

# ‘SHE’D MAKE A SPLENDID FREAK’<sup>1</sup>: FEMALE BODIES ON THE AMERICAN STAGE

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## PALABRAS CLAVE

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## ABSTRACT

In this article we intend to analyze theatre as a privileged (yet problematic) site to denounce how women’s bodies have been traditionally dissected and objectified under patriarchal scrutiny. To achieve this purpose we explore the controversial staging of the feminine body within feminist practice and concentrate on a study of three plays by contemporary American female playwrights so as to determine the performative aesthetics allowing for the dismantling of such traditional essentialist gaze. Our analysis of Suzan Lori-Parks’s *Venus* (1996), Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* (1996), and Lynn Nottage’s *Ruined* (2007) demonstrates how the feminist discourse aiming to destabilize normative notions of femininity may result in a misleading representation of female corporealities that, paradoxically enough, might accentuate those hegemonic notions that were originally intended to be dismantled. We support our study with the analysis of the strategies these authors resort to in their endeavor to revise traditional meanings associated to women’s anatomies and to defy dominant constructions of femininity. On that account, we identify the risks and difficulties that the (mis)representation of women’s embodied experiences from a feminist perspective may bring about.

## RESUMEN

En este artículo se trata de analizar el teatro como lugar privilegiado, aunque también problemático, desde el que denunciar el modo en que los cuerpos

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<sup>1</sup> “She’d Make a Splendid Freak” is the title of the first scene of the play (Parks 18).

femeninos han sido tradicionalmente diseccionados y reificados por la mirada patriarcal. Con este propósito, exploramos la controvertida representación del cuerpo femenino dentro de la práctica feminista, concentrándonos en el estudio de tres obras de dramaturgas americanas contemporáneas para determinar las estrategias teatrales que permiten el desmantelamiento de la perspectiva esencialista más convencional. Nuestro análisis de *Venus* (1996) de Suzan Lori-Parks, *The Vagina Monologues* (1996) de Eve Ensler, y *Ruined* (2007) de Lynn Nottage constata que el intento feminista de desestabilizar definiciones normativas de la feminidad puede derivar en una representación ambivalente de las corporealidades femeninas, acentuando precisamente esas definiciones hegemónicas que originalmente se pretendían desmantelar. Apoyamos nuestro estudio en el análisis de las estrategias que estas autoras emplean en su intento de revisar los significados tradicionales asociados a la anatomía de las mujeres y de cuestionar construcciones dominantes de la feminidad; y a tenor de ello, identificamos los riesgos y dificultades inherentes a la representación de las experiencias corporales femeninas desde una perspectiva feminista.

In a context of virtual relations and remote spectatorships, theatre keeps on offering a “real” flesh-and-blood space to confront intimacy and physicality that allows women to use their body in performance as an alternative to the symbolic order of a man-made language which has traditionally concealed or distorted female corpo-realities. The aim of this discussion is to explore contributions that three American female playwrights –Suzan-Lori Parks, Eve Ensler and Lynn Nottage— have made to the current thought on the status of the female body, in a time when it seems to be at the core of so many social and political controversies.<sup>2</sup> Although feminist drama has always tried to contest the ways in which patriarchal theatre traditionally disembodied the female on stage and replaced it with incarnations of male fantasy, this contestation has never been unproblematic. The question of how to represent women’s bodies on stage without objectifying or mystifying them is a complex one, mainly because the body is always already within representation when it enters the stage, and as thus, it is part of a complicated system of patriarchal referents for both performer and audience. Following Janet Wolff and many other feminists who have analyzed the problematic use of the female body for feminist ends, we are fully aware that the body’s pre-existing meanings as sex object of the male gaze often prevail and re-appropriate it despite the intentions of the artists or activists themselves (121). This raises important and related questions: 1. How can we engage in a critical politics of the body in a culture which so consistently and comprehensively codes and defines women’s bodies as

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<sup>2</sup> Echoing the overwhelming presence of the body in all the major political and moral problems of our age, Bryan S. Turner coined the term *somatic society*, which he defines “as a social system in which the body, as simultaneously constraint and resistance, is the principle field of cultural and political activity—a system which is structured around regulating bodies” (12-13).

