks, Lorde employs a terminology of change when describing feminist anger. She asserts that “anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification” (“Uses” 127). Here, Lorde affirms the abiding importance of anger to feminist activism, and she recommends that it can be “translated” in service of social justice. Lorde suggests that the differences between feminist allies, especially white women’s unexamined privilege, often generate anger for women of color. She stresses the importance of addressing this anger and encourages women to examine difference. Anger, she proposes, can be a “a powerful source of energy” when it is put towards “change” (“Uses” 127).

Lorde’s language, which theorizes anger’s essential nature as a form of energy, evokes the Yoruba spiritual traditions that Bridgforth draws upon. The Yoruba concept of *ashe* ascribes a divine energy to all extant matter, and this power flows from “God Almighty – Oloddumare,” who used it to create the universe (González-Wippler 5). *Ashe* is an energy that *does*, and individuals can draw from *ashe* in order to solve problems, quell enemies and negating forces, or shape the world around them (González-Wippler 5). Inasmuch as Lorde hypothesizes that anger can strongly propel feminist activism, her treatment of anger is not

unlike *ashe*, which can be “align[ed] with a particular energetic frequency, which is then directed toward a specific intention” (Correal 27). The linkages between these two bodies of work have suggestive implications. The active spark of anger can be read as a spiritual, or divine, force. Feminist anger and spirituality need not be mutually exclusive emotions.

I see “The Uses of Anger” as a cornerstone of feminist theory, and the essay asks readers to think very critically about negative sentiment. Alternatively, I’m interested in the notion of change and translation that both hooks and Lorde use in order to discuss anger. Lorde and hooks’ theorization of feminist anger through the language of change, growth, and transformation stress the importance of anger while providing a roadmap of how experiencing this difficult feeling and then molding it into something *else* can craft a more just world.

Bridforth’s theater, however, seems to be performing a different gesture with its depiction of anger. *love conjure/blues* places a number of different emotions and affects alongside anger, and these emotions exist simultaneously and in tension with each other, proving that anger that recurs over multiple generations might not change, but can still be productive. The “Altar Film” envisions anger as “an end in itself” and not a specific point in a larger, linear trajectory (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 66). Since the past, present, and future overlap and meet up with one another in Bridforth’s theatrical work, the past is never truly left behind.

Moreover, by working on her altar regularly, the woman in the “Altar Film” works on her anger regularly. This performance coincides with hooks and Lorde’s writing by assigning value to the experience of anger; but, by showing a woman physically manipulating her anger within a durational performance, the “Altar Film” breaks with the language of change and transformation. The woman on screen is never seen departing from her altar – she stands behind it at the end of the film and examines it, looking at it from overhead. If



Bridgforth invites audiences to consider anger as a kind of altar, then the woman continually works on, and alongside, her anger. While the inhabitants of the master's plantation are allowed to walk off its grounds as a result of Isadora's performance of rage, the story is passed down over generations. Her anger offers change since it radically alters the circumstances of the lives of the individuals formerly enslaved on the plantation. But, it also doesn't offer change: the story is an embedded, inherited memory for cat.

Bridgforth revises our conception of anger's temporal dimensions. The relationship between altars and temporality is explored in depth by art historian Robert Farris Thompson. For Thompson, the performance of altar maintenance inherently bends linear temporality and connects past moments in time with present or future temporalities. "All altars overthrow time," he suggests, since altars allow "the dead [to] come back" (26). Not only are the altars depicted in *love conjure/blues* engaged in drawing out time, slowing it down and stretching out embodied worship over a long duration, but the altars also continually return the supplicant to the past. By narrating her ancestors' histories, and re-living the anger that they experienced, cat lingers with affects that are sedimented in her memory. This affective framework layers past and future feelings on top of one another rather than investing in change or transformation. Bridgforth and Thompson's accounts of altar-making ask that we rethink teleological narratives that privilege forward motion. Instead, their assertions imply that feelings are in some way permanent, bubbling to the surface in perpetuity. The *Text Installation* demonstrates that the project of rethinking affect and anger calls into question our affective relationship to time.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Bridgforth's articulation of an alternative temporality is not unsimilar to recent theorizations of queer temporalities. Though Bridgforth's writing differentiates itself from this branch of queer theory by drawing from Yoruba spiritual traditions, the similarities between these two bodies of work suggest that they are in conversation with each other. For a more thorough discussion of queer temporalities, see, for example: Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010); Jack (Judith) Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005); and Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (1999).

While in *Lesbians Who Kill* the act of slowing down and sitting with anger results in stagnation, asking audiences to be wary of anger that does not move or go anywhere, *love conjure/blues* reveals how anger can linger but not be strictly inactive. cat, like the woman in the altar film, is dwelling with a story of anger but she is continually in motion – performing physical labor and manipulating the objects on her altar. The “Altar Film,” therefore combines the act of staying, of dwelling with anger, and a performance of movement. Within *love conjure/blues* and its “Altar Film,” anger is both a lingering, a staying, but also activity.

Bridgforth’s characters prove that anger seeps into other modes of feeling – including happiness. *love conjure/blues* speaks of rage by weaving the scene of angry violence into a larger frame of family connectivity and healing, suggesting that the trauma experienced by cat and her ancestors is not easily dissociated from their emotional transcendence.<sup>42</sup> I suggest that Bridgforth refuses any dichotomy between anger and happiness.

In the spirit of the jazz aesthetic, which demands that audiences open themselves to seeing and hearing many things onstage at once, I suggest that Bridgforth calls for audiences to embrace the challenge of *feeling* multiple things at once. The model of feeling simultaneously is implicit in the jazz aesthetic tradition, I argue, and it offers a counterpoint to many feminist accounts of affect theory. Theatrical jazz, and Bridgforth’s contribution to this body of work, constitutes a theory of affect in and of itself because of its commitment to multiplicity and the way in which it rewrites linear time.

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<sup>42</sup> Queer theory’s investigation of trauma has proposed a similar co-extant relationship between positive and negative affect. Cvetkovich’s writing in *An Archive of Feelings* is illustrative in this regard, especially her reading of Dorothy Allison’s novel *Bastard out of Carolina*. See: “Sexual Trauma/Queer Memory: Incest, Lesbianism, and Therapeutic Culture” in *An Archive of Feelings*.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Tangles of Resentment: Accessing Anger, Againstness, and Terry Galloway's Me(a)taphors of Madness**

Anger involves a reading of pain (which also involves reading): we do not all respond with anger, and to be angry is to assume that something is wrong. However, it is not necessarily the case that something is named or felt to be the cause of anger: there are moments where it is unclear what one is angry about, and all these moments do not necessarily gather together to form a coherent response.

– Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*

I will always be caught up in a tangle of resentment at the accident that befell me even before I was born.

– Terry Galloway, *Mean Little deaf Queer*

Born in Germany and raised in Texas, performance artist, playwright, and memoirist Terry Galloway lost her hearing at a young age. Around the same time, she began having powerful hallucinations caused by chemical imbalances in her brain that made her feel like she was “zipp[ing] up to the rafters,” leaving her body and flying overhead (xiii). Galloway's experiences with deafness and illness led her to be pulled into the orbit of disability culture. As a child, her parents enrolled her in the Lions Summer Camp for Crippled Children, where, because she could “pass for normal” (49), she worried about not being “handicapped enough” to fit into disability culture (52). Her ability to pass as able-bodied and able-minded did not prevent her from being the subject of discrimination, however: when, envisioning herself as a blossoming actress, Galloway attempted to join the theater department of her college, she was told that she would not be allowed to act and should, instead, take up costuming if she wanted to participate in the theater. Galloway's impairments would only continue to grow in number as she aged. In her twenties, Galloway began experiencing symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia and spent time in a New York psychiatric hospital.

In addition to her frustration with the ways in which dominant culture views disability, Galloway has often found herself furious with discrimination against lesbians, gays, and queers. Galloway's struggles, as an artist with a disability and as a queer woman, take center stage in her 2009 memoir *Mean Little deaf Queer*. At its ending, readers find Galloway in a position of relative stability: living in Florida with her partner, professor Donna Marie Nudd, and running a performance collective comprised of artists with disabilities, called the Mickee Faust Club. Throughout the memoir, Galloway narrates her relationship to her anger. In the memoir's prologue, she admits to feeling frustrated with her body and worries that such feelings threaten "to churn into bitter meanness" (xv). She "crackles with fury" when, as an undergraduate, she is told to take up costuming instead of acting (98), and though she has attained a life full of love and artistic fulfillment by the memoir's end, in its last pages she admits that she will "always be caught up in a tangle of resentment" (227). By so explicitly narrating her anger, Galloway, an avowed feminist, invites readers to consider the relationship between feminism and anger. Specifically, I argue, Galloway's autobiographical work indexes the figure of the madwoman – a "crazy and angry woman" working to break free from social oppression (Gilbert and Gubar 77) – by linking her discussion of anger to her analysis of her own mental illness.

Feminist scholars of the twenty-first century are invariably familiar with the figure of the madwoman. Since the publication of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's landmark text *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), discussions within the academy have productively explored the ways in which feminists angry with the status quo of contemporary life have become associated with insanity. Such associations unfold in literary texts that depict angry women escaping the confines of patriarchal oppression by slipping into madness, such as "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) or in real-life instances of women being dismissed as mad for pointing out discrimination. Some scholars have skeptically viewed the liberatory potential of

madwoman figures. While Gilbert and Gubar read Bertha Mason as a psychological “dark double” of the author Charlotte Brontë and of the titular protagonist of *Jane Eyre* (1847), Gayatri Spivak advises that such a reading requires that Bertha, a woman of color, end her own life so that “Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction” (251). As a white woman, Galloway is more likely to receive diagnosis and treatment of her mental illness. Women of color within the United States who experience schizophrenia, the diagnosis Galloway receives, are “more at risk for misdiagnosis and violent victimization” (Sparks 196). Galloway’s whiteness influences the degree to which she can speak of her psychiatric illness and expect to be taken seriously.

Within popular culture, I can remember an article called “Lady, You Really Aren’t Crazy,” which originally appeared in the popular online publication *The Gloss*, being widely shared among my feminist colleagues and friends. The article advised women that even though men might routinely dismiss them as “crazy” after a nasty breakup, these women’s sanity was still, assuredly, in tact. Such issues are incredibly important to discuss, and they reveal the ways in which disability and feminism intersect. But notably absent in all these discourses are the perspectives of women who *do* live with mental illnesses. This chapter takes up the question of anger as it gets articulated in and through the bodies of women with disabilities, specifically, women who have psychiatric disabilities and mental illness. I explore the question of how women with mental illnesses relate to anger through a reading of Galloway’s memoir *Mean Little deaf Queer*. Galloway honed her performance skills at The University of Texas at Austin and would later go on to perform in notable venues such as the American Palace Theater and New York’s WOW Café. However, in considering her performance of feminist anger, I do not read the script of her now well-known one-woman show *Out All Night and Lost My Shoes* (1987-89). Instead, I focus my attention on the everyday performances of anger that Galloway narrates in her memoir.

*Mean Little deaf Queer* frames Galloway's performance of madness within a larger narrative about deaf and crip identity. The author's hearing loss is explored alongside her mental illness, queer desire, and feminist anger – and the decision to broach these issues together shows Galloway reaching towards identity positions that have been stigmatized within twentieth- and twenty-first-century U.S. culture. Deaf studies scholars, for instance, have identified a history of Deaf communities distancing themselves from individuals living with mental illness or developmental disabilities for fear of being labeled “feeble-minded.” Mad studies scholars have shown how those marked by mental illness have had to dispel pernicious stereotypes about being angry and violent. What's more, the genre of performance has long been used to put persons with mental illness on display for dominant culture to consume, scrutinize, and stigmatize.

Instead of trying to move away from these fraught associations, Galloway affirms them in *Mean Little deaf Queer* and – going one step further – conflates her mental illness, deafness, and feminist anger. This series of productive confluences that intertwine mental illness and deafness, madness and violent feminist anger, and invisible and visible disabilities eventually helps Galloway build supportive communities that provide her with a place to define her identity on her own terms. Since she articulates her mental illness through the genre of performance, Galloway suggests that performance can serve as a useful artistic genre for thinking through the experience of mental difference. Situating her feminist rage as a type of insanity illustrates that mental illness makes anger no less valid. Galloway's text shows these categories feeding into one another, like a Möbius strip with no inside and no outside, demanding readers consider whether her various disabilities can ever be parsed from one another.

