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REDEFINING POLITICAL THEATRE: MASOCHISM AND THE
PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Redefining Political Theatre: Masochism and the Problem of Identity

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This dissertation proposes that the psychoanalytic concept of masochism is indispensable in interpreting race and gender politics in contemporary American theatre by women of color. The plays I examine – Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus*, Adrienne Kennedy’s *The Ohio State Murders* and Alice Tuan’s *Hit* – use race and gender to expose the manner in which the democratic principles of modernity are not fulfilled, despite the appearance of equality. They do this, paradoxically, by staging the ways in which social factors might produce political conformity rather than defiance. Masochism, I argue, offers a compelling critical lens into the failures of liberal democracy as experienced by women of color. These failures surface as crises in the idealized concept of the autonomous, free-willing subject, a concept on which the democratic principles are based. Unlike much political theatre, the plays in this study do not represent efforts to achieve such an idealized subject position. Instead they depict masochistic subjects for whom such positions are unavailable, delineating the inadequacies of liberal democracy as they pertain to racialized and gendered subjects in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

I proceed from the recognition that masochism, an inherently cultural phenomenon, is an acted-out symptom of the discrepancy between modernity's ideals of sovereignty and equality and a differently experienced reality. More than merely serving as a mechanism of sexual gratification, masochism is a complex psychic and social matrix, always both adaptive and defensive. It is in fact a paradoxical act of resistance, a defense mechanism for those for whom autonomy is out of reach. Through close readings of the three plays, I provide an example of masochism's usefulness in interpreting the politics in dramas that represent women of color whose masochistic behavior perpetuates rather than defies their oppression. Formally and thematically closer to the theatre of Jean Genet than to that of the Black Arts Movement or feminist groups, these plays foreground a new way of representing race and gender-based social criticism in the theatre.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: The Paradoxical Politics of Masochism

Theatrical expression is not a discourse. It does not address itself to man's rational faculties. It is a poetic act that imposes itself as a categorical imperative. Confronted by such an imperative, reason, although it does not disappear altogether, has to accept its subservience. (qtd. in Lavery, "Reading" 73).
Jean Genet ("Preface to *The Blacks*")

The bold title of this dissertation – “Redefining Political Theatre” – is deliberate. I have chosen it in order to insist that the term “political theatre” is still a valuable tool of American theatre criticism against the prevailing view that the term has become pointless after it served its purpose describing the explicitly political theatre of the 1960s and 70s. The era witnessed both the proliferation of leftist agit-prop and of theatre that insisted that the personal is political, theatre that often located resistance in depictions of strong identity. Of the two trends the latter has proved more resilient to the changes in the political climate and has persisted into the 21st century. This study, as it concentrates on contemporary representations of race and gender, is concerned with challenging the foundations of such identity-based politics in the theatre rather than with leftist politics. That said, the plays that I use as examples – Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus* (1996), Adrienne Kennedy’s *The Ohio State Murders* (1992) and Alice Tuan’s *Hit* (2000) – are all also in conversation with the issues of class, capitalism and particularly with global capital’s depoliticized nature. They never, however, openly or deliberately protest against capitalist oppression but rather in subtle ways seek to expose the manner in which the

ideology of global capitalism not only taints the principles of liberal democracy but also molds individual identities.

These three plays are formally dissimilar, and they are concerned with different time periods ranging from the early nineteenth century to the present. Yet they share a commonality: they all represent female identity as permeable, susceptible to the normative demands of dominant culture, and hence, as I interpret it, as an unreliable location of political resistance. In fact, they never stage protest or resistance at all, but show their heroines as willingly perpetuating the circumstances that seem to oppress them: *Venus's* South African heroine co-operates with the Europeans who exhibit her as a side show freak, the African American college student of *The Ohio State Murders* protects her white literature professor's reputation even after he has killed their illegitimate twins and *Hit's* Korean American adoptee perpetuates her feelings of objectification by commodifying her ethnicity and making money on it.

The legacy of the 60s and 70s identity-based theatre, which I argue still informs the way theatrical representations of particularly race and gender are interpreted, would render such representations as apolitical, offensive and even reactionary. I propose, however, that they are profoundly political because they candidly represent identity's shortcomings and are thus capable of exposing the ways in which the socially disenfranchised might participate in upholding structures of domination. Such a way of creating political content in the theatre does not, as it might seem, put the responsibility of the oppressive circumstances on the victims. It rather illuminates the manner in which social domination inspires conformity rather than defiance and shifts the attention away from the individual. I am alluding here to domination that is less about material

conditions than about their effects on subjectivities, for I believe it is on such a level that social inequalities today, during an era of presumed equality, do most damage. In order for such representations' politics to be properly teased out, I argue that they are best interpreted with the framework of masochism.

I suggest it is particularly the concept of resistance and its representation in the theatre that need to be redefined in order for the term political theatre to have currency today. Masochism is indispensable in such a task because it is in fact a paradoxical form of resistance, a defiance that is more on par with contemporary forms of domination, operating on the level of subjectivity, than the ones political theatre is used to staging. It bears similarities to Michel Foucault's view of power and resistance: he claimed that the same power that shapes us, that molds our desires and identities, also inspires resistance. If we accept Foucault's definition of power, if it indeed operates deep within us and inspires both self-policing and opposition, what kind of resistance to it can be represented on stage? To oppose such a power with placards and demonstrations, as was the strategy of agit-prop theatre, does not make any sense. But neither do representations that make claims to equality based on victimization nor those that represent characters heroically claiming agency and fighting against oppression for they both perceive power as an easily defined enemy, operating only outside the subject.

A central claim of this dissertation is that theatrical representations of victimization or of acts of claiming agency, though designed to instigate change and to give a sense of empowerment to the disenfranchised in the audience, in fact help uphold the prevailing structures of domination. My position is informed by Wendy Brown's political theory. She asserts that while today the fictional basis of the "autonomous,

willing, reasoning, rights-bearing subject convened by modernity” (Politics 10) is widely acknowledged, “yet we continue to operate politically as if these premises still held, and as if the political-cultural narratives based on them were intact” (Politics 4). That is, the autonomous subject and the concepts of sovereignty and egalitarianism based on it are still the functional bases both for the state and the individual, even though their premises reveal more and more to be illusory. Brown argues that our political narratives hold onto these Enlightenment principles even as their believability is constantly undermined by the increasingly visible evidence of the contrary: individuals continue to be hierarchized in terms of race, gender, sexuality and wealth. Using Foucault’s theory of subjectivity constituted by power, Brown suggests that these hierarchies “not only position but form us.” In the process, “the self-made autonomously willing, sovereign subject all but vanishes” (Politics 11). It seems to me that theatrical representations of fortifications of identity, especially of those who are hierarchized according to the categories Brown lists, are based on this Enlightenment concept of an autonomous subject. That is, representations of characters successfully claiming agency participate in upholding the fictional premise of egalitarianism by making it seem the position of autonomy is available for everyone.

Representations of victimization due to societal hierarchies, another strategy of identity-based theatre, function in a similar way. In her critique of identity politics, Brown argues that politicized identities are based on a notion of victimization that in fact validates the white, male, heteronormative and middle class societal values, because it is “a protest against exclusion” (States 65) from being able to partake in them. In other words, the politicization of particularized identities, often based on racial, gendered or

sexual difference, only seemingly challenges the principles of egalitarianism as exclusionary. The challenge of politicized identities remains ostensible, because as it opposes exclusion, “it posits a sovereign and unified “I” that is disenfranchised by an exclusive “we”” (States 64-65). This willingly claimed position of particularized victimization, or of a sovereign ‘I’ excluded from the universal category of ‘we,’ in fact validates the prevailing concept of sovereignty based on a notion of unified subjectivity. According to Brown, this identity production, as it concentrates on the exclusion of the disenfranchised based on racial, gendered or sexual difference, also discourages class-based criticism: the middle class basis of the ideals that the disenfranchised claim to have been excluded from is obscured in the process.

I agree with Brown’s critique of identity politics, but I want to be very clear here about my argument in regards to agency: I do acknowledge that political agency is of utmost importance in political struggles *outside the theatre* and is necessary for political participation. My point is that *representing the disenfranchised claiming agency in the theatre* for the purpose of instigating change does not achieve the desired end, but rather has the opposite effect of upholding prevailing societal hierarchies. I am not the first, of course, to point out the limits of identity-based theatre. The onset of poststructuralist theory in the 1980s challenged the idea of unified subjectivity and rendered identities as fragmented and imaginary. Accordingly, feminist theatre critics using such theory maintained that “coherent conceptions of identity are specious since even race, class, and sexuality, as well as gender, are constructed within discursive fields and changeable within the flux of history” (Dolan 96). Such criticism was a response not only to identity-based theatre but also to the challenges that the feminist movement faced in the 80s:

women of color and feminists of working class backgrounds claimed that their experience was not represented by the mainstream feminism, which portrayed white middle-class women's experience as universal. What ensued was a dissemination of "feminism" into "feminisms."¹

In terms of theatre, the feminist critics using poststructuralist theory – for example Sue-Ellen Case, Elin Diamond and Jill Dolan – turned their focus on the way meaning is made in theatrical representations and especially on the ways in which gender and race are constructed in performance. The type of theatre they, and many other critics favoring postmodern styles of performances, deemed politically productive foregrounded such processes rather than concentrated on depictions of unified identity, victimization or resistance. In the 1980s and 90s, during the peak of poststructuralist criticism, the object of theatre criticism also changed: it expanded from the confines of drama texts performed in theatre buildings to performance art and everyday life as performance. For a while the emphasis on small, particularized performances, which were cheap to produce and due to their ephemeral nature seemed to escape commodification, brought up new, exciting possibilities for performing politics. In terms of feminist politics, for example the lesbian group *Split Britches*' ironic shows about lesbian role-play and Karen Finley's performance art, which disrupted the perception of the nude female body as a sexual

¹ I am simplifying a complex and multifaceted process here into two sentences only because it has been well documented elsewhere and because delineating its nuances is not central to my argument. For further information on the fragmentation of the feminist movement in the 1980s and its effects on feminist theatre criticism, see for example: Angela Y. Davis: Women, Race, & Class. New York: Random House, 1981; Combabee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizations in the 70s and 80s, Kitchen Table/Women of Color, 1986; Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre. Ed. Sue-Ellen Case. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990; A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance. Ed. Carol Martin. London and New York: Routledge, 1996; Charlotte Canning: "The Beautiful Legs of Feminist Theater: At the Foot of the Mountain and Its Legacy." Restaging the Sixties: Radical Theaters and Their Legacies. Eds. James M. Harding and Cindy Rosenthal. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006.

object, were heralded appropriately political: they were not claiming their perspective as representative of all women but rather concentrated on the way meaning is made in representation. However, the emphasis on multiple viewpoints also brought along the danger of relativism and a seeming acceptance of plurality without any tangible change in societal hierarchies. Moreover, the concentration on discourse and representation seemed to take attention away from individual experience of social domination.

Perhaps due to these drawbacks, feminist poststructural theatre criticism dwindled as the 90s came to a close. Poststructuralism still informs most criticism done in the field, but it is not as often used as the sole basis of political arguments or in theorizing feminist political theatre. It seems that as a result, or perhaps because of what is called post-feminism, new developments in feminist theatre criticism seem to have come to a standstill. This is where I hope to make an intervention: my dissertation builds on the work of the poststructuralist feminist theatre critics, but also seeks to make a more concrete connection between postmodern political theatre and criticism and to provide new critical vocabulary as a way out of the feminist theatre criticism's deadlock. While the poststructuralist criticism concerned itself primarily with how laws of representation supported the racist patriarchy – and its Lacanian strand with how, within the symbolic order, woman cannot be represented at all – my interest goes back to material experiences in their connection to social domination. I maintain, however, the same critical attitude to the means of representation.

In a sense, my approach is a step back to a concentration on identity, but not in an effort to again make it seem unified or essentialized, quite the contrary. The plays I examine do not represent coherent ethnic and gender identity but rather expose its

malleability in the face of the normative societal demands. Yet they do not seek merely to portray the constructed nature of identity either. Instead they build their social criticism against race and gender based social hierarchies by portraying the negative material effects of injustice on their heroines. That is, they represent how regardless of how much our identities are imaginary and constructed, we still experience reality through them, and they remain the organizing principle of our everyday lives and a determinant of our desires. In Janelle Reinelt's words, though "'nation' and 'subject' [have become] seemingly obsolete categories, ...daily life requires and indeed continues to inscribe bodies with codes of both subjectivity and nationality" ("Notes" 285). The focus turned back on character and identity is thus in an effort to delineate the ways in which individuals are "inscribed with codes of subjectivity," but always in connection to the social sphere. For such codes do not only continue to determine individual experience, but as Wendy Brown points out, the autonomous subject declared fictional by poststructuralism is still the functional basis of our societal arrangements. In other words, the focus of this dissertation is on the ways in which the effects of such coding make individuals participate in upholding the fiction of egalitarianism.

This is why I argue that the psychoanalytic concept of masochism proves indispensable. As a symptom of identity's acquiescence, and as a tangible behavior pattern, I read masochism as a materialization of the discrepancy between the political narratives of egalitarianism and a differently experienced reality by those for whom the subject position of autonomy is not available. For this reason it is important to bring the focus back on the subject and its relationship to the social sphere. In the theatre, this also means revisiting the issue of identity and in a way the ways in which the personal is

political, just as the theatre of the 60s and 70s claimed. But because masochism is, as I will demonstrate throughout the dissertation, a simultaneous fortification of power relations and an act of resistance against them, representations of masochistic characters disrupt the ways in which personal was made political in earlier forms of political theatre. As such a paradoxical act, masochism challenges, on the level of representation, binary oppositions of subject-object, active-passive, powerful-powerless, autonomous-dependent, and hence also that of hero-victim.² In this challenge, in masochism's ability to disrupt laws of representation and to illuminate the effects of societal inequalities on subjectivities, lies its potential for political theatre.

'Political theatre' is of course a contested term with no agreed upon definition. While some claim that all theatre is on some level political because it always reflects an ideology, others would assert, or at least those that connect the term with leftist politics and revolutionary aims, that "the politics of a truly political theatre must be a matter of conscious choice and deliberate intention" (Holderness 3). In their discussion of the contemporary British and American theatre scene, Janelle Reinelt and Gerald Hewitt divide the types of political theatre into four categories. They call the category that represents political systems directly "conventional-political," a type of political theatre that includes plays that discuss local, governmental, or international politics. Another, perhaps the best-known type is agitation propaganda, which aims to move its audience to take action. Reinelt and Hewitt call it "activist-political theater," and acknowledge that

² Disrupting these binaries was already the poststructuralist critics' aim: see for example Sue-Ellen Case's "Introduction." *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990. My argument is, however, that an emphasis on heterogeneity or the representation of "motility within" (Case 5) such categories do not result in changing the societal arrangements that are based on such binaries. Masochism, because it reveals the ways in which the subject participates in the upholding of these arrangements and gains pleasure from doing it, even while it opposes them, provides a more fundamental challenge to them, one that is more revealing about the ways in which subjectivities are constructed.

today it is “not [a] very respected category” (“Principles” 6). Both types of theatre, it seems to me, fail to address the ways in which individuals might participate in upholding the power they critique. Moreover, the latter type has an uncomplicated view of change not fitting to the contemporary world, for as David Barnett points out, “the direction for change is no longer evident in a world that seems totally integrated into global networks” (40). Because the concept of change itself is problematic today, it not only renders politics more abstract but also its representation on stage necessarily subtler than in the heyday of activist-political theatre.

The third category Reinelt and Hewitt name, the largest of them and which includes plays that make the personal political, is “implicit-political.” Never overtly polemical or aiming to produce activism, these types of plays invoke larger themes that are central to politics such as “justice vs. injustice, freedom v. equality, or individual interests v. common good” and address them through particular and personal situations. They have an ability to “bring to life the complex facets of otherwise abstract principles and to use apparently non-political materials to reference and investigate political topics” (“Principles” 4). Today, as activist-political theatre is looked down upon for its lack of subtlety, most theatre groups and playwrights who are interested in social issues tackle their concerns implicitly.³ Accordingly, the three plays I examine in this dissertation are political only implicitly and are not trying to advance a political ideology or a polemical

³ The more implicit the political content becomes, the more plays can possibly be included in the category. I am concerned here with tracing a trajectory of American political theatre since the 1960s that concerns itself specifically with issues of race and gender, and their interrelatedness. Thus I don’t include in my discussion for example George Bernard Shaw’s plays such as *Major Barbara* (1905) and *Heartbreak House* (1920), examples of implicitly political plays, which investigate political topics of armament and war through the personal and the particular.

point. Similar to Reinelt and Hewitt's recognition that most political theatre today is implicit, Graham Holderness points out that

[a]gainst the traditional notion that 'political' drama has to be about revolutions, strikes, demonstrations, pickets, factory occupations and police brutality, we can set the modern recognition that plays about sexism in language, or male prostitution, or the personal experience of racism, have just as much claim to the status of 'political theatre.' (13-14)

This dissertation's intervention is to insist that even more implicitly political theatre, one that represents masochistic subjects in order to illuminate the ways in which societal inequalities work on the level of subjectivities, is worthy of the status of 'political theatre.' My usage of the term 'theatre' rather than 'performance' is again deliberate. In his book The Radical in Performance, Baz Kershaw argues that "performances in theatre buildings are deeply embedded in theatre as *disciplinary system*" (31). Using Foucault's term, he paints a picture of theatre institutions functioning in a similar way to for example law and education, designed to produce self-discipline and normalizing effects. Because of this, he suggests that today the 'radical in performance' can only exist outside theatre buildings, in alternate spaces, which are freer from such disciplining effects. I argue, however, that for the same reason theatre is the best place for staging the paradoxical politics of masochism. That is, as I read masochism as a form of Foucaultian self-discipline, as a symptom of normalization as well as a reaction against it, its criticism works the best when staged within an institution producing such effects. It is there it can best illuminate those mechanisms at work.

I disagree with Kershaw on another issue as well: I do not see any alternate performance spaces that are less influenced by the disciplinary effects he situates particularly in the theatre. My view is admittedly postmodern. In his book, Presence and

Resistance, Philip Auslander claims that "postmodernist political art cannot place itself outside the object of its own critique," using this lack of distance as one of its defining features. He continues, "because postmodernist political art must position itself within postmodern culture, it must use the same representational means as all other cultural expression yet remain permanently suspicious of them" (23). I agree with Auslander's assessment, especially as it pertains to contemporary commodity culture. Its effects operate as much in the institution of theatre as in the spaces Kershaw perceives to exist outside of its reach, as well as on the level of subjectivity. All postmodern political art can do is to use the same means, maintain a suspicious attitude towards them, while operating from within.

Again my view is similar, but with a slight variation, to that of the feminist critics using poststructuralism. In her early essay, "Refusing the Romanticism of Identity," Elin Diamond employs Julia Kristeva's opinion that the "'sociosymbolic contract'... must never be accepted and must never be ignored; it must be subverted from within." Diamond argues that such a subversion can take place in performance if the female subject is represented "not transcendent yet not erased, but rather carefully, subversively at odds with what exists" (105). Such a model for representing feminist resistance to the "coercive social, legal, and linguistic systems in which we live, based on sexual difference and the repression of instinctual drives" (Diamond 105), as Kristeva understands the 'sociosymbolic contract,' functions in ways Auslander suggests: it critiques from within, suspicious of the means of representation and hence depicting the female subject at odds with them. The model of theatrical resistance I argue for also functions from within the institution of theatre, using its representational means while

distrustful of them, but rather than showing the female subject at odds with its mechanisms, it seeks to expose the ways in which *female subjects uphold those systems* even while they seem to harm their well-being, limiting their agency.

Hence my main concern is not the means of representation, structure of language or discourse. I perceive them as colonized by oppressive power structures, producing self-discipline and masochistic effects, but I am more interested in the ways in which the contemporary effects of commodity culture influence the tangible experience of race and gender. Also influenced by Foucault's theories, Grace Kyungwon Hong's book Ruptures of American Capital argues that global capitalism has incorporated racial and gender difference into its workings. The postmodern relativism, its seeming tolerance of all viewpoints as equal, she argues, is only an ostensible acceptance of racial and gender difference when in fact they are commodified and utilized as a basis of trade. Adding to Hong's argument, I maintain that such commodification of difference can produce masochistic effects. When capitalism's effects run so deep, operating at the level of one's experience of race and gender, their investigation in the theatre requires conceptual rather than concrete tools. In terms of Reinelt and Hewitt's categories, the type of political theatre I'm advocating, while implicit, might then also be called "philosophical-political," for it "represent[s] head-on the broadest, most fundamental political questions" ("Principles" 5). For theatre that concerns itself with issues of race and gender and their connection to global capitalism, the most fundamental political questions are about the ways in which these categories are constructed and upheld by the subjects themselves, and/or about the ways in which being ascribed and clinging to the commodified

paradigms obstructs one from receiving all the rights and benefits democratic principles supposedly guarantee for everyone.

Admittedly, the notion of politics that I am promoting is of an abstract sort, but in an era that has rendered the concept of change itself problematic, this seems a necessity. Further, because of my Foucaultian understanding of power operating on the level of subjectivity, I do not believe it can be successfully protested against with the old forms of political theatre, which defined resistance in terms too black and white. But neither do I perceive the poststructuralist critique of representational means effective enough. Representations of masochistic behavior, I suggest, are capable of making the abstract, theoretical questions materialize and to make their concerns tangible: because it is a paradoxical act of resistance, masochism provides a material paradigm for representing the simultaneous self-discipline and resistance contemporary commodity culture inspires. My view that there is room for resistance within such culture is aligned with Hong, who maintains that “race and gender are constitutive contradictions to capital, and these contradictions emerge in culture. In other words, culture is not totally and unidirectionally determined by capital, but is rather a site where capital’s contradictions and incoherences emerge” (39). My new definition of political theatre does not claim to be exhaustive covering all styles of theatre, but is concerned with postmodern plays that represent behavior that is seemingly contradictory and incoherent, but which is capable of drawing attention to complex societal problems, indeed to capital’s contradictions. Masochism’s usefulness, I propose, has to do with its ability to materialize such contradictions and hence to illuminate the breakdown of the rational, autonomous subject our political narratives are based on.

Before introducing the plays I examine in this study in more detail and before discussing their way of creating a political impact by comparing theirs to the methods of Jean Genet and Bertolt Brecht, in the next sections I will first provide a theoretical account of masochism and its connection to postmodern theories of subjectivity.

The Story of Masochism

Masochism still causes many theoretical disagreements and disputes. In fact, it seems that the only thing people agree about masochism is that it is a construct of nineteenth century Europe. Sexual practices based on physical punishment and humiliation existed before the nineteenth century of course, but until that time, they were not central concerns of medical and literary discourse. Because of its roots in discourse, some literary critics like Nick Mansfield, view masochism as a purely literary phenomenon, “produced out of the overlaps and gaps between [the writings of Kraft-Ebing, Sacher-Masoch, Freud and Sartre]” (1). Carol Siegel goes even further and argues that “rather than being an identifiable syndrome, disorder, perversion, or drive (as it is variously styled), masochism is...created textually in response to the impact of specific developments in gender and sexual politics...[and] has meaning only in reference to language” (2). I maintain, however, that masochism, though a theoretical construct of the nineteenth century, has relevance beyond the historical textual context or discourse and actually exists as an identifiable psychological phenomenon. Masochism’s relevance for cultural studies, or the study of literature and theatre, stems from its roots in culture and the way it bridges the social, the psychic and the material. That is, rather than an

individual, psychopathological syndrome, masochism is a profoundly social phenomenon with tangible implications.

My position is closely aligned with John K. Noyes's argument that Leopold Sacher-Masoch, after whom sexologist Richard von Kraft-Ebing coined the term masochism in 1890, wrote his novels about the ecstasy of submission as "a reaction against the increasing social injustices and violence" (8) in late nineteenth century Europe. Sacher-Masoch's novels transform this social violence, and "the liberal crisis of private and public agency out of which masochism arose" (Noyes 208), into a technology of pleasure, a potentially subversive practice. Kraft-Ebing's project of cataloging sexual perversions and separating them from normative behavior was another kind of a reaction to the era's growing indeterminacies, one that was part of the ongoing "normalizations of subjectivity" (Noyes 6). Noyes argues that in his attempt to thwart masochism's subversiveness, Kraft-Ebing "[removed] technologies of pleasure from their sociohistorical contexts, rendering them abstract and harmless. The result was a theory of masochism's universality" (79). Kraft-Ebing's efforts were in line, according to Noyes, with the liberal projects of the time, which were determined "to isolate the subject as a realm of normative sexuality, desire, intention and free will, an "inside" that could be quarantined from the field of historical phenomena and social life" (6). Hence masochism came to be perceived only as a sexual perversion, devoid of social significance. As such, it posed no threat to the liberal formulations of normative subjectivity based on intentionality, autonomy and free will.

Noyes maintains that though it was a product of the nineteenth century, "masochism today possesses a modernist and a postmodernist dimension" (211). The

continuum can be found precisely in masochism's contested relationship to the liberalist notion of the autonomous, free-willing subjectivity. Kraft-Ebing found it necessary to render masochism harmless by classifying it as a sexual perversion not only because of its roots in European social violence that led to World War I, but because it directly undermined the liberal precepts of subjectivity: the masochistic act fundamentally ridicules the notions of free will and autonomy by renouncing them in a highly theatrical way. As is evident in the work of Wendy Brown, the postmodern era has witnessed a further erosion of the belief in the subject's rationality and autonomy, while, paradoxically, the political narratives still hold onto these principles. Masochism, as it renders the subject's free will questionable and ridicules rationality, is, I suggest, a symptom and an acting out of this contradiction, an act that is all the more relevant today as this contradiction becomes increasingly conspicuous. It is on this level, on the level of conceptualizations of subjectivity, that masochism becomes a pertinent way of theorizing the contradictory effects of a governmental system that was shaped in the nineteenth century and whose principles continue to organize the political sphere today.

Sigmund Freud's work on masochism laid the ground for understanding both the phenomenon's psychological structure and its philosophical ramifications. As with many other issues, however, Freud changed his view on masochism over his long career. In the early writings, he discussed masochism only in terms of sexual perversion. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, first published in 1905, he still maintained that masochism is an inverted form of sadism: "It can often be shown that masochism is nothing more than an extension of sadism turned round upon the subject's own self, which thus, to begin with, takes the place of the sexual object" (24). Since aggression

seemed instinctually to be part of human, especially male, sexuality, Freud reasoned that masochism was formed by that same aggression. Only in masochism the destructive energy was aimed at oneself, not at a sexual partner. This view is directly drawn from Kraft-Ebing, whose work on masochism was published only fifteen years before the *Three Essays*. Interested in classifying perversions, Kraft-Ebing saw masochism only as a male phenomenon, because women's sexual submission, in his markedly Victorian view, was natural, and hence not perverted.

Freud, however, did not take female masochism as given but studied it together with male masochism. The 1919 essay "A Child Is Being Beaten" was his next attempt at defining masochism. It concentrates solely on women and men's masturbatory beating fantasies, and their gendered differences. Though Freud discovers that the conscious parts of the fantasy, the parts the patients are able to recount to the therapist, are markedly different in women and men, he comes to a conclusion that "[i]n both cases the beating-phantasy has its origin in an incestuous attachment to the father" (198). However, this underlying reason for the masochistic fantasy is repressed due to its incestuous nature and hence in the conscious fantasy the father is replaced by a substitute: the male masochist fantasizes he is being beaten by his mother, while the woman fantasizes about a group of boys being beaten by an authoritative man, a psychic stand-in for the father, while she observes. Though only discussing one type of masochism, Freud's essay managed to map many of its crucial elements, which are far more complex than the theory of inverted sadism. The essay foregrounded the importance of fantasy and representation to masochism and acknowledged that unconsciously the masochist is searching for something else than pain, namely the father's love, which the beating comes to represent.

Contemporary theorists, based on Freud's essay, have also come to emphasize masochism's transgressive qualities. These are based primarily on the strange gender role reversals that are central to the fantasies Freud recounted. In the male masochist's conscious fantasy, the mother takes the father's place. Though Freud interpreted this substitution as a repression of the man's homosexual affection for the father⁴, contemporary literary theorists have teased out the representation's rebellious dimension, especially when acted out in staged scenarios of S/M sex. For example Biman Basu sees the masochist and his mistress "reciprocally [enacting] a carnivalesque degradation of the law of the father" (385). While it is easy to see how the male masochist's desire to submit to a woman is a ritualized distortion of the patriarchal social order, it is also clear that the male masochist is in charge of the situation, and the woman has power only because the masochist bestows it on her. There is, in fact, no reciprocity involved. Basu, too, acknowledges that despite the carnivalesque play with socially inscribed power relations, "the masochistic script is superscribed by the prevailing configuration of power" (395). However, though the staged scenario does not permanently change societal power relations, on the level of representation it has an unsettling effect. John K. Noyes argues that "it casts doubt on any system of meaning that relies on fixed relations of political power, or fixed boundaries of gender. In this way, masochism can eat away at the core of "truth" in representation" (115). Here Noyes further underlines masochism's relevance for postmodern concerns: masochism is capable of questioning the ways in which meaning is made in representation.

⁴ Several critics have disputed Freud's claim that underneath male masochism is repressed homosexuality. Nick Mansfield reads into Freud's interpretation his own desire to make the fantasy compatible with the Oedipus Complex theory, while Gilles Deleuze claims that behind this fantasy is the utter repudiation of masculine power, where "the father...is expelled from the symbolic order" (60) and the mother bestowed with all his power.