subordinate? Or, if we translate this question to the realm of theatre, is it possible, as Kimberley Solga argues, to transform the legacy of visual violence against women so prevalent in traditional stagings of the female body into a critical, ethical representation of that body? (62-63) 2. What happens when the female body is affirmed and displayed thus challenging the dominant ideals of the classical, discreet feminine body (Wolff 128) and ultimately representing something other than what is dictated by the paradigms of male desires and fantasies?<sup>3</sup>

Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus* (1996) and Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* (1996) represent two clear instances of this problematic staging of female bodies within feminist practice. Both plays address the spectacularization of female body parts –buttocks and vaginas respectively—to explore and denounce how women’s corporealities have been objectified and commodified. But it becomes evident that Parks’s and Ensler’s work cannot escape from the ideological context in which they inscribe their renderings of the body, because the very idea of women being reduced to their sexualized anatomies lies so deep at the core of patriarchal culture that it cannot simply let female audiences be carried along by the playwrights’ feminist ends without questioning the paradoxes and contradictions generated by their modes of representation. As Sharon Willis observes,

To play with visibility, with femininity as spectacle, allows feminist performance practice to uncover certain contradictions which inhabit psychoanalysis and the logic of the gaze. But to seize the apparatus of spectacle, to expose and display the feminine body on stage demands that this practice maintain a critical relation to its own discourse, a consciousness of the risk of reinstating these structures. (78-79)

Parks dramatizes the sensational story of Saartjie Baartman, *The Venus Hottentot*, a 19th century South African woman whose aberrant anatomy (the abnormal protuberance of her buttocks and genitalia scientifically termed as *steatopygia*) made her the object of imperialist practices and market commodification as she was exhibited in the freak shows of London and Paris inspiring both horror and fascination. When she died her corpse was dissected by the naturalist George Couvier (impersonated in the play by the Baron Docteur) and her

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<sup>3</sup> Since the 1970’s this controversial and risky use of the female body for feminist purposes has been brought to the artistic arena by women artists like Orlan, Cindy Sherman, Marina Abramovic, Carolee Schneemann or Gina Pane among others. Their work has consistently tried to deconstruct women’s “natural” relationship with their biological selves and opened up important debates about the socially constructed character of gender and sexuality, but their hyper-literal use of the female body as text and canvas has often been misinterpreted because the ideological connotations associated to it have cancelled down the possibility of alternative representations.

remains were on public display at the Musée d'Homme in Paris till the late 1990s. By the time her remains were repatriated in 2002, after a long diplomatic process, Baartman had become a transnational postcolonial icon.

Critics of Parks (Wallace; Young; Keizer) have argued that the Brechtian aesthetics she employs in the play has made it difficult for spectators to engage with the humanist figure of this woman, locally and historically grounded in real events, but in our opinion, it is precisely this kind of anti-naturalistic approach—through farcical elements, non-linear and fragmentary structure, inclusion of songs, rhymes, choruses, intertextual footnotes, and other alienating strategies that keep on interrupting the course of events and detaching the audience from the action onstage—what allows the body to constantly elude full representation, refusing to be fixed, and paradoxically enough, objectified. In her influential essay on the relationship between Brechtian theory and feminist theatre, Elin Diamond argues that both models coincide in their dismantling of the traditional gaze, which implies the liberation of female bodies from their objectified “to-be-looked-at-ness” position and the adoption instead of a “looking-at-being-looked-at-ness” position (“Brechtian” 89). Parks’s deliberate emphasis on artifice and theatricality exemplifies this Brechtian/feminist position that discourages readers and viewers from seeing her Hottentot Venus as a believable historical subject (which might explain many of the negative responses to the play), but brings us face to face with a complex legacy of misrepresentation—of both the female and the black bodies—and makes us reconsider our traditional scopic regimes.