## Disarticulated Histories

I employ a variety of terms to speak of the mental and emotional experiences Galloway documents in her memoir. The term “mental illness” helps me think about the ways that Galloway works (sometimes ambivalently) within dominant medical institutions. While some have critiqued the medical term “mental illness” as a label that “pathologizes” persons with mental difference (Wallin), others have argued that the medical model is not as monolithic as it is often made out to be. Emily Martin’s *Bipolar Expeditions* (2007) offers a thorough discussion of the not-at-all-straightforward relationship that persons with mental illness can have with medical practitioners who try, with varying degrees of success, to alleviate their suffering. Conversely, Mad Pride activists employ the word “madness” as an umbrella term that describes psychiatric difference in language not governed by the medical institution (Lewis 339). Since Galloway is critical of medical models of mental illness as she works within them, I also use the term madness to describe her narration of her own paranoia.

Culturally Deaf individuals have criticized the assumption that Deafness constitutes a disability, arguing instead that it represents a language difference. “Deaf people” explains Harlan Lane, “cherish their unique identity and seek integration that honors their distinct language and culture” (369). Because she was “‘mainstreamed’ to be part of the hearing world” as a child, Galloway says she feels like an outsider to Deaf culture, and she recalls feeling “hostility and suspicion” directed at her when she attended Deaf gatherings (78). She characterizes herself as the “lowest on the deaf totem pole” since she “suck[s] at Sign” and does not identify as culturally Deaf. Her choice to align herself with disability activist organizations, claiming that she views her deafness as a disability, also separates Galloway from the Deaf community. Following Galloway’s self-descriptions of her own experiences, I

use both “deafness” (with a lower-case “d,” since she does not identify as culturally Deaf) and “disability” to speak of Galloway’s hearing loss in this chapter.

Galloway evinces a complicated relationship to any proposed cure of her deafness or of her mental differences, and she discloses feeling ambivalent about the medical institution and the medicalization of mental illness. Her skepticism towards the medical institution mirrors the criticisms leveraged against the medical model of mental illness by queer studies and disability studies scholars such as Robert McRuer, Ann Cvetkovich, and Lennard Davis. According to McRuer, “medical and psychiatric institutions,” such as those in which Galloway participates, are “designed to guarantee the production” (20) of what Michel Foucault deems “docile bodies” (136). “Docile bodies” are those that have been “subjected, used, transformed, and improved” to optimize productivity under capitalist systems (136). McRuer states that “during the last two or three centuries bodies have been monitored (by disciplinary institutions and increasingly by compulsory self-policing) for signs of behavioral and physical difference that might impede their productivity” (21). In a similar fashion, Cvetkovich is resistant to medicalizing discourses that “search for the core symptoms” of a mental illness and therefore overlook the different ways psychic pain can manifest across “historical context[s],” “geopolitical location[s],” and “individual experiences” (31-32). Lennard Davis’s *Obsession: A History* (2008) contributes to these arguments by revealing the ways in which mental illnesses seem to be as much “the products of the explanatory systems used” by the medical apparatus as they are of the seemingly stable biological symptoms to which medical cures attend (21-22).

Galloway neither wholly accepts or rejects the medicalization of mental illness or the medical model of mental health. She notes that she is deeply “suspicious” of doctors since they caused her hearing loss to begin with (TEDxTalks). While pregnant with Terry, Galloway’s mother visited a German doctor who injected her with an antibiotic in order to



cure a kidney infection. As a result, the drugs in her mother's body produced a "chemical imbalance" (30) that resulted in Galloway being "not quite blind as a bat, but definitely deaf as a doornail" (*Out All Night* 8).

So when doctors initially approach her about getting a cochlear implant, at a time when the technology was "crude" (TEDxTalks), Galloway says she told the doctors "Hell no, piss off!" She also says she feels "prisoner to the cure" such as her hearing aids, which are sometimes cumbersome (TEDxTalks). At the same time, Galloway has wished to hear again, and in 2011 she made the decision to get cochlear implant surgery to restore her ability to hear. At multiple points in her memoir, Galloway reveals that she has worked hard to lessen the fears and anxieties that are born of her mental illness. Doctors diagnose her as a "possible paranoid schizophrenic" (174) as an adult, and Galloway's use of the term "possible" next to such clinical terminology signals neither complete acceptance or rejection of the medical model of mental illness. She has a shifting, disidentificatory relationship to the medical institution and to "cures" of mental or physical dis/ability.

Describing her experiences with mental illness, physical disability, and deafness as occurring simultaneously, Galloway's memoir draws together a group of identity categories that have historically been difficult to think together. Galloway writes of her paranoid schizophrenia in the same breath as she describes the "chemical imbalances" in her brain (30) that cause her to have hallucinations that make her feel as if she has left her body, "flying six feet in the air, looking down" at herself from above (xii). These hallucinations are caused in part, says Galloway, by her "myopia" and the changes in her body that are producing her deafness (30). Situating this list of bodily and mental experiences as disabilities, Galloway insists that mental illness, impairment, deafness, and disability are inextricably bound together for her.

To do so invokes the historic tensions and allegiances between Mad Pride activism, disability rights activism, and d/Deaf studies and culture. Mad Pride activism and disability activism have a decidedly ambivalent history with one another, sometimes working together and other times working at odds. According to Bradley Lewis, Mad activists and disability activists haven't formed a "sustained coalition" since the "two groups are composed of different subcultures – with different histories, different cultural artifacts, and different networks of association" (340). While a good deal of disability scholarship has attended to bodily impairments, arguing for conceiving of disability as something constructed by social convention and not as sickness or illness, Mad activists and mental health advocates such as the Consumer/Survivor/Ex-Patient (C/S/X) movement argue that disability can, at times, cause suffering and illness.

Similar divisions and oppositions have separated Deaf culture from hearing communities and from disability activism. According to Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, Deaf culture tends to see Deafness as that which is not hearing. In ASL, a "key concept in defining HEARING" is that "HEARING means the opposite of what we [Deaf persons] are" (Padden and Humphries 332). Moreover, Deaf studies scholars have dismissed the idea that Deafness constitutes a disability. Padden and Humphries testify to meeting a number of Deaf persons who see the term "disabled" as a word that references "those who are blind or physically handicapped, not Deaf people" (333).

The subjects of mental illness and mental inferiority have also been fraught within communities of Deaf individuals and activists in the U.S. Deaf or hard-of-hearing persons have faced accusations of being "feeble-minded" throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Individuals who were hard of hearing and could not vocalize fluently were often deemed mentally unfit, according to Susan Burch, who explains that the "repeated linking of deaf people with mentally disabled people – the 'feeble-minded' – created distinct difficulties

for the Deaf cultural community” (135). This use of the term “feeble-minded” spread rapidly in the U.S. after its appearance in the *New York Times-Index* in 1908 (Devlieger 176) and has been used to characterize Deaf adults and children as mentally unfit (Robinson 13). Deafness was frequently “misinterpreted as mental retardation, insanity, or criminality” (Burch 137). Non-Deaf persons have historically twinned mental illness and cognitive impairment, misdiagnosing Deaf individuals as both, simultaneously (Burch 138). Burch writes that intersections of racism and ableism meant that Black Deaf individuals were especially stigmatized, and thus vulnerable to “greater state intervention” and “sterilization” (137).

Tavian Robinson argues that the ableist tendency to see mental inferiority as the cause of Deafness gave leaders in the Deaf community cause to distance Deafness from mental illness. This “distancing” was achieved in many ways (Robinson 8). At the beginning of the twentieth century, schools for deaf children instituted policies to “reject prospective pupils who appeared to be feeble-minded” in order “to segregate ‘feeble-minded’ children from ‘normal’ deaf children” (Robinson 7). This strategy was aimed at demonstrating the inherent normalcy of individuals who were deaf by “accepting ableist ideas” about persons with mental illness (Robinson 5). As someone with hearing loss and a mental illness, Galloway cannot separate these two phenomena in her everyday life, even though specific movements in American culture and history have worked to disarticulate them.

Galloway’s autobiography references the historical “misdiagnoses” that grouped “deaf people with individuals with cognitive and developmental disabilities” (Robinson 7). While working on a PBS television show for children with disabilities, Galloway meets a woman who identifies as culturally Deaf, and Galloway soon develops a “crush” on her (79). While they work together on the TV show, Galloway listens to her stories about a “whole generation” of deaf children who were forced to either learn lip-reading or go “without

language,” since educators deemed ASL too “animal” and “vulgar” (80). The woman tells Galloway about a hearing-impaired girl diagnosed by her own parents as “mentally retarded” and subsequently “committed as a toddler to a state institution” (80). As the young girl grew up, doctors realized her parents’ error, but not before the woman took on “facial expressions” and speaking patterns similar to individuals who do have intellectual or developmental disabilities (81). In this young girl’s story, cognitive impairments linger on her body through repeated everyday performances. Embedding this story in her memoir, Galloway suggests that psychiatric, cognitive, and hearing impairments sometimes intersect in ways that are not easy to predict or pull apart.

Galloway’s memoir claims identity positions that have historically been disavowed. Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals have long had to grapple with dominant culture’s harmful assumption that deafness is linked to intellectual or cognitive inferiority. Galloway, instead of disavowing this harmful stereotype, actively plays the role herself in *Mean Little deaf Queer*. For example, she professes to identify with the portrayal of Hellen Keller in the 1962 film *The Miracle Worker*. Galloway remembers a childhood afternoon spent watching Patty Duke play Helen Keller on screen, and she yearns to perform the same combination of crazy and crippled fury she observed:

As a little crippled girl I was expected to act the part. But what part was that? Patty Duke as Helen Keller in *The Miracle Worker*? I wouldn’t have minded that in the least. She got to run around like crazy and break and shatter things in her furies, and there was nothing more appealing than her homoerotic attachment to Ann Bancroft. So boy, I was willing to try that role. (196)

Galloway’s account of viewing *The Miracle Worker* accepts the pathologized associations between Keller’s deafness and mental difference. Keller is celebrated as someone free to act “crazy” and angry because of her hearing loss, and Galloway eventually plays this role herself when she is institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital. In her interpretation of *The Miracle*

*Worker*, Galloway positions deafness as the instigating force that drives Helen Keller to insanity, “crazy”-ness, and to destructive violence born of her “furies” (196). Declining to disprove the pernicious stereotype that attributes mental deficiency to persons with hearing loss, Galloway insists on the connection between her hearing loss and her mental and emotional distress. She does not attempt to portray herself as normal or adjusted, opting instead to articulate the difficulties of her mental illness. A crucial difference between the history of “medical misdiagnoses” (Robinson 7) of feeble-mindedness in Deaf individuals and Galloway’s own amalgamation of deafness and “craz[iness]” is that Galloway asserts her diagnosis herself (Galloway 170). She diagnoses herself as simultaneously mentally ill and deaf, rather than allowing an outside party (the medical institution) to “misdiagnose” her (Robinson 7).

### **Anger, Tangled**

The subject of Galloway’s own “furies” are the many forces of discrimination she encounters in her daily life, from ableism to sexism. However, her anger at specific oppressions is made unstable through the memoir’s narrative, and Galloway depicts the work of feeling angry as deeply complicated and messy. Such an approach diverges from Ahmed’s account of feminist rage, which I suggest conceptualizes anger as an energy that has a particular geography: moving straightforwardly to push against and overturn specific oppressions. *Mean Little deaf Queer* shows how anger can sometimes operate as a direct current of energy, moving in opposition to injustice. At other times, though, the text frames anger as *tangled*. Anger, Galloway proposes, can just as easily move in direct opposition to a person, practice, or system of oppression as it can turn back on itself, move inwards toward the person who felt the anger in the first place, direct itself outward again, or become nebulous, directionless, and knotty.