The transgressive qualities of the masturbatory fantasies Freud recorded are obviously not the same for men and women. Yet contemporary feminist theorists have found that transgression is also at the heart of masochistic women's fantasies. Kaja Silverman writes about the curious substitution of the girl with boys in the conscious parts of women's masochistic fantasies. Further, the consciously fantasized part is not masochistic, but seemingly sadistic as the woman, as a voyeur, observes a group of boys being beaten. Silverman interprets these reversals as pointing, for example, to "the desire to be a boy while being so treated by the father; [and] to the desire to occupy a male subject-position in some more general sense, but one under the sign of femininity rather than that of masculinity" (203). The scene where an authoritative man is beating a group of boys while the woman observes puts the female masochist in the masculine subject position of a voyeur. Yet this position does not grant her full access to male subjectivity, because as an observer she remains passive. Freud, too, noted this curious connection of masculinity and passivity in the female masochist's fantasy: "She turns in phantasy into a man, without herself becoming active in a masculine way" (199). Silverman suggests that by occupying a position of feminized masculinity, the woman in fact ensures access to the father's agency, thus escaping the culturally assigned position of a passive object. Yet unconsciously she craves and receives punishment for her transgression. Psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin interprets the scene in a similar way: "It is the woman's wish to be like the powerful father, and to be recognized by him as like, that the fantasy simultaneously punishes and gratifies" (111).

Thus at the root of the woman's masochistic fantasy is the desire to transgress gender roles. Because of it, it is the masochistic part where she is herself beaten, the one

that is more closely aligned with her cultural position, which is repressed, while in the conscious part she imagines herself a step closer to masculine power. The male masochist's fantasy is openly masochistic, because that is a position of transgression for him. Though both genders seek the father's love, they also both, on the level of fantasy and representation, repudiate their culturally determined gender roles: the male masochist refuses to occupy the masculine position of power, while the female masochist rejects the traditionally passive role of a woman. Freud remarks the elaborate way in which the male masochist, in his evasion of the homosexual underpinning, restructures his fantasy: "the remarkable thing about his later conscious phantasy [of being beaten by the mother] is that it has for its content a feminine attitude without a homosexual object choice" (199). Thus in both men and women's masochistic fantasies the dichotomies of masculine-feminine and active-passive are distorted. They are not simply reversed, but made ambiguous: the male masochist takes a passive, yet heterosexual position, while the female masochist fantasizes about being masculine but remains passive at the same time. Such disruption of binaries, the desire to transgress gender roles and to redistribute relations of power and agency are central elements of the masochistic fantasy.

Masochistic desire is always, however, simultaneously transgressive and reactionary. While for example the female masochist transgresses gender roles in fantasy, she also desires punishment for it and finds pleasure in receiving it. In the end, the father's social power, which she desires to have a part of, remains not only intact, but idealized. This is why David Savran concludes that "masochism... represents no more or less than a scandalous eroticization of patriarchal relations, a desire for the father that is transformed into a desire to submit to the cruelty of the father's will and all he

represents” (32). These same contradictory layers of transgression and submission are also present in masochism’s behavioral version, which Freud, in 1924, coined “moral masochism,” and Theodor Reik, in 1941, renamed as “social masochism” (292). Better described as an everyday behavior pattern than as a sexual practice, social masochism is fully unconscious. That is, the social masochist is often not even aware of his/her masochism as it never materializes in consciously acted out sexual scenarios. Yet, as a behavior pattern, social masochism is as unsettling as the transgressive representations of the sexual masochist’s fantasies. For it, too, defies the laws of common sense by seemingly seeking out and cherishing self-defeat and suffering, and by deriving pleasure from them.

Freud’s last and most thorough study on the subject, “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” published in 1924, attempts to understand masochism’s irrationality, the problem it poses to the “economy” of the psychic apparatus and to what he had named “the pleasure principle.” Here he divides masochism into three categories: erotogenic, feminine and moral masochism, thus acknowledging masochism’s relevance to a wide variety of phenomena and permanently removing it from the category of sexual perversion. Erotogenic or primary masochism is the biological base for the ability to gain sexual pleasure from pain, which, according to Freud, is innate in everyone, based on pleasurable physical sensations experienced in infancy in connection to discomfort. The later secondary forms of masochism – moral and feminine – are superimposed on the primary one, reactivating the infant physiological mechanism and hence suggesting a regression in psychic development. Feminine masochism does not, even though it has often been misinterpreted that way, suggest that masochism comes naturally to women.

In fact, the term describes male behavior. It applies mostly to men who desire to take a feminine, which in Freud's vocabulary refers to passive, position in fantasy or a sexual act. The masturbatory fantasies and staged S/M rituals are examples of feminine masochism. Moral masochism, because it is wholly unconscious, does not directly have to do with the body or sexuality. But Freud maintains that both secondary forms of masochism are connected to the primary one, and hence also to physical pleasure.

By this time, Freud had come up with his theory of the psyche divided into the super-ego, the ego and the id, as well as the new concept of the death drive.⁵ His last essay on masochism can be seen as an attempt to reconcile these new formulations with the perplexing phenomenon of masochism, but the essay reveals a curious wavering between biological, psychological and metapsychological registers. Freud's attempt to theorize a universal, biological basis for masochism is connected to his theory of the death drive: human beings not only have instincts for self-preservation and mastery (sadism), but also for self-destruction (masochism). Though this is a radical project, Freud fails to develop its connection to the discovery of moral masochism, "a norm of behavior" (161), which is culturally instigated and hence always specific to the masochist's socio-historical environment. While primary masochism is its own entity and independent of sadism, Freud also still holds onto the idea that especially moral masochism is caused by inverted sadism. Only now he acknowledges that the inversion takes place due to "a *cultural* suppression of the [sadistic] instincts" (170), but never elaborates on what these cultural circumstances might be.

In terms of his three-part theory of the psyche, Freud explains masochism as a

⁵ *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was published in 1920 and *Ego and the Id* in 1923.

struggle between the ego and the super-ego: the masochist's ego is constantly struggling to meet the demands of the harsh super-ego, but never manages to satisfy them. Here again, as the super-ego is the receptacle of both parental power and cultural influences, Freud underlies the cultural demands' role in masochism. In the structure of the psyche, it is this cultural representative that causes masochism, not the id and its unruly passions. As the representative of parental power in the psyche, the super-ego is also "the heir to the Oedipus complex" (Rathbone 15). Because of it, Freud conceptualizes moral masochism as an eroticization of morality and as such a reawakening of the trials of the Oedipus Complex. Thus Freud sees moral masochism, though instigated by cultural demands, as a form of regression in the subject's psychic development. Yet at the same time he suggests that there are similarities in the onset of moral masochism and in the normal development of the conscience, because both are based on the role of the supervising super-ego watching over the ego. In the end, the boundary between moral masochism and so-called normative behavior is anything but clear. Hence June Rathbone, writing about clinical definitions of masochism, points out that today "moral masochism seems to have more currency as an abstract cultural paradigm about subjectivity rather than as a behavioral model" (21).

On one hand acknowledging the innate capability for masochism in all people, and on the other emphasizing moral masochism's cultural roots and its proximity to the functioning of a healthy conscience, Freud's simultaneous discourse on masochism as regression is, I suggest, symptomatic of the challenge masochism poses to the nineteenth century formulation of subjectivity based on autonomy. Though Freud recognized the subject's powerlessness under the influence of the unconscious, his larger project adheres

to the precepts of the subject's sovereignty and autonomy, and to scientific progress – the cornerstones of nineteenth century thinking. Masochism poses an “economic problem” to these concepts, because the masochist seems willingly to renounce autonomy, ridiculing the concept of free will and disregarding self-preservation. In fact, masochism can be seen as the arena where many deep-seated dichotomies – active and passive, subject and object, autonomy and dependency – break down.

Yet the concept of primary masochism shows Freud's own skepticism about European liberalism's master narratives, especially where the biological and the social meet. John K. Noyes interprets the pessimistic implications of Freud's theory: “The repetitiveness of history casts individual experience into a time scale where life itself appears as nothing but self-destruction, and where [masochistic] fantasies seem to be playing a constitutive role in the subject's social and historical identity.” Within this cultural scenario, “[m]asochism becomes a radical self-realization of libido, which must be suppressed if the fictions of totality upon which subjectivity builds are to be successfully concluded” (149). By developing Freud's implications from where he left them, Noyes sees Freud's last essay on masochism not only revealing a growing suspicion towards the nineteenth century precepts of subjectivity, but foregrounding the postmodern view of subjectivity as irrational and unintentional. He concludes that “Freud's theory of moral masochism describes the ego's attachment to its own culturally determined submissiveness” (156). This view of identity as a result of prevailing social power relations rather than a fortress against them is closer to Michel Foucault's view of identity than to nineteenth century fictions of totality.

Masochism and Postmodern Theories of Subjectivity

Michel Foucault never used Freud as the basis of his theories, but in her book The Psychic Life of Power, Judith Butler investigates the role of the psyche in the Foucaultian theory of power and subjectivity. She finds a similarity between Foucault and Freud's otherwise incongruent theories in the way both view power as somehow constitutive of subjectivity. In Foucault's view, an individual is shaped by societal power relations and is simultaneously their instrument, producing and policing his/her own behavior, thoughts and desires according to them. This self-reflexivity on the level of the individual forms a unity with other more readily recognizable, institutional types of power such as law, economy and education. Within the interplay between self-reflexivity and institutions of power, the subject's identity is formed as it comes to be recognized as such: "The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle" (Foucault, "Two" 98). Butler interprets Foucault's theory of subjectivity as a theory of "subjection," because it describes a "simultaneous subordination and forming of the subject." Further, this subjection "assumes a specific psychoanalytic valence when we consider that no subject emerges without a passionate attachment to those on whom he or she is fundamentally dependent" (7). In Freud's theory, the child is passionately attached to his/her parents, on whom he/she is dependant but who also represent prohibition. Thus the Foucaultian agency of self-policing is parallel to the Freudian super-ego, which is modeled after the parents and cultural influences. It is through the super-ego that social power relations become constitutive of subjectivity.

According to Butler then, the similarity between Freud and Foucault is a theory of the subject, in which power is seen as part of the subject's constitution. But because of the passionate attachment to it, it is not simply power that is internalized and then obeyed in behavior. Butler claims that in the act of self-reflexivity, in a process of turning back upon oneself, the subject voluntarily subjugates him/herself. And because it is precisely this turn that constitutes his/her subjectivity, subjugation becomes the precondition of the subject. In other words, according to Butler, with the promise of subjectivity comes subjugation, which is self-imposed. Further, since the subject would not exist without this condition, he/she has a narcissistic attachment to his/her subordination, which is why Butler calls it "a passionate attachment to subjection." Thus Butler connects Foucault and Freud not only in terms of constitutive power, but also in terms of affect: in both their theories the subject passionately holds onto its own subjection.

In addition to the passion for one's own survival and the narcissistic investment in the subjectivity granting subordination, in both theories disciplinary power, too, is eroticized. In Freud's theory the eroticization takes place within the Oedipal trials, and in Foucault the disciplinary "apparatus is itself eroticized" (Butler 101). Though Butler's theory of a subject who passionately invests in his/her own subordination, and eroticizes disciplinary power, looks very much like a theory of a masochistic subject, she mentions masochism only once in her book when she asks: "How are we to understand, not merely the disciplinary production of the subject, but the disciplinary cultivation of *an attachment to subjection*? Such a postulation may raise the question of masochism – indeed, the question of masochism in subject-formation (102). This postulation, as Butler wonders about and as Noyes interprets Freud's last essay on masochism gesturing

towards, proposes that there is something masochistic about modern and postmodern subjectivity itself. If it is indeed so, the proposition actually turns the tables on the liberal ideal of a rights-bearing, autonomous, sovereign subject and formulates subjectivity as its opposite: as a passionate attachment to societal subordination and dependency.

The formulation of subjectivity itself as masochistic, as being constituted by a clinging onto one's own subordination, seems to render political resistance if not impossible, at least utterly futile. But this is not necessarily the case, at least not in Foucault's view. Unlike for example Jacques Lacan, in whose theory of subjectivity resistance would have to exist in another realm than where subjection to law takes place, "Foucault formulates resistance as an effect of the very power that it is said to oppose" (Butler 98). Thus while Lacan formulates the symbolic as the realm of subjection and subject formation and the imaginary as the site of misrecognition and "disorder, a site where identity is contested" (Butler 97), for Foucault all this takes place within what Lacan calls the symbolic. Foucault's

insistence on the dual possibility of being both *constituted* by the law and *an effect of resistance* to the law marks a departure from the Lacanian framework, for where Lacan restricts the notion of social power to the symbolic domain and delegates resistance to the imaginary, Foucault recasts the symbolic as relations of power and understands resistance as an effect of power. (Butler 98-99)

Foucault's theory is in fact more optimistic in terms of resistance than Lacan's view that renders the symbolic untouchable for the way Foucault views the symbolic as relations of power makes possible the simultaneous opposition and subordination. Though neither Foucault nor Butler brings it up, I want to point out that the way Foucault formulates resistance is strikingly similar to how masochism functions as a paradoxical form of

resistance, which is always simultaneously a result of, a reaction against, and an affirmation of societal power relations.

Masochism as Resistance

Many contemporary theorists write about male sexual masochism as such resistance using theatrical vocabulary. For example Gilles Deleuze reads it as parody, the purpose of which is a “demonstration of the law’s absurdity” (77). However, parody is far from obvious in the case of social masochism – when subjectivity itself is viewed as masochistic – and especially in the social masochism of those who don’t culturally occupy positions of power. No doubt for this reason, most theorists writing about masochism as resistance examine only male masochism, but I want to extend the discussion to what masochism’s theatricality and its function as a paradoxical form of resistance might mean for women, or more precisely for women of color. According to Margaret-Ann Fitzpatrick Hanly, since the 1950s, in the field of clinical psychoanalysis, “some consensus has existed that masochism is at the same time adaptive, defensive and gratifying” (1049). These three layers of masochism apply to all its forms, and I interpret them present also in Butler’s postulation about masochistic subject formation: such formation is adaptive because in an attempt to adjust to law’s demands the subject comes to accept subjugation as a condition of his/her existence; the same act is erotically gratifying because the law’s disciplinary power is eroticized and it is narcissistically gratifying because the masochistic subjugation is the precondition of the subject; and it is defensive in the sense that the same law or power that subordinates also gives birth to resistance, which then “appears as the effect of power, as part of power, its self-

subversion" (Butler 93).

The theory of masochistic subject formation does not, however, make it easier to detect all of masochism's layers in acts of social masochism. For example masochism's resistance is practically imperceptible in a scene in Kennedy's *The Ohio State Murders*, where – out of fear and tension caused by racism – the shy, young black female protagonist winds curlers in her hair so tightly that her scalp bleeds. Yet the act is decidedly masochistic: it is an act of self-punishment, instigated by social violence. Or in Freud's vocabulary, it is sadism, which due to cultural restrictions does not find social outlet and is turned against the self. This type of masochism has much more in common with young women's self-mutilation than male masochists' ritualistic sex acts. June Rathbone points out that the purpose of self-mutilation "is primarily to relieve unbearable tension, replacing one pain by another" (284). While such an adaptive quality of self-mutilation or of Kennedy's literary example is relatively easy to perceive, how is it defiant or pleasurable? The gratification in a male masochist's acted-out sexual scenarios is more than clear, but its role in instances of social masochism, of which self-mutilation is a symptom, is more perplexing because it remains unconscious. In Freud's theory, the social masochist sexualizes morality itself so that the act of submitting to the harsh demands of the super-ego becomes erotically gratifying, albeit unconsciously. However, many contemporary theorists have refuted its connection to sexuality and maintain that "in moral masochism suffering provides narcissistic satisfaction" (Rathbone 36). Butler's postulation of masochistic subjectivity, and self-mutilation as its symptom, could be interpreted as providing narcissistic pleasure as it unconsciously affirms the passionate attachment to the social sub-ordination that grants subjectivity.

Feminist theorist Jessica Benjamin, in interpreting women and men's power dynamics, detects defiance in women's social masochism in its masked, roundabout attempt to access male agency. Benjamin suggests that women's "masochism reflects the inability to express one's own desire and agency. In submission [to a man], even the fulfillment of desire is made to appear as the expression of the other's will" (79). Benjamin's phrase "made to appear" underlines the theatricality of even social masochism, which is, however, as its motives are unconscious, even further removed from the noticeable parody of the male masochist's performance. But I maintain that their mechanism is the same. Robert Tobin reads masochism's theatricality to point to its "falsehood," which in the male masochist's act stems from its "appearance of subordination" (40). Similarly, it seems to me, women's social masochism is a pretense of something it is not: I am arguing that social masochism in women is a theatrical pretense of accepting subordination, or self-harm, while pursuing agency and power. This is why John K. Noyes interprets women's social masochism as "an elaborate performance of the powerlessness of victims, which has its origins in social relations of power and whose aim is to neutralize or at least render tolerable the misuses of power" (17). Her "performance of powerlessness" is theatrical precisely because it falsely makes a spectacle out of powerlessness, while adaptively rendering the situation tolerable and while gaining narcissistic gratification from thus, secretly, getting closer to her aim.

I maintain that women's social masochism, too, is a paradoxical act of resistance, because it demonstrates all of masochism's three layers of being adaptive, defensive and gratifying. However, the political possibilities of masochism do not lie in its function *for the masochist* as a form of resistance. The isolated act of self-mutilation or a bleeding

scalp – though its purpose is to soothe anxiety and unconsciously to assume a kind of agency and thus gain narcissistic pleasure – is even less capable of permanently changing power relations than the male masochist’s ritualized sex act. Instead such acts are likely to go undetected or read according to their surface value as only affirming prevailing power relations. But as discussed earlier, masochism’s disruptive power lies in its challenge to laws of representation. I suggest that on this level, especially when used in theatrical representation and shown in its connection to the social sphere, women’s social masochism can have powerful political value.

Jean Genet and the Affective Assault

Having so far challenged the theatrical legacies of the 60s and 70s, I do delineate the roots of the type of political theatre I’m advocating to the same era. This theatrical style is experimental in form, intellectual in content and influenced by the European avant-garde movements. Its beginnings can be traced to the French playwright and novelist Jean Genet’s play *The Blacks: A Clown Show*, which had its American premiere on May 4th, 1961, at the St. Mark’s Playhouse in New York. It ran for over three years in altogether 1408 performances, making it “the longest standing serious drama in the history of New York theatre” (Warrick 139). Written for an all black cast and intended for a white audience, the play is an experimental meditation on race, power and theatricality, centered on a funeral rite of a white woman the cast has supposedly killed. The rite, which the play implies is repeated daily, is performed for an onstage court in white masks. By constantly blurring the lines between theatre and the world outside of it, where it insinuates a black revolution is taking place, the play managed to create a feeling

of immediate danger about a black uprising in the white audience. This, at a time of a rapidly increasing interest in racial issues, proved not only controversial but also inspirational to a generation of African American playwrights.⁶

For the concrete concerns of the burgeoning Civil Rights movement the play was, however, too ambiguous and its take on racial issues too abstract. For example African American playwright Lorraine Hansberry, speaking for the black community, publicly accused Genet for “his distrust of us; his refusal to honor our longings for communion” (qtd. in Warrick 136). Hansberry’s complaint stems from Genet’s portrayal of blacks in power as cruel and power-hungry as whites thus undermining any positive sense of black community based on ethnic identity. In the context of the time, Hansberry’s criticism seems understandable. *The Blacks*’ insistence on breaking “the false sentimentality of community” (27), as Rustom Bharucha puts it, just as the activist theatre movement was being born, made it seem negative, even reactionary. The activist theatre movement’s philosophy was based on the “belief that theater, as an event that enveloped the audience and made them active agents in the performance, could effect social, political and cultural change more generally” (Harding and Rosenthal 8). Such belief in the positive force of theatre and in the collective power of people was characteristic of the 1960s and 70s American group theatres, such as the leftist *Bread and Puppet Theater* and the *San Francisco Mime Troupe*. These are groups that used street theatre aesthetics with the aim to raise awareness whether about the US military operations abroad or the political repression at home. Due to such groups’ strong legacy, Graham Holderness points out

⁶ See for example John Warrick: “*The Blacks* and Its Impact on African American Theatre.” *Jean Genet: Performance and Politics*. Eds. Finburgh et al. Basingstoke [England], New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.; or the documentary *Black Theatre: the Making of a Movement* writ. and dir. Woodie King, Jr.; California Newsreel 1978.

that “in practical usage the concept ‘political theatre’ is almost exclusively synonymous with left-wing theatre” (3),⁷ and hence with the belief in theatre’s ability to instigate change.

In retrospect, however, as the new collection of essays, Jean Genet: Performance and Politics, points out, Genet might have been ahead of his time in the way he perceived the relationship between theatre and politics. The editors – Clare Finburgh, Carl Lavery and Maria Shevtsova – claim that Anglophone criticism has largely overlooked Genet’s politics because of his “insistence upon failure” and because his plays “offer little in the way of revolutionary hope” (11). Especially compared to the theatrical trends of the time, Genet’s emphasis on failure and lack of hope rendered his plays ostensibly apolitical. But as Alisa Solomon, writing about the still operating collective *Living Theatre*, argues, the belief that theatre can be revolutionary and offer hope is based on Enlightenment principles. She claims that *Living Theatre*, which was founded in the 60s, “has held fast to the Enlightenment principles affirming a universal human subject and the inevitability of progress; these ideals continue to fuel their convictions that a better world is possible and that theater has a role to play in imagining such a world and bringing it into being” (“Four” 58). It is precisely this notion of a universal subject and progress, principles Solomon points out are “modernist” (“Four” 57), that I argue the paradoxical politics of masochism renders questionable. Similar to Genet, *Venus*, *The Ohio State Murders* and *Hit* do not imagine a better world but rather emphasize failure by showing women of color acting against their best interest, perpetuating their position of

⁷ Political theatre’s association with the leftist politics is not only due to the legacy of the 1960s and 70s. The German director Edwin Piscator, in the 1920s, made the connection explicit and Bertolt Brecht continued the legacy with openly leftist pieces and theory of the theatre to accompany them. In the US, for example *The Federal Theatre Project*, in the 1930s, produced explicitly socialist performances called *Living Newspapers*.

powerlessness. I argue that the purpose of these representations is not to show individual failure, however, but to illuminate the failure of Enlightenment ideals, especially as they pertain to women of color.

In this way, I align my redefinition of political theatre more with Genet than with the theatre of Bertolt Brecht, although *Venus* uses some Brechtian elements. The play, which I examine in chapter two, tackles the failure of Enlightenment principles directly, but like Genet's *The Blacks*, offers no hope or alternatives. The play builds its critique by staging the story of Saartjie Baartman, the so-called Venus Hottentot exhibited in the early nineteenth century in the London and Paris freak show circuit. Connecting colonial Europe to the contemporary US, it represents its heroine as masochistically co-operating with the Europeans in charge of her exhibition, wanting to become rich and famous by showing her body. Parks does not attempt to strive for historical accuracy by recreating the nineteenth century or by imagining how the historical person Saartjie Baartman might have been. Instead she calls the character based on Baartman "The Venus" and thus foregrounds her commodification, her status as an icon. Such naming that denies her individuality, as well as the way the play refuses to depict her with an in-depth identity, are classic Brechtian devices of distancing, the purpose of which is to keep the audience member from identifying with the character. Brecht's theory locates agency and resistance in the logical audience member, who, by keeping her distance by emotionally not identifying with the character, is capable of rationally analyzing the historical and socio-political circumstances portrayed on stage. Yet, as I argue in chapter two, *Venus*'s inherent ambiguity undermines the possibilities for rational interpretation and hence goes against the grain of Brechtian theatre.

Genet famously despised Brecht's theory for political theatre precisely because Brecht "[tried] to use theatre for rational ends" (Lavery, "Between" 224) and based his views on "Marxist ideals of progress" (Lavery, "Between" 226). Carl Lavery interprets Genet's position to be grounded, rather than in the audience's rational capabilities and in societal progress, in a disbelief in the subject's and the theatre's rational basis. Genet's emphasis on failure and his lack of revolutionary hope seem to stem from this distrust of human rationality, and hence, I want to add, of the Enlightenment principles and the possibilities of the egalitarian society built on them. Yet Genet's aim was not to further negativity. He was, though often accused of being cynical, active in the anti-colonial movement and wrote about his views on the representation of race in the theatre.

Tellingly of his idiosyncratic ideas, Genet's long Preface to *The Blacks* has only been available in an abridged version until 2004, and still hasn't been translated into English. Analyzing the original French text, Carl Lavery points out that Genet believed it was impossible to represent blacks truthfully on a Western stage, because "black experience in a colonized society is inherently theatricalized" ("Reading" 70). Hence *The Blacks* does not offer essentialized depictions of ethnic identity or positive images of black community but rather "deliberately betrays the living reality of black experience by presenting it as it appears in white culture: that is to say, as something fake, performative and clichéd" (Lavery, "Reading" 70). Hansberry interpreted the play to reflect Genet's distrust of blacks and his refusal to acknowledge their community as such, but Genet's concentration was elsewhere. He asserts in the Preface that *The Blacks* "is not written *for* Blacks but *against* Whites" (qtd. in Lavery, "Reading" 72). The play's purpose, then,

is to foreground white perceptions of blackness in all their falseness, not to represent authentic black experience.

I read the clash between Genet's intentions and Hansberry's concern about their outcome on stage as a precursor to the debates that surfaced in the 1980s surrounding the shift from the theatrical activism of the 1960s and 70s to postmodernism. While activist theatre, similar to Hansberry, was concerned with positive representations of community and theatre as a forum for empowerment and revolution, Genet's ideas about racial identity as fake and constructed and his distrustfulness about the ways theatre had been used to advance political views were predecessors of the postmodern debates. His postmodern sensibility is evident also in the epigraph at the beginning of the published version of *The Blacks*: "One evening an actor asked me to write a play for an all-black cast. But what exactly is a black? First of all, what's his color?" As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, poststructural feminist theatre criticism argued – similar to Genet's opinion about depicting blackness – that women's experience cannot be represented using traditional patriarchal methods of theatrical expression. Genet's questions about the constitution of racial categories seem also similar to postmodern feminist theatre's emphasis on questioning the constitution of gender categories and the ways in which they are created in representation. Carl Lavery suggests that Genet's theatre is also "indicative of postmodernist suspicions about the aesthetic as a realm of value that is somehow able to stand outside of the debased, inauthentic world of commodity exchange" ("Between" 230). Thus Genet's emphasis on failure and his suspicion for using the theatre for revolutionary aims seem also to stem from such a postmodern distrust for the medium of theatre.

I maintain, however, that while Genet's theatre heralded many characteristics of postmodern performance, it also departed from it in important ways. Postmodern theatre, as it simultaneously uses and critiques the representational means at hand, is often marked by ambiguity. Like the theatre of Genet, it rarely provides conclusive answers to the questions it raises, and instead of logic, invests in paradox. David Barnett describes postmodern political theatre, I believe accurately, as "identifying contradiction, exposing it but still refusing to liberate [the performance] from it" (40). But while ambiguity and paradox are hallmarks of the theatre of Genet as well as of postmodern theatre, Genet also invested in the use of affect. *The Blacks*, according to Finburgh, Lavery and Shetsova, offered a "model of political performance based on ambiguity and affect" (12). Genet's use of affect, his technique of "wounding" the audience as "a way of catching the audience off-guard" (Lavery, "Reading" 69) is quite different from the common postmodern sensibility of detached irony.⁸ Genet's purpose in wanting to 'wound' the audience was political: he wanted to unsettle its old ways of perceiving things and to make it see the surrounding world more clearly. Hence his method of political theatre doesn't offer any answers to the questions it raises, or doesn't instigate action or revolution, but attempts to expose societal power structures.

Genet's interest in disturbing the audience is also another important difference between his theatre and that of Brecht: "Where Brecht is famously concerned to distance the spectator from the onstage action, Genet wants to involve the spectator in the

⁸ Excellent examples of this style are the work of director Robert Wilson and The Wooster Group. The detached style of acting they developed in the 1980s was a reaction against the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski's concept of "poor theatre," which he developed in the 1960s. He argued that theatre should not try to compete with film but should instead concentrate on the live performance's ritual power and the energy emanating from the actors. During the 70s Grotowski's concept grew so influential that Wilson and The Wooster Group deliberately rejected the poor theatre aesthetics and foregrounded the more ironic, postmodern acting style.

theatrical event, and thus create a sense of actual encounter” (Finburgh et al 4). While both Genet and Brecht despised the bourgeois realist theatre that granted the audience its invisibility and privacy, Genet attempted to interfere with its safe viewing position by means of an affective assault, not through rationality. I suggest that the paradoxical politics of masochism staged in the theatre functions the same way: it affectively assaults the audience, tries to catch it off-guard and creates discomfort and uneasiness with representations of the disenfranchised perpetuating their unfavorable circumstances with their own behavior. Though such representations, like Genet’s depiction of blacks, might on the surface look insulting, accommodating or apolitical, I argue that their critique of societal inequalities functions on a much more profound level than positive representations of individual or collective gender or ethnic identity, or the postmodern depictions of the fragmentation of culture and identity. The discomfort these representations produce in the audience is deep-seated, because rather than attacking those in power or supporting those who are not, the plays stage the masochistic effects of societal inequalities on disadvantaged subjects. Witnessing such masochistic behavior in the theatre is unsettling, I argue, because it undermines the foundational concepts of our societal arrangement.