Our problematic perception of *Venus* is channelled in different directions. We think, for instance, that Suzan-Lori Parks’s aims at re-membering and vindicating this iconic figure are only partially successful because, as Arlene R. Keizer observes, the image of the black woman equated to her sexual parts and exploited within popular culture leads Parks to deterritorialize the historical Baartman and bring her to an American context (200), making a case about the gender racialized imaginary in the US and ultimately reproducing in the present the very imperialist attitudes the play tries to denounce. And it has to be admitted that, when confronted with the difficult task of digging up the remains of a traumatic past, even at the risk of re-inscribing the very images she tried to dispel, what Parks really re-surrects is not the historical tragedy of Baartman, but the necessary ghost of an African ancestral figure symbolizing the enslavement of millions of black bodies in North America.

In silencing the local and historical specificity of Baartman and her people, the Khoi San, Parks prefers to focus on her own contemporary culture evidencing that the former modes of physical and psychic colonization persist under different forms. A phenomenon that Keizer illustrates with instances of the hyper-exploitation of black female bodies in American consumer culture, like the proliferation of buttock-enhancing jeans, pants and surgery, or the fascination with the backsides of

Beyoncé, J.Lo, Rihanna and other black divas (209), which bespeak a utilization of black body stereotypes to signify a hot, wild, appealing female sexuality.

This idea is also addressed in the short "play- within-a-play", fragments of which are inserted in the different acts of Parks's text. "For the Love of the Venus", a one-act vaudeville premiered in Paris during Baartman's exhibition to counteract the impact that her presence had on European sensibilities, tells the story of a white French woman who seduces her white French fiancé by usurping racial stereotypes in the form of buttock and breast prostheses and a blackface mask to satisfy his sexual fantasies. That identity (racial, generic, or whatever) is always prosthetic and performative echoes Judith Butler's theories which have been addressed in a variety of contexts and which we do not mean to discuss here, but the idea that blackness can be worn to signify lasciviousness in white women is an interesting aspect that has even been related to the cult of black lingerie as a form of racial masquerade. Some critics have observed that, unlike white lingerie connoting a bridal, respectable and virginal femininity, black underwear can convey sexual availability and allow white women—who, in the patriarchal imagination, might be considered as "closeted" sexual savages—to express the eroticism attributed to black women "through a safely contained and removable black skin" (Fields 114).<sup>4</sup> Against The Negro Resurrectionist's metatheatrical pronouncement that "[t]he Venus Hottentot iz dead [and] there wont b inny show tuhnite" (11, 160), it seems as if Sarah Baartman's bodily image and its connotations continued to be recycled and commodified in contemporary visual culture.

Another area of controversy that Parks has raised among critics is whether her staged representation of Baartman renders her as complicit in her own exploitation, thus implying that she had the freedom and agency to obtain material benefit out of the consented spectacularization and commodification of her exotic body. Some examples from the text might suggest so:

THE GIRL: ...I've come here to get rich. I'm an exotic dancer. Very well known at home.

My manager is at this very moment securing us proper room.

We are planning to construct a mint, he and me together. (30)

or

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<sup>4</sup> Jill Fields' provocative analysis of black lingerie explores the racialized content that can be perceived in much of its production and consumption from the 19th century to the present. Together with the café au lait chorus girls, the coon singers, the minstrel shows and other representations of female blackness in Western popular culture, she mentions the Venus Hottentot as an explicit example of these abundant portrayals of African or Afro-American women depicted as simultaneously repugnant and attractive. Drawing from this dual nature of racial masquerade, she investigates how eroticism can be redirected from black women to white women and "how meanings might 'leap' from bodies to clothing and from clothing to bodies" (121).

THE VENUS: Servant girl! Do this and that! / When Im Mistress I'll be a tough  
 cookie. / I'll rule the house with an iron fist and have the most fabulous parties.  
 (137)