The tangled nature of anger is explored in Galloway's memoir through a series of games she played with her family. In the first chapter of her memoir, titled "*Them and Me*," Galloway describes a game called "Scare," which is a darker, more ominous version of hide-and-seek. "Scare" involves the Galloway parents playing the role of a predator as they hunt for their children, who hide in the various corners and recesses of their dimly-lit apartment. Galloway and her siblings are the "Us" of the game, an in-group of sisterly filiation who find elaborate spots for keeping themselves out of sight, tucking themselves into places such as the crannies between the "slats and springs" of a bed, in the top of the linen closet, or in storage trunks (11). "We three girls," Galloway recalls, "were always the prey during this late night game, and the role of our parents was to find us out" (11). Their mother and father became the "Them" force that hunted the "Us" of the Galloway sisters. Though as beautiful as a "princess," when their mother was Them she "looked more wicked than any witch" in a fairytale, beckoning to her kids with the "grin of a clever, hungry wolf" and a "growling croon" (12). Their father turned their apartment "still" when he was Them, hunting the girls "like a spider" and letting this daughters "question his hidden presence" until "every creak, every shift of light, every prickling of our skin became them" (12). The Galloways' Us vs. Them games construct the sisters as a cohesive unit against which their parents are opposed, albeit playfully. Opposition, in this game, is played out through performance. Her parents play the "role" of a predator when they search for their children, and the game is an elaborate exercise in "playing" (11).

The game takes on sinister contours when Galloway finds herself living in a real-world version of Scare. After her father takes a job as a government spy, their family is transplanted to Berlin, and Galloway's father finds himself embroiled in a large-scale geopolitical conflict. The Galloways move to Berlin in 1954, in the middle of the Cold War, and Galloway's father's duties as an intelligence agent involve crossing into East Berlin under

a false name to spy on the Communist government. Though she was too young to recognize it at the time, as she aged Galloway realized that their in-home performances “playing at predator and prey” (11) mirror the political tensions between East and West Berlin, with the spies from each half of the divided city hunting one another. Communists living just across the Berlin Wall seem to Terry a “real life Them” who might harm her or her family at any moment (11). In this scenario, her father is a “covert operative” playing his own “brand of Scare with the enemy in East Berlin” (12). Linking her childhood game to the events surrounding an international conflict, Galloway shows how political and social power can be conceived of through a series of oppositions. In both the pretend version of Scare and her nascent understanding of the German political climate after World War II, the conceptual apparatus of a subject group, “Us,” opposing a third-person cluster of antagonists, “Them,” is used to articulate conflict.

Galloway explains that her experiences playing Scare – both within her home and in Berlin, the “jittery city on the verge” (15) – give her a set of tools that help her survive the sexism, homophobia, and ableism that permeate dominant U.S. culture. Scare teaches Galloway how to contend with adversaries who would do her harm, whether actively or through complacency, and she describes the game as a “dress rehearsal” for her “shifting, hallucinatory, and deafening childhood,” for the disability activism in which she’d engage in her adult years, and for her daily life as a queer woman (15). Once again, Scare becomes an act of theater, allowing her to “rehears[e]” for later in life (15). For example, when Galloway is working with the Austin-based cabaret theater Esther’s Follies, she meets a Them when she encounters a sexist university bureaucrat who hopes to offer her theater company financial backing. Galloway meets with the bureaucrat to discuss the possibility of funding Esther’s, and she arrives at his office accompanied by two male actors who are there to translate for her. However, though she is a writer-director for Esther’s Follies and a leading

member of the troupe, the administrator speaks only to her male companions. Her two male friends insist repeatedly to the administrator that they are not leaders in the theater troupe. Nevertheless, Galloway remembers, “each time he talked business he addressed himself to the men” (153). Galloway is familiar with people like this administrator, she says: “I’d run into his kind so many other times in my life” (154). The administrator is “a type, a *them*” (154). *Thems* recur in Galloway’s memoir. When she is cast in a production of *Henry IV, Part I* while completing her undergraduate studies at The University of Texas, Galloway recognizes Falstaff as Prince Hal’s “Them” (112). Her own body even becomes a Them to her as she loses her sense of hearing: “[T]he alien thing – draining away words and sounds and pulling me out of the sweet, solid world I loved into some cold, remote place above it all – wasn’t outside, but lurking within me. It was my body turning into a *them*, my body that was beginning to scare me” (27).

The conceptual apparatus of Us vs. Them eventually helps Galloway situate her experiences with physical and mental disability. As she makes a growing number of friends who also have disabilities, Galloway comes to realize that many people who do not fit within a normative framework of embodiment or ability see themselves as Uses being hunted by Them forces:

“‘Lucky to have made it thanks to them’ is a popular mantra among my disabled friends, the *them* shifting with the circumstances, the story. They can be upper-class parents who stick you in an institution when you’re a toddler because your spine twists where it shouldn’t; or scientists who conduct thirty-six exploratory operations so they can test their theories on your eleven year old body; or just superstitious passersby who gawk at the newborn you like you’re some kind of nasty insect and they wish they had a swatter. Their insufferable self-regard and trumped-up cultural standards of purity are a shallow disguise [...] Beware *them*. Steel yourself against *them*. (9-10)

Scare, then, provides a model for thinking through discrimination and opposition to it. Privileged subjects are assigned *Them* status under this rubric, and they seem sharply divided



from the *Us* being discriminated against – the child being institutionalized, the person being gawked at. Galloway’s model suggests that persons who enjoy institutional and social power are *Thems* – third party groups who are not related to the first-person *Us*-es. The subject groups – Galloway’s friends with disabilities, *Uses* – are visibly different, and do not enjoy institutional authority.

Galloway’s narrative imbues this model of bifurcated opposition with anger. She explains that the common phrase uttered by her friends with disabilities, “Yeah. We made it. No thanks to *them*,” is often accompanied by a “sharp *hub* of anger” (9). Throughout this first chapter in her memoir, Galloway links anger to her rhetoric of *Us* vs. *Them*. She feels “contempt” and “venom” for a childhood friend who does not recognize her own privilege (16), sees a “mean streak unfolding” in her young self (15), and cultivates a “well-developed suspicious distrust of them, whoever they might prove to be” (10). Division breeds distrust and resentment, and Galloway directs her anger against outside forces who are violent or oppressive. Formulating her politics of anger as a mode of reaction, Galloway’s anger operates as a form of *againstness* (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 176). Being a feminist, Ahmed explains, frequently means articulating opposition to specific histories of pain and injury. Instead of insisting that feminists move actively towards goals instead of reacting against injury, Ahmed suggests that anger at oppression “gives feminist politics its edge” (174). “Feminism,” she writes,

is shaped by what it is against, just as women’s bodies and lives may be shaped by histories of violence that bring them into a feminist consciousness. If feminism is an emotional as well as ethical and political response to what it is against, then what feminism is against cannot be seen as ‘exterior’ to feminism [...] If anger is a form of ‘against-ness,’ then it is precisely about the impossibility of moving beyond the history of injuries to a pure of innocent position. (*Cultural Politics* 174)

Anger, and being “against” the many *Thems* of the world, including persons who are racist, sexist, and homophobic, moves Galloway away from those who would hurt her, such as the

university bureaucrat or discriminatory scientists, and toward clusters of like-minded individuals who are also subjected to stigma.

Such movements, I argue, have a geography. Moving in a particular direction, against one thing or towards another, seems to offer a model of movement that is guided in one direction. When we push up against an object, we use our energy to move the object in a line. If I put my hands on a chair and push against it, it will move forward (assuming it is not too heavy). “Anger,” Ahmed writes, “is not simply defined in relationship to the past, but as an opening up of the future” (*Cultural Politics* 175). Moving from the past to the future implies a linear teleology, with energies directed at oppression “opening up” a better world. Ahmed identifies a “directionality” to anger: though different feminists might “construe the ‘object’ of anger quite differently,” each articulation of anger is similarly oriented in a particular direction (176). Being against something maps a straightforward movement away from that which causes violence. Anger can therefore operate as movement in a singular direction. “Directed against this or that,” anger identifies the object to which it is opposed and propels the feeling subject away (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics* 176).

However, Galloway’s anger against the various *Thems* of the world sometimes move her in a direction that is not at all straightforward. As Galloway grows into adulthood, she begins noticing how the oppositions between “Us and Them” forces often change very quickly and without her being able to expect it. She writes that communities of persons with disabilities suspect that “Them” agents are “everywhere,” and could appear at any moment (9). In a chilling twist of the “Us” versus “Them” game, Galloway reveals that you can even be your own “Them”: “They can even be you, hating your own screwed-up body, wanting it dead” (10). This extra layer of nuance that Galloway infuses into the “Us Versus Them” model of opposition and of disability unsettles any stable method for determining who the

“Us” or the “Them” is at any given moment. “They can be you” Galloway explains, but they might not be (10).

Galloway experiences self-directed anger firsthand when, during the course of her theater career, she is asked to run a workshop for aspiring artists with disabilities. Instead of being excited about the prospect of working with other disabled artists, Galloway is hesitant and doesn’t want to lead the workshop. She feels “resentful” at being assigned to teach this “inferior” workshop, and says that she goes into the workshop “feeling so superior” to everyone else in the room (151). As a result, Galloway admits she did a poor job teaching movement and articulation, and she realizes that she left the group of hopeful artists unsatisfied. Later, it dawns on Galloway that she had discounted their performance abilities. She realizes that she’d become a “Them” figure: she has internalized the stigma against persons with disabilities and used it to discriminate against this group of disabled artists. She realizes that she had thought she’d “put all *them* behind me after I found the good guys – the kinds of people” who would not judge her for her queerness or her disability (155). However, reflecting on her actions in the workshop, she becomes upset with herself. “In the lumpy discomfort of my English bed, I pulled my coat on over my pajamas and curled into a fetal position under the might-as-well-be-nonexistant blanket” (158). She shudders to realize that she’d become “a kind of hideous *them*...guilty, as they always were, of an epic failure of imagination” (158). Galloway’s anger at *them* turns back in on itself, on herself, after she realizes that she has internalized the things she is against. Her body, curled up and twisted, mirrors the directionality of her anger. Instead of moving against oppression, Galloway must shuttle between directing her anger outwards and inwards. She also realizes that she has internalized ableism with remarkable ease. Discrimination and stigma can be embedded in any number of persons, systems, and practices, even ones thought to be egalitarian. It becomes difficult, then, to know where to direct anger.

Ahmed addresses the ambiguities that anger can take on when we do not know where we are directing it. “There are moments of anger where it is unclear what one is angry about,” Ahmed explains “and all these moments do not necessarily gather together to form a coherent response” (*Cultural Politics* 176). Ahmed suggests that these kinds of ambiguities demand “reading”: the intellectual labor of figuring out what one is angry at (*Cultural Politics* 176). I want to dwell with this moment of uncertainty that Ahmed identifies. She states that uncertainty about anger compels feminists to stage “a reading of the response to anger,” moving feminists “from anger into an interpretation of that which one is against, whereby associations or connections are made between the object of anger and broader patterns or structures” (*Cultural Politics* 176). Galloway’s memoir seems to suggest that such moments of “reading” are happening all the time for feminists, and that determining the “directionality” of anger is not always a simple task. Such reading practices often take a great deal of intellectual work and can be emotionally and physically taxing. I view such moments of reading anger as cyclical and discursive, and as not at all straightforward. Anger can eventually be sorted out, directed against specific systems, persons, or injustices. But I think anger can also move in multiple contradictory directions before it ever gets straightened out. Anger is, at times, knotty, and tangled, like the bed-sheets that trap May and June in *Lesbians Who Kill*. Anger, then, could be conceptualized like the convection currents of the Earth’s mantle, where semisolid hot rock moves in cyclical currents beneath the Earth’s crust. The plates that rest on top of the hot mantle move in specific directions, but the lava-like liquid beneath the plates is constantly swirling, moving in a vortex. Anger might eventually move in a single direction, but underneath such “directional” movement is a cyclical flow of energy that is moving, sometimes messily, in many directions.

I view this messy, knotty anger as a reflection of the ways in which we are so often complicit with systems of oppression. Because of racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia’s

widespread invisibility, and the way in which these forces of discrimination are made to appear natural, it is incredibly easy to take them on ourselves, even though we might not want to. If we have internalized ableism, as Galloway has when she discriminates against the disabled artists in her workshop, are we angry with ourselves? Or with the systemic oppressions that have shaped our thinking? Or some combination of both? And, what is the direction of such an anger? Describing her own anger as a “tangle of resentment” in which she is “caught up” illustrates the various, forces she feels she is against (227). What she is up against is not a clearly defined opposition, but a “tangle” that she must sort out. Oppositions between inside and outside, oppressors and the oppressed, deafness and mental illness, invisible and visible disability are all difficult to pin down within Galloway’s “Us versus Them” framework. Galloway concedes that the “Us Versus Them” model is useful for her because of how it allows the two parties to be “shifting with the circumstances, the story” (9-10). The Uses and Thems of the world are perpetually in motion, and are not at all stable.