In chapter three, in my reading of *The Ohio States Murders*, I demonstrate the necessity of understanding the psychic mechanism of masochism in order to tease out the social cause behind the protagonist’s masochistic act that results in the bleeding scalp mentioned earlier. Like self-mutilation, the act can be read to “be expressing anger and frustration” (Rathbone 284): the chapter investigates masochism as a roundabout way of showing anger. However, the play’s politics are not located in the representation of this

one gesture, but on the connection it draws between the protagonist's inability to react in any other way to the social violence around her and the political paralysis often accompanying oppressive circumstances. The play does this by using the series of rejections the protagonist experiences on the 1950s Ohio State college campus as a metaphor for the continued rejection of African Americans from full political citizenship. It thus exposes the discrepancy between the principles of liberal democracy and the reality of the sharply racialized US, but does this innovatively by emphasizing the masochistic reactions produced by the discrepancy, instead of representing resistance to it. This startling representation, I argue, is more effective in asking fundamental political and philosophical questions about the implementation of democratic principles than representations of direct rage or resistance, which was the pet method of the Black Arts Movement.

My chapter on Kennedy's play juxtaposes its way of creating political content to Amiri Baraka's 1964 one-act *Dutchman*, which many perceive as the beginning of the Black Arts Movement. Baraka's play shows the possibly disastrous results of African Americans adapting white middle class values, and thus launched what was to become the movement's central idea: the vital importance of pride in one's own culture and ethnic identity. Baraka's *Dutchman* is inventive in its departure from psychological realism by its use of different levels of meaning making, most likely influenced by the meta-theatricality of Genet's *The Blacks*. It thus exemplifies what seems to be the most lasting legacy of the movement: its creation of an artistically innovative and energetic political theatre scene that mixed agit-prop with avant-garde techniques and philosophical questions with militancy. Mike Sell argues that the movement's "most far-reaching

impact on post-BAM African American theatrical arts” is not political at all, but is located in its “challenge to western dramatic form inspired by African American music and its paradoxically radical vision of tradition and innovation” (280). The theatre of the Black Arts Movement thus managed to escape a common complaint against political theatre: that its emphasis on politics jeopardizes the art.

Kennedy never adopted the Black Arts Movement’s confrontational methods of staging politics, but rather invested in a Genet-like “esthetic of suffering” (Lavery, “Between” 229). While *Dutchman* is formally clearly influenced by Genet, its aim is more Brechtian and hence revolutionary. Because of such an aim’s basis on the Enlightenment principles, as I point out in chapter three, it only succeeds in supporting the status quo. Kennedy’s method of staging her heroine’s suffering by using sentimentality and masochism functions differently: it illuminates the ways in which the protagonist participates in upholding the structures of power that cause her suffering. The political power of such a representation lies in unsettling the audience, in making it see the distressing effects social domination can have. The play uses as its main trope the exclusionary and inherently white world of literature, a world the heroine deeply admires but which continually rejects her. I suggest a successful staging of the play would attempt to make the audience feel as if the institution of theatre is an extension of that world and hence that the audience is part of the world that has caused the heroine’s unsettling masochism. This is the play’s Genet-like affective assault on the audience.

But because *The Ohio State Murders* is similar to the theatre of Genet in that it is “neither straightforward nor self-evident” (Lavery, “Reading” 69), its affective assault on the audience can easily be evaded. This happened for example in the staging by *Theatre*

for a New Audience in November 2007 in New York. Directed by Evan Yionoulis, the highly professional and well-acted production, emphasized, rather than suffering, the heroine's anger, directing it at the audience. It also made the protagonist recall her passive suffering as a student with irony rather than with sentimentality. This choice obstructed the play's masochism from surfacing, because sentimentality and masochism are inherently connected: both are based on pleasurable suffering. Yionoulis's choices, I suggest, let the audience off the hook and made it easy for it to side with the heroine, angry at the injustices she had to suffer, without prompting it to examine the oppressive power structures the protagonist and the audience participate in upholding. It thus ended up functioning precisely the way Genet warns against in a note added to the 1960 published version of *The Balcony*:

When the problem of a certain disorder – or evil – has been solved on stage, this shows that it has in fact been abolished, since, according to the dramatic conventions of our times, a theatrical representation can only be the representation of a fact. We can then turn our minds to something else, and allow our hearts to swell with pride, seeing that we took the side of the hero who aimed – successfully – at finding a solution. (xiv)

The text of *The Ohio State Murders* does not provide solutions to the problems it raises, but Yionoulis's production gave an opportunity for the audience to take sides with the heroine and hence, it seems to me, allowed its "hearts to swell with pride." Rather than providing the audience such opportunities for refuge, Genet suggests that the social evil the play represents should make "it...explode, should show us naked, and leave us distraught, if possible, and having no other recourse than ourselves" (xiv). For Genet, the power of theatre is not located in provoking rational analysis, but in the audience's affective response to such "explosion of evil" on stage and its ensuing feelings of nakedness and distraught. Witnessing masochism, I suggest, functions this way as it is

much more demanding to the audience than, as Genet points out, taking sides with a hero. It is through this discomfort masochism creates in its audience that its political capabilities in the theatre are realized.

Similar to *The Ohio State Murders*, a staging of *Venus* would have to accentuate the heroine's masochism in order for the play's cultural criticism to be legible. Directed by Richard Foreman, the play's first production in the spring of 1996 at the Yale Repertory Theatre and the Public Theatre in New York seems to have made the staging too abstract. Foreman, who is arguably also influenced by Genet's formal experimentation, is known for his idiosyncratic, highly stylized plays, which aim to stage the irrational with an orchestrated stream of objects, images, repeated actions, musical phrases and voice-overs. His texts are not character-based, and he divides lines between actors from fragments of dialogue only in rehearsals. Parks, too, uses repeated phrases and actions and often investigates her subject matter through stereotypes rather than psychologically realized characters. The Village Voice critic Michael Feingold saw this similarity between Foreman and Parks as a disadvantage: "Foreman's directorial style is so closely allied to Parks's word-structures that it overshadows any sense of substance." In his New York Times review, Alvin Klein also critiqued the production for lacking clarity and suggested that Foreman's direction reduced the play to "drivel and ostentation." Based on a video recording I have seen of the production, Foreman's direction abstracted the already ambiguous text to a point that it became illegible to many. Such abstraction, it seems to me, also obstructed an affective response to The Venus's masochism.

A 2004 student production I saw at Hunter College did a better job at affectively involving the audience. Bill Walters's direction accentuated the way the play's realistic elements provide glimpses into The Venus's character, which are always, however, immediately canceled out with a returned focus to her status as a commodified icon of curiosity. I maintain that these moments are necessary for the audience to experience discomfort witnessing The Venus's masochism, on which its affective assault on the audience hinges. That is, in *Venus*, due to the play's inherent ambiguity, masochism's raw power to unsettle has to be given a chance to work on the audience by giving it enough of a realistic context and not just to make it an abstraction as Foreman's directorial choices did. Yet, I do not believe that masochism's challenge to the audience works in conventionally realistic plays. Theories of masochism can be of course used to read characters' motives in realistic dramas, but such readings do not necessarily make a play political. For example, Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) exhibits masochistic traits and her masochism can be interpreted as having been caused by the repressive norms of Southern femininity she aspires to match. But the play's naturalist frame leaves the audience off the hook in a similar way a depiction of a hero does, because it allows the spectators to go on thinking Blanche is an example of a social masochist whose behavior has nothing to do with its role in supporting the structures of domination capable of producing masochistic behavior. That is, in order for representations of masochism to be able to unsettle the audience, its role has to be affectively foregrounded and not to be left invisible and objective as the conventional realistic theatre does.

The affective assault of Alice Tuan's *Hit* functions a bit differently. In the farcical world of global capitalism Tuan creates, there is no escape from relentless consumerism. The play's black humor stems from a vicious relationship between an obese white mother and her adopted Korean daughter. Obesity and transnational adoption function as its main tropes of investigation into the far-reaching effects of global capitalism, which the play shows to operate also on the level of identity and desire. In chapter four, I interpret the play drawing a parallel between masochism and life dominated by consumerism. Rather than staging recognizable acts of masochism, this parallel functions solely on the level of identity and subjectivity. In the end then, *Hit*'s black humor is aimed at consumerist masochism and depends on the audience's ability to laugh at not only the characters' perpetuation of consumerism's pleasurable entrapment, but also at its own similar condition. Unlike *Venus* and *The Ohio State Murders*, whose affective assault depends on making the audience recognize its participation in the structures of domination oppressing the protagonist, a successful staging of *Hit* would depend on making the audience realize the consumerist freedom it invests in is a hoax. In other words, the masochistic entrapment the play portrays would have to be accentuated enough to make the audience realize it is included in the play's farcical world.

Without pretending that the forum of theatre stands outside its reach, *Hit* portrays consumerism as ubiquitous and simultaneously illuminates its seemingly apolitical nature by making fun of the notion of consumerist freedom. By portraying consumerist life as masochistic rather than free, it is, I argue, capable of re-politicizing consumerism. I also interpret it suggesting that the widespread politicization of identities that the cultural movements of the 1960s and 70s helped launch have only helped consumer capitalism to

remain depoliticized. My chapter on *Hit* compares its portrayal of identities as thoroughly soiled by consumerism to David Henry Hwang's *FOB* (1979), which still emphasized the importance of ethnic group identification. *Hit* foregrounds the ways in which such representations have only helped depoliticized capitalism mask societal inequalities and its fetishization of difference. While such criticism might seem as furthering negativity, I argue the contrary. As a form of paradoxical resistance, and because of its ability to disrupt laws of representation, masochism can expose the fictional premise of liberal democracy and can hence highlight societal hierarchies in our era of presumed equality. This is why masochism and its affective assault, quite paradoxically, is capable of advancing optimism in the often pessimistic postmodern theatre, itself invested in paradoxes.

CHAPTER TWO

Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus* and the Politics of Disavowal

Theatre is the place which best allows me to figure out how
the world works. (4)

Suzan-Lori Parks, "Possession"

Theatre Journal's December 2005 special issue on black performance featured a forum that asked sixteen theatre artists and scholars, "What is a black play?" and/or "What is playing black?" Suzan-Lori Parks's response consisted of contradictory definitions, anecdotes and bits of creative writing, all demonstrating her quirky sense of humor as well as her resistance to black plays being reduced to racial politics. She entitled her essay "New black math" in recognition of another essay of hers, "An Equation for Black People on Stage," published a decade earlier, in which she articulated the need to represent African Americans on stage "in states other than the Oppressed by /Obsessed with "Whitey" state; where the White, when present is not the oppressor, and where the audiences are encouraged to see and understand and discuss these dramas in terms other than that same old shit" (20). With this gesture, right at the beginning of her career, she made clear that she would not answer to the still tangible, even if unspoken demand that black playwrights should represent the black community and write about race relations, a persisting legacy left behind by the Black Arts Movement. It is this tendency of using black drama for political ends or for advancing a particular point that she calls "the same old shit." The same tendency seems to have prompted her in the 2005

forum to announce that “[a] black play is not political – that term don’t even begin to approach its complexity, especially these days, dog” (578).

The complexity of contemporary life and the multitude of black experiences within it are issues Parks keeps returning to and which she feels the representation of blacks only in terms of race relations would necessarily flatten. Her usage of “dog,” an African American vernacular phrase, at the end of her announcement about the reductive nature of the term “political” further implies her understanding of the clash between what is required from black playwrights and an unrestricted black cultural expression. And yet, almost as adamantly as Parks has always denied that her plays are political, critics have interpreted their investigations into the persisting effects of history and the workings of stereotypes, even their placement of words on the page, as profoundly meaningful, engaging in cultural criticism, if not politics. The meaningfulness critics find in her plays no doubt stems from the way Parks uses theatre to “figure out how the world works.” In an era permeated with what Michel Foucault theorized as multidirectional power, an era that has rendered the direction for change uncertain and the target of protests unclear, Parks’s seems a theatrical method more adept at producing cultural criticism than using theatre as a platform for advancing a political point.

Parks’s plays seem to better represent the complexities of the contemporary world precisely because they are multifaceted. Her plays, as she explains her intentions as a playwright, “explore the form, ask questions, make a good show, tell a good story, ask more questions, take nothing for granted” (“Elements” 6). Parks’s 1996 two-act *Venus* does all this, and more. It explores the interplay of realistic and experimental form, asks a lot of questions about the effects of history and the history and nature of theatrical

entertainment, tells a good, if remarkably gruesome story of Saartjie Baartman, the so-called Venus Hottentot, and makes it all into a wildly theatrical show. As it does all this, it also titillates those audience members so inclined by restaging the early nineteenth century freak-show performances of the scantily dressed Baartman. Moreover, it makes spectators, especially those who might find the restaging of Baartman's performances offensive, uncomfortable by showing Baartman willingly co-operating with the Europeans in charge of her exhibition and having an affair with the man who is to later dissect her body, while never attempting to establish her as a psychologically fully realized character. I suggest that all of this, while it in many ways exposes "how the world works," also mounts to a critique of the manner in which the political theatre of the 1960s and 70s and the feminist movement have created expectations of how a black female character, especially one that is crudely exploited, should be represented. Parks's choice of depicting Baartman as an accomplice in her exploitation directly challenges these expectations that would rather see her represented as having a voice, agency and demonstrating resistance.

The critique that I detect in the play might not have been Parks's intention, but an effect of her characteristic desire to break away from the restrictions set for African American playwrights. Yet this particular side effect proved to be more challenging than those in her previous plays. While her staging of racial stereotypes in for example *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990) – whose main characters are Black Woman with Fried Drumstick and Black Man with Watermelon – was thought innovative and bold, her portrayal of Baartman as co-operating with her exploiters was found more perplexing. Because on one hand the play obviously aims to criticize

colonial racism and sexism and on the other seems to give permission to blame Baartman for her own exploitation – while simultaneously doing a plethora of other things – the play was found hard to interpret. For example Shawn-Marie Garrett, in an essay “Return of the Repressed,” asserts that *Venus*’s most “difficult and troubling” aspect is that it “does not have a clear point of view” (40). Similarly in a *Variety* review of the play’s first production, Markland Taylor points out that “it’s difficult to pin down just what point of view Parks is trying to illustrate.” What seem to be at odds here are the extremity of Baartman’s abuse and the highly ambiguous means Parks employs to tell her story.

Ambiguity and paradox are hallmarks of postmodern theatre, but I propose that *Venus* departs from the usual way they are used because it does not operate in the safety of detached irony that often accompanies these devices. It does use ironic humor – Baartman is for instance called “stepsister-monkey to the great venal love goddess” (35) – but it also works on affecting the audience in ways other than encouraging a detached or coolly analytical attitude. In this way, it bears many similarities to the way Jean Genet’s *The Blacks* works, which, as I pointed out in the introductory chapter, attempts to affectively assault the audience in order to make them see, to use Parks’s phrase, “how the world works.” This way of getting to the audience coupled with the refusal to let it find refuge in a heroic portrayal of the protagonist puts the pressure on the spectators to examine the cause of their discomfort. Thus the audience and its reactions become the focus, not the characterizations on stage. Similar to Genet’s insistence that *The Blacks* was not written for blacks but against whites (Lavery, “Reading” 72), Greg Miller, in his essay “The Bottom of Desire in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus*” asserts that “Parks effectively

stages *us*; the play presents a “history” with which we are profoundly uncomfortable” (135). I want to add to Miller’s observation that in making the audience uncomfortable, *Venus* not only presents a history the audiences would rather forget but also manages to illuminate that history’s presence in the contemporary US and its continued effect on the production of race and gender difference.

Parks suggests that “when audiences read [a black play] primarily through the rubric of “race relations,” that those audiences are suffering from an acute attack of white narcissism” (“New” 578). No doubt both Greg Miller and I are suffering from this ailment. Yet my intention is not to claim that *Venus* is *only* about race and gender politics, or that making a statement about it was Parks’s objective. Rather it seems that her way of defying the conventional ways of representing race and gender in order to take nothing for granted and to make a good show brings up important questions about the political efficacy of representation of resistance today. By staging no resistance at all, *Venus* manages to illuminate the unrealistic expectation that an exploited individual should rise above the machinery taking advantage of her and to try and achieve autonomy against all odds, a convention political theatre has only helped to uphold. Thus I argue that *Venus*’s cultural criticism is not about the brutal objectification of the Venus Hottentot in the nineteenth century Europe. It rather stems from the way the play manages to expose, quite paradoxically, the disavowal of race and gender difference not only at the time of the Venus Hottentot’s exhibition at the London and Paris freak show circuit but also in the contemporary US. The representation of The Venus, as the character based on Baartman is called, participating with her exploiters and the discomfort it causes in the audience are, I propose, crucial in bringing forth this criticism.

By looking at The Venus's behavior as masochism, this chapter shows it not to be as accommodating as it might first appear and reveals the discomfort it causes in the audience to be a sign of its participation in denying the existence of social hierarchies based on race and gender.

Masochism's Unsettling Power

The way masochism seems to defy common logic and the reason why Sigmund Freud called it "an economic problem," deems it not only incomprehensible, but also uncomfortable to witness. This is especially the case with social masochism, when powerless people seem to willingly perpetuate circumstances that are harmful to them. Though historically such behavior has been used as justification for further domination, such as in cases of domestic violence or colonial domination, in today's climate of presumed equality witnessing masochism is more likely to produce discomfort in the observer. Contemporary theorists claim that masochism can have this effect not only due to its irrationality but also because it is "in part a demonstration and perversion of power relations" (Tobin 51) and hence reveals too much of them. Masochistic behavior thus directly challenges the concept of societal equality, drawing attention to the unequally distributed social power by performing powerlessness.

Such a performance is, however, never straightforward and can easily be misinterpreted as an affirmation of current power relations. But reading masochism this way concentrates only on its outer layer of "demonstrating" power relations, and disregards the way it simultaneously "perverts" them. Masochism's ability to pervert the workings of power relations and to elucidate social hierarchies is directly linked to the

way it distorts binary oppositions, blurring the distinctions between active-passive, subject-object and autonomy-dependency. Because these dichotomies are foundational to Western thought, their perversion, when performed, causes discomfort. That is, while masochism is not capable of changing the power relations it is a reaction against, it can nevertheless have a discomfiting, even disturbing effect in the observer of its performance. This effect is created on the level of representation, as masochism disrupts the laws of representation by perverting and making ambiguous its foundational dichotomies. I maintain, however, that because these dichotomies are also the foundation of our societal arrangement, the disruption masochism creates has reverberations beyond the means of representation.

John K. Noyes detects this disturbance masochism is capable of creating already in Leopold Sacher-Masoch's novels, which made indistinct "the difficult boundary between private desires and public agency, between sexual and social fields of power, a boundary that had sought to isolate subjectivity as a privileged sphere where the effects of social arrangements are minimized" (218). Hence Richard von Kraft-Ebing, in order to retain subjectivity as an isolated sphere of normative behavior, autonomy and free will, was quick to categorize the phenomenon Sacher-Masoch delineated in his novels as a symptom of individual psychopathology, an interior issue. The most fundamental of masochism's challenges to the foundational dichotomies of Western thought seems then to be the way it erodes the boundary between individual subjectivity and the social sphere, making visible the societal relations of power in the formations of subjectivity.

This challenge has a disruptive power already because it proves fictional the nineteenth century concept of subjectivity based on autonomy and interiority. Yet

Suzanne R. Stewart hesitates to immediately equate such a challenge with subversion and criticizes postmodern theories' tendency to celebrate the failure of subjectivity's totality as inevitably dissident:

The problem with so many postmodern theories of the subject is the elevation of the failure into a general condition of all subjectivity, a failure that is then celebrated as necessarily subversive. The result is an equation of a whole series of terms: masochism, trauma, the sublime, and the demonic all become names for an enigmatic site that holds the place of self-dissolution in the name of a critique of all normativity. (10)

While masochism's challenge to the nineteenth century formulation of subjectivity as a normative, isolated sphere has subversive qualities, I agree with Stewart's criticism. If such challenge is made into "a general condition of all subjectivity" and celebrated as a universal failure of normativity, the specific social conditions producing the failure are again obscured. Hence I argue that masochism has a subversive and a potentially political effect only when the focus is kept tightly on the social sphere that has produced the masochistic behavior.

In *Venus*, the heroine's masochistic co-operation with the Europeans who hold her captive is an example of a situation where masochism does not easily translate into a celebration of subjective failure. Because *The Venus* is not in a position of autonomy to begin with, her behavior seems rather to read as her acceptance of the prevailing power relations, a demonstration of them rather than their perversion. But in the context of contemporary theatre, the representation of her willingly accepting the existing dominance in itself proves unsettling. Adding to such representation's disorienting effect, especially at our time of presumed equality, is the play's inherent ambiguity about *The Venus's* subjectivity. In their essay, "Body Parts: Between Story and Spectacle in *Venus* by Suzan-Lori Parks," Harry J. Elam Jr. and Alice Rayner note the play's

ambiguities on several levels: “*Venus* the play, Saartjie Baartman, the Venus Hottentot, the actor in body suit who reembodies the Venus – all evidence a problematic ambivalence. They are at once subject and object, present and absent, symbol and matter” (280). The play uses formal experimentation, as I will discuss shortly, to create this ambiguity surrounding The Venus’s characterization, but I argue that it is her masochism that disrupts the binary oppositions Elam and Rayner list. Most importantly her masochism also disrupts the boundary between The Venus’s subjectivity and the social scene, creating the uncomfortable impression that the exploitation depicted on stage is affecting the exploited protagonist’s identity, her interior space.

This depiction, I propose, shifts the focus on the audience and its desire to escape its discomfort witnessing the scene. A representation of The Venus having a complex, full subjectivity would have provided such an escape, but it would have also masked the social domination’s role in producing the masochism. This representation is uncomfortable to witness because it reveals too much about relations of power, revealing a domination that not only obstructs The Venus from trying to attain the position of autonomy but also seems to make her not want to try. I argue that it is precisely the autonomous subject position’s unavailability for black women that The Venus’s masochism exposes. Further, as the play establishes a continuum between the colonial Europe and the contemporary US, it reveals the uncomfortable reality that such subject position remains to be unattainable for women of color, even though the liberal democracy’s master narratives insist it is available for everyone.

A Continuum between Colonial Europe and the Contemporary US

I interpret Parks's *Venus* as illuminating the continuing discrepancy between the principles of egalitarianism and their failed implementation by creating what at first seems an unlikely parallel between the early nineteenth century Europe and the contemporary US. While the play seems to thematically concentrate on the nineteenth century, it establishes a connection to the contemporary US with formal experimentation. However, the two-act proceeds for the most part chronologically, staging the few known facts about Saartjie Baartman's life. She was a young South African woman brought to London in 1810 to be exhibited in a freak show. Her value as a freak show attraction had to do with her (by European standards) unusually big buttocks. Only a few years later, after having been exhibited in France by a circus animal trainer, Baartman died in Paris. Before her death, she drew the attention of French anatomists, including Napoleon's surgeon Baron Georges Cuvier. A famous anatomist and paleontologist, Cuvier led the group who, after Baartman's death, dissected her body, carefully measured and analyzed it, and used the published results as scientific proof of the inferiority of African races. As a result, a model of Baartman's skeleton and her pickled genitalia and brain were put on display in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, where they were exhibited until 1974 and subsequently moved to storage. In 2002, after years of petitioning, her remains were given to representatives of her Khoisan tribe, who buried them in South Africa.

The play progresses mostly in a linear manner as it stages these facts about Baartman's life. Yet it does not attempt to reproduce the historical period of the early nineteenth century or to achieve historical accuracy. Instead Parks mixes historical facts with fiction. The surviving documents about Baartman's life are newspaper ads and

cartoons, diary entries of people who had witnessed her exhibition, petitions against her mistreatment, court documents from the hearing in a London court set to determine whether she was kept in England against her will, and of course, detailed anatomical records from her dissection. Parks uses some of these historical documents in her play and invents others. The Negro Resurrectionist – the only other black character besides The Venus, as the character based on Baartman is called – is the play’s narrator or MC of sorts. He announces the titles of the scenes and also reads aloud, in a formal format, footnotes– “Footnote #1./ Historical extract. Category: Theatrical” (24) – varying in topic from theatrical, medical, literary, musical, legal to journalistic documents. The Negro Resurrectionist’s name is at the same time literal and figurative: he has a past as a grave robber, having had “resurrected” bodies for anatomy classes, but as he reads the footnotes he is also figuratively “resurrecting” forgotten pieces of history.

As the Negro Resurrectionist brings to light the past, it is never quite certain, however, whether the footnotes he reads are quotes from historical documents, or whether Parks has invented them. Parks’s attitude towards history, especially to how black history has been recorded, is distrustful to say the least. In an essay describing her writing process, she insists that “[t]heatre is an incubator for the creation of historical events – and, as in the case of artificial insemination, the baby is no less human” (“Possession” 5). Thus historical accuracy is not of importance to her: if an event takes place on stage, it becomes part of the historical record. Further, the scenes the Negro Resurrectionist announces are numbered in reverse order from 31 to 1. In addition to complicating the linearity of the story, the reverse numbering refutes the nineteenth century belief in societal progress, suggesting that the story of Baartman’s abuse

regresses at the same time it moves forward. This reverse numbering also demonstrates Parks's understanding of history as circular and as "time that won't quit" ("Elements" 15).

Rather than bridging the time periods thematically, *Venus* connects the present to the past by the use of subtle formal devices, for example, by mixing different styles of dialogue. Verse lines, such as "She gained fortune and fame by not wearing a scrap, hiding only the privates that lipped in her lap" (6), are mixed with more contemporary, conversational language. For instance, The Mother-Showman – who runs the freak show The Venus is sold to after arriving in England – threatens The Venus unwilling to go on performing: "Next doors a smoky pub full of drunken men. I just may invite them in one at a time and let them fuck yr brains out" (56). Parks's signature device of repetition and revision,⁹ derived from African American tradition and specifically from jazz, serves in *Venus* the same purpose of blurring distinctions between time periods as does the different styles of dialogue. For instance, The Chorus of Spectators, eyeing The Venus, says repetitious and nonsensical phrases such as "Diggidy-diggidy-diggidy-diggidy" (3), conveying their sexual excitement. Such phrases also gesture at American popular culture, the above-mentioned phrase particularly at Pat Boone's 1950s hit, and its thinly veiled sexual content. At times the phrase is revised into a form of "diggidy-diggidy-diggidy-dawg" (3), thus adding an African American layer to the white popular culture context. These complications to chronology, the references to American pop culture, the mixing of historical facts with fiction, as well as references to jet lag (19),

⁹ Parks explains "Rep & Rev" as "a concept integral to the Jazz esthetic," which she uses in order to "create a dramatic text that departs from the traditional linear narrative style to look and sound more like a musical score," a narrative style that does not "lead the audience toward some single explosive moment" ("Elements of Style," 8-9).

economic brackets (42) and games like Canasta, Whist and Crazy 8s (26) make it clear that the play is not only about the nineteenth century.

While on the surface a story about colonial racism and sexism in the nineteenth century Europe, and *The Venus Hottentot* in its epicenter, the cross-references seem to suggest not only a layering of time frames but also of locations. This layering becomes the most obvious during the unusual intermission, which treats the contemporary audience as if part of the nineteenth century medical profession. While the audience is encouraged to leave the theatre, *The Baron Docteur*, modeled after Cuvier, remains on stage reading out loud from his report on *The Venus's* dissection. Taking place “Several Years from Now” (91), it too disrupts the linearity of the story, not to mention confuses the audience about whether to take a break or not. It is here that Baartman’s objectification is at its extreme as *The Baron Docteur*, in the name of science, goes over the measurements of her height and weight, skin, face, breasts and muscular system. A few times he explains the medical terms he uses – for example, “*The Depressor anguli oris* and the *Depressor labii inferioris*, that is, the muscles of the mouth, were both unusually well developed, the latter forming a distinct prominence causing the protuberant under lip so characteristic of the Negro tribe” (95) – but mostly they are left unexplained. In case some audience members don’t leave the theatre, *The Baron Docteur* says about half way into the gruesome details: “You look, Distinguished Colleagues, as if you need relief or sleep. Please, Sir, indulge yourself. Go take uh break” (95). The collapsing of time frames and locations refuse the American audience a comfortable position of distance and hints at the possibility that somehow Baartman’s abuse is ongoing and not only prevalent in Europe.

Greg Miller interprets this conflation of audiences as political: “The shift from the spectators on stage to the real-life spectators signals a blatant political gesture by Parks, since we ourselves are caught up in the oppression of the real Saartjie Baartman (along with those onstage and along with the playwright)” (134-5). However, in their essay, Harry Elam Jr. and Alice Rayner are not so optimistic that this device works. They doubt that audiences are capable of understanding the conflation of the nineteenth century spectators represented on stage and the audience members: “[In] a re-production we, the contemporary audience members, are...viewing the Hottentot Venus with an assumption of superiority over those earlier spectators, thus ignoring our own complicity in the sight” (276). Elam and Rayner’s fear that audiences might not understand that their complicity is insinuated is certainly justified, as becomes evident in some of the first production’s reviews. For example Ben Brantley of the New York Times, obviously referring to the grotesque way the play portrays The Venus being treated in the nineteenth century, thought the play “makes its points about racial and sexual exploitation firmly and early and then treads water in contorted postures for two hours” (C3). Nevertheless, I suggest that the play not only conflates the audience with the nineteenth century spectators, but also works to expose the contemporary audience’s inherent position of superiority in relationship to Baartman. Thus the audience’s “assumption of superiority,” which Elam and Rayner propose hinders the politics of the play, is, I argue, in fact its object of criticism. That is, the implied audience consent does not suggest that it is literally partaking in Baartman’s abuse, but that both historical periods – the early nineteenth century and the contemporary moment – participate in the disavowal of social hierarchies based on racial and gender difference, albeit in distinct modes.

