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Straddling Feminisms: Post-Wave Pop Politics and Experimental Performance

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Straddling Feminisms: Post-Wave Pop Politics and Experimental Performance

By

Jessica Del Vecchio

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

2016
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Jessica Del Vecchio

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Straddling Feminisms: Post-Wave Pop Politics and Experimental Performance

By

Jessica Del Vecchio

Adviser: Dr. David Savran

“Straddling Feminisms,” is the first academic study of a new movement in feminist theatre. Examining experimental performances from 2008 to today, I argue that this resurgence of explicitly feminist work in New York City represents the rise of what I call “post-wave pop feminism”—an intergenerational politics that engages French feminist philosophy, 1980s U.S. feminist ideologies, queer and trans theory, and Third Wave feminist thought. Unlike performances of previous decades, in which feminist politics arose from a conscious presentation of “gender as a construction,” today’s work embodies a kind of woman-centricity that expands upon the definition of woman—to include queer cohorts of all sorts—without essentializing it. I contend that this work presents a “homonormal” worldview and I show how the performances depict trans men and women as crucial feminist constituencies, countering lesbian feminists’ historical rejection of these groups. I also demonstrate that, central to all of these performances, is the simultaneous celebration and critique of popular culture. The concept of “post-wave pop feminism” is a useful paradigm for other research; it presents new ways of understanding our contemporary feminist moment beyond the stage, and provides strategies for making U.S. feminism a more intergenerational, coalitional, and multi-vocal movement.
Acknowledgements

Getting here has been a decade-long drama. Looking back now, from this final stage, I am overwhelmed by the number of extraordinary people I have encountered, by the number of friends who have seen me through from start to finish. They all played crucial roles in this production. I am full of gratitude and still some stage fright . . .

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**Introduction: Breaking Waves**

In 2009, Emily Glassberg Sands’s senior thesis project for the economics department at Princeton University exposed gender bias in regional theatres across the United States. Her findings, the results of three studies conducted over the course of a year, reveal that female artistic directors and literary managers tend to rate female-written scripts as lower quality, having poorer economic prospects, and likely to face customer discrimination.¹ She finds this bias to be even more severe when the female playwright’s work is about women.² Sands also examines Broadway and concludes that, in order to achieve a Broadway production, female-written plays need to demonstrate greater audience appeal and therefore the potential to generate more income than those by male playwrights. This unequal standard leads to a dearth of plays by women playwrights on Broadway.³⁴

Historically, in the Off Off Broadway scene, there exists a deep gender bias as well. As James Harding argues in the polemical first chapter of *Cutting Performances: Collage Events, Feminist Artists and the American Avant-Garde*, “the erasure of women ‘as women’ unites the vanguard with the mainstream—disrupting the implicit binary between the two—since the

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² Ibid., 104–5.
³ Ibid., 105.
⁴ In the years since the study, the situation appears to have improved. New plays by emergent playwrights such as Amy Herzog and Annie Baker, for example, both nominated for Pulitzer Prizes, have received Off-Broadway productions. Theresa Rebeck’s plays, such as *Seminar* (2011) and *Dead Accounts* (2012), have been regularly produced on Broadway. Lisa D’Amour’s *Airline Highway* ran on Broadway for several months in 2015. *Fun Home*, a musical based on Alison Bechdel’s memoir, written by Lisa Kron and composed by Jeanine Tesori, moved from the Public Theatre to Broadway, and won a slew of awards including the 2015 Tony for Best Musical. In 2016, the musical *Waitress*—widely marketed as historic for its “all-female creative team”—opened on Broadway.
erasure is common to both.”\textsuperscript{5} His book is, in part, an interrogation of the values and definitions that critics use to uphold and celebrate certain work as avant-garde, values that, he argues, often ignore the aesthetics of women’s art, and therefore exclude women as an integral part of avant-garde performance history.\textsuperscript{6} “Locating feminist performance art within the tradition of the avant-garde,” he writes, “begs the question of whether the two are actually compatible, whether one compromises the other.”\textsuperscript{7}

My own research confirms that this erasure continued in the experimental scene in New York City in the early twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{8} In 2006, I was captivated by Susie Sokol’s out-of-drag performance of Jack Kerouac in Elevator Repair Service’s \textit{No Great Society} for what I saw as its destabilization of the gender binary and the questions her performance raised about the location of masculinity in the body. When I interviewed members of the acclaimed experimental company, however, generous though they were about my queer and feminist reading, they insisted their choices were aesthetic and not political—a disavowal I found fairly typical for experimental groups at the time. This cross-gendered performance which I read as highlighting Kerouac’s masculinity as performance and calling attention to his queerness, could also be read—especially in conjunction with the company’s analysis of the work—as an erasure of gender politics in favor of what artistic director John Collins described as “something a little more universal.”\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{8} Jessica Del Vecchio, “Crossing Kerouac: Susie Sokol in Elevator Repair Service’s No Great Society” (Master’s Thesis, University of Texas, Austin, 2008).
\textsuperscript{9} John Collins, Interview with author, January 2008.
It is surprising then, that since 2008, even as organizations lament the lack of plays by women on Broadway and in regional theatres, as scholars express concern that the notion of queer has erased the lesbian feminist position,\(^{10}\) and as the media pronounces the United States “postfeminist,” women-run experimental theatre companies in New York City have been presenting explicitly queer, feminist work and claiming it as such. “Straddling Feminisms” is the first academic study of this new movement in feminist theatre. In the pages that follow, I analyze some of the important feminist performances that took place in New York City from 2008 to 2015: *Room for Cream*, a live lesbian soap opera presented by the Dyke Division of the Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf from 2008-2010, the plays of Tina Satter and her company Half Straddle; performance artist Jibz Cameron’s solo shows as alter-ego Dynasty Handbag; and two iterations of playwright Young Jean Lee’s *Untitled Feminist Show* (2010-2012).

I use the term experimental as an indicator of how and where the companies make work, as much as to describe the aesthetic of it. These companies labor with low budgets in Off Off Broadway venues that have a tradition of presenting avant-garde work. Much of the work is experimental in its aesthetic, meaning, to use Sara Bailes’s description, that it “does not adhere to the use of formal theatre convention in predetermined ways, such as the use of linear narratives, the fourth wall, absorbed portrayal of psychological realistic character, and first person dialogue to order and progress meaning.”\(^{11}\) Instead, audiences generate their own meanings from the often-abstract productions in which the performers themselves—their acting styles and embodiment—and the mise en scène—the set, lighting, costume, and sound design—is just as important as the play text.

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\(^{10}\) For example, see the introduction of Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminist and Queer Performance: Critical Strategies* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Examining these performances, I argue that this resurgence of explicitly feminist work in New York City represents the rise of what I call “post-wave pop feminism”—an intergenerational politics that engages French feminist philosophy, 1980s U.S. feminist ideologies, queer and trans theory, and Third Wave feminist thought. Unlike performances of previous decades, in which feminist politics arose from a conscious presentation of gender as a “construction,” today’s work embodies a kind of woman-centricity that expands upon the definition of woman—to include queer cohorts of all sorts—without essentializing it. I contend that this work presents what I describe as a “homonormal” worldview—a decentering of heterosexuality—and I show how the performances depict trans men and women as crucial feminist constituencies, countering lesbian feminists’ historical rejection of these groups. I also demonstrate that, central to all of these performances, is the simultaneous celebration and critique of popular culture.

Today’s feminism and the performances that embody it are “post-wave” in the way they insist upon a through line from Second Wave and Third Wave ideologies to the queer theories of today. These works perform what Elizabeth Freeman calls “temporal drag,” finding inspiration in the “cultural debris [that] includes our incomplete, partial, or otherwise failed transformation of the social field.”12 Freeman takes up a number of artists who she argues use temporal drag, among them artist Sharon Hayes (who had a recurring role in Room for Cream), whose recycling of Second Wave political slogans in her ongoing performance project In the Near Future Freeman finds particularly powerful. She describes the performance as showing “the pull of the past on the present,” a way of forging connections between queer theory and lesbian-feminism.

12 Elizabeth Freeman, Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xiii.
“Second Wave Feminism” describes the ideologies derived from the Women’s Liberation Movement, which took place in the United States from roughly the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Among so many issues, members of the movement fought for women’s right to birth control, abortion, and affordable childcare; publicized the prevalence of domestic violence and rape; protested the Miss America pageant and other locations of female objectification; and advocated for fair treatment of women in the work place. A body of lesbian feminist politics emerged out of the movement as well, critiquing the heteronormativity of patriarchal society. Second Wave politics are not all sisterhood and solidarity; for example, debates about the movement’s whiteness and its members’ class privilege, disagreements over the deployment of women’s sexuality, and the perpetuation of policies that marginalized transgender people all mark this period as well.

I consider French Feminist philosophy, which strongly influences Half Straddle’s work, as part of the legacy of the Second Wave. The critiques written at this time by Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Monique Wittig had broad impact, across disciplines and geography. Their work influenced U.S. feminist theatre scholars such as Jill Dolan and Elin Diamond, as well as queer theorists such as Judith Butler, as I discuss below.

A major influence on post-wave pop feminism is also the ethos of Third Wave feminism. As Shelley Budgeon points out, “Third Wave feminism is a contested term” that “does not easily lend itself to a straightforward definition,” and I would add that its ideology has not been adequately theorized in scholarly texts. It was feminists of color in the late 1980s who—

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seeking to challenge the bourgeois, white feminism of the Second Wave—first proclaimed themselves part of the “Third Wave.” Rebecca Walker, the biracial daughter of Alice Walker, coined the phrase, describing the Third Wave against what she sees as the homogenous nature of the Women’s Liberation Movement. She writes, “For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn’t allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories.”

Third Wave feminism, then, although indebted to the Second Wave, in many ways, positioned itself against perceptions (often misperceptions) of the feminisms that came before.

Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake classify Third Wavers as the generation born between 1963 and 1974, those too young to have participated in the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970s first-hand, but old enough to have been brought up with its ideals. In their 2000 book Manifesta, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards define the Third Wave as “the core mass of the current women’s movement in their late teens through their thirties, roughly speaking—the ones who grew up with Judy Blume, Free to Be . . . You and Me, and Sesame Street . . . the ‘daughters,’ both real and metaphorical, of the Second Wave.” In the mid 1990s, young, mostly white feminists, including Riot Grrrls, who received extensive, mainstream media coverage, also declared themselves proud Third Wavers. Although the Third Wave is now over, women who came of age during the popularity of this kind of feminism still feel its influence—as the performance work discussed in this dissertation demonstrates.

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15 Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism (University Of Minnesota Press, 1997).
Scholar sometimes conflate Third Wave ideology with “postfeminism,” another complicated and contested term. In her reconsideration of Wendy Wasserstein’s work, for example, Jill Dolan uses Third Wave feminist and postfeminist interchangeably to refer to “a chronologically younger generation of . . . women for whom . . . feminism is accounted for” and who encourage “conducting feminist practice . . . from a place within capitalism (and within dominant ideology).”\(^{17}\) In other words, she understands the Third Wave as a group that has little use for feminism that works outside of or against society’s dominant structures and that is generally uninterested in engaging in critiques of economic policies. Elaine Aston too in “Feeling the Loss of Feminism,” fails to adequately account for the swell of feminist sentiments in the 1990s, instead identifying the post-Second Wave period as a time of “feminism fatigue.”\(^{18}\)

Third Wave feminism and postfeminism are two distinct phenomena. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff describe postfeminism, not as a set of beliefs held by a certain generation of women, but as a temporal shift in society’s understanding of and relationship to feminism that occurred in the early 2000s.\(^{19}\) Considering postfeminism as a decline in or backlash against feminist activity in the early aughts, the post-wave ethos embodied in the performances I discuss combines aspects of the Second and Third Wave to combat the notion of a postfeminist malaise.

“Post-wave” also indicates that the wave model of feminism fails to fully account for the politics of today’s feminist performances. It also shows adherence to a particular “wave” to be an unsatisfactory mode of identification. Separating ourselves into “waves,” we reiterate

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generational divides, implying that our feminist politics are frozen in a particular moment in time. For instance, I was radicalized in the mid-1990s, at the height of the Third Wave, through the Riot Grrrl movement. At the time, my understanding of feminism was informed in large part by a positioning of my own beliefs against what I perceived as the anti-sex stance of the Second Wavers. As I got older and understood the diversity of politics expressed in the 1970s and 80s, this oppositional stance became problematic, and, today, my continued identification as a “Third Waver” feels inadequate and infantilizing. Similarly, many women who are generationally part of the Second Wave no longer subscribe to the same politics they did during that movement’s height. Although imperfect, “post-wave feminism” is an apt term to describes today’s feminist position; it implies an intergenerational coalition and it signals a critique of the understanding of our current moment as “postfeminist.”

Post-wave feminism is heavily indebted to queer theory, and the post-wave performance I discuss here is explicitly queer. Queer theory itself builds on a central premise of contemporary feminist theory—that gender is a social construct—to destabilize the hetero/homosexual binary and to expand the categories of sexual identity beyond those solely based on the gender of one’s partner. In the context of performance, I understand “queer” to describe a piece of theatre that actively labors against heteronormativity assumptions, either in its content, in its representations of sexuality as non-binary, or both. Historically a homophobic slur, in the late 1980s, the term “queer” was re-appropriated by gay activist groups such as Queer Nation, who claimed it as a means of identification. The term was a politically charged symbol of gay anger over hate-crimes and homophobia, to be deployed, according to a Queer Nation manifesto, as “an ironic weapon”
against heterosexuality. The phrase “Queer Theory” was coined by feminist film scholar Teresa de Lauretis in 1991, when she edited a special issue of the journal *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, dubbing the volume, “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities.”

Queer theory derives in part from Michel Foucault’s post-structuralist critique of modern sexuality and in part from contemporary feminist work on gender. Writing in the 1970s, Foucault points out that homosexual identity is a relatively recent phenomenon in the West, and that prior to the turn of the century, even if a person participated in homosexual acts, those acts did not indicate an overarching identity. Using historical examples, Foucault theorizes that the language of sexuality does not merely describe the world as it exists, but actually creates ways of knowing the world, citing the ways in which Western concepts of homosexuality are constituted through the language we use to talk about it.

Ten years later, Judith Butler uses Foucault’s theoretical framework and French feminists de Beauvoir, Irigaray, Kristeva, and Wittig to deconstruct the Western male/female gender dichotomy. Resisting the essentialist notions of womanhood that empowered some participants in the Second Wave, in her 1988 essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” and later in *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues that gender is not a stable identity, but a “symbolic social sign” constituted by “bodily gestures, movement, and enactment.” She theorizes the notion of “performativity,” which she defines as both “dramatic” and “non-referential,” to characterize gender as something that both men and women constantly and compulsively

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produce, although there is no original, or essential model for how they produce it.\footnote{Ibid., 521.} Butler’s theories have had broad-reaching effects, and although they were originally rooted in feminist theory, they are usually seen as the foundation of queer theory. Although Butler distanced the notion of performativity from actual performance in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), her ideas would inspire performance scholars and practitioners to find the possibility for exploring gender’s performativity in theoretical performance.

Eve Sedgwick, in the introduction to her book *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) also uses Foucault’s theories, calling for a definition of sexuality that accounts for “the array of acts, expectations, narratives, pleasures, identity-formations, and knowledges, in both women and men, that tends to cluster most densely around certain genital sensations but is not adequately defined by them.”\footnote{Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 29.} In her expansive definition, “queer” is both a sexual identity and a form of scholarship, a reading practice which she models in her book, looking at classic literary texts and excavating the queer tensions within them. Inspired by her methodology, many scholars have queered performance texts; Alexander Doty, for instance, queers popular television texts in *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, Stacy Wolf queers American Musicals in *A Problem Like Maria*, and J. Jack Halberstam queers animated film in *The Queer Art of Failure*. As I argue throughout these chapters, the queering of popular culture texts is an important feature of post-wave pop feminist experimental performance.

Queer and feminist theatre practice might be tracked loosely against feminisms and the development of queer theory. Charlotte Canning’s *Feminist Theatre in the U.S.A.*, for example, describes an “explosion of feminist theatre activity” that took place in the US in the 70s and 80s,
which she characterizes as the “first time in history [in which] women had an enormous collective impact on theatre.” She traces the feminist work in this period to two points of origin: the Women’s Liberation Movement and experimental companies such as the Open Theatre and San Francisco Mime Troupe, in which women’s dissatisfaction with their roles and positions led them to form their own companies that focused on feminist issues. She describes the working practices of these feminist theatres—their collectivity and collaboration, the community fostered by the work, their dealing with difference (racial, class-based, sexual), as well as the subject matter taken up in the performances—the mother-daughter relationship, patriarchy, and violence against women. In Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America, Jane Wark studies feminist performance art throughout the same period, showing how performance art articulated the feminist objectives of the Women’s Movement, and the ways in which women artists transformed the field by using their work to critique women’s social roles.

In 1988, Jill Dolan published Feminist Spectator as Critic, in which she outlines three different types of feminism—liberal, cultural (or radical), and materialist—and shows how these ideologies manifest in different types of theatrical performance, from that of Wendy Wasserstein to Women’s Experimental Theatre to Split Britches. Transposing Laura Mulvey’s feminist film criticism to the theatre, Dolan argues that some formalist experimental performance (such as that of Richard Foreman) and mainstream theatre work (for example, Marsha Norman’s ‘night Mother) construct and maintain a male gaze, while experimental material feminist theatre (such as the work of Split Britches), in part because of its assumption of a lesbian audience, deconstructs traditional gender roles and disrupts conventional ways of viewing women onstage.

Dolan’s book was also published the same year as Judith Butler’s essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” and whereas Butler uses the notion of performance as a metaphor that exposes gendered practices in everyday life, Dolan uses actual theatrical performance to the same end. Dolan contends that feminist theatre practitioners should not only “denaturalize gender as representation,” but also “demystify the workings of the genderized representational apparatus itself,” arguing that often postmodern performance work fails to do this, even as it critiques subjectivity and notions of stable identity. Like Dolan, Elin Diamond finds a feminist power in the demystification of the performance’s narrative. Diamond uses the writing of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva (and later, Butler’s work as well) to critique the idea that theatre is mimetic—that it is capable of representing reality—arguing that representation is contingent on who controls the mechanisms of representation. Diamond theorizes “gestic feminist criticism,” a mode of analysis in which feminism might “re-radicalize” Brechtian techniques to offer a feminist interpretation of performance. “A gestic feminist criticism,” she writes, “would ‘alienate’ or foreground these moments in a playtext when social attitudes about gender and sexuality conceal or disrupt patriarchal ideology.” Diamond reads Brecht’s alienation- or A-effect as the “technique of defamiliarizing a word, an idea, a gesture so as to enable the spectator to see or hear it afresh.” Because gender roles are so familiar, so naturalized in society, the A-effect is a particularly valuable technique for providing gender critique in performance. For example, Diamond argues that a feminist theatre practice might

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29 Ibid., 54.
30 Ibid., 45.
“mock the strictures of gender” and highlight rather than reject “gender-as-appearance.””31 In doing so, performance can expose masculinity and femininity as constructed and contingent, allowing spectators “to see what s/he can’t see: a sign system as a sign system.”32

The post-wave performance I discuss here in queer in its presentation of sexual identity as mutable and contingent. Like the work that Dolan champions, these performances often assume an in-the-know lesbian audience. Even so, these artists seem largely uninterested in depicting “gender-as-appearance.” As I argue throughout, this work is “woman-centric” and—in the case of Half Straddle—specifically feminine in its aesthetic. Rather than pointing to femininity as performative, however, these groups strive to naturalize it. Foregrounding the female, however, this work is not essentialist; it suggests that anyone might take up the mantle of “lesbian feminist.”

This re-evaluation of Butler’s theories of gender performativity embodied in post-wave performance might be attributed, in part, to recent attention to transgender politics. Trans theory developed at the same time as queer theory, though it has been less ubiquitous. Early trans theorists include Sandy Stone whose essay “The Empire Strikes Back” (1987), a response to Second Wave feminist Janice Raymond’s controversial book The Transsexual Empire, interweaves her history as a transgender woman and theorization of transgender as potentially destabilizing gender binaries. Kate Bornstein’s Gender Outlaw (1994) takes a similar view of trans bodies as a site of potential radical re-envisioning of gender possibilities, and proposes that the theatre could potentially be a “Third Space,” an inclusive place in which performers can

31 Ibid., 46.
32 Ibid., 47.
camp the established orders, redefine culture’s images, and portray sexual power as safe.\textsuperscript{33} Julia Serano, however, critiques Butler and other queer theorists’ emphasis on gender’s performativity. She writes, “We must stop dismissing [femininity] as ‘artificial’ or as a ‘performance,’ and instead recognize that certain aspects of femininity (masculinity as well) transcend both socialization and biological sex—otherwise there would not be feminine boy and masculine girl children.”\textsuperscript{34} Making a case for the ways that femininity is scapegoated in U.S. culture, she argues that “Rather than focus on how femininity and masculinity are produced (an issue that has unfortunately dominated the field of gender studies of late), we should instead turn our attention to the ways these gender traits are interpreted.”\textsuperscript{35}

Some scholars such as Vivane Namaste argue that queer theoretical texts have actually erased the existence of trans people. As Namaste writes in \textit{Invisible Lives}, “queer theory as it is currently practiced must be challenged because it exhibits a remarkable insensitivity to the substantive issues of transgendered people’s everyday lives”\textsuperscript{36} She points out that much work done on actual transgender lives is in the field of social sciences—though most work in this area still objectifies transgender people—while the humanities tend to focus on cultural or literary texts without attention to their context or the “relations between discourse and society.”\textsuperscript{37} Scholarship on trans performance in theatre is almost non-existent. An attempt to start to remedy this, throughout the dissertation, I analyze the representation of trans lives in the experimental performances I take up. I demonstrate that Dyke Division and Half Straddle depict coalition

\textsuperscript{33} Kate Bornstein, \textit{Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us} (New York: Routledge, 1994).
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 39.
between lesbian feminists and trans men and women, rather than rehearsing historical divisions in queer communities. I show, in contrast, how the development of Young Jean Lee’s *Untitled Feminist Show* erased the possibility of trans women as feminist.

Another theme that arises throughout the dissertation is the post-wave performance’s persistent whiteness. Although this work overcomes some of the problems that plagued the Second Wave—particularly its difficulties grappling with sexual difference and trans identity—it fails to achieve true intersectionality in terms of race. Centering gender, unfortunately, seems to still result in an exclusion of real racial critique. This problem with feminism in general is compounded by the fact that, with a few notable exceptions (Young Jean Lee being one), New York City’s experimental theatre scene is dominated by white artists.38 The performances I analyze here are created and performed by mostly white artists who do not always interrogate the racial implications of their productions. For instance, Half Straddle’s work, which so convincingly argues for the importance of femininity, fails to fully foreground the ways in which the femininity is often explicitly linked to whiteness. Even Young Jean Lee, who so astutely critiques racialized representations in many of her plays, foregoes a sophisticated intersectional analysis in the final version of *Untitled Feminist Show*.

“Straddling Feminisms” shows how the feminism of the Dyke Division, Half Straddle, and Jibz Cameron is deeply indebted to popular culture, and, in particular, to television. These artists create what I call “queer live television” that celebrates and critiques televisual representations, asking audiences to imagine queerer, far more feminist possibilities than those offered to us in today’s television series. If we are—as Brett Martin asserts—currently living in

the “Third Golden Age” of television.\textsuperscript{39} if—as Chuck Klosterman argues—“high end television has usurped the cultural positions of film, rock, and literary fiction,” it is no wonder theatre today is taking its cues from TV.\textsuperscript{40}

Even as they take inspiration from televisual forms, these productions mark their distance from their mediatized models. Dyke Division and Half Straddle’s performances are distinctly “de-mediatized;” their analogue productions foreground live bodies and real time audience/actor interactions. Developed out of his study of Charles Ludlam’s theatre, Edward Miller defines “de-mediatized” as “the recycling of lost/found media images/narratives through the performance of live queer bodies/voices without the augmentation of visible or audible digital media onstage.”\textsuperscript{41} Cameron makes use of media onstage, but often to foreground her own live body interacting in real time with live audiences. These post-wave feminist artists celebrate beloved TV shows—reminding audiences of the sometimes guilty pleasures we take in watching, for example *The L Word*, *Friday Night Lights*, or *Brothers and Sisters*—but they simultaneously critique their content. They camp and queer televisual forms, and in doing so, call attention to the normativity of certain gender dynamics, of certain kinds of queerness, of certain modes of gender expression on television. The performances then allow audiences to see what television often renders invisible: normative masculinity, class hierarchies (and how they are tied to gender performance), rigid standards of beauty, and non-normative desires. These performances seem to confirm Phillip Auslander’s assertion in *Liveness* (1999) that “the general response of live performance to the oppression and economic superiority of mediatized forms has been to become

\textsuperscript{41} Edward Miller, Email correspondence with author, October 26, 2015.
as much like them as possible.” But by foregrounding liveness in their performances, they reject
the restrictive representations circulated in mediatized forms, even as they embrace televisual
tropes.

Whereas Second Wave feminist critique was often “underpinned by a hostility towards
the popular,” Third Wave feminisms engaged with popular culture as something to be
simultaneously enjoyed and critically assessed, rather than merely dismissed as a tool of the
patriarchy unworthy of serious feminist analysis.\textsuperscript{42} Shelley Budgeon notes, “For third-wave
feminism it is possible to approach popular culture simultaneously as a site of pleasure and an
object of critique.”\textsuperscript{43} This attitude continues today, perpetuated by publications such as \textit{Bitch} and
\textit{Bust} magazines, and websites such as AfterEllen, Racialicious, Feministing, Crunk Feminist
Collective, Jezebel, and Vice Media’s Broadly channel, all of which regularly study and debate
pop culture from a host of perspectives with attention to gender, sexuality, race, class, and
ability.\textsuperscript{44} Writers for these publications approach television as both feminist fans and critics—
critiquing and celebrating, for example, Beyoncé’s latest album,\textsuperscript{45} or praising the inclusion of a
bisexual character on \textit{Grey’s Anatomy}, while wondering if its depiction of Dr. Miranda Bailey

\textsuperscript{42} Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley, “Popularity Contests: The Meaning of Popular
Feminism,” in \textit{Feminism and Popular Culture}, ed. Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley (New
York: Berg, 2006), 5.
\textsuperscript{43} Budgeon, “The Contradictions of Successful Femininity: Third-Wave Feminism,
Postfeminism, and ‘New Femininities,’” 280.
\textsuperscript{44} The editors at \textit{Bitch} magazine, the tagline of which is “a feminist response to pop culture,”
explain that they want to apply “a sharp-yet-sympathetic lens” to popular culture. See “About
\textsuperscript{45} See, for example Brittnay Cooper, “5 Reasons I’m Here for Beyonce’, the Feminist,” \textit{The
2013/12/13/5-reasons-im-here-for-beyonce-the-feminist/ and Rosie Swash, “Why Is Beyoncé
lifeandstyle/the-womens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2013/feb/05/beyonce-calling-herself-mrs-
carter for debates about Beyoncé’s feminism.
reifies the “Mammy” stereotype. In the comments sections of these online publications, readers weigh in with their own thoughts, broadening the conversation beyond just the perspectives of the writers. These publications recognize how important popular culture is in the shaping of our understanding of ourselves, and, by taking it seriously as a subject for analysis, create an engaged online feminist community that holds the music, television, film, and fashion industries accountable for their representations. They also embrace the complex contradictions inherent in this engagement; writers and readers denounce certain aspects of popular shows, while simultaneously taking pleasure in others. Dyke Division, Half Straddle, and Jibz Cameron use their performances toward the same ends, drawing on TV as both a source of pleasure and parody, as inspiration and as an opportunity for incisive evaluation of women’s and queer people’s roles in the U.S. media today.

This dissertation is divided into four chapters, each of which takes up the work of a single company or artist. Within each chapter, I show how the work embodies, or in the case of Young Jean Lee’s Untitled Feminist Show, falls short of embodying the various aspects of the post-wave pop feminist ethos described above: it’s intergeneration approach to feminism, its queerness, its transgender and racial politics, and its use of popular culture. Chapter One, “Dyke Division(s) and Coalitions,” demonstrates that Room for Cream, the live lesbian soap opera presented by the Dyke Division of the Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf at La MaMa, E.T.C. from 2008-2010, imagines a multi-vocal lesbian utopia that inspires queer community onstage and off. Using research on lesbian feminism of the 1980s, I argue that, rather than rehearsing historical divisions, Room for Cream models modes of respectful engagement of difference without

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depicting a monolithically “correct” lesbian feminist point of view. In this chapter, I first theorize the notion of “homonormalcy,” distinct from Lisa Duggan’s “homonormativity,” to describe the de-centering of heterosexuality in its onstage worlds. I argue that the Dyke Division stages a “heterogeneous homonormalcy, particularly in terms of lesbian sex, which they use to validate desires of all kinds. I also demonstrate how the series served as a kind of “anti-L Word,” critiquing the glossy commercialized representations of lesbian life on Showtime’s hit nighttime soap.

Chapter Two, “’Pop Influenced Écriture Féminine’: Half Straddle’s Feminine Possibilities,” argues that Tina Satter’s company, Half Straddle, wrests the Third Wave notion of “girliness” from an essentialized understanding of the feminine and deploys it as a naturalized aesthetic. I show how in productions such as Family (2009), In the Pony Palace/FOOTBALL (2011), and Seagull (Thinking of You) (2013), Satter depicts adolescence as an innately queer time and frames femininity as an inherently queer practice. Even as it denaturalizes masculinity, however, I argue that Half Straddle’s work renders invisible the relationship between femininity and race, replicating an enduring problem with feminist performance and U.S. feminism in general—that of its uninterrogated whiteness.

In Chapter Three, “Bad Feminism, Bad Form, and Bad Feelings: Dynasty Handbag’s Spectacular Failures,” I contend that Jibz Cameron’s multi-media performances as Dynasty Handbag embody the productivity of feminist failure. Extending Muñoz and Halberstam’s theories of queer failure, I argue that Dynasty Handbag consistently foregrounds her own failures in order to show audiences how to be better feminists. By pointing to the ways in which today’s feminism falls short, for instance, of intersectionality, Cameron demonstrates that post-wave feminism is always, necessarily, in process. With her grotesque parodies of popular culture, I
also show how Cameron’s work offers a scathing critique of the media, and presents alternative visions for lesbian feminist futures.

In Chapter Four, “Limiting Language: Gender Fluidity and Young Jean Lee’s *Untitled Feminist Show,*” I use Lee’s wordless, all-nude dance piece as a counter-example to the others in the dissertation. Though the piece demonstrates the pervasiveness of feminist politics in experimental theatre today, it also shows how those politics might be mobilized toward an unsophisticated gender critique. Examining the workshop production as well as the NYC premier in 2012, I argue that *Untitled Feminist Show* embodies—not “post-wave pop feminism”—but “choice feminism,” a defanged politics that centers on individual performance over coalition-building, and emphasizes entertainment over true engagement.

“Straddling Feminisms” covers previously unexamined experimental work, and provides an archive of often-undocumented productions. I attended almost all of the performances I write about—and I approach the work with a desire to capture it as well as critique it. To this end, I perform close readings of the performance texts and the productions’ design, staging, and performance styles. Situating this new feminist work in the trajectory of the American avant-garde, my dissertation marks the turn in NYC’s experimental theatre from decidedly apolitical in the early aughts to explicitly engaging feminist and queer politics over the past eight years. The concept of “post-wave pop feminism” provides a paradigm for other research; it offers new ways of articulating feminism in performance, particularly when the feminist theatre criticism of decades past does not adequately describe its politics. The dissertation provides an historical look at today’s experimental work—analyzing how it relates to lesbian feminism of the 70s and 80s as well as to queer and feminist performances of the past. Understanding post-wave pop feminist performance—what it values and what it lacks—we gain understanding our contemporary
feminist moment beyond the stage as well. And if we allow art to imitate life, post-wave pop feminist performance will provide strategies for making U.S. feminism a more intergenerational, coalitional, and multi-vocal movement.
Dyke Division(s) and Coalitions

“[I]t’s true Sappho's entire population might be made up of lesbians and that we all might be trying to get in to each other’s pants. But ideals don't have to be fantasies!”
---Dire, Room for Cream, Season 2, Episode 2

Introduction

In the introduction to Utopia in Performance, feminist theatre scholar Jill Dolan theorizes what she calls “utopian performatives,” those “small but profound” moments in which spectators “connect . . . with the complexities of our past and the possibility of a better future.”¹ These moments, she insists, “make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better.”² The performances she analyzes in her book—everything from the autobiographical work of Peggy Shaw to Anna Deavere Smith’s multiple-character solo pieces, from Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam to Mary Zimmerman’s Metamorphoses—don’t depict utopia, but, she contends, they stir utopic feelings that inspire audiences to envision a better world.

Throughout theatre history, however, productions do deliberately depict utopia onstage. Plays such as Shakespeare’s The Tempest (1610-11) and Marivaux’s The Colony (1750) are set in fictional “no places”; they construct an alternative reality that put their audience’s own into relief, offering it up for critique by comparison. Sixties performance troupes like the Living Theatre and the Performance Group created participatory utopias that asked audiences to engage bodily with the momentary actuality of more liberated societies. Feminist theatre companies of the 1970s and 80s—for instance It’s Alright to be a Woman Theater and At the Foot of the Mountain—also used audience participation to utopic ends, creating theatre events inspired by the Consciousness Raising groups of the Women’s Liberation Movement. Taking from all these

² Ibid., 6.
traditions, *Room for Cream (RFC)*, the live lesbian soap opera presented by the Dyke Division of the Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf at La MaMa, E.T.C. from 2008-2010, portrays an alternative reality for millennial feminist audiences. The series calls on feminism’s complex histories, creating utopian performatives, allowing audiences to experience the power of queer community, and asking us to imagine possibilities for a feminist future.

This chapter argues that RFC manifests “post-wave pop feminism,” using humor to unite generations of feminists across historical divisions. After a bit of “herstory,” I demonstrate how, with its huge cast and shared authorship, this sprawling theatrical text constructs “lesbian” as an expansive category that includes queer cohorts of all sorts, for example, trans men and women, gay men, bisexual women, and others. By decentering heterosexuality in its stage world, *Room for Cream* enacts a “heterogeneous homonormality” that is utopic in its diversity. The series performs an archive of lesbian material, claiming all manner of culture—popular and academic—as “lesbian.” It puts the “pop” in the post-wave politics by using a distinctly de-mediatized style to stage mediatized forms, camping soap opera structures and specifically Showtime’s slick and sexy series, *The L Word*. The Dyke Division uses sex to argue for its importance, validating a variety of queer desires. I use the final two sections of the chapter to show how RFC’s storylines emphasize multi-vocality as an empowering feminist approach, arguing for a kind of radical democracy that embraces, rather than avoids, dissent. All of these strategies coalesce to create a community onstage and off; *Room for Cream* effected real change in downtown theatre and has the potential to do so more broadly as well.

**Herstory**
The work of the Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf (2HC) never seemed to me to be particularly queer or feminist. Since its inception in 1999, the New York City-based experimental theatre company, founded by director Brooke O’Harra and composer Brendan Connelly, garnered critical acclaim for their reworking of respected theatrical texts into experimental collages. Often calling on the same group of performers—Tina Shepard, Barbara Lanciers, Mike Mikos, Laryssa Husiak, and Heidi Schreck are among their most frequent collaborators—O’Harra and Connelly develop their pieces over the course of months and years. Their first New York productions were Stanislaw Witkiewicz’s plays from the 1920s: Tumor Brainiowicz (2002) and The Mother (2003), both presented at La MaMa, E.T.C. The following year, they created a bizarre, chaotic adaptation of Henry Fielding’s 18th century play, The Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great (2004) in which the titular character was played by a potato. Their Kabuki-inflected version of George Bernard Shaw’s Major Barbara (2006) had audiences moving from room to room in La MaMa’s large annex space, long before the explosion of immersive theatre downtown. In 2007, their irreverent, punk rock rendering of Chikamatsu Monzaemon’s Drum of the Waves of Horikawa was lauded by critics and audiences alike. They presented three workshops of excerpts from adaptation of Macbeth, titled It Cannot Be Called Our Mother But Our Graves, which they developed with SOHO Rep Studio in 2009; a final, full-length version never premiered. Though I admire the company and its formalist aesthetics—the mixing of lo-fi and sophisticated technology, their manifestation of disparate theatrical influences, the alienated acting style, and Connelly’s challenging new music scores—I find their work feels somewhat cold, intellectually but not affectively compelling.

Two-Headed Calf’s work has always been political; as Steve Luber argues, the company uses its aesthetic to critique Orientalism and to question the creation of hybrid theatrical
languages in experimental work.\textsuperscript{3} Though it doesn’t deal with identity politics directly, \textit{Drum of the Waves} used nontraditional casting—Jess Barbagallo played its leading man—and to O’Harra the production felt queer. Fatigued by 2HC’s lengthy creation process and wanting to engage identity politics more directly, in 2008 she traded esoteric experimentalism for the conventions of television soaps, abandoning the long development periods and carefully cultivated experiments for a lightning-paced production schedule, slip-shod aesthetics, and melodramatic antics. Along with Connelly, Laryssa Husiak, Laura Stinger, and Jess Barbagallo (and later Barbara Lanciers and Sacha Yanow), O’Harra formed the Dyke Division and to realize her vision for a “live lesbian soap opera.”

The Dyke Division secured an early Saturday slot at the Club at La MaMa, a small cabaret-style space curated by Nicky Paraiso. Episodes of \textit{Room for Cream} were presented bi-weekly (Seasons 1 and 2) and monthly (Season 3). Harkening back to the collectivity advocated by lesbian feminists during the Second Wave, \textit{Room for Cream} was very much a group effort, and, in contrast to the 2HC’s protracted creation process, the 45-minute episodes were put up with “almost no rehearsal.”\textsuperscript{4} The Dyke Division members, including O’Harra, both wrote and performed in the series. One Division member acted as a kind of “head writer” on each episode, bringing in a mostly-finished script to the group, which met to edit it and brainstorm future episodes. The cast got the final version of the script on Sunday, and assembled for a read-through and blocking session on Thursday with the episode’s director. (O’Harra directed most of the episodes, with other Division members occasionally taking the helm.) The following Thursday, they met to rehearse again. On Saturday before the 5:30 PM show, they did a run-through, a

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{OHarra2009} Brooke O’Harra, Interview with author, November 15, 2009.
\end{thebibliography}
speed-through, a tech-through, and then performed the show. This quick and collective process lead to uneven and unresolved narratives—it is almost impossible to track who is feuding and/or having sex with whom—but that is part of the show’s fun, and ultimately, the characters—which are loosely based on the actors that played them—are much more compelling than their storylines.

The eleven episodes that comprise the first season, presented in January through June of 2008, attracted large, enthusiastic audiences and garnered positive—if sometimes patronizing—reviews. (Adam Feldman, for example, called the show “collegiate” in Time Out New York, writing, “This is a sweet cappuccino, two-thirds foam.”5) In the wake of this highly successful first season, the group staged a Season One “box set,” presenting two Season One episodes at a time, before premiering eight new episodes as Season Two the following February.6 Season Three, which the Dyke Division called a “mini-series,” consisted of five episodes presented monthly in February through June of 2010.

The first season of Room for Cream revolves around three major conflicts—one personal, one political, one otherworldly. The series is set in Sappho, a lesbian haven hidden somewhere in the Berkshire mountains. Ellie (Kate Benson) and Robbie (Nehessau deGannes) are proprietors of the titular café, Room for Cream, and adoptive mothers to a runaway baby butch named Bailey Donovan (Jess Barbagallo). Their long term relationship hits the rocks when Robbie is abducted by an out of control heterosexual couple looking to spice up their sex life and Ellie’s former flame Tahira (Igor Siddiqui) mysteriously arrives in town. In the meantime, City

6 I attended six of the eleven remounted Season One episodes. I attended six of the eight episodes of Season Two and four of five episodes of Season Three. The company provided me with DVDs and scripts when available to facilitate my research.
Councilperson Brandy Rogers (K8 Hardy) is trying to close down the Bearded Goat, a local organic farm run by a collective of trans men. Dr. Jane O’Boyle (Brooke O’Harra), a quirky professor of film and feminism at the University of Sappho, falls for the enigmatic Officer Jill Andrews (Nina Hoffman), who is tragically murdered by a coven of vampires before their relationship can really take off. Jane, in despair, runs away to a convent, and becomes a major crush for the Mother Superior (Heidi Schreck).

Season One’s subplots develop Sappho’s colorful characters. Seventeen-year-old Bailey, a barista at Cream, explores first-time love with hot high school volleyball player Francesca (Jill Guidera) and gender identity with Willow (Hans Kuzmich), her friend and goat farmer. The steamy romance between Sappho’s endearing and ever-horny handywoman, Dire Owens (Becca Blackwell), and Lacey Peters (Larissa Husiak), a grad student and part-time manager of Progressive Pussies, “Sappho’s oldest sex shop” (2.1), is interrupted by Julie Jaspers (Amber Valentine), an odd U. Sapph undergrad who becomes enamored with Lacey, and by Cadie Bosch (Laura Berlin Stinger), a bi-curious documentary filmmaker who piques Dire’s interest. In anticipation of a plot point that will develop in Season Two, Grace Tanning (Rosemary Quinn) receives a call from her long-lost adopted daughter, CIA Agent Steph (Jibz Cameron).

Perhaps evidence of the collective creation taking its toll, Season Two’s storylines are less defined; its episodes focus on the almost-always rocky romantic relationships of Sappho’s residents. There are characters such as Yiff and Chan, the “furries” who appear in Episode 3, and never return. Bailey is absent for much of the season when she runs away to Florida to try to reconcile with her parents. Dire is dating Cadie and trying to put together a business plan for

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7 All quotations cited here come from the unpublished scripts of the series. I refer to them by season and episode number throughout; the titles and authors for all of the episodes listed in the Appendix.
Trimmin’ Twats, a landscaping company that never materializes. Jane and ex-Mother Superior Meghan (now played by Elizabeth Whitney) struggle with the sexual dimension of their budding romance. Portia Morrison (Sacha Yanow), an ambitious video artist, hooks up with Lacey. Their liaisons fuel Lacey’s substance abuse problems, and she spirals out of control. At the end of the season, when Ellie and Roberta decide to take time off from their relationship and give up Room for Cream, Bailey and Dire take over the establishment.