### **Queer Crip Theory and Disability Studies**

To locate Galloway’s memoir within the purview of a particular field of critical theory presents challenges, given that Galloway simultaneously claims both physical and mental, visible and invisible disabilities. Disability studies has largely focused on visible and physical impairments rather than mental illnesses, which are typically classified as invisible and not embodied. However, disability scholars have been working to include studies of mental illness in this field. According to Anna Mollow, dominant theorizations about disability within the academy have “been developed primarily with physical disability in mind,” though she acknowledges that “cognitive and psychiatric impairments” are increasingly discussed in academic contexts (284). Mollow has remarked that when she was researching a project about Black women and depression from a disability studies perspective, a fellow scholar approached her to ask whether depression “counts” as a

disability (284). Assuring this scholar that mental illness “counts” as a legitimate disability, Mollow urges for disability studies scholars to re-formulate models of disability in order to fully address the lived experiences of persons with psychiatric difference. Mollow’s response to her colleague echoes my own reservations with models of disability that hope to “count” mental illness as a disability by suggesting that invisible and non-embodied impairments are just as valid as physical and visible ones. Instead of arguing that “mental illness counts too,” or “invisible disabilities count too,” I am interested in an inclusion strategy that demonstrates how mental illnesses *are* physical phenomena and *do* have visible components.

Scholars working within queer crip theory have argued for establishing heterogeneous, coalitional groups of dis/abled subjects. Alison Kafer, for example, asserts that persons with disabilities and impairments could benefit from crafting “collective affinities” that “recognize potential linkages among” a range of disabilities, from “people with learning disabilities to those with chronic illnesses, from people with mobility impairments to those with HIV/AIDS, from people with sensory impairments to those with mental illness” (11). I appreciate Kafer’s approach to disability for the way it preserves difference and resists flattening out disability into a monolithic category. At the same time, I am interested in examining the ways in which various disabilities and impairments can bleed into one another. For Galloway, her sensory impairment (her deafness) gives rise to her paranoia (her mental illness). While on some level, the experience of having hearing loss is distinct and different from the experience of living with a mental illness, Galloway’s text asks us to remain attentive to the ways in which boundaries between different disabilities can be porous.

Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow explain that while physical impairments are viewed as paradigmatic within disability studies, invisible disabilities like mental illness are typically sidelined in disability studies discourse but valorized, or, more specifically

romanticized, within queer theory. The “romantic outlaw sort” of disability – “illegitimate figures” such as “addicts, crazies, compulsives, sick people” – is regularly invoked by queer theorists but “appear[s] infrequently in disability studies” (McRuer and Mollow 27). I worry that the romanticizing of mental illness that McRuer and Mollow reference falls in line with the uncritical use of madness as a metaphor for women’s rebellion within feminist studies, which I will address later. However, I return here to my assertion that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between physical and non-physical disabilities. All of the illnesses and impairments marked as “illegitimate” and “romantic” by Mollow and McRuer are commonly thought of as invisible (that is, not visible on the body). But if we identify some physical basis for addiction and mental illness, do such disabilities cease to be strictly invisible, and subsequently, do they lose their status as “romantic outlaw” disabilities?

The struggle within queer crip theory and disability studies to grapple with the relationship between physical and mental, invisible and visible disabilities is also present in theater critics’ reaction to Galloway’s work. My choice to consistently track Galloway’s diagnosis of “paranoid schizophrenia” (174) throughout her memoir responds to scholarly and critical conventions that often mark Galloway’s status as mentally ill after, subsequently, or secondarily to her status as hard of hearing. For example, Carrie Sandahl’s “Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer?” illustrates how Galloway’s performance art reveals solo performance’s potential to expand the identity categories “crip” and “queer.” Sandahl describes Galloway as a “deaf theater artist and writer in her early fifties” and attends to the artist’s creative life in Austin and New York City before referencing her “bouts with mental illness” (34). While deafness is attributed to her identity – she is a “deaf theater artist” – Galloway’s mental differences are characterized as “bouts”: transient episodes that do not adhere to her core selfhood (34). Sandahl’s article portrays Galloway’s mental illness as something she *has* rather than *is*.

Some critics use sequencing to hierarchize Galloway's mental illness after or below her deafness. This descriptive tactic appears in professor and theater critic Kathy O'Dell's 1990 review of Galloway's solo performance *Out All Night and Lost My Shoes*<sup>43</sup> – a text that contains kernels of many stories that would later appear in *Mean Little deaf Queer*. The review's first two paragraphs describe Galloway as an artist with profound hearing loss but explain that she does not identify as culturally Deaf. The third paragraph, of four total, analyzes Galloway's performance of "hysteria" (148), and the fourth paragraph attends to the performer's broad "exclusion" from mainstream U.S. culture (148). O'Dell's review speaks to Galloway's madness after addressing her deafness, ascribing a clear order to her treatment of Galloway's disabilities, and considers Galloway's auditory impairments with more substance than her mental ones.

O'Dell's review also explicitly states that audiences can more easily relate to Galloway's marginalization as a deaf woman than with her tales of psychiatric disability. When Galloway reveals the "circumstances of her birth," in which her mother received a prenatal injection that would eventually cause Galloway's deafness, O'Dell feels the performer "had us [the audience] on her side" (147). O'Dell continues that the "performer-audience relationship grew uncomfortable – effectively uncomfortable" when Galloway describes her stay in Gracie Square psychiatric hospital. As the performer testifies to her own "hysteria," O'Dell claims the piece grows "alienating" (148).

What is the significance of marking mental difference – a type of disability typically classified as invisible – after or behind the author's hearing loss? Why is a performance of physical disability more "relatable" than one of mental illness? This type of sequential attention to the author's various disabilities reflects a general stigma against mental illness

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<sup>43</sup> Galloway staged the show at the Hennepin Cultural Center for the Arts in Minneapolis, MN in 1990, and O'Dell's review appeared soon after in *ArtForum* magazine.



embedded within disability studies and theater studies. I argue that a close reading of *Mean Little deaf Queer* will offer a different agenda than the one evinced by O'Dell and Sandahl's writing, since the memoir suggests throughout that Galloway's "mental affliction[s]" (189) are fundamentally tied to her physical ailments.

### **Madness as Me(a)taphor**

Aware from a very young age that "ugly or not, idiots or not, boys always had an aura of authority, of primacy," Galloway's memoir names the embedded privileges accorded to men within U.S. culture. She demonstrates in her account of the meeting with the university bureaucrat who favors addressing her male companions instead of her that such privileging of maleness and masculinity irritates her, fueling her "nasty little temper" (155). Indexing the longstanding associations between feminism and anger, Galloway's memoir is "saturated with unhappiness" at sexism and homophobia (Ahmed, *Promise* 65). But as a woman who lives with mental illness – with paranoia and a diagnosis of schizophrenia – her narrative brings madness-as-insanity into conversation with madness as a form of feminist anger. The etymology of the word "mad" itself testifies to these dual meanings: "mad" signified insanity in its earliest recorded usage in the 1300s, but came to refer to anger and frustration after the 1400s. "Mad" as a word that could denote anger entered reference works from the "late eighteenth century onwards" ("Mad"). Insanity has been taken up by feminist theorists, notably Gilbert and Gubar, as a metaphor for angry feminist rebellion. According to Gilbert and Gubar, nineteenth-century women writers were frequently engaged in "projecting their rebellious impulses not into their heroines but into mad or monstrous women," thereby dramatizing "their own self-division, their desire both to accept the strictures of patriarchal society and to reject them" (78). Gilbert and Gubar deploy the "madwoman" as a metaphor for women's anger at patriarchal oppression, and suggest that

she represents the desire of women writers to break the madwoman free from “a silence in which neither she nor her author can continue to acquiesce” (77).

According to Elizabeth Donaldson, Bertha Antoinette Mason of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys’s transformative novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) became for feminist scholars a “quintessential madwoman in the attic” and therefore a “compelling metaphor for women’s rebellion” (99, 100). The madwoman-as-metaphor has its basis in the historical realities facing many women in nineteenth-century Britain and the United States. Women who “aspired to professional independence,” “sexual freedom,” or otherwise identified as feminists were frequently “denounced as case studies in hysteria” during the nineteenth century (Showalter, *Malady* 146). In some instance, women who “challenged the norms of feminine conduct were actually committed to lunatic asylums” (Showalter, *Malady* 146). However, Donaldson argues that the popularity of the madwoman as a figure for feminist anger at patriarchal oppression has obscured the study of mental illness as a physiological phenomenon within feminist studies. The madwoman metaphor has become “an almost monolithic way of reading” within “feminist literary criticism,” Donaldson advises, one that “indirectly diminishes the lived experience of many people disabled by mental illness” (102). “Indeed,” Donaldson argues, “when madness is used as a metaphor for feminist rebellion, mental illness itself is erased” (102). It is Donaldson’s belief that women’s studies scholarship would be well-served by “departing from the established ‘madness as rebellion’ trope” (99). I concur that the figuration of madness as an escape from patriarchal authority misreads mental illness as strictly liberatory, and many who do live with mental illness associate psychiatric illness not with freedom but rather with pain and a range of restrictions placed on the way they can live their lives. Shoshana Felman has argued that mental illness is more often a reflection of powerlessness than it is of rebellion. “Depressed and terrified women,” Felman writes, “are not about to seize the means of production and reproduction”

and stage revolution (2). Rather, Felman views mental illness as an “impasse” that faces women who are ill (2). Revealing the ways in which womanhood has been associated with madness and with silence, Felman claims that the problem facing women writers is how to articulate themselves without having to appeal to normative therapeutic models that privilege masculinity and pure reason (10).

Along with Felman and Donaldson, I agree that the uncritical appropriation of mental illness as a metaphor for feminist anger has at times covered over the tangible, practical realities of life with mental illness – realities that often encompass suffering and pain. But I also believe that the metaphor of the madwoman needn’t *always* cover over the physical, biological realities of mental illness, nor must mental illness always be read as a form of powerlessness. Contextually, when metaphors of madness-as-anger are deployed by a feminist with no history of mental illness, the signification of such a metaphor reads differently than when a woman with a psychiatric or intellectual disability uses her body to purposefully stage or explore the metaphor. The body of the subject who speaks the metaphor impacts the metaphor’s performative effects. For a nondisabled feminist to claim “I am a madwoman,” the effect of such a statement is to legitimize the appropriation of difference by privileged subjects. But a feminist with a mental illness who claims that she is a madwoman performatively constructs ambiguity: listeners may wonder if she is referring to her feminist anger or to her psychiatric disability. How might a woman writer whose feminist anger is perceived as madness, and who *also* has a mental illness, relate to the category of a madwoman?

I am also interested in how the scene of performance – the physical location where the statement “I am a madwoman” is uttered – impacts the speaking of this statement. How might a public performance of madness-as-metaphor by a woman with a mental illness read differently than a private one? It is my suggestion that Galloway uses her body as a stage for

performing the dual senses of the term “mad,” allowing the categories of madness as metaphorical and literal to rub up against one another on and through her flesh. I also claim that Galloway mediates readers’ and viewers’ access to these performances that imbricate the metaphorical and the literal madwoman. At times Galloway performs these dual roles privately, and at times she grants others access to these performances – but Galloway always holds viewers at some sort of remove. In doing so, Galloway disallows spectators from claiming the metaphor as their own. Galloway insists that the metaphor is *hers* to explore and play with, and her narrative makes it clear that the metaphor does not belong to non-disabled readers and audiences.