Disavowal Based on Universal Principles

I base my claim here on Grace Kyungwon Hong's argument about the ways in which racial and gender difference has been simultaneously fixated upon and disavowed within the different phases of liberal democracy and capitalism. The nineteenth century, she argues, was a time that solidified the autonomous subject also as a propertied subject, the process of which "disavow[ed] racial and gendered subordination through the promise of universal incorporation" (xiii). This universal incorporation was based on the egalitarian principles of the bourgeois society and more precisely its political and legal systems built on the idea of social contract signed by autonomous, sovereign subjects. Michel Foucault maintains, however, that while European bourgeois egalitarianism "[defines] juridical subjects according to universal norms, the disciplines characterize, classify, specialize; they distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchize individuals in relation to one another" (Discipline 223). While everyone is openly held to a universal standard, the more imperceptible and "dark side of these processes" (Discipline 222) makes sure individuals are distributed along a scale and hierarchized. This is the work of what Foucault calls the disciplinary mechanisms, which in fact "have the precise role of introducing insuperable asymmetries and excluding reciprocities" (Discipline 222). Thus while the egalitarian principles of liberal democracy promise universal incorporation, the disciplinary mechanisms simultaneously make sure that the position of autonomy and owning property is kept exclusionary.

I suggest that *Venus* works at making visible this disjuncture between the egalitarian principles and their implementation by exposing the ways in which race and gender difference is disavowed according to the promise universal principles of

egalitarianism, while hypocritically at the same it is the basis of monetary exchange granting pleasure and excitement. Most criticism on *Venus* addresses, rather than this disjuncture, only The Venus's crude objectification: her, or more specifically her buttocks, which one character describes as "an ass to write home about" (7), as a fetishized object of desire. This is no surprise as the play makes her status as such an object more than clear. The play's first and last scenes, which are similar to each other, highlight The Venus as the focal point of the play and frame the linear story with stylization and further accentuate the story's circularity. The first scene, entitled the Overture, introduces all the characters as they call out their own names, and sets a carnival-like atmosphere to the play. But mostly the Overture focuses on The Venus, who rotates in one spot so that she can be seen from all angles. The play begins with the following stage directions: "The Venus facing the stage right. She revolves, counterclockwise, 270 degrees. She faces upstage" (1). As she continues revolving, the other characters repeatedly say: "The Venus Hottentot!" (1), as if presenting the star of the night and shout out lines such as "Lookie-Lookie-Look-at-her. Ooh-la-la. What-a-find. Hubba-hubba-hubba" (6). The last scene of the play, called Final Chorus, is a shorter version of the same scene with many of the same lines repeated. These scenes, with The Venus revolving so that she can be seen from all angles, underline The Venus's life on display, whether in the freak show, in court, in front of doctors, or as a scientific exhibit in a museum after her death – as well as in front of the audience of Parks's play.

As disturbing as the crudeness of The Venus's objectification is, it isn't the play's only focus. The Overture, besides pronouncing The Venus's big buttocks "well worth the admission price" (7), also declares her death. After the characters introduce

themselves, The Negro Resurrectionist announces: “I regret to inform you that the Venus Hottentot iz dead. There wont b innny show tonite” (3). Among speculation as to how she died, The Venus herself repeats these lines about her own death. In a chaotic manner, seemingly in no particular order, the other characters shout out objections like “Outrage Its an outrage!/ Gimmie Gimmie back my buck!” (7), but then go on expressing their excitement about the show, which continues regardless. On one hand, the announcement of The Venus’s death in the first scene ironically points out that the exhibition of Saartjie Baartman did not end with her death, again underlying the continuity of the story to the present day. The references to money, on the other hand, emphasize the capitalistic undertaking The Venus Hottentot’s exhibition was, and is.

In addition to The Venus’s objectification and theatrical exhibition, what seems to be at stake here is the proximity of her captivity and exhibition to slavery, and especially to the economy based on it. In the play’s second to last scene, The Venus suddenly transforms into a historian. In a monologue, entitled “A Brief History of Chocolate,” she explains how the ancient Gods gave chocolate to the people as an act of love. As time goes by, in the nineteenth century, “The Aztec word cacao literally “food of the Gods” becomes chocolate and cocoa. The cacao bean, once used as money becomes an exotic beverage” (155). She recounts the European excitement for and horror against chocolate brought from the colonies: “the church wages a campaign against chocolate on the grounds that it was tainted by the character of its heathen inventors” (155). Thus much like the horror and fascination Baartman caused in the nineteenth century Europe, chocolate was exoticized, deemed heathen, and greatly enjoyed. The Venus’s obvious alignment of herself with the colonial treasure of chocolate underlies not only her

objectification, but also the marriage of capitalism and colonialism. Like chocolate, the colonized people were objectified and became part of the colonial trade, not only as freak show attractions but also, and more poignantly, as slaves.

Slavery is in fact, rather than the apparent focus of the play, its ever-present undercurrent. It is only mentioned a few times during the play, most often in a line The Negro Resurrectionist repeats, with slight variation, three times: “The year was 1810, three years after the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade had been passed in Parliament, and among protests and denials, horror and fascination, The Venus show went on” (36, 77, 159). The repeated line points out the ways in which the effects of slavery were not abolished with the institution: the play invites spectators to perceive the continuum from the abolition of slavery to economic exploitation. Though Baartman’s European captivity takes place immediately after the abolition of the slave trade, the way *Venus* connects the nineteenth century Europe to the contemporary US also suggests that the effects of the slave trade are still prevalent. This is in fact Parks’s point in claiming that Tennessee Williams’s *Glass Menagerie* is a black play in her response to the Theatre Journal’s forum on black performance. According to Parks, “A black play is written by a black person. A black play has black actors. A black play is written by a white person and has white actors. A black play doesn’t have anything to do with black people. I’m saying *The Glass Menagerie* is a black play” (“New” 580). Explaining her ambiguous and playful remark, she writes: “Every play that is born in the United States of America is a black play because we all exist in the shadow of slavery. All of us” (“New” 580). *Venus*, seems to suggest that “the shadow of slavery,” though not as easily perceptible as in 1810, nevertheless also hangs over the contemporary US.

While the play's portrayal of The Venus's captivity and exhibition make it clear that her position is not much different from that of a slave, the scenes that depict the English court hearings – set to determine whether The Venus has been made against her will to exhibit herself – show her treated according to universal standards. In five successive scenes the court hears The Venus herself and a number of other witnesses, some of which deem The Venus morally corrupt, while others condemn her exhibition as immoral. It is during these scenes that a character draws a direct connection between The Venus's captivity and slavery. A “noted abolitionist” (72), a witness at the court, judges The Venus's exhibition as immoral: “I think it base in the extreme, that *any* human beings should be thus exposed! It is contrary to every principle of morality and good order as this exhibition connects the same offense to public decency with that most horrid of all situations, *Slavery*” (72). The emphasis on “*any* human beings” reveals an inherently racist attitude in the abolitionist's well-meaning comment: the black woman occupies the lowest possible position in the imperceptible hierarchies of the egalitarian society. Regardless of the abolitionist's testimony the court comes to the conclusion that since The Venus wants to earn money by exhibiting herself, and because she has a right to do so just like anyone else, there is no crime involved in her exhibition. The court's decision based on The Venus's “right” to exhibit herself ridicules its seemingly egalitarian principles, which obviously do not in most circumstances apply to black women.

Just a few scenes earlier, when The Venus threatens to leave the freak show – “I'll set up shop and show myself. Be my own Boss make my own mint” (55) – the woman running the show calls her “The Queen of Fucking Sheeba” (55) for thinking that

someone in her position could be independent and points out: “They dont let your kind run loose in the streets much less set up their own shops” (56). The way this scene is juxtaposed to the court proceedings and how they both underline the right to make money and own property reveal the supposedly universal principle of bourgeois egalitarianism based on the propertied subject, as Hong suggests. The juxtaposition also renders this subject position, though presumably universal, as implicitly white and male.

The court scenes’ conclusive speech further underlines The Venus caught between the principles of inclusion and exclusion and shows how the hearing was more about The Venus’s utility for the solidification of the court’s egalitarian principles than about an interest in her well-being: “In closing, whatever happens to her, we should note that, it is very much to the credit of our great country that even a female Hottentot can find a court review her status” (78). After the remark, the court breaks into a wild laugh, and preceding its conclusion, The Negro Resurrectionist repeats his line about the abolition of the slave trade just three years earlier (77). At stake here is the egalitarianism of the English court as a sign of a just society, which is affirmed by its inclusion of “even a female Hottentot.” She is the furthest removed from the privileged white, male subject position, but her inclusion in the court system helps mask the race and gender based hierarchy existing concurrently with the universal principles. Hence race and gender difference is simultaneously disavowed and, as “the Venus show went on” (36) regardless of the abolition of the slave trade, capitalized and fixated upon.

Masochism and the Production of Race and Gender Difference

Hong argues that race and gender difference is not only disavowed in the name of universality while it concurrently remains excessive to it, but that it is also produced within liberal democracy's capitalistic machinery. In other words, "[r]ace is both capitalism's effect and its excess" (81). Hong bases her argument about the production of race on the idea of imperialistic surveillance. She argues that "[i]mperialism's goal...is to register and codify difference and diversity in order to constitute subjects marked by their difference from a universal imperialist subject" (77). Surveillance, according to Hong, is an integral element in imperialism achieving its goal as it allows the imperialistic subject to remain anonymous and observing, while the colonized subject is observed and marked by excess. As this excess is codified, commodified and made part of a trade, race difference is produced within the transaction. I suggest that while on some level *Venus* is without doubt about Saartjie Baartman's life story and about her crude exploitation, its most insightful cultural criticism emerges from the way it illuminates this production of race and gender difference as moneymaking entertainment.

The representation of *The Venus*'s masochism is instrumental in exposing the ways in which race and gender difference is both produced and disavowed in the capitalist undertaking of her exhibition. Parks explains her decision to portray her protagonist this way in an interview: "I could have written a two-hour saga with Venus being the victim. But she's adaptable. She's vain, beautiful, intelligent, and yes, complicit" (Williams). Here Parks again stresses her view that portraying oppression is reductive and that she would rather emphasize *The Venus*'s beauty, intelligence and vanity than her victimization. All these attributes come across in the play, yet it is her

complicity that concerned most commentators. While Parks and all critics refer to The Venus's willingness to perform and to become a star as "complicity," I argue that masochism is a more fitting term. In her article "With Deliberate Calculation: Money, Sex, and the Black Playwright in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*," Jennifer Larson points out that complicity "in its purest form, [implies] cooperation or collaboration in a completely malignant enterprise" (205). Complicity as a term is in fact often evoked in connection with the crimes of Nazi Germany or the South African apartheid, whereby it implies either knowingly participating or choosing to ignore the atrocities at hand and thus escaping one's "moral responsibility" (Sanders 3). Hence masochism, as understood broadly as behavior that goes against one's best interest, seems to be a more appropriate term to describe The Venus's behavior, because her complicity in her exploitation only directly harms herself, not anyone else.

Parks's method of evading the limitations that she perceives as accompanying portrayals of victimization divided the reviewers' and critics' opinions. For example, Robert Brustein thought it clever that by making The Venus co-operate with her exploiters, Parks "avoided pushing sympathy buttons." Contrary to his view, in the essay "The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*," Jean Young sharply criticizes Parks's choice as "[reifying] the perverse imperialist mindset" (700), because it depicts Baartman as "a sovereign, consenting individual with the freedom and agency to trade in her human dignity for the promise of material gain" (699). Young is adamant that "Baartman was a victim and not an accomplice" (700). Yet, as throughout the play it is made clear that at issue is not only the nineteenth century or Baartman's life, such an insistence ignores the continuum the

play establishes to the present and its undercurrent of “the shadow of slavery” that is still with us. That is, had Parks represented The Venus as a victim, all the responsibility of Baartman’s treatment would have neatly fallen on the nineteenth century Europeans as the victimizers. But the scene of exploitation as the site of simultaneous disavowal and production of race and gender difference, as *Venus* represents it, is rather a scene of capitalist social hierarchies with reverberations well into the present. Further, these hierarchies are such that everybody, including Baartman, Parks and the ticket-buying contemporary audience, participates in them.

It is here that masochism, as a critical lens, becomes useful, because knowledge of masochism’s psychological structure can shed light on the ways in which social hierarchies can in fact produce compliant behavior rather than defiance. As discussed in the introductory chapter, in “The Economic Problem of Masochism” Freud came to the conclusion that primary, biologically based masochism is innate in everyone and not merely a reversal of sadism. While this theory of primary masochism has radical implications, its biology-based universality does not seem to coincide with his suggestion that behavioral masochism is a culturally instigated reversal of sadism and hence specific to the masochist’s social environment: “The turning back of sadism against the self regularly occurs when *a cultural suppression of the instincts* holds back a large part of the subject’s destructive instinctual components from being exercised in life” (170). On one hand then, Freud claims that primary masochism is independent of sadism, and on the other that the secondary masochism’s behavioral mode is still tied to a culturally obstructed projection of sadism. Further, he never elaborates on what these cultural circumstances might be and instead explains how *the successful projection* of sadism is

directed “towards objects in the external world. The instinct is then called the destructive instinct, the instinct for mastery, or the will to power” (163). These metapsychological phrases describing the projection of sadistic instincts have a positive ring to them, while he calls the masochistic turning against the self a “*regress* to [an] earlier situation [emphasis added]” (164).

In this way, Freud connects “the instinct for mastery” with developmental progress and masochism with regress and in the process reveals the Enlightenment ideals hampering his more radical lines of thought. The language he uses to describe the successful sadistic impulses seems to coincide with the ethos of European imperialism, the inevitability of scientific progress and the ensuing belief of Europe’s entitlement over the colonies. The parallel to the developmental story of classical psychoanalysis is obvious: the subject must become autonomous in order to separate from the mother, who represents the undifferentiated developmental past, the time before subjectivity. The path to autonomy is parallel to the development of “will to power,” whereby masochism as its opposite signifies dependency, helplessness and ultimately the lack of subjectivity. Yet Freud’s essay also reveals masochism’s challenge to these ideals in the curious wavering between the biological, cultural and metapsychological registers, which seems to reflect his trouble in explaining masochism on all these levels. John K. Noyes interprets Freud’s use of the terms progress and regress in connection to sadism and masochism in the following way: “When the masochist fails to adopt these [sadistic] impulses, he reverts back to being a child. And his failure is the failure of the imperialist man” (145). By the time of the essay’s publication in 1924, as Freud was already suspecting that modern Europe was producing masochistic subjectivities rather than supporting the instinct for

mastery, his attempt to reconcile masochism's fundamental challenge to the nineteenth century concepts left him echoing the principles his essay simultaneously undermines.

It is self-evident how especially in the nineteenth century a development of "will to power" was perpetually out of reach for the colonized in general, and in particular for black women, not to mention slaves. These groups of people were culturally obstructed from developing "the instinct for mastery," as it might have either been futile to show one's rage, or such attempts could have been severely punished. In The Wretched of The Earth, Frantz Fanon describes the psychological effects of colonialism on the colonized and writes of suppressed anger: "The settler keeps alive in the native an anger which he deprives of outlet" (54). He then points out, similar to Freud, how this suppressed anger results in a turning against the self, which in the colonial situation takes the form of "collective autodestruction." It is "a suicidal behavior which proves to the settler (whose existence and domination is by them all the more justified) that these men are not reasonable human beings" (54). Because masochistic behavior – the turning against the self – undermines the most valued aspects of the nineteenth century formulation of subjectivity – self-preservation and autonomy – it reads as irrationality. Indeed, based on the nineteenth century notions of liberal subjectivity, nothing seems more irrational than suicidal masochism: a tendency to act against one's best interest and finally a willing erasure of one's own subjectivity. Hence the concept of masochism and its connection to developmental regress neatly coincided with Europe's view of the colonized as primitive and child-like, while in fact, as Freud describes it, colonial domination *produced* the behavior that was then regarded as evidence of Europeans' superiority.

Fanon never uses the term masochism in this connection, but it seems to me the process of colonial domination he describes is also descriptive of the production of masochistic behavior. While this process is more perceptible in the nineteenth century phase of colonialism and its overt domination, I want to suggest that forms of neo-colonialism and their more covert forms of surveillance have similar effects. Hong points out that surveillance is in fact specifically a tool of the more imperceptible ways of imperial domination: "If neocolonialism is less about overt and direct modes of coercive power and more about the production of neocolonial self-discipline through surveillance, then surveillance and the corresponding construction of an imperialist seeing subject is not a byproduct, but the central process of...imperialism" (77). Thus Hong identifies the self-discipline surveillance inspires and the invisible, observing imperial subject that the mechanism depends on as the key machinery of imperialism. In addition to Hong's point that surveillance produces race and gender difference, it can then also be said to produce behavioral masochism, as I read it as a form of self-discipline. Parks's portrayal of *The Venus* wanting to become rich and famous and thus co-operating with the Europeans in charge of her exhibition coincides with the psychology Fanon describes and the effects of surveillance Hong proposes. Racial domination and imperialistic surveillance are in fact capable of producing masochistic behavior, but if it surfaces, it is judged as irrational and used as justification for further domination. This seems especially to be the case in the more covert forms of neocolonialism, where the domination remains invisible.

Parks's spin on the situation is that *The Venus* is not exactly suicidal, but wants to participate in and gain profit from the capitalistic undertaking of her own exhibition thus perpetuating her victimization. This is another way *Venus* connects the nineteenth century

to the present as *The Venus*'s business tactics seem more in line with the contemporary moment than the previous century: *The Venus* for instance suggests ways to make her act more interesting – “We should spruce up our act. I could speak for them. Say a little poem or something” (51) – and demands more money than the other freaks realizing she is the main attraction: “You pay us each 5 coins a week. We’re all paid equal but we don’t draw equal” (53). In her review of *Venus*'s first production, Anne Davis Basting acknowledges that “[t]his seemingly straightforward tale of exploitation... is complicated by Baartman's desires to be famous, loved, and, in her own words, filthy rich” (223). Yet it is precisely this complication, i.e. *The Venus*'s masochism, I argue, that is capable of illuminating the ways in which racial and gender difference is produced within the exchange of money based on it, and how it is in other contexts disavowed according to universal standards. Judging *The Venus*'s behavior as irrational – or Parks's representation of it as unacceptable – reveals an implicit and completely unrealistic expectation that people at the bottom of societal hierarchies are morally above the capitalist machinery, which in fact produces gender and racial difference and thus maintains the social hierarchies based on it.

The Contemporary Idealization of the Oppressed

As masochism seems ostensibly to give permission to blame the victim, it is easy to understand why Parks's portrayal of *The Venus* as masochistic caused many concerns. For example Greg Miller, though he argues that Parks “refuses to recognize a clear division between oppressor and oppressed,” is also quick to add that this representation does not imply that “Baartman shares the blame equally” (127). The erasure of clear

divisions between the oppressor and the oppressed possibly permitting to put the blame on the party suffering from injustices seems to signal a dangerous ineptitude in critical thinking about oppression, especially as it pertains to racial and gender difference. Jessica Benjamin sees the problem in the “[idealization of] the oppressed,” in the tendency to assume that “their politics and culture were untouched by the system of domination, as if [oppressed] people did not participate in their own submission.” She argues that this line of thinking only serves to “reduce domination to a simple relation of doer and done-to” (9-10). Though most critics recognized Parks’s intention of complicating the dichotomy of the oppressor and the oppressed, *The Venus*’s masochism, which, with knowledge of its psychological structure, can be read as a logical result of her captivity, seemed too much to accept.

The idealization of the oppressed, which cancels out the possibility that they might participate in their own submission, seems to influence many critics. Embedded in for example Jean Young’s argument that *Venus* in fact re-commodifies the historical Baartman is an assumption about how an exploited black female protagonist should be portrayed. Young argues that Parks wrongly represents *The Venus* as complicit and hence as consenting because “[c]oncepts of consent and choice are limited to non-subjugated individuals involved in free labor, and Baartman and her peoples were neither” (702). However, when looked at in connection with masochism, the seemingly easy to explain terms of “consent” and “choice” turn out to be much trickier to define than they seem. Susan Schmeiser, writing about the complexities that S/M sex has caused in the field of law, demonstrates how the law does not honor the masochist’s consent for his victimization, because it cannot recognize such decision as rational.

Hence, the law interprets the masochist to be in need of its protection. Schmeiser suggests that the law's denial to accept the masochist's testimony reflects the unease S/M causes by mirroring the social contract: "In their consideration of S/M these courts first perceive a broad-based injury to social order and rationality, and then locate that injury specifically on the wounded, but acquiescent, subject" (24). The social contract is based on free will, rationality and autonomy, and if these categories become questionable, the social contract loses its validity. Because of this, Schmeiser argues, a masochist's willingness to give up his autonomy and free will cannot be viewed as rational. Thus the law has to displace the injury it detects from the weak spot in the philosophy of law onto the consenting masochist's body.

Young claims that Parks's representation of Baartman as consenting is preposterous because she was not in a position to choose differently or to consent, but as Schmeiser points out, consent is considered absurd even in the case of "free" people, if they consent to harm that is done to them. If the consent is given, as is the case with S/M sex, to be hurt by another person, there must be something wrong with the person permitting it. He is deemed irrational and incapable of taking care of himself, that is, the person is not seen as autonomous anymore. Thus, paradoxically, autonomy is not the masochist's to give away. But unlike the courts' reactions to white male masochists who are autonomous to begin with, in their reactions to *Venus*, the reviewers and critics do not deem *The Venus* incapable or irrational, but Parks's representation unacceptable. Young accuses Parks of re-objectifying and re-commodifying Baartman, and even in their more nuanced discussion, Harry J. Elam Jr. and Alice Rayner suggest that the play inadvertently sustains the complex social hierarchies it criticizes: "The play accepts the

forces of show business even as it reveals the abuses of that show business system enacted on the body of the Venus” (272). It seems to me that their critique, although it is not explicitly expressed, stems from *The Venus*’s willing participation in the capitalistic forces of show business and from the uncomfortable implication that she does this even as the abuse and pain they inflict on her is evident. Elam and Rayner don’t want to put the blame of participating in the capitalistic undertaking of her own exhibition on Baartman, but, like Young, feel more comfortable putting it on Parks. These attitudes speak volumes of the contemporary tendency to idealize the oppressed and the ensuing unwillingness to investigate their participation in their submission, and also show how such idealization might obstruct a more comprehensive analysis of the effects of oppression.

The Imperial Subject and Realistic Theatre

Connected to the contemporary tendency to idealize the oppressed is the audience’s desire to see *The Venus* represented as having a complex subjectivity. The frustration that the play does not attempt to do that is evident for instance in The Village Voice critic Michael Feingold’s review of the first production. Although he is appreciative of Parks’s previous plays, which were based on Parks’s “own metaphoric variants on black stereotypes,” Feingold believes a play on a historical figure cannot be written using the same devices as a play on racial stereotypes. He continues, “The Hottentot Venus was a person who had a life...and trying to read the icon Parks makes of her, without the light of a corrective reality, ultimately becomes a frustrating task.” Feingold is right to note that to look for signs of the historical person behind *The Venus*

is indeed frustrating. The play seems, however, to encourage such a search at times: it baits the spectators with the linear story and with glimpses into depth of character for example with the unlikely love story between The Venus and The Baron Docteur.

The Baron Docteur buys The Venus from Mother-Showman and takes her to Paris. They become lovers and he introduces her to luxurious living, all the while secretly studying her anatomy and exhibiting her to his peers at the Academy. The Venus becomes pregnant twice, but both times The Baron Docteur forces her to have an abortion in order to protect his reputation as a scientist, and as a married man. Finally The Grade-School Chum, presumably an old acquaintance of The Baron Docteur, convinces him to give The Venus up by hinting that other scientists are already dissecting Hottentots and close to publishing results. Reluctantly The Baron Docteur causes The Venus, who is sick with the clap, to be jailed, ironically for indecency. Though it is at all times clear that The Baron Docteur's interest in The Venus is self-serving, their love story also leaves room for "cause-and-effect sequences of actions," and depicts the two as "characters who react to the environment and action in complex and clearly motivated ways" (17), elements of which Patricia R. Schroeder assigns to psychological realism. Such moments – especially those concerning The Venus's pregnancy and abortions – are always quickly invalidated, however, with a returned focus on The Venus's iconicity and her status as a commodity.

Situated between Parks's thoroughly experimental earlier plays and the later realistic ones, *Venus* seems thus to employ elements of both styles resulting in a curious tension between genres. At times these styles are directly juxtaposed, for example in the way The Venus and The Baron Docteur's love story has a satirical counterpart in "For the

Love of Venus,” a play-within-a-play, acted in six scenes that are dispersed throughout the play. It is performed by the eight performers, who also form “The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders” as the side show freaks, “The Chorus of the Spectators” of The Venus’s freak show performances, “The Chorus of the Court” in the scenes at the court hearings, and “The Chorus of the 8 anatomists” in Paris where The Baron-Docteur exhibits The Venus to his peers. The play-within-the-play portrays a young Victorian English couple planning to marry. However, their relationship is in trouble because The Young Man desires to travel to Africa. He feels he needs to discover something in order to be a man. But he finds a way to fulfill his dream back home when he sees a newspaper ad for the Venus Hottentot. He wants to have her so that he can “love something Wild” (48), but the bride concocts a plan whereby she disguises herself as a Hottentot and wins back her fiancé’s love. The play-within-the-play is exaggeratedly theatrical and has a clearly ironic tone to it. The Baron Docteur is its only spectator, though he is joined a few times by The Negro Resurrectionist. The Venus is present in these scenes as a spectator as well. She does not watch the play, however, but observes The Baron Docteur watching the play, a device that seems to underline The Venus’s self-awareness about the nature of her relationship with the Baron Docteur and his self-serving interest in her.

Elam and Rayner base their argument that the contemporary audience might not comprehend the play’s suggestion that it is taking part in Baartman’s exploitation on these different modes the play employs. They call them “the opposing structures” of the linear narrative of Baartman’s life story and the circus sideshow displaying The Venus’s body in front of the spectators on stage and those in the audience of Parks’s play. They

write, “The narrative tends to offer the comfort of a whole story and threatens to obscure an audience’s complicity in the spectacle” (272). But I want to suggest that this tension between the genres, that is, the seeming comfort in the linearity coupled with its continuous disruption, is integral to the way the play functions because it foregrounds the audience’s role not only as consumers of the sexualized spectacle of Baartman’s body, but also as imperialistic surveilling subjects. That is, the mechanism places the audience at times in the position of a disembodied imperial subject and at others foregrounds its role as such and hence insinuates that the tradition of realistic theatre itself is continuing the legacy of the crude nineteenth century attitudes.

In Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater, W.B. Worthen argues that realistic drama as a genre depends on the audience’s role as invisible. Realism as a prose style, on which realist and naturalist theater, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, modeled itself, took its inspiration from scientific objectivity. Hence in the theater of realism, “[t]he spectator is cast as an impartial observer” (Worthen 17). The observer’s impartiality is intimately linked to the pleasure of filling in the gaps and finding out the truth of the characters’ identity. According to Worthen, this pleasurable detective job is a private act, which depends on the audience cast “as absent from the field of representation” (15). Parks’s method of implicating the audience in the scene of abuse – for example during the intermission or as spectators of the sideshow act – makes the audience’s role public, inserts it in the field of representation and denies its impartiality. Similar to Worthen, Marlene Moser describes how the mechanism of psychological realism is built upon giving the audience a chance to put together an in-depth story of a character’s identity based on surface facts. As “[t]he audience fills in the gaps,” and

makes the story coherent, it gains “a frisson of pleasure from making the deduction” (233). The audience, which expects the pleasure of filling in the gaps of the story of self, is thus denied that pleasure by the representation of The Venus’s iconicity and lack of depth in her character, but also by the denial of its own privacy and invisibility.

Realistic theatre seems thus to mimic the surveilling imperialist subject’s relationship to its colonized counterpart: “In contrast to the exceedingly material and embodied status of the colonized subject, the imperialist subject is marked by the lack of marking; it is disembodied, seemingly objective, and omniscient” (Hong 80). Further, Worthen argues that stage realism works to *produce* a particular kind of audience. He writes, “The aim of realism is to produce an audience, to legitimate its private acts of interpretation *as* objective” (17). The production of an objective audience thus in its part helped legitimate the European white, male, bourgeois viewpoint as the norm. This point of view was inherently connected not only to the belief of scientific objectivity and progress, but also implicitly to the legitimacy of colonization, as the nineteenth century witnessed the height of both projects, as well as the birth of theatrical realism. Psychoanalysis and the scientific interest in the human mind, which serve as the basis of interpreting the hidden motives of characters, were also products of the nineteenth century. In the realist theater, the audience’s position seems thus aligned with the visible forces of scientific progress and egalitarianism, which guarantee its objectivity. This objectivity, however, masks the audience’s position of superiority over the character it analyzes, a façade that I suggest *Venus*’s play with the genres seeks to expose.