Though less madcap than the previous seasons, Season Three is thematically cohesive—its episodes deal explicitly with politics and the ways in which the personal is always political. The season provides a platform for political debate, literally. In this season, after Mayor Wheeler’s shocking death, three main characters run for the office, a plot point that permits each woman to present her vision for Sappho’s future. The season is also political in its staging the debate about gay marriage. The impending nuptials between Dr. O’Boyle and Agent Steph—as well as Dire and Julie’s drunken marriage and Officer Ann Ruffins’s (Lea Robinson) pregnancy—allow an opportunity for characters to present differing views on gay marriage and queer domesticity.

As the ridiculous storylines indicate, Room for Cream relies on humor, delivering its lesbian feminism in the enormously entertaining package of a soapy serial. It uses pleasure as a politics, performing what Sara Warner calls an “act of gaiety.” Acts of gaiety, she writes, “involve a flamboyant and flagrant flaunting [of] one’s sexuality.” Warner wants to “reanimate” gaiety in part to remind (or inform) audiences of lesbian feminist’s funny histories in light of what she sees as “queer theorists’ amnesiac relation to . . . lesbian feminist structures of feeling”

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and the “homoliberalization of the LGBT movement.”9 As Warner points out, though “[l]esbians and feminists are not typically associated with gaiety” there is a rich tradition of lesbian humor in performance, and the Dyke Division’s aesthetics are indebted to many of the groups she analyzes.10

Like many of the lesbian performance groups that have come before, the Dyke Division employs a “do-it-yourself” aesthetic that contributes to its comedy. Kate Davy points out that WOW Café Theatre—a women’s performance space in New York City where groups such as Medusa’s Revenge, Split Britches, Five Lesbian Brothers, Spiderwoman got their start in the 1980s and 90s—provided an opportunity for anyone to perform, despite formal training or talent. Like the Dyke Division, the artists working at WOW cultivated an aesthetic of “inspired messiness.”11 Davy argues, “Haphazardly thrown-together sets and costumes, missed entrances, and actors fishing for their lines served to expand rather than diminish the experience.”12 As I discuss below, Room for Cream is fully aware of its antecedents. But whereas the work at WOW Café was, according to Davy, “representative of a departure from the ascendant feminist aesthetic that had emerged in the 1970s,” Room for Cream embraces the politics and performance aesthetics of 1970s as well as the 80s and 90s, marking it as distinctly post-wave.

All three seasons of Room for Cream sold out, and, as the popularity of the series grew, the Division added additional shows; episodes from Season Two and Three were performed at both 5 PM and 6.30 PM. Tickets cost $8 a piece ($15 for the double-headers in the “box set”), and devoted fans could purchase a Season Pass that gave them access to all the shows in the

9 Ibid., xii, xiii, xxi.
10 Ibid., 9.
12 Ibid., 2.
season at a discounted rate. Unlike much downtown theatre, *Room for Cream* actually managed to make money, largely because no one involved was paid. At the end of each season, the Dyke Division used any leftover funds to throw a big party for everyone involved.

For audiences, the shows themselves felt like queer parties; audience members mingled beforehand and were invited to meet up with cast members at a local bar after the show. Patrons could purchase cheap beer at the venue, which they were permitted to drink throughout the performance. The show’s staging also encouraged feelings of community. For most of its run, *Room for Cream* used a configuration that might be described as a traverse stage meets cabaret seating.\(^{13}\) Although some scenes took place on the stage at one end of the room, the titular coffee shop was situated in the center of the audience. A small counter with an espresso maker sat to the right on the floor of the house, surrounded by cabaret tables and chairs. Some tables were reserved as the site of the stage action, but audience members were free to fill in the rest. The remainder of the audience sat on risers on either side of the room, facing center. The arrangement brought the audience into the drama and allowed spectators to really see each other, amplifying a sense of queer community. This feeling of *communitas*—as Dolan argues via Victor Turner—serves as a “model for other social interactions.”\(^{14}\) In other words, as audiences see themselves as part of a queer community, they are also urged to consider how the conversations initiated by the series can continue, how the commitments of the series might be carried out of La MaMa’s cabaret space and into real life. The queer party doesn’t have to end with the series’ finale.

**Heterogeneous Homonormality**

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\(^{13}\) Halfway through the final season, however, the fire marshals declared this set-up unsafe, and the Dyke Division had to revert to a more traditional audience arrangement.

\(^{14}\) Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 11.
When Greg Mehrten—an Associate of both the Wooster Group and Mabou Mines—joined the RFC cast in Season One as Warden Tim, part time volunteer at Sappho’s slammer, he took on a role that was originally intended for Donna Barkman (an established solo performer and poet). Rather than re-write the part for Mehrten, the Dyke Division left the scripts and their lesbian references intact and wrote a new part for Barkman (Tim’s best friend Benny who appears in Seasons Two and Three). O’Harra instructed Mehrten to imagine Barkman doing his role and to play it “like a 70 year old lesbian.” The result is a character that is at once a gay man—someone who enjoys leather chaps and Mikey, the handsome bouncer at the Boozy Butch—and a lesbian—Tim is also a flannel-wearing, Oxygen-watching, crocheting member of Sappho’s pagan women’s singing circle. Through his character, the Dyke Division unites these two groups and argues for the congruency of their investments.

According to O’Harra, the Dyke Division had the idea to set the show in the Berkshires, and, as they drafted scripts for the first season, it quickly become apparent to them that everyone in Sappho is a lesbian. Even so, Room for Cream consists of characters that represent a broad spectrum of gender identities, ages, races, ethnicity, and desires that complicate this category. At the same time, the episodes depict and enact a palpable sense of community derived, in part, from the specificity of that category. In Sappho, gay men, bisexual women, trans men, and trans women all might be considered “lesbian” or, to use Elizabeth Grosz’s term, “becoming-lesbian.” Grosz argues that rather than “being-lesbian,” as in “identifying with that being known as a lesbian” or claiming any identity at all, we might instead ask “what kinds of lesbian connections, what kinds of lesbian-machine, we invest our time, energy, and bodies in, what

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15 O’Harra, Interview with author, November 15, 2009.
16 Ibid.
kinds of sexuality we invest ourselves in, with what other kinds of bodies and to what effects?”
Doing so, she proposes, opens up possibility: new ways of ourselves and our relationships, new
ways of looking at our world.

Encompassing every character under the rubric of “becoming-lesbian,” *Room for Cream*
does the important political work of instantiating a heterogeneous homonormalcy. The term
“homonormativity” has negative connotations—Lisa Duggan defines it as “a politics that does
not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains
them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized,
depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”18 Instead, I use the term
“homonormalcy” to indicate the very political choice that the Dyke Division makes to de-center
straight culture and present lesbian feminist culture as the norm in *RFC*. The concept of
heterogeneous homonormalcy suggests that, although Sappho is entirely queer, not all of its
constituents share the same point of view—nor should they.

Unlike 2HC’s previous work, which critiques realism with its very experimental
aesthetic, *RFC* is realistic, if often ridiculous. Its dialogue attempts to imitate everyday speech,
its characters—even its vampires—are seemingly “real” people with back stories and complex
motivations, it depicts situations that are largely personal and domestic, and it tells its stories
using a straightforward chronological narrative structure. Historically, critics have questioned
realism’s ability to put forth an efficacious queer and feminist agenda. Jill Dolan writes in
*Feminist Spectator as Critic*, for example, “The lesbian subject position in realism is always

18 Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on
singular, never adequately the site of the difference between or among lesbians.”\textsuperscript{19} Refuting this conception of realism, RFC features multiple lesbian subjects, and presents varied political perspectives, lifestyle choices, and sexual proclivities. As a serial with an on-going narrative, RFC allows audiences a sustained investment in these characters and resists some of realism’s familiar traps—avoiding, for instance, a monolithic view of lesbian life or the image of a singular, alienated lesbian subject.

The cast is comprised of a combination of seasoned performers, a new crop of downtown actors, and many an “art star” who had never before been onstage. The intergenerational nature of the cast enables the series to depict an array of political perspectives, putting Second Wave ideas and issues in conversation with those of more contemporary feminisms. In this way, the series embodies a post-wave politics; it presents the viewpoint that today’s generation has something to learn from the older one (and vice versa).

The Open Theatre’s Tina Shepard plays Bea, Dire’s mother and an irascible but endearing retiree, and Rosemary Quinn—also a Chaiken collaborator and a former associate of Mabou Mines—plays her best friend Grace. Grace is a farm-dwelling, Birkenstock-and socks-wearing Wiccan, an activist who was a part of a variety of social movements in the 1970s. Feeling like she had to choose between her child and her causes, Grace gave up her adoptive daughter Steph to her partner Ellen (played by Wooster’s Kate Valk in a cameo appearance as a \textit{deus ex machina} at the end of Season Two). Grace’s back-story offers an opportunity to remind audiences of the challenges that Second Wave feminists faced. Late in Season Three, Officer Ruffins urges Steph to forgive her mothers, to understand their very different circumstances, to recognize their mistakes, and to move on. She tells her, “Your parents were trying to make space

for some of the possibilities of queerness. . . . Your parents were trying one way and it didn’t work for them both. But they have made peace with each other and with themselves. Maybe you could do that” (3.5).

Featuring actors of different generations also allows the Dyke Division to stage its own theatrical history. Moe Angelos, a founding member of the Five Lesbian Brothers, is featured in the series. Casting Angelos as a character nicknamed “Dad,” the Dyke Division highlights its indebtedness to the Brothers at the same time as it establishes its own place in a history of downtown lesbian performance. Sharon Hayes—a prominent multimedia artist and activist who is also O’Harra’s partner—plays a character called Big Alice, Sappho’s mechanic and stage manager for their community theatre productions. Elizabeth Freeman uses Hayes’s work to theorize her concept of “temporal drag”—Hayes’s project In the Near Future (2005) stages public performances in which she holds signs with anachronistic protest slogans (for example, “Ratify ERA Now!”). Big Alice’s name connotes “older,” conjuring images of Hayes as a kind of big sister to the other characters. Hayes’s presence in RFC has a dual significance: she represents a generation of feminist artists that came to prominence in the 1990s and she is also an artist whose work re-performs and reflects upon lesbian feminist political histories, just as RFC does.

Nicky Paraiso, Director of Programming for The Club at La MaMa, introduced each RFC episode. Paraiso himself is a well-established queer performance artist and an alum of Jeff Weiss and Carlos Ricardo Martinez’s And That’s How the Rent Gets Paid, the darkly comic politically incorrect serial about the seedy underbelly of 70s and 80s gay New York City. That on-going work was part of O’Harra’s inspiration for doing a live queer series. With each of his flamboyant

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20 Freeman, Time Binds.
introductions, Paraiso passes the torch of irreverent, imperfect queer performance to O’Harra and company, as he reminds audiences of the past in which RFC is situated.

Outside the world of the play, the decision to cast older actors emphasizes their value in a field that often favors youth, especially in women. According to O’Harra, casting actors across generations was a deliberate choice; she explains, “[T]he older cast members are “all extraordinarily strong women and . . . powerful actors. They are such phenomenal actors and there aren’t that many roles for them now.” Room for Cream provides them with meaty roles that allow them to be funny and melodramatic, and, perhaps most transgressively, sexual as well.

Although most of its main characters are white, Room for Cream is racially and ethnically more diverse than many of downtown theatre’s recent offerings. In particular, the series depicts partnerships between characters of different races, arguing for an intersectional feminism that forges such alliances. For instance, Ellie and Robbie’s interracial relationship is a focus of the first season, and Robbie’s friendship with Dad spans the series; together they form the Black Knights, “Berkshire County’s first and only Ebony and Ivory Black Power motorcycle club.” Ellie’s ex-Tahira (played by Igor Siddiqui, a Croatian-born architect) is Pakistani, and, as I discuss later in the chapter, the Dyke Division uses Tahira’s ethnicity to highlight the limitations of a U.S.-centric feminism.

An Archive of Lesbian Feminist Feeling

Although Season Three was the last, RFC produced a lesbian affective archive, the effects of which endure even outside of the theatre space. Although her work focuses specifically

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21 O’Harra, Interview with author, November 15, 2009.
on trauma, Ann Cvetkovich defines an “archive of feelings” as “an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception.”

Replete with references aimed towards an in-the-know audience savvy enough to appreciate its allusions, RFC creates an archive of lesbian culture that is pleasurable to audiences in the theatre as well as accessible to them outside of it. The Dyke Division’s queer readings of cultural objects resonate with audience members when they leave Sappho’s utopia and return to the real world.

*Room for Cream*’s archive includes artifacts from both highbrow and lowbrow lesbian culture, making its humor appealing to a range of spectators. A mention of Deborah Addington’s book on vaginal fisting follows a discussion of Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*. The audience laughs as hard when Bailey’s cell phone plays Ani DiFranco’s angsty classic “Both Hands” as when Dr. O’Boyle longs for a copy of Julia Kristeva’s essay on melancholy to console her when vampires murder her girlfriend. The archive also serves as a pedagogical tool; references to little-known feminists like filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger and controversial video artist Alicja Zebrowska expose audiences to these women’s work. RFC argues for movies such as *Personal Best* (1982), *Bound* (1996), and *If These Walls Could Talk* (1996) as lesbian classics. The Dyke Division also makes lesbian use of non-queer cultural references, claiming a movie like *Sister Act* (1992) with Whoopi Goldberg, which Jane is seen watching in episode 1.9, as a lesbian artifact for its subtext of same-sex desire. “And I’m Telling You, I’m Not Going” from *Dreamgirls* becomes a lesbian anthem when sung in the Season One finale, “Field of Queers.”

The town of Sappho itself is a celebration of lesbian feminist “herstory.” In addition to places like the local strip club Lavender Legs, The Boozy Butch bar, and the HomoSapettes Gym

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(2.4), there are locations throughout Sappho that honor famous women, cataloguing a who’s who of lesbian feminist herstory. Dr. Wendy Dooley (Barbara Lanciers), therapist to everyone in Sappho, directs local productions at the Sandra Bernhard Community Theater (2.1; 2.2; 3.2), until it is shut down in Season 3. Jane, distressed about the murder of her girlfriend, goes for an extended stay at the Convent of Hildegard von Bingen (1.11). Betty Friedan Drive leads from Room for Cream to the University (3.3). U. Sapph’s Library boasts the Dorothy Arzner Media Center (3.3), and the women often congregate at the Rita Mae Brown Reads bookstore (2.1; 2.7). Officer Ruffins coaches basketball at the Martina Navratilova Community Recreational Center (3.1), while Portia tricks Dire in giving money to support Sappho’s Alla Nazimova Movie House and then runs away with the funds (3.4).

Music is especially important in the series. The Room for Cream musical archive includes the multi-generational catalogue of women’s music used in the episodes; between scenes, the audience hears clips of everything from Melissa Etheridge and k. d. lang, to Joan Armatrading, Patti Smith, and Bikini Kill. In the final episode of Season One, Bailey attempts to set the romantic mood for her first sexual experience with her girlfriend Francesca using music. Francesca laughs at Bailey’s mention that she has “some Janis Ian” in her collection. Bailey explains, “It was a present from Ellie—some bullshit about my ‘proud lesbian heritage’” (1.11). The music selections played, quoted, and referenced throughout the series do, in fact, celebrate a “proud lesbian musical heritage.” The Dyke Division claims within that heritage a broad array of musical genres and artists (lesbian and otherwise.) In Season 1 Episode 7, a drunk Bea raps an excerpt from electroclash rocker Peaches’ “Fuck the Pain Away.” Angsty, earnest Bailey regularly quotes Melissa Etheridge, telling Francesca, as they embark on a road trip at the end of episode 1.1, “You can sleep while I drive”—a sly reference to the title of a 1989 Etheridge song.
Lyrics from Sophie B. Hawkin’s “Damn I Wish I Was Your Lover” are interpolated into the text of episode 1.7, when Tahira explains to Ellie what happened to her in Pakistan, and how she was able to transition into the body of a male.

TAHIRA: I joined the UVO and went into the mountains. I was there for two years. It was terrible. The state militia was surrounding us. Many around me were dying. It is there that I learned about my powers.

ELLIE: Go on.

TAHIRA: It was raining. A major thunder storm descended upon us but you could barely hear the thunder over the artillery fire which was getting closer every second. There were nine of us and we started to sing, to intone. The women I was with were so strong, their collective will was very powerful, like a really good Yoga studio.

ELLIE: Sure.

TAHIRA: We got to this intensity, this fervor that I cannot put into words, like all the best third world experiences.

ELLIE: I know.

TAHIRA: Lighting struck, of course, and I could feel my skin move without me. I began to transmogrify for the first time. I was slipping. In a state of slippage.

ELLIE: I feel that way all the time. God, you’re awesome.

TAHIRA: Suddenly I was somewhere else. I think I was in the south, far from the war. I sat on the mountainside with peace of mind
I lay by the ocean making love to her with visions clear
Walked for days with no one near
And I return as chained and bound to you.

ELLIE: Damn, I wish I was your lover. (1.7)

The scene starts with the serious political issue of a woman fighting for her life as part of the resistance in Pakistan and a critique of U.S. feminism’s Orientalist perspective on “third
world” women.\textsuperscript{24} Tahira uses “a really good Yoga studio” as a referent to explain her experience of collectivity to Ellie. (The reference to Yoga is particularly apt, as an eastern practice co-opted and consumerized by Western culture.) When Tahira references the unspeakable intensity of “the best third world experiences,” she parodies the Western feminism’s fetishizing view of women in developing nations as deeply spiritual and connected with nature. By quoting the Hawkins song at the end of the scene (starting with the line “I sat on the mountain side” . . .), the Dyke Division makes it clear to audiences that both Tahira and Ellie are in on the joke.

The series also pays homage to a lesbian theatre tradition. Lacey Chambers’s name references the lesbian playwright Jane Chambers and the character Lacey in her 1983 play \textit{Quintessential Image}. Ellie, too, is character in Chambers’s 1974 play, \textit{A Late Snow}. In Season Two, the women of Sappho prepare for a community theatre production of Frank Marcus’s 1964 play, \textit{The Killing of Sister George}. Jill Dolan famously deconstructs the play in her article on lesbian subjectivity, finding it difficult to read against the grain of the realistic text, in which June Buckridge, a butch character portrayed as a monstrous affront to both femininity and masculinity, is ultimately marginalized.\textsuperscript{25} The Dyke Division, however, camps the piece, framing the fraught text within the characters’ complex network of desires, simultaneously claiming the play as a lesbian artifact and questioning its problematic assumptions, all the while providing historical context for the piece. For example, Jane exclaims that the film version is one of her favorite, noting “It was so controversial the Daughters of Bilitis urged lesbians to boycott it when it was released in ’68!” Francesca (in this season, played by Mieke Duffly) explains that Robert

\textsuperscript{24} Despite my research, I have not been able to find out to what “UVO” refers. I assume it is some kind of left-wing resistance group, such as the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy, fighting against the military rule in Pakistan in the late 1970s and 80s.

\textsuperscript{25} See “‘Lesbian’ Subjectivity in Realism: Dragging at the Margins of Structure and Ideology” in Dolan, \textit{Presence and Desire}. 

Aldrich directed the 1968 movie version, “the guy who does those guy movies like *The Dirty Dozen* and *The Frisco Kid,*” which she points out is, “Sort of weird, right?” As the characters pair up and use the play’s text to audition, the violent scenes between June and Childie read as titillating role-play scenarios, exposing the sexual tensions between auditioners. At the same time, the play-within-a-play structure allows the Dyke Division to quote and critique the play’s over-the-top stereotypes of a butch lesbian and her subservient lover. Ultimately Bea and Francesca win the roles of George and Childie, and perform them to enthusiastic response from the community.

In the following episode (2.4), Francesca and Bea continue to blur the lines between theatre and real life, enacting scenes from the cult film *Harold and Maude* (1971), with Bea as Maude and Francesca as Harold. Claiming the text as a lesbian artifact, Bea believes it “could be a beautiful production,” and, in doing so, recasts the relationship between Harold and the much-older Maude as queer (2.4).26 In Season Three, the Dyke Division uses Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* as a template for the introduction of Episode Three, arguing for Sappho as an “every town, USA”—another example of the series’ homonormalcy.

The uses of these texts and references range from gentle parody to resistant recuperation. *RFC*’s affective archive is at once a celebration of lesbian heritage and an embrace of an imperfect past. The archive serves as a lesson in herstory for its audiences at the same time as it uses that culture herstory to build community in anticipation of queer futures.

**An Anti-*L Word***

26 The film was made into a play that ran briefly on Broadway in 1980.
RFC begs comparison to The L Word, a nighttime drama and one of the first television series to center around lesbian lives, which premiered on cable’s Showtime network in 2004 and ran for five seasons. According to Jess Barbagallo, however, The L Word was inspirational as a foil, rather than a model for their work; the women of Sappho are intentionally not the chic L.A. lipstick lesbians that populate the Showtime series.\textsuperscript{27} Room for Cream’s patrons represent a range of class identities—cops, coaches, barristas, farmers, janitors, professors, psychiatrists—a more diverse group than the unrealistically upper-middle- and upper-class characters hanging out at The L Word’s local coffee shop, The Planet. In Episode 1.4 the Dyke Division explicitly marks its difference from The L Word, comically suggesting that the women of Sappho have some critiques for creator Ilene Chaiken on the show’s storylines. Jane (Brooke O’Harra) walks into Room for Cream talking to Portia (Sacha Yanow):

JANE: And then I said, “Listen, Ilene – do you want me to consult with you on this or not?”

PORTIA: And they still went ahead with the Dana breast-cancer storyline. That Chaiken .

When the other patrons look up from their coffees, Jane explains, “Oh, hey guys . . . Portia and I were just talking about death tropes and executives in popular lesbian drama. Any thoughts?”

Room for Cream (RFC) draws on mediatized forms, yet its use of these forms is more of a politicized parody, a kind of queering that ultimately serves to distance the performances from their mediatized models. Although RFC is indisputably a soap opera, it does not merely appropriate the structures of the daytime dramas, but actively camps them. In the introduction to The Politics and Poetics of Camp, Moe Meyer defines camp as “the strategies and tactics of

\textsuperscript{27} Jess Barbagallo, Interview with author, April 21, 2011.
queer parody. Following Linda Hutcheon’s definition of parody as “an extended repetition with critical distance,” and challenging Susan Sontag’s notion of camp as simply a sensibility—a definition he feels does not allow for camp to be seen as a political tool—he argues that camp is a “specifically queer parody possessing cultural and ideological analytic potential, taking on new meanings with implications for the emergence of a theory that can provide an oppositional queer critique.”

Soap operas, which usually revolve around a family or several families and focus on romantic relationships between men and women are distinctly heteronormative. As the Dyke Division camps the familiar formulas, however, they highlight this heteronormativity, mark RFC’s distance from it, and provide an alternative, homonormal, feminist worldview.

The soap structure itself has historically been seen as a “feminine” or even feminist resistance to more traditional, “masculine” dramatic forms. In the early 80s, Tania Modleski’s groundbreaking study of soap operas legitimized this “women’s genre” as fodder for serious study. She describes the form as “anti-progressiver,” writing that “soap opera is opposed to the classic (male) film narrative, which, with maximum action and minimum, always pertinent dialogue, speeds its way to the restoration of order.” Modleski also notes that soap operas are unique in that they allow spectators to experience connections to a number of different characters. As opposed to the spectator identifying with the male protagonist and agent of power, as per Laura Mulvey’s argument about the operation of the gaze in film, Modleski writes, “[T]he multiple identifications which occur in soap opera results in the spectator’s being divested of

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29 Ibid., qtd. on 9.
30 Ibid., 10.
power.”[32] She continues, “[T]he spectator is never permitted to identify with a character completing an entire action” and is “thwarted in its attempts to control events because of inadequate knowledge of other people’s plans, motivations, and schemes,” and because of this, “feminine powerless is reinforced.”[33] On the other hand, she points out, “Not only do soap operas suggest an alternate kind of narrative pleasure experienced by women,” but they also provide a “collective fantasy”—“a fantasy of community,” an “extended family” in which all the characters intimately involved in each other’s lives.[34]

RFCh’s episodic text, with its ongoing, intertwining narratives, its multiple climaxes, its fluidity and changeability (resulting in part from its collective authorship), as well as its bi-weekly performance structure that emphasizes process over product, takes the soap structure to a parodic extreme. RFC demanded dedication from its audience, asking them to be physically present every other Saturday afternoon for two months or more, creating a sense of community for those who regularly attended. In contrast to Modleski’s argument, an important aspect of RFC’s politics emerges from these incomplete, multiple identifications. With its large and diverse cast, RFC invites audiences to indulge in the pleasures of the performance of a broad spectrum of gender identities, to crush on a variety of the quirky characters, and, in doing so, to imagine a lesbian feminist utopia free of the distinctions that in “real life” often divide the community. In Sappho, butches and trans men, lipstick lesbians and farm-loving former activists, sex-positive strippers and sex-shy academics all exist respectfully and peacefully—save for the occasional influx of vampires. Representations of such a diverse “extended family,” a queer and

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32 Ibid., 91.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 108.
feminist “fantasy community”—comprised of women historically positioned against one another—are politically significant.

Queer and feminist scholars remain deeply conflicted about *The L Word*, despite its importance for increasing lesbian representation on television. Though Sarah Warn, former editor of AfterEllen.com, finds the series revolutionary for its insistence that the world can revolve around lesbians, she also points out that “the characters on the series were generally written to conform to traditional notions of femininity.”  

35 Jill Dolan, incredulous and delighted at the show’s mainstream success, appreciates it for its lesbian “eye candy,” even as she worries about the titillation factor inherent in its Season Five mainstream ad campaign.  

36 In “The (In)visible Lesbian: Anxieties of Representation in the *L Word*,” Susan J. Wolfe and Lee Ann Roripaugh quote from the series’ many detractors, who argue that, all in all, real lesbians are still invisible on the show, because all the show makes visible are very beautiful, skinny, femmes.  

37 Indeed the women of *The L Word* conform to traditional U.S. standards of attractiveness, and Showtime’s media machine necessarily transforms its stars into commodities whose images are reproduced and circulated in promotional ads, on DVD cases, and on the Internet. As Richard Dyer points out in his influential study of celebrity, “Stars are made for profit. . . . They are part

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of the labour that produces film as a commodity that can be sold for profit in the market place.”

In his study of celebrity in the twentieth century, sociologist Joshua Gamson asserts that television has become the central location for star-making. He argues, “Television, with its constant flow, enormous reach, and vast space-filling needs, has from its initial boom provided the most significant new outlet for image-creation. . . . As the prime outlet for, disseminator of, and certifier of public images, television has made decontextualized fame a ubiquitous currency.”

RFC resists such decontextualization and commodification of its stars. RFC is not slick or well produced; it is emblematic of a “Do-It-Yourself aesthetic.” The stagehands are visible throughout the performances, actively reminding audience of the labor going on behind-the-scenes, rather than disguising it. The set is slip-shod: a mattress might represent a bedroom, a desk—Dr. O’Boyle’s office, even the Room for Cream counter is bare-boned in terms of props. But, in particular, it is the non-virtuosic style of many of the actors that helps to invoke a communal spirit that is palpable in the audience. According to O’Harra, audience members often prefer the “non-actors” to the more experienced performers. Certainly, some of the funniest and most pleasurable moments in the show are those in which the performers, unable to contain their smiles or laughter at the soapy situations, break character. In these moments, contingent on the performance’s liveness, spectators see the actor in addition to the character and are reminded of

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their own dual status as spectators and citizens who are part of a larger lesbian feminist community comprised of people with similar interests and investments.  

RFC camps the image-making and marketing processes of mass media, featuring a number of “guest stars” throughout its three seasons. As cultural studies scholar Graeme Turner explains, celebrities’ “names and images are used to market films, CDs, magazines, newspapers, television programmes—even the evening news,” and he points out that “television programmes feature guest appearances from celebrities to build their audiences.”  

Playwright and actor Wallace Shawn, queer performance artist Taylor Mac, and the Wooster Group’s Kate Valk, for example, are among the members of the New York City theatre community lucky enough to land a spot in the series. That some of these “stars” are not particularly well known outside of downtown theatre circles camps the very notion of celebrity guest spots, and the guests’ ovethe-top performances point to and parody those appearances meant to draw eyes and advertising dollars to commercial television programs. For example, The Dyke Division uses Valk as a hilarious *deus ex machina* in Season Two’s penultimate episode. Making no effort to mask the ridiculously contrived plot device, Valk appears as Ellen, Agent Steph’s mother and Grace’s estranged former partner. She shows up at Room for Cream just in time to save Benny, a seventy-something on-the-lam activist, from arrest by Agent Steph, in an all-too-neat tying up of one of the season’s storylines.

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40 Significantly, *RFC*’s performers are open about their identities in public and private, in contrast to many television actors. For example, according to Diane Anderson-Minshall, Showtime and its “PR Machine,” sought to obscure the sexualities of all but one of *The L Word*’s actors. For more information, see Diane Anderson-Minshall, “Sex and the Clittie,” in *Reading The L Word: Outing Contemporary Television*, ed. Kim Akass, Janet McCabe, and Sarah Warn (London; New York: I.B.Tauris, 2006), 11–14.

While there are some critics who argue in favor of *The L Word*’s portrayals, maintaining that they combat the more usual lesbian stereotypes—those of ugly, frumpy, flannel-wearing, mannish women—for others, the show creates a troubling divide between the generations. For instance, *The L Word* reminds Wolfe and Roripaugh of Astrid Henry’s assertion that “young dykes tend to portray the previous generation of feminists as frumpy and unsexy,” reminding us that “[f]ashion plays a central role in staging this generational divide.” They conclude that *The L Word* “reveal[s] a consistent sense of anxiety about lesbian representations,” forming binary oppositions such as “identitarian ‘authenticity’ vs. Revlon revolution ‘passing,’ second-wave vs. third-wave feminism, lesbian vs. post-lesbianism.” The Dyke Division offers an alternative to such strict binaries by depicting a variety of generations, gender performances, and feminist stances.

Ultimately, Modleski sees televised soaps as a conservative force for women. She ends her chapter calling for an alternative to the limited representations offered through television soaps: “As feminists, we have a responsibility to devise ways of meeting these needs that are more creative, honest, and interesting than the ones mass culture has supplied.” Thirty years later, *Room for Cream* is an example of an honest and interesting antidote to mainstream mediatized performance in that it transforms its tropes into a politically powerful tool, camping mass-culture, overtly resisting the commodification of women, and parodying the celebrity-obsession bolstered by the media.

**Gen(d)erational Divides**

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43 Ibid., 45.
A major tenet of “post-wave pop feminism” is an understanding of trans people as allies, not opponents, in feminist struggle. Season One of Room for Cream explicitly explores trans identity and the relationship—historical and present-day—between trans and lesbian culture. The series depicts trans men and women in a respectful and sensitive manner, demonstrating that negotiation of difference is a crucial part of cultivating community. The trans men from the Bearded Goat farm feature regularly throughout the series, with Willow and Bailey’s friendship acting as a touchstone throughout. The Dyke Division also depicts a transfeminine character—albeit briefly—who eventually allies herself with the trans men of the Bearded Goat and the lesbians of Sappho.

Historical fault lines divide lesbian feminists and trans-identified people. In particular, beginning during the Second Wave, many radical feminists refused to accept trans women as women. In 1973, feminist activist Robin Morgan misgendered and disparaged trans woman singer Beth Elliot, saying “we must not call him sister.”45 Academic and activist Janice Raymond penned The Transsexual Empire (1979), in which she accuses trans women of “‘rap[ing] women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact” and of “appropriating of women’s minds, convictions of feminism, and sexuality.”46 Lesbian feminists attacked women’s music label Olivia Records, when Sandy Stone, an engineer at the collective, was revealed to be a trans woman.47 (Stone responded to Raymond in her essay, “The Empire Strikes Back: A

Posttranssexual Manifesto,” a text credited with launching transgender studies. Lesbian feminist institutions such as the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival famously maintained “women-born-women only” policies for years. With the recent visibility of the trans movement in mainstream U.S. culture—evidenced in part by actor Laverne Cox gracing the cover of Time magazine—these battles have re-emerged. A 2014 New Yorker article, for example, analyzes the philosophy of today’s TERFs—Trans-Exclusive Radical Feminists—and a 2015 op-ed in the Times by feminist Elinor Burkett, “What Makes a Woman,” accuses trans women such as Caitlyn Jenner of having “disregard for the fact that being a woman means having accrued certain experiences, endured certain indignities and relished certain courtesies in a culture that reacted to you as one.”

Butches and trans men (sometimes referred to as FTMs or female-to-male transsexual people) have also engaged in what J. Jack Halberstam calls “border wars,” with each group critiquing the other’s identity practices. Iconic 70s lesbian feminist folk singer Alix Dobkin, for example, published a transphobic screed entitled “The Emperor’s New Gender” in Off Our Backs in 2000 in which she expresses wariness of queer theory and skepticism about the validity of trans men’s identities. In Female Masculinity, Halberstam traces the history of these tensions, arguing that “[a]s the visibility of the transsexual community grows . . . [s]ome lesbians seem to

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see FTMs as traitors to a ‘woman’s’ movement who cross over and become the enemy. Some FTMs see lesbian feminism as a discourse that has demonized FTMs and their masculinity.”

*Room for Cream* depicts no such divisions. The Bearded Goat is an organic dairy farm run by trans men that sits just outside of Sappho. The farm supplies Room for Cream with many of its products, and the women of Sappho support the farm and its members. When the future of the Bearded Goat is threatened, Sappho’s residents jump to their defense. Dire is a tried and true butch—someone who, per Halberstam’s narrative, might feel the viability of her identity threatened by trans men. Dire demonstrates otherwise, however, exclaiming in Episode 1.3, “I love the Bearded Goat. I go up there to help them clean their gutters after the leaves fall. Good people. And they’ve got great parties. You’ll have to let me know the next time they’re having a solstice.” At one protest, Dire tries to put a muzzle on councilperson Brandy Rogers and ends up in jail.

Bailey is Dire’s “mini me,” a baby butch just out of high school who is working part time at Room for Cream. When she strikes up a friendship with Willow, a farmer from the Bearded Goat, audiences watch her negotiate her gender identity as she tries to figure out if she is trans. In Episode 1.4, Willow asks her about her sexual preferences, and Bailey confirms she prefers women, but that she is questioning her gender.

WILLOW: I just didn’t want to assume anything. There’s nothing that frustrates me more than people thinking . . . how do I say it?

BAILEY: That appearance and desire are inextricably linked?

WILLOW: Yeah. That’s a great way to put it.

BAILEY: I mean sure—gender and sexuality totally intersect, but they also diverge. And that’s why so many conversations about it get all convoluted and fucked up. (1.4)

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53 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 144.
In this scene, the Dyke Division articulates, through Bailey, the complicated relationship between gender expression and sexual orientation, emphasizing that not all lesbian-identified people share the same relationship to their gender identity and performance.

Season One of *Room for Cream* depicts a transgender woman who is at odds with the women of Sappho, a plot line that seems to re-inscribe historical divisions. Brandy Rogers is a real estate agent and a recently appointed councilperson. Sappho residents do not like her—Bea mocks her campaign slogan, “Putting the Safe Back Into Sappho” (1.4)—but Brandy really earns the wrath of the community when she tries to evict the trans men from their organic farm in order to pursue a development opportunity there. Claiming that the Bearded Goat collective has been illegally squatting on their land, Brandy promises to kick them off the property if they can’t raise $500,000.

In an emotional scene later in the episode, audiences are exposed to another side of Brandy. When Lacey Peters visits Brandy’s office to try to convince her not to close the Bearded Goat, we learn that Brandy is actually Lacey’s estranged sister, a trans woman who used to be named Randy. Lacey, shocked by the news, tells her she looks great, and asks her why she left home without explanation. Brandy clarifies that when she told their mom she is trans, she urged her to get therapy. This back-story highlights the nonequivalence of the struggles of trans and gay people. Presumably Lacey’s family knows that she is a lesbian and accepts her identity, but Brandy felt she had to leave home after revealing she is trans. Lacey is still in touch with her family, but for Brandy, merging her current life and former feels impossible. The fact that Lacey didn’t know her sister’s identity or that she is living in Sappho represents the invisibility of trans women even within lesbian worlds.
Lacey begs Brandy to reconsider her stance on the Bearded Goat, citing her responsibility to Sappho’s queer community, but Brandy is unmoved.

BRANDY: Fat chance, little sister. Hate to break it you, but this isn’t some Trans-Movie of the Week. This is about dollars. And the Bearded Goat doesn’t have a leg to stand on.

LACEY: I can’t believe this. I can’t believe you’d do this to your own community …

BRANDY: Oh come on. If I have to hear the word “community” one more time, I’ll put this lip-gloss through my eye. (1.4)

Perhaps evincing the historical divisions between trans women and lesbians, Brandy doesn’t see Sappho as her community. On the one hand, this plotline appears to reinscribe the animosity between the two groups. Ultimately, however, the power of community is, in fact, too strong for Brandy to resist. She reconsiders and gives Oak (Daphne Fitzpatrick) the deed to the Bearded Goat’s property, though she refuses to publicly disclose her reasons why. In the end, a trans woman saves the trans man collective; the episode ultimately argues for alliances between the two groups, a potentially powerful coalition that is rarely represented.

Although Brandy is played by a woman—as many activists argue, we need more representations of trans people by trans people—Hans Kuzmich, the actor who played Willow is a trans man. Unlike Half Straddle, which represents transmasculinity but not transfemininity and Young Jean Lee’s Untitled Feminist Show, which erases transfemininity as part of feminism, the Dyke Division depicts both trans men and women as lesbian feminist allies. In what amounts to a troubling anti-progress narrative, Room for Cream—the oldest of the texts I take up in this dissertation—is, ironically enough, the one that makes the most room for various types of trans identities.
Sex in Sappho

In a draft script for the second episode of Season Three, there is a note: “more sex in our shows.” The parenthetical reminder indicates that the Dyke Division is deliberate about its incorporation of sex scenes into its series. As Gayle Rubin contends, sex is more than just a “frivolous diversion,” and as Elizabeth Grosz argues, desire and sexuality are “[p]roductive” even when they are in “no way reproductive.” An important part of the Room for Cream’s politics, the onstage sex in it is pleasurable, deeply political, and productive. Within the world of Sappho, frank discussions about sex demonstrate to audiences that feminists do (and should) disagree about sex, and that the ultimate objective is not complete accord, but understanding. The series also uses onstage sex to argue for the ways it can constitute community. Finally, the sex scenes work on a metatheatrical level, providing audiences with representations of sex that they don’t see elsewhere, validating their own queer desires.

Sex has always been a contentious issue for feminists—especially spectacularized sex in theatre, film, and television—so the fact that Room for Cream takes a non-judgmental, pluralistic, and explicit approach is a significant political statement. The “Sex Wars” notoriously plagued feminism in the 1980s, with many of the issues coming to a head at the Barnard Conference on Sexuality in 1982. Lisa Duggan defines these “wars” as “a series of bitter political and cultural battles over issues of sexuality”—including a range of topics such as pornography, prostitution, the status of “obscene” art, sex ed curricula, sexual abuse, reproductive freedom for women, and gay and lesbian rights—that took place in the U.S.

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1980 to 1990. Duggan points out that feminist and gay/lesbian activists did not join forces in these fights, and the “porn wars,” which debated the function of sexuality explicit material, in particular divided the feminist community. The anti-porn side, exemplified by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, argued that pornography is a tool of the patriarchy that perpetuates violence against women. The “pro-sex” stance, taken up by feminist scholars such as Gayle Rubin sought to deconstruct divisions between “bad” and “good” sexuality. Duggan writes, “We were ultimately shocked to find ourselves defending our activist communities—of sex workers, of butch-fem dykes, of lesbian sadomasochists—against political attacks launched by feminists” (emphasis in the original). The stakes of these debates were particularly high for lesbians; as Jill Dolan contends, “The anti-sex morality of the antiporn movement threatens to render lesbians not only marginal to feminism, but totally invisible.”

During this time, performance theorists also debated the stakes of representation of lesbian desire and spectatorship on stage. For example, Dolan argues that lesbian performance—in particular, she points to the work at the WOW Café—demonstrates that “power, sexuality, and desire can be recuperated from the strict male domain, and can assume distinctly different meanings place in different sexual and gender contexts.” Teresa de Lauretis critiques this position and similar stances articulated by Sue-Ellen Case and Kate Davy, finding them “dependent on the presumption of a unified lesbian viewer/reader.” A simple inversion of the male gaze is not, for de Lauretis, inherently unproblematically powerful.

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58 Ibid., 5.
60 Ibid., 81.
In the 1990s, Third Wave feminists posited their “sex positivity” in response to the legacy of the “Sex wars”—what was perceived as the Second Wave’s stodginess and what Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards call the “stereotype of being too serious, too political, and seemingly asexual.” The postfeminist era that followed in the 2000s, brought with it a wave of self-sexualization, which feminist critic Angela McRobbie argues was, in fact, self-exploitation rather than empowerment. These debates over feminist displays of female sexuality continue today, as evidenced by the well-publicized disagreement between Janet Mock and bell hooks over Beyoncé’s sexuality at a panel discussion at the New School in May 2015.

Room for Cream doesn’t resolve the debates over the spectacularization of lesbian sex on stage. But over the course of its three seasons, Room for Cream shows all kinds of sexual practice without judgment, developing what Rubin calls a “pluralistic sexual ethics.” For example, we witness masturbation, sex between two “furries” inside of a pink pony costume (2.3), tantric sex, and bondage. We see Agent Steph getting a blowjob on a strap-on dildo (1.9); first time sex between Bailey and Francesca (1.11); and kinky role-play between Lacey and Portia. We hear in graphic detail about otherworldly sex between Lacey and Percy, an alien (in Season Three), and anal sex between Dire and a vampire (when Dire is in jail in Season One).