Although some of these speeches might depict her more in an oppressor's than in a victim's position, Jean Young argues that it is seriously questionable that a 19th century illiterate African woman was a liberated and sovereign individual capable of making choices, and that the argument of the female complicitness in her own domination lies at the core of many stories of violation and enslavement and has often worked as ideological justification for sexual violence (700). For her, "concepts of consent and choice are limited to non-subjugated individuals, and Baartman and her people were neither" (701), so Parks's representation of this figure as simultaneously enjoying her status as sex-object and denying such status contradicts historical evidences about the opposite. The female body is here once again at the crossroads of different and contradictory categories that question the definitions of colonizer and colonized, master and slave, perpetrator and victim. Despite the numerous intertextual sources gathered by Parks in her re-invention of Saartjie Baartman –scientific lectures, historical documents, testimonial accounts of spectators, court proceedings, legend and myth—, her silent body, remains a mere exhibition of otherness. But her silence, interpreted in the trial scenes as a sign of complicitness with her exploiters ("THE CHORUS OF THE COURT: ...This Court wonders if she is at inny time/ under the control of others, or some other dark force, some say,/ black magic/making her exhibition against her will", Parks 73), turns into a very eloquent manifestation of the plight of the black female body in Western culture, always trapped within powerful stereotypes of race and gender.

The second play we want to address is Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, which, as is very well known, is much more than a script; it has become a worldwide phenomenon, a sort of mass culture event and the stimulus for an international anti-violence campaign which has not ceased to expand since the mid-90's. Ensler contests the exoticisation of the female sexual body under the male gaze, by making what the patriarchal tradition has rendered as the "dark continent", the last "terra incognita", the "ultimate frontier", visible and explicit. It is true that in the show female genitalia –traditionally framed within the realm of the abject, phobic and deviant—are taken out of their closets and literally spoken out with irreverence and wit, thus deconstructing some of the patriarchal prejudices about them and seeking feminist strategies to reclaim and celebrate women's bodies.

But, despite her benevolent and politically correct intentions and the play's commercial success, Ensler's attempt at creating a kind of global, universal vaginhood, ends up reinstating biological essentialism in a discourse that, once again, equates vaginas to women –after all, the play is full of allusions about our vaginas being ourselves, our destiny, our essence, our center, our point, our motor, our dream, our identity. Most feminists consider that the reduction of femaleness to

the sexual body has served to justify women's subordination in a somatophobic and misogynist tradition, so *The Vagina Monologues*' collapsing of self and vagina, Christine Cooper argues, "however energizing and entertaining the gesture, carries the ideological baggage of this essentialist history" (6), and in our view, it constitutes one further example of how the female body's traditional meanings prevail, thus compromising the possibility of an alternative gaze. In a similar vein, Ensler's attempts at depicting an uninhibited discourse about the female genitals, acknowledging the silence and abjection that have traditionally surrounded them, get trapped in a frustratingly reductionist language that ends up reinforcing an all-too-familiar mystical femininity. When, in one of the monologues, she asks "what does a vagina smell like?" (93), she makes account of a series of scents that her interviewees are supposed to identify their vaginas with, like "Earth", "God", "Sweet ginger", "Chalice essence", "Cinnamon and cloves", "Roses", "Peaches", "The woods", "Ripe fruit", "Heaven", "Light, sweet liquor" or "Ocean" (93-95), the result being a romanticized approach to the female body that might be deeply troubling for feminist audiences.

Another ambivalent result is produced by the monologue format, which, though generating a confessional mode (a mode with a considerable feminist pedigree)<sup>5</sup>, in the end, reduces the variety of the original material to solitary versions of the same (Cooper 728). Attention to diversity and difference seems to have inspired Ensler when she refers to the play's making-off in these terms: "So I decided to talk to women about their vaginas, to do vagina interviews... I talked with over two hundred women. I talked to older women, young women, married women, single women, lesbians, college professors, actors, corporate professionals, sex workers, African American women, Native American women, Caucasian women, Jewish women." (4-5) But when we realize how those "vagina interviews" become "vagina monologues" and we get to know that permission to stage the play is made contingent on following scrupulously Ensler's script with no cultural or geographical variations, we might conclude that the play fails to open a real dialogue and manifests itself as flagrantly *mono-logic*. In fact, her "vaginal multiculturalism" seems to operate just as a politically correct backdrop against which narratives of WASP identity are conveniently staged, as it might be the case with the participant in the "Vagina Workshop" who claims that the mirror examination of her genitals "was better than the Grand Canyon, ancient and full of grace. It had the innocence and freshness of a proper English garden" (46). Tani Barlow has described this hegemonic form of feminism as "an ideological package – a well financed, resurgent,