Making the audience’s role visible in such a way is a device of the type of political theatre Bertolt Brecht developed, as is for example the Negro Resurrectionist’s

announcement of scene titles. Elin Diamond maintains that there are “pleasures of interpretation” also in the Brechtian theatre, but ones that are geared towards “the production of political agency” (*Unmaking* viii). The audience’s act of interpretation is then not about searching for the hidden motives of characters and interpreting the truth of identity, but about obliterating “the ahistorical referent” (Diamond, *Unmaking* viii). The audience is thus required to look beyond the character and identity and instead to interpret the historicized situation. Thus the pleasure of interpretation produces political agency *in the audience* rather than in character, as the spectators are prompted to analyze and form opinions about the historicized situation without the distraction of in-depth characterization. *Venus* functions partly like this, as it repeatedly denies the audience the pleasure of finding out the truth about The Venus’s identity. And yet the play’s inherent ambiguity obstructs rather than encourages analytical interpretation.

It is here that *Venus* departs from Brechtian conventions and comes closer to those Jean Genet used, which were based on an affective impact rather than appealing to the audience’s rationality. Thus *Venus* does not merely ask the audience to distance itself and to analyze the structures of domination, but insists that the audience is part of those structures, part of what Greg Miller describes as “a pre-spun web of exploitation” (127). The play makes the audience realize its part by making it uncomfortable observing the results of that domination, namely masochism, on the exploited Venus. Masochism’s inherent ambiguity, its play with binaries and its “attack on rationality” (201), as John K. Noyes calls it, cancel out the possibility of analytical Brechtian interpretation. Diamond points out that “[d]espite Brecht’s loathing of the bourgeois subject, he needed... to retain, theoretically and politically, the notion of agency” (*Unmaking* 47). *Venus*’s

Genet-like affective assault on the audience seems to undermine precisely this analytical position of the audience, whether invisible or foregrounded in the Brechtian way: it works to expose the audience's position as inherently bourgeois and surveilling and renders any uncomplicated concept of its agency as such too. Rather than emphasizing the audience's agency, *Venus* seeks to show the ways in which its position of power is based on the subject position of autonomy, a position unavailable for the black woman portrayed exploited on stage. Such an affective assault on the audience reveals the ways in which the institution of theatre supports social hierarchies based on racial and gender difference against the prevailing view of presumed equality.

Full Subjectivity and the Fetishization of Difference

Venus seems to suggest that the exhibition of the colonized as a moneymaking entertainment finds a continuum in the realistic theatre whose spectators are placed similarly to those of the early nineteenth century freak shows. The conventions of realistic theatre position its audience, regardless of its members' race or gender, in the position of the imperial subject, viewing the performing black woman with detached objectivity and hence superiority. The discomfort such a positioning causes to those audience members not wanting to witness Baartman's overt sexualization or masochism prompts them to desire to see her represented as having a complex subjectivity. But as this desire is never fulfilled, frustration ensues. It seems to me that behind the desire to see *The Venus* displaying depth of character is not only the play's realistic elements teasing with its possibility, but also the huge influence of socially aware identity-based theatre, the rationale of which is that positive depictions of socially disadvantaged

subjects function as a road to empowerment and hence as a road to political agency.

Though this type of theatre had its heyday in the 1960s and 70s, its influence in the way theatrical representations of particularly women of color are interpreted is still prevalent.

In critical responses to *Venus* this influence surfaces as a concern for The Venus's

agency. For example, on one hand Jean Young criticizes Parks for representing

Baartman as "a sovereign, consenting individual with the freedom and agency to trade in her human dignity for the promise of material gain" (699), but perplexingly also that

"Parks does not attempt to give agency to Baartman (702). Embedded in this reasoning is an assumption that agency, especially when represented in contemporary theatre, should be used for empowerment not to the pursuit of feeble desires.

In "Macerations' French for 'Lunch'": Reading the Vampire in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*," Laura Wright reads the play through the trope of colonial vampirism.

She is the only critic who uses Fanon to read *Venus* and interprets The Venus's

complicity not as a sign of consent, but as an effect of the contaminating bite of

colonialism. Thus just like the vampire, in her interpretation, colonialism succeeds in

making its victims mimic its own behavior. The colonized not only want what the

colonizer has, or to take his place, but want to become him, a desire that constitutes a

harmful turning against the self. The Venus's self-negating behavior, Wright argues, is

caused by such a turn. Wright comes close to spelling out the psychic mechanism of

masochism as she goes onto interpret The Venus's turning against herself as a

displacement of the Fanonian "power fantasy against her own people," which she then

"must literally enact... against herself" by eating "Capezzoli di Venere ("nipples of

Venus"), Petits Coeurs ("little hearts") and Enfants de Bruxelles, dark chocolate lozenges

“with an image of a little African child” on them” (81). The Venus’s desire for fancy chocolate with images that refer to her on them does indeed constitute a cannibalistic image and, though Wright does not mention it, a representation of masochistic pleasure in subjective disappearance, tellingly intertwined with the intense pleasure chocolate provides.

While Wright does point out moments when The Venus acts in such self-negating ways, she also finds it important to insist that The Venus has no choice: “[The] Venus’s complicity...is a result of a vampiric infection, a situation that places the Venus in the interregnum space where *true choice* becomes impossible [emphasis added]” (79). By equating the psychological effects of colonialism to a vampiric infection Wright manages to evade an interrogation into The Venus’s participation in her exploitation. I interpret this move, even after she had accurately described the self-negating psychological effects of colonialism, as Wright’s attempt to save Baartman from blame: if The Venus has no true choice, she has no agency to misuse. Her masochism becomes only a vampiric disease and she is assigned the role of a victim. But this argument simplifies the psychic mechanism of submission, reduces domination to a simple relation of doer and done-to, and paradoxically diminishes the little agency The Venus has to maneuver *within* her situation of captivity.

Elam and Rayner insist on reading resistance into The Venus’s willingness to strike a pose and argue that her “apparent complicity in posing her body for the spectacle is *also* (not instead of, or in actuality, but additionally) resistant to the desire of and projection by the spectators” (278). However, since they acknowledge The Venus’s character lacking an inner depth and hence a solid identity, they assign the agency and

resistance in the conscious pose *to the actress* portraying The Venus: “[The actress’] Venus resists the reductions of racial essentialism and thereby recuperates Baartman as a complex subject, not a symbolic or figurative body” (279). I argue, however, that the play illuminates the impossibility of representing Baartman having a complex subjectivity within the theatrical tradition and the social hierarchies that commodify her and in which she participates. By representing The Venus as neither having an inner depth nor empowering agency the play shifts the focus from the historical Baartman onto *the contemporary audience’s desire* to see Baartman represented as a complex subject. Were the desire fulfilled, however, it would, similarly to a depiction of Baartman as a victim, give the contemporary audience a feeling of superiority over the nineteenth century victimizers who brutally objectified her.

I propose that the contemporary audience’s longing to see Baartman represented as having a complex subjectivity and its discontent with witnessing The Venus participate in her own exploitation in their own way disavow racial and gender difference. There seems to be a connection between the contemporary tendency to idealize the oppressed and what Grace Kyungwon Hong calls the fetishization of difference, which is the way, she argues, that our era of global capital deals with racial and gender difference. Her point is that

the explicit fetishization of difference inherent to the logic of ...[global capitalism] is a mode that attempts universally and uniformly extend a form of production and consumption, albeit in a form based on differentiation. In other words, because differentiation was such a disruption to the previous dominants, ... [the new phase of capitalism] makes virtue out of necessity and utilizes differentiation. (110)

Thus the contemporary tendency to fetishize difference, while seemingly considerate and respectful of it, in fact helps global capitalism utilize differentiation. In this current

mode, racial and gender difference is produced within the universal form of production and consumption, while paradoxically difference and social hierarchies based on it remain similarly disavowed as they did within the nineteenth century tendency to universalize.

In terms of theatrical representations, it seems that both identity-based theatre and the idealization of the oppressed often play into a similar disavowal. They do that by portraying socially disadvantaged subjects aspiring to inhabit the idealized subject position on which the political narratives of universality are based, which is, however, implicitly marked masculine and white. That is, to portray oppressed people having agency and successfully occupying the position of sovereignty inadvertently validate the universality of egalitarian principles. For the purposes of contemporary politics of race and gender, it might be more effective to stage the possibly masochistic effects of the interplay of capitalism and social hierarchies than to represent someone in *The Venus's* position having a full, complex subjectivity, capable of defiance. Such representations do not adequately examine the structures of domination that keep women of color at a distance from the idealized subject position and capitalistic accumulation in the first place. In fact, they might make it seem like the egalitarian principles are within everyone's reach. Parks's *Venus* shows otherwise and in doing so gestures at possible new ways of representing race and gender in contemporary political theatre.

The Masochist's Pleasure

In *Venus*, masochism is not only applicable to *The Venus's* willing participation in the business based on her exhibition. I suggest that its paradoxical layers can also help

read The Venus's laughter, which tellingly of its perplexing nature all critics have shied away from discussing, but which nevertheless is a prominent part of the play. In the second scene The Girl, not yet named The Venus Hottentot, asks, "Do I have a choice? I'd like to think on it" (17) as a response to the suggestion that she should leave South Africa and go to England. After a pause, she answers by laughing "Hahahaha!" (18), thus setting the events of the play in motion as her laughter appears to be her affirmative answer to the proposition. The Venus repeats the question – "Do I have a choice?" (87) – to The Baron Docteur when he suggests she should go to Paris with him. Both times the question is merely rhetorical, however, and her wish to consider the proposal pointless because autonomy and hence the position of making such decisions are obviously not an option for her. The Baron Docteur answers "Yes. God. Of course" (88), but he has in fact already bought The Venus from The Mother Showman, another instance that equates The Venus's position to that of a slave. Yet because The Venus is also represented as co-operating, she does seem to have *a degree of choice*. Since it is not enough to be autonomous, however, she uses it to co-operate and to adapt to the situation she cannot control. I read The Venus's "odd laugh" (18), instead of feeble-mindedness, madness or naiveté, as a sign of paradoxical pleasure in her masochistic attitude, which enables her to access, through submission, the idealized subject position of autonomy, property and power otherwise perpetually out of reach for her.

Jennifer Larson comes to a somewhat similar conclusion, though she does not discuss The Venus's laughter. She takes the title of her essay "With Deliberate Calculation" from Harriet Jacob's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, in which Jacobs claims to have "decided to choose a lover – one whom she does not love – rather than be

raped by her master” (Larson 204). Larson argues against Jean Young’s assertion that Parks’s portrayal of Baartman renders her a sovereign individual with “agency to trade in her human dignity for the promise of material gain” by equating The Venus’s position to that of Jacob’s and points out that “[a]lthough [The Venus] comes to find agency *within* her situation, she never has power *over* it” (206). Equating co-operation with complete freedom and hence with sovereignty as Young does, unnecessarily renders complicity and agency to be perceived only in terms of binary oppositions. At issue here are degrees of freedom and choice within captivity, not complete sovereignty and autonomy. Comparing The Venus’s tactics to those of the enslaved Jacobs, Larson writes, “She has embraced what little agency she has and is using it to move toward the more hopeful and potentially more economically viable option, but she will not call this “free will”” (207). It seems to me that *Venus*’s insistence on the shadow of slavery over the contemporary moment begs the audience to consider the effects of race and gender difference on issues of autonomy and sovereignty also today: when concepts of consent, choice and free will are abstracted and separated from their socio-economic realities, they come to serve the purposes of universality.

Frantz Fanon recognized the importance of the connection between owning property and the desired subject position of autonomy to the colonized: “[T]here is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler’s place” (39). Emphasizing the psychological effects of colonialism, Fanon was keen on pointing out that this is not a high-minded dream. Instead it is saturated with “a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses [the native’s] dreams of possession” (39). Coinciding with the psychology Fanon describes, while in the house of The Baron Docteur, The Venus

succumbs to the following daydream about her possible future as The Baron Docteur's wife with servants:

Every afternoon I'll take a 3 hour bath. In hot rosewater. After my bath theyll pat me down. Theyll rub my body with the most expensive oils, perfume my big buttocks and sprinkle them with gold dust! Come here quick, slave and attend me! Fetch my sweets! Fix my hair! Do this do that do this do that! Hahahahah! Mmmmmm.
(135-136)

Here The Venus's laughter is coupled with sounds of pleasure and though the daydream is obviously pleasurable, she also knows that the luxury in her lover's house does not come without a price: she endures the advances of the anatomists she has to pose for and admits of her lover that "He is not thuh most thrilling lay Ive had, but his gold makes up thuh difference and hhh, I love him" (135). To overlook The Venus's self-awareness, her material aspirations, odd laughter and feelings of love for the man who later dissects her means to deny the complexity of submission and to hinder a comprehensive investigation into the effects of oppression. While The Venus's complicity can be read as produced by social hierarchies, she is *also* deriving pleasure from her willing participation in the racial and gender based domination. To judge this pleasure – or to judge its representation in the theatre – only plays into the disavowal of race and gender difference, which is produced within the interplay between liberal democracy, its seemingly universal principles and the capitalist machinery, but which also works to mask the inequalities it produces.

Parks's great insight into structures of domination is that they don't necessarily inspire high morals of resistance, but that they may instigate co-operation and even pleasure in it. But when looked at through the theories of masochism, such pleasure is revealed always to co-exist with an underlying anger and defiance. This is, however, not

immediately recognizable, which is why masochism reads as irrational self-harm. Though inherently an act of defiance, the masochistic act is not capable of changing the unequal distribution of power it opposes, and yet *for the masochist* it still functions as a paradoxical form of resistance. Masochism can thus be seen as a type of contradictory resistance Foucault theorized, which is given birth to and shaped by the same relations of power it resists: “[Resistances] are an odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite” (History 96). Precisely this way, masochism is inscribed within the relations of power that gave birth to it, while it simultaneously opposes them. While the masochist willingly submits to painful conditions, there is a rationale: to access, through submission, the agency the other owns. Thus the masochist is active by choosing passivity, seeks subjectivity through objectification, and aims at autonomy by theatrically renouncing it. In other words, the masochist parodies the power it bows to. I interpret the sheer exaggeration of The Venus’s daydream – the perfuming and covering with gold dust the very buttocks that are the site of her value as a commodity – as such a masochistic parody of the dominant power. Thus The Venus paradoxically makes fun of the same power she idealizes and aspires to hold.

Although the masochist’s parody is not capable of changing anything, in fact it might be completely undetected, I still suggest that its candid representation *in the theatre* can have a different effect. Such representations can draw attention to the social hierarchies capable of producing masochistic behavior and to the disavowal of racial and gender difference inherent in the audience’s discomfort and desire not to witness it. That is, depictions of the possibly masochistic effects of oppression in the theatre effectively shift the focus onto the social hierarchies away from the victim’s implicitly obligatory

responsibility to aspire to inhabit the idealized subject position perpetually out of reach for her. *Venus*'s stubborn insistence on representing masochism instead seems similar to the strategy Grace Kyungwon Hong advocates for "women of color feminist practice," which she suggests "must be situated *within* a genealogy of liberal capitalism, as naming the crises and erasures of that genealogy" (xii). It seems to me that Parks's *Venus* functions in such a way, revealing the contradictory ways liberal capitalism affects the lives of women of color while connecting two distinct moments in its genealogy as similarly disavowing racial and gender difference. The play's masochistic moments draw attention to these disavowals and, I suggest, in doing so manage to re-politicize race and gender difference while disrupting its apolitical fetishization.

CHAPTER THREE

Staging Paradoxical Resistance: Sentimentality and Masochism in Adrienne Kennedy's *The Ohio State Murders*

All marginal groups in this society who suffer grave injustices, who are victimized by institutionalized systems of domination (race, class, gender, etc.) are faced with the peculiar dilemma of developing strategies that draw attention to one's plight in such a way that will merit regard and consideration without reinscribing a paradigm of victimization. (58)

bell hooks, Killing Rage: Ending Racism

My eight-grade teacher taught Shelley, Keats, Byron, Wordsworth. The words "poetic," "lyrical," "romantic" suggested that writers led meaningful, significant lives and as they expressed sorrow and great happiness they were still often misfits, at odds with society. Thoughts a thirteen-year-old "Negro" girl responded to. (42)

Adrienne Kennedy, People Who Led to My Plays

There is no doubt Adrienne Kennedy's *The Ohio State Murders* (1992) is an angry play. In the one-act, African American writer Suzanne Alexander recounts her tumultuous years as a student at Ohio State University in 1949-52. Her stay at Ohio State was overshadowed by discrimination and misfortune: the English department refused to admit Suzanne as a major because black students were not thought capable of mastering the subject, she had a brief affair with her English professor that led to pregnancy and her dismissal from school, and most shockingly, her baby twins were murdered one by one under mysterious conditions. In her essay about the play, Jeanne Colleran describes how Suzanne, in recounting her memories, is not looking for "therapeutic release," but instead

“nourishes her rage by narration” (98), and concludes that the play is Kennedy’s “angriest” (100).

Yet the anger in *The Ohio State Murders* is anything but frank. In fact, it is mostly concealed and covered, and rather than being confrontational, the play’s atmosphere at times resembles a melodrama, at others a Gothic murder mystery. The play, which takes place in the present in the O level of a library, is framed as a rehearsal of a lecture. Suzanne, now a well-known writer, has been invited back to Ohio State to talk about the violent imagery in her plays. Kennedy has two actresses playing Suzanne – one rehearsing her speech, the other forty years younger attending college. During the play, the stacks of the library transform into different parts of the campus as they serve as the backdrop for the memories the younger Suzanne enacts. Suitably to the lecture mode, Suzanne talks about her painful experiences calmly without expressing much emotion. The younger Suzanne’s reactions are also composed, because the enacted scenes never encompass the most shocking events. Instead they concentrate on the scenes in-between and make the younger Suzanne’s quiet suffering the play’s main focus. Nevertheless, as the play progresses it becomes gradually clear that the violent imagery in Suzanne’s plays – “bloodied heads, severed limbs, dead father, dead Nazis, dying Jesus” (27) – is related to the racism and sexism she experienced as a student.

Only masquerading as a murder mystery, the play is better described as a memory play. It is Suzanne unfolding her memories that gives the play – despite the disturbing events it describes – an air of sentimentality. Adding to the play’s curiously languid atmosphere is the portrayal of the younger Suzanne as frail and passive. The play’s mood is thus made up of oppositional forces: the obvious underlying anger at injustice and the

paradoxical means of conveying it. This chapter proposes that *The Ohio State Murders* stages anger and resistance by employing sentimentality and masochism as representational tools. These seemingly unlikely elements create the play's politics and convey its anger, I suggest, more powerfully than direct representations of defiance or outward expressions of rage. By using theories of masochism and by comparing Kennedy's methods of staging resistance to those of the Black Arts Movement, I argue that the paradoxical way of staging resistance is politically compelling, because it is, similarly to Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*, based on an intricate view of the effects of social domination.

Masochism as an Expression of Anger

Today masochism is perceived as a highly complex psychic mechanism that comes in many forms and intensities. All of these forms, however, are marked by paradox. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, Margaret-Ann Fitzpatrick Hanly points out that since the 1950s clinical psychoanalysts have come to agree that "masochism is at the same time adaptive, defensive and gratifying" (1049). In recent decades, scholars in the humanities have similarly emphasized masochism's adaptive and defensive qualities, besides its most perceptible role as providing gratification. John K. Noyes, writing against the misconstrued idea that masochism is a biological predisposition, suggests that it should rather be read as "communicative," and thus as a social phenomenon: It "has its origins in social relations of power and... [its] aim is to neutralize or at least render tolerable the misuses of power" (17). Kaja Silverman emphasizes its defensive qualities: "masochism in all its guises is as much a product of

the existing symbolic order as a reaction against it” (213). Yet because on the surface masochism seems only to comply, its subversive aspects – its defiance and reaction against misused social power, or in a larger context “symbolic order” – are often left unnoticed. These adaptive and subversive qualities co-exist, however, with the gratifying ones; it is always all of these things at the same time. Understood in such a three-fold way, masochism is much more than what is commonly assumed: a deliberate seeking of pain for sexual gratification. In fact, it is a way to cope with an unjust situation, an expression of rage at this injustice and a perplexing way of achieving pleasure from doing it.

Sigmund Freud read moral or behavioral masochism to be caused by culturally instigated inverted sadism, but rather than interpreting it as a cloaked act of defiance or a roundabout expression of rage, he saw such masochism as a regression in the subject’s psychic development. Though in “The Economic Problem of Masochism” Freud never elaborated on what the circumstances for the cultural suppression of sadistic instincts might be, he did so in a later lecture called “Femininity” (1932), where he discussed women’s lack of aggressiveness: “The suppression of women’s aggressiveness which is prescribed for them constitutionally and imposed on them socially favours the development of powerful masochistic impulses...Thus masochism, as people say, is truly feminine” (116). While masochism per se, according to Freud, is not a biological disposition of women, the suppression of aggressiveness is as it is partly “prescribed for them constitutionally.” Yet, here too, Freud insists that the condition for inhibited aggressiveness is “imposed on [women] *socially*.” Hence Freud seems to come close to admitting that gender-based social domination can be a cause of masochism. In the end

then, masochism is “truly feminine,” only because it is *culturally inscribed* to be so: because women’s anger is culturally controlled, it finds a circular expression in masochism. Or as Freud would have it – reflecting his Enlightenment views – that such control is capable of causing a regress in the subject’s psychic development, a view no longer maintained, as today masochism is perceived as a three-part phenomenon.

The era *The Ohio State Murders* revisits– the early 1950s – curbed women’s aggressiveness and expressions of anger, a restriction the black middle class aspirations further supported. Writing about the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs, founded in 1896, Darlene Clark Hine notes that its central concern was “with creating positive images of black women’s sexuality” (918), which meant embracing a “Victorian sense of modesty” (916). By 1914, NAWC had more members than NAACP and enjoyed a wide influence as “it encouraged its members to embrace those values, behaviors, and attitudes traditionally associated with the middle classes” (Hine 918). The organization’s influence carried well into the 1950s, a period right after World War II that enforced women’s domesticity as a reaction against many women having held men’s jobs during the war. Correspondingly black middle class femininity of the time “adhered to Victorian notions of home and family, and thereby protected [the black middle class women’s] prospects for upward mobility by claiming the most scrupulous of moral standards” (Colleran 106). *The Ohio State Murders* is deeply rooted in this cultural milieu that Jeanne Colleran describes, as is evident in the older Suzanne’s memory of her parents’ and her boyfriend Val’s surprise at her pregnancy: “With my preference for Peter Pan blouses and precise straightened curls I had been almost a cliché of the ultimate virgin. I had totally believed sex was a sin before marriage” (57).

I suggest *The Ohio State Murders* represents these Victorian ideals' effect on black middle class women's behavior in both content and form: the play portrays the younger Suzanne, according to the ideals of Victorian femininity as quiet, passive and frail, while the older Suzanne's composed lecture, which frames the whole play, has obvious angry undertones, which remain, however, suppressed throughout the play. This restrained anger has a bearing on the mood of the play, giving it a masochistic undercurrent. While Freud suggests that the curbing of anger, which is culturally inscribed for women, might find an outlet in behavioral masochism, Marianne Noble describes masochism as a communicative tool in place of anger: "For the person to whom the expression of anger is off-limits, masochism represents a sad but effective means of self-expression" (193). I acknowledge that masochism can indeed be a sad way of expressing anger, but propose that *The Ohio State Murders* breaks this circle by using masochism as a representational device to expose the cultural circumstances that demanded the curbing of black middle class women's anger. This representation does not endorse masochism, but puts it into political use.

As Kennedy represents it, Suzanne's curbed anger is a result of a complicated interplay between gender, race and class restrictions. In her narration, Suzanne reminisces how from the first days the college campus seemed hostile to her and how even its "geography made [her] anxious" (27). She experienced the atmosphere especially at the dormitory, where only twelve out of six hundred girls were black, as oppressive. Several times the older Suzanne's lecture returns to the white girls at her dorm, whom she "thought of a great deal" (59). Suzanne remembers how they "bragged often to the maids that [she and her friend] had nothing in common with them, that there

was nothing to talk about with [them]” (53). The white girls’ pride in their dissimilarity is based, I suggest, not only on racial difference but also on class. They refuse to perceive Suzanne as middle class, even though she makes a point of saying that she “owned beautiful possessions and jewelry that [her college educated] parents had given [her] on going away to school” (53). However, rather than finding out about Suzanne’s background or accepting her as affluent as they are, the white girls accuse her of stealing.

Grace Kyungwon Hong points out how especially in the decades following World War II “[t]he behavior and appearance of African Americans [were] rendered excessive, deviant, and subject to eradication, a disciplining process that [posited] African Americans against a normative subject” (37). According to Hong, this disciplining was done in an effort to protect middle class respectability and affluence as symbolically white. Thus Suzanne’s efforts of wearing Peter Pan blouses and precise straightened curls show to be futile: in the eyes of the white girls she is always either excessive or deviant, and not accepted as middle class. *The Ohio State Murders* illuminates this discrepancy between the demand of black women to uphold scrupulous moral standards in order to be perceived as middle class and the simultaneous disciplining process that kept middle class respectability perpetually unattainable. One of the effects of this discrepancy, the play implies, is curbed anger and the ensuing masochism.

Masochism and Normalization

The white girls’ remarks, parties behind closed doors and their accusations that Suzanne steals gave her reason enough to hate them, but her reaction to their hostility, in accordance with Victorian feminine ideals, was never an expression of anger. The older

Suzanne recounts, “If they saw us coming down the corridor they would giggle and close their door. I hated them. Their way of laughing when they saw us coming into the lounge, then refusal to speak was a powerful language. It had devastated me” (52). This is the only time during her speech that Suzanne puts to words her hatred of the white girls, and yet even with this admission, her train of thoughts ends with an expression of being “devastated,” thus emphasizing the impossibility for someone in her position to show anger. But the younger Suzanne shows even less. While the older Suzanne narrates these memories, she is seen “*alone in her dorm room reading Thomas Hardy. From time to time Bunny and her friends are heard in the next room singing*” (52). In this scene, Suzanne’s anger is suppressed on two levels: as a student, she escapes it to Hardy’s novel, while the older Suzanne’s composed and matter-of-fact style of narration curbs any traces of anger that might be there at the moment of narration. It is Bunny – a particular white girl at the dorm her narration returns to several times – and her friends’ singing that remains the scene’s dominant force; the scene conveys the reason for Suzanne’s anger rather than represents it.

Though Suzanne cannot express her anger at the white girls, she still has the most violent responses to them of all the characters. However, the outcome is devastation, fear and paranoia: she suspects the white girls at the dorm might have killed her daughter, who had been found drowned in the ravine on campus. In the following speech, Kennedy depicts the manner in which these emotions instigate a masochistic reaction:

I felt such danger from them. Had they somehow sought out me and my babies? Of course I told no one this. But I knew whites had killed Negroes, although I had not witnessed it. Thoughts of secret white groups murdering singed the edge of my mind. I was often so tense that I wound the plastic pink curlers in my hair so tightly that my head bled. (54)

In this sequence of thoughts, Suzanne's fear of the white girls moves seamlessly to a broader racist context of lynching, and finally to the way the anxiety-producing fear makes Suzanne hurt herself by winding curlers so tightly her head bleeds. This self-inflicted pain is clearly not a suffering she looked for or purposefully made happen, instead it is caused by her surroundings, or more precisely, by the deeply experienced racism, and its purpose is adaptive.

The above scene reveals how Kennedy often emphasizes the effects of racism rather than sexism. Yet the scene is gender specific as well as racial. With the minute detail of the pink curlers she weaves into the masochistic moment another form of social punishment, which women habitually perpetuate: the curlers emphasize how the beauty industry provides women with weapons of self-punishment and encourages their use in the name of beauty. Suzanne's "precise straightened curls" also draw attention, however, to the issue of class. In her effort to emulate white middle class femininity she first straightens her hair and then curls it with precision – and with self-inflicted violence – in order to separate herself from the deviant sexuality associated with black women. Thus the scene seems to imply that masochistic reactions are not only cultural byproducts of oppression, but can in fact be culturally endorsed.

By making the genesis and process of behavioral masochism visible, however, Kennedy does not shift all responsibility on the dominant culture. Instead she stages the process of what Michel Foucault called normalization – the production of disciplined subjects, who exercise punishment on themselves. Thus, though it is a memory play, *The Ohio State Murders* does not aim to romanticize self-discovery or intend to stabilize identity, but critiques our complicity in the perpetuation of normative identities. The

ways in which the play portrays the complicated and contradictory processes of identity formations suggest that “[m]aybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are” (“Afterword” 216), just as Foucault suggested.