Room for Cream’s characters hold a diverse array of opinions about sex, some of which reference the historical divisions between generations of feminists. In Season 2 Episode 3, for

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62 Baumgardner and Richards, Manifesta, 137, 80.
64 Grosz, “Reconfiguring Lesbian Desire,” 175.
example, Officer Ruffins and Julie Jaspers, who is a U. Sapph undergrad and a stripper at Lavender Legs, enter Room for Cream having a debate about sex workers’ status:

RUFFINS: That's a very interesting point of view, Ms. Jaspers. And like I said I'm not denying the rights of sex workers. It's more an ethical dilemma.

JULIE: I appreciate your opinion Officer Ruffins but with all due respect it sounds a little dusty. Maybe I could lend you my Annie Sprinkle *Anniethology*. (2.3)

Here, the Dyke Division nods to the 1980s “Sex Wars,” but rather than rehearsing the ways those disagreements turned divisive, the Dyke Division models modes of respectful engagement of (and the use of queer feminist performance history as a way of understanding) the issues without depicting a monolithically “correct” lesbian feminist point of view.

Even in its diverse manifestations, sex in Sappho is always shown to be something that is mutually pleasurable, not something that benefits one party and leaves the other objectified. As Rubin writes,

> A democratic morality should judge sexual acts by the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, the presence or absence of coercion, and quantity and quality of the pleasures they provide. Whether sex acts are gay or straight, coupled or in groups, naked or in underwear, commercial or free, with or without video, should not be ethical concerns.⁶⁶

A scene between Lacey Chambers and former Mother Superior Meghan demonstrates the operation of such a democratic sexual morality. Lacey considers herself sexually adventurous; she works at Progressive Pussies and offers bi-weekly Tantric Workshops there. Meghan, on the other hand, who leaves her life as a nun behind to pursue a relationship with Dr. O’Boyle, is much less experienced. In another example of an intergenerational discussion of sex, Meghan turns to Lacey for advice when their sex life stalls. Lacey is non-judgmental, reminding her,

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⁶⁶ Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality.”
“Good communication is the key to a great sex life,” before checking in with her about “using some more explicit language.”

Lacey: So, when you go down on Dr. O’Boyle do you find that she’s just not getting wet enough? Because you might be working her clit a little too hard. And prematurely. I’ve seen this so many times, you have no idea. It’s a common problem for novitiates . . . to use a little nun talk. (2.1)

When Meghan exclaims that she doesn’t know what she is doing, Lacey gently reassures her, “Of course you don’t. But then you do. The most important thing about sex is two specific bodies working together for a mutually satisfying experience. You’re not just pleasuring Dr. O’Boyle. You’re pleasuring each other” (2.1). Lacey emphasizes the tenets of a democratic morality, and the scene serves to validate those with little sexual experience at the same time as it values the frank sexuality of more experienced women.

Dyke Division also depicts a couple in which it is the older woman who is more sexually experienced. By the middle of Season Three, Dr. Dooley and Grace Tanning have become an item. Dooley is having trouble orgasming and Grace helps her to get in touch with her body. Both of them in bed, Grace leads Dooley through a guided meditation masturbation session. Audiences witness them climax together, as Grace exclaims, “I feel your breath in my nipples, along my thighs along the outer lips of my yoni, my crown is pulsing with your body’s breath—I feel you. I hear your body speaking!” (3.3). In the next episode, Dooley thanks Grace, “[W]hat you’ve done for me is beyond my wildest dreams. I’m not stuck in my mind anymore. I’m living a tactile life—it’s like, until you helped me feel my body and release and listen to my wants and desires, I wasn’t the whole me” (3.4).
Elizabeth Grosz proposes a model of existence “in which sexual relations are contiguous with and part of other relations.”67 She writes, “The bedroom is no more the privileged site of sexuality than any other space, sexuality and desire are part of the intensity and passion of life itself.”68 This is very much the case in Sappho, where to have sex is to participate in its community and vice versa, a notion developed in the relationship between Cadie Bosch and Dire Owens. Episode 2.2 features bi-curious Cadie offering a particularly graphic description of imagined sex with Dire. She recounts her dream, quietly at first, slowly gaining intensity:

CADIE: Dire, I had this dream where you were telling me what to do, you even told me what to wear. I'm talking about sex right now. But you were gentle the whole time, except for a couple times when you weren't, when you would spank me or grab me. And you were fucking me, I was on my stomach and you were behind me, slow with one hand on my head and one on my ass and then you would tell me to turn over and sit on your cock, you had a harness on. And you leaned back with one hand behind your head and watched me ride you. And you told me to take my shirt off, this white blouse you had told me to wear and you pulled my bra down and touched me. And then you asked me if I had cleaned my little asshole and I said yes and you told me to get on my hands and knees and you stuck your fingers in my ass and the other hand up front and I was going crazy and you were loving it.

The sex Cadie describes refuses singularity—it, in and of itself, is multiple. Dire is both gentle and rough; Cadie is both passive and aggressive; the acts include vaginal, anal, and digital penetration. The scene itself is simultaneous imaginary and quite explicit. Desire in Sappho is defined as a multiplicity.

When Cadie expresses her confusion about her feelings, Dire lays bare the connection between community and sex in Sappho. Cadie laments, “Dire, I think about you all the time but I don't know why. I'm so fucking confused . . . The thing is I have been with John for five years, I'm in love with him. Maybe I'm just attracted to the community you all have up here” (2.2). Stinger stresses the word “community,” and the actor pointing ironically to her character’s

68 Ibid.
dismissal of her own sexual feelings elicits large laughs from the audience. Dire makes explicit that Cadie’s affinity for the “community” is actually a sexual urge:

**DIRE:** It’s not the community Cadie, it’s called desire. You’ve been with this guy, John for half your adult life and you have passable sex every couple weeks and listen to NPR and shop on eBay together and nothing is too scary, nothing gets you too fired up. And you study the queers from afar to get your fix. But what you're feeling right now is something totally different, that's why you're so confused. Cadie, it's called desire. (2.2)

At the end of the scene, Cadie gives into her desire, passionately kissing Dire while Olivia Newton-John’s “Let’s Get Physical” plays over the house speakers and the lights fade to black.

In “Heteronormativity and the L Word: from a Politics of Representation to a Politics of Norms” Samuel A. Chambers writes that regardless of its representations of lesbians, *The L Word* employs “narrative structures that actually mimic and help to reify the structures of heteronormativity.” The show, he argues, upholds a gender binary through characters that “maintain given norms of gender.” In particular, he finds that the sex scenes pander to a straight male audience—for example, he points out that in the show’s pilot, the lesbian sex is literally framed as a heterosexual male fantasy, and he asserts that, throughout the series, “reminders of the implicit message that lesbians are sexy, attractive objects of desire, even for straight men, crop up repeatedly.” This is very different than the use of sex scenes in *RFC*. The sex scenes are usually slightly comic; the actors are clearly enjoying themselves, and audience members are free to take pleasure in the actors’/characters’ pleasure. The gaze of *Room for Cream*’s audiences is objectifying to be sure, but in Sappho, all kinds of bodies are validated as beautiful and sexy.

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70 Ibid., 91. Chambers points out that the first sex scene in the series is a depiction of heterosexual sex during which Jenny has a lesbian fantasy, religating lesbian sex to a “secondary place within the heterosexual norm” (90). The second sex scene shows Tina and Bette having sex in front of a straight man (in order to use him to conceive a child)—what Chambers calls, “the classic example of heteronormative fantasy” (91).
O’Harra, who goes topless during a sex scene in Season One, Episode Six, was surprised to find that she felt completely comfortable with the nudity. She attributes her ease to the fact that, in the world of the play and the community of the audience, she and her fellow actors do not feel subject to the harsh standards of beauty applied in ordinary life. O’Harra explains, “Lesbians have a different idea of what a body should be like. So you don’t feel like when you have a regular theatre audience, that you have to have an ‘actress’s body.’” 71 RFC’s audiences, she contends, “Aren’t looking for this svelte body” they are looking for what she describes as real women’s bodies. O’Harra continues, “in a way you don’t mind being objectified by these women . . . it is not threatening, and there is a certain kind of openness . . . that is fun.” 72

Pleasure is a powerful political strategy, and in showing women taking enormous pleasure in all kinds of sex, the Dyke Division takes a post-wave feminist stance. The sex scenes in RFC highlight the lack of representations of women’s desire, and specifically lesbian desire in other venues—in downtown theatre, theatre in general, film, and television. Depicting a wide variety of lesbian sex acts and taking them seriously as a community-building feminist strategy is a transgressive post-wave feminist project.

**Personal Choices, Political Platforms**

Although Sappho seems removed from the very real oppressions experienced by sexual minorities in the U.S.—the women there face more of a threat from vampire lesbians than anyone else—in Season Three, audiences find out that, despite being a lesbian utopia, Sappho is still subject to the United States’ prejudiced laws. When Dire discovers, in a drunken haze, she has married Julie, who is Canadian and desperate for a green card, the pair learns that in Sappho

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71 O’Harra, Interview with author, November 15, 2009.
72 Ibid.
gay marriage doesn’t confer the same rights as heterosexual marriage. She tells Julie: “I hate to break it to you, but I’ve been doing some research. And a same-sex marriage doesn't get you a green card sweetheart. Even in Sappho” (3.1).

Season Three is very much about marriage, motherhood, domesticity, and the nature of families. After their drunken quickie wedding, Julie and Dire play house, and Bailey takes pleasure in role-playing that Julie is her mother/lover. Grace and Wendy are shacking up at Grace’s farm. Officer Ruffins has started fertility treatments at the Alternative Insemination Resources Clinic at the LGBTQIA Dedicated Health and Emergency Services Center of Sappho in an attempt to have a baby on her own. The treatments work and she spends much of the season pregnant. Rather than show a single “right” way to live as a lesbian, the Dyke Division presents a diverse range of options. As Officer Ruffins explains to Steph, “one thing that seems important about being queer is not judging other people’s desires. Not to say that I can't be critical of the conditions (patriarchy, corporate media, capitalism) that produce or shape that desire in people, at least to some extent. That's different than being critical of the people themselves or their desire (3.5).” The Dyke Division takes Officer Ruffins’ philosophy seriously, especially in the final episode of the series, “I Love You,” in which they stage a variety of responses to Agent Steph and Dr. O’Boyle’s wedding—all presented matter-of-factly to the audience without comment or judgment.

Though the question of marriage really comes to the fore in the series finale, even early episodes reveal a tension between an emphasis on the kind of “normalcy” represented by marriage, and a desire for a more anarchic kind of queerness that, to use Michael Warner’s
phrase, sees “the trouble with normal.” At the start of the series, Ellie and Robbie’s is the most stable partnership. But when Robbie raises the specter of marriage at the end of Season One, Ellie starts to question the relationship. Robbie says the word “forever,” and it echoes dramatically in Ellie’s mind. Later, when Bailey jokes about taking a honeymoon with girlfriend Francesca, Ellie snaps, yelling, “You’re so young, you have so much life ahead of you, why commit now, you might not feel this way forever, there are so many fish in the sea, how can you ever be sure” (1.11). Eventually Ellie confides her conflicting feelings to her longtime friend Grace, in a scene that marks the Dyke Division’s first staging of the gay marriage debate.

GRACE: I mean Ellie, you’ve got a great thing with Robbie. Most people would kill to be in your shoes. She’s smart, she’s beautiful, she’s great in the sack . . .

ELLIE: But what if all that changes? Why do I need to confine myself to some heterosexist paradigm of what constitutes a legitimate relationship? Why do I need some piece of paper telling me that I love my partner?

GRACE: Well if it’s just some piece of paper, why the hell does it scare you so much? (1.11)

In Season Two, Jane vents her frustrations about Proposition 8, which, in the real world, had passed in California a few months earlier:

Funny, I wasn’t so interested in Prop 8 at first, but the more time goes by the more I think about it. Or, well, I think about the positioning of gay rights—do I really want marriage to be the battle we fight—not really. But then I reflect on all these people who can very publicly spout homophobic ideology as though they’re speaking genuine logic. It points to what we already know, which is that there is a hierarchy of prejudice. Like some guy sitting in a café can say to his friend, “Gay people shouldn’t raise children. They’ll pervert them.” Then his friend will be like “Geez George, that’s an interesting perspective.” But, it’s not a fucking interesting perspective. Cuz your friend George is stupid fucking homophobic shithead. People pervert children every day. I mean take a look at television . . . (2.2)

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The speech is funny; O’Boyle continues rambling when Meghan, who has emerged from the bedroom in a leopard robe, clearly doesn’t feel like taking about politics. But the monologue also provides an opportunity for the Dyke Division to articulate the complicated and sometimes conflicting feelings around marriage equality. On the one hand, as a radical academic and feminist thinker, Dr. O’Boyle feels like the gay marriage agenda sacrifices other more important matters of gay rights. But, on the other hand, she understands that the legalizing of gay marriage might serve to change the minds of those who see homophobic ideology as acceptable.

In the finale of Season Three, Steph and Jane’s wedding affords the Dyke Division an opportunity to have all the characters express their opinions about marriage. Early in the episode Officer Ruffins tells Steph:

My mother was part of the women's movement. One day she and her best friend looked at each other, took off their wedding rings, and laughed. I always felt blessed by my mom's rejection of marriage, the fact that she left my dad when I was a baby, and that she wanted us (her daughters) to be free. I never saw marriage as something to dream of, just something to shake off. So I don't want it or think about it . . . (3.5)

Ruffins, unconvinced about marriage, is committed to having a baby on her own. She sees parenthood as not “a gender or a womb or sperm or a figure of some kind . . . but a state of being” (3.4). Steph, who was present when Ruffins conceived, has agreed to be her Lamaze coach. Steph is secure in her own decision to marry, but is unsure about having children. She delivers a frantic speech that end in her exclaiming, “I will, I won’t, I will, I won’t, I will, I won’t, I will, I won’t, I will, I won’t, I will, I won’t . . .” (3.5). Their friendship demonstrates mutual support in the face of divergent life choices.

During the awkward wedding ceremony officiated by Warden Tim in the basement of Sappho’s Unitarian Church, Lacey lets out a groan that interrupts the proceedings and sets off the
series of position statements. Never one to suppress her true feelings, Lacey has composed a “statement on marriage rights” that she sends out with her RSVP card when invited to a wedding. Having received this, Jane can’t understand why, if Lacey wants to abolish marriage, she attended the wedding at all. Lacey explains that she wanted to show up to support Jane, because she is her friend, and she wants her to be happy. But she elaborates her position, explaining that she sees marriage as an exclusive institution that “privileges straights” and “harms other, unmarried forms of sexual and familial relationships by making the only right to sexual and familial relationships exist within the form of marriage” (3.5). Though she believes “people should do what they want,” she wishes that people had a deeper understanding of who marriage excludes (3.5).

Dire chimes in next, also declaring that she will never marry. She enumerates her reasons:

1. leading cause of divorce
2. the forever thing
3. the chattel thing/men’s property
4. the wedding industry
5. I hate planning
6. I can’t stand having attention on myself (3.5)

Dad presents a queer argument that accounts for the racial dimension of the struggle for gay marriage. In particular, she critiques the likening of the fight for gay marriage to other Civil Rights struggles. She “find[s] marriage very square” and “not queer at all” (3.5), and provides a bit of queer history on the subject. “I came up into a queer 80s/90s sensibility where queers made family differently than others . . . we built our families around us with fellow travelers and we could be a radical feminist example for others—it never occurred to me that queers would willfully choose to live a homonormative lifestyle” (3.5). Dad sees sexual relationships as
community-building, and family as something much more than merely married partners. She concludes, “I’d prefer to be a freak—soltera con aventuras—sweethearts, lovers in every port” (3.5).

Willow describes how his mind was changed about marriage, raising both the practical issue of health insurance, as well as more romantic notions about the power of community and ceremony. He and Oak, both trans men, got married in a small, spontaneous ceremony on the Bearded Goat farm, and he describes the experience as “amazing” and “overwhelming,” explaining, “I never ever thought I would say this, but I love being married, it's very romantic” (3.5).

Benny, a 60s radical activist and therapist, takes an entirely different approach, arguing that by taking part in marriage, queers are transforming the institution. She sees same-sex marriage itself as “quite radical,” because it challenges the gender roles in traditional relationships and threatens conservative notions of male dominance (3.5). She notes, “It's too bad that the HRC-style approach to fighting for marriage rights hasn't taken into consideration the radical element of same-sex marriage—of course, that would be too queer and feminist” (3.5). Her argument includes a critique of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), a leading advocate for gay marriage in the U.S. Many people criticize the organization for its narrow understanding of gay rights and social progress, and its lack of support for economic issues, for people of color, and the transgender community. Here, she points out that by emphasizing marriage as a catalyst for homonormativity, the HRC and organizations with similar agendas fail to see the radical potential in gay marriage.

Similarly, the Mother Vampire (Faye Driscoll), who, in previous episodes, represents the viewpoint of a Second Wave feminist—like Grace, she gave up her daughter, Jill, in the 1970s—
opposes marriage for the way it bolsters capitalism. Getting married, “under the witness of the state and the government,” she argues, is to “formalize one’s relationship to those larger structures” and to subscribe to their values and rules (3.5). A couple is thereby “organized” and “pacified” (3.5). She sees both single people and same-sex couples as a threat to this order. Singles represent “a threat of desire,” which according to a “capitalist mindframe” is “inefficient” and “distracting” (3.5). Same-sex couples’ are an “uncontrollable threat to the order of the . . . universe and therefore need to be oppressed, to keep the order of life” (3.5). Here, she points out that desire is contained and managed within heteronormative partnerships, and argues for the ways in which lesbian desire is inherently transgressive, even within the confines of a committed relationship.

The last to speak, Grace too expresses the desire for an expansive understanding of what marriage means; for her, friendships are committed bonds just as sacred. She expresses her desire to wear “a love band,” which she describes as “sort of like a wedding band” from her girlfriend Wendy, but also from Dire and Tim (3.5). Grace’s sentiments are interrupted by Ruffins’s water breaking; all the women help to talk Ruffins through her labor.

In its first person testimonial presentation of people’s relationship to the concept of marriage, the final episode of the series harkens back to the Consciousness Raising groups of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. As Carol Hanisch describes in her 1969 essay, “The Personal is Political,” “we go around the room answering the questions from our personal experiences . . . At the end of the meeting we try to sum up and generalize

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74 Some theatre companies of the 1970s—for example, It’s Alright to Be a Woman Theatre—explicitly used CR groups as the inspiration for their work.
from what’s been said and make connections.”

O’Harra compiled the text for the wedding scene after soliciting opinions on marriage from friends and colleagues via email. But unlike the CR groups of decades past, the episode does not generalize these experiences into a universal feminist platform. Instead, it allows the many perspectives to exist together, as if to argue that there is more than one feminist stance on the issue.

We don’t witness the conclusion of the wedding ceremony. Steph and Dr. O’Boyle are never pronounced married, and audiences are denied a homonormative happy ending. Instead, the episode (and series) concludes, not with the brides kissing or the baby’s birth, but with a scene between Dire and Lacey, in which they reject the notion of “the one,” in favor of “the many” and the “messy” (3.5). Dire laments, “I don’t think anyone is going to find that one person because honestly, I don’t think it comes from just one person. I mean look at us, here in Sappho. We’re all really different and we all have our own special gifts to give each other sexually, emotionally, philosophically” (3.5). Crucially, here Dire moves from talking about partnership to talking about the community as a whole. She emphasizes the diversity of Sappho’s community and its members’ interdependence. Lacey expresses how her feelings for Dire are multiple and messy, and don’t easily jibe with a definition of a normative relationship: “I love you, Dire. Not like in a freaky obsessive you’re-my-only-one and I-want-to-be-with-you-for-the-rest-of-my-life kind of way. But I mean, I love you as a friend, and as a lover and all that messy stuff in between” (3.5). After a beat, Dire responds, “I love you too, Lace” (3.5).

Choose Your Own Utopia

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In the second episode of Season Three of *Room for Cream*, “Time for Some Heads to Fly,” Sappho’s mayor dies in a tragic car accident, and Dr. Jane O’Boyle, Grace Tanning, and Lacey Peters all decide to run for her position. Dire hosts—not a debate—but a “Candidates’ Discussion Circle” at Room for Cream, and the episode offers the women the opportunity to articulate their dreams for the future of their little lesbian haven. As each candidate presents her platform, audiences are invited to imagine how we might remake our own world if given the opportunity.

Jane’s vision for Sappho is one in which members of the community come together to take care of one another. She wants “people [to] talk about their beliefs and ideas face to face and engage in debate are what democracy is supposed to be.” In this way, Jane’s campaign centers on a notion of radical democracy as set forth in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. In the Preface to the Second Edition of their 1985 book, the duo write that voting by an electorate does not ensure democracy. In fact, to them, it “is an impoverished conception of democratic politics, which does not acknowledge the way in which political identities are not pre-given but constituted and reconstituted through debate in the public sphere.”76 Instead, they call for an “account of the many different voices that a democratic society encompasses and to widen the field of democratic struggles.”77 Jane expresses this when she declares a need for “many utopias” within the “one utopia” of Sappho:

> I want to open Sappho up to all of your possibilities—open your arms to each other citizens of Sappho—embrace our full potential to be friends, lovers, and whatever. Enjoy watching dumb movies. Eat too many nachos. Or be driven and ambitious and scholarly and capable. Like Lacey! Or open and loving and kind like Grace! Or weird and

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77 Ibid.
neurotic like—well, let’s agree to make this a space where we support each and everyone’s desires where one utopia has to include many utopias where we embrace those who are most vulnerable so we can be our most powerful. (3.2)

A former activist, Grace proposes a practical and diverse menu of reforms. She envisions Sappho as a place with, for instance, affordable housing, group homes to support those who need help, free health care facilities, a community-run renewal energy company, green roofs on all buildings (and the harvest going to food pantries and school lunch programs), job training for the incarcerated, free bike-sharing, and city-wide compost pick up. “Taken together,” she states, “these reforms make us greener, more livable, more humane, more equitable, and all together happier. They are proposals which link ecology and happiness, health and equity, government and citizen. Economics, practicality, innovation, and fairness are woven through every proposal. . . participation, health, and empowerment are my platform” (3.2). Grace’s platform does not explicitly reference gender or sexuality, yet her list of political concerns argues for an intersectional understanding of feminism and queer activism that sees gender and sexuality as related to, for instance, economic fairness and environmental protection.

Lacey’s platform is academic, which is understandable given that she has just finished her PhD at U. Sapph. A queer theory devotee, Lacey promises to “take on the challenges of inequality by deconstructing one of our most powerful weapons: Language” (3.2). Specifically, she proposes to implement “O” as the new gender pronoun. She leads the audience through a relaxation exercise, telling them, “You are no longer a man or a woman or he or she. You are no longer ze or hir or ftm or mtf. You are genderless. You are label-less” (3.2). Speaking for the current generation of queer feminists, she argues for the possibility that a genderless society would create: “O is for opening eyes to new possibilities. Tackling social divisions that have
limited us as individuals for too long” (3.2). She ties her vision for Sappho into a future that provides many “Os” from openness to opportunity to orgasms.

At the end of the episode, the audience was brought into Sappho’s electoral process; the actors invited spectators to ask the candidates questions and to cast their votes on ballots designed by Jibz Cameron. Being asked to take part in Sappho’s election, audience members were prompted to reflect on our own political priorities, our own desires, and the ways in which these are shaped by our identities and communities. We were asked to think deeply about what is lacking in our own lives and society—the progressive platforms of all three Sappho candidates highlighting the need for real radical voices in our own election processes in the United States today.

Jill Dolan writes that, hailed by the utopian performative, spectators “can imagine together the affective potential of a future in which this rich feeling of warmth, even of love, could be experienced regularly and effectively outside of the theatre.” This episode of Room for Cream is an example of the utopian performative par excellence. In choosing which lesbian feminist utopia we preferred—Dr. O’Boyle’s, Grace’s, or Lacey’s—audience members were, for a moment, a part of Sappho’s lesbian feminist society. In an email to the cast the week after the episode was performed, O’Harra described the collected ballots as “little love letters” to the series in which audience members expressed their own desire to live in Sappho. The result of the election, she announces, “a Mayoral Cooperative,” telling the cast, “Better start practicing using O as your new pronoun!”

**Conclusion: Continuing Community**

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The multi-vocal politics, the diverse display of sexuality, and the lesbian feminist references all serve to create a queer community, onstage and off. Contributing to that sense of community is the fact that the show is created and performed almost entirely by lesbians. O’Harra points out, “[I]t is such a community-oriented show. People come to see their friends and people come to see lesbians. And people come to be part of a community.”79 Audience members eagerly awaited each episode, looking forward to watching their favorite characters’ high jinks, and experiencing the queer theatre community that gathered in the La MaMa’s club space, week after week, season after season. Getting audience members to commit to coming to a serial performance in New York City is no small feat. But O’Harra describes Room for Cream as the first time that she wasn’t desperate for an audience. With this show, she explains, “[Y]ou actually feel like your audience wants you.”80

In the fall of 2009, Room for Cream went international. Working with LAMDA Istanbul, O’Harra and Becca Blackwell traveled to Turkey to conduct workshops with a local queer group and facilitate their creation of scripts for a series modeled on Room for Cream. After helping the group to present three episodes in a month, O’Harra and Blackwell returned to the United States with the promise that the group would continue to write and stage the show. The Dyke Division hopes to publish its scripts, to bring RFC to other cities in the U.S. and other countries in the world; allowing local lesbian groups to perform the series and/or to create their own characters and imagine their own unique utopias.

Dyke Division’s commitment to creating community in New York City continued even after the series’ end. Following the final episode of Season Three, the Division decided to marshal their resources to support its members’ individual projects. They started holding regular

79 O’Harra, Interview with author, November 15, 2009.
80 Brooke O’Harra, Interview with author, April 2, 2011.
meetings. Inspired by Sacha Yanow’s research into 1970s lesbian activism, they invited everyone who had ever been involved in Room for Cream to attend, to talk about and bring in excerpts of new work. These meetings provided a queer context in which members could assume a (somewhat) shared perspective on gender, feminism, and queer politics. O’Harra points out, “it is different than if you are a resident in a theatre that is doing a reading where you have to come in and sort of say like, ‘This is what I am trying to think about with queerness and gender. These are the problems.’ —You don’t have to say any of that. You just show your work.”

The group, O’Harra says, wanted “to make sure that people aren’t working in these tiny little bubbles.”

These meetings also served to develop the Dyke Division’s interest in lesbian feminist history. They attended events together, for example organizing an outing to see lesbian romance Desert Hearts (1985) and hear director Donna Deitch speak at IFC. At one meeting they read Valerie Solanas’s Up Your Ass, intentionally photocopying and disseminating the script, which remains tightly held by Andy Warhol’s estate.

They presented a reading of Jane Chambers’s Last Summer at Bluefish Cove (1980) at Dixon Place in June 2012—a play that Jill Dolan famously critiques for the way it marginalizes and then kills off its butch main character. Like that of Room for Cream, the reading’s cast was comprised of intergenerational performers from New York City’s downtown theatre scene. In addition to RFC regulars like Sacha Yanow (who read stage directions), Sharon Hayes (Rita), Larissa Husiak (Eva), and Becca Blackwell (Lil), lesbian luminaries like Lisa Kron (Kitty), Babs Davy (Rae), and Holly Hughes (Annie) also participated. The older women in the group critiqued the play, rolling their eyes at its earnestness and the play’s affective excesses. Kron, in particular, expressed her distain for its formulaic plot that centers on the transformation of

81 Ibid.
82 Dolan, The Feminist Spectator as Critic.
heterosexual character. But many of the younger cast members and Jess Barbagallo—whose idea it was to do the reading—were moved by the play. In a post-show talkback, in which I participated along with playwright Sylvan Oswald and the cast, Barbagallo spoke about his nostalgia for a lesbian past of which he wasn’t a part. He started identifying as queer in college, he explained—never adopting “lesbian” as a label. To him, the play represents a history of lesbian theatre that he feels it is important to claim. That the play traffics in realism rather than post-modernism does not matter. For the performers of the previous generation, the play was once part of their present and, perhaps for that reason, the stakes of its representations seem higher. Last Summer at Bluefish Cove premiered in 1980 at the Actor’s Playhouse, the same year that the first WOW festival was staged on the Lower East Side. Hughes, Kron, and Davies all cut their theatrical teeth at WOW, and the work they made there specifically critiqued the conventions of realism and the kinds of lesbian representations that Chambers makes use of in her play.

Barbagallo’s response to Last Summer at Bluefish Cove, like Room for Cream itself, embodies both the “post-wave” and the “pop” ethos that I argue comprise today’s feminism. The Last Summer at Bluefish Cove reading represents an embrace of a feminist past (no matter how flawed). It also symbolizes a merging of the popular—Chambers’s play is arguably a capitulative depiction of lesbians—with the experimental—the performers have decidedly avant-garde histories and the reading takes place during off-hours in an off-off-Broadway theatre space. The warm response from the younger generation, my own included, stems from the way the Dyke Division framed the dated text. The in-the-know audience could laugh at the show’s sappy earnestness and take great pleasure in the virtuosic performers making the play their own—

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83 Barbagallo identifies as transgender and prefers masculine pronouns.
commenting on it and queering it through their line readings. We could also awe at the fact that a lesbian play garnered a modicum of mainstream success thirty years prior. A year before *Fun Home* premiered at the Public and then transferred to Broadway, it was difficult to imagine such a play with a lesbian protagonist succeeding in commercial theatre. Like Sappho’s own production of *The Killing of Sister George*, the Dyke Division used the Chambers text to perform multiple lesbian feminist histories to multiple political ends simultaneously.

The effects of *Room for Cream* still resonate. Making the series marked a turn in the Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf’s work in general. In 2010, they put on an abstract production of Susan Glaspell’s 1916 play *Trifles* at the Ontological-Hysteric theatre in NYC. With this piece, O’Harra returned to the 2HC aesthetic; new music ensemble Yarn/Wire played Brendan Connelly’s eerie score and the deliberately slow-paced production featured long stretches in which the performers hummed or sang the syllable “ah.” But, unlike their previous work, 2HC made its gender politics explicit, choosing a proto-feminist play that takes seriously the often-ignored aspects of women’s lives. In 2012, they again explored the everyday lives of women with *You, My Mother*, a two-part chamber opera about adult children reflecting on their relationships with their mothers. Directed by O’Harra, playwright Kristen Kosmas and composer Rick Burkhardt wrote the text and music, respectively, for the first part, and Karinne Keithley-Syers and Connelly, the second.

*Room for Cream* takes Jill Dolan’s notion of the utopian performative literally, and in performing a soap opera set in a fictitious lesbian haven, the Dyke Division actually ended up enacting a kind of real-life one as well. The Dyke Division’s vision for utopia, as illustrated in *Room for Cream*, is a “no place” comprised of a heterogeneous mix of lesbians—of various genders and generations, political affiliations and personal persuasions—all of whom are
radically committed to community. The series created a real-life community of artists who continue to collaborate, who encourage one another to make explicitly queer and feminist work, and who show up to support one another’s artistic endeavors, demonstrating that there is, in fact, an audience for post-wave pop feminist performance. As Dire says in Episode 2.2, “it’s true Sappho's entire population might be made up of lesbians and that we all might be trying to get in to each other’s pants. But ideals don't have to be fantasies!” Room for Cream and its real-life continuing community demonstrates that indulging in fantasies can result in changes in reality.
“Pop Influenced Écriture Féminine”: Half Straddle’s Feminine Possibilities

A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive.
--- Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”

Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread.
--- Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*

So it is about Possibility and beyond what is the usually visible.
--- Tina Satter

**Introduction**

Half Straddle’s first production is a messy mishmash of aesthetics, but underneath the façade of bad sequins and cool irony is a glimpse of a new kind of queer and feminist performance. In its weirdness, *The Knockout Blow* (2008) bears the influence of playwright Mac Wellman, writer/director Tina Satter’s mentor at Brooklyn College. The affectless acting style feels like a Richard Maxwell play and the use of microphones recalls the Wooster Group. Its icy post-apocalyptic set design is reminiscent of Radiohole’s *None of It* (2002). The play’s intentions are fuzzy; its loose narrative follows budding friendships between a werewolf named Were (Jess Barbagallo in a bad blond wig and little werewolf ears), an Eskimo (Julia Sirna-Frest), and a back-up singer named Byaanca (Eliza Bent with a Russian accent). It has an air of indifference—a hallmark of early millennial experimental work in New York City. Satter hasn’t yet committed to the earnestness that will come to be one of the most significant characteristics of her work.

But *The Knockout Blow*, presented at Incubator Arts, also shows signs of the innovation that Satter would fully realize in Half Straddle’s later pieces. There is the feminine lilt of the dialogue, at the time, unusual for NYC’s experimental stages. Chris Giarmo’s pop musical score includes songs titled “Sort Of” and “Or Something,” the lyrics of which embody and legitimate the inbetweeness of feminine hedging. The content is feminine as well; the girls reference Hello Kitty dolls and snow globes, and talk about purses, hairstyles, and favorite colors. Byaanca
proclaims, “My favorite color is pink!,” drinks pink Vitamin Water, and wants to know if there are “like any pink animals or anything.”1 Angst-ridden Were explains, “I love red. I like the color red. Like the color of blood and really good nails.”2 Stage directions include the girls doing “a pinkie-swear move” and putting on lipstick.3 There is a great deal of talk about hearts. Eskimo sings, “Every part is cold/ Except deep in my red heart.”4 Byaanca accuses Were of having a “jaggedy heart” which, she points out, “most girl hearts are.”5 But Were questions whether her girl heart really is jaggedy. She has an imagined place, she tells the audience through a microphone, “Arctic dreams” in her mind “where girl hearts aren’t jagged at all”6

Eskimo, Were, and Byaanca are adolescent girls figuring out who they are, in part by analyzing their pasts. They negotiate friendships, trying to find connection to one another, attempting to “understand what’s happening underneath,” “in the corners,” and “[i]n the sparkly places” of their lives.7 If audiences look in the production’s sparkly places, if we can decipher what’s happening underneath the seemingly silly narrative, we can piece together the political investments of the performance. For instance, Satter’s lyrics for the badly-sung songs read like a manifesto for a new kind of feminist feminine theatre. “Make it more right/ Make it more specific,” sings Byaanca, “Say it/ Say it all right/ Take your half-talk and dumb dreams/ And make them true/ Or something. Something.”8 Satter’s use of language that some might consider girlie “half-talk” and her subject matter, which some might see as a manifestation of “dumb

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1 Tina Satter, “The Knockout Blow” (Unpublished manuscript, 2009), 13,14.
2 Ibid., 11.
3 Ibid., 3.
4 Ibid., 7.
5 Ibid., 17.
6 Ibid., 20.
7 Ibid., 4.
8 Ibid., 18.
dreams,” are precisely what sets her work apart from that of New York City’s other emergent experimental companies.

Satter sees her work as being about “trying to communicate” and “say[ing] stupid things when you want to say something really important.” Her coded language simultaneously conveys the high stakes of the feelings to be communicated and the utter failure of language to adequately express them. Sometimes saying dumb things is important, her work argues. Were sings a soul song that expresses exactly this sentiment:

Those were all the dumb things I said.
But you know what?
It doesn’t matter
It don’t matter
Because it was night
It was at night.
And everything burned perfectly hard and bright.
And anything inconsequential and insubstantial was substantiated there.

These lines articulate Satter’s mandate to herself to make plays out of her experience and to frame them in her own specific terms. Satter had no academic theater training when she began working with Imago theatre in Portland, and was introduced to Richard Foreman, Wooster Group, Jacques Lecoq—artists whose work she describes a “much more visceral and interesting kind of theater and performance” than she had been exposed to previously. She made her first play when she was in her twenties, following her instincts about what makes compelling theatre. “I am just putting things up there—aesthetics, costumes, hairstyles, performers, etc. that I think Look/Read really Awesome (in my sort of personal adolescent sense of coolness),” she explains. In doing so, Satter creates worlds in which things often considered “inconsequential”

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11 Hammons, Unpublished interview with Tina Satter.
12 Tina Satter, Email correspondence with author, October 20, 2014.
and “insubstantial”—feminine things like Hello Kitty and the color pink and hairstyles—are substantiated, worlds in which the feminine is taken seriously. At the end of The Knockout Blow, Eskimo sings, “And it will come to mean something./ The meaning will be revealed./ And like everyone who walks with Hello Kitty in their hearts, which is everyone/ I will find what I’m meant to mean./ And I will unfreeze my dreams.”

Here, Satter argues for a universalized femininity, and predicts, accurately, that her work will come to mean something significant to New York City’s experimental theatre scene.

Tina Satter formed Half Straddle in 2008, as she was in her final year in the MFA playwriting program at Brooklyn College. There, she met Jess Barbagallo, a performer and playwright who agreed to play a werewolf in a performance she was staging at Richard Foreman’s Ontological-Hysteric theatre in the basement of a church on St. Marks Place in the East Village. Since that first production, Satter has honed her style, often writing for and working with the same group of performers (Barbagallo, for example, has been featured in all but one of Half Straddle’s shows). The plays often derive from Satter’s autobiography; she writes about “personal things,” but “with enough distance and sense of artfulness that the work is more potent and meaningful and abstractly specific, and potentially transcendent.”

Family (2009), for example, is a deconstruction of the relationships between three women in a suburban family, inspired by her own “slightly repressed New England upbringing.” Nurses in New England (2010) is a lesbian re-imagining of a medical drama set in a small coastal New England town that seems stuck in the 1970s. In the Pony Palace/FOOTBALL (2011), an abstract exploration of the inner-workings of an all-woman high school football team and cheerleading squad, and Away

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14 Hammons, Unpublished interview with Tina Satter.
15 Ibid.
Uniform (2012), a kind of companion-piece to FOOTBALL about the friendship between two field hockey players, both draw on Satter’s sports background. (She was an accomplished high school field hockey player “in a small New Hampshire town in which field hockey was everything.”16) House of Dance (2013) tells the story of a transgender teen and their small town’s tap studio. Most recently, the company developed Ancient Lives, “a play about coming of age and self-creation,” which premiered in January 2015 at the Kitchen in New York City.17

Half Straddle’s work is not devised or improvised; Satter writes the plays and brings them into rehearsal fully formed. An exception is Seagull (Thinking of You) (2013), a queer adaptation of the Chekhovian classic, which she developed with the company over many years. Through the workshop period, Satter transformed the turn-of-the-century work into a piece about the company’s own complex dynamics, and the result is an exploration of the messy relationships between a group of artists trying to make theatre together. Satter directs all of her plays herself, guiding her actors to cultivate a performance style she describes as a “loose charisma” or a “tight looseness.”18 The actors capture an adolescent insouciance, but they also imbue the work with convincing emotion when demanded by the script. Satter often comes into rehearsals with well-developed design concepts as well, and the makeup, costumes, props, and sets are all crucial components of the productions’ femininity. Half Straddle’s productions are aesthetically flawless—all of the elements are fully-realized and incredibly detailed without being slick. The well-coordinated and stylish costumes (usually designed by Enver Chakartash) evidence Satter’s interest in fashion. The lighting (usually by Zach Tinkelman) enhances the

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16 Pavol Liska and Kelly Copper, OK Radio Podcast, February 6, 2013. Ok Radio is a podcast in which Kelly Copper and Pavol Liska of the experimental company Nature Theatre of Oklahoma talk with artists about their work.
18 Liska and Copper, OK Radio Podcast.
moody and memory-like quality of the productions. The set designs are simple but striking; they often make use of rich color schemes that unify the productions. Since Half Straddle’s first production, Satter has collaborated with composer Chris Giarmo (Big Dance Group), and live pop music is an integral part of Half Straddle’s aesthetic, contributing to the work’s adolescent aesthetic heightening the emotion of her scripts.19

Satter regards her work as political, though she does not start from a place of trying to make a political point.20 Half Straddle’s performances are explicitly feminist and queer, embodying “post-wave pop feminist.” Being “post-wave,” this feminist philosophy does not position itself against the ideologies of feminism’s previous waves. Instead, it combines tenets of Second and Third Wave feminisms, demonstrating that both the successes and shortcomings of the prior movements have something to offer our present moment. Writing in a style she calls “pop influenced écriture féminine,” Satter revisits 1970s French feminism, updating it with the “girlie” pop cultural feminism of the Third Wave. Satter wrests “girlieness” from an essentialized understanding of the feminine by putting its aesthetics on masculine bodies as well as feminine, a move which—because she is not pointing to gender as performative—works to naturalize rather than alienate it. Keeping with post-wave’s merging of feminist and queer concerns, Satter shows adolescence as an innately queer time and frames femininity as an inherently queer practice. She includes trans masculine identities and narratives under the rubric of the company’s feminine aesthetic, and this trans-inclusivity is also a hallmark of post-wave feminism. Hers is a radical recuperation of a kind of de-essentialized and non-performative

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19 I saw most of the productions I write about and Satter provided me with scripts and videos when available to aid my research.
20 Hammons, Unpublished interview with Tina Satter.
femininity that disrupts the historical masculinity of New York City’s experimental theatre scene.

**Feminist Femininity**

Femininity is culturally and temporally contingent. Its manifestations shift with race, class, and age. Yet, as Serano points out in her book *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, “femininity is often assumed to be a monolithic entity—i.e. a ‘package deal’ of gender expressions, traits, and qualities that are inevitably bundled together.”

Taking on these assumptions, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, in *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*, use the plural to urge readers to overcome this tendency to overgeneralize. Pointing to the plethora of scholarship on masculinities, they ask why there have been so relatively few interrogations of femininity. They write, “For us, speaking of ‘femininities’ is a way of highlighting the *social production and construction of gender* and avoiding essentialism.”

I too want to avoid the essentialism that assumes femininity to be the exclusive territory of women. In the context of this chapter, I understand femininity to indicate a way of being in the world that is stereotypically linked with femaleness but can be experienced and performed by anyone. As Serano points out, femininity manifests in “behaviors, mannerisms, interests, and ways of presenting oneself.”