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<sup>5</sup> Deborah R. Geis observes that one reason why so many women playwrights have been drawn to the monologue form is that it implies "an almost literal seizing of the word...[it] marks a *locus* for the struggle for female subjectivity as it enacts the "drama" of the gendered speaking body and its polyvalent signifiers." (170)

neoliberal, United States-focused effort to establish common ground” (1099), and it seems to us that, as in Suzan Lori Parks’ play, the mystification of the woman’s body on which violence is universally committed tends to ignore the specific political and historical conditions in which such violence is produced. The Monologue about the Bosnian victims of war rape –significantly titled “My Vagina was My Village”—stands as an interesting example of this cosmopolitan feminism, where the individual voice of the Bosnian woman, Cooper argues, is colonized and ventriloquized into Ensler’s discourse reinforcing cultural stereotypes about the East, as a sort of primitive, pastoral, idealized Other dramatically destroyed by war (733-34).

Although the play claims to be all-inclusive about female sexual experiences, they manifest themselves, with a few exceptions, as uniformly heteronormative and racially homogeneous, because the white straight Western woman is posited as the norm against which the ‘other’ women in the monologues – who hardly seem to be acknowledged the right to speak for themselves—are taken as the means to show what Ensler considers to be uncivilized forms of sexual abuse and oppression. Besides, Ensler is very careful not to address controversial issues that might divide her audience in a way that rape, incest or bodily pleasures would not. So, important “vaginal” questions like birth control, virginity, fertility treatments, sterilization, pornography or abortion are deliberately omitted. That is why, despite its liberatory rhetoric and its success at consciousness and fund raising about gender violence, many critics agree that the play fails to address the contradictions between private bodies and the body politics (Cheng; Bell & Reverby; Hall; Cooper), and it constitutes an interesting example of how the “personal” fails to become “political”, by simply enacting a palatable and humorous version of feminism.

In both *Venus* and *The Vagina Monologues* we can distinguish female acts of rebellion through hyper-literal embodiments of femininity that unintentionally reify the oppression which they intend to protest.<sup>6</sup> But, despite the evidence that the female body is never free from its traditional connotations and always inscribes women in a cultural hierarchy, the re-inscription of corporeality by the female subject does not always lead to biological essentialism, and as Jeanie Forte argues, in much of women’s performance art, the body effectively “speaks both as sign and as an intervention into language; and it is further possible for the female body to be used in such a way as to foreground the genderisation of culture and the repressive system of representation” (“Women’s” 227).

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Bordo refers to this destructive nature of the female protest by focusing on such bodily phenomena as anorexia, hysteria, and agoraphobia, through which women attempt a subversive bodily protest against normative femininity, but they still operate within the existing structures of domination; in her view, these conditions “may provide a paradigm of the way in which potential resistance is not merely undercut but utilized in the maintenance and reproduction of existing power relations” (15).

It is in this way that Lynn Nottage’s Pulitzer Prize winning play *Ruined* (2007) challenges the romanticized view on women’s role in war as dictated by predominant patriarchal standards. Traditional phallogocentric approaches have fostered a tendency to use the masculine body as the site for the articulation of war corpo-realities to the extent that the scars, the muscular, tattooed and wounded body of the male soldier prevail as the privileged space where war narratives are inscribed. This inevitably leaves the female body on a secondary position where the only role devised for femininity is that of the caring motherly figure confined to the domestic realm and to the consolation of the wounded soldier.<sup>7</sup> Opposing such misogynist views on the representation of gender in a war conflict, Nottage centers the action of her play on the daily activity of a brothel set in the Democratic Republic of Congo during the recent civil war (sometime between 2001 and 2007) and focuses on the atrocious experiences suffered by four women and their struggle to overcome violence. Nottage’s war account addresses a particular geographical context and a specific political contingency, thus contesting the decontextualized view on indiscriminate gender violence in Ensler’s and Lori-Parks’s works, and ultimately aiming at a meticulous representation of the female body that moves away from cultural stereotypes: Nottage’s female models are based on real Congolese women that resist victimization and are determined to fight patriarchal power and violence, thus challenging the audience’s Eurocentric expectations.