Identity in Kennedy’s Plays

The Ohio State Murders does not, however, depict such refusal as an easy task. Instead it candidly represents the overwhelming desire for a normative identity, but also illuminates the possibly detrimental effects such desire can produce in those for whom the normative subject position is unattainable. Kennedy’s plays, especially the early ones she is best known for, are most often read through postmodern theories of fragmented and de-centered identity.¹⁰ Her method of staging multiple selves and the early plays’ emphasis on the protagonist’s light-skinned mother and darker father provide ample material for theorizing a hybrid, in-between and in-process identity. Accordingly, these plays’ politics are often read to be located in a celebration of such indeterminacy establishing it as an alternative to the normative identity. Elin Diamond writes of Kennedy’s plays using the notion of identification that both produces and destabilizes identity: “The subject’s identity is no more, or less, than the accumulated history of her identifications. Indeed “identity” is the illusory stable representation of that turbulent

¹⁰ See for example Rosemary Curb: “(Hetero)Sexual Terrors in Adrienne Kennedy’s Early Plays.” *Intersecting Boundaries: The Theatre of Adrienne Kennedy*, eds. Paul K. Bryant-Jackson, Lois More Overbeck. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1992; Savas Patsalidis: “Adrienne Kennedy’s Heterotopias and the (Im)possibilities of the (Black) Female Self.” *Staging Difference: Cultural Pluralism in American Theatre and Drama*. Ed. Marc Maufort. New York: Peter Lang, 1995; Kimberly W. Benston: *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism*. London, New York: Routledge, 2000; Jacqueline Wood: “Weight of the Mask: Parody and the Heritage of Minstrelsy in Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro*.” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* Spring (2003): 5-24.

history and no less powerful (in fact far more powerful) for being imaginary” (*Unmaking* 111). Diamond argues that Kennedy’s plays are political precisely because they make visible this turbulent process, revealing both the multiplicity and social violence inherent in identifications. The way Kennedy represents identity thus operates outside the racial dichotomy of black and white and renounces essentialism.

Kennedy had her breakthrough in 1964, when *Funnyhouse of a Negro* won an Obie award for the Best Off-Broadway Play. She developed the surreal one-act in a workshop led by Edward Albee, who encouraged her not to censure the play’s violence. Kennedy was born in 1931 to college-educated, middle-class parents, who were devoted to Civil Rights issues. As she started writing, she was bewildered by her own violent imagination, which she felt to be in sharp contrast to her stable upbringing. Yet especially her early plays are full of violent imagery. *Funnyhouse of a Negro* stages the inner turmoil of a young black woman, Sarah, who is torn between her white and black ancestry. Queen Victoria, Duchess of Hapsburg, Jesus and Patrice Lumumba are parts of Sarah’s fragmented identity, her “selves.” Flying ravens, bloodied faces, falling hair, rape and decay mark the play’s circular structure and nightmarish atmosphere. Thus, in *The Ohio State Murders*, the violent imagery Suzanne has been asked to talk about directly refers to images in Kennedy’s own early plays.

Most of Kennedy’s writings contain such references to her own plays, because much of her work is partly autobiographical. So it is also with *The Ohio State Murders*, whose protagonist is Kennedy’s thinly disguised alter ego. Both women are bookish, shy and share a love for literature and movies, and both attended the Ohio State University in the early 50s. What Kennedy has added to her own experiences at Ohio State, however,

are the sensational events: clandestine affair, expulsion from school, kidnapping, suicide and the murder of two illegitimate baby girls. In an interview with Claudia Barnett, Kennedy discussed her inclination for mixing facts and fiction and how Suzanne Alexander's character is "a blend of part-truth and part-fiction. It's so obvious that I love to do that" (163). In 1987, Kennedy published a well-received autobiography People who Led to My Plays, which at a first glance seems to serve as a guide to separating facts from fiction in her works. A closer look reveals, however, that it, too, remains curiously elusive. It is a collage of entries, where for example Chopin, Dracula, Elizabeth Taylor and Kennedy's relatives all receive similar attention and weight. Thus rather than a conventional autobiography, it is very similar to her plays, which frequently stage her idols and influences together with her family and her own alter egos, often surrealistically morphing them into each other.

Elin Diamond, interviewing Kennedy, says about the autobiography: "[E]very passage has a secret that can't be unlocked" (130) and that ultimately "the autobiography just gives us another Kennedy text, no more true than the plays" ("Interview" 137). In a similarly elusive manner *The Ohio State Murders* presents the audience with a series of mysteries rather than a factual depiction of Kennedy or Suzanne Alexander's experience in college. *The Alexander Plays*, a cycle of four plays that *The Ohio State Murders* is part of, are all elusive, mysterious and also more tranquil than Kennedy's early plays. Yet, as Alisa Solomon points out, these plays "seethe quietly with the same sense of violence and disjuncture" (x) as Kennedy's early ones. Only now the violence is cloaked in a mood heavy with sentimental longing, which becomes the plays' main focus in lieu of dramatic action: mostly the plays stage Suzanne, who is the cycle's protagonist,

waiting, reading literature and reminiscing. It seems that the air of sentimentality is also due to the cycle's nineteenth century source materials, whose language and moods the plays reverberate. Beethoven's music and biography, Napoleon's love letters to Josephine, Tennyson's poetry, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* are all quoted at length. Tracing Suzanne's experiences during 1949-92 in Ghana, London and the US, the plays show her dwelling in these historical and fictional characters' hardships and finding them echoing her own life.

I want to suggest that in contrast to Kennedy's early plays, where identity was portrayed as a turbulent process, in *The Ohio State Murders*, it, too, becomes a source of mystery. In her narration, Suzanne reminisces how "[she] often remembered Bunny and her friends had given the illusion of withholding secrets" (58). As a student, Suzanne often carries and reads a book of symbols as if to solve the mystery of the hostile campus. For example, the Sorority Row, where many of the white girls moved after their freshman year, seemed to her like "a city in itself, the cluster of streets with the columned mansions sitting on top of the lawn appeared like a citadel" (38). The unapproachable white town symbolizes the unmentioned, yet highly operative segregation on campus. The younger Suzanne reads in the book of symbols: "A city should have a sacred geography never arbitrary but planned in strict accord with the dictates of a doctrine that the society upholds" (38). The play seems to imply that in Suzanne's experience, the campus geography is planned in accord with the silent rules of segregation, not according to the doctrines it officially upholds.

This double standard adds to the sense of secrecy and mystery, which not only makes the campus seem threatening, but also influences the way Suzanne perceives

herself. Though the older Suzanne, in her narration, acknowledges that her perception of the white girls holding secrets was an illusion, in the following scene this sense of illusionary, unresolved mystery carries over to Suzanne's sense of self:

SCENE: SUZANNE, *past, in dorm room reading book of symbols.*

SUZANNE (Present): Bunny and her friends in the closed room next door had become something I thought of a great deal. Their refusal to talk to me made me feel that they knew something about me that was not apparent to myself. (59)

The scene reveals how the younger Suzanne not only feels that Bunny and her friends are withholding secrets, but also that they somehow know more about her than she does.

This is knowledge she cannot access even with the help of her book of symbols. In a subtle way, the scene illuminates the far-reaching effects of racism and the ways in which its effects can be internalized as self-doubt.

Characteristic of Kennedy's later work, however, this internalized racism is not represented as self-hatred, or even as a violent fragmentation of identity, but as a sentimentally depicted mystery of self. This representation, I argue, does not celebrate a de-centered, fictional identity as an alternative to the normative one, but concentrates on depicting the inevitable desire for such. It also, however, illuminates Suzanne's perpetual distance from the normative ideal and depicts the suffering the ideal's unavailability causes. Because the suffering is depicted by way of Suzanne dwelling in her memories, the representation gains a sentimental dimension. I am not, however, suggesting that Suzanne's lecture or Kennedy's play is thoroughly sentimental. Instead I use the term to signify romanticized suffering, which, I argue, Kennedy uses in unexpected ways to render the younger Suzanne's suffering admirable, and even pleasurable.

Suzanne and Tess – The Real Romance

Rendering suffering admirable and pleasurable is a seemingly odd choice in contemporary theatre where suffering and social injustice are mostly represented as a cause for defiance. Because sentimentality inherently romanticizes suffering, it is not a well-respected theatrical device, and it is close to an anomaly in contemporary theatre engaged with social issues. But in fact, the term quickly became derogatory after the sentimental novel flourished in England between 1740 and 1760. Janet Todd points out that “[s]entimentality” came in as a pejorative term in the 1770s when the idea of sensibility was losing ground. It suggested and still suggests debased and affected feeling, an indulgence in and display of emotions for its own sake beyond the stimulus and beyond propriety” (8). Although Todd alludes here to the decline of sensibility as a respected faculty of the mind and correspondingly the sentimental novel as a genre, sentimental storytelling elements still flourish today. But as she suggests, such elements are culturally connected to indulgence, and needless to say, to women’s genres.

While the scorned women’s genres use sentimentality to depict suffering as a necessary path to be worthy of love, Kennedy’s usage of it, I suggest, is closely related to Suzanne’s relationship to literature, which is the play’s central motif. During her taxing freshman year, Professor Hampshire’s class on the Victorian novel is Suzanne’s only consolation. It is in his class – which she is allowed to take though she is not an English major – where she reads Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. Suzanne’s paper on it is so impressive that Hampshire at first suspects she has not written it herself and asks her to meet him in his office. He soon concludes the paper is so good it is a shame Suzanne has to take a trial course to determine whether she could become an English major, a course

where she receives only C's on each paper, obviously due to her race. Later, after a few more visits to Professor Hampshire's office, Suzanne spends one weekend with him in his house, which leads to pregnancy.

The older Suzanne's narration never proceeds chronologically but rather eschews a sense of cause and effect by mixing memories of lectures on literature, conversations with friends, details of campus architecture and of murder, thus imitating the way memory often works. Suzanne's out-of-sequence narration also makes up the majority of the play's spoken word, leaving little room for conventional dialogue. Emphasizing the importance of literature, however, Professor Hampshire's lectures have a prominent presence in the play. He reads several times at length especially from *Tess*, while the younger Suzanne intently listens. Hardy's emotive nineteenth century usage of language seems excessive when read out loud in the context of Suzanne's lecture:

Why did you go away - why did you - when I loved you so? I can't think why you did it. But I don't blame you; only, Angel, will you forgive my sin against you, now I have killed him? I thought as I ran along that you would be sure to forgive me now I have done that. It came to me as a shining light that I should get you back that way.
(37)

After Hampshire finishes reading a much longer version of this excerpt of Tess's emotional outburst, the stage directions read: "(Suzanne *cries*. Hampshire *glances at her*. He leaves Quonset hut. She remains in her seat)" (37). Next to Suzanne's constrained lecture and the younger Suzanne's quiet suffering, Tess's emotionality seems exaggerated and renders the above passage sentimental, even though Hardy's novel as a whole is not. The discreet gestures between Suzanne and Hampshire – her quiet crying and his glance at her – find, the scene implies, a more extravagant expression in Hardy's passage.

In sharp contrast to Tess uttering her emotions in flowery words, Suzanne's own tragedies are expressed economically. On the path to the Quonset hut, where the literature classes meet, Suzanne tells Hampshire she is pregnant and after his refusal to believe he is the father, Suzanne, in the present, only comments laconically: "He walked past me" (42). No tears are shed and only later, again out of sequence, Suzanne, the narrator, wonders: "Seeing Bobby read made me brood over how he had dismissed me. Why?" (49) This is the only mention of grief over their short-lived affair. When Suzanne finally explains the murder of the first twin, it is expressed as tersely: "Then it happened. Near the beginning of March, Robert Hampshire kidnapped and murdered our daughter. She was the one called Cathi. He drowned her in the ravine" (49). There is no suspenseful build-up before the succinct comment, instead just before, Suzanne again reminisces of a literature class. In a similarly sparse way, she later explains how one day Professor Hampshire, pretending to be a graduate student conducting a study of Negroes in the Columbus area, comes to Suzanne's boarding house while she is at work and kills the other twin and himself.

I argue that while the older Suzanne never speaks about her suffering with excessive emotions – quite the contrary – it still comes across sentimentally because of the way her agony is relayed in the context of Hardy's emotive language. The play implies that Suzanne finds access to self-expression by identifying with the literature she reads, and especially with the character of Tess and her suffering. It is obvious that *The Ohio State Murders* makes the younger Suzanne's fate mirror that of Hardy's heroine, who also loses an illegitimate child and whose fate does not seem to be in her own hands. Like Tess, the younger Suzanne is portrayed as melancholic and often at odds with her

surroundings. The play also underlies their physical similarity. In the second excerpt Professor Hampshire reads from *Tess*, she is described as “pale ... breathless ... quivering in every muscle” (36), while Kennedy describes the younger Suzanne as “fragile and pale” (29). Professor Hampshire’s comments on Suzanne’s paper on the novel are also telling of her deep identification with Tess: “Paper has unusual empathy for Tess. The language of the paper seems an extension of Hardy’s own language” (34-35).

Yet, besides these parallels, the two women’s lives are not alike in every way: for example, Tess does not lose two children. Philip C. Kolin writes, “Kennedy does not permit a simple and clean identification between or equivalence of Tess and Suzanne. Unlike Tess, who kills Alec to get Angel back, Suzanne does not murder for love” (142). The differences suggest that Kennedy’s interest is not in a simple adaptation or a rewrite of the novel’s story, but in underlying an emotional equivalence between Tess and Suzanne. In fact, the play seems to build a triangulation of identifications between Suzanne and her younger self, who in turn identifies deeply with Hardy’s literary heroine. Thus the “romance” of the play is not located in Suzanne’s relationships with others – especially not in her affair with Hampshire – but in the way her own subjectivity is shaped by suffering and in relationship to literature. This is the source, I suggest, of the play’s air of sentimentality.

The Double-Edged Sword of Sentimentality

Feminist critics have interpreted sentimentality in varied ways. While some Marxist feminists have condemned sentimental literature as eroticizing and capitalizing

on women's suffering, others have found the literature to have helped women writers and readers fight oppression within the existing constraints of patriarchal society.¹¹ The most recent studies combine these two approaches, as does Marianne Noble's work. Her study concentrates on nineteenth century American literature and argues that at the time women writers used sentimental elements to do subversive cultural work, while she also acknowledges that pleasure in sentimentality is indeed dependent on female suffering just as the Marxist critics suggested: "The eroticism of sentimental suffering was a double-edged sword, functioning both as a discursive agent for the proliferation of oppressive ideologies and as a rhetorical tool for the exploration of female desire" (6). At the time, Noble argues, when women had little or no room for expressions of desire, sentimentality provided a means for its exploration, while its usage simultaneously fortified oppressive ideologies. Sentimentality as a form of paradoxical resistance, which simultaneously reinforces the power opposed, is in many ways similar to masochism: "The eroticism of sentimental suffering" brings out masochism's gratifying aspects, while its curbed anger is more directly related to its defensive qualities.

Unlike the nineteenth century literature Noble writes about, Kennedy uses sentimentality to depict the role of literature in Suzanne's formative years. And yet this usage, too, simultaneously defies and fortifies dominant ideologies. Sentimentality is put to defiant use as Suzanne finds an avenue of self-expression by identifying with Hardy's literary heroine and her suffering. Suzanne's deep identification with Tess, though based

¹¹ Examples of the former trend are Ann Barr Snitow, "Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different", *Radical History Review*, No. 20, Spring/Summer 1979; David Margolies, "Mills and Boon – Guilt Without Sex", *Red Letters*, No. 14 (1982); For the latter, see for example Jane Tompkins, Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860, Oxford University Press, 1985.

on gratifying suffering, is simultaneously an act of defiance since it functions as a cure for Suzanne's wounded narcissism, caused by the series of rejections she experiences. Kaja Silverman writes of identifications as having "the great virtue of making it possible for the ego to transform itself into the desired object, and thereby to promote self-love" (317). The depiction of Suzanne's identification with Tess thus enables an otherwise unachievable self-love in the harsh circumstances the play portrays, while it also demands that the romance of a black woman's formative years, no matter how self-indulgent, be given importance. In the context of the older Suzanne's return to campus forty years after the painful events that took place there, this is in fact a bold move and seems to function as a corrective of old wrongs.

However, while Suzanne finds consolation and a cure for her wounded narcissism in literature, her immense respect for Hampshire, a respect that even his loathsome deeds don't shatter, speaks of her unshakable idealization of him. Philip C. Kolin calls Hampshire "vile" (132), and without a doubt the play as a whole paints such a picture of him. But interestingly neither Suzanne ever expresses such an opinion. Even after he has brutally rejected her, Suzanne still holds Hampshire in high esteem, goes to hear his lectures and in order to protect his reputation never reveals, even when she is expelled from school, that he is the father of her twins. Suzanne never suspects him of wrongdoings either, instead she suggests to her aunt he might be able to help them find the murderer: "I asked her did she think I should get Professor Hampshire to help... She was the only person who knew Bobby was the father of my girls" (51). Seeking help and comfort from Hampshire, while protecting his reputation and sparing him of accusations is symptomatic, I want to suggest, of a masochistic attachment. But as with

sentimentality, Kennedy's usage of masochism here is not about romantic love. Instead it is a vehicle of social criticism.

I propose that rather than merely as a love interest, Hampshire should be read as a representative of the admired but exclusionary literary establishment on campus. He promised Suzanne access to the literary world in the form of physical embrace and also by admiring her papers on *Tess*, which he called "brilliant" (35). These promises of inclusion were, however, never kept. Instead, while the play's setting at a basement level of a library underlines the importance of literature as the play's central trope, Suzanne is rejected by Hampshire, denied the right to become an English major and forced to major in elementary education, a subject that "made [her] depressed," while she "missed the imagery, the marvel, the narratives, the language of the English courses" (46). The suffering these rejections cause is depicted sentimentally, and together with Suzanne's intense love for literature help fortify the exclusionary literary establishment's power in ways Marianne Noble suggests the use of sentimentality often does. In such a way the play draws an analogy, I suggest, between the literary establishment on campus and the wider social order, which has never fulfilled the promises of the alleged equal rights given to African Americans in the Civil Right Movement's aftermath.

Masochistic Political Subjectivity

In Politics out of History, Wendy Brown points out that the postmodern era has eroded the belief in societal progress and in the "autonomous, willing, reasoning, rights-bearing subject convened by modernity" (10). Her concern is that while today the fictional basis of these notions is widely acknowledged, "yet we continue to operate

politically as if these premises still held, and as if the political-cultural narratives based on them were intact” (4). That is, the principle of sovereignty is still the functional basis both for the state and the individual, even though its premise reveals more and more to be fictional. Brown argues that our political narratives hold onto the egalitarian principles even as their believability is constantly undermined by the increasingly visible evidence of the contrary: individuals continue to be hierarchized in terms of race, gender, sexuality and wealth. Using Michel Foucault’s theory of subjectivity constituted by power, Brown suggests that these hierarchies “not only position but form us.” In the process, “the self-made autonomously willing, sovereign subject all but vanishes” (11). But since the fiction of sovereignty remains to be upheld as an ideal, conflicts and contradictions arise surrounding political subjectivity and identity, especially for those who are positioned furthest from enjoying the fruits of its principles.

Brown draws an unexpected analogy between Freud’s theory of masochistic desire for punishment and “the historically specific desire to be punished – not for crimes as such, but for what might be termed the “social crimes” of being female, colored, or queer in a sexist, racist and homophobic social order” (46). As discussed in the introductory chapter, Freud traced the reason for the desire to be punished to unconscious incestuous love, but Brown finds a parallel for it, especially for socially disadvantaged subjects, in the never kept promises of equality and political inclusion. She bases her investigation on Foucault’s views on power, which not only prohibits or enables, but which also molds identities and desires. When hopes for political inclusion and equality have shaped the subject’s identity, her love for the social order might not be shattered even when she is excluded from it. In fact, the love might persist. Brown suggests that

such love could produce foundationally masochistic subjectivities when “the world to which [those pejoratively marked along lines of gender, sexuality or race] had presumed they belonged... did not in fact hold them in esteem: it spurned their expectations of belonging and protection, thereby humiliating them in their attachment” (52). That is, rather than hatred or defiance, the disappointment in the face of rejection and the ensuing humiliation might inspire a masochistic attachment to the exclusionary social order.

Though Brown’s concept is highly speculative, it seems nevertheless to describe well the type of political subjectivity Kennedy stages: one that has a masochistic attachment to the dominant social order, represented as the literary establishment on campus, which has not kept its promise of inclusion. This is a rejection, the play implies, which might cultivate masochistic attachments rather than defiance. While Brown points out the paralyzing potential of a masochistic political subjectivity, I suggest that its staging *in the theatre* can have opposite effects. It can effectively expose the circumstances of such subjectivities’ production and function as a reminder of the discrepancy between democratic principles and their implementation.

Similar to Wendy Brown’s discussion of lost hope, bell hooks observes a change in the African American protest against discrimination that took place after the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X: “Suddenly a spirit of resistance that had been grounded in an oppositional belief that white power was limited, that it could be challenged and transformed, had dissipated. In its place was a rhetoric that represented that structure as all-powerful, unchanging” (57). This change in rhetoric of resistance, hooks argues, led to emphasis on victimization, an identity which she perceives as “disempowering and disenabling” (51). hooks goes on to point out that

victim-based identity has become a safe position from which to voice complaints, because it not only holds up white male power, but also makes investigations into African American complicity unnecessary. What she calls for instead is investment in agency, because “when individual black people project a victim identity... they are acting in complicity with an assaultive structure of racist domination in which they invest in the absence of agency” (58).

While I acknowledge that an investment in agency is of utmost importance in political struggles, I suggest that the notion of agency, too, is complicated when “the assaultive structure of racist domination” is seen to shape the subjectivities of those who are to invest in agency. Wendy Brown, similar to hooks, critiques the production of politicized identities based on social injury and seeks to expose their perverse dependence on the normative social order. But she takes hooks’s observation that such production fortifies the current power structures even further and claims that injury-based identities might also generate a desire for perpetuating the trauma they are based on: “If identity formed at the point of injury is identity formed in part out of trauma, then there would also be a certain reassurance, and possibly even erotic gratification, in restaging the injury” (55). Since the social injury has helped form the subject’s identity, its restaging, Brown suggests, provides narcissistic reassurance. Thus the subject would form a narcissistic attachment to the injury constituting her identity and would gain masochistic pleasure from perpetuating it. If this is indeed the case, then the politicization of injury-based identities not only keeps up the status quo, but also helps perpetuate the social injuries on which they are based.

How then is such a power, which is injurious but which has also formed one's identity, resisted? Or more pertinently, how is resistance to such power staged in the theatre? When power is seen as part of the subject, and further, when succumbing to its demands provides masochistic pleasure, defiance against it cannot be a simple expression of anger, or a claiming of agency. That is, while claiming agency is an absolutely valid goal outside the theatre, representations of such acts on stage do not encourage investigations into the structures of domination that favor the production of injury-based, possibly masochistic subjectivities. I want to suggest that the representation of resistance against such power must take as contradictory a form as the power's role in the shaping of subjectivities. Kennedy seems to have employed such a strategy by creating a heroine, whose suffering is sentimentally and masochistically depicted, but in a context where the reason for her masochism is underlined. This staging, I argue, is different from a mere acceptance of masochistic subjectivity. The restaging of the foundational trauma, as Brown suggests, can obviously be detrimental and the trauma's circular reproduction can become politically paralyzing. But its representation in the theatre, when the reasons for masochism – the unfulfilled promises of egalitarianism – are exposed, is another matter. Such a representation can effectively illuminate the ways in which structures of domination favor the production of victim-based identities rather than inspire resistance. Moreover, the depiction of a masochistic subjectivity contains its own paradoxical defiance, because it refuses to let go of the dominant culture's promise of inclusion and respect, and instead stages the masochistic effects of its rejection.

Kennedy and The Black Arts Movement

Kennedy's strategy of drawing attention to societal inequalities by staging their masochistic effects rather than open defiance against them is a sharp departure from the legacies of the 1960s and 70s political theatre. Kennedy emerged as a playwright, however, in the midst of the Black Power and the Black Arts Movement and sympathized with their beliefs. Yet *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, first performed the same year as Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* – 1964 – perplexed its audiences, because its political aim was not clear-cut. It was a hit in the experimental theater scene, but not all Black Arts Movement people were happy with it. In his essay that defined the movement, Larry Neal writes that "The Black Arts Movement believes that your ethics and aesthetics are one" (260) and that the "motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world" (259).

Though *Funnyhouse* represents the decay of white culture – The curtain at the beginning of the play is "of a cheap material and a ghastly white, a material that brings to mind the interior of a cheap casket, parts of it are frayed and look as if it has been gnawed by rats" (2) – it is also influenced by the European avant-garde movements of Expressionism and Surrealism and its protagonist Sarah needs white friends "as an embankment to keep [her] from reflecting too much upon the fact that [she is] a Negro" (6). Sarah's agony, which leads to suicide, is clearly related to racism, yet this was not the type of theatre the Black Arts Movement was encouraging, as the time was a witness to "a growing number of black people who are snapping off the shackles of imitation and are wearing their skin, their hair, and their features "natural" and with pride" (Hoyt W. Fuller 8). Accordingly, Michael Kahn, the first production's director, says in an

interview, “[Kennedy’s] plays were considered neurotic and not supportive of the black movement”, and furthermore “[they were] not presenting a positive image of blackness” (Stein 192).

One of the Black Arts Movement’s most visible leaders, Amiri Baraka writes in his 1965 manifesto “the revolutionary theatre,” “This is a theatre of assault. The play that will split the heavens for us will be called THE DESTRUCTION OF AMERICA” (215, emphasis in original). Baraka’s essay encourages black artists not only to represent black pride, but also to react to the white culture’s assaults with counter-assaults, to respond to oppression with destruction. This was the official Black Arts attitude, the machismo of which has been well documented.¹² The essay takes into account, however, the complicated road from being oppressed to becoming an aggressive fighter: “The Revolutionary Theatre must...Accuse and Attack because it is a theatre of Victims. It looks at the sky with the victims’ eyes, and moves the victims to look at the strength in their minds and their bodies” (211). Thus Baraka sees as part of the job of the revolutionary theatre to make the victims see and understand their own strength, and to move them into action.

Yet Baraka is acutely aware of the complicated nature of staging black masculine aggression in political drama. He ends his battle cry with the following: “The heroes will be Crazy Horse, Denmark Vesey, Patrice Lumumba, and not history, not memory, not sad sentimental groping for a warmth in our despair” (215). Baraka’s list of heroic martyrs reflects his understanding of the volatile relationship of blackness and masculine aggression: it can only lead to death and martyrdom. *Dutchman*’s hero, Clay, whom

¹² See for example Jones’s own account of it: Amiri Baraka, The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones, Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1997.

Baraka describes as a victim in the essay, is a self-hating black man, who is killed by a white temptress, Lula, following an eruption of anger she purposefully prompts from him.

Baraka's point in creating the character of Clay, as his name already implies, is to warn against conforming to the demands of normative society. Clay has not completely conformed, however, as his momentary outburst makes known "the pure heart, the pumping black heart" (331) underneath the accommodating mask he has developed. Kimberly Benston suggests that Clay's "painful stripping away of cultivated masks... reveals the naked, unaccommodated knowledge latent in the protagonist" (158). This latent knowledge bursts out in Clay's violent speech, and is subsequently punished; Larry Neal points out that "[w]hen Clay finally digs himself it is too late" (265). Kennedy's understanding of her heroines' relationship to the demands of normalization is quite different: their power is never only outside the subject, but is part of her. In the early plays, as in *Funnyhouse*, this internalized power often causes self-hatred and self-destruction. The later works, especially *The Ohio State Murders*, however, represent the normative demands of dominant culture not merely as internalized and causing harm or as inspiring defiance, but as constitutive of Suzanne's identity creating various and often contradictory effects: they are shown to cause anger, fear, devastation, but most importantly also a desire to conform and pleasure in succumbing to the desire's demands. Suzanne's identity, as Kennedy depicts it, is thus not based on a latent knowledge inside her she could access and release but is already an effect of normalization.

Baraka's methods of staging resistance served a purpose of triggering rage in the audience in the 1960s and 70s, but today when such direct-action political theatre is not

well esteemed, representations of black rage – or of claiming agency for that matter – seem futile. As theatrical devices, they don't fit the contemporary climate of presumed equality and the concurrent, yet often imperceptible disparities. Likewise, in his essay on *Dutchman*, Matthew Rebhorn argues that for the purposes of political theatre the play's devices are not successful. He suggests that the representation of Clay's violent outburst can only be answered with his destruction. Thus Baraka's construction of the violent black masculinity, in order to get validated, has to be destroyed: "Clay's sudden assertion of masculine power and the subsequent demolishing of this power...effectively collapses heroism on top of victimization: to be a man, in other words, requires building one's own sense of black virility and, by necessity, its immediate punishment by the white hegemony" (808). According to Rebhorn, the Black Arts machismo can be read as a doomed type of masculinity, meaningful only if dangerous enough to require abolishment. This impossibility for virile black masculinity to exist in the racist US is without doubt one of Baraka's points. But since it ultimately aims at getting punished, Rebhorn suggests that Baraka's portrayal of black masculinity contains hints of masochism: "Baraka ironically privileges a masochistic desire as being one of the key features of a strong and independent black man" (808). Baraka's recipe for an effective political theatre, then, requires an odd collapsing of "heroism on top of victimization," as Rebhorn suggests. Jones juxtaposes his list of martyred heroes – Crazy Horse, Vesey, Lumumba – with "history...memory...[and] sad sentimental groping for a warmth in our despair" (215). The type of heroism he calls for is thus not based on dwelling on memories or in sentimentality – which is precisely the method Kennedy employs in *The*

Ohio State Murders – but on victimization propelled into masculine action, which, however, contains the masochistic desire to be punished.

Both Baraka and Kennedy's methods can be read using Wendy Brown's theory of masochistic political subjectivities. While Kennedy's staging underlines Suzanne's lingering love for the exclusionary yet admired dominant culture, Baraka stages open defiance against it. Yet as Rebhorn argues, Clay's defiance is only meaningful if punished and hence contains a masochistic dimension, which remains, however, unconscious and not directly represented. As mentioned in the introduction, in his discussion of women and men's masturbatory beating fantasies, Freud discovered that the conscious parts of the fantasy, the parts the patients are able to recount to the therapist, are markedly different in women and men. Yet he came to a conclusion that "[i]n both cases the beating-phantasy has its origin in an incestuous attachment to the father" ("Child" 198). While Brown, in her theory, substitutes the Oedipal father with the social order in general, the white male – the powerful father figure – can still be read as its representative.