Half Straddle translates these ways of being into an aesthetic practice, and, in the productions’ advocacy of

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femininity as consequential, vital, and powerful, the company enacts the possibility of feminist femininity.

Satter’s characters communicate in an invented language, a “coded girl speak,” as she puts it. Discussions of clothes, hair, and makeup; images of sparkles and stuffed animals; as well as pop songs and all shades of pink figure prominently in the performances. For example, in the first scene of Half Straddle’s In the Pony Palace/FOOTBALL, presented to sold-out audiences at the Bushwick Starr in Brooklyn in February of 2011, the lights come up on a high school’s “sparkly green football field.” Two cheerleader sisters, an epitome of femininity, sit on a small set of bleachers that is angled downstage with a small patch of grass and flowers at its side. They wear typical cheerleader uniforms: white turtlenecks under black and gold vests, short pleated skirts, black stockings with socks and sneakers. Anneke (Eliza Bent) wears blue eye shadow and hot pink lipstick and Eleanor (Emily Davis) has a sharp line of bright pink blush across one cheek. They both have big floppy white bows in their hair. Delivering their lines with a kind of deliberate nonchalance that both conjures and queers the cheerleader stereotype of teen movies, Anneke describes a moment of glory on the field:

ANNEKE: . . . It’s like when you had to do the rush corner flip sequence at PrePrep. Cause they set up a stick to stick. Remember. Fake back. Wrist up. Go high. Right? And even then, you’re kind of ‘hensive.

ELEANOR: Which is a shoot-out supreme actually.

ANNEKE: Yes! And the sun was like religious and you did your arms in all the best ways. And we ran the follow backwards in 6-on-6 precise. And Boodie landed every kick-fall with just two seconds left. Pause. They had no chances. And there was everyone there. And it was just like practice. Do you remember? Pause. How did the molecules hold the air like that for so long?

ELEANOR: I remember. Pause. It’s like everything that matters. But then. The overtime cake is—it’s like nothing at all. It’s like nothing. It’s perfect then.
ANNEKE: Yeah. It’s like that.24

At the Pony Palace, which Satter imagines as “a slightly abstracted place/concept that accounts for the school, the locker room, and the field,”25 competitive sports are not merely masculine territory; cheerleading is considered just as much a sport as football, its practices just as demanding, its stakes just as high. And, at this queer high school, femininity is not just the cheerleaders’ domain; the Pony Palace’s all-female football team, the Owls, is also “girlie,” each player presenting her own kind of (sometimes masculine) femininity. Over their tight white football pants, the players wear black v-neck short-sleeved jersey tops, which are decorated with gold sequins or lamé. In lieu of the black paint football players apply under their eyes, the players wear hot pink smudges on their cheeks or eyebrows and they carry sparkly silver helmets. The players’ “trash talk” includes calling other teams “puffballed short-stalked pussy willows” and “frappface gatedrivers.”26 Wide receiver Trace, a recent transfer to the Pony Palace, brags to her teammates about her experiences at her old school, asking:

Do you know how many Tigers, Panthers, Lemurs and the like I have blown by on my way to score yet again? How many Saturdays my mom threw me a football over and over and over? How many Sundays I ran all the way to the HollyHob and back? I thank all higher sparkle powers. Cause they are the root of my moves. You’re supermajor lucky that I came to the Pony Palace at all. I like the jimmies they put on the ice cream sundaes here. I like the Cheerleaders, I like Coach, and I have a soft spot for those tiny, little horses that live under the lockers. They have beautiful manes.27

The language in the play references the artifacts of adolescence (for example My Little Pony, Holly Hobby, and ice cream sundaes); incorporates slang such as “supermajor” and “’hensive,” and “precish;” and of course, makes ample use of the word “like.” Satter transforms the colloquialism of teenage girlhood into a kind of poetry, creating her own highly coded theatrical

25 Ibid., 3.
26 Ibid., 8.
27 Ibid., 35.
language. Note that it is Trace’s mother, rather than father, who played ball with her growing up. There are no men portrayed or even mentioned in the play—theirs is an entirely feminine world.

Half Straddle’s productions construct a feminist feminine aesthetic through form and theme, in addition to language. Abstract and non-linear, the plays are driven by Satter’s desire to “create feeling” by stringing together a series of “micro moments.” As she explains, “Those micro experiences from within a female/some kind of queer mind (‘cause that’s what I have to go from) are what I [am] trying to capture, put out there, consider.” The pieces argue for the importance of feminine values, specifically communication, understanding, and support. By inserting an earnest femininity into experimental performance, Half Straddle combats its historical absence in New York City’s avant-garde and the continual dismissal and derision of femininity in U.S. culture at large.

As Serano points out, today, “we remain light-years away from being able to say that most people believe that femininity is masculinity’s equal.” Half Straddle’s aesthetic recuperates femininity for everyone, and, in doing so, their performances productively critique the assumed neutrality of masculinity. In other words, rather than constructing femininity as excessive and performative vis-à-vis a masculinity that reads as natural or unperformed, Half Straddle creates a “feminine neutral” that undermines the status of masculinity as unmarked. In putting a naturalized femininity on butch bodies, on trans masculine bodies, and occasionally on the bodies of men, Half Straddle shows us the possibilities for femininity as a practice, and argues for the vital importance of seeing femininity as masculinity’s equal. In doing so, Half Straddle’s use of girlieness wrests femininity from its stereotypical association with the female sex, but it also recuperates it as something that can create community across a variety of identity vectors.

28 Liska and Copper, *OK Radio Podcast.*
29 Hammons, Unpublished interview with Tina Satter.
Women’s Writing and the Third Wave

Satter calls her work “a politicization of the personal”—a riff on the Second Wave slogan, “the personal is the political.” Making visible what is usually invisible, Satter uses “micro” moments to make a larger political point. *Family*, Half Straddle’s second full-length work and the piece that first received attention from New York City’s press, for example, highlights the usually unacknowledged labor of mothers. Staged at the Ontological Hysteric Theatre in summer of 2009, *Family* loses much of the ironic posturing of *The Knockout Blow*, but its acting style and design schemes remain a bit more over-the-top than that of the more recent work. There are earnest moments throughout the piece, most involving the character of The Mum (Rae C. Wright). Like many white women of her generation who came of age too early to fully reap the benefits of Women’s Liberation’s successes, Mum has been “depressed for 31 years.”

Throughout the play, the audience sees her hiding out in her “smoke hole” in the attic, stealing secret cigarettes. Her depression derives from an emptiness she feels; her children are grown, her husband is gone, and she has no career of her own. She lives vicariously through her daughters, particularly Frarajaca (Erin Markey)—who is trying to be an “art star.” When Rolf, a family friend (Joseph Keckler), asks her where the girls get their artistic spirit, and Mum lists all of the things—tangible and not—that she provided them as she raised them. She responds:

They get it from me. From me, Rolf. It’s everything I gave them. All those trips to the Giant Milk Bottle, the books, the ballet, the balance beam and black leotards. My old clarinet, the drum set, the dog stickers, Mt. Kearsarge, Pats Peak, and Annabelle Brooks. The twin beds, the bunk beds, the pink shag rug, the pale pink soft rug, the braided rug, the cats—Patchy, Cookie, Grey Guy, Fuzzy, Laalaa, and Four Paws, the dwarf hamsters,

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the glow fish, the full-size fish tank, the rocks for the bottom of the fish tank, Camp Conestayga, Cabin 13, the Old Road, the brown bog, ballet, tap and jazz, Portsmouth Plantation, Strawberry Banke, whistles, passbacks, kilts and yellow button downs. Tissue paper fish, gold leaf banisters, the Nutcracker, New London Barn playhouse, Kimball’s Pond, Kelly, Heather, Carl and Rachel. G-S suits, goggles, turtle fur and tiny nests. Christmas crowns, braids and curls. Outfits, ironing, elastic bands, Wauwinet, horseshoe crabs, and Quidnet. Rope bracelets, purple pouches, lace knee socks, linen, orange sailboat bottoms, flipflops, moccasins, high-tops, scented Swatch watches, miniskirts, seagulls and seaglass. The Western Woods, Rosemary’s dresses, the green canoe, the back deck, lighthouses, leggings, tiny horses, small stables and handknit sweaters. The tinfoil space ship, duck boots, flannel, state championships, windbreakers, wind pants, posters, pianos, mouse collections, nightlights, nail polish and picture frames.\textsuperscript{31}

In this monologue, Mum foregrounds the under-appreciated tasks that comprise raising girls—she notes the places she has taken her daughters, the things she has done for and with them, the things she has made or bought for them. At almost two minutes long, the performance of the list itself is a tour-de-force; audiences see the labor of the actor reciting all these acts at the same time as they imagine the labor of the mother having committed them. Despite her frustration with her circumstances, Satter makes clear, Mum loves her daughters deeply. In a love song to them, Mum sings motherly advice, “don’t forget your cleats/ Do you have a hat?/ I’ll cut your hair,”\textsuperscript{32} reminding the audience that it is her job to “Build em up.”\textsuperscript{33} Yet, the title of this song, “Stonewalls of My Heart,” encapsulates the mother’s difficult position. It raises the specter of liberation—conjuring the gay riots of 1969—and simultaneously connotes obstruction—a blocking of that liberation. Mum’s situation is all the more desperate in light of the fact that Women’s Liberation had opened doors for women elsewhere.

Mum in \textit{Family} is stuck between the wake of the Second Wave and the high tide brought in by Third Wavers like her daughters. Satter, for her part, wants out of the waves altogether, preferring perhaps a political whirlpool where various feminist theories swirl together. She is a

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 171–72.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 156.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 157.
Third Wave re-evaluating the Second Wave from the vantage point of the new millennium, embracing at once the 1970s notion of “écriture féminine” and the “girlie” feminism of the 1990s.

In her 1976 article “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous, theorizes écriture féminine—which translates as “feminine writing” or “women’s writing,” although, as Toril Moi notes, in English the word “feminine” has a negative connotation that it does not have in French. In the influential Second Wave essay, Cixous calls for woman to “write her self” to “write about women and bring women to writing,” inventing new languages, new histories, and new myths in the face of what she condemns as an historical lack of “any writing that inscribes femininity.” Satter heeds this call. She takes seriously women—specifically young women—and their stories as a legitimate subject of experimental theatre, a site where, as Cixous puts it, “a feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive.”

Cixous emphasizes the body as the source of feminine power. “By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her,” Cixous writes, “Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.” This emphasis, critics argue, essentializes gender, and the essay’s universalizing gesture erases real differences between women. Judith Butler, for example, writes that she “understood French feminism, with the exception of Monique Wittig . . . not only to assume the fundamental difference between masculine and feminine, but to reproduce it.”

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36 Ibid., 888.
37 Ibid., 880.
the physical body—the femininity in Satter’s work is located within the language, story, and design choices and its queerness manifests in desire rather than physical sex onstage—but there is a neo-essentialist bent to her understanding of gender in her plays. She tells producer Caleb Hammons that she is “wary of politicizing angles related to ideas of feminism that stick close to conceptions of femininity as a social construct, as that is not at all interesting to me as a reason to make art, and almost the opposite of what I want to consider and explore.”

Indeed Half Straddle’s performances do not show femininity as performative, or reveal it as a social construct. Instead, Satter is “interested in the essentialism that Cixous is laying out.” She explains, “I, in a non-academic way, feel there is, and want to have a playing space, where male/female (and now) trans essences are just there separate from cultural conditioning.” In other words, although she conceives of gender as an essential quality, something that exists prior to socialization, her understanding of it is non-binary. She does not limit the essential possibilities to just male or female; she also sees the possibility of a pre-existent trans identity than is neither. It is this conception of gender as non-binary but essential that separates her politics from those of Cixous and feminists of the Second Wave.

Satter, who identifies as a feminist, came of age in the 90s, during feminism’s Third Wave, and Half Straddle’s aesthetic is also indebted to what Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards call “girlie” feminism. “Girlie” feminism is a Third Wave feminist philosophy “based on a reclaiming of girl culture (or feminine accoutrements that were tossed out with sexism during the Second Wave)” including “such formerly disparaged girl things as knitting, the color

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39 Hammons, Unpublished interview with Tina Satter.
40 Ibid.
41 Tina Satter, Email correspondence with author, October 16, 2014.
pink, nail polish and fun.” 42 Girlie feminists, like most Third Wavers, positioned themselves against what they saw as the shortcomings of the ideology of the Second Wave, a move that served to reinforce a number of unfortunate stereotypes about 1970s feminism. Baumgardner and Richards argue that girlies were “rebelling against their mothers,” fighting against the “stereotype of being too serious, too political, and seemingly asexual” and the “antifeminine, antijoy emphasis that they perceive as the legacy of Second Wave seriousness.” 43

Influenced by groundbreaking texts such as Bettie Friedan’s Feminine Mystique and Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, many Second Wave feminists found freedom in the deconstruction of femininity as an unnatural, rigid, and repressive set of rules to which women were forced to adhere virtually from birth. 44 Many feminists advocated for androgyny as a means of empowerment and glorified natural (as opposed to “man-made”—to use Mary Daly’s term) femininity. 45 Girlie feminists of the Third Wave questioned this dismissal of femininity, and argued that judging feminine women to be mindless puppets of the patriarchy is also policing gender performance in a deeply sexist fashion. According to Baumgardner and Richards,

Girlie says we’re not broken, and our desires aren’t simply booby traps set by the patriarchy. Girlie encompasses the tabooed symbols of women’s feminine enculturation—Barbie dolls, makeup, fashion magazines, high heels—and says using them isn’t shorthand for “we’ve been duped.” Using makeup isn’t a sign of our sway to the marketplace and the male gaze; it can be sexy, campy, ironic, or simply decorating ourselves without the loaded issues. 46

43 Baumgardner and Richards, Manifesta, 137, 80.
46 Baumgardner and Richards, Manifesta, 136.
Third Wave feminism launched with Rebecca Walker’s critique of what she sees as 1970s feminism requirement for women “to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn’t allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories.”\textsuperscript{47} Although both Second and Third Wave feminism were multi-vocal movements, Third Wavers in particular emphasized and embraced the contradictions within their feminism. Shelley Budgeon explains,

By refusing to deploy straightforward codes to designate contemporary gender ideals in terms of simple binaries such as “good” or “bad”, third-wave feminism insists on the necessity of straddling binaries and working with the contradictions that result. Negatively coded terms such as “bitch”, “slut” or “girl” are often reappropriated in an ironic stance in order to express new amalgamations of contradictory feminine subjectivities. These are subjectivities expressed through acts of cultural production and consumption that seek to run counter to and subvert dominant representations of femininity yet often draw upon the products of popular culture as resources.\textsuperscript{48}

In contrast to the earnest embrace of femininity evidence in Cixous’s work, Third Wave girlies deployed femininity with a combination of irony and pleasure. In the 1990s, for instance, many feminists in their late teens and early twenties sported the pop cultural trappings of childhood, wearing plastic baby barrettes in their hair and carrying Hello Kitty backpacks. This style served to both call attention to femininity as a construct that begins in childhood, and to claim it as a legitimate means of expression. Other young feminists, inspired by the Riot Grrrl movement—an off-shoot of the 1990s punk revival—wore, for example, pretty baby doll dresses with ripped tights and combat boots, scrawling words like “SLUT” and “BITCH” in black marker on their bodies. With this more combative approach, the grrrls critiqued society’s strict enforcement of certain standards of femininity even as they appropriated them for their own pleasure.

Although few texts from the Third Wave mention Judith Butler’s work explicitly, many college-educated feminists’ understanding of gender was shaped by queer theory, which gained

\textsuperscript{47} Walker, \textit{To Be Real}, xxxiii.
\textsuperscript{48} Budgeon, “The Contradictions of Successful Femininity: Third-Wave Feminism, Postfeminism, and ‘New Femininities,’” 280.
popularity in the academy in the 1990s. As Rebecca Munford points out, “In its emphasis on destabilizing fixed definitions of gender and rejection of unitary notions of ‘woman’ and ‘feminism,’ third-wave feminism is clearly informed and shaped by postmodern theory, as well as other anti-foundationalist discourse such as postcolonialism and poststructuralism.” The personal gender performance of many Third Wavers manifests Butler’s theories of gender performativity; girlies recuperated the artifacts of feminine adolescence, using them simultaneously as symbols of precisely how gender is constructed, but also as something legitimately pleasurable and identity-forming. Baumgardner and Richards write:

[W]hat we loved as girls was good, and, because of feminism, we know how to make girl stuff work for us. Our Barbies had jobs and sex lives and friends. We weren’t staring at their plastic figures and Dynel tresses hoping to someday attain their pneumatic measurements. Sticker collections were no more trivial than stamp collections; both pursuits cultivated the connoisseur in a young person.

Half Straddle’s work exemplifies many of the tenets of girlie feminism; it celebrates femininity and critiques the idea of it as trivial, artificial, and inherently bad for women. The use of femininity in the work is not ironic or performative, however. Satter does not employ girlie artifacts for campy effect; as she notes, her work is “something more delicate than camp.” Her plays do not reveal femininity as constructed; in fact, they serve to naturalize it. In Satter’s plays, butch and trans masculine actors can easily take on the trappings of feminine accoutrements and convincingly speak girlie slang with a loose teen-girl lilt. Within Half Straddle’s surreal worlds,

50 That they then go on to compare the recuperation of girlie artifacts and aesthetics to the recuperation of the word “nigger” in African-American communities evidences one of the major shortcomings of the Third Wave: its lack of understanding of racial difference. Despite the Third Wave’s embrace of multi-vocality, girlies assumed that “girle” and girlhood signify universally, without interrogating how they are raced and classed. This insistent whiteness is a problem that plagues Second, Third, and post-wave feminism, as I will discuss throughout this dissertation.
51 Hammons, Unpublished interview with Tina Satter.
masculinities are incorporated under the rubric of femininity. Satter describes JayJay, the strange neighbor that torments the two young protagonists in *Away Uniform*, as a man who is “effeminate and not-effeminate, depending.”  

Nurses in New England, for example, is set in an all-female, nurse-run hospital—although here the category of “female” is expanded to include Feathers, the ballet-dancing “male orderly.”  

Half Straddle’s members include women and genderqueer performers, and these performers play a host of roles that express a variety of genders—all of which are framed as feminine. Barbagallo, for example, who has starred in most of Half Straddle’s productions, identifies as transgender. He (Barbagallo’s preferred gender pronouns are he/him/his) does feminine drag in *The Knockout Blow* and *Nurses in New England*, plays baby butch roles both in *FOOTBALL* and *Away Uniform*, takes on the angsty and effeminate man-child Treplov in *Seagull*, and portrays transgender teen Lee in *House of Dance*.

It is the earnestness with which Half Straddle deploys femininity that marks it as “more delicate” than camp, and theirs is a decidedly different feminist strategy than that used by previous generations of lesbian and feminist theatre-makers in New York City’s experimental theatre scene. In the late 1980s and 90s, performance often derived its feminism from exposing gender as performative; as Judith Butler theorized the instability of gender in her groundbreaking work *Gender Trouble* in 1990, groups like Split Britches, playwrights such as Caryl Churchill, and performance artists like Karen Finley put that instability into practice onstage. Writing about the lesbian/feminist performance work at WOW Café, Jill Dolan, in *Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988), observes that “lesbian performers, writers and directors often parody dominant cultural images of gender to deconstruct gender specific conduct and codes.”  

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52 Satter, *Seagull (Thinking of You)* with *Away Uniform and Family*, 76.
same performances, Elin Diamond theorizes “gestic feminist criticism” (1997), and advocates theatre that foregrounds gender in performance and highlights it as a constructed sign system.\footnote{Diamond, \textit{Unmaking Mimesis}, 52, 47.}

Part of post-wave pop feminism’s accounting of what has come before is a radical re-evaluation of Judith Butler’s theories of gender performativity and their resonance with feminist performance criticism. As others have pointed out, Butler—particularly in \textit{Gender Trouble}—participates in the denigration of femininity, seeming to critique it as more performative than masculinity.\footnote{See, for example, Rosi Braidotti, \textit{Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming} (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2002).} Although the constructed nature of gender is often taken for granted as the starting place for academic feminist theory today, displays of binary gender persist in U.S. society. Many feminists simultaneously acknowledge the constructedness of gender and the possibility of a gendered performance that feels somewhat innate. Revising her earlier position slightly, Butler writes in \textit{Undoing Gender}, “Sexual difference is neither fully given nor fully constructed, but partially both.” As post-wave feminism is trans inclusive, the idea of gender as a purely social construct seems less tenable. For example, as a transsexual woman who, from a very young age, felt feminine, Julia Serano, prefers to see gender as “socially exaggerated (rather than socially constructed).”\footnote{Serano, \textit{Whipping Girl}, 76.} She elaborates:

> While femininity is in many ways influenced, shaped, and enforced by society, to say that it is entirely “artificial” or merely a “performance” is patronizing towards those for whom femininity simply feels right. Indeed, one would have to have a rather grim view of the female population to believe that a majority of us could so easily be ‘brainwashed’ or “coerced” into enthusiastically adopting an entirely contrived or wholly artificial set of gender expressions. In fact, it seems incomprehensible that so many women could so actively gravitate toward femininity unless there was something about it that resonated with them on a profound level.\footnote{Ibid., 339.}
She urges, “Rather than focus on how femininity and masculinity are produced (an issue that has unfortunately dominated the field of gender studies of late), we should instead turn our attention to the ways these gender traits are interpreted.” She goes on to argue that U.S. society continues to devalue femininity, and she sees this as a more pressing problem than that of how gender is constructed. Like Serano, Half Straddle is more concerned with advocating for femininity than with showing it as a construction.

With their earnestness and unironic deployment of femininity, Half Straddle’s plays form a feminine anti-canon, the kind for which Cixous called in 1976. Satter’s “pop influenced écriture féminine” takes seriously the importance of women’s writing, and adds to it the Third Wave’s pleasure in feminine style and girlish adolescent artifacts. In its explicit queerness and its exploration of transmasculine identities, the work takes up contemporary concerns. In its bridging all of these politics, Half Straddle’s plays are post-wave pop feminist.

**Growing Backwards**

Adolescence—that fraught period between childhood and adulthood—is a time of searching for self and for belonging—for trying to find community that allows and encourages you to be who you are or aspire to be. Representing adolescence and girlish practices and behaviors in the context of New York City’s experimental theatre scene, Satter makes a case for their relevance, their continued effect on our present. With the exception of *Nurses in New England*, Half Straddle’s plays all deal explicitly with adolescence—depicting teen characters struggling to forge and articulate their identities and to negotiate relationships—familial, friendly, and romantic. Satter’s plays argue that we all can find subjectivity through adolescent

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59 Ibid., 75.
femininity, that the younger self is perhaps the more authentic self, and that girlhood is potentially a site of both femininity and feminism.

Satter was interested in adapting *The Seagull* in part because she sees the characters of Nina and Masha as “an interesting rendering of, like, late teen girls,“ Recoding the play in her girlie language, Satter emphasizes that, at its core, this is a play about angsty adolescents caught in a love triangle. With *Thinking of You (Seagull)*, Satter remakes Chekhov’s realist tragicomedy into an abstract girlie teen dream. Developed in a residency at the New Museum and premiered as part of PS 122’s COIL Festival in January of 2013, the production features original Russian folk metal music, sung by the performers, and extended sequences in Russian. The actors’ costumes include lace and fur, mixing period-inspired pieces with more modern accessories such as an acid washed denim jacket for Treplov (Jess Barbagallo) and knee-high white boots for Nina (Emily Davis). The actors move in and out of various characters, sometimes playing themselves. The set consists of flowing pale pink fabric, lit from below, draped around the playing area, and, at the show’s premier, the imposing columns that frame the New Ohio Theatre’s stage, which are ordinarily black, were painted a dusty rose for the occasion.

Masha (Eliza Bent)—who describes her class status in girlie terms, explaining she was “raised on respect for who had what . . . giving thanks for every stuffed animal . . . making the rounds as a camp counselor without the right shoes”—is in love with the moody, aspiring playwright Treplov, who does not return her affection but instead obsesses over the naïve and passionate Nina. Toward the end of the play, Masha delivers a poignant monologue, trying to explain her sense of heartbreak to Nina who, in Half Straddle’s version seems to be in love with both Arkadina (Susie Sokol) and Peter (Becca Blackwell):

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60 Liska and Copper, *OK Radio Podcast.*
61 Satter, *Seagull (Thinking of You) with Away Uniform and Family,* 63–64.
This is what it feels like, knowing that someone (is there), not there anymore. It’s like, I can see half of my heart and it’s out and it is walking around and it’s pale pink. And it is really big, and not that my heart is so big—but that half that I could see, that was out and walking around, it had legs and it was really big, it was life-size, and it was just one half, and it was very pale pink, and I could feel like I was wanting to reach for it and I was reaching for it, but as it was walking, while this was happening, it was being erased. By like a giant eraser. So it was like this half of my heart was out there walking and I could see it, but it was being erased and I was reaching and reaching and it was disappearing. That whole half of my heart . . . And it would be easier if it was just gone, but watching it fade.  

Here Satter returns to the heart imagery she explored in Half Straddle’s first production. Masha’s feelings of vulnerability and desire are manifested in the image of a giant pale pink heart. The artful repetition within the monologue emphasizes Masha’s difficulty with articulating her feelings of longing and loneliness. In girlhood, Satter states, “[Y]ou’re trying to communicate. You want someone to understand you . . . [Y]ou’re trying to see if any of the flares you are putting out into the world anyone else gets.” 63 Nina and Masha “get” each other; Nina is moved by Masha’s words, and at the end of the speech, both of their faces are wet with tears. This moment must be performed earnestly; the stage directions dictate that “Nina cries. Then Masha cries. They have to make each other cry.” 64 In other words, in this moment, the girls must show their empathy for each other’s pain, communicating it, not just to each other, but to the audience, as well. Though adolescent crushes are often deemed trivial, by locating these emotions within Chekhov’s classic play and by presenting them earnestly, Satter argues for the significance and universality of such feelings.

Satter depicts girlhood as a special time, a time of angst and growing pains, identity formation, of intense friendships—some that slip into romances—influential mentorships, and community-making. There is the sense, in her plays, of losing time, and, although they look

62 Ibid., 60.
63 Liska and Copper, OK Radio Podcast.
64 Satter, Seagull (Thinking of You) with Away Uniform and Family, 61.
forward to the future, the characters mourn for moments to which they will never return, even as they experience them. Because of this, although the plays are often quite funny, there is a melancholy that hangs over them as well. In *Away Uniform*, for instance, Farah (Davis) promises Jem (Barbagallo), her best friend/girlfriend that to her she’s “an eternal first-year. Forever.”\(^65\) In *FOOTBALL*, the characters, who feel their time together growing shorter, try to articulate their conflicting feelings, both wanting but not wanting the change they know will come with graduation:

TRACE (*To the team.*) There is kind of a way. To go forward, I think. (*Pause.*) But, we’d have to change everything.

DARA I have all these memories. (*Draws a square in the air.*) Like out there. And postcard flashes mashed up. And feelings of amazingness and shame/embarrass and trying really hard and laughing the hardest I’ll ever laugh. And riding on a bus. And feeling like I might die. Of something. So I can’t really tell anymore.

ANNEKE I’ll love and lift up the Pony Palace cause it’s my job. Either way, I’ll be by my sister forever.

ELEANOR Even if I’m never captain. We can just go from here. And I’ll play forever too.

SASHA Ditto.

TIMBER It’s a no brainer.

KAYLA Then. We have to change everything.\(^66\)

In this “micro moment” the girls are completely connected—through their school, their team, and their shared experiences. In the real world, the audience knows, they won’t be sisters forever, they won’t play forever, and that to go forward, everything has to change. But *FOOTBALL* suggests that we can hold on to these moments in our grown-up state, we can continue to have community, to experience sisterhood, and, if we do, we will be better for it. At

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 101.

\(^{66}\) Satter, “In the Pony Palace/FOOTBALL,” 40.
the end of the play, when the team piles on Dara after a winning game, Coach says, in what is the last line of the show, “I used to be just like that,” and the audience gets the sense she wishes she still were.57

Satter shows adolescence as a time of vital mentorship, as if to argue for the importance of post-wave feminism’s intergenerational allies. In the original production of FOOTBALL, Assistant Coach Maureen was played, appropriately, by Moe Angelos of the esteemed queer feminist performance troupe the Five Lesbian Brothers. Angelos’s presence as a coach performs a continuation of lesbian feminist performance history, reminding audiences that Half Straddle is part of the legacy of the women at the WOW Café in the 1990s. Assistant Coach Maureen repeats the team’s “rules” to the girls, usually in the form of silly one-liners that send up motivational sports slogans. For example, she tells them: “Rule 14 of the Pony Palace. Don’t leave anything on the field. Pause. I’m serious. Someone could trip.”68 In the first scene of the play, she offers the number one rule of the school, which has a deeper meaning that resonates with the themes of Half Straddle’s work. Assuring the girls that all kinds of femininity are acceptable for Owls, she tells them: “Rule One of the Pony Palace. You can have short hair or long hair. Pause. You don’t step on the field without a mouthguard.”69

Other contemporary performance artists have similarly seen girlhood as a site rife for feminist exploration. Analyzing the work of contemporary artists such as Amber Hawk Swanson, Kate Gilmore, and Ann Liv Young, Anna Watkins Fisher theorizes the notion of “adolescence drag,” which she defines as “a parasitical operation that redirects notions of kitsch and regression to critique the limited identificatory positions available to a generation of young women said to

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57 Ibid., 42.
58 Ibid., 23.
59 Ibid., 8.
be the heirs of Western feminism: either that of the sanctimonious convert or the rebellious postfeminist, the good or the bad daughter.” These artists, she argues, “lampoon the commercial production and exploitation of a privileged representation of femininity,” “hyperbolizing . . . the adolescent figure,” or critiquing “the girl as unattainable ideal.”

Although it might appear to be a kind of adolescence drag—after all, Satter and her performers are well into their 30s and beyond—the work does not lampoon or hyperbolize “the girl” but rather argues for her seriousness and significance. Satter and her performers “drag” girlhood in order to reveal the insights this time period offers, a move that critiques feminism’s historical casting of the girl as immature, in process, not-yet-feminist subject. As Catherine Driscoll points out

Positioned in opposition to the stabilizing centrality of the transcendental Subject, girls are . . . positioned as always in the process of their own production . . . feminism mostly aspires to Subjectivity defined against immaturity and femininity . . . Woman is presumed to be the end point of a naturalized process of developing individual identity that relegates a vast range of roles, behaviors, or practices to its immature past.”

Satter shows us the feminism in femininity and girlhood, that identity can be articulated through girlie artifacts, not just by leaving them behind.

In an interview with Kelly Copper and Pavol Liska on their OK Radio podcast, Liska asks Satter if she considers “late teen girls” to be her specialty. She answers that she feels like they are, in part, but—sensing the potential for that characterization to trivialize her company’s work—she stresses that this is not cause for dismissal. These pieces contend that a return to “girlishness” is not regression; in fact, these performances demonstrate that, looking back to girlhood, we can come to new understandings of ourselves in relation to others. “I feel like I

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71 Ibid., 49.
have grown backwards” she says, “or I am getting more to my true self.” Satter’s idea that the true self manifests through images of adolescence runs counter to common feminist understanding of that time of life. Her plays articulate a feminist position beyond that of either “the good or bad daughter”; she is the daughter who “grows backwards,” looking to her own queer girlhood for inspiration and putting to use pieces of feminisms past in order to move forward to a positive queer and feminist future.

“Totally Queer”

In Family, Frarajaca and her friends perform a rap in which they shout, “It’s girl power/ And it’s totally queer”—in effect, arguing that feminism is necessarily queer. Half Straddle’s shows are also totally queer—only House of Dance hints at a heterosexual relationship between Martle and Brendan—and the femininity within them is depicted as an exclusively queer practice. Framing femininity in this way, Half Straddle avoids the postfeminist pitfall of using femininity to re-establish strict heteronormative gender roles. The plays cast queer relationships as the norm, and demonstrate the ways in which femininity can be deployed in the service of all kinds of queerness.

Explicit sex onstage can be radical, as I argue it is in the Dyke Division’s Room for Cream in the previous chapter. It can be validating for audiences to see bodies not considered conventionally attractive engaged in sex acts that are characterized by some as deviant. With her work, however, Satter is not motivated to push boundaries of acceptability in this way. “Usually, stage sex is super uninteresting to me,” Satter tells the New York Times, “It’s just like, cool,

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73 Liska and Copper, OK Radio Podcast.
74 Tina Satter, “Family” (Unpublished manuscript, 2009), 23. Oddly, this line appears in the unpublished manuscript but is cut from the published version of the text.
you’re seeing some kind of hot people grapple around.”

Rather, she explains, that she is “interested in the air between people about to kiss or people who don’t want to kiss” and how you might stage that. In other words, her plays explore sexual tension, and introducing explicit sex onstage would diffuse the palpable queer desire between the characters.

For example, *Away Uniform* takes up the friendship/romance of two high school field hockey players. Although it was one of the first plays Satter wrote, it was not performed until January 2012, when it was presented as part of Incubator Arts Project’s Other Forces Festival. Set in what seems to be a small Midwestern town, *Away Uniform* offers an intensely intimate and romantic rendering of a queer relationship between two weird high school girls. In the last scene of the play, Jem and Farah have the following exchange:

JEM This look means I love you. *She bites her lip.*

FARAH Do it again. *Jem does the look.*

FARAH Do it again. It’s good. *Jem does the look.*

FARAH Do it again. *Jem does the look.*

FARAH Oh, do it again. *Jem does the look.*

FARAH Do it again. *Jem does the look.*

FARAH Do it again. *Jem does the look.*

FARAH Do it again. *Jem does the look.*

FARAH Please, do it again.

*Pause.*

JEM I can’t. I’m so tired.

*Pause.*

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76 Ibid.
FARAH Please.
The repetition of the demand and Jem’s meeting it embodies the girls’ longing for each other.
Farah is desperate to hold on to this high school love, afraid that it will end. The fact that the
look Jem performs is a gentle biting of her lip—a small and subtle gesture —shows the deepness
of their connection. It is an action that is gently sexual, but that inflicts slight pain on oneself.
When the play ends with Farah’s word “please,” it leaves the audience in a kind of suspended
adolescence, imaging that the exchange and their romance continues.

Adult queer sexuality is represented in *Nurses in New England*, a musical that translates
the typically masculine realm of medicine into a feminine dreamscape. In it, Satter spoofs soapy
medical dramas at the same time as she delivers an earnest meditation on the gender hierarchy of
hospital labor. *Nurses* tells the story of an “all-nurse run hospital”—a rapidly disappearing type
of facility in which women do the hard work of saving sick stuffed animals. As ridiculous as the
premise sounds, the piece—which was shown as part of the Ohio Theater’s Ice Factory festival
in the summer of 2010—highlights and valorizes the work of under-sung heroes of hospitals:
nurses. The nurses at Putney Hill feel that their line of work is devalued and they fear that it will
disappear altogether. The Head of Surgery, Derek Shepherd (Jess Barbagallo) fights to remain
relevant, eventually joining forces with her former lover Lois Lewis to try to regain Putney Hill’s
previous glory and their own previous personal happiness.

All the women at Putney Hill Hospital are smitten with the EMT (Erin Markey), who
takes great pleasure in her sex appeal. Her uniform is shorter and tighter than that of the nurses,
who wear old-fashioned mid-calf length skirts with thick white tights, sensible sneakers, and
paper hats with pink stripes across them. EMT constantly calls attention to her fabulous hair,
doing a move referred to in the script as “a ponytail release, shake out and re-pony.”

Halfway through the performance, she sings a soulful rock number full of innuendo and double entendre.

Lit by hot-pink lights, and dancing suggestively, she sings:

I got me an ambulance
A bed in back
And a hat
With a ponytail in the back . . .

Maintain patient airway
Circulate some air
Transfer, transfer to an appropriate destination
For advanced medical care

Out in the field
Radio to my hip
Elastic band for my braid.
Protective gloss for my lips

BACKUP:
Nobody’s gonna hurt you.
Lay back and ride.
Nobody’s gonna hurt you.
Lay-ay back and ride.

EMT derives her sexiness in part from her girliness, highlighting her feminine performance by pointing out her long ponytail and her lip gloss. But within the onstage world, femininity is performed for other feminine subjects—it is not an attempt to attract men. Lois Lewis is attracted to EMT—she starts growing her hair out trying to imitate EMT’s ponytail—but it is her relationship with Shepherd that is a representation of meaningful lesbian romance. The two nurses have a complex relationship that is at once romantic and professional. Lewis burned Shepherd when she left Putney Hill years ago, and Shepherd has been pining for her ever since. When she returns, Shepherd makes tentative gestures to rekindle their romance:

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78 Ibid., 33.
SHEPHERD Do you love EMT?

LOIS Derek. She’s wise and she’s got a good heart and strong hair. But it’s not even… You and I. We are Nurses. In New England.

SHEPHERD And that’s really specific.

Together, they launch into a soft-rock ballad which Giarmo has written to sound like something from the 1970s. They sing, “I’m gonna dig deep/ I’m gonna laugh with you/ I can try/ I can try/ That view is all I need/ The view from right here.” Lewis and Shepherd’s relationship is more about mutual respect than sex, and Satter depicts this lesbian love as having the potential to be a mature partnership, less-than-perfect, but the work of which will be pleasurable.

The successes and failures of the Third Wave are just now coming into perspective. In the short term, girlie feminism seems to have failed to effect radical change; Baumgardner and Richards point to the difficulty its proponents had connecting culture to politics. As the Third Wave receded, the tenets of girlie feminism were transformed into a watered-down notion of “girl power,” nothing more than a banal slogan to be emblazoned on pink baby-doll tees and sold to teens in strip malls. Third Wavers’ defiant sex-positivity that once empowered women to feel confident about sex and sexuality, turned into an exploitative enterprise. After the so-called Sex Wars polarized the lesbian and feminist community in the early 1980s, 1990s feminists fought to de-stigmatize sex work, pornography, and sexual practices like BDSM. Third Wave girlie feminists often embodied hyper-feminized sexuality at the same time as they adopted stereotypically masculine attitudes about casual sex. Baumgardner and Richards note, “Girlie culture is a rebellion against the false impression that since women don’t want to be sexually exploited, they don’t want to be sexual . . . against the anachronistic belief that because women

79 Ibid., 42.
could be dehumanized by porn (and we include erotica in our definition), they must be; and the idea that girls and power don’t mix.”\(^{81}\) By the early aughts, however, the sexual empowerment that the Third Wave fought hard for led to a dangerous kind of self-exploitation and what Ariel Levy deems the “rise of raunch culture,” a heteronormative hypersexuality bolstered by consumerism.\(^{82}\) Enter the era of postfeminism.

Angela McRobbie argues that part of the postfeminist agenda of the new millennium has been a “re-securing of the boundaries of required femininity.”\(^{83}\) Although this “postfeminist masquerade,” as she calls it, “openly acknowledges and celebrates the fictive status of femininity,” it simultaneously “establish[es] new ways of enforcing sexual difference.”\(^{84}\) McRobbie makes a convincing case that, while women may declare their femininity ironic—a choice rather than an obligation and therefore beyond reproach—in today’s postfeminist climate, such femininity serves to re-stabilize gender roles, uphold whiteness as dominant, and alienate non-heterosexual subjects.

In its queerness, Half Straddle’s work avoids the heteronormativity that McRobbie argues Third Wave girlie feminism reiterates, and, as it advocates queer community, it combats the maintenance of the self-centered postfeminist individualist subject. As Serano writes, “feminine self-presentation is often framed as though it solely exists to entice or attract men. . . . Clearly, it’s the idea that feminine self-presentation exists for men’s benefit that is oppressive to women, not the acts of self-presentation themselves.”\(^{85}\) Satter’s plays are homonormal, depicting queer

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\(^{81}\) Baumgardner and Richards, *Manifesta*, 137.


\(^{84}\) Ibid., 64.

\(^{85}\) Tina Satter, Email correspondence with author, October 20, 2014.
romance and desire almost exclusively, and within them, femininity is wrested from its usual role of performing for the heterosexual male gaze. Because all of the characters are framed as feminine, the romances avoid butch/femme pairings often necessary for a femme to read as queer. Instead, the plays depict a variety of kinds of queer romances, and argue that these romances can occur between people of any gender performance.

**Trans Essence**

For *House of Dance*, Satter “wanted to work with a more male idea” in making a show. Even so, she sets its masculinities in a very feminine context: a small town dance studio—a location usually populated by young girls aspiring to famous ballet troupes or Broadway stardom. Satter had originally envisioned the piece using four men, but cast Elizabeth DeMent, who, she says is: “totally a like smudged version of a femininity that [she] found so exciting” because she has “has this male energy, in a really female way” to play Brendan. Presented by Half Straddle in association with New York City Players in 2013 and as part of PS 122’s COIL Festival in 2014, at the piece’s center is a mentor-mentee relationship between a tap teacher and a transgender teen. At the opening of the show, Lee (Jess Barbagallo) is gearing up for an audition for “Teen Tap Dance Roadshow” under the tutelage of Martle (Jim Fletcher), the owner of the House of Dance. Martle works with Lee during what is supposed to be a solo class when an odd woman, Brendan, interrupts them, returning to the studio after so many years, she

87 Satter, Email correspondence with author, October 20, 2014.
claims, to finish a project. She antagonizes Lee, Martle, and Joel, the rehearsal pianist (Paul Pontrelli), but in the end, she and Lee help each other to find the courage to forge new identities and revisit old ones.