Galloway explores the relationship between madness and anger through an informal, though no less theatrical, scene of performance in the Dallas airport that she narrates in her memoir. During an interview with Beacon Press, the publishers of *Mean Little deaf Queer*, Galloway explains that she has harbored flying fears for some time and confesses that her fears are rooted in her hearing difficulties. While on board an airplane, she can’t hear the PA announcements made by the captain and crew. So although she knows a message is being broadcast to passengers, she cannot decipher what the announcement is. Paranoia causes her to assume the in-flight announcements are alerting the passengers of an oncoming cataclysm, spelling “Doom! Doom!” (Beacon Press).

One particularly bad flight solidifies her fears. Galloway aims to travel from LaGuardia airport in New York back to her home in Austin. She never completes the journey by air, though, since the airline company (Braniff Airlines) goes out of business midway through her flight. Braniff grounds all its planes since it is no longer in business, and Galloway finds herself stuck in the Dallas airport with a “sea of television crews, print reporters, photographers, cops, and thousands upon thousands of royally pissed-off” passengers (184). Galloway scrambles to figure out what’s going on since she cannot hear

the announcements being made overhead in the airport (184). She asks a nearby stewardess for help, but the woman tells her “Everything’s finished, it’s over, it’s done” (184) and Galloway assumes that the woman is referring to the end of the world, rather than the end of the Braniff airline company. Appropriately, she calls the terminal a “madhouse,” figuratively framing the “royally pissed-off frequent and not-so-frequent fliers” within a psych ward similar to the one she had inhabited months earlier (184).

Specific stigmas have been attached to mental illness in the United States during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, one of which is the pathologized association between anger, violence, and mental illness. While “physical illnesses like a fracture or heart disease” might cause “feelings of sympathy for the victim,” says Narendra Wig, mental differences are “perceived as something strange, mysterious, and also dangerous” (187). Shayda Kafai asserts that dominant culture attaches pernicious labels to madness, reading mad bodies as “violent, illogical,” and “dangerous.” Embedded in Wig and Kafai’s analysis is an understanding that ableism reads anger into mental illness. Stranded in a city far from her home and unable to call someone to assist her, Galloway is in a precarious position. She is experiencing a paranoid episode and would be read as a disabled woman were someone to approach her (that is, to perceive she was deaf). Far from her home in Austin and unable to use a traditional pay phone to call for help, her old fears of apocalyptic scenarios begin to well up.

In this instance, Galloway’s mental illness spikes because of the actions of a corporate entity. Going out of business mid-flight and grounding their entire fleet of airplanes exacerbates the paranoia that Galloway is already experiencing because of her history of psychiatric illness. Her response to this sudden uptick in her paranoid symptoms is a destructive act aimed, symbolically and literally, at capitalist systems of power. In the Dallas airport, Galloway knows that she needs to use the restroom but is unable to find it in the

crowded airport terminal. When she tracks down an airline representative to help her find the bathroom, they tell her that the nearest one is more than a mile down the road at a different terminal.

Faced with the prospect of venturing to this different terminal on her own, when she is already lost and upset, Galloway takes a different tactic. Specifically, she decides to relieve herself (physically by peeing and by venting her frustration) by going into the airport parking garage, finding the “newest, most expensive car” she can, and, after removing her pants, “piss[ing] rather inexpertly all over” its front grille (185). She admits that these actions are “bordering on nuts,” but she explains that “rich is rich and I knew some rich greedheads somewhere were responsible for this cock-up” (185). After she pees on the luxury vehicle, she says she feels better, her “mind cleared of resentment” (185), and she is able to focus on the task of finding her way back to her home in Austin.

In order to ameliorate the spike in her paranoid/schizophrenic symptoms, Galloway defaces a commodity object, since the actions of “rich greedheads” have exacerbated her psychiatric symptoms. The physical roots of her mental illness are impacted by social and political systems of privilege. The economic inequalities attached to capitalism are associated with the symbolic imagery of the phallus when she calls the situation in Dallas a “cockup.” Galloway’s response to her uptick in her mental symptoms is to *express* herself – both her mind and her bladder. The owner of the car will no doubt catch a whiff of her irritation after she relieves her physical corpus by peeing on the vehicle. Her anger at capitalism takes a physical form – she is pissed off which compels her to piss on a car. Her *feeling* of feminist anger (feeling pissed) takes a physical form by creating tangible piss. And it is this act – the making literal (urine) of her feminist anger that helps her cope with her mental illness enough to find her way back home. The metaphoric function of the madwoman-as-angry-feminist becomes literal as she expresses her bladder and her mind through the performance

of peeing, and this action “clears her mind.” Such an act is also “therapeutic” for her – it makes her feel better. Her mind is therapeutically “cured” when her bladder is emptied.

Here, the metaphor of the angry madwoman – a woman who acts “nuts” and pees on cars because she is so pissed off at social inequality – is indistinguishable from the act of living as a woman with a mental illness. In clearing her mind through pissing, Galloway makes metaphor and literal indistinguishable. Relieving her body like this, and showing the metaphor to be a bodily act, combines the metaphor and the literal in and through her body. The metaphor has become a me(a)taphor: a metaphor constituted in and through the flesh, the meat, of her body. Such a performance of literal and metaphorical madness shows how we can critique the metaphor of the madwoman, when it gets taken up uncritically, but not necessarily depart from it. Galloway acknowledges that her performance of peeing is “bordering on nuts” and makes her seem like a woman who is “mad” because she is angry. However, economic injustice and a critique of capitalism are wedded to her paranoia – her mental illness and her life within systems of social inequality mutually exacerbate one another. Galloway seems to want to hold on to both the metaphor – the angry feminist who is crazy because of her anger at the patriarchy – as well as the literal experience of mental illness.

It is, of course, important to recognize the ways in which mental illness can be linked to powerlessness. Persons in the U.S. living with mental illness are overwhelmingly more likely to experience violence than those who do not have a mental illness. A person with a mental illness is anywhere from 4 times (Teasdale et al, 988) to 12 times more likely to be the subject of violent crime than a member of the general population (Eisenberg 825). At the same time, mentally ill persons are assumed to be violent within U.S. culture. However, I am not sure that mental illness is always a form of impotence. Sometimes, simply living with a mental illness can be a form of contestation. In writing her memoir, Galloway speaks openly

about the ways in which she has survived. It seems possible, to me, that one could claim to experience mental illness as a form of powerlessness while simultaneously asserting that mental illness is not only an experience of subjugation and powerlessness. Though Galloway was relatively disempowered in the airport, she is more empowered as she finds the time and space to write about the story in her memoir, years later.

### **The Mental Hospital as a Stage for Anger**

By reading *Mean Little deaf Queer* alongside the stage plays<sup>44</sup> I scrutinize in this dissertation, I challenge what ‘counts’ as performance and search for a wide conception of what it means to perform feminist anger. I contest that feminists perform their anger through a variety of genres and mediums, among them theater, memoir, and everyday acts and gestures. I argue that we can read Galloway’s rich descriptions of her individual performances in the memoir, including accounts of both planned and impromptu, theatrical and everyday performances, as devices that increase the accessibility of performance genres. Readers access these scenes of performance through Galloway’s thick descriptions of them. Her vivid details of where these performances occurred, the audience members present, staging techniques, sets, costumes, and how any action unfolded enable readers a glimpse into these theatrical events. The carefully transcribed scenes of performance, transformed into prose, challenge Peggy Phelan’s notion that performance genres are constituted through disappearance. Phelan remarks that performance is “[d]efined by its ephemeral nature” (31) and is fundamentally “nonreproductive” (148). Galloway’s narration of these performances makes them accessible to a wider variety of audiences than just those who were physically present at their original productions. Considering Galloway’s history of disability activism,

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<sup>44</sup> I invoke the traditional sense of the word “play” here: a “written text” that serves as the “blueprint” for a “theatrical production” (Brockett and Ball 39). According to Brockett and Ball, a play is “made up primarily of dialogue constructed with great care to convey its intentions and to create the sense of spontaneous speech by characters involved in a developing action” (39).



the faithful renderings of individual performances through prose description strike me as a type of disability accommodation. For example, as a college student Galloway played the role of Sir John Falstaff in a production of *Henry IV*. The production took place in an “old hay barn” in a remote part of central Texas, and the set consisted of a “couple of picnic tables” the cast had “plunked down in the middle of the dirt floor of the barn” (110). Various disabilities or impairments could have potentially barred viewers from attending (in a traditional sense) this performance, including: a mental health issue, a mobility impairment that the barn-as-venue could not accommodate, or a visual impairment that disallowed viewing the costumes or set. Galloway’s memoir allows this performance to come to life on the page, showing how embodied theater can incorporate written genres in order to make theatrical works more accessible.

Furthermore, I propose that all these genres, including women’s lived experiences and the everyday performance of anger, are deeply literary. Feminist scholars have shown that women’s memoirs and stories about their own lives are inherently performative genres. Lynda Hall, for instance, suggests that women’s autobiographical texts function in a “dramatically active” fashion, allowing female authors to stage an “autobiographical gesture” through print literature (96). Hall asserts that autobiography enables women writers to bodily, and therefore theatrically, perform selfhood. For lesbian and queer women and women of color – groups that have historically been discouraged from narrating their own lives and have even been “silenced” – autobiography allows them to engage in “creating and reinventing the self through writing” (96). In *Mean Little deaf Queer*, Galloway “literally and symbolically” puts her “body on the line” in order to carve out space for herself in the world (Hall 96).

Galloway’s performance of anger at times seems like a model of what we traditionally think of as the “madwoman”: she is loud and brash, she is somewhat violent

when she defaces the luxury car in the Dallas airport, and she admits to harboring a “panicked spitefulness” since childhood (32). However, Galloway’s simultaneous performances of madness-as-illness and madness-as-metaphor are embedded in a narrative that recounts these performances in the past tense. We are only granted access to her anger inasmuch as she describes it to readers after it has been staged.

The performances of anger Galloway describes in her memoir have a shifting relationship to visibility. Galloway has performed in notable venues such as New York’s W.O.W. Café Theater and the American Palace Theater, and her work has been supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Kennedy Center. However, she also confesses that one of her most “gratifying performances” occurred in a private, locked ward in a psychiatric hospital (175). Since her childhood spent in both Germany and Texas, she’s harbored intense anxieties, but after she moves to New York to pursue a playwriting career Galloway slips into a “galvanized psychosis” so pronounced that it lands her in Gracie Square psychiatric hospital (174). Galloway’s madness takes the form of paranoia: she begins “seeing signs of the end of days” and identifies apocalyptic omens in the Bible, in the hour “3:30 am,” in the newspaper, and even in a travel ad for Disney world (171-172). She eventually tries to kill herself “just to relieve some tension” (174) and is admitted to Gracie Square psychiatric hospital as a result. She remains institutionalized there for just over a month.

One evening, the ward’s residents are watching Ronald Reagan’s Iran Contra testimony and engage in loudly “poking fun” (174) at the president. After overhearing the patients’ banter, the ultra-conservative woman working as their nurse decides to revoke their television privileges as punishment. The nurse “switched off the television and locked down the room,” leaving patients meandering in the hallways (175). Bored and forbidden to watch TV, Galloway stages a spur-of-the-moment variety show involving all of her fellow patients.

Galloway proposes they perform skits to pass the time. They entertain each other with stories, prayers, dirty jokes, clog dancing, and amateur ventriloquism – whatever each can contribute with skills they already have. The only audience for this “impromptu” performance is its performers (174), and each actor’s costume is their pajamas. Galloway includes details in her memoir about what each performer looked like and wore and why they were staying in the hospital. For example, a “spindly” teenager with “an acne-swollen nose” and a history of suicide attempts recites “prayers in Latin” for the group (175). Galloway’s performance consists of an “S&M ventriloquist act” (175) where she puts a mop on her hand, names it “Mister Handchops” and makes the hand-puppet go crazy and beat himself against the wall violently.<sup>45</sup> Mister Handchops’s afflictions appear to be a morbid parody of Galloway’s own madness. The performance ends when a woman diagnosed with schizophrenia helps Galloway find a punch line to her ventriloquist act. Galloway is repeatedly beating Mr. Handchops against one of the hospital walls when the woman pipes in with the line “And then we both cry. Because it hurts me more than it hurts him” (175). Galloway feels the line provides a fitting end to the routine.