In *The Ohio State Murders*, Kennedy represents this figure as Professor Hampshire and candidly portrays Suzanne's lingering love for him regardless of the humiliations he makes her experience. In contrast, the power games Lula and Clay play in *Dutchman* are descriptively fought in the absence of the white father figure. Rebhorn points out that Baraka's vision of black masculinity is initially constructed by disgracing white queer men and women: "Baraka's black masculinity not only exhibits notable "macho" traits, but also depends for its definition on being directed against those "colonized" subjects who are also abjectified by dominant society" (800). I want to add

to Rebhorn's observation that it is still the white man's power that haunts the scene of Lula and Clay's battle: Clay is only able to achieve masculine power, even if momentarily, by physically assaulting Lula and debasing women and queer white men in his aggressive speech, while the heterosexual white man's power remains in tact. It is his love and acceptance, figuratively, that Clay unconsciously desires and subsequently looks for punishment for this forbidden desire. Thus his political subjectivity is no less masochistic than Suzanne's.

As a representational device, Baraka's construction of the martyred black heroism is highly problematic. In fact, since the white man's power stays in tact, Clay's violent speech and his ensuing punishment only help maintain the established order. The dangerous black masculinity, in need of punishment, gets its validation in destruction as the status quo is restored.¹³ Though Rebhorn does not discuss Kennedy's work, I want to pose the following question in terms of his discussion: In the end, what makes Clay so different from *Funnyhouse*'s Sarah? Clay's aggression, while symbolically aimed at white men, only manages to debase others in a similarly inferior cultural position, and ends in his destruction. Sarah, too, is destroyed while the white power stays in tact, and coincidentally her agony is also staged in the absence of the powerful white man: Her white boyfriend is Jewish, and one of her selves, Jesus, is a hunchback dwarf. The only difference between the characters is that Clay's anger is directed outwards, while Sarah's, in a masochistically self-destructive way, is directed at herself. Yet both plays make painstakingly clear that the reason behind their protagonists' ill fate is racism. The

¹³ This is only true of Jones's heroes in his early dramas: *Dutchman*, *The Slave* and *The Toilet*. Soon after *Dutchman*'s success, as Baraka moved from the Greenwich Village to Harlem, his writing became more aligned with African arts, music, folk tradition, spirituality and communal values. He subsequently changed his method of staging politics and based it on collective action rather than individual heroes.

reason, then, why The Black Arts Movement favored *Dutchman* over *Funnyhouse* has to do with the representation of rage, and the masculinity it grants, albeit only momentarily.

Both Heroine and Victim

I suggest that in *The Ohio State Murders*, by including Hampshire as a representative of the dominant culture, Kennedy creates a more comprehensive picture of societal power relations. And while Suzanne's lecture puts no direct blame on Hampshire, the play does, however, effectively expose his contemptible actions. At the same time, though, it is able to show how the dominant power remains idealized and masochistically loved even by the older Suzanne. In this way, the play better exposes the possibly masochistic effects of the demands of normalization than depictions of open defiance, which only work to mask such effects. Since the play as a whole achieves this, rather than the depiction of Suzanne's character, *The Ohio State Murders* also refuses resistance to be located in politicized, injury-based identity in a very similar manner that Suzan-Lori Parks refused to portray Saartjie Baartman as a victim.

But while Parks achieved this by portraying her exploited heroine cashing in on her exhibition, Kennedy does the same by blurring the lines between heroine and victim; Suzanne seems to be both at the same time. In Baraka's view of effective political theatre, the two are polarized: the victim, through aggression, must become a hero. But *The Ohio State Murders* seems rather to entwine heroism and victimization and thus operates outside the either-or binary. Contrary to Baraka's method, Kennedy's heroine dwells in her subjective memories and even in what might be called "sentimental groping," which Baraka advised against. But while both Clay and Suzanne exhibit

masochistic tendencies, their gendered difference gives them different representational significance. Whereas Clay's momentary black machismo is destroyed because it requires the dominant power's validation, it is precisely the masochistic traits in Suzanne's behavior that create subversive content: rather than seeking punishment for or shamefully hiding the younger Suzanne's frail passivity or the older Suzanne's pleasure in dwelling in her memories of suffering, the staging of *The Ohio State Murders* makes them admirable characteristics and a source of self-love.

Kennedy's usage of nineteenth century source materials seems to serve the same purpose of blurring the lines between heroism and victimization. In 2000, in an interview with Scott T. Cummings for the Boston Phoenix, Kennedy says of her work: "I have this idea in my mind that Jane Eyre was a heroine, Anna Karenina was a heroine, Emma Bovary. I am just trying to create a heroine. That is all I am trying to do" (7). In a style typical of her, Kennedy describes her intention in rather simplistic terms. However, in the same interview she also talks about her longstanding aspiration to fight against racism. At the first glance then, Kennedy's appropriation of these iconic nineteenth century European literary heroines to make a point against racism seems rather paradoxical. But a closer look reveals what Kennedy is drawn to. Ellen Rosenman argues that the nineteenth century novel, while much more complex psychologically than its sentimental or melodramatic predecessor, nevertheless retains their "intense emotions, pre-eminently suffering" (23). If these daring heroines Kennedy lists have anything in common, it is precisely the intensity of their passion and their suffering. It seems that modeling her own black heroines after nineteenth century literary ones gives Kennedy a chance to create a type of black female character, who is rarely seen in contemporary

American political theater: a woman, who is simultaneously an admirable heroine and a sentimentalized victim.

In Cummings' interview, Kennedy does not mention Hardy's *Tess of the D'urbervilles* as one of the literary heroines she admires, but she could easily be added to the list. Hardy's novel seems to provide Kennedy a model for a female protagonist, whose passive suffering is emphasized, but who is also an admirable, headstrong heroine. Accordingly, Kennedy couples the younger Suzanne's frailty and passivity with determination. Reminiscent of the nineteenth century heroines' behavior, she protects Professor Hampshire's reputation. And despite further humiliation, she audaciously insists on returning to Columbus, Ohio after giving birth in New York, and stays even after the murder of the first twin based only on a premonition: "I felt my baby's murderer was someone I knew" (52). Yet she does nothing to help solve the crime, but rather just patiently waits for the racist police to do their work. Rosemary Curb describes Suzanne as "intelligent, shy, lonely, passionate, passive, and taciturn," and in what seems like a slight complaint: "She never acts as a moral agent"(50). Curb's dissatisfaction with Suzanne's passivity hints at an expectation of representation of female agency and heroism. Suzanne's curious passivity when faced with injustice, however, seems to stem from Kennedy's desire to model her heroine after the nineteenth century literary ones and to sentimentally depict her suffering in order to blur the line between heroine and victim.

I want to further suggest that the nineteenth century literary heroine serves as a model for a representation of an identity, which enables self-love while also taking into consideration the normative demands. The literary heroine's self-expression is subdued due to cultural restrictions just like Suzanne's: class and economic oppression shape

Tess's fate, while Suzanne's experiences are marked by racism and yet both experience very similar constraints due to their gender. By drawing a parallel between Tess and Suzanne, the play emphasizes the Victorian morality's influence on black middle class women's behavior in the 1950s. I want to suggest that this parallel is both liberating as it promotes self-love, and limiting as it shows Suzanne taking pleasure in identifying with Tess as a representative of Victorian femininity. While both Tess and Suzanne break the strict Victorian moral standards and are subsequently punished, their admirable frailty and passivity still hold up the Victorian feminine ideals. Such a representation is more effective, I suggest, in exposing the contradictory effects of normalization, which generates both resistance and desire to conform, than The Black Arts Movement's confrontational methods.

Masochism as a Paradoxical Form of Resistance

The way the play portrays Suzanne as both a heroine and a victim is telling of masochism's paradoxical layers, but also of its play with binaries, which Nick Mansfield calls "a sort of pornography for masochism" (19). The masochist's play with binaries becomes visible for example in the way she is active by choosing passivity, seeks subjectivity through objectification, and aims at autonomy by theatrically renouncing it. Criticizing the view that masochism is an act of defiance, Mansfield views it as a closed system, where the masochist is at the same time both the subject and object to herself, and where the playing with binaries leads nowhere. It is certainly true that the masochistic act changes nothing, albeit it functions as an act of resistance *for the masochist*. However, it seems to me that the problem with Mansfield's argument is that

he takes the notion of masochism's resistance too literally. Though Foucault never writes about masochism as a form of resistance, his division of resistances into three types will help clarify my point:

Generally, it can be said that there are three types of struggles: either against forms of domination (ethnic, social, and religious); against forms of exploitation which separate individuals from what they produce; or against that which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others in this way (struggles against subjection, against forms of subjectivity and submission). ("Afterword" 212)

I suggest that masochism as resistance is only of the third kind: struggle against normative forms of subjectivity. That is, masochism does not directly oppose forms of social domination, or economic exploitation, but battles the effects of subjection and subordination on the level of subjectivity. Because these effects are always contradictory, so is the struggle against them. I propose that masochism's playing with binaries, especially when represented in the theatre, successfully draws attention to this battle, because it unsettles the more recognizable types of resistance social domination and economic exploitation require: active, heroic opposition or claims to be made based on passive victimization.

Foucault insists, however, that all three types of struggles he lists are connected, but that "[mechanisms of subjection] do not merely constitute the "terminal" of more fundamental mechanisms [of domination and exploitation]. They entertain complex and circular relations with other forms" ("Afterword" 213). I want to suggest that political theatre most fitting to resist the implicit forms of contemporary inequalities, represents, rather than open defiance, resistance to these mechanisms of subjection while underlying their connection to the more visible forms of oppression. This is, it seems to me, what *The Ohio State Murders* does by representing Suzanne's conflicting desires, curbed

expression of anger as well as her complicity in helping uphold the dominant power by idealizing and protecting Hampshire.

But Kennedy makes sure to connect Suzanne's actions to the larger mechanisms of domination as well. The older Suzanne recalls how, besides her, the whole school participated in aiding Hampshire: "The university protected Robert Hampshire for a long time. Nothing of the story came out in the papers. There were stories that a white professor had wandered into the Negro section of Columbus and was killed" (62). I suggest that the representation of Suzanne's masochistic participation in these webs of power, while exposing their larger workings, paints a more truthful picture of contemporary power relations, how they are supported and how they shape subjectivities than single acts of defiance or representations of claiming agency could. Furthermore, while representations of claiming agency work to mask the effects of normalization on identity, the staging of their masochistic effects draw attention away from individual responsibility and direct it instead on structures of domination capable of producing such effects.

Masochism's Three Layers

However, though masochism is a paradoxical form of resistance, it is always also a source of pleasure. An entry in Kennedy's autobiography illuminates these different levels of masochism. Kennedy writes about a painful memory of her yearly trips to Montezuma, Georgia to visit her grandparents. The young Kennedy loved the visits, but not the travel down South "in the dirty Jim Crow car" (People 33). She rode the train from Cleveland alone with her little brother, who would invariably cry all the way to

Cincinnati. She continues:

Night would come while we rode into the South and he cried with his head on my shoulder. My father had bought me some magazines at the Cleveland Terminal. One was a Modern Screen with a picture of Clark Gable in an army uniform. I tried to interest my brother in the magazine, but he kept sobbing, "I want to go home." I put my arm around my brother, looked out of the dirty double-panel windows and clutched the Modern Screen magazine with Gable on the cover. (*People* 33-34)

Deborah Thompson analyzes the moment: "Kennedy's impulse to clutch Clark Gable in response to fear, helplessness, and racial injustice is itself a self-contradictory gesture. Internal multiplicity and contradiction to this extent is not enabling, as postmodernism would have it, but paralyzing" (72-73). Writing against the postmodern tendency to celebrate contradiction, Thompson points out the paralyzing potential in the moment. Yet Thompson reads the moment in terms that seem too harsh as Kennedy's passage is more multilayered than Thompson's description: the young Kennedy is not completely paralyzed, but looks out the window, puts her arm around her little brother *and* clutches the image of Clark Gable.

I want to suggest that the moment's complexity, like the representation of Suzanne's relationship to Hampshire and her curbed anger, is best understood as a masochistic behavior. The entry in the autobiography is self-contradictory, I argue, because masochism is inherently a reaction against "fear, helplessness" and "injustice," but even though an act of defiance, its end result might not be enabling, but indeed, in the worst case scenario, paralyzing. And yet the act also produces pleasure. Discussing the moment in an interview, Kennedy says: "[D]on't you think these magazines offered comfort and illusion? I mean, it's a little embarrassing, but I'm sure I spent the rest of the summer, many, many hours, in a Clark Gable fantasy...Imagining him kissing me" (Diamond, "Interview" 133). Afraid and vulnerable, and angry at racial injustice in a Jim

Crow car, Kennedy nevertheless finds comfort in clutching the image of the handsome, white actor in an army uniform, later succumbing to a fantasy of kissing him. However, by using the word “illusion,” she also acknowledges that the moment’s comfort is indeed based on fantasy, and hence cannot as readily be coined paralyzing as Thompson would have it. Instead this entry in Kennedy’s autobiography, I suggest, perfectly exemplifies the kinds of defensive, adaptive and gratifying work masochism performs.

Due to these three layers of masochism, I argue it a mistake to read *The Ohio State Murders* as merely angry. Jeanne Colleran argues about the play, I suggest mistakenly, that “what appears to be a series of admissions is actually a progression of accusations” (99), but she never elaborates on how the seeming admissions become accusations. It seems to me she doesn’t because they never in fact do. Moreover, such an interpretation unnecessarily flattens the play’s intricate portrayal of the effects of social domination and, similarly to the *Theatre for a New Audience* production mentioned in the introduction, makes it easy on the audience. I maintain that the effects of social domination in the play include pleasure in submission and love for the dominating power. This is why the play never represents the anger producing power only as the blatant racism, but also as the loved, and yet rejecting literary establishment. But because anger towards it cannot be expressed directly, Suzanne gives preference, rather than voicing direct accusations, to recounting the younger Suzanne’s feelings of exclusion, suffering and her immense enjoyment of literature. Only the last sentence of the play – “And that is the main source of the violent imagery in my work” (63) – contains an indirect accusation. Yet the sense is that the word “that” refers to all of the preceding events, which, besides horrific events, also include long excerpts from literature and a

sentimental depiction of a young black woman's suffering. And according to the normative race, gender and class based restrictions the play represents, Suzanne's lecture ends, even after the indirect accusation, with a decorous "Thank you" (63). This representation of Suzanne's contained anger and well-mannered lecture, in the context of the play's upsetting events, is politically more effective than a direct representation of anger, because Suzanne's masochism prompts an affective response from the audience.

Writer Among Others

I want to now return to *The Ohio State Murders*' central trope of literature. In an interview, Kennedy has admitted the following about writing: "[T]hat to me is probably my biggest pleasure in being a writer: to be connected to other writers. In fact, there's no doubt that that's my biggest pleasure" (Barnett 164). As a writer, Kennedy implies, she is in fact included in the literary world she admires, her alter ego Suzanne's exclusion from which *The Ohio State Murders* represents. Interestingly she talks about being connected to other writers in terms of pleasure and it seems that she does not leave this pleasure to be fulfilled up for chance, but in fact uses her plays to make it happen.

Claudia Barnett writes about Kennedy's tendency to include long excerpts from literature in her work:

Along with her many references in her plays to other writers, [Kennedy] frequently includes long quotations, often without quotation marks; this is especially true of the later plays in which the language of Bram Stoker, Thomas Hardy, even Napoleon and Josephine, figures prominently. As Suzanne Alexander speaks these writers' words, she likewise quotes the plays and manuscripts of Adrienne Kennedy – thereby creating a level playing field among her canonized heroes and herself. (183)

Barnett suggests that by including quotations from canonized writers and by blending the distinctions between theirs and her own words, Kennedy effectively connects herself to these authors. She thus uses playwriting to ensure her pleasure of inclusion.

Kennedy has also confessed that she feels “tremendous rage against American society” and that “as a black person in America, you almost have to force yourself on society” (Bryant-Jackson and Overbeck 7-8). I interpret *The Ohio State Murders* as an expression of such rage, which is represented in a masochistically underhanded but effective way. It is not only an effective expression of anger at racism, but also an insightful representation of the conflicting effects of the demands of normalization. Yet the play also delicately inserts Kennedy within the literary world she so admires by leveling the playing field between herself and Thomas Hardy, by including passages from his novel and by making Tess and her own heroine counterparts. The transgression here is subtle: Kennedy manages to make herself part of the exclusionary literary world, whose rejection of her heroine the play simultaneously stages. This, I suggest, is a complex and compelling representation of anger as well as a shrewd way for Kennedy to “force” herself “on society.” The subtlety of this forcing proves more effective than open expressions of defiance. It does not rely on victimization to make demands, but neither does it remain merely a postmodern depiction of the turbulent process of identity formation. Instead it stages its heroine’s painful exclusion from the social order and its principles of egalitarianism while conveying all the contradictory effects of its rejection.

CHAPTER FOUR

Alice Tuan's *Hit* and Masochistic Consumerism

The Asians don't quite get it, the Americans don't quite get it
— that's my definition of Asian American.
Alice Tuan (Interview with Terry Hong)

Alice Tuan's two-act farce *Hit* (2000) centers on a wickedly dysfunctional family made up of an obese mother, Sharon Maywell, and her 28-year-old adopted daughter Kim. Kim is of a mixed racial heritage – half white, half Korean – whom Sharon, an economics professor, has adopted when Kim was ten years old. There is also a father of sorts – Luc, Italian born but raised in France – but who has mostly been absent and whose role as a husband or a father has never been made official. He subsequently takes liberties with his undefined role in the family and sleeps with both the mother and the daughter. The play takes place in contemporary Los Angeles, which Luc – with marked European arrogance – describes as a place where “everything is in an ugly strip mall. That you can only drive to. To consume under the most vulgar light” (12). Consumerism, a theme of which the play is highly self-conscious, is also the target of its criticism: *Hit* ridicules consumerism's pervasiveness in the contemporary US alongside the presumption that it provides freedom. Rather than as freeing, the play portrays life dominated by consumerism as a masochistic experience: a pleasurable entrapment the characters perpetuate with their own behavior while loudly condemning it.

The play's main tropes are transnational adoption and obesity, the use of which immediately enters it into conversation with the concerns of global capitalism.

According to Grace Kyungwon Hong, capitalism's global phase has a different relationship to racial difference than its earlier phases, which marked it as hyper-embodied, material and hence inferior to the disembodied, omniscient whiteness. Global capitalism, Hong argues, fetishizes racial difference, seemingly respecting diversity while in fact commodifying and incorporating it into its mechanism. Similar to the "different but equal rhetoric" of multiculturalism, the process in fact helps mask race-based social inequalities. Transnational adoption, I suggest, epitomizes such a fetishization of difference: the practice hinges on the adopted child's ethnicity while it neutralizes the global socio-economic issues that have created the circumstances for the adoption. However, the racial difference between the adopting parents and the child remains a permanent marker of the brushed aside issues of history, politics and economy, which, through the adoption, enter the sentimentalized realm of middle-class family. With black humor and farcical ruthlessness, *Hit* portrays the possible problems such an infiltration of global capitalism and consumerism into family life can cause: it imagines the relationship between Sharon and Kim as not only psychologically damaging but also physically violent. Tangled up with Kim's resentment for her mother, whom she calls her "kidnapper," is her disgust for Sharon's obesity, another symptom of relentless consumerism and a quickly spreading side effect of global capitalism.

In 2000 and 2003, The Public Theatre in New York hosted staged readings of *Hit*, but though under consideration for a while, it was never produced. The East West Players in Los Angeles also staged a reading in 2000, and Mark Taper Forum in 2001. To this date, *Hit* has not been produced. This is perhaps no wonder because its scope is quite ambitious and it is doubtful all the things it attempts to achieve would come across in

performance. In addition to its scope, its representation of consumerism as masochistic rather than freeing, its portrayal of transnational adoption that amplifies all the anxieties attached to the volatile practice, and its pitiless depiction of consumer society's contested relationship to fat do not make it easy on the audience. Moreover, though *Hit* is essentially a farce, it also builds an acute portrayal of the psychic pain circulated between the mother and her adopted daughter at the heart of the play. But because this same relationship is also the source of much of the play's farcical commotion and biting black humor, the psychological portrayal rarely receives full attention. Nevertheless, in the context of this dissertation's focus on new forms of political theatre, Tuan's bold attempt to address many pressing consumer culture issues in the form of a farce, a genre rarely used for the exploration of social issues in the US, merits critical attention.

In this chapter, I analyze an unpublished script Tuan revised in 2003 after the last of two Public Theatre play development workshops with actors. In addition to studies of consumerism and masochism, I use the theories of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler to develop a connection between masochism and life dominated by consumerism. When examined under the light of these theories, *Hit*'s humor turns out to reveal not only the paradoxical condition of the alleged consumerist freedom, but also the hidden politics behind consumerism. Tuan uses transnational adoption as the central frame of investigation into the interconnectedness of race, gender and de-politicized consumerism, drawing attention to the ways in which racial identities are not only fetishized but are constructed by the use of products. The play thus dramatizes the individualizing effects of consumerism that have replaced ethnic group identification, a process Josephine Lee describes thus: "Racial and ethnic identification [have] become perceived as a matter of

“life-style,” determined to a large extent by products purchased and consumed: films, clothing, music, books, theater tickets” (*Performing* 165). I interpret the play questioning the integrity of identities constructed by acts of consumption and perceived as a matter of life-style, a strategy noticeably different from the early days of Asian American theatre. Towards the end of the chapter, I compare *Hit* to David Henry Hwang’s *FOB* (1979) in order to highlight the way Tuan’s play not only perceives racial and ethnic difference as commodified, but also criticizes the politicization of identities. I build this reading on Wendy Brown’s essays about the connection between de-politicized capitalism and politicized identities and argue that the play hints at the possibility that the politicization of identities has only helped capitalism remain depoliticized. But because *Hit* is packaged as a farce, a genre mostly viewed as light entertainment, its poignant cultural criticism often threatens to remain obscure. This is where masochism as a critical lens proves useful: it can help shed light on the play’s basic premise of consumerism as a claustrophobic yet pleasurable entrapment.

Masochistic Consumerism

In his book *Freedom*, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman asserts that “[i]n our society, individual freedom is constituted as, first and foremost, freedom of the consumer; it hangs upon the presence of an effective market, and in its turn assures the conditions of such a presence” (7-8). The circular structure of the interdependence between consumers and the market immediately brings up the question of whether such freedom is in fact based on the free will and voluntary participation of the individual, or whether membership in what Benjamin Barber calls “the universal tribe of consumers” (23) is

compulsory. And if consumerism is indeed compulsory, what kind of a freedom can it provide the basis for? Perceiving the concept of consumerist freedom as a grand act of deception, Marxist critic Conrad Lodziak claims that “[it is] perverse to refer to the realm of consumption as a realm of freedom when participation in this realm is a requirement, a necessity. Whatever freedoms accrue in the realm of consumption, they are freedoms within unfreedom, and reflect our powerlessness to act otherwise” (78). Viewed in this way, individuals embrace consumerism’s promise of freedom and pleasure only because they compensate for the experience of powerlessness within its larger structure.

Yet participation in consumerism is without doubt pleasurable. What Grace Hong calls capitalism’s global phase, Bauman calls its “consumer phase.” The previous phase was still based on production and it accordingly placed cultural value on hard work and on good work ethics, but the emphasis has now shifted on consumerism. Bauman interprets this shift’s connection to pleasure through Sigmund Freud’s concept of the pleasure principle. Writing during the era of capitalism that was still based on production, Freud reasoned that the societal arrangement required human beings’ innate drive to gain sensual pleasure to be suppressed: they were willing to work only under the pressure of social coercion. Bauman argues that what has changed since the early twentieth century, however, is that capitalism has now harnessed people’s search for pleasure for its own means: “Far from suppressing the human drive to pleasure, the capitalist system in its consumer phase deploys it for its own perpetuation” (76). With emphasis on consumerism and the endless possibility of pleasures it can provide, the pleasure principle need no longer be suppressed in order for capitalism to work. It is now in fact providing the fuel for capitalism’s global, consumer phase.

Similarly to Lodziak, Bauman also, however, acknowledges that the consumer market is a “form of control which those who are to be controlled by it willingly and enthusiastically embrace” (62). Bauman’s description of consumerism as a willingly embraced control and Tuan’s dramatization of it as pleasurable entrapment have palpable similarities to the structure of masochism, as perceived as a behavioral model rather than as a sexual practice. In behavioral masochism, as in capitalism’s consumer phase, pleasure seems to coexist with phenomena that would logically cancel it out. For Freud, this remained the most perplexing aspect of masochism. He began his last essay on the topic, “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” with laying out the obvious discrepancy between his concept of pleasure principle and masochism: “if mental processes are governed by the pleasure principle in such a way that their first aim is the avoidance of unpleasure and the obtaining of pleasure, masochism is incomprehensible” (159). The masochist’s unusual way of gaining pleasure from what would rationally be avoided by all costs led Freud to insist that even masochism’s unconscious form is tied to physical pleasure. He came to the conclusion that though moral masochism, as he called it, has seemingly nothing to do with sexuality, in it “morality becomes sexualized once more” (169). The phrase “once more” refers to Freud’s view that moral masochism reawakens the subject’s Oedipal attachments, and as the parents were the subject’s first moral authority figures, morality is unconsciously sexualized in the process.

Today, as masochism is perceived to have more layers than Freud detected in it, the moral or social masochist’s pleasure is seen to come from narcissistic fulfillment rather than from the sexualization of morals. One of the first to refute Freud’s view of pleasure in social masochism was Karen Horney, whose theory of it as a paradigm of women’s

identity formation was a forerunner of many contemporary views. Writing in the decades following Freud's last writings on the topic, Horney wasn't, however, the only one of Freud's female disciples working on his indeterminate theory of masochism in connection to femininity. Helene Deutsch, adopting an opposite view from Horney, completely disregarded Freud's suggestion that moral masochism is a social phenomenon with the disastrous results that she concluded, unlike Freud, that women are biologically determined to be masochists.¹⁴ Horney vehemently disagreed with Deutsch and concentrated solely on the cultural effects in the development of women's social masochism. Her views stemmed from an anthropological perspective on psychoanalysis; she insisted on a culturally specific view of psychoanalytic theories against Freud's tendency to universalize. Horney emphasized the ego's frailty in the face of cultural demands and reasoned that for women meeting societal demands often meant adapting to men's fantasies of women and striving to meet them. This, and not biology, is where women's social or unconscious masochism is rooted: she claimed that women were not naturally submissive, but acted in such a way in an attempt to adapt to male fantasies of women. Hence she argued against Freud's idea that beneath moral masochism, too, lies sexuality, and suggested that "[masochism's] core is the attempt of an intimidated and isolated individual to cope with life and its dangers by dependency and unobtrusiveness" (274). In Horney's theory women's social masochism becomes a way to negotiate one's relationship to the culturally held ideals of femininity and a way of gaining control in a powerless situation. She thus "explains moral masochism in terms of the subjective performances and negotiations required by culture in the production of identity" (Noyes

¹⁴ Deutsch's views, not Freud's, are largely responsible for the common misunderstanding that women are masochists by nature. See for example the chapter "Beyond the Death Instinct" in John K. Noyes's The Mastery of Submission: Inventions of Masochism, Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1997.

180).

Horney shied away from discussing the masochist's pleasure in her emphasis of it as a survival mechanism, but contemporary theories assume such pleasure can co-exist with the masochist's attempt to cope with harsh circumstances. The pleasure does not stem from sexualized morality as Freud argued, however, but from a narcissistic fulfillment the masochist obtains from performing submissiveness while secretly gaining a roundabout access to agency by submitting to a person or circumstances of social power. I argue that the similarity between consumerism and social masochism stems precisely from the narcissism both feeds. But I want to suggest that consumerism's masochism is a much more common paradigm than the occurrences of masochism's pathological forms. That is, if we accept Horney's view of social masochism as a paradigm for identity construction rather than for pathological behavior, then perhaps we can read consumerist identity construction with the use of products as a masochistic formation? Consumer studies seem to support such a postulation, for it has become a truism in the field that "to define oneself to others, even to one's self, requires greater and greater use of products and consumption experiences. Increasingly, we are what we consume" (Firat and Dholakia 128). While these studies often describe such production of identities in neutral or even celebratory terms, it is rendered problematic as soon as we perceive consumerism as a form of control consumers willingly embrace. Examined in such a light, the construction of one's identity by consuming products begins to resemble an act of masochism: it is a narcissism-feeding attempt to match societal demands within a larger structure of control.

Unlike Horney, Freud never discussed masochism in terms of identity production.

Yet he himself was not always clear on the differences between moral masochism's pathological forms and normative behavior. This is especially the case when at the end of "The Economic Problem of Masochism," he describes the ways in which the cultural suppression of instincts, as is generally required by civilization, produces a good conscience: "One might expect that if a man knows that he is in the habit of avoiding the commission of acts of aggression that are undesirable from a cultural standpoint he will for that reason have a good conscience and will watch over his ego less suspiciously" (170). Yet a similar suppression of aggressiveness, as discussed in the previous chapters, causes, according to Freud, moral masochism. Curiously, he never clarifies the difference in their production. Hence John K. Noyes interprets Freud's "theory of moral masochism [articulating] the basic incompatibility of civilization and human life" and that "[t]he moral masochist is not only acting out the failure of the self to live out its biological instincts, he is also acting out the impossibility of civilization" (156). In the end, the difference between Horney and Freud's theory of moral masochism is mostly about their choice of expression: for Freud masochism stems from a violent clash of interests, for Horney from the individual's attempt to adapt to social violence. Both, however, seem to describing a theory of masochistic subjectivity formation that is far from pathological and in fact culturally induced.