Lee, who has a small hint of a moustache and wears a sparkly earring in their right ear, claims to come from “a broken family.”89 They are looking to get out of their small town, and they see the possibility for escape through the Teen Tap Roadshow competition.90 “If you make it, you get to go around,” Lee tells Martle.91 They are struggling with their relationship with their family—they hide the fact they are in dance class from their stepbrother. “Screw my life,” they exclaim, “I just wanna be ready for tryouts. I hate this town. I am going to be a millionaire by the time I am 40. And just. Live somewhere else!”92 They are desperate for a role model; they repeatedly ask Martle: “Shouldn’t you be encouraging my wings?”93

Martle does “encourage Lee’s wings,” in part by teaching them to fly on their own. He urges Lee to find their narrative—a metaphor for finding comfort in their own expression of gender identity. “[T]he main thing is that you’re telling a story, right . . . You tell a story while you’re dancing, okay,” he tells Lee.94 When Brendan asks Lee for a tampon and insists that she is “allowed to ask that,” the room freezes. Lee looks to Martle before answering no. Martle puts his hand gently on Lee’s shoulder, in a subtle gesture of support.95 Later, Lee sings a rousing

89 I read Lee as a young transman, but the script indicates that Lee is a “teenage transgender tap student” and uses the pronouns “they, their, them” in referencing Lee throughout. I follow suit here.
91 Ibid., 4.
92 Ibid., 21.
93 Satter, Email correspondence with author, October 20, 2014, 4.
95 According to an interview with Barbagallo on Howlround, this was based on an actual incident in which Barbagallo got upset when Satter loudly asked them for a tampon across a crowded theatre. See David Dower, Friday Phone Call # 60: Gender Identity in Theater—Jess Barbagallo.
rendition of Melissa Etheridge’s hit, “Come to my Window.” Holding a sparkly wireless microphone and gazing at their reflection in the mirror, Lee sings the song earnestly. It is a moving moment; the audience empathizes with this teen, understanding that Lee connects with this outdated lesbian power ballad because it represents something visibly queer in their very straight small town life. With newly found confidence, Lee performs a series of dances with names like “In the Crypt,” “Giant Coffin,” “Zombie Walk,” and “Flying Person,” accompanied by Martle, Joel, and Brendan. The sequence leaves them all out of breath and Martle exclaims, “That is a story.” Exhilarated, Lee concurs, “That’s a story,” and asks, “Can use it for the contest?”

Just before the end of the piece, the cast sings the “House of Dance” theme song, a quiet, pretty, poppy melody, the lyrics of which deliver a message of persistence:

Make it work
Reach with your toes
Press with a hand
Listen to my breath
Let me stand
Oh, find a way
Oh, steal a chance
Look there right ahead
House of Dance

The song suggests that, though we need others there to hold our hand and to listen to us, we ultimately must find a way to stand on our own, take our own chance, and make life work for us. Even as we forge our own paths, a home (in this case, the community of outsiders at the House of Dance) will always be there, right ahead, waiting for us if we return. Immediately following

the song, Lee delivers a monologue about the complexities of gender, knowing they must find their own way forward:

I see this. I see a way that is different and clean and my skin is pure and soft and I am also tough, like made of all bone. And I see this way in where I am simple and strong and there is a kind of pleasure I have because I let everything else I know fall away. If I reach past all the edges.\textsuperscript{96}

Here, through Lee, Satter imagines the potential pleasure in focusing on essences rather than social construction. Lee seems to describe an inner femininity and masculinity that can’t be named because these states of being exist when all the trappings of gender have fallen away. Lee continues, as if they are being asked a question in a pageant, or a contest like “Teen Tap Road Show.”

How do I see myself down the line? It’s impossible to know. But I know that I don’t see something that encloses me with safety where I have regular support and love that flows all ways. What I do see is that I see myself with this glow around me that needs to have all these sources that I can’t even see powering it. That this feeling where I am coming away from myself to be myself will be the way that I know.\textsuperscript{97}

Lee articulates their understanding that they might not have the safety net of a traditional family that loves and supports them, but they will have people like Martle who have helped them along the way. Lee realizes to find their true self, they need to reject inherited images of how they should be.

When Lee asks Martle if he will go with them to the contest, there is a long pause. Finally Martle says that he can’t because he has class. Brendan chimes in, “I have this dance thing too,” and the play ends. Martle is Lee’s mentor; Lee wants to be just like him, but Martle knows the right way to “encourage Lee’s wings” is to force them perform on their own.

Running just an hour, staged on a simple set, and featuring only four characters, \textit{House of Dance} is a small production. It is a sparkly slice of life; it takes place almost in real time and is

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
mostly realistic, though there are surreal, magical moments in which time slows down and feelings are physicalized in exaggerated movements. But this is a slice of life with a transgender hero; the play gives us a glimpse into the struggle of an adolescent trans man, played by a genderqueer performer, trying to find their identity in a parochial small town. This is extraordinary in the context of New York City’s experimental theatre scene and U.S. culture at large. There has been a recent increase in the visibility of trans actors and narratives in mainstream media. Laverne Cox, for example, is a trans woman and activist whose storyline on *Orange is the New Black* takes up the issues trans women face in prison. The Amazon.com series *Transparent* received acclaim for its depiction of a trans woman’s relationship with her three grown children as she transitions. As transfemininity becomes more visible, however, transmasculinity remains largely ignored. Foregrounding transmasculinity, a transmasculine narrative, and transmasculine actors like Barbagallo, Half Straddle makes a much-needed intervention in theatre and U.S. culture in general.

**Little White Dolls**

Even as it denaturalizes masculinity and forges queer community, Half Straddle’s work renders invisible the relationship between femininity and race, replicating an enduring problem with feminist performance and U.S. feminism in general—that of its uninterrogated whiteness. In the 80s, Cixous’s invocation of a universal woman subject, her emphasis on the linkage between

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writing and the body was critiqued by post colonial feminists as essentializing gender and erasing differences—for example, in class, race, sexuality—between women. From today’s vantage point, its essentialism might be seen as trans-exclusive. It was precisely this type of universalizing that Third Wavers hoped to combat with their embrace of multi-vocality and emphasis on intersectionality. Yet they often failed to do so. For example, according to Baumgardner and Richards, “Girlie is pretty much an all-white phenomenon, and black women have never made such a big deal about the implications of wearing nail polish or make up.” Although this is an unnuanced over-generalization, it is true that feminists of color have often demonstrated different concerns than those of white women in the U.S. In many ways, women of color are always already excluded from a mainstream conception of femininity in the U.S., so it follows that they might not find girlie feminism empowering.

Satter draws on her biography for her work, inspired by what she describes as “a very classic New England, upwardly striving white middle class family” which she feels became “heavily female” after her parents’ divorce. She was a ballet dancer until the age of fourteen and a varsity field hockey player throughout high school and college, and she used these experiences when writing *House of Dance, FOOTBALL,* and *Away Uniform.* The specificity of her positionality comes through in her plays, both as a strength—Satter’s attention to detail in language and visual aesthetic creates the feelings the shows conjure—and as a limitation of the work. Although Half Straddle’s work argues for coalition across gender, sexuality and, to some extent class, with their uninterrogated whiteness, the performances fail to argue for a feminism that is racially diverse. In fact, because the performers in her company are mostly white—Nikki

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100 Hammons, Unpublished interview with Tina Satter.
Calonge (*FOOTBALL*) and Paul Pontrelli (*House of Dance*) being notable exceptions—in many ways, the work reinscribes femininity and, in turn, feminism as white.

In *Family*, Satter highlights the relationship between gender and class, but does not do so for gender and race. The play tells a story of a family—a single mom and her two daughters Lily (Emily Davis) and Frarajaca (Erin Markey)—that was once wealthy, but lately is struggling financially. According to the stage directions, “It seems like they might have been banished (from New England?). But it doesn’t really matter, they still live in a sort of castle. On their grounds is a heated saltwater swimming pool and a snow globe that has an ice skating rink in it.”

The play is a critique of New England life—the mom is worried about what the neighbors think, she is concerned about carrying on the family’s lineage, and she feels grateful they were “gifted” the sperm of family friend Rudolf Nureyev so that they can “force-impregnate” Lily and continue the family line. Lily asks Frarajaca, “If Mum’s broke why are the front steps being re-done in granite.”

Lily says, “It’s like the last vestiges of what she was. And they were. And all they had. All that old traditional stuff.” It is clear from this exchange that we are meant to see Mum’s class-consciousness as pathetic; the play critiques the reliance on such commodities as a basis for one’s worth. The sisters comment that Mum “stacks all the wood by herself; hardly highlights her hair anymore” and that she makes “all those trips to the dump . . . for us basically,” making plain the relationship between financial status and ability to maintain an appropriate gender performance.

Yet the piece calls on a stereotypical blackness to signal “rebellion” without offering a similar critique of the relationship between femininity and whiteness. Frara, who is trying to

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102 Satter, *Seagull (Thinking of You) with Away Uniform and Family*, 120.
103 Ibid., 123.
104 Ibid., 167.
105 Ibid., 124.
distance herself from her older sister and her mother, claims she wants to stage a “beautiful gangbang” as an art project. Singing a song about it, she uses a vernacular stereotypically associated with African-Americans:

We be goin’ really fast.
We be goin’ really far.
We be goin’, we be goin’,
We be goin’ to the art fair.\(^{106}\)

Later, Frara and her friends perform a “rap mix,” using slang like “bring it,” “she don’t play,” and words like “holla.”\(^{107}\) They rap,

So like
Robots, birds, books and bikes
Ballet, jazz, hot pants and tights
Bring it all over
Bring it all here

It’s girl power
And it’s totally queer

Uh – huh
Uh - huh

Holla
Holla

Break it down nice. (ice ice)\(^{108}\)

Satter contrasts the slang-ridden hip-hop number with the trappings of a suburban girl’s upbringing (dance classes, birds, books, and bikes). It is meant to be ironic, the result comedic. But given the fact Half Straddle’s company members (and experimental theatre’s audiences) are almost all white, measuring Frara’s distinctly white upper class upbringing against a non-specific

\(^{106}\) Ibid., 140.
\(^{107}\) Ibid., 149–52.
\(^{108}\) Ibid., 151–52.
image of blackness further alienates non-white subjects by casting their experience as a stereotype to draw on and discard, without ever acknowledging the specificity of their lives.

In most of Half Straddle’s productions, the relationship between whiteness and femininity is implicit. In the first Half Straddle production, however unintentionally, this connection is made explicit in through the play’s language and narrative. In The Knockout Blow, the reference to Nunivak Island indicates that the character of Eskimo is a Yupik, a native person from Russia. Some critics deem the term “Eskimo” itself offensive, and here it is used to describe a character for which we have no other name. Even more troubling is that Satter’s depiction of the character draws on stereotypes—for instance, her skin is “so cold,” she has a pet polar bear, and she knows the “[m]agic parts of animals.” The other characters exoticize her. Byaanca describes her as coming from “a Northern Country” where “they have cold weather, they have cold hearts.” Were says, “That Eskimo. She’s kind of weird and stupid or something, but she’s kind. And I like her stories about frozen organs, and seals that sing and sparkle stars and all that other bullshit she’s always talking about.”

The narrative represents Eskimos as a people whose culture is being erased, but in fact, it is Satter that erases their specificity. Eskimo explains in song that “each day away, less people speak my tongue” and she is trying to do what the village elder said she should, to “tell our stories.” But her story, as presented in the play, is deeply problematic. Eskimo does not even get to tell it herself; it is told for her. Byaanca narrates:

In 1966 an Eskimo named Mutt returned from the lower 48 with a doll for his newborn child, a tiny little Eskimo girl named Poof. This doll looked like the land of the Eskimos

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110 Ibid., 11.
111 Ibid., 10.
112 Ibid., 20.
113 Ibid., 24.
itself, an icy tundra on which to project a hundred thousand frozen dreams. The little doll was white, furry white just like the family’s pet polar bear, Snarl . . . that Mutt kept tied up in front of their igloo. So, they weren’t the highest class of Eskimos, but Mutt had walked for days, for weeks, for months with this little white doll with tiny black eyes and a hula skirt on tucked into the back of his deer-hooked left mukluk. He placed it down in front of his tiny daughter, she blinked her own tiny black eyes, reached out a hand for the little doll with the odd pointed ears and said her first words, Hello Kitty!114

The characterization of “the land of the Eskimos” as a space “on which to project a hundred thousand frozen dreams” is at once self-conscious—Satter seems to acknowledge that her depiction of “the North country” is her own fantasy—and self-consumed—she has no qualms about claiming this region for her own narrative purposes. Satter erases the specificity of the native culture and transposes her own pop cultural interests onto the experience of a native character, presuming that little girls everywhere love and receive Hello Kitty dolls. This “little white doll” becomes a stand-in for femininity in the text. For example, when Eskimo sings, “And like everyone who walks with Hello Kitty in their hearts, which is everyone” she is arguing that we all have femininity inside of us. Hello Kitty’s actual name is Kitty White, so perhaps that is from where the reference derives, however, in the context of a story about a native character whose skin likely would be brown, the emphasis on the doll’s whiteness is disturbing.115 The sentiment that we all carry this “little white doll” in our hearts is a universalizing notion that elides very real differences and erases non-white subjects.

Whatever That Thing Is

In the OK Radio interview, Satter asks, “Why am I always more satisfied watching TV than most theatre? What are they doing? What is so wrong with [theatre] having whatever that

114 Ibid.
Indeed her work draws on many aspects of mediatized forms, taking “whatever that thing is” that makes us fall in love with television series and putting it onstage. *Nurses in New England, In the Pony Palace/FOOTBALL, and House of Dance* all remake popular television shows in the company’s “delicately campy” fashion, combining a reverence for televisual models with a utopian reimagining of the possibilities of popular culture for women and queer people. Half Straddle doesn’t just parody TV. Instead they transpose certain aspects of the source programs—often keeping intact their best qualities such as their emotionality, earnestness, and beauty—searching for “whatever that thing is” that attracts us to television series and using it, rather than ridiculing it. Half Straddle’s work invites spectators beyond the now of televisual representation, asking us to imagine what it would mean if these beloved characters and storylines were reworked into worlds more feminist and queer.

As Brett Martin points out, much of today’s television takes masculinity as its subject. Even so, masculinity onscreen is often rendered invisible, depicted as a non-performative, natural form of embodiment, usually in opposition to femininity’s very performative, constructed form of embodiment. Television shows about masculinity are not understood as being relevant only to men, however; they are considered shows for everyone. On the other hand, shows about women are often marketed to and considered exclusively interesting to a female audience. In other words, the popular media reiterates that the (white, straight) masculine experience is a neutral universal experience, while the feminine experience is “other.” By employing their neutral feminine aesthetic, Half Straddle critiques television’s presumption of a “masculine neutral.”

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*Nurses in New England* queers the tropes of television medical dramas, particularly ABC’s long-running nighttime soap opera, *Grey’s Anatomy*. It feminizes the jargon of medical dramas into a kind of girl-speak—at Putney Hill the nurses treat sick stuffed animals by giving them a “smidge of septismack,” by “pushing the Heartlight Pink,” and repairing “butterfly tears”—and the performance incorporates elements of teen girl culture throughout.\(^{117}\) For example, the nurses frequently discuss who has the best hair and sing sleep away camp songs, and one character records her thoughts in her “Oral Diary.” The audience takes great pleasure in the parody, but, as Satter does in all of her work, she offsets the humor with bittersweet earnestness. Unlike *Grey’s Anatomy*, which is largely about doctors and not nurses, Satter uses the piece to make a point about the invisibility of women’s labor, particularly in medicine. The nurses call Shepherd a “female doctor” out of respect when she operates even though she is not a doctor, and they always refer to Feathers as the “male orderly.” These labels reveal how our understanding of medical labor is deeply gendered. When Lewis encourages Shepherd to mentor Faye, a young upstart resident with dreams of being a doctor, Shepherd is resistant, reminding her, “We’re both relics of the Semantics Wars that pitted Nurse against RN, PA against Doc, etc.,” a statement that foregrounds the hierarchies of work in hospitals.\(^{118}\) *Nurses in New England* also exposes the class differences between doctors and nurses. Compared to the glamorized doctors on *Grey’s Anatomy*, Shepherd in *Nurses* admits that financially she is just “hanging on.” She drinks Coors light and cheap white wine, eats at Cracker Barrel, gets her hair cut down at the dock, and lives with her recently laid off sanitation worker brother.

*Grey’s Anatomy* has a complicated relationship to queer representation. In 2007, actor Isaiah Washington (Dr. Preston Burke) was let go from the series after its third season, despite

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\(^{118}\) Ibid., 25.
being a major character, when he reportedly used a homophobic slur to refer to his co-star T. R. Knight during an argument with Patrick Dempsey. The following year, actor Brooke Smith was abruptly fired from the show soon after her character, Dr. Erica Hahn, started a romantic relationship with Dr. Callie Torres (Sara Ramirez), a move which—although creator and producer Shonda Rhimes denied it—fans and critics speculated was due to ABC’s discomfort with the lesbian storyline.119 Since then, however, Callie has been in a serious relationship with Dr. Arizona Robbins (Jessica Capshaw) that has spanned multiple seasons.

Rhimes, “one of the most powerful show runners in the business,” is an African-American woman who believes firmly in diversifying representation on television.120 According to Indiewire.com, she features gay and lesbian storylines in her shows because I believe everyone should get to see themselves reflected on TV. EVERYONE. . . AND because I think same-sex marriage is the civil rights fight of our era and back when being a person of color was the civil rights fight, people like Norman Lear put black people on TV and helped change some minds. So you know, it's gotta be paid forward. As long as we are willing to sit by while one person is not free, none of us are free. And FINALLY: because as long as someone feels like it is okay to ask the question "why all the gay people on your shows", then there is still a HUGE problem that needs to be solved. It's like asking "Why all the black people on your shows". (Which is, in fact, why there are also a lot of people of color on my shows. Cause people keep asking. Like it's unusual. Which means we have a LONG way to go).121

Though it is a show that features out actors and numerous characters of color, and that portrays queer lives, Grey’s Anatomy, like most television shows, is in fact very limited in its depictions.

For example, all of the actors playing lesbian characters on *Grey’s Anatomy* are straight, and their characters appear appropriately feminine. Half Straddle, by presenting an all-female, homonormal worldview in *Nurses in New England*, highlights these limitations.

Satter, however, casts queer performers that display a range of gender performances in her productions. She repeatedly writes Barbagallo, a transgender actor, as the “leading man” in her plays, a move that inherently critiques pop culture’s very narrow understanding of the appropriate masculine love interest. Barbagallo’s *Nurses* character shares her name with Patrick Dempsey’s romantic lead in *Grey’s Anatomy*. (On the show, the female residents refer to Dempsey’s Dr. Shepherd as “McDreamy,” underlining his dream-guy status.) Satter uses the Dr. Derek Shepherd moniker for Barbagallo’s character in order to call attention to the construction of masculinity on medical dramas and to highlight the ways in which it is tied to the performance of heroism in the constant crisis situations at the hospital. In the production’s title song, for instance, Barbagallo as Shepherd sings:

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They call me doctor
Female doctor
The really good lines
Oh, those are mine

Oh yeah, those are mine
Oh yeah, those are mine

All the good lines
(all the very best lines)
are mine.122
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With this song, Satter acknowledges how nighttime soaps construct a romantic male lead in part by giving him “all the good lines.” Singing the number low in his register, Barbagallo

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emphasizes his own “leading man” status, shoring up his sex appeal as he critiques the limited range of masculine sexiness represented on television.

*In the Pony Palace/FOOTBALL* was inspired, in part, by Satter’s love for the television drama *Friday Night Lights*, a series about a high school football team in a small Texas town, and which ran for five seasons, first on NBC, then on Direct TV, from 2006 - 2011. Like many shows of television’s new Golden Age, *Friday Night Lights* is about masculinity and manhood, albeit an enlightened, sensitive sort embodied and encouraged by Coach Eric Taylor (Kyle Chandler). When the show first debuted on NBC in 2007, it received critical praise but poor ratings. Network executives blamed the low viewership in part on the show’s ad campaign, which emphasized football, and, they speculated, turned off potential female viewers. The network promptly changed its tact; using the tagline “It’s about life” in commercials in an attempt to capture a broader audience. Although it maintained a legion of devoted fans throughout its run, the show continued to struggle with ratings. As media scholar Jason Mittell points out, “For those people who like melodrama and teen drama, which is a more female-skewing audience, the football alienated them,” said Mittell. "For people who like football, mainly men, the melodrama alienated them.”

*In the Pony Palace/FOOTBALL* keeps the teen drama and remakes *Friday Night Lights* to be about young womanhood. Half Straddle’s fictional high school subverts traditional gender dynamics of sports and televisual representations of them. Like *Nurses in New England*, *In the Pony Palace/FOOTBALL* presents a homonormal worldview in which lesbian desire de-centers heterosexuality. Here Barbagallo, as the moody quarterback Dara, plays the teen-idol heartthrob

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123 I saw this production at the Bushwick Starr in 2011.
lead. She wears number 7, the same number as the shy, handsome hero Matt Saracen (Zach Gilford) on *Friday Night Lights*. The characters crush on one another—pairing off for sweet slow dances in a post-game party scene—queering and feminizing typical depictions of high school romances. Like *Friday Night Lights*, *In the Pony Palace/FOOTBALL* features long game sequences, inspired by real football plays, underscored by up-tempo music. These sequences were criticized as “the least realistic, most clichéd and therefore weakest part of the series,” but Half Straddle’s versions are thrilling for their energy and choreography that transform the sport into a series of slowed-down and stylized dance moves rather than displays of aggression.\textsuperscript{125}

With *In the Pony Palace/FOOTBALL*, Satter critiques and queers the “masculine” values typically valorized by high school athletics, espousing instead a doctrine of sisterhood and support. For instance, in the first football practice sequence, a live marching band blares an adaptation of a Lady Gaga song as the four members of the team walk onto the stage holding hands. Sasha (Nikki Calonge) runs downstage and calls to Dara to pass her the ball. Rather than do so, Dara runs across the field and embraces her. The other two team members join them in a giant group hug. “You know what’s even better than a hug” Coach (Glennis McMurray) gently scolds, “A completed pass.”\textsuperscript{126}

Satter thwarts audience’s real-world assumptions about gender and sports at every turn. Kayla (Julia Sirna-Frest) talks with Dara about studying books on “mental toughness in sports” under her covers in bed when she was a little girl.\textsuperscript{127} One of the most powerful lines in the play subtly recasts the typical father-son dynamic as a mother-daughter one. In the middle of a tough game, wide receiver Trace (Erin Markey), a new transfer to the Pony Palace, asks her teammates:

\textsuperscript{125} Tim Liew, “Friday Night Lights: Season 3 Review,” *Slouching towards TV*, February 5, 2013, http://slouching.tv/2013/02/05/friday-night-lights-season-3-review/.

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 39.
“Do you know how many passes I’ve returned for a touchdown? . . . How many Saturdays mom threw me a football over and over and over.”

The simple gender switch reiterates that this fictional world is woman-centric and asks audiences to see possibilities beyond normative gender roles.

In contrast, in season four of Friday Night Lights, Jess Merriweather faces sexist ridicule for her dreams of becoming a football coach. Even the usually sensitive Coach Taylor is dismissive—he tells her there has never been a female coach of a college team—before finally allowing her to work as the equipment manager for the Panthers. In Dillon, Texas, it is made clear, the only socially acceptable way for women to be close to football is through the demeaning role of “rally girl,” a young woman charged with wearing her team member’s jersey and leaving him gifts like baked goods and porno mags in his locker. At the Pony Palace, however, women are the coaches and players as well as cheerleaders. In the final scene of the performance, the cheerleaders receive awards alongside the football players and the team’s mascot.

Toward the end of the performance, after the disappointment of losing a big game, the cast sings a rousing mash-up of the Rolling Stones’s “Blue Turns to Grey” (1965) and Lady Gaga’s “Speechless” (2009) accompanied by a marching band. It is a moment that serves as an apt metaphor for the aesthetics of the performance itself. Juxtaposing a jangly break-up song by a band that is the epitome of sixties rock and roll machismo with the retro piano ballad of hyper-feminine pop star, Half Straddle presents the possibilities beyond an either/or perspective. Like the song, In the Pony Palace/FOOTBALL takes the romanticized masculinities of sports shows

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128 Ibid., 35.
and mixes it with Satter’s brand of fantasy femininities, critiquing the banal reality of gender representations on television.

*House of Dance* conjures the reality series *Dance Moms*, which is currently in its fourth season on the cable network Lifetime. The show follows dancers aged 7 through 14 who are training with the difficult and demanding choreographer Abby Lee Miller. The girls rehearse daily in their Pittsburg, PA studio and travel the country to dance competitions chasing the dream of a national title. The show’s considerable drama is generated by Miss Abby’s arguably abusive relationships with her young dancers, the competition fostered between the team members, the oftentimes-inappropriate choreography the girls are asked to perform, and the infighting between the titular moms who accompany the girls to rehearsals and performances.

*Dance Moms* has received a fair amount of criticism for what could be seen as its exploitation of its young stars, but in 2012, an episode called “Topless Showgirls,” generated a firestorm of controversy regarding the sexualization of the dancers. In the episode, the girls perform a burlesque-style fan dance in which they wear bodysuits that Miss Abby hopes “give the illusion” of nudity. Instructing them on the choreography, Miss Abby urges the girls to convey a message of, “I’m hot, I’m mean, you can’t have me, you can’t afford me!” and tells them to emphasize “crotch, boobs, crotch, boobs!” When the Dance Moms and the girls express discomfort with the costumes and the sexualized moves, Miss Abby insists that the routine is “harmless.” After the Internet uproar, Lifetime eventually pulled the episode from its on air rotation, as well as from iTunes, Amazon, and MyLifetime.com.129

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Once again Satter’s theatrical reimagining shows us the shortcomings of TV’s representations of gender roles. Like that of many reality shows, the cast of Dance Moms is comprised almost entirely of women. And, as is so often the case with shows of this genre, the women are depicted in a negative light: machinating, gossiping, and backstabbing. Rather than reiterate tired tropes of women fighting against women, and thwarting expectations that dance lessons are for girls, Satter centers her piece on the relationships between three men.

Costumes play an important role in House of Dance, but as a potential tool for liberation and self-expression, rather than as an agent of repressive reinforcement of gender roles. Lee is in crisis about what they should wear for the audition, anxiety which represents their struggle to embody their true gender identity. Martle suggests a “Maiden’s Harbingers Belt,” the name of which conjures restricting, feminine garments, hinting at the women’s underwear brand “maidenform” and the image of a chastity belt. As a “harbinger,” it is also a sign of something to come. In a move symbolizing the rejection of a restrictive femininity and embracing a not-yet-realized identity, Lee refuses to wear it. “I don’t want to wear this belt,” they shout at Martle, “I want to wear what you would wear.”¹³⁰ Martle provides a complicated model for Lee’s masculinity. He wears a gold necklace, pinky ring and a blue sleeveless shirt with pink and purple fringe that has his name emblazoned on the back in gold letters. He wears an obvious hairpiece, which Brendan tells him “looks fucking awesome.”¹³¹ Martle uses girlie text speak, for example saying “brb” for “be right back.”¹³² Brendan tells Lee, “You’re not the only one who needs a costume you know,” explaining that she is looking for her “pale pink onesie—that I wore

¹³¹ Ibid., 12.
¹³² Ibid., 14.
when I was awesome.” For Brendan, finding the onesie—which she eventually does inside a pillow in the studio—means recapturing her confidence in herself. Rather than prescribe routines like Miss Abby does, Martle encourages Lee “to find their narrative” through their dance.

So much more than parody, Half Straddle’s feminized, queer representations of small-town life, framed within the context of experimental performance, bring into sharp focus what is lacking in popular culture representations. Even a well-written and moving television text like *Friday Night Lights*, in trying for a kind of “authenticity,” misses the beauty of possibility beyond what is “real life.” A show like *Grey’s Anatomy*, despite its prominent lesbian storyline, conforms to conventional understandings of gender. Half Straddle’s work is utopian because it embodies performances of alternative pop cultural possibilities—because they present worlds familiar but also far away, not yet realized. In the awards ceremony sequence at the end of *In the Pony Palace/FOOTBALL* Coach tells the women, “This can be all yours for the taking. Just depends how bad you want it.” Satter looks at the fictional worlds of the television shows we love and hate (or love to hate) and sees them all as for the taking and for the transforming into something feminist and queer, funny and poignant.

**Conclusion: Performing Possibility**

Experimental theatre in New York City has always had a male bias. Jill Dolan notes that “despite their aesthetic radicalism, the American post-modernists have for the most part . . . left intact the gender dichotomies of the cultural status quo maintained by traditional theatre.”

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133 Ibid., 14, 21.  
Charlotte Canning points out that in the 1970s and 80s, many women left celebrated experimental groups like Open Theatre, San Francisco Mime Troupe, and Bread and Puppet Theatre to form their own companies, when conflicts over the groups’ gender politics became too much to bear.\textsuperscript{137} When James Harding argues that women’s success in the avant-garde requires “the erasure of women ‘as women,’”\textsuperscript{138} I read that to mean that experimental theatre has historically encouraged an erasure of explicit femininity in its texts.

In fact, Satter claims that she didn’t “need to activate a feminist defensiveness” until she started making theatre.\textsuperscript{139} Making performances with a feminine form and aesthetic, telling small stories of queer comings of age, Satter challenges New York City’s historically masculine experimental theatre scene and provides a much-needed alternative perspective. In the context of the postfeminist new millennium, the staging of Satter’s “pop influenced \textit{écriture féminine}” in the experimental theatre scene in New York City is a radical act.

Half Straddle demands that femininity be taken seriously as subject matter for experimental performance and argues that the work is not niche. In her OK Radio interview, Satter critiques the notion Half Straddle is “just this girl theatre,” that her plays are “just about teenage adolescence.”\textsuperscript{140} Comparing her plays to a fanzine, a do-it-yourself publication considered “one of the most important third-wave feminist outlets and forms of expression,”\textsuperscript{141} she explains that, “In one part of me that feels really special and cool. But I feel like you want other people to read the fanzine and realize there’s cool stuff happening in it.”\textsuperscript{142} Her work

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\textsuperscript{137} Canning, \textit{Feminist Theatres in the USA}.
\textsuperscript{138} Harding, \textit{Cutting Performances}, 5.
\textsuperscript{139} Hammons, Unpublished interview with Tina Satter.
\textsuperscript{140} Liska and Copper, \textit{OK Radio Podcast}.
\textsuperscript{141} Heywood, \textit{The Women’s Movement Today}, 1:374.
\textsuperscript{142} Liska and Copper, \textit{OK Radio Podcast}.
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warrants a wider audience because of, rather than despite, its subject matter. Everyone has something to learn from the queer, feminine, feminist values the work encourages.

People are realizing “cool stuff” is happening in Half Straddle’s girlie performances. Since their inception, the company has been well regarded by bloggers and alternative press outlets, but recently, they have received mainstream attention as well. From the start, their productions have been staged in well-respected, curated venues in New York City, such as the Bushwick Starr, which is host to some of the city’s best emerging experimental work. They have participated in the Ice Factory Festival, the Other Forces festival at the Ontological-Hysteric, the COIL Festival at PS 122. They have been vetted by NYC’s institutional avant-garde as well; they were granted a Project Development residency at the Performing Garage as part of Wooster Group’s visiting artist program and completed an eight-month residency at the Kitchen in January of 2015. They were awarded an Obie Award in 2013, a MAP Fund Grant in 2014, and Satter received a Doris Duke impact award that same year. In the Pony Palace/FOOTBALL, Away Uniform, and Seagull (Thinking of You) and House of Dance, have toured internationally

In her essay “The End of Sexual Difference,” Judith Butler predicts that “the future symbolic will be one in which femininity has multiple possibilities.” Then she goes on to say, “Butch desire may, as some say, be experienced as part of ‘women’s desire,’ but it can also be

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145 Butler, Undoing Gender, 197.
experienced, that is, named and interpreted, as a kind of masculinity, one that is not to be found in men . . . why shy away from the fact that there may be ways that masculinity emerges in women, and that feminine and masculine do not belong to differently sexed bodies?"146 Ultimately the goal of post-wave pop feminism is to argue that there is and should be masculine and feminine in all of us, that there are a multiplicity of genders and gender expressions all of which should be embraced. It is an important strategic move to claim butch desire as feminine, to claim certain masculinities as feminine, as Half Straddle does, in order to investigate and eradicate the biases against femininity to which our culture clings.

As Serano points out, “No form of gender equity can ever truly be achieved until we first work to empower femininity itself.”147 Half Straddle’s work argues for the femininity in all of us, and demonstrates that we all have something to learn “growing backward” into girlhood and revitalizing girlieness. Satter is not reiterating sexual difference, but expanding the definition of “femininity,” empowering it to encompass female masculinities, trans masculinities, and queerness of all kinds. As Satter puts it, her work is “about Possibility and beyond what is the usually visible.”148 Making visible a queer feminist femininity throughout her work, Satter manifests the multiple possibilities of post-wave pop feminism.

146 Ibid., 198.
147 Serano, Whipping Girl, 6.
Bad Feminism, Bad Form, and Bad Feelings: Dynasty Handbag’s Spectacular Failures

I embrace the label of bad feminist because I am human. I am messy. I’m not trying to be an example. I am not trying to be perfect.

--- Roxane Gay, Bad Feminist

Introduction

Jibz Cameron’s first performance as the quirky clown character Dynasty Handbag (DH) took place at Ladyfest 2002, a feminist music and arts festival in San Francisco. Accompanied by an experimental soundtrack of wood block and squeaky saxophone, she performs a poem about wanting to have sex with a policeman and fireman. Shouting instructions about what the men should leave on (the policeman’s hat and the fireman’s vest) and what to take off (the policeman’s coat and, oddly, the fireman’s truck), she puts particular emphasis on the phallic appeal of the fireman’s hose and the policeman’s bat. “The scene of the crime,” she sing/screams, “is the fiery hole!” Her choreography—performed between lines of the poem—is robotic; her lanky arms and legs making herky-jerky movements as she backs away from the microphone. It is difficult to tell from the poor quality of the video documenting this performance, but DH appears to be sporting her thrift store bests—a strapless ruched gold gown that features a large bow in back, and a gaudy purse she has slung diagonally across her body. Although it seems she lacks the messy make-up that will become a signature part of DH’s aesthetic, Cameron’s brown hair is teased into a helmet around her gaunt face.

The performance calls to mind Karen Finley’s early musical work—the declamatory delivery, the explicit sexual content, and the rhythmic backing track are reminiscent of the songs on such albums as The Truth Is Hard to Swallow (1988). But suddenly, about a minute into the song, Cameron’s self-serious performance art routine is interrupted by a recording of her own voice. “Jibz, this is God,” the voice says, before admitting, “It’s not God, it’s your conscience. I
just wanted to know, are you doing everything you want to in life?” Cameron stammers a response, giving excuses for why she hasn’t yet achieved her dreams of fame and fortune. Speaking in a saccharine Midwestern accent, the voice continues, “Are you depressed?” Cameron rolls her eyes but admits that she yes, she sometimes feels depressed, even though (as the voice is quick to remind her), she doesn’t like to use that word.

Cameron creates theatrical worlds through which Dynasty Handbag must struggle to survive, if not succeed, using pre-recorded audio clips (which she sometimes runs herself from a laptop onstage) and projections, usually cartoonish slides or found photographs—complete with the tell-tale watermarks of stock photos. The media sometimes gives voice and body to the wacky characters DH encounters, but most often, it represents the voices in her head that comfort, control, or criticize her. In the Ladyfest performance, the voice highlights Cameron’s failure to properly perform the role of the hyper-sexual, earnest, and angry feminist solo performance artist. It ties her failure to her inability to overcome her depression and sends Cameron into a spiral of self-doubt about her status as an artist.

Dynasty Handbag’s aesthetic was born, appropriately, out of the failure of Cameron’s marriage. She tells Dossier Journal, “the first show I did was called Miami Divorce Funeral Vacation, or something like that. It was sort of a retired divorcé, bitter, that kind of thing. . . . I was sort of making fun of myself because I was there, like 26, and divorced.” Since then, Dynasty Handbag has exposed other failures in hour-long one-woman shows such as Escape From The Family Home (2009), VERTititGO (2010), Brothers and Sisters and Motherfuckers

(2010), Eternal Quadrangle (2011), Soggy Glasses, a Homo's Odyssey (2014), and Good Morning Evening Feelings (2015), as well as in shorter pieces like Hell in a Handbag (2006), Deep Feelings (2007), Bags (2008), Remote Penetration (2013), and I Never Were Again, A Concert (2015). The failures Cameron depicts include DH’s inability to live up to expectations of femininity, of form, and of feminism. Dynasty Handbag refuses to be bound by the strictures of appropriate gender. Cameron’s performances as DH defy genre—she calls on the solo performance tradition and updates it with a very millennial use of media. Always on display is DH’s failure to function “normally” in everyday circumstances, which Cameron often reveals to be deeply (and disturbingly) gendered. Cameron uses DH to foreground the silence around psychiatric disabilities like depression and anxiety, and to critique a culture that often sees such disabilities as their own kinds of failure.

In this chapter, I show how Cameron mobilizes these failures toward a post-wave pop feminist end. The chapter features three sections, each of which explores a different facet of Dynasty Handbag’s failure. The first section extends José Esteban Muñoz and J. Jack Halberstam’s theorizations of queer failure to feminism. Cameron identifies as a lesbian and her failure is, as Muñoz argues, most certainly a “queer failure.” But hers is also a feminist failure that highlights the impossibility of perfect feminism at the same time as it asks us to strive for it. The second section looks at Cameron’s “genre trouble”—how she uses a confusion of forms to demonstrate, in post-wave fashion, her indebtedness to artists of other generations. In the final section, I closely examine four performances for the ways they parody popular culture and mark the failure of today’s television shows to adequately account for the complexities of the lives of women and queer people.

The character of Dynasty Handbag may be a mess, but Cameron herself is a trained virtuosic performer with both theatre and art-world chops. She attended art school at the San Francisco Art Institute and completed two years of training at the American Conservatory Theatre. Far from a failure, in her East Coast debut performance as DH in 2005, Cameron won the Miss Lez pageant, a queer beauty pageant presided over by downtown drag king Murray Hill. She interned for acclaimed experimental ensemble, the Wooster Group, which led to Kate Valk mentoring Cameron’s first full-length performance, VertititGo, presented in Dixon Place’s Hot Festival in 2010. Valk invited Cameron to audition for Wooster’s shows, and in 2012 she was cast in Troilus & Cressida, their collaboration with the Royal Shakespeare Company. She starred as CIA Agent Steph in Seasons Two and Three of Dyke Division’s Room for Cream (in which Valk makes a cameo appearance as her mother), and she is featured in a number of successful web series.

Getting an “F” in Feminism

Dynasty Handbag is characterized by grotesque excess; she is the embodiment of failed femininity. Her face is plastered with poorly-applied makeup: foundation that doesn’t match her skin tone stops an inch shy of her hairline and just below her chin, smudged eye liner rings her eyes raccoon-style, metallic blue eye shadow covers her eyelids up to heavily-penciled brows, bright lipstick sloppily coats her lips. Her outfits are an outrageous 1980s-inspired hodge-podge of thrift store finds: a turquoise tourist tee shirt sliced into fringes over a pair of partially buttoned red short-shorts and a sun visor; a brightly patterned leotard covered by baggy wind pants; tight leopard print pants paired with a shoulder-padded silk blouse. She is inappropriate,

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4 Cameron quit before the show, re-titled Cry, Trojans, toured the U.S.
often sporting her underwear over her clothes instead of under it. Handbag’s grotesque appearance points to femininity as process, and her over-doing emphasizes the effort it takes to strive for impossible feminine standards of beauty. Analyzing Dynasty Handbag’s off-kilter fashion sense for the New York Times’s T Magazine blog, Cameron explains: “Such is the sad tale for so many of us who try and try, but the conventions of men just do not come so easily.” DH’s failure to properly execute the “conventions of men” allows her audiences to view and critique them as conventions.

Through DH’s in-process excess, Cameron flouts both participation in a system that values women based on their attractiveness and facility with such conventions. In this way, her failure is a feminist act. As Halberstam points out, “From the perspective of feminism, failure has always been a better bet than success. Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relived of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures.” For audiences, DH’s failed femininity offers the pleasure of possibilities outside of restrictive gender roles. It also might be viewed as a specifically queer or lesbian failure. Muñoz argues that queer failure, “rejects normative ideas of value” and Halberstam notes that the lesbian “is irrevocably tied to failure in all kinds of ways.” Cameron’s performances highlight her lesbian identity, and through the Dynasty Handbag character, audiences witness a queer woman caught in the act of trying—and failing—to achieve normative heteronormative womanhood.

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The feminism of Cameron’s performances also derives from Dynasty Handbag’s refusal to behave as a “normal” woman. Mary Russo begins her book *The Female Grotesque* with a critique of the “normalization” of feminism in the 1990s, what she deems “a cultural and political disarticulation of feminism from the strange, the risky, the minoritarian, the excessive, the outlawed, and the alien.” She believes that the “normalizing strategy” which helped to make feminism mainstream “concedes much to the misogyny which permeates the fear of ‘losing one’s femininity,’ ‘making a spectacle of oneself,’ ‘alienating men’ (meaning powerful men) or otherwise making ‘errors.’” She concludes, “Most importantly, it leaves uninterrogated the very terms and processes of normalcy.”

I disagree with Russo’s unsupported generalization about 90s feminism. As I argue throughout, the Third Wave feminism of the 1990s contributed many important concepts to contemporary feminist discourse. Still, her thoughts on the power of the strange, of making mistakes, and of making a spectacle of oneself are useful for understanding the feminist ethos embodied in Cameron’s performances as Dynasty Handbag. Almost ten years later, Halberstam makes a case for pop star Lady Gaga as “a symbol for a new kind of feminism” one that he writes “find[s] inspiration in the silly and the marginal, the childish and the outlandish.” Dynasty Handbag, a character who is spectacular, strange, silly, and outlandish, might be seen as embodying this kind of “gaga feminism.”