When working on the play, Nottage met and interviewed a number of Congolese women in the refugee camps of Uganda in 2004, and, while her initial idea was a rewriting of Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939), it was due to such encounters with these women and by learning about their war experience that Nottage decided to start anew and work on an original piece about these women’s strength in their determination to overcome their traumatic situation, and their refusal of resignation and victimhood. As Ozieblo and Hernández-Real recently stated in the introduction to their collection of essays, *Performing Gender Violence. Plays by Contemporary American Women Dramatists* (2012), “overcoming this position of humiliation and willing martyrdom was not necessarily easy and required an inner strength that frequently came from bonding with other women or from overturning, deconstructing, or reversing accepted patterns of behaviour” (2). Such is the attitude that Nottage’s female characters resort to in *Ruined*. The examination of how their bodies

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<sup>7</sup> Rape and sexual exploitation in war have been systematically disregarded as war crimes in a military culture that considers primarily the direct effects on combatants and less-frequently on civilians. The recent revelations of the genocidal rape of Muslim women during the Balkans’ conflict and of Tutsi women in Rwanda have triggered specific gender-based analyses of war and its impact on women’s lives (Hynes; Ashford & Huet-Vaughn).

—simultaneously “ruined” and empowered—are brought to the stage in the form of theatrical strategies that intend to establish a feminist social model will be the central point of this final section. Hence, and trying to answer the questions posed at the very beginning of this essay, we examine what happens on the stage and what is the audience’s reaction when the female body is deconstructed to challenge the ideals of the classical feminine body (in this case in a war context, a predominantly male-centred space). Whether or not *Ruined* repeats the objectification and merchantilization of black female bodies while vindicating their bearers’ position as agents and survivors in a conflict generated by men is worth considering, and to a certain extent, as feminist spectators, we might feel disturbed by the fact that the play empowers these women and simultaneously recasts them within the realm of the abject, as prostitutes, torture and rape victims, infected, pregnant and “ruined”.

Nottage tries to contest this conventional gaze by means of theatrical strategies that privilege feminine agency in times of war and coincide with Diamond’s contention that “by alienating (not simply rejecting) iconicity, by foregrounding the expectation of resemblance, the ideology of gender is exposed and thrown back to the spectator” (*Unmaking* 46). In this vein, Nottage works meticulously with characterization and audience expectations so as to raise their awareness concerning women’s suffering in war. She experiments with women’s dehumanization on the stage as a theatrical device in the attempt to denounce how women’s bodies tend to be objectified (how they become prizes won by either the soldiers or the rebels, or how they themselves turn into warfare to combat the enemy), a situation she learnt about from the real accounts by the Congolese women she interviewed. Some moments from the play point very explicitly to this attempt at dehumanizing the black female body, as in the scene where Mama Nadi, the madam and owner of the brothel, and Christian (a travelling salesman) bargain over the price of two women, Sophie and Salima. It is not until Sophie and Salima appear on the stage that we realize that Mama Nadi and Christian have been talking about two human beings:

MAMA: What did you bring me? Are you going to keep me guessing?

CHRISTIAN: Go on, take a peek in the truck...

MAMA: How many?

CHRISTIAN: Three.

MAMA: Three? But I can’t use three right now. You know that.

CHRISTIAN: Of course you can. And I’ll give you a good price if you take all of them...

*(Mama goes to the doorway, and peers out at the offerings, unimpressed)*

MAMA: I don’t know. They look used. Worn...