The Mister Handchops character comes to Galloway in a moment of anger. Her frustration at the psych ward’s nurse for forbidding her from watching TV drives her to craft a performance about a woman and a hand puppet degenerating into zany, furious hysteria. The Mister Handchops routine arises directly from Galloway’s anger, but it occurs within the context of a mental hospital. This performance, therefore, shows how her anger is indelibly connected to her mental illness. These linkages between mental illness and anger do not

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<sup>45</sup> A fuller version of this sketch is included in her one-woman show *Out All Night and Lost My Shoes*. In this version of the Mister Handchops act, she plays Sherrie Loose, an actress performing only by the allowance of her psychiatrist, who permits her to leave the psych ward. In her act, she says she’s “afraid” of “everything. My mother’s womb. Stuffed rabbits. Beautiful afternoons. My own two hands” (23). The Sherrie Loose act appears both in performance (in *Out All Night*) and in print text (in *Mean Little deaf Queer*).

suggest that either is any less valid. In *Mean Little deaf Queer*, insanity and anger converge, sketching out a model of feminist anger as a kind of productive insanity.

To narrate these performances as occurring within the context of a mental institution calls upon the pathologized associations between mental illness and embodied performance. Persons with mental illness have faced an historical imperative to perform their madness publicly, allowing their bodies to be scrutinized by audiences, doctors, and the broad public for traces of interior difference. Nineteenth-century psychiatrists including Sigmund Freud and Jean-Martin Charcot popularized the performances of mental illness, often putting female “hysterics” on public display as part of their practice (Showalter, *Female Malady* 148). According to Elaine Showalter, Charcot used French “madhouses” as sites for public spectacles, where “hysterical patients”

became celebrities who were regularly featured in his books, the main attractions at the Salpêtrière’s Bal des Folles, and hypnotized and exhibited at his popular public lectures. (*Female Malady* 148)

In amphitheaters crowded with audiences, Charcot practiced diagnosing female patients’ mental distress by examining the “strange physical contortions” they evinced onstage (Showalter, *Female Malady* 150):

Every Friday morning, he gave a prepared lecture-demonstration, often involving hysterical patients [...] This bravado and virtuosity drew huge, spellbound audiences of as many as five hundred. (Showalter, *Hystories* 31)

These supposedly therapeutic encounters were highly “theatrical” (Showalter, *Female Malady* 150), and were offered to the Parisian public on a bi-weekly basis.

The Mister Handchops routine shows Galloway enacting her mental illness explicitly through a performance genre and for a number of spectators. However, Galloway rewrites the terms of the historic mandate for persons with mental illness to perform their disability publicly by crafting a specific, controlled audience for her act. Within the psych ward, she

performs madness for other persons with mental illness. This gesture affirms the spectacular qualities of her mental illness, and Galloway does not shy away from claiming such a stigmatized history. However, Galloway explicitly performs her hysterical ventriloquist act for her fellow hospital patients as well as readers of *Mean Little deaf Queer*. Readers of the memoir can only access her performance alongside the audience of psychiatric patients and through the framework of a written narrative. These groups – both disabled and non-disabled readers of *Mean Little deaf Queer* and mentally ill patients – are placed in the viewers' seats next to each other. This narrative framing requires non-disabled readers acknowledge their co-presence with the immediate spectators Galloway performed for in the hospital – spectators who have a diagnosed mental illness.

After being released from Gracie Square, Galloway staged the Mr. Handchops routine at the Women's One World theater in New York when she included it in her solo show *Out All Night and Lost My Shoes*. In this performance, Galloway takes on the role of a character called Sherrie Loose, a “nut case with a string mop wig tied to one of her hands” (22). Galloway plays out the same ventriloquist act she did in the hospital, this time with an obvious reference to the popular children's show starring Shari Lewis and Lamb Chop. During this version of the Mister Handchops routine, as well as its iteration in *Mean Little deaf Queer*, Galloway performs her mental illness on her own terms. She is not trotted out by a doctor to perform on command. In fact, during the “Sherrie Loose” portion of *Out All Night*, Galloway includes a reference to an imaginary doctor named Dr. Katz who is allowing her to perform the ventriloquist act. Before she begins her routine, Sherrie thanks Dr. Katz for letting her “perform here tonight” (22). Such a statement references and sarcastically criticizes the types of routines historically staged by Drs. Charcot and Freud.

The audience to whom Galloway addresses her Mr. Handchops routine illustrates the ways in which performance can facilitate persons with mental illness building

community. She identifies a network of people with similar life experiences within the confines of a mental hospital, a place created and maintained by the dominant medical institution. McRuer has suggested that persons who accept medical models of mental illness have not sufficiently formed community because of the way that “ideologies of treatment and ‘cure’” are “central” for those living with mental health difference (214). For persons who have “mental or behavioral disabilities,” McRuer states, “there has been little minority consciousness” (214). McRuer links acceptance of medical models of mental illness with an inability to formulate a “reverse discourse” of disability (214).

Galloway’s narration of the Mister Handchops routine in her memoir implicitly contests McRuer’s assertions. She creates a coalition of persons diagnosed with mental illness and uses a performance genre – a night of variety entertainment – to enable each patient to tell their own story. These performances occur within a space controlled by the medical institution, hinting at the ways that minority subjects can speak back to dominant discourses while still within their jurisdiction. This evening at the ‘theater’ might not fit within traditional models of what constitutes minority consciousness, but the community Galloway finds in Gracie Square is very significant to her. For Galloway, minority consciousness builds in a private space that might not be widely visible to others. Speaking back to Foucault’s theory of subjugation, Galloway stages her performance within the space of an institution, but her body is not at all “docile,” engaging in acts of play even though the institutional authority in charge of her ward had wanted her revelry to end.

Jill Dolan has argued that performance is a generative artistic medium for building minoritized community. Her theory of the “utopian performative” illuminates the specific contours of performance that seize the “attention” of an audience “in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous” and “intersubjectively intense”

as performance itself (*Utopia* 5). This concept characterizes performance as an inherently communal activity, one in which audiences become “participatory publics” (*Utopia* 11). I see Galloway’s Mr. Handchops routine as an example of Dolan’s theory. Galloway builds community within a physical structure controlled and operated by the dominant medical apparatus. She simultaneously creates a reverse discourse within this space – gathering a group of patients together to allow each to perform their own version of selfhood – but relies on the hospital to help her relieve her paranoia. During their night of variety entertainment, the patients in Gracie Square are able to temporarily escape the mandates of the dour nurse running their ward. This is an escape that they feel together, as a group.

Galloway claims the stereotypical figure of the angry, hysterical madwoman, but readers are only granted access to her occupation of this role within the context of a written narrative. Readers are offered Galloway’s performance of madness (as both mental illness and feminist anger) after she performs it for the residents of the psychiatric hospital. In some way, this performance of anger is protected and private, withheld from nondisabled audiences until Galloway has had a chance to perform it first among fellow persons living with disabilities. Her performance needn’t be highly public in order to effect change. In fact, mediating the wider public’s access to her performance of anger enables her to retain control of it.

### **Like a Möbius Strip**

Not only does Galloway intertwine mental illness with madness as a metaphor for feminist anger, she also imbricates physical and mental disabilities. When Galloway discusses being institutionalized for her paranoid schizophrenia, she explicitly states that her hearing difficulties are a contributing factor to her emotional and mental distress. She claims that her hearing loss makes her feel “dread” (167), a word that is repeated several times within a single paragraph in the chapter “Scare.” Galloway fears she will be hurt by a force she can’t

anticipate or hear coming. While living in New York, these fears crescendo when her hearing aids begin to break down. Her “inability to understand anything” makes her feel like “every other word was being censored” (169). This hearing loss generates a “cocktail of depression and self-loathing” (169) that eventually leads to her “going crazy” and attempting to kill herself (170).

Galloway characterizes her mental and physical disabilities as forces that give rise to each other. Her deafness is a disability that causes her “dread” (167) so pronounced that she fears it will eventually “drive her straight to the crazy house” (168) – and it does. The regular stream of people approaching her without her knowledge means she is “constantly being taken unawares,” and so she becomes “jumpy, almost paranoid” (75). Explicitly linking her hearing loss to the elevated anxiety she typically faces, Galloway writes:

There is an existential funk you can get into when you lose a sense the way I did – uncertainly, in increments, knowing what you’re losing even before it’s lost [...] When your body betrays you like mine did, then who’s to say the world won’t crack open at your feet, the sea rise up to sweep you away, or the sky rain down its cosmic debris? (189)

This passage frames Galloway’s mental and physical differences as mutually constitutive forces. Her deafness gives rise to anxiety and paranoia, and these extreme fears lead to physical confinement in a psychiatric ward on several occasions. Paranoia causes her to consider her body differently. Feeling frightened of impending deafness leads Galloway to see her body as an “alien thing” that is “draining away words and sounds” (27). In short, Galloway envisions a model of disability that accounts for the way that physical and mental disabilities can feed into one another.

The playful performances that the Galloway family engages in during their games of “Scare” illustrate these connections that Galloway posits between mental and physical disability. The game dramatizes the links between being feeling anxious – a mental state



frequently characterized as internal or invisible – and bodily difference. Galloway’s narration of the “Scare” games focuses on the way these activities alter her body from its everyday shape and size, contorting it into non-traditional positions. In order to play the role of the fearful prey, Galloway and her sisters find unusual hiding places, including spots “sandwich[ed]” “between the slats and the springs” of a bed (12). They might also “climb up the shelves of the linen closet and burrow behind the heaps of folded towels, or curl our bodies so tight they’d fit into the packing trunks” (12). The pressure to stay quiet and unseen during Scare teaches her how to “hold” her physical form “so still” she can almost “negate” her body entirely (14). In this play-pretend game, feeling afraid leads to a re-worked, re-figured body. The language in this passage illustrates how interior mental difference can precipitate bodily changes.

“Scare” prompts Galloway to identify connections between her mental and physical disabilities. This portrait of embodiment evokes Elizabeth Grosz’s conception of the body as a type of Möbius strip, in which no inside or outside can be identified. Grosz outlines the ways that embodiment consists of “the inflection of the mind into body and body into mind”: “Through a kind of twisting or inversion, one side becomes another” (xii). Though “dichotomous thinking” has historically structured Western conceptions of the body, dividing inside from outside, Grosz sketches a theory of embodiment showing how “relations occurring on the surface of the skin and various body parts” enable the production of “all the effects of a psychical interior, an underlying depth, individuality, or consciousness” (116). The human form, for Grosz, operates just as

a Möbius strip creates both an inside and an outside [...] [t]racing the outside of the strip leads one directly to its inside without at any point leaving its surface. (116-117)

Similarly, Galloway’s exterior, physical experiences produce her interior, mental ones, and *vice-versa*. Not only does Galloway’s narrative play out Grosz’s theory of embodiment, but it

also shows that her various experiences with disability are all connected. Galloway's narrative defies categories such as invisible versus visible, and embodied versus mental disability. Galloway shows how such terms would better be situated as closely related to one another, not opposed to each other.

### **Are Emotions Accessible?**

I want to conclude by meditating on how disability theory, specifically the language of accessibility, might provide a productive framework for thinking about how emotions are able to circulate in and through certain bodies and subject positions. Throughout this dissertation, I have demonstrated how specific histories present obstacles that make it difficult for specific groups of women – women with psychiatric disabilities, Black women, and queer women – to claim their anger openly. A range of social forces might make the act of performing anger fraught for women in the United States – I think here of women in abusive or coercive relationships, working-class women or women in precarious living conditions, or even women who do not feel traditionally “empowered” as we often expect feminists to be. Sometimes, performing the role of the “angry feminist” risks violence. For example, though Showalter traces how feminists of the nineteenth century were often institutionalized involuntarily for openly voicing their feminist rage, this phenomenon still occurs today: in 2012 rapper and singer Lauryn Hill was court-ordered to undergo therapy for posting on her *Tumblr* account that she believes that the music industry is “manipulated and controlled by a media protected military-industrial complex”<sup>46</sup> – a statement that would not be out of place in contemporary feminist studies. Expressing her anger led to state intervention.

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<sup>46</sup> Hill's blog post can be read on her *Tumblr*: <<http://mslaurynhill.com/post/24689947994/it-was-reported-yesterday-that-ms-lauryn-hill-has>>.