Dynasty Handbag endlessly struggles to respond “normally” in situations ranging from the everyday to the bizarre, and her mistakes and her strangeness interrogate the very processes of normalcy. An example of this is the short film Cameron made with Hedia Maron, *The Quiet Storm* (2007), in which a chance meeting with a friend sends DH into an existential crisis. Her

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9 Ibid., 12.
10 Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism*, xii, xxv.
friend describes doing “all kinds of normal stuff” with her life: she tells DH that among other things, she recently had a baby, went on vacation, quit her job, got married, started a new business, had her cat put to sleep, built a darkroom in her apartment, stopped eating wheat, got cable, and learned how to knit. DH responds only by making bizarre faces. As she walks away, we hear the voice in DH’s head disparage her for not doing anything fun or interesting in her own life. Ordering a sandwich, DH complains to the deli worker, “Like I’m really different from the rest of the world and I can’t have a normal conversation to save my life . . . and also when I do talk, my brain says, ‘Don’t say that.’” When the sandwich order turns out wrong, the voice in her head once again chastises her, urging her to just throw in the towel. The friend’s litany of “normal” activities—many of which are distinctly gendered female—foregrounds the absurdity of demands placed on women to “have it all.” The film critiques the value of the lifestyle choices that supposedly equal success and lead to happiness. Seeing and hearing DH’s “abnormal” responses reassures spectators that we are not alone in our inadequacies as we fail to achieve absurd standards.

*Bags*, a 20-minute live performance piece in which Dynasty Handbag interacts with a series of plastic and paper bags strewn about the stage, literalizes the sexual demands on women and shows how DH tries desperately but fails to meet them. The bags—speaking in pre-recorded voice-overs performed by Cameron herself—cat-call DH, asking her to “touch me soft,” “hold me,” and “go inside.” DH looks uncertain but obeys the requests, gently cradling, caressing, and eventually penetrating the bags. As the performance progresses, the bags get more demanding and dependent. A trash bag yells at her to ”put that shit down and come!” and she

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11 All quotations are transcribed from the video, which is available online at: https://vimeo.com/8267984.

12 Cameron has performed this piece a various venues throughout the country. I saw it live in Austin, TX in 2008. A video is available online at http://www.dynastyhandbag.com/bags.html.
must comfort a weeping bag that begs, “Don’t leave me!” Eventually one of the bags persuades DH to dance for it—“I just want to watch you dance,” it says suggestively—offering images that DH must interpret physically. “Reach out from your soul to me,” it tells her, “Oh yeah, you’re beautiful, you’re a rainbow, you’re a cloud, you’re a pony.” As the bag’s requests come more quickly they become increasingly difficult to execute. The bag tells her, “[Y]ou’re a butterfly, you’re a magic carpet ride, you’re a soft, soft thing, you’re a tiger in the woods, you’re a turnip, you’re a toy, funny toy, you’re a toilet.” There is a sexual overtone to their dynamic; the bag serves a voyeur as DH contorts her lanky body to perform the stream of consciousness demands, which she tries and fails to do well. The humorous but grotesque dance that results signifies society’s expectation that women will constantly transform themselves in order to satisfy the sexual demands of men. The bag’s final request is that DH pretend to be “Mick Jagger with a dagger,” and DH preens herself with a plastic knife as an instrumental rendition of The Rolling Stones’ “Gimme Shelter” plays in the background. The song—the chorus of which is “Rape, murder!/ It’s just a shot away,” is a chilling reminder of threat that often underlies the sort of street harassment the bags inflict on DH. Cameron performs a dark and distorted parody of Jagger’s signature dance moves—highlighting her failure to be the icon of masculinity. She struts around the stage and flaps her arms until she finally turns the knife she is holding on herself. Pretending there is someone chasing her with the knife thrusting at her back, DH runs screaming around the stage until finally she dramatically stabs herself in the stomach and the music warps and halts. The ending of this sequence recalls images of women being violently murdered in horror films, and ties such spectacularized violence to the sexual manipulation depicted earlier in the piece.
In her performances as well as in her promotional materials, Cameron makes visible Dynasty Handbag’s struggles with depression. In doing so, she critiques the notion that depression is a (particularly female) failure. On Cameron’s website, you find your way to her press clippings through a link titled “DEPRESSION.” Soggy Glasses: A Homo’s Odyssey, which she performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Next Wave Festival in 2014 and in the American Realness Festival at Abrons Art Center in 2015, features a “jazzy lounge ballad” called “Depression.” The show, which queers and feminizes the “hero’s journey,” depicts DH on a quest to accept herself bodily and mentally, challenging what society might see as her physical and psychological shortcomings. Dynasty Handbag starts the show saying, “It was really hard getting here tonight. I had a lot of problems . . . And can I just say, anyone who made it out of the house, you are my hero.” Later in the show, she sings:

I don't feel so good  
I feel not so good  
In fact ladies and gentlemen I have a confession  
I hate to use this word  
It’s overused and trite  
But I think it might be true  
That I have . . . depression  
I'm not sayin’ I got the bluuuuuuuuues  
I’m not talking about the sads  
I’m saying that I have lost my interest in life completely unable to find joy in anything  
no motivation to go outside to see friends to make art to walk the doggie or ride my bicycle or cook healthy meals for myself all I have is an impending sense of doom a heavy cloud of void that is crushing me onto the couch into useless hours of sleeping, like I am watching myself from above seeing a person I do not recognize moving through space and time but I am not connected to at all . . . I am drowning in a flood of emotionssssss.

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13 I saw the BAM production on October 17, 2014. Cameron provided me with a script of the final version of the show.  
15 Ibid., 2.  
16 Ibid., 5.
DH frames her revelation of her depression as a “confession” to call attention to the ways society shames people into silence about these sorts of mental health struggles. Her specific disavowal of “the blues” and “the sads” highlights the ways that depression—particularly women’s depression—is often minimized, and the long-winded ending of the song embodies just how overwhelming the illness can be.

In an interview with Michael Musto, Cameron asserts that her performances have “a feminist message.” But in many ways Dynasty Handbag shows herself to be a “bad feminist.” Depicting DH’s failure to be a perfect feminist is a post-wave feminist strategy; Cameron’s performances point to the impossibility of the infallible feminist. They question the ability of (and the desire for) feminism itself to ever fully accomplish its goals, and, in this way, the performances point to feminism as an on-going process rather than a single-issue stance.

Born of a Third Wave ethos of embracing contradiction and a “choice” feminist refusal to judge another woman’s feminism, the identity of “bad feminist” is a particularly contemporary one. Cultural critic Roxane Gay writes, in her collection of essays entitled Bad Feminist:

I embrace the label of bad feminist because I am human. I am messy. I’m not trying to be an example. I am not trying to be perfect. I am not trying to say I have all the answers. I am not trying to say I’m right. I am just trying — trying to support what I believe in, trying to do some good in this world . . . a woman who loves pink and likes to get freaky and sometimes dances her ass off to music she knows, she knows, is terrible for women and who sometimes plays dumb with repairmen because it’s just easier to let them feel macho than it is to stand on the high moral ground. . . . I am a bad feminist because I never want to be placed on a Feminist Pedestal. People who are placed on pedestals are expected to pose, perfectly. They get knocked off when they fuck it up. I regularly fuck it up. Consider me already knocked off.

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Admitting her feminist failures, stating that she doesn't have all the answers, Gay doesn’t let herself off the hook, but instead invites dialogue and advocates for a multi-vocal feminism. She writes that she knows feminism “cannot fix everything;” showing what feminism can’t fix implies that to succeed it must become a more intersectional movement.  

*Good Morning Evening Feelings*, Cameron’s take on television talk shows presented at the Kitchen in 2015, exemplifies DH’s own grappling with being a politically imperfect and contradictory “bad feminist.” In a segment called “Flaming Headlines,” Cameron ridicules the “Hot Topics” segments on the women’s talk shows like The View and the Wendy Williams Show and former late night talk show host Jay Leno’s “Funny Headlines” bit. DH hails the audience as specifically female saying, “This is the point in the show when we come together as people—as people, as women—as womanish people—and talk about today’s hot button topics,” as she peruses a newspaper. The “disembodied monster-ish voice of SHAME” interrupts her reading, relentlessly critiquing her lack of knowledge about politics and the economy, deriding her for her celebrity obsession. Finally the voice delivers a judgmental monologue, telling DH:

> [Y]ou are made up entirely of contradictions and bad behavior. You are an obnoxious vegetarian and yet you eat eggs sometimes. Sometimes you’re in a restaurant and you don’t ask is it organic, who were these chickens, etc. You’re also a lesbian who has slept with more men than women—a lot more! And you’re a liar and you’re a cheater and you stole brassieres from Nordstroms and you come from a dysfunctional family full of alcoholics, and crazy people, wife stealers, coke heads, oil prospectors, statutory rapists, Hari Krishnas, Muslims, Born-agains, you wet the bed ‘til you were twelve, you’re gassy, you’re wrinkly . . .

SHAME suddenly breaks into a jazzy number, singing, “What I’m trying to say is: Kid, you’ve got a lot to be ashamed of, today! You’ve got a lot to be ashamed of, yesterday! You’ve got a lot

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19 Ibid., xii.
20 Jibz Cameron, “Good Morning, Evening Feelings” (Unpublished manuscript, n.d.), 17.
21 Ibid.
to be ashamed of forever and ever and ever and ever.”

She continues, “Today is the day to feel bad, tomorrow is the day to feel worse,” as DH convulses in time with the music and collapses, covering her face with the newspaper and curling up into the fetal position downstage. Just when we think DH is has been defeated by SHAME, however, she stands up and sings, “I’ve got something to say to you voices in my head,” before taking a deep breath and screaming “Soooooooooo what!!!”

Dynasty Handbag’s defiance resonates with the kind of “bad” feminism about which Gay writes. DH knows that she is imperfect, that she “fucks it up.” Rather than pretend she doesn't, like Gay, DH asks why it matters. Cameron depicts DH’s political shortcomings to demonstrate we are all full of contradictions. Speaking to her audience as women specifically, she shows that we are all only getting it partially right—and, she seems to say, that is okay. DH fosters community-feeling by sharing her failures. We see DH—always imperfect, but nonetheless trying, and, as she strives to be better, and so can we. Successful feminism is a never-ending process.

Modeling both failure and this kind of intersectional project, Cameron often raises the specter of her own whiteness and privilege in her performances. In an Artforum article about her exhibition at the Portland Museum of Modern Art in Oregon, for example, she points out how DH’s clothing choices might be linked to colonialism and racism. “I have one outfit that’s a disgusting collage of just animal prints. I like thinking about the significations of animal print culturally; images of tourism and the invention of the long airplane ride to another country, colonialism, the jungle, sexualizing so-called savages—deep, weird racism.”

When DH tries to reason with a giant cartoon bird that attacks her outside her cabin at the artist colon-y in Soggy

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22 Transcribed from the video.
23 Cameron, “Good Morning, Evening Feelings,” 17.
Glasses, the Narrator remarks, “Who is she to think the bird speaks her language? What privilege.” Such considerations of intersectionality are examples of how Cameron demonstrates feminism’s need to be more than a movement solely invested in gender oppression.

**Failures of Form**

Failure is a popular aesthetic in contemporary experimental theatre, less as subject matter and more as a structuring framework that guides certain companies’ creation process and their style of performance. In her book *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, Sara Jane Bailes argues that Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, and Elevator Repair Service create an aesthetic of failure, setting up impossible tasks for themselves, showing their work as a failure to be the thing it is trying to represent, and using purposefully unconvincing or “bad” acting styles. In doing this, she contends, the companies’ work challenges capitalism, “undermin[ing] the perceived stability of mainstream capitalist ideology’s preferred aspiration to achieve, succeed, or win.”

She sees the performance of failure as a utopian project, calling it “inclusive” and contending that because failure “counter[s] the authority of a singular or ‘correct’ outcome,” it “indexes an alternative route or way of doing or making” and “offers new conceptions of virtuosity and mastery.” The companies she analyzes, however, are actually enormously successful—particularly for experimental artists. Despite playing with the poetics of failure, they produce works that have a glossy sheen of professionalism.

Similarly, Cameron’s performances are not actual failures, though she does allow her work to be sloppy. She breaks character, falls out of sync with her pre-recorded audio and video tracks, and leaves room for improvisation in her shows, which gives them an air of

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25 Ibid., 13.
unpredictability. And similarly, there is a utopian spirit to Cameron’s performances as Dynasty Handbag—she is free from the restrictions of making “good” theatre. But Cameron’s shows are often about the fear of failing as an artist; she embodies the struggle of art-making, and foregrounds the ridiculousness of the curatorial process, exposing the often-precarious material conditions for queer and feminist performers working today.

By poking fun at her own lack of fame in her mockumentary film *A Dream is Not a Life* (2013), for instance, she calls into question the meaning of success in performance art. In *Good Morning, Evening Feelings*, performed at the Kitchen—a world-renowned venue for experimental art—she mentions in an aside that she’s been begging for a show there for the past ten years. The title of the retrospective of DH costumes at the Portland Museum of Modern Art is “Simply the Worst.”26 She traffics in imaginary fame and fortune, her feigned stardom allowing her to critique celebrity culture. *I Never Were Again, A Concert*, presented at Gibney Dance in 2015, was advertised as: “Dynasty Handbag returns to NYC with a new retrospective of her golden oldies, which were never recorded or released, by people she never was; the concert of an imaginary lifetime—unplugged, unhinged, and uncomfortable.” During the show, she references how expensive the performance space looks, noting how out of place she is performing there.

DH’s fear of artistic failure comes to the fore in *Soggy Glasses: A Homo’s Odyssey*. Originally commissioned by Franklin Furnace and supported by residencies at Yaddo and The MacDowell Colony, the piece metaphorically engages Cameron’s failure to correctly use those prestigious residencies to create a successful performance. On her website, she describes the piece as: “[u]sing Homer’s *Odyssey* as both dramaturgical framework and toilet paper”27 and part

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26 Davis, “Jibz Cameron Talks about Her New One-Woman Show and TV Pilot.”
of it takes place at an “artist colon-y”—where, like the bowels the hyphenated name references, all she can produce is shit. DH brainstorms, coming up with an idea to write a “Homonymyth”—a queering of the “monomyth”—in which the heroine travels in a giant foam sandwich boat through a vagina to try and find herself. The voices in DH’s head quickly critique her subject matter as self-indulgent. “The self, the self, right, another performance piece about the self,” she chides. “I mean, that's all I know about right so fuck it who can blame me. But how do I get there, how do I start? . . . I haven't a son, I haven't any real things exactly, no credit, no MFA, oh god I am a failure, shit here we go again.”

At the “artist colon-y,” DH is tormented by a snake who insists, “You're here to make something incredible, but no presssssssssssure.” Alone in her cabin, again she spirals into self-doubt:

I never have any good ideas anyway, my shit sucks, I have wasted too much time! Too much time doing nothing. I shoulda gone to college earlier, wasn’t such a slut when I was younger, helped people more, went to more marches! Saw more French movies, didn't date that person or that person or that person . . . OK enough, time to focus on masterpiece.

The masterpiece (of shit?) she makes is, of course, the show that we are seeing. We witness its successful staging as we simultaneously hear DH’s intensive fears about its failure.

Cameron frequently foregrounds her work’s confusion of form—her work’s failure to fit into fixed categories. The work is not highbrow enough, for example, to make her a proper performance artist (though she often presents at museums and gallery spaces). In Good Morning Evening Feelings, DH says she “curated” the guests that appear on her talk show, noting that she wants to use the art world’s language. But, she continues, “I hope no one was thinking they were

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29 Ibid., 9.
30 Ibid., 10.
going to see art. Are there art people here? Because I’ve changed—it’s all about entertainment." At the same time, her work is too much performance art to really be considered theatre. It is not stand-up comedy (though the shows are very funny), nor musical (though they often involve DH’s off-key belting), nor dance (though physicality is important to them.)

Cameron’s genre trouble might also be seen in the ways her performances straddle generational divides. Her work reaches back through time, referencing 1970s body art, the identity politics of 1980s performance, the multiple-character documentary theatre that dominated the 1990s, and, in this way, it embodies the ethos of post-wave politics. But even as she harkens back to the heyday of solo performance art, Cameron highlights her own failure to execute the genre properly, as we see in the Ladyfest performance that I describe in the opening of this chapter.

Cameron draws on her autobiography in creating her work, participating in a legacy of solo performance art, in which, Jayne Wark writes, women “sought to redress” an “absence of presence . . . through autobiography a narrative—not just through content, but also by foregrounding the presence of the artist as producer of the work.” Referencing the Second Wave adage that “the personal is the political,” Cameron explains, “When I write for DH, the inspiration usually comes from a reaction to a feeling, either personal or political (which it turns out are often the same).” The material may be deeply personal—it deals with her Cameron’s own inner demons, her complicated childhood, her insecurities, her depression, and her anxiety—but by filtering her narratives through the fictional character of Dynasty Handbag,

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31 Transcribed from the video.
33 Cameron and Maron, “The Dynasty Handbag Show by Jibz Cameron & Hedia Maron.”
Cameron troubles the illusion of authenticity so integral to solo autobiographical performance art.

Like Dyke Division and Half Straddle, Cameron makes meta-theatrical reference to her indebtedness to lesbian feminist performance history. *Soggy Glasses* starts with projections of “a montage of ‘monomythic journeys’” while Martha Wilson, a feminist video artist and founder of the Franklin Furnace, an organization that has supported avant-garde art since the 1970s, calls on Cameron to create a great work of art. Casting one of her funders as a character in the work, Cameron calls attention to the material realities of art-making. Wilson is, of course, a mentor, someone who offered Cameron an opportunity to present her work, but she is also someone to whom Cameron feels responsible, someone whose artistic expectations she must fulfill.

Later in the performance, as DH encounters an obstacle on her homo’s odyssey, performance artist and activist Yoko Ono appears to help her, declaring (quoting from Chaka Khan’s 1978 hit), “I’m every woman. It’s all in me.” Taking her statement literally, Dynasty Handbag proceeds to find out, just how inclusive Ono’s concept of “every” woman is:

DH Are you Lily Tomlin?

YOKO ONO Yes.

DH Are you Angela Davis?

YOKO ONO Yesss.

DH Are you Viola Davis?

YOKO ONO Yes

DH Are you Geena Davis?

YOKO ONO Yes

DH Are you Mavis Staples?
YOKO ONO Yes. I am also Poly Styrene, Audre Lorde, Emma Goldman, Sandra Bernhard, Valerie Solanas, Gilda Radner, Tina Fey, Laurie Anderson, Sheila E.

DH Are you Madonna?

YOKO ONO No.

Here, Cameron hails a number of important women artists from across time, implying that they are influences on her own work and situating herself in a lineage with them. Dynasty Handbag may perform her failure to be the solo performance artist of previous generations, but she shows that she is indebted to them. That Cameron has Ono reject Madonna is significant; Cameron sees Madonna as inspiration for parody, not praise. Later in this chapter, I analyze Cameron’s scathing critique of Madonna in *Good Morning Evening Feelings*.

*Soggy Glasses* also acts a commentary on the solo performance “body art” of the 1970s and 80s, updating the form for a millennial sensibility. Like much of that work, *Soggy Glasses* is a celebration of the female body, but in a parodic way. As the performance progresses, we realize that DH is journeying through her own body—which is depicted as a map on a large screen upstage. Though at first she believes she should head to the brain, she eventually comes to realize that the journey is about process—the point is that she gets her to know and accept her body, not that she actually gets anywhere inside of it. DH’s alienation from her body is emphasized when she encounters a cartoon Cyclops who tasks her with naming at least one of the three passageways in her vagina. As DH struggles, stammering “Um okay . . . fallopians, pussy, snatch, ejaculation, glory hole, fuck. G-spot? Cunt licker?,” it becomes clear how little she

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34 Cameron drew the cartoons for the production and Meriem Bennani animated them.
knows about her own anatomy. More than that, she hates her body. At the start of the piece she laments:

Each day I look in the mirror and I say to myself, “you are a piece of shit!” which is really helpful because then I can just get through the day with ZERO expectations. Then I look at my naked body and I criticize all its flaws. Like so... wow, that sure is getting saggy, your pubes are turning grey and that is disgusting, and remember those weak chicken legs and boobs that instead of petite round radio knobs they are two different sizes and they each point down towards your muffin top (in case anyone is hungry.)

But by the end of the piece, after traveling throughout her body and surviving a near-death experience with a giant wave on the way to her heart, she has a revelation:

Oh it’s beautiful! Oh glory! Look at that intricately lined skin! That expanding waistline! You're a miracle! You have made room for the growing of bebe! And look at those outer thighs! Glorious sturdy wide berth, with which to support said bebe if I so choose to do that kind of thing WHICH I WON'T! but isn't it amazing that I could. And you my boobs! I love you both! We love you toooo! Mamma, do you still love me even though I am longer than her and point downwards with my nipple? Yes I do! I love you the same! Even though I she has a silky hair growing out of her? Yes! Wonderful body. All parts that equal the whole and every hole and every hair, even me even though I am grey! Only means you are more experienced! I must go there!

An animated Subway Rat explains to her that she never left—she was always in her body “right where she is supposed to be.” Ultimately, Cameron’s purpose with *Soggy Glasses* is to empower women through an exploration of the female body. Though it fails to be the profound and intellectual performance art of Martha Wilson or Yoko Ono, it broadcasts its own meaningful message in part by parodying that form.

**Re-Making Media**

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36 Ibid., 2.
37 Ibid., 18.
38 Ibid.
Cameron’s work is deeply indebted to popular culture, though her relationship with televisual forms has been tempestuous. In 2006, she realized that *Saturday Night Live* was regularly featuring a character they called DJ Dynasty Handbag (played by Kenan Thompson) on a recurring segment titled “Deep Dish House,” a parody of MTV talk shows. Cameron’s improvisation teacher at the Upright Citizen’s Brigade Theatre shrugged it off, saying it was common for the show to steal material from little-known acts, and friends advised she try to convince Lorne Michaels to cast her on the show. But, Cameron tells *Vice* magazine, “I don’t want to be on that fucking bozo show.” Cameron wrote SNL a “cease and desist” letter, and eventually they stopped airing the segment.

Then in 2010, television producers approached Cameron and filmmaker Hedia Maron about making a television show featuring the Dynasty Handbag character. The pair shot the pitch video and eventually finagled a meeting with producers at Adult Swim (a cable channel that is part of Cartoon Network). The producers liked the video but suggested they adapt their idea into a show for kids. For over a year, Cameron and Maron generated pitch after pitch, but Cameron was never satisfied with any of them. In a final attempt to salvage the show idea, the producers suggested what they referred to as a “lesbian *Seinfeld*”—a program that depicts Cameron in her “real life” interspersed with her performance as Dynasty Handbag. Cameron broke it to Maron that she didn’t want to do the project and their friendship suffered. The pair, who have since started working together again, chronicle the saga in a multi-media article on the Triple Canopy website, as part of the online magazine’s “Internet as Material” project.

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40 Cameron and Maron, “The Dynasty Handbag Show by Jibz Cameron & Hedia Maron.”
41 Ibid.
Though she failed to get her own TV show off the ground, Cameron regularly makes use of mediatized forms in her work, taking television and films as fodder for the parody her pieces provide. As representations of gay and lesbian lives proliferate and become—to borrow the title from Ryan Murphy’s 2012-2013 FOX sitcom—“the new normal” on television, Cameron uses her live work precisely to deconstruct the notion of “normal.” *Brothers and Sisters and Motherfuckers* (2011), *Eternal Quadrangle* (2011), *Transparent Trap/A Dream is not a Life* (2013), and *Good Morning Evening Feelings* (2015) parody the family drama, the dating game reality show, the documentary feature, and the talk show, respectively—critiquing the forms themselves and the normativity, in terms of gender, sexuality, and, socio-economics, that they bolster.\(^4^2\)

Linda Hutcheon defines parody “repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity.”\(^4^3\) In some ways, parodies function through failure; it is within the gap between the referent and re-making of it that the artist’s commentary often occurs. Dynasty Handbag’s attempts to perform in these televisual genres always fail—she is too obvious, too over-the-top, and the seams always start to show. But, as Muñoz puts it in his analysis of her 2006 performance *Hell in a Handbag*, DH’s is a “not so much a failure to succeed as it is a failure to participate in a system of valuation that is predicated on exploitation and conformity.”\(^4^4\) Her refusal to succeed at these televisual genres reminds audiences the ways in which televisual representations have consistently failed queer subjects.

\(^{42}\) I saw *Brothers and Sisters and Motherfuckers* at PS 122 in New York City on December 18, 2011.


In *Brothers and Sisters and Motherfuckers*, written, directed, and performed by Cameron in December of 2011 at New York City’s P.S. 122, DH’s failures function as a kind of contamination that queers the concept of normal, threatens those that come in contact with it, and resists commodification even as it spreads. She uses this “holiday special” to critique television’s representations of families, the stereotypical gender roles they reify, and the class anxieties they mask. She also uses it to question the assumption of gay lives into their kind of bourgeois normative domesticity. The performance takes as its subject something familiar and familial: a holiday dinner. But of course, DH cannot properly perform the domesticity demanded by the situation when hosting her brother and two sisters at her house. She serves vegetarian sausages on cracked, hand-me-down dishware, and introduces the meal by declaring “[H]ere’s the spread!” and holding the plate of food in front of her crotch. As the holiday dinner progresses, DH and her guests fall ill. Initially, it is only DH who is farting at the table, much to her siblings’ dismay. Soon, however, all four find themselves struck with stomachaches and terrible gas, and the stage quickly fills with a symphony of their flatulence and laughter. As they each contributed an item to the meal—DH, the meatless sausage; Sister 1, the chocolates; Sister 2 homemade tarts; and Brother, store-bought dinner rolls—they take turns blaming each other for the illness. As the fight escalates, Grandma’s ashes are spilled, an accident that enables her to return from the dead to crash the dinner party.

The performance consists of a live DH interacting with pre-recorded video footage of her two sisters and her brother, as if they are all sitting around the dining room table together. It is an impressive technological feat, the smoothness of which belies its complexity. The stage is sparsely furnished with a rug, a round table and a chair, and a small potted pine tree decorated with lights sits off to one corner. The playing space is surrounded in a semi-circle by four large
white screens. Cameron plays all of her family members, demonstrating her incredible versatility and virtuosity as a performer, but also pointing to both the construction and relatedness of the characters’ various gender performances.

The two sisters each presents an excessive and failing femininity different than Dynasty Handbag’s. DH dresses in a satiny red romper, the pants of which billow to just below her knee. It is belted, high above her waist with a sparkly cummerbund. Her teased and matted short brown hair frames her face, which is smeared with her usual grotesque makeup—in this case her eyelids are swathed in red and yellow and her cheeks in too much blush. Sister 1 wears a curly red wig tied with a bow, a princess sleeved red polka dot dress with a lacey neck, and glasses. Sister 1 is a shy, neurotic woman, who babbles nervously and worries incessantly about other people feelings. She speaks in a high-pitched whispery, lisping voice. She makes certain that the chocolates she buys at the airport to bring to dinner are fair trade and organic and questions the ethics of the processed soy sausage her sister serves for dinner.

Sister 2, on the other hand, represents a Sex and the City-era brand of femininity bolstered by consumerism. She wears a red mini dress with black bra straps peeking out beneath, carries numerous designer purses and multiple cell phones (all of which play Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies” as their ring tone), and has long, bright pink manicured nails. She wears a red wig cut in a hip style, hot pink lipstick, and matching pink eye shadow with heavy mascara. She speaks, according to Brother, like she is in a rap music video. (The first line we hear her say to her sister is “OMG I have hellza gossps to relay . . . but I can't now cuz there is no prives right now.”)45

Cameron’s Sister 2 is a personification of the cultural (Louis Vuitton) baggage left behind by Carrie and company. Except, as Cameron embodies her as grotesque and exaggerated,

45 Jibz Cameron, “Brothers and Sisters and Motherfuckers” (Unpublished manuscript, n.d.).
audiences can see what is rendered invisible in the representations of femininity on shows such as *Sex and the City*. Cameron makes plain her class striving; Sister 2 wants desperately to distinguish herself from her abnormal siblings, telling them: “I like nice things you fucktards. You are all satisfied with fucking garbage and don't know anything about proper dining or cuisine or anything, like, not totally trashy and stupid.” Sister 2’s in-process attempts to escape her “trashy” brother and sister fail; she is—as grandma will deem her later in the performance “a nouveau riche, tacky, alcoholic slut.” She fails at passing as upper class precisely because of her excessive femininity and through her failure, Cameron reveals the relationship between gender and class performance.

Cameron uses the Brother character to present an excessive and failing masculinity. Wearing high-waisted kakis, a brown shirt reminiscent of a Boy Scout uniform, and a cell phone holster on his belt, Brother speaks using pseudo-military jargon and ridiculous abbreviations such as CATFU (“completely and totally fucked up”), that serve to undermine his masculine authority rather than shore it up. His over-the-top and awkward misogynist language—he refers

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46 *Sex and the City* as a feminist text has been hotly debated and defended. Astrid Henry, for instance, argues that the show has merits for its depiction of female friendship, which serves as a self-selected family that can be seen as a kind of queer kinship structure. The show is certainly groundbreaking for its frank discussions and graphic depictions of women’s sexuality. Henry points out, however, that in many ways “the feminism the show offers suggests white, upper-class, straight women have the luxury narrowly to define liberation exclusively in terms of their sexual freedom” (70). Indeed, she argues, the show “like much of the third wave, lacks a larger political agenda but rather is focused on the effects of individual choices on individual lives” (72). This ethos, which I discuss in Chapter 4 as “choice feminism,” argues problematically that feminism’s main purpose was to provide women with choice, that all choices are equal, and women should be supported in them regardless. In addition, the line between sexual empowerment and exploitation can be blurry, and *Sex and the City’s* run was concomitant with the rise of raunch culture and a disturbing trend of women’s self-objectification. Finally the show provides an unrealistic image of a largely white, upper-class Manhattan, for the most part, uncritically celebrating unfettered consumerism. Astrid Henry, “Orgasms and Empowerment: Sex and the City and the Third Wave Feminism,” in *Reading Sex and the City*, ed. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (London; New York: I.B.Tauris, 2003).

47 Cameron, “Brothers and Sisters and Motherfuckers.”
to children as “little fuck trophies,” calls his sisters “sluts,” and tells them to “shut their cum dumpsters”—render him a grotesque parody of the family patriarch. As Rebecca Feasey explains in the introduction to her *Masculinity and Popular Television*, although the representation of femininities in television has been widely theorized, the depictions of masculinities have only just come under investigation by scholars. Because of this, “masculinity and male heterosexuality continued to be understood as fixed, stable, unalterable and therefore beyond enquiry.”

Cameron’s over-performance, however, renders Brother’s brand of white heterosexual masculinity visible, just as much a performance as his sisters’ femininity.

The title of Cameron’s piece distorts the title of the series *Brothers & Sisters*, which ran on ABC from 2006 to 2011, and the performance invites a reading as a distorted parody of the television drama. The series focuses on the Walkers, an upper-middle class family living in California. The plotlines are mostly dull, dealing with domestic issues, the relationships between the five siblings, and the ups and downs of the family business. In fact, in a critique of the first season of the show in the *Washington Post*, Tom Shales writes that its creators

opened the menu for generic family dramas and took one from Column A and one from Column B, but they forgot about Column C—where the heart is. Whacking away at the façades of seemingly happy households to expose hatreds and hypocrisies underneath—yawn—is a sport for playwrights and novelists that goes back about a million years.

*Brothers and Sisters and Motherfuckers* starts by proudly proclaiming its narrative’s generic nature. Grandma’s voice, broadcast through a black out, declares, “This story is old. It has been told and told and told and told. A family name. A family shame. A family game of family blame.

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Like a moth to a flame we gather for light but it is all in vain. Rain. Pain. Stain.

But by pushing her characters and their circumstances to the extreme, Cameron exposes the sort of televisual formulas that Shales critiques as formulas, its types as types. Even if its plots are banal, *Brothers & Sisters* is remarkable, however, for providing the first representation of a same-sex marriage on U.S. network television during its second season in Episode 16, “Prior Commitments.” In depicting Kevin Walker and his boyfriend Scotty’s relationship as no different from that of the heterosexual couples, the series forwards what Sara Warner calls “homoliberalism”—“a conservative program of social assimilation” which deems “certain normative-leaning, straight-acting homosexuals” acceptable at the expense of non-normative subjects. Melanie E.S. Kohnen argues that Kevin and Scotty’s wedding functions simultaneously as an outward sign of televisual and social progress by asserting that gays and lesbians have the right to marry on TV and in real life under certain conditions) and yet still as an impediment to that progress, as it reaffirms longstanding criteria, such as whiteness and heteronormativity, that regulate and restrict who has access to civil rights, to privacy, and to symbolic inclusion in the nation.

By performing her over-the-top grotesque versions of brothers and sisters whose attempts at normative gender and class performance so obviously fail, Cameron points to the exclusions of these sorts of representations of homosexuality (as male, white, upper-middle class, gender normative), and argues for more inclusive kinds of queer representations.

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50 Cameron, “Brothers and Sisters and Motherfuckers.”
54 Kohnen also points out how *Brothers & Sisters* works to erase any evidence of class and race difference, particularly with regards to the family’s citrus business, Ojai Foods. “The significance of California’s racialized history is screened out of *Brothers & Sisters* to make way for a normative story about a white upper class family,” she writes (166). She links this erasure
Cameron reveals how generic family dramas like *Brothers & Sisters* work to make class invisible, by making it obvious in her own work. Her characters appear in front of cartoon backgrounds that represent rooms in DH’s apartment—each background more ridiculously opulent than the next. When she enters, Sister 2 stands in front of a grand staircase and Brother appears in a fancy study complete with mounted animal heads and leather chairs. Later, all the characters turn up in a lavish living room with an enormous chandelier. Placing the characters in the exaggerated upper class backgrounds emphasizes how out of place they are there; rather than fit seamlessly into society’s normative structures, her characters’ queerness—usually manifested in problematic gender performances—renders them abject.

In the final scene, Dynasty Handbag appears onscreen while Cameron plays Grandma live. Hunched over on a cane with a shock of white hair, Cameron speaks in a slight British accent, her tongue out moving lizard-like across her lips. A laughing hag, she denigrates each of her grandchildren, pointing out their failures. She calls Sister 1 a “prattling ninny” and tells Sister 2 that she is “a nouveau riche, tacky, alcoholic slut.” She ridicules Brother’s attempts at masculinity saying, “Big boy—thank you for taking control of the situation. For managing your little microcosmic world. What a big boy, big boy—I don’t know what we would do without big daddy here!” Finally, she blames Dynasty Handbag for the illness they are all suffering from:

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55 Cameron, “Brothers and Sisters and Motherfuckers.”
56 Ibid.
“They are at your house after all. You are the host, you might as well be the host of the disease.”

Each deemed a failure, the siblings band together in their status as abnormal and alien. One by one, they defend DH against Grandma until, finally, DH vacuums up her ashes and she leaves the stage. The pat ending of the piece and the siblings’ solidarity in the last moments mirrors the feel-good final scenes regularly shown on episodes of television series such as Modern Family and Parenthood, but Cameron delivers this cutesie conclusion with a literal wink. The closing image of the performance is a close-up on DH’s face giving the audience a smile and a wink that is punctuated by the sound of a chime. Infusing the ending with irony Cameron reminds us that this family can’t return to normal. As she is getting sucked into the onscreen vacuum cleaner, Grandma admits that it was not, in fact, DH’s dinner that made them sick. “You were sick before you got here!” she shrieks. “You were sick before you were born! Your grandparents were sick, their parents were sick, the immigrants that were related to you were sick!” That contamination, strangeness, and failure were always already present in the family, emphasizes the inevitability of inheriting these traits. Grandma’s universalizing introduction to the performance, moreover, indicates that they are present in all families. By depicting abnormality as inescapable, Cameron actually allows an escape from normative values; if we are all always already strange, we can stop trying not to be.

In Eternal Quadrangle, Cameron’s parody of the long-running TV game show, The Dating Game and more recent reality show dating competitions, we see DH wrestle with

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57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
heteronormativity and revel in her utter inability to correctly play by its rules. As Bitch magazine co-founder Andi Zeisler points out, in the new millennium, “Feminism still had plenty of battles to fight in the realm of representation. . . . The first of the new guard of reality shows immediately struck fear into the hearts of feminists everywhere.” Reality television is a guilty pleasure that Jenifer Pozner argues provides a deeply damaging and problematic pastime for women. In a discussion of dating games in which women compete for the affections of a man (for example Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire, Joe Millionaire, The Bachelor, Flava of Love, and Rock of Love among many others), Pozner claims that these shows are “misogynistic spectacles,” and that their narratives “both reflect and reinforce deeply ingrained societal biases about women, men, love, beauty, class and race” and teach young women that their sole value lies in their looks and their ability to secure a man.

Cameron performs her own critique of the genre and renders the reality dating game grotesque and bizarre, thus exposing what it usually masks about gender, class, and sexuality and their relationship to one another. In Eternal Quadrangle, we are presented with the four eligible bachelors competing for Handbag’s affection, projected on a large video screen downstage: an overachieving professional golfer, a cerebral cortex, “a stray dog from the side of a road” (represented by an image of a stuffed animal), and the “miasma and uncertainty of death” (represented by a black and white drawing of a skeleton carrying a scythe). In some iterations of the performance Dynasty Handbag herself appears live and interacts with the contestants; in the

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59 I saw the premiere of this performance at the New Museum in New York City on May 15, 2012. A video version is also available on Dynasty Handbag’s Vimeo site. The quotations are transcribed from the video.

60 Andi Zeisler, Feminism and Pop Culture: Seal Studies (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008), 123.

version I saw, she also appears onscreen. A voice-over attempts to convince the TV audience of Handbag’s normalcy, but instead, the introduction is over-explicit, declaring that she hails from “her mother’s vagina like everyone else.” Peppy game show music underscores the entire performance, punctuated with canned laughter and applause, which is augmented by the sounds of the live audience.

DH fails at the role of game show contestant. She forgets to ask questions of the candidates and instead asks inappropriate ones, thereby critiquing the rituals of dating that demand a performance of “normalcy.” DH asks the cortex what kind of obsessive thinking it displays, implying her own struggle with mental illness—ordinarily a taboo topic for a potential date. She asks death what sort of privilege he enjoys in his life, noting she has the privilege to choose to be vegetarian. Death responds by detailing the benefits of what sounds like white, heterosexual male privilege: that he doesn’t “have to worry about discrimination when trying to get a job or joining the military,” that he is “free to enter a retail establishment without being suspicious,” and that he is “not worried about being attacked or violated walking the streets at night.” Cameron raises the specter of privilege to acknowledge how constructions of race and gender operate within romantic relationships. Compared to the preppily-clad golfer who claims that he “enjoys setting goals and achieving them,” Handbag, in a loud leopard print jacket, once again acknowledges her failure, explaining that she is “the kind of girl who has no goals or ambition” and who “likes to fantasize about all the things in life she’d like to do but can’t bring herself to do them.”

In the end, DH admits she has lost the game, and declares that she probably needs a little of each of the contestants in her life while the melancholic guitar theme from the film *Brokeback Mountain* plays in the background. The use of the theme song brings to mind Hollywood’s image
of gay romance—white, straight-acting, male—and contrasts that with Handbag’s failure to act appropriately romantic or effectively court romance. Her desire for a polyamorous relationship with a man, a stuffed animal, a brain, and death—the foursome which comprise the quadrangle of the title—is, of course, ridiculous, but the ending of the piece also serves as a reminder of outsider sexualities that are masked by media representations that assume gay white men as universal sympathetic subjects and by reality shows so often invested in normative manifestations of heterosexuality.62

The New Museum premier of Eternal Quadrangle marked the start of Cameron’s explicit exploration of art making and her place in the hierarchy of the entertainment world. After screening the film, Cameron presented “a very special postmodern, post-performance performance of a Q&A and Awards Ceremony,” an extended parody of an awards ceremony in which she brought each of her collaborators onto the stage to honor them for their contribution to the film.63 Intentionally long, tedious, and with deliberately low-quality, slipshod production values, the ceremony exposed the labor of such a project, demonstrating how many people are involved in producing even something as lo-fi as the short film.

Cameron continues this exploration with Transparent Trap, a performance in which she uses a Power Point presentation to explain her decision to sell the online rights to the film version of Eternal Quadrangle to MOCA.tv, the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Francisco’s online video channel. As part of this performance, presented by the New Museum in New York City, Cameron screened A Dream is Not a Life (2013), a mockumentary about her

return to San Francisco—where she attended art school—for a series of shows. A Dream is Not a Life, directed by Hedia Maron, is a parody of Life is But a Dream, a 2013 documentary made for the cable network HBO that “provides raw, unprecedented access” to Beyoncé Knowles, the singer, actress, and “entertainment icon.” Beyoncé’s film uses familiar tropes such as black and white footage, voice-over, and melodramatic underscoring to tell the story of her career, and features footage of her candid thoughts whispered to the webcam of her laptop. The documentary attempts to paint an intimate portrait of the superstar, providing fans a glimpse into her well-guarded personal life and a behind-the-scenes look at her tours. The documentary fails at this. As many critics point out, it is surprisingly unrevealing, serving mostly to maintain her brand, which is largely built on an image of Beyoncé as perfect—a hardworking “triple threat,” (singer/dancer/actress) and now wife and mother. Cameron’s A Dream is Not a Life, also fails to properly execute these documentary tropes, and, in doing so, exposes the material realities of art-making today, and critiques gender norms, particularly notions of femininity that rely on the performance of hyper heterosexuality and motherhood.