*(Christian, defeated, exits. Mama smiles victoriously and retrieves another soda from the cooler...Christian re-enters...A moment later two women in ragged clothing step tentatively into the bar...)* (9-10)

The fact that Mama Nadi refers to Salima and Sophie as “offerings” or as “worn” goods to traffic with is one of the many layers from which Nottage denounces the dehumanization of women in a war context. Similarly, the female body is represented in Nottage’s play as a specific weapon used both by the soldiers and the rebels in their attempt to undermine each other. As Patricia Hynes observes, “[w]ars of the late 20th and early 21st centuries are fought with remotely guided weapons, at distances that shield the combatant from witnessing the death and maiming of his victims...Military rape and sexual exploitation, on the other hand, are perpetrated face to face on the battlefields of women’s bodies”(11). A circumstance that, in the play, is made particularly manifest in the case of Salima, who was kidnapped and repeatedly raped by the soldiers (under the cry “She is for everyone, soup to be had before dinner”, Nottage 69) while her husband, Fortune, was away in town. That is the reason driving Fortune’s implication in the revolution (he camps opposite Mama Nadi’s brothel and promises to remain there, under the rain, until he can see Salima). And still, Fortune and Simon, the men trying to save Salima from her abused condition under Mama Nadi’s influence, describe her as a stolen good that they want to recover: “If you’re angry, then be angry at the men who took her. Think about how they did you, they reached right into your pocket and stole from you” (Nottage 74).

The idea that, regardless of their positioning in the war conflict developing in the background, all the male characters in the play equally treat women as goods to possess is reinforced by Nottage’s Brechtian strategy to cast the same male actors to perform the role of both the soldiers and the rebels.<sup>8</sup> With this theatrical device, Nottage demystifies representation and releases the spectator from possible imaginary identifications, thus allowing for a reception of what is being represented onstage from a detached and more critical perspective. This is also the case of Mama Nadi and her ambiguous character: we first meet her bargaining about the price of two women whom she will exploit despite their physical condition (she knows that Sophie is “ruined” and also starts to suspect that Salima is pregnant), but then she reveals her true altruistic nature with her frustrated attempt to save Sophie by giving away the raw diamond she possessed so that Sophie could escape and afford an operation that would fix her “ruined” condition (Nottage 91-2). Mama Nadi’s duplicity (she also offers her services both to the soldiers and the rebels indistinctively) becomes, in this light, a further Brechtian strategy preventing the audience from sympathizing with her, as her moral ambiguity triggers the spectator’s constant shift in their response to her, thus detaching themselves from the action and regarding the performance from a certain (critical) distance. Moreover, Mama Nadi’s dubious moral integrity is later on revealed to be a

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<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, Richard Foreman’s 1996 production of *Venus* employs a multicultural casting, thus implying that both white and black men are indistinctive exploiters of black women.

consequence of the reality she has forcefully encountered: “I didn’t come here as Mama Nadi, I found her the same way miners find their wealth in the muck” (86).

In this vein, by distancing the audience from the action on stage and thus awakening a more critical gaze, Nottage’s exposé of gender violence in a war context becomes more effective. The audience does not empathize with either Mama Nadi, the soldiers or the rebels, and the portrayal of the female body as an object or territory to be possessed (“You will not fight your battles on my body anymore”, Nottage 94) prompts a greater impact in terms of audience response. The staging of the female body as a fractured or broken good culminates with Salima’s desperate attempt at reaching freedom and agency by committing suicide (Nottage 94). Offering suicide as an alternative for women to escape indiscriminate violence and subjugation seems problematic from a feminist viewpoint, as the author would be offering no satisfactory solution to gender violence and it would, in a way, end up reinforcing the predominant patriarchal ideology (Forte, “Realism” 117). Notwithstanding, Noelia Herando-Real argues that, as a theatrical strategy, suicide shows a female character’s “determination to control her life and become an agent” (46) in a similar way to that in which masculine suicide associates the male character with the classic tragic hero, as is the case with Arthur Miller’s *Willy Loman*.

Female bonding is offered in Nottage’s play as yet another possible instrument to prevent the imposition of patriarchal ideals, in this case contrasting with suicide inasmuch as the “sisterly atmosphere” generated in the play derives in the optimistic belief that women can escape, or at least minimize, male oppression (Narbona-Carrión 67). The bond established between Salima and Sophie, and eventually the revelation that Mama Nadi’s actual drive is that of protecting her girls (especially Sophie) creates a reliable sisterhood that emphasizes the relevance of other victims’ support to overcome victimization and subjugation, thus offering a feasible solution to gender violence (as opposed to suicide, which foregrounded female agency but offered no possible way out). In this vein, female bonding becomes a sentimentally-driven strategy leading to trauma recovery by means of the mutual care and protection offered by equally damaged characters.