To illustrate this point further, I could turn to the recent protests in Ferguson, Missouri, following the murder of unarmed 18 year old Michael Brown. Though reports have shown the demonstrations to be almost entirely peaceful, non-violent expressions of anger and grief, the backlash against women in particular has been severe. The *Daily Mail* reported on November 25th, 2014, that a woman marching in a demonstration suffered a heart attack, and as she was being carried to safety she was tear-gassed by police officers (Evans). *USA Today* reported on November 30th, 2014 that a woman who was not protesting but had driven her car near the demonstrations was shot in the eye with a police's bean-bag gun, causing her to permanently lose sight in her left eye. The woman, named Dornella Conner, remarked to reporters that she was not participating in the protests, and that the people surrounding her in the parking lot where her car sat weren't demonstrating loudly – she insists they were not “going haywire” (qtd. in Broaddus). Conner's statement reveals her knowledge that expressing anger openly could put her in jeopardy, leading her to regulate her behavior. Even Missouri State Senator Maria Chappelle-Nadal, who peacefully protested Mike Brown's death, was tear-gassed. On August 18th, 2014, *The Huffington Post* reported that Senator Chappelle-Nadal publicly confronted police chief Tom Jackson, asking if such tactics would be used again if she decided to protest in the future: “We were peacefully sitting [...] I just want to know if I was going to be gassed again” (qtd. in Reilly, and Conetta).

Anger is not an emotion that is equally available for all to express. “It is a great privilege,” explains Audrey Kobayashi, “to express one's emotions openly and to be confident that one is in a cultural context where one's feelings will be understood” (72). Knowing that an expression of anger will be met with resistance – verbal, physical, or otherwise – can sometimes precipitate denying oneself the feeling at all. For example, Galloway suppressed her own rage for large portions of her life. While in college, Galloway

worked hard to pass as hearing by reading lips, and she also denied her queer sexuality by passing as straight. “No one was going to know,” Galloway writes:

No one was going to know I was deaf. No one was going to know I was queer and wanting. No one was going to know that inside my smiling pretty-girl exterior I was so frustrated, fearful, and mad it was making me mean as a snake. (102)

Galloway forbids herself to express anger, attempting instead to repress it. In this way, Galloway is denied *access* to her anger. Disability activists and scholars have revealed the ways in which “forms of exclusion from physical and social space are ubiquitous,” from buildings that lack entry ramps to movies that lack closed captions (Hughes 71). Such exclusions limit “the movement and mobility of people with impairments” (Hughes 71). In a similar fashion, society constructs barriers that can exclude certain bodies from occupying an affective or emotive position, thereby limiting the mobility of a person’s *feelings*. Is anger accessible? Is anger accessible to everyone in the same way? Or, how do we access anger? Thinking about affect and emotion within the framework of disability theory might give us the language needed to address the ways in which emotions themselves are not always available to everyone in the same way. I desire a feminist theory of anger that legitimizes its expression in private, ambivalent, or vulnerable situations, but I also believe that, as feminists, we ought to work to make public, brash performances of anger more available to women than they have been in the past.

My study of feminist anger leads me to believe that anger can be, itself, a particularly inaccessible emotion – many bodies, identities, and subject positions have a difficult time gaining access to the performance of anger. Of course, the unique social forces that might make anger inaccessible for certain groups of women are themselves discrete and separate. The strictures that might prevent a woman of color from articulating her anger publicly are decidedly different from issues of disability or impairment. I do not want to suggest that it’s

possible to elide the differences between issues of race or disability. But, I do argue that one project of feminist politics, going forward, should be the work of making anger more accessible: to implement accommodations and assistive devices that will enable more women to be able to give voice to their rage.

## EPILOGUE

### **Fear is the Most Elegant Weapon / Scared Girls are Scary**

“FEAR IS THE MOST ELEGANT WEAPON, YOUR HANDS ARE NEVER MESSY. THREATENING BODILY HARM IS CRUDE. WORK INSTEAD ON MINDS AND BELIEFS, PLAY INSECURITIES LIKE A PIANO.”

– Jenny Holzer, *Inflammatory Essays*

“In particular agoraphobia, the fear of public places, does indeed appear to be a predominantly feminine ‘weakness.’ In a review of twelve different agoraphobia studies, Clum and Knowles (1991) found that women accounted for 89 percent of sufferers, a figure comparable to those suffering from anorexia nervosa.”

– Joyce Davidson, “Fear and Trembling in the Mall”

“What place would be better for us than this? Who wants us, outside? The world is full of terrible people.”

– *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*

Every text explored in this dissertation contains a crucial scene where a woman expresses her anger within a contained space, whether a home or a removed, semi-private setting. Beneatha Younger covertly mocks Carl Lindner in her family’s living room; May and June dream of murdering male travellers as they sit in their car, parked in their driveway; Isadora punishes a plantation master in the kitchen of his own home; and Terry Galloway stages her madwoman’s puppetry act inside a psychiatric ward. The physical enclosure that characterizes these settings – houses, hospitals, cars – indexes figurative representations of confinement that also mask the women’s anger. Beneatha, for example, hides her frustration beneath wry jokes, just as Galloway allows her sock puppet to serve as the mouthpiece of her anger, rather than literally speaking it herself. Of course, these women’s expressions of anger do circulate in highly visible ways, through Broadway performance or printed publication. But within each text, performances of feminist anger are explicitly located in out-of-the-way settings, hidden from easy accessibility.

Likewise, all the angry women mentioned in my study find themselves in precarious positions. All face threats of sexualized and gendered violence, and Isadora and Beneatha face an additional layer of violence from anti-Black racism in the U.S. Galloway, also, recognizes that her psychiatric and physical impairments make her vulnerable to harm. I speculate that anxiety and fear account for the mediation of anger that takes place in the texts I draw together. For example, upon Carl Lindner's first entrance in *A Raisin in the Sun*, Beneatha answers the door and, after calling for her brother and sister-in-law, warns them of Lindner's presence through anxious, soundless speech: the stage directions state she is "Enunciating precisely but soundlessly: 'There's a white man at the door!'" (113). Fear transmutes and codes the transmission of Beneatha's anger, as she "precisely" but noiselessly alerts her relatives that there is an interloper in their home. For all the women I study, openly voicing anger would put them at risk. As such, their anger emerges and retreats in equal measure, covering itself over even as it comes into view.

Anger has a curious, but powerful, relationship to fear. When I began writing this dissertation, I thought the project was all about anger. Now that I have finished writing it, I realize that it is actually about anxiety.

The palpable anxiety experienced by the angry women I write about in this dissertation has, in many instances, reformulated the ways in which their anger can be performed. In some instances, such as *Lesbians Who Kill*, Shaw and Weaver can take to the stage to embody through live performance the anger of two women. But other performances of anger come forward through text – through fiction and non-fiction. For example, Galloway's performance of peeing on a car in an airport parking garage must be *written* about in order to be communicated. Scared and insecure in a tense moment of interaction, Galloway cannot make her initial performance viewable. She must turn to text to make the performance available to others.

Such an uneasy relationship to live performance mirrors my own relationship to theater. From the early stages of my academic career, I have been trained as a theater and performance scholar, and this training placed a heavy emphasis on attending live performances. However, after my OCD reached disabling levels, it became difficult for me to leave my apartment. I was faced with a dilemma: how could I engage with theater if I couldn't always attend theatrical productions in person? Did this mean I had to give up theater scholarship entirely? I hoped I didn't have to, and so I began looking for creative ways to consume theater. I read about specific performances as much as I could. I watched filmed performances streamed onto my personal computer. I scrutinized performances embedded in fiction and non-fiction. My personal experiences gave me insights into the tensions between the genre of live theater and agoraphobia – the fear of public spaces, which can result in the act of remaining indoors.

Just like feminism and anger, women and agoraphobia have a long history of association. In 1895, Freud suggested that anxiety neuroses such as agoraphobia arise from an “accumulation of sexual tension” that is “extremely frequent in modern society, especially among women” (81). Agoraphobia has been read by contemporary feminist critics as a “complain[t] that pertain[s] to the boundaries of the house and the (sexualized) body, both of which are symbolically associated with ‘woman’” (Shands 54). Others propose that agoraphobia represents an “allegoriz[ation]” of the “sexual division of labor” and a “parodic femininity” that is “based on a literal interpretation of domesticity as immobility, helplessness, and infantilization, according to the main stereotype fabricated in the West as a role model for affluent” – and I would add white – “women” (da Costa Meyer 11). Indeed, the majority of individuals living with agoraphobia are female: according to the *DSM-5* “Every year approximately 1.7% of adolescents and adults have a diagnosis of agoraphobia. Females are twice as likely as males to experience agoraphobia” (“Agoraphobia”).



For the purposes of this epilogue, I am less interested in the symbolic function of agoraphobia and more eager to explore the ways in which women who have lived with agoraphobic symptoms, including myself, find ways to navigate society and culture, even from within the confines of their homes.

Among the most notable agoraphobic writers of the U.S. is novelist and short story author Shirley Jackson. Jackson married a Jewish man and consequently faced no small amount of anti-Semitism in the New England town of Bennington where she lived. This racism, coupled with addiction and psychiatric illness, lead the author to fear the world beyond her home (Hattenhauer 21). Many of Jackson's texts deal with agoraphobia either explicitly or implicitly: her well-known haunted house tale, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), shows protagonist Eleanor Vance being consumed by the ancestral mansion of Hugh Crain. Believing that the ghosts of the house want her to stay there in perpetuity, Eleanor at one point muses to herself: "I am disappearing inch by inch into this house" (201). Patricia White has productively interpreted the 1963 film adaptation of *The Haunting of Hill House* as a meditation on the (un)representability of lesbian desire. White's close reading of the novel is, I believe, complemented by a surface reading ("close, but not deep," in Heather Love's words) of it as a text about agoraphobia. Eleanor's anxiety about "disappearing" into a house is a fairly literal description of the problems associated with agoraphobia.

More explicitly depicting agoraphobia is Jackson's 1962 novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* – a revenge narrative that tells the story of a young girl, Mary Katherine Blackwood, who murders her family and subsequently drives fear into the hearts of the surrounding community. It is remarkable, for the purposes of my argument here, that Mary Katherine's deeds are accomplished through her total withdrawal from society.

A few years before the novel's action begins, Mary Katherine, affectionately called Merricat by her sister, murders her family by lacing their sugar bowl with rat poison. Readers

are given clues that she committed the homicides because her father was a brutal tyrant whose cruelty was tacitly supported by the rest of her family. “The Blackwood family,” asserts Lynnette Carpenter, “exploited its women if they were docile and dismissed them if they were not” (33). Merricat’s father is a “redoubtable patriarch” who exemplifies Jackson’s tendency to reveal, through fiction, patriarchal authority’s “terrifying power over women” (Carpenter 32).

After Merricat’s fatal deed, her sister Constance aids her by washing the sugar bowl – effectively destroying any evidence of her sister’s guilt. Readers learn that Constance does not take sugar in her tea, offering Merricat a convenient strategy for killing her family but protecting her beloved sister. At the novel’s opening, readers find Merricat and Constance living alone in their family’s house and caring for their Uncle Julian – a relative who survived the poisoning but was badly injured by it, resulting in loss of motor function and an impairment of his mental faculties.

Though Merricat committed the fatal poisoning, Constance is accused of the crime. Constance stands trial and is eventually acquitted. Afterwards, though, the sisters become town pariahs. Neighbors shun the two, treating them with contempt and mockery, which leads Constance and Merricat to retreat into their house. Merricat occasionally leaves the house to fetch groceries, but Constance is entirely housebound.

Constance is agoraphobic, like Jackson herself. Though Merricat is not initially afraid to leave the house, she is not free from anxiety either. She has a laundry list of rituals and compulsions she performs in order to keep herself safe, such as burying specific household items in the yard, avoiding saying or thinking specific words, and symbolically “erasing” strangers’ touches from the house (41, 44, 68). Other than Constance, Merricat’s only friend is a small cat named Jonas.

Merricat and Constance are angry women, having worked together to successfully kill their family, just as they are both afraid of the exterior world. But unlike the rest of the texts explored in this dissertation, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is a novel, with no seeming ties to performance genres (though the text was adapted into a musical in 2010 by Adam Bock and Todd Almond and produced at the Yale Repertory Theater).

How might someone afraid to leave their house participate in the theater? Moreover: how are various literary genres accessible or inaccessible for specific audiences, such as audiences with disabilities?