The film begins with Cameron, dressed in a bathrobe and wearing glasses, watching Beyoncé’s documentary on her laptop in bed. Decidedly unglamorous, she picks her teeth and reacts aloud to the film. (“Big discovery there, Beyoncé,” she says sarcastically, “Art doesn’t make sense.”) Declaring that the documentary wasn’t very good, Cameron states, “I should make a movie like that. I bet my fans want to know what I am really like—onstage off stage.” She rolls

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her eyes and falls asleep snoring, implying that the rest of the film is a dream of her own version of a tell-all documentary.\textsuperscript{66}

Cameron’s version addresses the ups and downs of her life using dark humor, whereas Beyoncé’s documentary starts with nostalgic reflections on her idyllic childhood in Houston and skips over the details of her painful professional break up with her father and former manager. Cameron claims that her mother lives with her and then holds up a bag of her ashes, joking that she hopes she got the good parts of her. She visits her father’s grave and pours an espresso on it (since she couldn’t find Japanese porn, which, she explains, he also liked). Ever inappropriate, she sings Fleetwood Mac’s “Oh Daddy” to his tombstone before realizing, that it is a “song about a boyfriend.” She ridicules coming out narratives and critiques homonormativity, using a voice-over to describe what she remembers about her time in San Francisco. “I remember my sexuality,” she muses, “discovering it and being like what is this? I remember thinking that being gay was boring, actually trendy, and if I were to be gay, I would have done it before it was cool.”

Cameron mocks the self-important tone of the Beyoncé film throughout, calling attention to the reality of her own life as an artist, which contrasts sharply with the glamour of Beyoncé’s celebrity. For example, in one scene, she crookedly frames a tiny newspaper clipped announcement of her San Francisco show, memorabilia that she says she will pass on to her children and her children’s children. She brags that her three-day tour has sold out, before revealing that the venue in which she is performing seats only 40 people.

The film includes footage of Cameron’s performance, in which she, as Dynasty Handbag, does a disturbing parody of Beyoncé’s 2011 R & B song, “Party,” and its music video. DH’s version, which she ironically “hopes won’t outshine the original” transforms the sexy slow jam

\textsuperscript{66} I saw this performance and film at the New Museum in New York City on September 26, 2013. The quotations are transcribed from the film.
into something sinister and scary. Beyoncé, who grew up middle-class in suburban Texas, plays with lower-class, rural signifiers in her music video for the song—she sports blonde hair and dark roots, a cheetah print tank top, and eats cheese doodles at a party in a trailer park with plastic lawn furniture and rusty cars. Dynasty Handbag wears a cheetah-print shirt as well, but, mocking over-the-top sexuality on display in music videos, she wears her underwear over her high-waisted pants. Making decidedly unsexy gestures, DH opens her thighs, rubs her legs, and gyrates her hips, alternatively whining for attention and trying to act tough. DH scream/sings along with the track, foregrounding the dangers of female self-objectification in the original song (the lyrics of which include, “I may be young, but I'm ready/To give you all my love. . . . So in love/ I'll give it all away/ Just don't tell nobody tomorrow”). She changes the lyrics, scream/singing that, after the night of “giving it away” she will have to take the “next-day pill ‘cause now I need it.” Here DH punctures the romantic façade created in the pop cultural artifact, exposing the unromantic potential aftermath of a one-night stand: an unwanted pregnancy.

But by far the most compelling part of Cameron’s film is her critique of representations of celebrity motherhood. Beyoncé had a baby with husband, rapper Jay-Z, in 2012, and, after making the announcement that they were expecting on the MTV Music Video Awards, rumors circulated that she was not, in fact, pregnant, but having the baby via a surrogate in order to preserve her figure. In an extended sequence about having a baby, Cameron parodies this and the culture norms that tie appropriate femininity to motherhood. She explains, “It is every woman’s dream to give birth to a child,” and, referencing the Beyoncé controversy, “since my body is basically my career, I thought, I’ll just have someone else make it for me. I did however want to go through the birthing process, because I feel it's an experience that every woman needs to have.”
Beyoncé’s documentary and Cameron’s parody of it participate in this new spectacularization of maternity within the media. Imogen Tyler writes that “since the mid-1990s there has been an extraordinary proliferation of representations of maternity within popular culture... The fascination with celebrity pregnancy and motherhood... a new emphasis on the maternal in the visual and performance arts and the ascendance of ‘Maternal TV’ reality formats, are indicative of this new visibility.” But this visibility is not an accurate picture of actual births. A recent study of representations of birth on reality television shows finds that these programs “made pregnancy and childbirth much more dramatic and perilous than they are in reality.” These shows “depict women as powerless, physicians in control, and technology as the saving grace for women’s imperfect bodies.” Cameron parodies these depictions of maternity when she describes going to the hospital in order to “go through the motions” and channel what her surrogate, who was off having the baby somewhere else, was going through. Painting a stereotypically heteronormative picture of childbirth, she explains that present was a “male doctor, of course” and the obligatory “husband there holding my hand.” (Referencing the birth scenes in countless TV shows, she notes, the husband passes out during the birth.) Foregrounding ideas women’s bodies as unruly, Cameron performs a grotesque vision of childbirth, lying on the kitchen floor with her legs spread, screaming, breathing, pushing, making fart sounds and water noises to indicate the baby coming out. “Oh you’re perfect,” she declares in a sarcastic voice. “I’m just glowing because it’s like nothing I’ve ever experienced before”

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69 Ibid., 140.
and, commenting on our culture’s obsession with the regulation of celebrities’ post-pregnancy bodies, “the baby weight came off like really fast.”

Later, a woman arrives at Cameron’s apartment with a baby, which Cameron eagerly pretends is hers—until the infant starts slobbering and crying. Highlighting the superficiality of motherhood as television performance, she says, “take her—she’s not doing anything—I mean for the camera, she’s not doing anything” and, in a horrific comment on our culture’s obsession with weight, she points out that the baby is “a little bit heavy.” Finally, taking a moment to make sure she looks good in a mirror, Cameron says, glancing at the camera, “bye baby, I love you, baby” in a phony, high-pitched voice. This disturbing scene references a brief moment in the Beyoncé film in which an assistant brings Beyoncé’s baby to her. Beyoncé, sitting on a white couch, mid-interview, cuddles the child and says, “You see that microphone? Say, ‘Hi, microphone!’” before giving the assistant the okay to take the baby away.

Cameron’s mockumentary asks audiences to see conformity to certain of society’s standards of success as ridiculous; DH’s failure to adhere reads as resistance. She reminds us that most artists’ lives fail to fit neatly into documentary fairy tale narratives shot in hazy soft focus and artsy black and white. She questions motherhood as a naturalized part of every fulfilled life and demonstrates how women’s bodies are policed and regulated before, during, and after birth (for example by celebrity magazine’s “bump watch” segments in articles about who lost the baby weight and how quickly).

The faux-documentary is only one of the many media forms Cameron mobilizes in order to stage feminist failure in the name of a post-wave pop feminist politics. Another form she takes on is the gendered format of the talk show in Good Morning Evening Feelings (GMEF), presented at The Kitchen in April of 2015. In promotional materials, Cameron describes the
piece as “a live, conceptual, one-hour hybrid morning/late-night/children’s show for adults, hosted by everyone’s favorite no one, Dynasty Handbag.” The performance combines the tropes of daytime talk shows, usually hosted by and geared towards women, and nighttime talk shows, almost exclusively hosted by men—inherently critiquing this deeply gendered paradigm. Cameron explains that she was “thinking a lot about why women get to do the morning and men get to do the evening shows. There are a lot of reasons for this, I’m sure, and none of them really that good.”

The simple set consists of a large desk angled downstage left and a giant screen upstage. The performance makes use of canned applause, and the screen shows cheesy graphics that parody those that introduce the various segments on morning shows. As host, Dynasty Handbag sports a tuxedo jacket painted with garish pastel-colored flowers. Beneath, she wears a beige leotard, a hot pink bra and a pair of shiny “granny panties.” Thick beige stockings cover her legs, and the control top lines are visible on her upper thighs. Her makeup is overdone—blue eye shadow covers her lids, and the candy-colored pink of her cheeks and lips matches that of her bra. Her brown hair is teased into a spiked mess. Playing the parts of announcer, host, and guests, Cameron makes all of her costume changes in full view of the audience.

Cameron’s hybrid format takes on not only the gendered conventions of the talk show, but their thematic conventions as well. GMEF begins like a daytime talk show, which, as Laura Grindstaff argues, “take the backstage of everyday life and put it up front, onstage, making public events of personal experience.” But it concludes with a series of interviews with

71 Davis, “Jibz Cameron Talks about Her New One-Woman Show and TV Pilot.”
celebrity guests, adhering to the format of late-night shows, on which actors appear to advertise their latest projects. In contrast to the superficial fare usually featured these shows, this episode of GMEF, DH tells us, centers on the “Universal horror of FAGS” a queer acronym that stands for “fear, anger, guilt, and shame.” Rather than trying to overcome FAGS, in the style of self-help talk shows such as Dr. Phil, GMEF and its guests will help the audience to accept FAGS, and to understand that they don’t have to do it alone.

This embrace of FAGS resonates with moves within queer studies to reclaim negative feelings. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes that “at least for certain (‘queer’) people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity: one that has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities.”73 In her book Feeling Backwards, Heather Love analyzes the “dark representations” of gay and lesbian lives, focusing on depictions of such feelings as regret, shame, despair, self-hatred, defeatism and loneliness.74 “The embarrassment of owning such feelings,” she writes, feels “out place . . . in a movement that takes pride as its watchword,” but she argues for the importance of articulating them.75 Similarly, Ann Cvetkovich’s writing on trauma claims a communal power in archiving pain, loss, and suffering.76 Cameron’s performances often work in this tradition, and in GMEF in particular, she performs her negative feelings publically, claiming them—not as failures of character—but as an important part of the lesbian experience.

75 Ibid.
76 Cvetkovich, An Archive of Feelings.
The first guest on the show is Kristie Smoofes, the “very popular lesbian breakfast chef” who does a segment called “Kookin Wiff Kristie” that is meant to help the audience exorcise the “F” in FAGS—their fears—by making “fear-based smoothies.” Wearing ugly high-waisted jeans, a pink bowling shirt, and a tacky apron featuring a picture of a shirtless man’s well-defined abdominals, Smoofes explains that she is a comedian turned chef, which, she notes, are both respectful lesbian professions. She tells the audience, “If you’re like me, you wake up each morning like the vampire Lestat, gasping for air in pure terror. It’s as though my inner demon has had coffee, shaved, and done pushups before I have even opened my peepers!” She ties the feelings of fear to her family background; the main ingredient in the smoothie, she tells the audience, is “a precious family heirloom—something that represents the terror in your childhood home.” She adds to that a “healthy pile of anxiety about the future” and blends. Staring at a plastic bag intensely while a sound effect of a blender whirs, Smoofes eventually opens the bag and shows the audience, there’s “no fear in there!” The segment is a critique of the products (often pedaled on and between daytime talk shows) that purport to improve women’s lives but really prey on their vulnerabilities. In particular, the smoothie recalls countless diet shakes geared towards helping with women’s weight loss. “Kookin Wiff Kristie” also offers audiences solace in the fact that they are not alone in their anxieties over childhood trauma. The segment allows the possibility that by making these negative feelings public, we might help each other to overcome them.

In the two segments that follow, Cameron critiques women’s position in the entertainment industry. First, we fast-forward through the career of Mallory Stroppleckalves, who

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77 Cameron, “Good Morning, Evening Feelings,” 3.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid., 4.
Dynasty Handbag tells us is a famous Broadway dancer. To play Stropplecalves, Cameron dons a garish black and white striped leotard featuring black fringe, a short brown wig and small black cap, white tap shoes and white gloves. We see Stropplecalves as a ten-year old in Miss Footes’s “advanced jazz tap modern class,” a voice-over repeatedly correcting her out-of-time dancing in a phony French accent. Parodying many a rise-to-fame story, in which a young girl travels to NYC to make it big on Broadway, Mallory buys a one-way bus ticket, and upon arrival, is immediately cast in a musical despite her “amazing but still horrible” dancing at the audition.\(^8\) A montage of career highlights flashes on the screen—we see DH’s signature grimace superimposed on actors in everything from Spiderman the Musical to Cabaret, from Cats to Beauty and the Beast. An image of the Tony Award stage appears, and a voice-over announces that “the award for best danceress in a musical of all time is Mallory Stropplecalves!” She also wins a “lifetime achievement award, on the anniversary of her 4,657th performance.”\(^9\)

But before long, we are told, Stropplecalves’s luck changes. In a commentary on the precarity of women’s work in the theatre—particularly the short shelf life of dancers—the voice-over tells her: “We are sorry Miss Stropplecalves but you are just too old to play the lead . . . we are hiring someone younger and more beautiful and talented.”\(^10\) Mallory spirals into an alcoholic depression, crying, “I used to be the greatest, I used to have it all.” Suddenly her luck changes once again when the voice-over declares, “Well my name is blah blah blah blah and I am a young happening TV producer. Why don’t you be on my hit comedy show as the batty old lady with some spice!”\(^11\) Sadly, in the middle of filming the comedy show, Stropplecalves dies.

\(^8\) Ibid., 8.
\(^9\) Ibid., 9.
\(^10\) Ibid.
\(^11\) Ibid.
Dynasty Handbag tells us that this segment is meant to demonstrate the effects of the “A” in FAGS—“anger.” In her post-death interview with DH, Stroppplecalves says she owes her “absolutely perfect career” to “molten, excruciating, deeply held, unrelenting anger.” She continues:

Every time it looked like it was time to throw in the towel, I would think of the woman who would get this opportunity if I didn’t take it. I would think of the people who tried to stifle my greatness. And I would think of all the losers without dreams and it would give me enough rage to move through the day as my best self. I guess a love of anger is one of life’s greatest lessons—my unprocessed, misdirected, pathological anger. No spa days, no cryin’ in a circle, no EMDR, no SSRIs, no SAD lamps, no cupping, no elimination diets—I let gluten eat my brain—no float pods, no sunflower seed oils, no self administered acupressure, no vision boards, no secret, you want a secret—I’ll tell you a secret—Rage is the only thing movin’ this society forward! If you reflect on all man’s greatest triumphs you will find that underneath it lays.

Anger remains a taboo emotion for women, something to be stifled and certainly not discussed as a motivating factor in one’s life and career. The gendered nature of anger is revealed in the last sentence of the monologue—men use anger toward triumph—while women channel it into spa days and crying circles. Through Stroppplecalves’s monologue, Cameron critiques the kinds of self-help remedies society foists on women in an attempt to redirect their rage.

In the most pointed segment of the show, Dynasty Handbag interviews Womanhood, who is represented onscreen by a cartoon image of a woman’s legs, crotch, and lower torso. The crotch is covered by a pair of white underwear decorated with large googly eyes, big red lips, and two large tufts of black pubic hair sticking out from either side of it. Speaking in a proper British accent, Womanhood explains that she has been featured in “pretty much every movie and television show that has ever been made . . . Except Reservoir Dogs, although maybe I am in that. I can’t remember. If I was I wasn’t significant!”84 When asked about the current state of her

84 Ibid., 14.
career she points to the limited roles available to older women in the industry: “I’m over 40 now so mostly it’s been just domineering hags and witchy types. Oh and the occasional lonely but successful and ruthless cunt.”

Even earlier in her career, however, her characters were often sexualized victims: “When I was younger I could do prostitutes and women that were tied up in basements, there was a lot of that—I mean it came in waves. It’s pretty popular now but I’m too old for those roles. I mean, who wants to see a 40 year old woman in a dirty nighty chained up in a basement!”

Critiquing the way interviewers often focus on the family life of female celebrities, as opposed to their acting work, Dynasty Handbag inquires about Womanhood’s upcoming nuptials. She exclaims, “Oh yes! Probably spending around 30 grand, that’s my average . . . Which is above the annual United States poverty line.” DH emphasizes the economic critique of the wedding-industrial complex, adding under her breath, “that’s more than I make.”

When DH whether Womanhood will have kids, she explains that she is both always pregnant and always on her period, an exaggeration of the image of women as purely reproductive. DH asks if her kids are home watching the show tonight and Womanhood offers an economic critique of U.S. poverty and the prison system: “Well, probably a few million are, but a lot of them are starving, or diseased. A good portion of them are incarcerated. But about 1% of them are doing pretty good!”

Womanhood has been brought on the show to discuss the “G” in FAGS, her “guilt,” which predictably results from her failure to effectively balance motherhood and career:

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85 Ibid.
86 Ibid., 15.
87 Transcribed from the video.
88 Cameron, “Good Morning, Evening Feelings,” 16.
I’m sure that my career makes me a terrible mother. I’m so envious of my male co-stars. How do they balance fatherhood and career? They seem to really manage well! I just need to accept that everyone suffers when I follow my dreams. Younger women will have to learn to go through life with the feeling that they caused all the suffering in humanity with their free spirit, I guess.\textsuperscript{89}

Here, Cameron points to the gender imbalance in who experiences parental guilt: Womanhood’s male co-stars are not under the same kinds of pressures she is to give up her dreams for her children. Womanhood indicates that there is no hope for younger women; they will encounter the same situation, which they too will fail to adequately negotiate. Cameron highlights this cycle of guilt with the hopes that by exposing it, we can start to try to eliminate it.

There is an addendum to the performance. A very famous guest, who originally claimed she was too busy to appear on \textit{Good Morning Evening Feelings}, is in the studio. “She is actually super \textit{apropos},” DH says, exaggerating the French pronunciation, “because it is the 25\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of this really big hit she did. It actually has a lot to do with fags. Some say this person has used fags in not such a good way, manipulated fags, stole their dance moves . . . but you know, if fags were there . . .” As she speaks, she puts on tailored black pants and pulls a black lace bodysuit over them. She takes a marker out of her desk drawer and dots a big fake black mole above her lip.

The opening strains of Madonna’s hit “Vogue” begin. With her back turned to the audience, DH suggestively pulses her shoulder in time with the music, dragging a blond wig across the stage by an almost invisible thread. She puts on the wig and turns, whispering, “Vague, Vague, Vague,” to the audience. DH breaks into song, intentionally fumbling the lyrics, yelling non-sense, and distorting Madonna’s dance moves. The video screen upstage features clip art that parodies the black and white imagery of the chic 1990 MTV music video. We see

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 17.
twirling feather dusters, French maids, a giant baby drinking milk, tumble weeds, covered wagons, disembodied hands, knives, headless men in tuxedos, and a rubber duck wearing pearls all floating across the screen. During the spoken section of the song, in which Madonna recites the names of Hollywood legends, DH speaks vague sentiments, “Blurry and not very clear,” she says, “I don’t know. I can’t see through the fog. Are we gonna break up or are we together?”

Madonna’s song and its accompanying video have been widely criticized for their appropriation of “vogueing,” a dance form which, according to Marcos Becquera and Jose Gatti combines an imitation of poses from fashion magazines, break dancing, and gestures from Egyptian hieroglyphics and was popularized by young, gay, often poor, men of color. Becquera and Gatti write, “Madonna’s video . . . hails vogueing as the next step in a continuing line of utopian glamour (epitomized by Madonna herself?), but glosses its positions in the traditions of resistance, outside Hollywood camp.” Cameron’s rewrite of the lyric from “vogue” to “vague” critiques the non-politics espoused in the Madonna hit. Becquera and Gatti point out how Madonna’s song and video broadcast a facile and vague brand of unity politics that ignore the specifics of racialized and gendered struggles:

In Madonna’s video this resistant pose . . . is given a new, (de)politicized character. It becomes a (star) vehicle of escape to polymorphous perversity of an idealized, universally available dance floor where, as the lyrics go, “it makes no difference if you’re black or white, if you’re a boy or a girl.” Madonna thus defines the very topos of multiculturalism as a place where antagonisms would be erased and struggles rendered superfluous.

As DH screams her non-sense lyrics, she embodies how “vague” notions of easy solidarity perpetuated by popular culture and their erasures of the specificity of struggles and material differences across gender, race, sexuality, and class, should be viewed as a kind of violence.

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90 Jibz Cameron, “Good Morning, Evening Feelings” (Unpublished manuscript, n.d.), 12.
91 Ibid., 75.
92 Ibid., 80.
Cameron’s re-making of media is a kind of queer live television. At one point in the *GMEF*, she says, half sarcastically, half seriously: “what makes things real in this world is human experience you know and that is how we all connect—through human experience. And that is why live performance and live television, like we are doing now—as a performance . . . live performance is so important because we are sharing moments together.” She calls attention to the strangeness of her signature style—her live renderings of mediatized forms—but also explains why she finds liveness particularly powerful, because of the community it fosters.

In the conclusion of Cameron and Maron’s article on their failure to produce a successful television show, the duo lament that “turning performance art into a TV show was a lot harder than we thought.” In the final analysis, though, they determine that the blame lies not with their work but with the televisual form itself. “The narrow construct of TV was just holding us back,” they write. Cameron’s performances as Dynasty Handbag invite us to examine the narrow constructs provided to us through televisual representation. They ask us to celebrate the circulation of the abnormal, the excessive, the strange, the grotesque. They invite us to understand how televisual forms repeatedly fail women and queer subjects, so that we can forgive our own failures to live up to their restrictive representations.

**Conclusion: Fail Better, Feel Better**

Cameron’s work exploits failure in order to present a post-wave pop feminist ethos. If our feminism embraces failure, she argues, it can’t be accused of failing. If it is forever in process, there is no way to argue that it is over. She acknowledges popular culture’s importance at the

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93 Transcribed from the video.
94 Cameron and Maron, “The Dynasty Handbag Show by Jibz Cameron & Hedia Maron.”
95 Ibid.
same time as her queer parodies show us its shortcomings. Her work tells us that we can take
pleasure in both the original media representation and in DH’s revision of it—and that this
contradiction does not compromise our feminist politics.

Muñoz and others point out that there is a utopian gesture in Cameron’s work. He
describes utopia as “never prescriptive,” “always destined to fail,” and an “attempt to visualize
that which is not yet here,” and reads Cameron’s performances as “not an aesthetic failure but,
instead, a political refusal.”

Jill Dolan also finds Cameron’s work optimistic, writing of a 2008
performance in Austin, Texas: “[f]ar from cynical, her irony seemed shy rather than coy, hopeful
rather than debased.” Cameron herself wants the audience to find forgiveness through Dynasty
Handbag’s failures. Describing *Brothers and Sisters and Motherfuckers*, she tells *Paper Mag*,
“The family doesn’t quite know how to do things right, but they try. Everything is hanging on to
some sort of normalcy, by a thread . . . I’m hoping the story will be forgiving to everybody,
including myself.”

Dynasty Handbag’s message is that—normal or not, failure or
functioning—we press on. At the end of *Good Morning Evening Feelings*, she sheepishly says,
“The point of this show is just to say, yes I have FAGS, a lot, many . . . but I still will show up
and do the show . . . You’ve got to show up with FAGS and show up without FAGS.”
Witnessing Dynasty Handbag’s many failures, seeing her struggle with her own negative
feelings helps audiences to feel better about their own.

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96 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 173, 170, 177.
97 Jill Dolan, “Dynasty Handbag,” *The Feminist Spectator*, February 27, 2008,
http://feministspectator.princeton.edu/2008/02/27/dynasty-handbag/.
98 Tom Murrin, “Stage Notes: Brothers and Sisters and Motherfuckers - PAPERMAG,” *Paper
motherfuckers-1425711601.html.
Limiting Language: Gender Fluidity and Young Jean Lee’s *Untitled Feminist Show*

There is no possibility of recovering the female body as a neutral sign for feminist meanings.
---Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude*

What’s edgy about onstage nudity?
It’s like the most embarrassingly old-fashioned trick in the book.
---Untitled Feminist Multimedia Technology Show

Introduction

When I first heard that Young Jean Lee was making a performance called *Untitled Feminist Multimedia Technology Show* I was both intrigued and irked. The title promised an experimental performance that would explore the feminist potential of technology onstage, something I had long wished to see in New York City. Lee, however, famously makes plays about topics that initially repel her. Floundering in the Brooklyn College MFA Playwriting program, she asked her adviser, playwright Mac Wellman for guidance. He encouraged her to “write the worst play you can possibly write”¹—advice, she says, that gave her “a way to tap into my actual creative impulses.”² Her use of a terrible-sounding idea as a starting point for her work is now a hallmark of her brand of experimental theatre. On her website, Lee writes: “When starting a play, I ask myself, ‘What’s the last show in the world I would ever want to make?’ Then I force myself to make it.” Although Hilton Als describes all of Lee’s work as “feminist minded”³ and Lee herself identifies as a feminist⁴—knowing her approach to material, I feared her “feminist” play would treat the subject with disdain, perhaps mocking the politics as passé. Regardless, I thought, one of downtown’s most celebrated playwrights making a play explicitly

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² Ibid.
⁴ Young Jean Lee, Email correspondence with author, October 18, 2014.
about feminism is proof that contemporary experimental theatre is reckoning with feminist ideas in new ways.\(^5\)

The afternoon I attended *Untitled Feminist Multimedia Technology Show* in December of 2010, the audience was a “who’s who” of downtown theatre makers—members of Elevator Repair Service, Dynasty Handbag, and legendary feminist performer Holly Hughes were all present at the New Museum for the workshop performance. Toward the end of the performance, in a moment of staged audience interaction, the house lights came up and performer Becca Blackwell, completely naked, asked the audience to brainstorm alternatives to patriarchy. Hughes, who would later engage in an argument about the show with Lee on Facebook, confronted the performers, asking pointedly if they had any awareness of feminist performance history, and implying that the piece seemed ignorant of feminist work of previous decades. Young Jean Lee’s answer to this question would be “no.” As she tells the *Wall Street Journal*, in a 2010 interview, “I haven’t read any Feminist theories in theatre, nothing, zero.”\(^6\)

Young Jean Lee presented two additional versions of this piece in New York City: an excerpt at the Prelude Festival the following fall, and the premier, which took place at the Baryshnikov Art Center (co-presented by Performance Space 122 as part of the COIL Festival) in January of 2012.\(^7\) The New Museum version declared itself a “debate on feminism,” and featured provocative text in addition to a series of dances performed by naked women. In publicity materials, Lee is credited with conceiving and directing the piece in collaboration with

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\(^5\) Lee has received a host of awards, grants, and residencies for her work. See “Funders and Awards,” *Young Jean Lee’s Theater Company*, accessed April 24, 2016, http://www.youngjeanlee.org/new-page/.


\(^7\) I attended all three versions of the production.
choreographer Faye Driscoll, playwright Morgan Gould, and the original performers. Lee describes her process as “really collaborative”—she not only uses conversations and improvisations with her performers to generate material, she regularly works with dramaturg Mike Farry, and seeks audience feedback, which she uses to shape her plays. Audience feedback after the New Museum showing, as well as comments solicited on her company’s Facebook page influenced her decision to cut the text from subsequent versions. In the second version, presented in October of 2011, the naked dances were framed by multiple-choice questions posed to the audience by a performer wearing a lab coat. Audience members recorded their answers on slips of paper that were later collected. We were asked, for example, to interpret the dances and to speculate on the genders of the performers. The final version, re-titled simply Untitled Feminist Show (UFS), retained the nude dance pieces and excised everything else.

As I watched the text disappear in each subsequent version of the performance, I felt the complexity of the piece evaporate as well. In this chapter, I look at the premier of UFS in conversation with the first workshop version of Untitled Feminist Multimedia Technology Show (UFMTS), exploring what the cuts and additions reveal about how today’s feminist politics are performed. I argue that by opting to create an entertaining audience experience rather than a less pleasant one that truly engages with the complexities of millennial feminism, UFS represents politics that are more aligned with “choice feminism” than what I understand as post-wave pop feminism. Although it evidences post-wave politics in some respects—there is a queerness to some of the dances, it celebrates femininity—Lee’s willful ignorance of feminist performance history means that the performance lacks a true merging of Second and Third Wave philosophies. Though it celebrates transmasculinity, it erases transfemininity, repeating the intolerance and exclusions that plagued 70s feminism. Unlike the work of Half Straddle and the
Dyke Division, which manifests an expansive and challenging understanding of femininity and what constitutes “woman,” *UFS* deploys a troubling essentialism even as it argues for gender fluidity. Rather than offer a complex millennial understanding of the relationship between the female body and gender performance, it centers on the rather simplistic notion that female-bodied people can and do perform a range of emotions, roles, and positions, and it suggests that this freedom to perform as one chooses inherently manifests a feminist politics. The final product favors taking the audience on an emotional journey that presents a one-dimensional, easily digestible, non-controversial (but still sufficiently “edgy,” largely because of the nudity) picture of what feminism means today. Although *UFS* does inspire—almost universally—utopic and exuberant feelings in its audiences, the performance’s vague politics leaves spectators unclear about how to pursue the feminist possibilities its title seems to promise.

**Gender Fluidity and Feminism**

*Untitled Feminist Show* opens with four naked performers entering from the back of the Baryshnikov Art Center, making their way slowly down the steps through the house, past the audience toward the stage. They are silent—only their heavy breaths are audible. White noise—a low rumble reminiscent of thunder—starts quietly in the background, providing a sense of anticipation. The set, by David Evans Morris, is simple. The white square stage floor is a blank canvas for Raquel Davis’s lighting design; in the opening sequence, it is washed in a deep blue. A large white rectangle hangs above the stage—it looks like it is floating. It serves as a screen for the abstract projections by Leah Gelpe that are used throughout the show. For this opening number, it is also blue. Becca Blackwell and World Famous *BOB* reach the stage first, their naked bodies slowly illuminated from their feet up, as they step into the stream of stage light.
The two could not appear more differently. Blackwell, whose cropped hair is a fiery red, is stocky and muscular. *BOB*, a self-described “female-female impersonator” is a classic blond bombshell, her body buxom and curvaceous. The four other naked performers converge on them and turn their backs toward the audience. Blackwell raises their arms above their head and an Indian-inspired hip-hop melody begins. The sound for the show, designed by Chris Giarmo and Jamie McElhinney, was created out of hundreds of samples, cut and mixed together. The first is an instrumental clip from Lil’ Kim’s “Suck my Dick,” a song about no-strings-attached cunnilingus that features the refrain “If I was a dude, I’d tell you all to suck my dick.”

As the sample repeats and repeats, the performers do a slow, ritualistic dance that references images of women in art and religion. At one point, Lady Rizo and Hilary Clark lie in repose with their legs out to the side while Regina Rocke and Katy Pyle hold their hair, a position reminiscent of countless female subjects in paintings for instance Titian's Venus of Urbino (1583). Their movements invoke religion when Rizo and Clark raise their arms to the sky in a plaintive gesture, and when Blackwell and *BOB* move upstage and form a four-armed creature that recalls Hindu God Vishnu. As the music starts to wind down, *BOB* moves to the center, with Blackwell directly downstage of her. The other four performers circle around *BOB*, lift her up, and, as a siren sound blares, pull open her legs, giving the audience a full view of her open vagina. Blackwell, who has been sitting with their knees up and arms crossed in a powerful pose down center, drops their knees and also opens their legs, holding one arm across

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9 Blackwell’s preferred gender pronouns are they/them/their.
10 Lady Rizo is the stage name of Amelia Zirin-Brown.
their breasts and one hand cupped in front of their vagina. All the performers freeze for a moment and the lights go black.

In its invocation and transformation of religious images, in its replacement of male deities with powerful female ones, the opening dance aims for what theatre scholar Jeanie Forte points out much feminist performance in the 80s achieved. She writes, “Ritualistic elements in women’s performance are designed to cathartically shed the patriarchal images of women and embrace new, self-generated images.”¹¹ The making over of patriarchal representations into displays of strong femininity is a theme present in the ritualistic sections of UFS. Its ritualistic aspects also reference the work of 1960s and 70s experimental troupes like The Performance Group, the Open Theatre, and the Living Theatre, as well as feminist companies such as At the Foot of the Mountain Theatre, It’s All Right to Be Woman Theater, and Women’s Experimental Theatre. Victor Turner explains that rituals are liminal practices with transgressive potential. They are “a storehouse of possibilities,” he writes, “a striving after new forms and structure.”¹² The opening ritual in UFS portends a time when femininity is celebrated as powerful and desirable, an image that is soon revised when femininity is shown to be potentially violent and cruel. Unlike the work of these other companies, UFS lacks audience interaction; we are never hailed as part of a feminist community. The production fails to define or demonstrate what “new forms or structure” feminist transformation might inspire.

In another example of ritual dance, five of the performers—all except *BOB*—perform an ode to housework and domesticity. Accompanied by “Nothin’” by N.O.R.E. sans lyrics, the performers’ movements reference cooking (they shake a bottle into a pot and stir); childcare

(they rock an infant, run after a child with a wagging finger, and discard a smelly diaper); and cleaning. The movements are robotic; all five performers move in perfect unison, critiquing the monotony and ubiquity of such domestic work. But their movements are also sexy—the performers’ hips sway, their shoulders thrust forward in time with the music. In the cleaning sequence, the performers get on all fours to mime scrubbing the floor—suggestively tossing their heads back. Wiping the window turns into a sassy “talk to the hand” type gesture, and the spray cleaner bottle becomes a gun. At the end of the dance, the performers form an impressive giant human vacuum cleaner. Rocke sits atop Blackwell’s shoulders, moving her arm forward and back as if controlling the giant machine. The other three are on the ground as the base, and Pyle has one leg pointing upwards, forming the neck. Together, the performers undulate, giving the impression of giant sexualized female vacuum poised to consume the audience.

With this ritual dance, Lee illustrates the empowering potential of cooking, housework, and childcare, but because this power derives from the sexualization of domestic duties, its message is undercut. As Jill Dolan warns in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, cultural feminist ritual performance often has a troublingly universalizing impulse—she analyzes performances in the 1980s by feminist groups that erase differences between women, offering messages that supposedly speak to, from, and for the entire gender. Here too, as all the performers execute the sexed-up domestic routine simultaneously, they lose their individuality. As spectators, we lose all sense of the very different relationships to housework and childcare female-assigned people have depending on their class, race, sexuality, and gender performance.

As these examples suggest, *UFS* explores traditional femininity as something forceful—a potential source of sexuality and safety, but also of violence, as something that can both build

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and tear community apart. After the opening dance, for example, is an extended pantomimed narrative accompanied by Tchaikovsky’s “Violin Concerto in D Major,” about a shape-shifting witch, played by Rizo, her child, played by Pyle, and three little girls, played by Blackwell, Clark, and Rocke. When Pyle expresses that she is hungry, Rizo uses her magic to capture the girls so that her daughter may eat them. Eventually *BOB* appears as a good witch, carrying four frilly pink parasols that protect the girls from the witch and her daughter’s dinner plate. Rizo manages to trick Blackwell and Clark into relinquishing the protective parasols, taking advantage of their trusting natures, and Pyle eats them. Rizo pretends to be a strapping young man in order to woo Rocke, who eventually sees through her act. She hits Rizo over the head with the parasol and stabs Pyle with it, cutting open her stomach to release Clark and Blackwell.

The pantomime critiques gender roles in fairytales by telling a new all-female one. In Lee’s story, femininity rather than masculinity saves the day. The moral of the tale is that femininity, as symbolized by the pink parasols, vanquishes evil but also can be wielded as a weapon. After Rocke kills Pyle, the girls proceed to voraciously feast on her guts before picking up their parasols and skipping blithely off stage. According to Lee, mothers can be killers, and a clique of innocent girls can turn quickly into a cabal of cannibals. At the end of the sequence, Rizo mourns the loss of her child. As she is crying over the dead body, *BOB* enters to comfort her, her left arm holding her parasol high in the air like a torch. She kneels next to Rizo, who holds Pyle’s hand, and puts her arm gently around her shoulder. In the final tableau, *BOB* tilts the parasol forward toward the audience and bows her head.

A more abstract section follows; the performers re-enter to do a utopic dance with their parasols. They execute ballet-inspired movements—leaping, twirling, and spinning the parasols joyously, as the stage is washed in light pink. A sample of “100,000 Fireflies” by the Magnetic
Fields fades in, a pretty melody that sounds like it is played on a child’s toy piano. Despite the conflict depicted in the fairytale pantomime, this dance celebrates femininity as liberatory and community-building—here the performers are once again dancing as a unit—and liberatory.

One of Lee’s goals with the performance is to represent a utopian vision of the possibilities of gender fluidity. Lee’s website describes UFS as “an exhilaratingly irreverent, nearly-wordless celebration of a fluid and limitless sense of identity.” The concept of gender fluidity can be traced to Judith Butler’s 1988 article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” in which she theorizes gender as an act rather than an expression of an inner truth. “In effect,” she writes, “gender is made to comply with a model of truth and falsity which not only contradicts its own performative fluidity but serves a social policy of gender regulation and control.”

To Lee, gender fluidity means taking on any “gendered identity”—the masculine and/or the feminine—at will. To that end, UFS celebrates both the feminine and the masculine potential of female-bodied people. In one scene, for example, Clark performs a dance of rage that transforms into slow motion fight with another woman. Clark—a choreographer who dances with Tere O'Connor and Luciana Achugar, among others—stands convulsing to a sample of the song “Flesh and the Power It Holds” by the heavy metal band Death. Her whole body vibrates violently as she falls into the other performers onstage. As she moves, she becomes more enraged, she slams the ground, holds her head, and covers her face with her hands. The other performers look on as Clark struts in a circle menacingly, flailing her arms in anger. She comes offstage past the footlights, close to the first row of the audience members, her stomach jiggling, her long blond hair flying wildly. She charges up the stairs to the stage and runs to the other performers who have started to form a circle. She pushes against them, as if in a mosh pit, and

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they push her back to the center of the ring. Suddenly, *BOB* lets out an open-mouthed scream and comes toward Clark with a fist raised. A slow motion fight ensues—there is hair pulling, biting. They hit each other in the breasts and vagina, symbolically attacking each other’s womanhood. The others observe with glee, rooting them on. Like in the fairytale sequence, which explores both the bright and the darker side of femininity, here, Lee shows the potential and the problems with a woman’s assumption of stereotypically masculine domain. Audiences witness the powerful freedom of a woman appropriating “masculine” rage, but also how quickly it leads to menacing violence than might be unleashed against other women.

Lee’s feminist message is clearest and in the moments that emphasize dance rather than pantomimed movement and those in which the nudity is a critical component to the critique rather than an incidental choice. For most of the piece, the nudity is gratuitous—the performance could be done fully clothed and make the same point. Similarly, when the piece is pantomimed, the one to one correlation between stage movement and real life movement just serves to highlight the lack of text. In contrast, in the more abstracted sections, the movement comes to mean more than the sum of its gestures. One example of both is the explicitly queer, romantic duet between Rocke and Pyle set to the instrumental background of “He Hit Me” by Grizzly Bear—an indie rock cover of Carole King and Gerry Goffin’s “He Hit Me (and It Felt Like a Kiss)” (1962). Both skilled dancers—Pyle is the founder of the queer dance troupe Ballez and Rocke has a BFA and MFA in dance—the two perform a ballet that tells a story of two women meeting and falling in love. Though the classical choreography is at times hackneyed—they perform arabesques, grand jetés, and pirouettes— their performance queers the traditional heteronormative pairings in dance; the muscular Pyle lifts the petite Rocke, and gently carries her around the stage, as they gaze lovingly into each other’s eyes. Later, as the music picks up,
Pyle spins her, Rocke’s head and arms thrown back in ecstasy. It is intimate, particularly when the two women lie on the stage “spooning”—Rocke’s black and Pyle’s white body folding in on one another. But the queer erotics are never fully realized; the sexual power of the piece is undercut when the dancers hold hands and laugh girlishly at the end, making the preceding dance more about same-sex friendship than forceful queer desire.

As they laugh, the other performers enter and join them, also laughing. The music becomes rhythmic and robotic—sampling the intro from Swedish electronic duo The Knife’s “We Share Our Mother’s Health”—and the performer shake to the music, vibrating together as they hold on to each others’ bodies. They create a series of vibrating tableaux, holding each other’s ankles, knees, and sternums. They grab each other’s heads, putting their feet on one another’s backs, sometimes lying on the floor, sometimes kneeling, sometimes standing up. Their movements are fascinating to watch—the scene shifts from sexual to scary, at times it seems like the performers are orgasming, at others as if they are writhing in pain. The dance critiques society’s obsession with sexual pleasure—the roteness with which they get into their various positions, the ways that they seem to grip each other for support as their bodies shake, and how their faces register blank expressions all point to the ways female-bodied people are used as sexual objects in performance regardless of their own pleasure.

Nudity is also foregrounded in a solo performed by Lady Rizo in which she uses grotesque depictions of heterosexual sex and violence to flip notions of the gaze and female objectification on their head. Alone on stage, Rizo interacts with the audience, miming a series of explicit acts that quickly turn from erotic to grotesquely masochistic. Rizo is a “comedienne and chanteuse,” a cabaret performer with a monthly gig at Joe’s Pub in New York City.15 She is thin,

her blond hair cut into a hip shag. She starts by winking at a male audience member. She mimes giving him a blowjob, then a hand job, every so often pointing at him again. The scene escalates and she goes from caressing his testicles to roughly squeezing them to cutting them off with a pair of scissors and violently sewing them back on. Each sexual scenario gets a little more brutal and a little more ridiculous, and Rizo performs them all with a look that implies that the chosen men are taking pleasure in the pretend pain. At one point, she mimes giving two simultaneous hand jobs and pretends that semen sprays into her eye—a reference to pornography’s “money shot” in which a man ejaculates on a woman’s face—and then, hilariously, under both her armpits. Playing with the homophobia that forbids men from interacting in sexual scenarios featuring two men and a woman, she touches the two penises together, making kissy faces. She mimes braiding the penises together, strokes them, and then chops at them with an axe before smiling and pointing at her two victims once again. In the climax of her act, Rizo points to a man way up in the balcony. She mimes performing analingus on him, then fists him, her hand going so far into his body that it comes out of his mouth. She pulls it out, sniffs her hand and arm and mimes “call me” at the audience member.