Nottage’s appeal for an emotional understanding of the events being represented onstage, as opposed to a more Epic (in Brechtian terms) or intellectual reading, predominates in her work. In an interview conducted by Celia McGee in 2009 for the *New York Times*, Nottage talked about the intellectual engagement prompted by Brecht’s theatrical pieces in contrast with her own theatrical goals: “I believe in engaging people emotionally, because I think they react more out of emotion...It is important that this not become a documentary, or agitprop. And that Mama Nadi is morally ambiguous, that you’re constantly shifting in your response to her” (Web). This is the perspective from which to interpret her attempts (very similar to those of Parks’s in *Venus*) to distance the audience from the action

performed onstage with the purpose to elicit a critical understanding of the events. A good example of such particular use of Brechtian detachment is seen in the many musical scenes to be found in the play. As Jill Dolan contends, "the musical performances...let the spectators – and the character—rest from the viciousness of the action, giving us a chance to breath, to think, to contemplate how a sound so beautiful could come from a situation so untenable" (2009). Hence, Sophie's singing is appealing in a sensorial and sentimental, rather than intellectual, way and it succeeds in driving the audience's attention far away from the poisonous atmosphere infecting the stage, so that their return to the actual action onstage, once the musical performance has finished, generates a stronger receptive impact. This distracting musical strategy can be classified along with other theatrical attempts to deconstruct the representation of gender violence onstage. Noelia Hernando-Real provides a thorough analysis of Paula Vogel's use of slow motion in *Hot 'n Throbbing* (1994) as another example of a theatrical strategy aimed at deconstructing gender violence and provoking a particular reaction in the audience without the need to hurt their sensitivity unnecessarily (51). Vogel's strategy may be equated with Nottage's musical device in that, by appealing to a sensorial embodiment—associated more to the semiotic than to the symbolic realm, and fairly opposed to Brecht's Epic Theater—it allows for a critically distanced contemplation of the events performed.

But it is precisely Nottage's final emphasis on the sentimental aspect of the real experiences upon which her play is based that constitutes the major criticism to her play. The fact that at one point the play falls under the romanticized view that a woman's wounds and bitter temper may be soothed by the love of a man (in scene 7 Christian comes back so as to pursue Mama Nadi's love) has been the focus of the play's criticism, as it has been understood that by this shift in the course of the events, Nottage has not "maintained her singular, Brechtian vision of the consequences of war for women" (Dolan 2009). It is unquestionable that in bringing these 'ruined' female bodies to the stage, the playwright has given voice to embodied black women's experiences, often ignored by Western audiences, but as evidenced by the analysis of Parks's and Ensler's work, bodily images are too easily swollen by traditional discourse, and the harsh criticism of the gender politics in such a specific war context that Nottage gradually builds in her play seems all of a sudden to dissipate within a conservative heteronormative closure that points to a fairy-tale kind of happy ending.

We might conclude that the exhibition of female bodies in contemporary American theatre is transgressive when it operates in defiance of the dominant constructions of femininity. Grotesque, excessive, and unruly representations of female corporealities –as those offered by Parks's huge buttocks, Ensler's speaking vaginas and Nottage's ruined bodies—may be subversive because they make visible what has been denigrated and suppressed, and help destabilize normative notions of

feminine beauty and eroticism, but, as Wolff observes, “we must be aware of making the easy assumption that the use of the body is itself transgressive, in a culture which allows only the ‘classical’ body” (135). As the analysis above illustrates, the use of women’s embodied experiences for feminist ends constitutes a complex and risky practice that is always haunted by the traumas and dilemmas of (mis)representation. To that extent, if a feminist body politics is to be effectively incorporated to the American stage it seems necessary that both playwrights and audiences escape the Scylla of biological essentialism and the Charybdis of re-assimilation by the patriarchal gaze.

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