Maro Green and Caroline Griffin have explored agoraphobia in their theatrical work, especially in their collaborative theatre piece titled *More* (1985). The play opens to show one of the lead characters tied with a rope around her waist. The other end of the rope disappears offstage. According to Griffin, who herself lived with agoraphobia, the character's rope binding signifies that she "hasn't been born properly at all," which is a representation of to "the agoraphobic experience: i.e. not being able to believe the possibility of the self surviving as separate" (qtd. in Goodman). While Green performed in *More* as one of the primary characters, Griffin did not participate in the play's performances because she was afraid to leave her house.

While Griffin's anxiety prevented her from taking to the stage in a literal sense, Jackson's prose reveals how women can perform their anger in the world, even if they are restricted to the confines of their house. In *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Merricat and Constance's anger compels them to stage a radical withdrawal from society which, in turn, changes the shape of the society around them.

The sisters face a conundrum when a distant cousin, Charles Blackwood, pays them a visit. They know little of Charles but offer him lodging in their home, though it soon becomes clear to Merricat that his intentions are nefarious: he is planning to seize the family

money left in Constance's name. Charles tries to assert himself as the patriarch of the household, and he attempts to threaten Merricat into submission.

In the novel's climax, Charles absentmindedly abandons a pipe in an ashtray and accidentally sets the house on fire. The townspeople, who already despise the sisters, watch gleefully as the house burns and then ransack its contents, breaking their possessions and stealing valuable items. Merricat and Constance escape to the woods near their house, where they wait for the fire to abate.

Charles flees. The sisters return to the house after the fire and the neighbors are gone.

Constance and Merricat cope with the loss of their house by shutting themselves up into its ruins entirely. Merricat builds a barricade around the house with the remnants of their broken possessions – detritus, “broken boards, and furniture” (133). They subsist on the canned food they've stored in their basement over many years. All day, every day, the sisters sit near their front door and listen to the people passing by. “We learned,” says Merricat, “that all the strangers could see from outside, when they looked at all, was a great ruined structure overgrown with vines, barely recognizable as a house” (146).

Though the sisters are afraid of the outside world, their act of ensconcing themselves in their dilapidated home has the effect of intimidating and scaring the surrounding town. Stories begin to spread that the sisters are angry. Townspeople bring food and leave it on the sisters' doorstep as a tacit apology. Rumors circulate that the sisters eat little children for dinner. Lingering traces of their rage quietly permeate the surrounding town. Merricat and Constance's silence and absence performs more work than Merricat ever did when she walked through the village, head held high, refusing to listen to the taunts hurled at her by her neighbors.

I turn to Jackson's narrative in this epilogue because I want to consider a spectrum of literary genres that constitute "performance." The outside world can, sometimes, be difficult to access for persons with disabilities. For example, Melanie Yergeau has explained that for persons with mental illness, the "crippled and the feeble-minded," the Internet can provide avenues for expression that are not available in meatspace (the physical world):

The cripples and the queers have been talking on *Tumblr*. Disabled people of color have been flash-blogging. Poor autistics have taken to *Etsy*. Our communities – various and intersected – have been crowdfunding to cover costs of prescription drugs, and sometimes food and toilet paper. We have been virtually organizing for more than two decades now.

Typically, scholarly frameworks presume that, at the theater, strangers "come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination" that Jill Dolan terms the "utopian performative": the "fleeting intimations of a better world" (*Utopia* 2). But as Yergeau's remarks demonstrate, the material work of feeling together that occurs in a darkened theater is not always well-suited to the communal imaginations of communities of people like me – the crazies and the feeble-minded.

I include a narrative work at the end of this dissertation because I want to think about fiction as a performance genre. A good deal of feminist theory has shown how, at the level of genre, written text can constitute performance or have performative contours. Gloria Anzaldúa suggests that her written "stories" are themselves "acts encapsulated in time, 'enacted' every time they are spoken aloud or read silently" (67). Every written text is, for Anzaldúa, a "performance" and not an "inert and 'dead'" object (67), a concept she draws from Nahuatl. "When I write," she explains, "it feels like I'm carving bone [...] My soul makes itself through the creative act" (73). Conversely, Judith Butler has argued that the body itself functions as a text, a "materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else" ("Performative Acts" 521). Many of the ambivalent or semi-public performances of anger

that I read in this dissertation bridge the written and the embodied. My reading of Beneatha's anger stays very closely attuned to Hansberry's stage directions, just as Bridgforth's performance novel is intended for both embodied performance and quiet reading. I often have a hard time discerning where a "performance genre" begins and ends. In that Jackson's narrative preserves via fiction the same sorts of enclosures she lived, enacted, or endured in her own everyday life, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* is a performance text.

One of the most important tasks that faces contemporary feminism, I believe, is reaching towards a feminist politics that makes room for women who are vulnerable or fragile – women who might not be able to get in their cars or on public busses to come to the theater. Longstanding associations between feminism, feminist anger, and terms like "empowerment" have placed strong and capable women at the center of feminist thought on anger. Within feminist criticism, Marilyn Frye suggests that "anger implies a claim to domain – a claim that one is a being whose purposes and activities require and create a web of objects, spaces, attitudes, and interests that is worthy of respect" (87). Likewise, Jen McWeeney insists that feminist angers constitute "ways of knowing" that "create possibilities" for women's "liberation" (296).

Rhetoric linking feminism and empowerment also appears in corporate America. Recently, *Facebook* executive Sheryl Sandberg advised women to *Lean In* (2013) to their careers. "Conferences promoting women's empowerment are on the rise," says a recent article in the *New York Times*, with "media companies looking to align themselves with a generation of working women – and corporate sponsors – eager to celebrate their achievements and push for new career heights" (Haughney and Kaufman). Within the framework of disability activism, prominent feminist and queer scholars have criticized students who advocate for the use of trigger warnings in university classrooms for making

themselves out to be weaker than they really are. On the collectively-authored website *BullyBloggers*, Jack Halberstam describes these newer generations of feminist, queer, and disabled student activists as having “come to think of themselves as communities of naked, shivering, quaking little selves – too vulnerable to take a joke, too damaged to make one.” These texts envision the ideal feminist subject as a strong, fit, and often high-earning woman who is hearty, robust, and fearless.

Around the same time *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* was first published, in the “late 1960s and early 1970s,” the feminist self-help movement began gaining popularity among groups of white women whose “race and class privilege brought sexism to the fore” of their political consciousness (Murphy 117). Such texts “promise to empower” women by making the tools of clinical psychology available to the laywoman and “inviting her to engage in self-therapy” (Schrager 178, 179). Often, anger circulates in these texts as a tool that ostensibly helps women achieve empowerment. Sandra Thomas’s *Use Your Anger: A Woman’s Guide to Empowerment* (1996), for example, explicitly links anger and agency.

I am suspicious of the ease with which feminist empowerment rhetoric can buttress the mechanisms of capitalism, valuing women only insofar as they can be productive workers. Also troubling to me is the implicit erasure of women who *are* or who *feel* fragile, insecure, or weak. To work towards a future in which every woman is unafraid, in control her own life, and able to define her identity in her own terms is absolutely worthwhile. But are women who do not feel traditionally “empowered” – whether or not they speak their anger freely – somehow less feminist? Some women *do* live in precarious positions, and some women *feel* helpless – whether because of mental illness, state violence, intimate partner violence, or institutionalized racism, sexism, and homophobia. What does anger look like when its speaker is, or feels, fragile?

For Mary Katherine Blackwood, anger presents itself alongside agoraphobic and obsessive-compulsive-like symptoms. This fearful anger seems to stand in contrast to the empowering anger posited by feminist public culture. However, I am not sure that being terrified is always necessarily a mode of resignation. While so far in this dissertation I've traced a narrative where anxiety works to cover over articulations of anger, Jackson's novel turns this formulation on its head. Just as anxiety can mediate anger's expression, feeling afraid can also make one grow angry. Or, put another way: being scared sometimes enables one to scare others.

At the beginning of Jackson's novel, Merricat confesses that she loathes the local villagers because of the way they jeer at her when she is running errands in town. "I wished they were all dead," Merricat muses, "and I was walking on their bodies" (10). She doesn't risk saying such things "out loud," however, and admits she is "afraid" of the townspeople (7). By the end of the novel, Merricat has made the villagers afraid of her. This revenge is achieved when she allows her fear to blossom, becoming a recluse. The idea of two women locked together in a gloomy house overgrown with vines makes the villagers cower in fear. "I can't help it when people are frightened" says Merricat, "I always want to frighten them more" (39).

A former therapist once told me that anger has a special relationship to fear – that these feelings are two sides of the same coin. I reveal my therapeutic past here only warily. I know that in the academy, where intellectual and mental fitness are prized, admitting to severe mental illness is a risky move. I also know the skepticism with which contemporary feminist and queer theory views the medical establishment – an "institution that offers to 'fix'" me in "the Foucauldian sense (transform, or improve)" of the term – and those who participate in it (McRuer 22).



I have tried, on various occasions, to research the clinical literature that my former therapist might have been referencing. A number of scholarly texts attribute to author and psychotherapist Mel Schwartz the following remarks:

Although we may have come to regard anger as a source emotion, it is really a smoke screen for fear. When we look at our anger, we can always find fear buried beneath it. In our culture we are trained to believe that it's unwise to show fear. We erroneously believe that expressing such vulnerability will permit others to take advantage of us. Yet the fear is there nonetheless. (qtd. in Loy and Goodhew 98).

Schwartz's claims, while provocative, seem overly general. I am not convinced that anger is "always" a mask for fear, and I am not sure that "expressing...vulnerability" is a strategy that is equally available to all. But I do share Schwartz's desire to critique dominant cultural scripts that do not account for individuals who experience weakness.

I am hesitant to suggest that all women can boldly claim their anger in the same way. It is my intention, in this dissertation, to trace an uneasy relationship between feminism and anger. Anger can be extraordinarily powerful, but expressing anger can be perilous or even impossible for some. For example, clinician Lundy Bancroft suggests in *Why Does He Do That?* (2002), a self-help book on abuse that I've seen frequently passed around between women I know, that the hallmark of an abusive relationship is a woman's inability to object to her mistreatment. "No matter how badly he treats you, he believes that your voice shouldn't rise and your blood shouldn't boil," explains Bancroft (60). Women who were abused as children are said to have higher rates of "anger inhibitors" because of the silencing they experienced while young (Thomas, Bannister, and Hall 171). Because abused women have so often seen anger "come to an aggressive [...] violent conclusion," it is common for them to fear their own anger, worrying that "if they allow themselves to be in touch with it, they will lose control totally and become violent" (Goodman and Fallon 101-102). For some women, the path to claiming and asserting anger is a difficult one.

Merricat and Constance discern a strategy for balancing their fear of the outside world with their desire to enact revenge on it. The last pages of Jackson's novel show Merricat and Constance sitting just inside the securely locked front door of their house, covertly watching small children dare each other to run up their front steps. The town's children have grown afraid of the sisters' house and warn each other "You can't go on those steps [...] if you do, the ladies will get you" (146). One young boy takes up his friends' challenge, however, and approaches their porch. He

stood at the foot of the steps facing the house, and shivered and almost cried and almost ran away, and then called out shakily, "Merricat, said Constance, would you like a cup of tea?" and then fled. (146)

The shaking, shivering voice of this young boy mirrors the terror the sisters have long experienced at the hands of a tyrannical father and neighbors who persecute them. At the novel's conclusion, the sisters are given a wide berth by the surrounding community and find more freedom indoors than they ever did outside. Merricat tells Constance "Oh, we are so happy" to be safe, inside, where nothing can "get" them (146).

Merricat's anger is linked to timidity, but this deeply ingrained fear ends up providing her with the mechanism to retaliate against her persecutors. We expect anger to make women confident, more independent, and more liberated. Instead, in the texts I survey here, anger produces both liberation and anxiety.

It would be a mistake to say that Constance and Merricat are hiding at the end of the novel. Their anger does not make them wholly confident, freewheeling, or independent, but it does not resign them to simple passivity either. Scaring others, in Jackson's story, is deeply related to being scared. Sometimes, scared girls – quaking, shivering, vulnerable, or damaged women, young or old – are profoundly scary themselves.

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