The audience finds this routine uproariously funny; Rizo is a charismatic performer and very gifted mime. In mainstream heterosexual porn, women are objects of male pleasure, the male gaze is paramount and the narratives are constructed to fulfill male fantasies. Rizo’s act subverts the traditional pornographic gaze, forcing the audience to envision a naked man on the receiving end of Rizo’s deeds. This imaginary male then becomes the sexual object, despite the fact that Rizo is the one who is actually naked in our view. No longer are the men in the audience simply voyeurs of the naked female bodies before them. As Rizo hails various men and draws them into her performance, male audience are made visible to spectators as spectators who are
both pleased and punished for their gaze. After her routine, Rizo pauses before singing “Ar lan y môr” (“Down by the Sea”). The gorgeous, simple Welsh folk song functions as a kind of healing ritual; Rizo sings a sweet love song as if to cleanse herself of the violence she has committed and enjoyed.16

The penultimate dance is a solo by Blackwell, and a celebration of transmasculinity in which their female body slips its insistent sex. At the start of the scene, *BOB*, who is a popular neo-burlesque dancer, performs part of her striptease routine. She thrusts her large breasts out, moves her hands up the sides of her breasts and runs her fingers through her bleach-blonde hair, then brings them back down again. Smiling at the audience, she gets to her feet, stroking her extended leg from foot to the top of her thigh. She rubs her breast together, thrusting her hip to the side in time with the low bass line of the song “H.” by the heavy rock band Tool. Assuming a classic striptease posture, she places one hand forward on her hip, and folds the other behind her head. *BOB* expertly rotates her hips in a circle, making gestures with her arms as if to present her body for the audience’s consumption. At this point, Blackwell moves out of the upstage shadows and imitates *BOB*’s sexy burlesque moves. No more than a few seconds long, this brief exchange of gestures gives audiences a glimpse of gender performance reflected through a funhouse mirror. The audience sees the gestures gendered in two different ways on two different bodies, even though those bodies are sexed the same. The effortless, sexy femininity of *BOB*’s moves contrasts with Blackwell’s obvious masculinity as they mirror them.

*BOB* exits and Blackwell transforms the gestures into jazz hands, looking cautiously at the audience. They start singing a melody that sounds like a distortion of a classic striptease song, their voice low and brassy, using only the syllable “da.” They move back and forth across

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the stage, with their hands out to the sides, doing an old time soft shoe. They shake their breasts suggestively, smiling and winking at the audience. Blackwell mimes being a boxer, then a decrepit old man, then a drunk. Now slurring, they sing “da da da” more aggressively, looking at the audience menacingly as they move across the stage. They get angry and start screaming—the “da das” become wails. The mood suddenly shifts and Blackwell walks downstage quietly resuming the “da das,” flirting with the audience. They play at a stereotype of queer masculinity, snapping their fingers in front of their face and throwing their head back, strutting around the stage like a diva. Albeit brief, this is another moment that reveals layers of gender at work. The audience sees a female-bodied, male-identified person performing the queer masculinity of a drag queen—a man performing a heightened version of woman. The scene ends with Blackwell yelling one final “daaaaaa,” their arms raised, their body looking like that of a male wrestler. In this scene, audiences do experience true gender fluidity—we see the ways that different gender performances can and do manifest in one masculine but female-coded body.

After the group finale, there is a long blackout followed by the curtain call in which all the performers appear in their own clothes and some with makeup. As Charles Isherwood points out in the Times, the ending is the moment in the show in which the performers are most differentiated:

Ms. Lee’s program note also states that in the process of creation she discovered that the uninterrupted nudity “prevented the audience from imposing identities on the performers.” I think that is mostly true, and detrimental to the work’s effectiveness. Despite their various body types and distinctive faces, the performers gradually come to seem undifferentiated . . . Oddly, it was only when the show had concluded, and the cast reappeared fully clothed for the curtain call, that I got a sense of how many ways there are to be an individual woman in the world today.17

This is also the point in the show when the bodies are the least associated with their biological sex. At this moment, the diversity of gender performance across varying bodies is most readily visible. After taking their bows, the performers form two lines, and one at a time, they each dance through the two lines downstage, performing a version of their own identities with both clothes and movement, their names projected on the cube above the stage. Rocke, wearing black skinny jeans and a vest over a plaid shirt, slides into an effortless split when she reaches the end of the lines. Blackwell wears a vest, tie, and tight red jeans, and drops to the floor and does “The Worm.” In a long plaid wool skirt, Pyle does a backward somersault, revealing her bright white underwear to the audience. *BOB* and Lady Rizo look glamorous, *BOB* in a throwback red polka dotted top and black pencil skirt, Rizo in a belted black dress and statement necklace. Rizo struts forward with her hands on her hips and waves, and *BOB* does an arm wave and points at the audience and smiles. Clarke wears a skirt, a top, and cardigan sweater. When she gets downstage, she swings her head wildly in a circle. Clothes and makeup allow the performers to mask, morph, or amplify their biological sex into a chosen gender performance. Despite Lee’s desire to show gender’s fluidity through nudity, more “binary terror”—to use Vivian Patraka’s term—is elicited from clothed bodies than unclothed.18

Lee conceptualizes the naked female body as mutable. She imagines that her performers stand outside of signification, as if their bodies are blank slates for expressing sexuality, violence, rage, strength, vulnerability, sensuality, masculinity, and femininity. By stripping the clothes and makeup away, she argues, audiences can see how identity is constructed and constantly shifting, and performers can experience the liberation of not being limited by gender roles. She explains:

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If you are assigned the female gender at birth, then you grow up being constantly made to feel inadequate, inferior to men, and ashamed of your body and appearance. The performers in the show, all of whom were designated female at birth, represent people who do not suffer from those feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, and shame. They take on whatever gendered identities they want at any given moment without feeling limited by defined gender roles. In the world of the show, our non-female-identifying performer can show their nude body without having to worry that people are going to assume they are female.19

_UFS_ does negate the notion of naked female body as de facto sex object. Because it is so prolonged, the performers’ nudity becomes naturalized rather than sexualized (Pyle likened it to wearing a costume). There is also something remarkable about seeing a variety of body types of female bodies onstage—masculine, buxom, fat, skinny, black, white—because media representations present such skewed images of what women should look like. _UFS_ is a celebration of all kinds of female bodies.

Miriam Felton-Dansky reads _UFS_ as evidencing a “politics of identification” in which anonymity is powerful.20 Admitting that the piece’s feminist politics are difficult to pin down, she argues that the piece’s “asserts a form of feminism that does not need a name to forge an existence.”21 In the naked bodies of Lee’s performers, she sees “a joyful landscape of fluid associations between bodies and meaning.”22 For her, the performance “proposes a new relationship between identity and visibility, not through new forms of signification, but by refusing to signify at all.”23

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21 Ibid., 269.
22 Ibid., 261.
23 Ibid.
Yet, when female-coded bodies appear onstage unclothed, they always wear the trappings of ideology and of history. Rather than make the performers’ genders disappear, the nudity emphasizes biological sex. Powerful alliances can be forged out of this emphasis, but in this case, it actually erases notions of gender identity beyond the biological, even as it argues that anyone can take on any gender performance. As Dolan points out, “Many performers insist that the female body, stripped to its ‘essential femaleness,’ communicates a universal meaning recognizable by all women. They see the nude female body as somehow outside the system of representation that objectifies women, free of the culture’s imposed constructs and constrictions.”

Performing *UFS* was difficult for all its cast members, but Blackwell, in particular struggled with the nudity because, as Dolan points out,

Rather than stripping the performer of her socially constructed gender role, her nudity relegates her to subservient status as “woman.” From a materialist feminist perspective, the female body is not reducible to a sign free of connotation. Women always bear the mark and meaning of their sex, which inscribes them within a cultural hierarchy.

Blackwell explains that they “don’t identify with either [sex].” Although, they point out, “I feel much more masculine than half the people who have male parts are,” they fear that their gender identity does not read within the context of this performance. “If they [the audience] don’t see a dick, they don’t see a man,” Blackwell concludes. Even so, they came through the process of performing nude somewhat more at ease with their female body. “I don’t have as much body shame as I did before this whole process. I used to be really ashamed of having female parts . . . I don’t have the shame I used to. They (my breasts) don’t signify this thing to me that they always did before.”

By displaying their body, they find that bodies might not matter much in terms of one’s own gender identification, proving Lee’s point about the power of nudity to overcome the

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25 Ibid., 63.
26 Interview with Rocke, Pyle, and Blackwell on Wagler and Wortzel, “Some Feminist Stuff.”
materiality of the body. From the audience’s perspective, however, Blackwell’s concerns are justified. Despite Lee’s careful use of the term “female-coded” to describe her cast, the press consistently refers to the show as “all female” and the performers as “women.”

In its use of naked performers *Untitled Feminist Show* harkens back to the body art of the 1970s and 1980s, when women artists used nudity to raise questions about the status of women in representation and in society. *UFS* also harkens back to the exclusions of the same period when it implicitly (and explicitly, in the workshop version) insists upon female bodiedness as prerequisite for performing its nude dances, and by extension, participating in its feminisms. In this way, the production narrows the category of “woman” at the same time that it claims to subvert the connection between body and gender identity. Rather than critique the old exclusions of the Second Wave, *UFS* rehearses them, outcasting a transwoman performer in the first workshop of the piece and excising her from the final version, even as the show embraces transmasculinity.

“Can You Werk Wit Dat?”: The First Workshop

In the first workshop of *UFS*, developed as part of a residency at the New Museum, text presented by two clothed lecturers played by Blackwell and Bianca Leigh frames the naked dances. Though it was originally titled *Untitled Feminist Multimedia Technology Show* (*UFMTS*), the piece features very little media at all. The “technology” of the title references a

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28 I saw this workshop, and Lee provided me with a copy of the unpublished script to facilitate my research.
series of projections used during the opening sequence. A montage of “girlie” cartoons—My Little Ponies, prancing unicorns, rainbows, and sparkles are projected on a large upstage screen, underscored by DJ Quik’s “Can You Werk Wit Dat” before the lecturers enter. The piece includes an audience participation section, in which Blackwell solicits feedback from spectators on how we can avoid perpetuating patriarchy. After having watched the dances from the side of the stage for the entirety of the show, for the final number, set to Fischerspooner’s “Emerge,” Blackwell strips off their clothes and joins in the dancing. Leigh abandons her lecturer post and lip-syncs the role of Maria in a pantomimed version of “The Lonely Goatherd” from The Sound of Music, but does not participate in the naked dancing.

Though UFMTS begins with Blackwell welcoming the audience to “our debate on feminism,” the production is actually more of a debate about the value of bodily experience versus linguistic expression. The body ultimately wins, both within the world of the performance, and in general, by virtue of the fact that all text was cut from the final version of UFS. According to Lee, the weekend before the workshop, she wrote a script as a “placeholder to give the dances context,” and throughout, the text was presented as inherently in conflict with the bodily movements. For instance, Blackwell asks Leigh why they are not naked and Leigh responds that their job is to “debate verbally.” Blackwell says, “Fuck that. I wanna dance,” to which Leigh retorts, “You can dance when I am finished talking.” This set up of speech versus movement reifies the age-old mind/body duality that seeks to separates reason from emotion and often relates reasoning with men and masculinity and emotionality with women and femininity.

29 Orel, “Playwright Young Jean Lee on Singing, Feminism, and Writing for Brad Pitt.”
30 Young Jean Lee, “Untitled Feminist Multimedia Technology Show” (Unpublished manuscript, December 2010), 7.
Within the text of *UFMTS*, movement is described as a more efficacious expression of feminism than discussion, a sentiment Lee herself echoes in her description of the evolution of the piece. Blackwell tries to convince Leigh to join the dancers:

BECCA I really think we should just get naked and do the dances. They’re so much more effective.

BIANCA Effective at what?

BECCA At not making me feel like shit about myself.\(^{31}\)

Here, words are explicitly vilified. Discussions of feminism make people feel “like shit,” while allowing them to express themselves bodily makes them feel good. Similarly, Lee posits the academic in conflict with the experiential in an email exchange with me about the piece:

During these workshops the audience did nothing but make academic arguments about feminism. I wanted to hit people on a more emotional level, so when we kept doing workshops, I kept cutting out more and more of the text until there was nothing left but movement, and the audience was forced to react emotionally. In the U.S. a few people got mad about this and said that in order to be feminist you need to preach, but I disagree. Also, from the beginning, we found that movement communicated what we wanted much more strongly than words did. We heard that over and over again from many workshop audience members. I tried hard to write words that could compete with the movement and dance, but I couldn’t.\(^ {32}\)

Academic arguments can be emotional, and a negative reaction is an emotional reaction. Much of the text in *UFMTS* is deliberately provocative, and the anger it inspires, productive in that it generates conversations about the state and stakes of feminism today. By cutting the text, Lee makes her piece perhaps more palatable, perhaps more positive, but not necessarily more emotional.

After the opening video montage, Blackwell and Leigh take their positions behind two podiums onstage and present a series of free-associative monologues, rife with internal

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\(^{31}\) Ibid., 11.  
\(^{32}\) Lee, Email correspondence with author.
contradictions. For example, Blackwell declares:

Feminism is when a white woman wearing glasses and an expensive sweater starts attacking you.

It is unclear whether people hate feminists because they are mean, or if feminists are mean because people hate them.

Most people do not feel that calling a woman a cunt is the equivalent of calling a black person a nigger or a gay man a faggot.

A black woman once told me, “You don’t see us sitting around the ghetto talking about feminism. . . .

Gay men can be even more chauvinistic than straight men. . . .

The goals of feminism have not been achieved.33

These kinds of contradictory, inflammatory speeches are a hallmark of Lee’s work, particularly her “identity plays.” In Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven (2006), a character known only as Korean-American delivers an opening monologue that expresses internalized racist sentiments (she likens being raised by Asians to “being raised by monkeys—these retarded monkeys who can barely speak English and are too evil to understand anything besides conformity and status.”34); makes proclamations about white people (“White people are so alert to any infringements on their rights. It’s really funny.”35); and threatens the audience (“I can promise you one thing, which is that we [Koreans] will crush you.”36). Similarly, in The Shipment (2008), a black stand-up comedian starts the show with a routine performed in a stereotypical black dialect that ranges from gratuitously obscene (“If I was to take a shit onstage, use my own shit as blackface paint, fuck a human brain until I came, suck my come back out of the brain, and spit it

34 Young Jean Lee, Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven and Other Plays (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009), 40.
35 Ibid., 41.
36 Ibid.
at the audience.”

Both *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* and *The Shipment* offer provocations—Lee makes gross stereotypical generalizations and painfully honest observations back-to-back, priming the audience to think critically about their racial biases. Having raised the specter of all manner of racism, she then deconstructs popular representations of Asians and African-Americans in US culture, showing how these biases manifest in film, television, music, and dance, and theatre. By making work in which the racialized “other” explicitly controls the stage, Lee asks audiences to think about who controls these media in real life. Though perhaps difficult and unpleasant for some audiences, these productions raise crucial questions about stereotypes, white privilege, and race relations. This early version of *UFMTS* was more like the rest of Young Jean Lee’s so-called “identity plays” in this regard.

Throughout *UFMTS*, Leigh and Blackwell present contradictions in this provocative vein, offering suggestions about what feminism does and should mean. They relay disparate anecdotes about women’s experience as simple statements without comment and without relating the statements to one another. For instance, Leigh says, “To have a woman’s body, to menstruate and be able to bear children, is a tremendous power” and follows this statement with “I think of my body as a cage that traps me into an identity I don’t want”—letting an essentialist cultural

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38 Ibid., 15.
39 Ibid., 14.
feminist notion stand next to what might be a transgender person’s statement about their body.\textsuperscript{40}

There are expressions of “girlie” feminism. For example, Leigh says,

Unicorns, kittens, rainbows, the color pink, mermaids, ballerinas in tutus, Hello Kitty, Little House on the Prairie, and Strawberry Shortcake are inherently feminine and childish. Men and powerful women should not be attracted to such things . . . When I see those things, it makes me sad. I feel a sense of loss and yearning. I want to embrace them and be embraced by them. I want to see myself in that world and revel in it.\textsuperscript{41}

There are also stories of generational conflict, of stay-at-home wives and mothers feeling judged by their daughters’ feminism, believing that “Being a good mother and wife requires as much hard work and skill as being a doctor, and if you really want to empower women you should start by giving them credit for their accomplishments!”\textsuperscript{42} There are disturbing stories about the ways in which young women are taught their place in society. Blackwell states matter-of-factly:

When a woman of my demographic is sixteen, it is common for her to get a small part in her school’s production of Hamlet, and to go to a cast party at which she ends up smoking pot in the bathroom with Hamlet himself. He naturally will want to have sex. If she says no, he may decide to have sex with her anyway, given that he is Hamlet and she must be playing hard to get. While it is happening, she may keep still to get it over with as quickly as possible. Typically she will not scream, because her friends are right outside and it is embarrassing to be getting raped.\textsuperscript{43}

Embodying contradictions, the text represents the diversity of understandings of what feminism and being a woman means. The performance of these statements creates a multi-vocality similar to that in Room for Cream’s gay marriage episode, and its expansive, inter-generational understanding of feminism embodies a post-wave politics.

Another powerful instance of multi-vocal intersectional feminist identification occurs just before the final dance. Against Blackwell’s protest that such confessionals are “cheesy,” all of the performers come up to the podium and identify themselves as feminists. Bianca, for

\textsuperscript{40} Lee, “Untitled Feminist Multimedia Technology Show,” 5–6.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 5.
example, explains, “I am a woman of transsexual experience, and I am a feminist”; Pyle states, “I am a lesbian, and I am a feminist;” and *BOB* declares, “I have a ninth grade education, and I am a feminist.” It is the only time the audience gets to hear the dancers, who have otherwise remained silent, speak, and the audience assumes they are speaking as themselves in this moment. The performers claim subjectivity as they claim feminism.

In offering two facets of their identities in their statements, the performers acknowledge identity’s inherent intersectionality, and argue for feminism’s compatibility with various other identifications. Accepting diversity among feminists and feminist positions is an important part of making post-wave feminism viable. None of the performers, including the one woman of color in the piece, mention race when claiming their feminist identities, demonstrating yet again the ways in which feminism tends to exclude critical race analysis. Though Blackwell undercuts the moment by looking at the audience “apologetically,” saying, “that was not my idea for how to end things,” it is a remarkable moment of theatre, in which Lee and her performers carve out a feminist space within the historically male-dominated, often anti-feminist context of New York City’s experimental theatre scene. It is a moment that combats the notion that women today are afraid to identify as feminist, an explicit critique of the postfeminist idea that feminism is dead. That the final version of *UFS* does not include these feminist confessions shifts the political meaning of the piece.

The lack of lecturer characters in the final version of the piece also changes the ways in which the audience views the naked bodies of the performers. In the workshop, the audience watches Blackwell and Leigh watching the naked dancers, making visible the audience’s gaze by commenting on their own. At the end of the first dance, for example, Bianca, who the script

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44 Ibid., 15.
45 Ibid., 16.
describes as being “very moved,” exclaims that it was beautiful.\textsuperscript{46} Meanwhile, after a dance that ends with a view of *BOB*’s crotch, Becca says, “I can’t help objectifying women. When you see a hot woman, how are you supposed to not want to fuck her? And why can’t I share my feelings about it with my friends?”\textsuperscript{47} Their comment raises one of the major dilemmas of post-wave feminism: that of the objectification of women. Though Third Wave feminist politics were concerned with empowering women as desiring, sexual subjects, as Angela McRobbie argues, this empowerment quickly turned into exploitation of woman as objects in the era of postfeminism. Blackwell’s comment asks audiences to think critically about how we perceive the naked women before us, and how objectification—whether by other women, by men, or by ourselves—aligns with or thwarts feminist objectives.

The performance derails during a moment of audience interaction, in which Lee leaves her performers to take responsibility for a text they didn’t write. Unlike the autobiographical work of the 70s, 80s, and 90s in which performers moved from object to subject as the creators of their own performance work, in \textit{UFS} and especially in \textit{UFMTS}, Lee has ultimate authorial control, and therefore the performers are relegated to non-speaking objects broadcasting her message. For instance, whereas performance theorist Rebecca Schneider discusses artists like Carolee Schneemann as “not only image but image-maker,”\textsuperscript{48} here, Lee is the ostensible image-maker, using these bodies to make images that speak her thoughts on feminism. This becomes uncomfortable when Blackwell initiates a talkback with the audience. Toward the end of the piece, the houselights come up, and Blackwell approaches the audience, saying

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{48} Rebecca Schneider, \textit{The Explicit Body in Performance} (London ; New York: Routledge, 1997), 35.
There’s patriarchy everywhere. Everyone takes on the male perspective and contributes to their own oppression. But what’s the alternative? That’s a serious question. I’m asking you. What’s the alternative? Anyone? I can see there are some smart-looking people out there. Someone must have an answer. Maybe it’s not a good question. If so, can anyone think of a better one?

With Lee nowhere to be seen, the audience addressed the performers as the authors of the piece, putting them in the vulnerable position of defending a performance text that they didn’t create (while most of them were naked).

As troubling as it was, the “talk-back” in the first workshop brought audiences into the performance, asking them—in light of what they had seen and heard—to articulate how gender oppression operates in their own lives and to offer possible solutions to it. Blackwell’s opening statement takes for granted the fact that gender oppression exists in our society today and points out that we all perpetuate it. The “talk-back” invited audiences to evaluate their own relationship to feminism, or to pose their own questions about its relevance. Similarly, the questionnaire format of the Prelude version of the show guided the audience to think critically about some of the issues Lee attempts to explore in the piece—the complex identities of the performers, what the dances depict or deconstruct. In the final version of UFS, spectators are hailed at several different moments in the performance, but not invited into it—we consume what we see onstage, but we are not asked to analyze our relationship to it or to think critically about how we might engage with feminism after we leave the performance.

At the end of UFMITS, Blackwell abandons their position of lecturer and joins the dancers; this narrative—the only real arch of the piece—contributes to the essentialist understanding of gender espoused by it. After the discussion with the audience, Blackwell takes their place back at the podium and tells the audience, “I don’t identify as a woman, yet somehow
I find myself in that category.”⁴⁹ Despite not identifying as female, in the world of the performance, Blackwell can join the other dancers because they are biologically female. On the other hand, Leigh, a trans woman, refuses to participate in the naked dance. She does not offer a reason for her refusal to get naked, but the implication is that the stakes of onstage nudity are higher for her as a trans woman. Trans women have historically been objectified and exploited; they are often forced to negotiate society’s curiosity about and fixation on their genitalia.⁵⁰

BECCA I think it’s inspiring. Let’s take off our clothes.

BIANCA You can get naked. I’m not going to.

BECCA Why not?

BIANCA Because I would just never do that in a million years.

BECCA It’ll be liberating!

BIANCA What’s liberating about taking off your clothes when you don’t want to?

BECCA You can’t do the closing dance if you’re not naked.

BIANCA Why can’t I do it wearing clothes?

BECCA Because it won’t look as good.

BIANCA Well, I guess there are always limits to inclusiveness.⁵¹

The exclusion of a trans woman from the “liberating” feminist finale rehearses the historical exclusion of trans women from feminist spaces and events, which, in some circles, continues today.⁵² Leigh’s sly comment about the limits of inclusiveness references this history. After

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⁵² See, for example, Goldberg, “The Dispute Between Radical Feminism and Transgenderism.”
Leigh eventually left the show, the transfeminine experience disappears entirely from *UFS*.

Although, the transmasculine experience is validated and celebrated during Blackwell’s solo in the final version of *UFS*, the transfeminine experience is not. With Leigh’s erasure, and with its emphasis on female bodies, *UFS* seems to argue that feminism is a politics that applies to women-born-women only.

**Conclusion: “I Choose my Choice!”**

Lee’s goal with her plays in general is, “to figure out ways to get people to consider and engage with things they want to dismiss”  

Because she identifies as a feminist, she notes, “It was important for us to put ‘feminist’ in the title to show that we embraced that word and that it could be associated with something that was also entertaining and fun.”  

At this, she is successful. The show was very well received by audiences and has toured widely—across the U.S. and around the world. It is by far the most widely produced and reviewed of the shows I take up in this dissertation. Artistic Director and Co-founder of Mount Tremper Arts, where Lee was in residency in 2011, Mathew Pokoik reflects,

> we have never had a show that received such an enthusiastic / emotional / spiritual / dramatic / passionate / positive response from our audience as *UFS* – nothing else even close. We had a wonderful and amazing group within the audience that included a diverse set of individuals, including a large contingent (maybe 40% of the audience) of older lesbian couples from the local community. Certainly one of the more obvious reactions

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53 This heading references Season 4 Episode 7 of *Sex in the City* in which the character of Charlotte decides to stop working after her marriage to a wealthy man. Defending her decision to her friend Miranda, a high-powered attorney, she says, “The women's movement is supposed to be about choice. And if I choose to quit my job, that is my choice,” eventually yelling, “I choose my choice! I choose my choice!”

54 Satter, 30.

55 Lee, Email correspondence with author.
was a great joy, pleasure, and gratitude regarding the diverse body types of the performers, and how that was expressed and utilized throughout UFS.56

As he notes, many spectators, including feminist spectators, found the final version of the piece to be thrilling and utopic. Performer Erin Markey, who would perform in subsequent iterations of UFS writes,

There’s more than one way to communicate something. In this instance, the silence was an exhilarating way to give me a kind of total authorship over my experience. It was the feeling of watching it that i liked [sic]. And it made me think about that feeling a little more. I like that feeling. I've felt it often before and I want to feel it often again.57

She argues for the value of feelings as political, emphasizing that locating and seeking out certain feelings can be a kind of feminist pursuit. On Culturebot.org, Cassie Peterson, a performing arts critic and self-defined “lavender menace,” describes the show “a visceral in-your-face clash of varying feminist paradigms . . . where every archetype, stereotype, caricature, and construction of ‘woman’ is performed in a chaotic First-, Second-, and Third-Wave Feminist Mash-Up.”58 She finds the performance to be:

an ecstatic celebration of choice—both as a reclamation of the power in historical “female” gender roles and as a pioneering vision into futuristic, feminist utopias. The age-old currents of sexism, misogyny, able-ism, size-ism and transphobia are revealed in this dramatic vacillation and our collective notions of “womanhood” and “feminism” are shattered into a million pieces.59

The characterization of the show as “a celebration of choice” which provides a vision into “futuristic, feminist utopias” is telling. Living in an era of “choice feminism,” we practice a

59 Ibid.
defanged feminist politics that is never fully critical and never fully engaged. Like postfeminism, it is a problematic millennial politics that uses the name “feminism” precisely to foreclose on its potential. Postfeminism, is an assumption of the “pastness” of feminism, to use Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra’s term. As Angela McRobbie contends, it is more insidious than merely a backlash; postfeminism acknowledges feminism as something over and done, something accounted for and therefore no longer useful or applicable. Having peaked in the early 2000s, postfeminism no longer describes our current cultural climate in the U.S. (McRobbie, Tasker, and Negra are British scholars writing in 2009 and 2007, respectively.) As I discuss in the conclusion, today, all manner of celebrities identify as feminist and advocate feminist politics—so many that in February 2014, an article on Jezebel.com asked: “What does it mean if feminism becomes trendy?”

“Choice feminism” asserts that feminism’s primary fight is to offer women choices, and argues that, therefore, all choices are feminist. It allows people to claim the feminist mantle, and subsume any number of pursuits under its rubric. It emphasizes the belief in equality between men and women, but like postfeminism, “choice feminism” is centered on individual performance as the primary location of politics. At its heart, it is more interested in entertainment than true engagement that might lead to real change.

Lee seems to echo these ideas when she claims that the final iteration of UFS is feminist, but is not about feminism:

Though, I think there are a lot of different definitions of feminism, and the show does not attempt to define feminism or make a statement about it. This show is not a ‘feminist’ show in the sense that it attempts to define feminism or engage in a feminist argument.

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We think of it as a show that is feminist rather than a show about feminism, and it is feminist because it attempts to challenge the notion of what people with female-coded bodies (especially female-coded bodies that deviate from an accepted norm) are supposed to be like.\textsuperscript{62}

The idea that feminism is simply breaking stereotypical notions of gender performance is at once outdated and perfectly millennial. It is an individualist perspective concerned mostly with one’s own performance but little more. In other words, it doesn’t engage with structural inequalities. Even the fact that the show is \textit{untitled} seems appropriate: Lee cannot seem to find the words to express how the show is feminist other than by claiming that it \textit{is} feminist. It evacuates feminism of any real meaning and any possibility of forcing real change.

In \textit{UFS}, the privileging of movement over words is a means of entertaining audiences and avoiding true engagement with the complexities of contemporary feminism, emphasizing instead an uninterrogated notion of gender fluidity. \textit{Times} writer Claudia La Rocco who began her career as a dance critic, points out that the choreography of the piece “feels, frankly, like dance made by theater folks: simplistic and schlocky, with no understanding of what it doesn’t know.”\textsuperscript{63} The same could be said about the feminism of the piece. Lee tells the \textit{Wall Street Journal}, “I don’t know Feminist theory or history. I do a lot of stuff that is not very empowered . . . Somebody sent me a link to a Wikipedia entry on radical Feminism. I tried to read it and couldn’t get through it.”\textsuperscript{64} \textit{UFS} demonstrates no understanding of what it doesn’t know about feminism and feminist performance history.

I was enraged by the first version of the show, but I enjoyed watching the final version. I found \textit{UFMTS} difficult to watch because, in its attempts to articulate what feminism means to us today, it presented ideas with which I disagree in a form that disregarded its performers’ labor. It

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} Lee, Email correspondence with author.
\item \textsuperscript{63} La Rocco, “All the Naked Ladies.”
\item \textsuperscript{64} Orel, “Playwright Young Jean Lee on Singing, Feminism, and Writing for Brad Pitt.”
\end{itemize}
embodied a complex range of potential relationships to the concept of feminism. Simply a
celebration of our ability to take on whatever identity we choose, however, *UFS* was easy to
watch because it was easy to agree with its position that female-bodied people can/should/do
perform a range of roles. “It’s not really a sendup,” Lee explained prior to the premier, “It’s
much closer to actually being a Feminist show.” I certainly didn’t want the piece to be a “send-
up” of feminism—that was my initial fear—but a more complicated engagement with it would
have been more thought-provoking, potentially inspiring real change.

As queer theorist Ann Cvetkovich argues in *An Archive of Feelings*, feminist “safe space”
does not necessarily indicate a space in which all present are in total agreement. In fact, she
writes, “the power of the notion of safe space resides in its double status as the name for both a
space free of conflict and a space in which conflict and anger can emerge as a necessary
compONENT of psychic resolution.” She continues, “the pain and conflict inevitably unleashed
when safe spaces are established should be considered signs of success rather than of failure.”
Lee’s other identity plays demand critical thinking about identity because they engender conflict,
both onstage and in their audiences. Ostensibly *UFS* does this too, showing a range of roles
female-bodied people can play, and displaying both the “good” and “bad” sides of femininity
and masculinity. There is so little substance to the onstage imagery created through the
choreography, however, that there is nothing with which to contend. Rather than add complexity
to the piece, Lee ends up arguing nothing at all. As dramaturg Jeremy M. Barker points out

Lee seems to assume that the presentation of various realities—diversity of
representations, diversity of behaviors, diversity of bodies—is somehow utopian and

65 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
that these things, in and of themselves, offer a critique of the dominant paradigm rather
the existing comfortably within it.  

Here, Barker critiques Lee’s notion that simply offering a range of representations amounts to a
cohesive feminist politics, and condemns the show’s banality and what he characterizes as its
“self-evident” arguments that he likens to those discussed in your “eighth-grade health class.”

Lee hopes UFS “represents a small part of a utopian feminist experience,” a glimpse of a
world as feminists dream it could be. Transposing Cvetkovich’s thoughts on safe space to the
notion of utopia, however, I contend that a feminist utopia is not necessarily a conflict-free zone,
a solely celebratory space. Instead, a feminist utopia is populated by a broad spectrum of
participants with intersectional identities and divergent backgrounds. It is a conflictual space in
which we are all actively engaged, sometimes in arguments, sometimes in agreement. By
limiting the language in UFS, by eliminating the talkback, and by focusing exclusively on
female-coded bodies, Lee cuts off the possibility of painful political engagement which might
lead audiences to reassess their own feminisms, to realign their politics in the ways I argue Half
Straddle, Dyke Division and Dynasty Handbag’s performances do. Instead, Lee favors facile
“choice feminism” and entertainment.

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68 Barker, “Young Jean Lee’s ‘Untitled Feminist Show.’”
69 Ibid.
70 Lee, Email correspondence with author.
Conclusion: Feminism as a Trending Topic

I am a modern-day feminist. I do believe in equality, and that we have a ways to go and it's something that's pushed aside and something that we have been conditioned to accept. ---Beyoncé Knowles

Today, feminism is a trending topic on stages large and small. The past few years have seen more and more experimental theatre companies following the lead of the Dyke Division, Half Straddle, and Jibz Cameron, presenting explicitly queer, feminist, and female-focused work. The T.E.A.M., whose previous productions evidence an uninterrogated heteronormativity, premiered *RoosevElvis* (2013), a two-hander that follows Teddy Roosevelt and Elvis Presley on a queer road trip across America.¹ In it, the two icons of masculinity are portrayed by women in drag (Kristen Sieh and Libby King, respectively), and it includes a sub-plot about a working class butch lesbian. Banana, Bag, and Bodice’s *LongYarn* (2016) marks a departure from the group’s arguably masculine aesthetic. The piece prominently features Jessica Jelliffe as a larger-than-life old woman spinning stories from her past—many of which center on her experience as a female. She recounts, for instance, facing the threat of physical harm from a group of men and prevailing. After years of producing male-dominated work based on the canon of “great American novels” like *The Great Gatsby*, *The Sun Also Rises*, and *The Sound and the Fury*, Elevator Repair Service asked experimental playwright Sibyl Kempson to write a new play that features the women of the company. The resulting piece, *Fondly, Collette Richland*, premiered at the New York Theatre Workshop in fall of 2015. Kempson’s formation of the Seven Daughters

¹ See, for example, *Mission Drift* (2011), which tells the story of the rise and fall of real estate in Las Vegas framed as a heterosexual romance.
of Eve Thtr & Perf Co. earlier that year evidences her own interest in women-centered work; the company’s mission, she says, is “to explore performance narrative in a more feminine way.”

This shift in New York City’s experimental theatre scene is due, in part, to the proliferation of post-wave pop feminism through the work of the artists discussed throughout “Straddling Feminisms.” Half Straddle legitimates queer femininity as an experimental aesthetic in what has historically been a masculine field. Dyke Division’s Room for Cream created a large community of artists and audience members, demonstrating for both that there is a real desire for politically engaged experimental performance. The series encouraged the artists involved to think anew about their own work’s relation to lesbian feminist histories and politics, and many have gone on to create innovative explicitly queer and feminist performance. Kate Benson (Ellie in RFC) for instance, presented her critically acclaimed, deeply feminist play, A Beautiful Day in November on the Banks of the Greatest of the Great Lakes at the New Georges Theatre in 2015. Lea Robinson made a solo show based on her RFC character, Officer Ruffins. Additionally, the artists associated with RFC have continued to collaborate with one another and to support one another’s work—Sacha Yanow served as dramaturg on Jibz Cameron’s Soggy Glasses and Jess Barbagallo consulted on Becca Blackwell’s solo They, Themself, and Schmerm (2016). The series inspired like-minded artist/audience members as well. In the wake of the series, Tina Satter cast Blackwell in Half Straddle’s Seagull (Thinking of You). I started collaborating with Elizabeth Whitney after seeing her in RFC. Casey Llewellyn was in the audience for many an episode of Room for Cream and her O, Earth—a queering of Thornton Wilder’s Our Town

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which debuted at HERE Arts Center in 2016, takes much further an idea staged in Episode 3.3, in which Sappho stands in for Grover’s Corners.

On larger stages too, artists are declaring themselves feminist, a shift that reaffirms that experimental performance is always on the cultural pulse, predicting the trends in the mainstream if not producing them. In February 2014, an article on Jezebel.com cited the many performers—pop singers Miley Cyrus and Lorde, actors Claire Danes and Rashida Jones among them—who recently “came out” as feminist, asking: “What does it mean if feminism becomes trendy?”

Later that year, pop star Beyoncé Knowles received the Michael Jackson Video Vanguard Award at MTV’s annual Video Music Awards ceremony. She took to the stage at the end of the event and performed a medley of tracks from her groundbreaking self-titled album released in 2013. During the song “Flawless”—which features Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie defining “feminist”—the word “F-E-M-I-N-S-T” appeared in bright white across the LED screen upstage. Beyoncé stood downstage in shadow, her legs apart, mic in hand, her long hair flowing, her small waist accentuated by a bedazzled body suit that reflected the stage lights in brilliant beams. “Feminist,” Adichie says, “the person who believes in social, political, and economic equality of the sexes.” Beyoncé turns, asking the audience, “How did you wake up this morning?” She repeats the question. The audience roars, and she launches into the song, which affirms, “We flawless,” instructing, “ladies, tell ‘em/ I woke up like this.” The song offers a complicated message. On the one hand it seems to promote natural beauty—we are all flawless no matter what—but on the other hand, it advocates a denial of the work demanded to maintain high standards (and certainly Bey’s standard) of feminine beauty. Is this a kind of post-wave pop feminist performance? Possibly.

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3 Beusman, “What Does It Mean for Feminism If Feminism Becomes Trendy?”
The rubric of post-wave pop feminism helps us to parse through Beyoncé’s politics. Leading into the song “Jealous,” during that same VMA performance, she says, “Perfection is so . . .” and dismissingly cocks her head to the side with a look of disgust on her face. It is an expression of her acknowledgment of her failure to live up to U.S. society’s standards of beauty—perfection is skinny and white—a small gesture of post-wave feminism. When she sings the line, “I’m just human. Don’t judge me,” at the song’s conclusion, this is an admission of “bad feminism” à la Cameron and Gay.

Post-wave pop feminism allows us to understand Beyoncé’s interpolation of New Orleans bounce artist Big Freedia’s words on “Formation” (released on the eve of her Superbowl performance in January of 2016) as a desire to make her feminism queer- and trans- inclusive. “Formation” and its accompanying video are rallying cries that operate at the intersection of blackness and gender. The video features imagery that draws connections between the Civil Rights, the Black Panther, and the Black Lives Matter Movements—creating an historical through-line in a post-wave fashion. Ultimately, it is women (well, “ladies”) that Beyoncé calls to “get in formation” to fight the white patriarchy. The song’s chorus incorporates black gay slang, repeating the phrase “cause I slay,” a twist on Big Freedia’s “I came to slay, bitch!” heard in the song’s opening. Some critics argue that the song is a powerful coalition-building expression of queerness.\(^4\) (Big Freedia is gay, and though male, she uses the feminine pronoun for her stage persona.\(^5\)) Others see it as an example of cultural appropriation without appropriate


credit—Freedia doesn’t actually appear in the video. Is this effective post-wave pop feminism or might this pop cultural text be fodder for the Dynasty Handbag treatment in Cameron’s next show?

In her 2012 book, *Everywhere and Nowhere*, Jo Reger laments that, though the effects of feminist movements are undoubtedly felt in all aspects of U.S. society, the fact that so few women claim the label of feminism means that it has actually disappeared. Just four years after her book was published, however, I am feeling feminism everywhere. Gone is the much lamented “feminism fatigue” and the much-maligned “postfeminist” malaise. From Roxane Gay’s *Bad Feminist* to Emma Watson’s “HeForShe” campaign, to the popularity of the “solidarity is for white women” hashtag on Twitter, to the editor of Cosmopolitan declaring the magazine “deeply feminist,” to the *New Yorker’s* article on TERFs (trans-exclusive radical feminists)—people are defining and debating contemporary feminisms. Disavowal is no longer people’s dominant mode of engaging with feminism.

With this renewed interest in feminist politics, we run the risk of a problem opposite to the one Reger identifies: if everyone claims feminism, how can it possibly have an effective political agenda? Post-wave feminism, as embodied in the performances I analyze here, argues for a plural approach, one that asks us all to imagine ourselves as lesbian feminists, one that

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7 See Aston, “Feeling the Loss of Feminism.”
10 Martin, *Difficult Men*.
11 Goldberg, “The Dispute Between Radical Feminism and Transgenderism.”
encourages us all to practice femininity, one that assure us that we will all fail to be perfect feminists, but tells us to keep trying.

This moment, then, is an opportunity if also a challenge, and the post-wave feminist performance of the Dyke Division, Half Straddle, and Jibz Cameron can help point a way forward. By theorizing our larger cultural moment as post-wave, rather than postfeminist, we mobilize people across generations, genders, and sexualities. Post-wave feminists must continue to emphasize multi-vocality, without subscribing to an uncritical kind of “choice feminism.” We need to strive for increased intersectionality—interrogating and eradicating the racial biases in our politics and representations. We must continue to critique the popular culture we consume, asking for more nuanced and varied depictions of our world. And finally, we must recognize that post-wave pop feminism is always in process.
Appendix

Room for Cream Episode Guide

Season One

Episode 1: “Welcome to Sappho” by Jess Barbagallo
Episode 2: Untitled by Laryssa Husiak
Episode 3: Untitled by Laura Berlin Stinger
Episode 4: Untitled by Jess Barbagallo
Episode 5: Untitled by The Dyke Division
Episode 6: “Arisen” by Brooke O’Harra
Episode 7: “Chained and Bound to You” by Brendan Connelly
Episode 8: Untitled by Laura Berlin Stinger
Episode 9: “My Finger on Your Trigger” by Jess Barbagallo
Episode 10: “Here Pussy, Pussy” by Laryssa Husiak and Brooke O’Harra
Episode 11: “Field of Queers” by Jess Barbagallo

Season Two

Episode 1: Untitled by Jess Barbagallo
Episode 2: Untitled by Brooke O’Harra and Laryssa Husiak
Episode 3: Untitled by Brendan Connelly
Episode 4: “Of Age” by Laura Stinger
Episode 5: Untitled by Jess Barbagallo
Episode 6: Untitled by Laryssa Husiak
Episode 7: Untitled by Brooke O’Harra and Barbara Lanciers
Episode 8: “Last Call” by Jess Barbagallo

Season Three

Episode 1: Untitled by Jess Barbagallo and Laryssa Husiak
Episode 2: “Time for Some Heads to Fly” by Barbara Lanciers
Episode 3: “Our Town” by The Dyke Division
Episode 4: “This Woman’s Work” by Jess Barbagallo, Barbara Lanciers and Sacha Yanow
Episode 5: “I Love You” by Jess Barbagallo, Laryssa Husiak, and Brooke O’Harra
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