I want to suggest that social masochism, especially its forms that are hardly separable from normative behavior, can also be read in terms of Michel Foucault's theory of power that inspires self-discipline. As Foucault stresses, this power that encourages the subject to police his or her own behavior and desires does not work on a pre-existing identity, but that identities are in fact an effect of its permeation:

The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike, and in so doing subdues or crushes individuals. In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals. (“Two” 98)

I propose that consumerism should be read as one manifestation of such power Foucault describes. But when it is perceived as a form of such power, identity construction with the use of products in ways Firat and Dholakia describe it begins to look like a willing act of self-policing. That is, the desires consumerism in fact produces in the subject are fulfilled and perpetuated as incorporation on the level of identity. Moreover, no coercion is required: the subject voluntarily perpetuates the power of consumerism and its effects and simultaneously comes to police his or her own behavior.

The mechanism Foucault describes in fact functions in the same way Horney describes social masochists measuring themselves up to cultural stereotypes. As John K. Noyes describes Horney’s view, “[m]oral injunctions represent a negotiated interaction with the social environment, an appropriated standard which the individual is constantly modifying according to her self-image” (180). Such cultural standards and demands are in operation deep within the social masochists’ subjectivity, inspiring self-discipline. If we add the pleasure consumerism provides to Horney’s description, the equation for the production of consumerism’s masochism is complete. Bauman places consumerism’s pleasure in rivalry, which has shifted from the mere accumulation of wealth and power to symbolic rivalry where competition has practically no limits. According to Bauman, such symbolic rivalry has become the contemporary arena of self-assertion: “The rivalry, the individual energy it summons, the variety of choices it makes possible, the personal gratification it brings, are all real enough. They are enjoyed, cherished, seen as

tantamount to self-assertion and would not be easily surrendered” (59). The possibilities for self-assertion and narcissistic fulfillment are hence at the core of the consumer’s pleasure and can easily be seen also as the basis of consumerism ability to inspire self-discipline. Rather than pathological behavior, this kind of consumerist self-policing, I propose, is an example of what Foucault calls “disciplinary normalisation” (“Two” 107).

To make myself clear, I am not suggesting that all consumers are practicing masochists, but instead want to raise the question of the foundations of the normalized consumerist subjectivity as masochistic. If we accept Foucault’s theory of the “disciplinary production of the subject,” and if we perceive consumerism as a prime vehicle of this production, Judith Butler’s hypothesis of the Foucaultian disciplining effects cultivating “an attachment to subjection” necessarily raises the question of consumerism cultivating foundationally masochistic subjectivities. What Butler means by the term “a passionate attachment to subjection,” is the subject’s own narcissistic attachment to his/her subjugated cultural role. Because the subjugation is constitutive of the subject, he/she has a passionate, that is, narcissistic attachment to it. In terms of this postulation, Tuan’s vision of contemporary consumer culture begins to resemble a depiction of culturally produced masochistic subjects. Since consumerism plays such a key role in identity construction and since it is part of the disciplinary machinery, it follows that the Foucaultian disciplinary effects can be seen as constitutive of subjectivities, a condition, which is merrily reproduced again and again and paradoxically embraced as freedom. I interpret *Hit* ridiculing precisely this practice – the embrace of consumerism blind to its subjugating effects – and attempting to reveal its masochistic nature through farcical exaggeration of consumerism’s pervasiveness and circularity.

The Farcical World of *Hit*

Farce seems a particularly fitting genre for the investigation of consumerism as masochistic behavior, because it has traditionally been used to investigate the incompatibility of human desires and societal restrictions. Leslie Smith argues that modern “farce explores and dramatises a universal conflict between id and ego, the rational and the animal, the social mask and the real face, authority or convention and freedom” (214). While in the sixteenth and seventeenth century farce was mostly used to elicit laughter at the expense of its buffoonish characters, the list of conflicts Smith argues integral to farce began to gain more sinister overtones especially in the works of the French farceur Feydeau, writing at the turn of the twentieth century. Joan F. Dean delineates “a vision of man’s animality and selfishness” (483) from Feydeau to the British Joe Orton, the setting of whose 1960s farces “invariably generated... [an atmosphere] of...claustrophobia and entrapment” (486). Going against the theatrical trends of the time, Orton employed the scorned and commercial genre of farce and used it to create characters that “are driven by private fantasies and desires that are, at least in polite society, neither acknowledged nor pursued” (Dean 486). His aim, according to Dean, was to criticize the hypocrisy of the so-called polite society. He built his criticism by depicting none of the characters better than the others, thus departing from the farcical tradition that would have one or two characters not quite so base as the others.

There isn’t an equivalent to Orton in the US, where farce has rarely been used as a vehicle for social criticism. Though some of the 1960s and 70s theatre collectives, such as *The San Francisco Mime Troupe*, used farcical elements in the staging of politics, their aim was to illuminate societal problems and to instigate change, not to portray the world

as claustrophobic and disabling. This is, however, precisely what Tuan does with *Hit*.

The play bears some similarities to Orton's approach, but also takes its cultural criticism a step further, as it doesn't only target societal hypocrisy but the US of global capitalism as a society of restriction. The ubiquitous consumerism concerns all the characters as they are shown to be perpetuating its effects, while loudly criticizing it; they

masochistically draw pleasure from the same system that imprisons them. Farce's characters, according to Eric Bentley, are "monuments to stupidity" (xix) and this seems to be true of *Hit*'s characters, none of whom, similar to Orton's characters, are likable.

While they are all savvy enough, their stupidity stems from their inability to see their own character faults: Kim is a needy, spoiled brat, Sharon violent and thoroughly abject, Serena – a black woman who considers herself Kim's sister – polices everyone else's behavior while blind to her own faults, Mank – Serena's ex-lover and Kim's current one – is a hopeless romantic who is unconscious of the way he has conflated economics into his brand of romanticism, and Luc, who is perhaps the worst of all, is arrogant and self-righteous. In addition to not being aware of their personal flaws, these characters are more importantly blind to the enveloping and imprisoning structure of consumerism. Their farcical fight against and simultaneous perpetuation of their imprisonment is designed to illuminate the condition of entrapment for the audience.

Hit begins with Kim in the spotlight singing Cher's 1974 hit "Half-Breed", whose chorus goes as follows: "Half breed/that's all I ever heard/Half breed/how I love to hate that word/Half breed/she's no good they warned/both sides were against me/since the day I was born" (1). Kim's song finishes abruptly as we hear the sound of a car crash. She has been singing while driving and is hit by another car. The next scene takes place in

Kim's empty apartment, where she is jotting down information from the car's driver, Mank. Kim's apartment is empty because she has moved all her stuff to the kitchen and the bathroom in an attempt to "re-see the environs" and "unclutter" (5). After playful yet blunt flirting, the scene ends with Mank performing oral sex on Kim and them "[devouring] each other" (6), thus bringing in rampant sexuality, a farcical staple, within the first five minutes of the play. In scene two, we meet the extremely obese and very drunk Sharon and her on-off partner Luc. The scene takes place in a bar where Mank happens to work, and marks the first in a series of the play's many unlikely coincidences, another quintessential farcical element. Sharon and Luc are having a multilingual fight – they abruptly change their conversation from English to French to Spanish – about their twenty-two years together. Sharon demands that the itinerant Luc stay put in Los Angeles if he wants to continue their relationship and drunkenly scorns him for having saved her from her many suicide attempts: "I am a freeee woman, in a freeee country. (hiccup) If I want to end it, I should be able to end it," but Luc protests: "I'm not American, I don't dispose of human life like that" (12), a line among many of his about Europeans' superiority over Americans.

The turning point of Act One is Kim's visit to Sharon's office. The scene reveals the moving force of the play: Kim's deep resentment for her mother. Kim informs Sharon of her plans to drop her mother's last name. Sharon assumes Kim wants to take a more Asian name, but Kim protests: "You make these weird Asian allusions. I'm mixed. I'm both, OK? I went through an awkward asian [sic] era when I was looking for my blood" (24). Kim's objections against her mother culminate in her insistence on being racially mixed, and not a rescued Korean orphan. Sharon defends herself ironically in the

language appropriate for an economics professor: "I'm sorry my ideal of contributing to the human race didn't work out. I thought I could provide and share resources." Kim's response is resentful: "You're not my rescuer, OK? You're more like my kidnapper" (25). Kim's affair with her adopted father – they have been lovers for the past fourteen years – also serves as a protest against their family unit. By violating the taboo of sleeping with her father behind her mother's back she challenges their family as one. In the same vein, she blurts out to Sharon the real reason she is dropping her last name: "I just don't feel related to you" (24) and exclaims that Sharon's obesity disgusts her. As a response, Sharon reveals her not so benevolent nature by hitting Kim.

The last scene of Act One ridicules the quintessential family event – the dinner – and exemplifies another characteristic of farce, what Joan F. Dean calls "frenetic physical activity" (485). Kim is hosting a dinner party for Luc, Mank and Serena. Sharon, who lives in the apartment above Kim's, crashes the party. Kim's eye is black from the blow Sharon gave her in her office and she is openly resentful to Sharon joining them: "You were NOT invited...please leave" (35-36), but Sharon stays regardless. Open sexuality, violence and slandering, which are ideally thought to be outside the family realm, go seemingly unnoticed here: before Sharon arrives Kim gives a blowjob to Luc, whose loud moaning is audible to everyone present; during dinner Kim and Mank are all over each other; and at one point Luc has loud sex with Sharon off stage. Amidst the fast pace, insults are delivered with casual flair, while remarks of joyful family reunion are circulated simultaneously. Sharon: "Que festive!" (37). The long scene with overlapping conversations ends with Sharon having a nervous breakdown. She sings a sentimental song that reminds her of the day she brought Kim to the US in order to soothe herself,

while the last image of Act One is Kim screaming a spiteful punk version of the same song over her mother.

Eric Bentley, whose 1958 essay “The Psychology of Farce” was one of the first to insist on the genre’s serious side, argues that farce’s “swift tempo” has meaning beyond technical virtuosity: “[T]he speeding up of movements has a psychological and moral – or rather, immoral – effect, namely, that of making actions seem abstract and automatic when in real life they would be concrete and subject to free will” (xx). The fast pace of Act One’s last scene creates such a feeling of automation as the characters’ base and offensive behavior seems compulsively repeated and depicts their situation as a helpless perpetuation of pain and insults. But I want to suggest that the scene is not only about character psychology and the baseness of human nature. This long scene begins with Luc and Serena’s postmodern theory-savvy exchange about Los Angeles. As a response to Luc slandering Los Angeles, Serena defends its meaning coming from “how you pick and choose the multitude of existences, and connect them into your own picture” and envisions a future where cities and countries are not only more like Los Angeles, but sponsored by corporations: “Sony Los Angeles to be followed with Nike Norway, Microsoft Mexico, Walmart Chicago and Exxon New York” (29). Their dispute also connects the American led global capitalism and corporate domination to fat. For example, Serena claims that “It’s the American planet, exporting all its fat fast” (27), and Luc comments: “[T]he American Legacy: greasy fingers and the inability to stop” (28). The casual seeming bickering about these truisms of today in fact renders the characters’ automatic seeming behavior as an extension of life dominated by consumerism. As Luc exclaims that the American legacy is “the inability to stop,” the scene portrays the

contemporary consumerist US as a masochistic society of automation, far from providing freedom, while the scene's sex and eating accentuate the pleasures to be had within it.

Critical Black Humor

Leonard C. Pronko claims that compared to other forms of comedy "farce... only shows the mechanism of things, of life itself, and obviously cannot correct anything." Yet he continues to add that "[t]oday we feel that this very mechanism of things has become such a terrifying reality that farce suddenly turns out to be the most metaphysical of comic forms" (qtd. in Smith 214). Due to modern farce's use of humor to depict "a terrifying reality," the type of humor it employs is often described as black. William Solomon notes "the academically unfashionable nature" (470) of the term, the meaning of which has been reduced to journalistic vocabulary simplistically referring to cruel jokes. Yet the term originally referred to the absurdity of the human condition rather than to the joke's level of cruelty. It was coined by the surrealist André Breton who in 1939 published a collection of short stories – "The Lightning Rod" – in an attempt to define the type of humor so fitting to the modernist sensibility. In the foreword to the 1966 edition, Breton reminds the reader that "when it first appeared, the words "black humor" made no *sense*" (xii, emphasis in original). While the term "black" in front of humor has been in common usage come to be interpreted as referring to nihilism, cruelty or to a bleak vision of the future, Breton's original usage seems in fact in line with the surrealists' "insistence on...turning to non-European cultures to understand the social function of myth, the sacred, and the irrational" (Edwards 84). That is, Breton seems to have employed "black" as in primitive, quite naively, to signal the type of humor that was irrational and

that was capable of better explicating the absurdity of modern life in Europe.

Such an employment of the term does of course carry with itself the original racial undercurrents, though they are not often discussed today. William Solomon takes up the issue in his essay “Secret Integrations: Black Humor and the Critique of Whiteness,” where he examines the heyday – the 1960s – of black humor in American novels. He argues that as black humor was engulfed as a critical term into postmodernism, its racial connotations were erased. In his reading, the use of the term postmodernism obscured “the attention black humorists paid to the role of racial and ethnic others in post-war constructions of white selves” (470). He thus views black humor as “a critical interrogation of the process whereby identities are forged through interracial relationships” (471), where the humor’s target is “the vicissitudes of whiteness” (471). How are we then to understand the use of such humor by an Asian American playwright? I suggest we read the racial dimension of *Hit*’s black humor through Karen Shimakawa’s argument about the “abjection” of Asian Americans in the US, whereby “Asian Americanness...occupies a role both necessary to and mutually constitutive of national subject formation” (3), an assessment that seems to describe the same process as Solomon, only from the point of view of those whiteness is defined against. Sharon’s way of forming a family and thus her white middle class identity is an example of such a process which depends on Kim’s ethnicity, but the importance of which is also undermined as it does not come to change her whiteness, but only affirms it. But rather than only ridiculing the construction of whiteness and its unconscious dependence on interracial relationships, *Hit* seems to use black humor to also portray the absurdity of Asian Americanness, of which the “half-breed” condition of the transnationally adopted

child is an extreme example. Tuan's definition of Asian Americanness that I quote in the epigraph – "The Asians don't quite get it, the Americans don't quite get it" – draws attention not only to its in-between state, but also precisely to its paradoxical nature, its constituent absurdity that neither Asians nor Americans understand.

Hit connects such absurdity at all times to consumerism, however, as all the processes described above are negotiated through it. So it is also with Kim's own relationship to her ethnicity, an issue I will return to shortly. While the consumerist formations of whiteness and Asian Americanness are depicted with the use of black humor, its most obvious target is Sharon's obesity. At the beginning of Act Two, set two months after the events of Act One, the ceiling of Kim's apartment has finally collapsed under Sharon's weight. A few scenes later we are presented a wholly transformed Sharon: she has gone through liposuction – she used the insurance money from the collapsed ceiling to "renovate" her body – and looks "thin and perky" (64). Following the instant gratification logic of consumerism, Sharon believes she can fix her life by surgically removing "all the bad baggage" (67) in her life. In another darkly humorous twist, Sharon refuses to let go of the fat sucked out of her and carries it with her in a plastic bag. Now knowing of Luc's affair with her daughter, she throws the bag of fat to Luc and proclaims: "Being that I now know that you and my daughter have been lovers for the 14 past years, in order to even begin to ask my forgiveness you must eat down the complete contents of what was the old me" (79). Begrudgingly, after a heated conversation, Luc agrees to Sharon's terms in order to show that he takes "responsibility for [his] freedom" (80). In a revolting, yet hilarious moment that is both farcical and darkly humorous Luc eats the contents of the bag while he lists the twenty-two cities in

four continents that have nurtured their mutually destructive relationship.

While *Hit*'s targeting of Sharon's obesity seems at times closer to the common definition of black humor as merely cruel, I argue that it, too, contains a critical dimension. In his essay, "The Persistence of Irony: Interfering with Surrealist Black Humour," Doug Haynes detects social criticism in Breton and the other surrealists' use of black humor though it was condescendingly perceived at the time as "parlour anarchism." In his analysis of Breton's foreword and the collection of texts in the anthology, Haynes asserts that "while black humour is of course frequently tendentious, its 'target'... is the nature of social conflict as such, rather than any underprivileged group" (27). Haynes thus interprets Breton's understanding of black humor to have a decidedly social and critical dimension. He goes as far as claiming that black humor in fact "becomes the articulation of a kind of 'social unconscious,' at its kernel the detection and amplification... of displaced but agonistic social and historical contradictions" (26).

I propose that *Hit*'s use of black humor, as in Haynes's interpretation of Breton, targets "social and historical contradictions" rather than just Sharon's obesity. The subtle framing of the scenes with sounds serves as an example of this: many blackouts that mark the scene changes are accompanied by "Deafening sound of helicopters" (19), which are never spoken about. The scene that follows the first occurrence of these sounds takes place during Mank's visit in Sharon's office where "[t]hrough the chopper noise, [Sharon] holds up a graph: a parabola, which she traces with her finger like a nipple-less tit. She mutely explains, as the noise overwhelms. Mank must move closer to hear" (19). The farcical blending of a tax curve with sexual innuendo takes place here against another, more sinister dimension, which the sound of helicopters creates. Rather

than a state of chaos or war, the sound seems to imply a police surveillance and hence the diminishing of civil liberties. Speaking through the noise, as Sharon does, also suggests a docile acceptance of the state of affairs.

Some scenes of Act One begin with another type of sound: Kim's apartment's crackling ceiling, falling apart under Sharon's weight. For example, in the beginning of the dinner scene, there is "Suddenly a rumble – seems like an earthquake. Heavy steps from the apartment upstairs cause bits of ceiling to fall into Kim's eye, causing tears" (26), and the scene ends with "Bits of ceiling tremor[ing] down" (53). Though on the surface these moments seem to exemplify black humor's adolescent cruelty in targeting obesity, when they are juxtaposed to the sound of helicopters during the other scene changes, they too gain a social significance: obesity and police surveillance are both subtly connected to the social milieu of consumerism. The play frequently and ironically connects Sharon's obesity to American freedom – Luc: "Eat the whole bag, Sharon. That's the kind of freedom America knows the best" (48) – but the irony of this concept is further accentuated when connected to the surveillance helicopters, representing the constantly diminishing civil liberties. Here, consumerism does not symbolize freedom at all, but the lack of it. This is black humor doing critical work: the pieces of the ceiling falling before its collapse and the deafening chopper sounds, to use Haynes's vocabulary, "detect" contemporary societal "contradictions" and "amplify" them as apocalyptic signs, of which, due to farce's nature, the characters remain ignorant.

Fat and Freedom

In the nineteenth century, farces elicited laughter from audiences by ridiculing the

bourgeoisie's strict moral standards concerning sexuality. A common assumption about the genre is that it "functions best in a repressive or convention-ridden society... where its fantasies and fun can act as a safety-valve, a pleasurable release of feelings in the audience that can't be acted on in their everyday lives" (Smith 14). Adding a darker dimension to Smith's observation about farce, Eric Bentley reads it expressing the repressed wishes of the unconscious in their brutal immorality and violence, and in a sense, unlike realistic theater, "imitates what is beneath the surface" (ix). He continues, "It is a matter, then, of finding external representation – symbol – for what cannot be photographed or described" (ix). In the sexually liberal twenty-first century, sexual morals are hardly the topic that could provide shocking humor, pleasurable release or even symbolize the repressed unconscious wishes. Accordingly, though Tuan's farce employs rampant sexuality and depicts a sexual relationship between a father and his adopted daughter, it is fat that functions as a source of shocking humor and as a symbol of what is repressed. On one hand, fat is highly visible in Sharon's obesity and an obvious target of cruel jokes – Kim: "Problem is, we don't have enough to feed YOU, Sharon" (45) – and thus arguably expresses the brutal humor repressed in the culture of political correctness. But on the other hand, fat also functions as a symbol of consumerism's circularity and the inability to stop, and thus carries the social criticism of black humor without losing its connection to the unconscious: in *Hit*, fat represents all that is abject in contemporary culture.

Hit does, however, also highlight the pleasure in fat as it farcically collapses eating and sex in the long dinner scene. Kim had planned to serve an elaborate dinner of pork tenderloin – "I'll deal with all the shit and and and get my kitchen working again"

(18) – but she is unable to organize and instead serves Chinese fast food: Zankou chicken, which she brings directly from the car to the table. Luc’s condescending comments earlier in the scene about Americans’ tendency to eat fast food in their cars and to have greasy fingers suddenly fade away as he, too, joins in the consumption. Sharon tries to warn him of the dish’s unhealthiness – “O don’t eat the fat, Luc” (44) – but later exclaims gluttonously: “O and the skin is so greasy” (45). While eating, Kim and Mank are constantly licking the greasy garlic paste off each others’ lips and several times Luc joins them in voicing the sounds of pleasure: “MMMMMMMMMM” (46). Serena, who is the only one disgusted by the greasy fast food, tries to leave in the middle of the dinner, but Kim exclaims, again conflating eating with sex: “You can’t leave mid-bite. It’ll be like interruptus” (45). The sexually charged eating makes sly fun of the orgiastic pleasures of greasy food and shows how even its biggest critic – Luc – is easily seduced by it.

While the scene illuminates the immense satisfaction consumerism’s momentary pleasures provide, it also highlights the problem that accompanies such pleasure: once succumbed to, it is hard to stop, the dilemma of which Sharon embodies. Throughout the others’ orgiastic eating, Sharon only “salivatingly looks on” (44), trying to restrict herself: “I’m not eating. I’m, I’m on a diet” (44). In fact she doesn’t eat, but much of the scene’s humor stems from her desire to eat: She wonders out loud how good the chicken smells, and asks Luc to describe its taste, totally “engrossed in the eaters” (46). The obese character’s pitiful attempt at self-discipline juxtaposed to the others’ wildly pleasurable eating emphasizes consumerism’s circularity: Once the desire for immensely pleasurable products has been created, it can become insatiable. Sharon acknowledges this circularity

by saying: “I’ll stop this loop. I’ll change I will” (50), but almost immediately she has her breakdown: “I DON’T WANT TO BE FAT ANYMORE... But...I’m – starving” (51).

Sharon’s helplessness in the face of her insatiable hunger ridicules the idea that consumerism provides freedom. Thus while Luc, Mank and Kim’s pleasure represents consumerism’s joys, Sharon embodies the worst-case scenario of its imprisonment.

True to farce’s ruthlessness, Tuan makes Sharon thoroughly abject and Kim’s hatred for her vicious. After the eating, Sharon asks to use Kim’s bathroom but she refuses: “No, you have to go” (47). But because of her obesity, Sharon realizes she can’t make it in time to her own bathroom upstairs: “All those steps, I won’t be able to hold it and climb” (47). In the midst of the others’ fast pace discussion, “Sharon calculates that she won’t be able to make it through the mess to the toilet” (48). Again appropriating the language of economics, she says, “I can’t input. I can’t output.” “[D]efeated,” she “goes for it” (48). Totally immobilized by her weight, her imprisonment is complete and her abjectness highlighted by her wetting herself. Her emotional neediness and dependency on Luc’s admiration add to her wretched character. Before the dinner she rummages through Kim’s messy kitchen in order to find snacks but gets stuck between tightly packed boxes. Luc goes to help her, but finds her in a position that turns him on – “That’s quite a position you’ve got yourself into there, Sharon” (41) – and they have sex. Later Sharon brings up their “moment in the kitchen tonight,” but now Luc is appalled: “Don’t make me think of it” (49). Sharon keeps insinuating that if she were to trim down, perhaps Luc would find her attractive again, and asks him to hold her. Luc answers by immediately leaving the party without saying a word. In her pathetic state of mind, Sharon nevertheless keeps insisting, talking to herself, – “I’ll lose it for you I will”

– and holds onto their moment in the kitchen: “I’m still wet with him” (50). In order to linger in the moment with Luc, in an act that completes her abjectness, she “puts her fingers in her pants and then sniffs them” (51).

In his essay “Fat in America,” Peter N. Stearns describes the vicious cycle of over-eating with an anecdote: “A woman tries a diet; she registers no improvement or even falls back a bit (a statistically common occurrence in all contemporary societies); she berates herself as a moral failure and eats to console” (246-7). The point of Stearn’s anecdote is that over-eating is a complex phenomenon, and not simply a matter of self-control. In contemporary society fat is connected both to morality and attractiveness, which complicates its cultural meanings: in an effort to fit the culturally appreciated body image, people diet, but when they fail, it becomes a moral, not an aesthetic failure, because fat is associated with greed, laziness, self-indulgence, abjectness, lack of hygiene, all of which Sharon embodies. Stearns points out that “the fight against fat began at a time when Americans were increasingly indulging in consumer society” (246), which can readily be seen in the over-indulgence consumerism paradoxically both encourages and judges. Tuan grabs onto these multiple meanings of fat as she makes it a farcical symbol of all things abject when associated with excess, and shrewdly uses it to stage the paradox of consumerism’s simultaneous pleasure and entrapment, especially as embodied in Sharon’s obesity.

Consumerism’s circularity is taken to an absurd extreme as Sharon’s abject excess fat is not discarded but circulated as revenge, and re-consumed by Luc. The eating of the fat is farcically by far the most effective moment in the play, both in terms of its capability to elicit disgust and laughter, and to function as a multi-layered symbol. On

the most obvious level, the scene makes fun of Luc's shallowness – he will do anything to get Sharon back now that she is thin – and of his European arrogance. Having had loudly protested the soiling of Europe by American fast-food – “It's infiltrating into our culture” (14) – his eating Sharon's fat marks a moment when American fat is literally consumed by Europe. Moreover, since Luc does so willingly, Serena's point about American fast food in Europe is proven correct: “Supply and demand. Wouldn't be there if ya'll didn't want it. Ain't no dictator forcing you to eat burgers and shit” (15).

I argue that the point of the scene is not, however, only to ridicule Luc and his European arrogance. The moment's outrageousness is reminiscent of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896), which Jessica Milner Davis argues is the first play to marry black humor and farce. According to her, the “'shadowing' of the traditionally non-reflective laughter of farce” (16), now a common element of contemporary farce, began in the late nineteenth century with Jarry's *Ubu* plays, continuing with Samuel Beckett's absurd existentialism, and onwards. In *Ubu Roi*, the title character's – Pere Ubu – greed and grossness have no limits. In his attempts to gain political power, he for example kills a mass of people, throws gold at his citizens so that he can, for his amusement, observe them kill each other over it, serves his guests cauliflower in shit and asks them to taste his toilet brush. Farcically rendering human nature as thoroughly detestable, Jarry's Pere Ubu is not just ruthless and sadistic, however, but abject: he enjoys the cauliflower in shit himself. At the time, the play's deliberate outrageousness was interpreted as a childish satire of bourgeois greed, but this seems to not have been Jarry's aim. In the program note, Jarry writes: “M. Ubu is an ignoble being, which is why (from underneath) he resembles all of us” (qtd. in Blackadder 196). Rather than ridiculing the bourgeoisie, according to Neil

Blackadder, Jarry “was trying to forestall the efforts of critics and others to regard *Ubu* as a satirical portrayal of a particular kind of person, emphasizing instead how much *Ubu* has in common with all people – and through the pronoun “us” he includes himself” (195-6).

I want to suggest that *Hit*’s cultural criticism has similarities to that of *Ubu Roi*. Ultimately its point is not to make fun of character types, but of all of our willingness to perpetuate the lie about consumerist freedom. Jarry’s interest was to underline the baseness of all people and thus he used feces as the most abject and yet common symbol for it. Tuan uses a much more appropriate abject symbol for contemporary consumer culture: fat. The fat-eating scene thus underlines consumerism’s inherent masochism: this is the gross extent Luc will go in order to take “responsibility for [his] freedom” (80). Though the line seems to suggest that he tries to amend the wrongs he has committed in the past, it is also the shallow desires consumerism has created in him that drives him, willingly, to consume the fat. I propose that in the context of the whole play, Luc’s line at the moment of his consent to eating the fat does not only refer to his sexual freedom in Sharon and his relationship, but also to all of our vulnerability and gullibility in the face of the desires consumerism creates in us. The loaded moment symbolizes the extent to which consumers swallow lies in order to hold onto the fulfillment of those desires and to a sense of freedom within the larger system of unfreedom. In other words, the moment suggests that we are responsible for our own masochistic condition because we willingly perpetuate it.

Transnational Adoption and Global Capitalism

While Larry's *Ubu the King* was completely farcical and operated on the same note throughout the play, *Hit* functions on different registers. Besides fat, Tuan utilizes transnational adoption as a source of black humor but also to stage the ways in which global capitalism, regardless of its seeming tolerance of difference, organizes subjects in hierarchies. As with obesity, however, the humor's target is not to criticize the practice of transnational adoption per se, but to ridicule the assumption that family is a safe haven from the reach of global capitalism. But whereas fat is used as a farcical symbol, transnational adoption serves as the arena for the psychological drama at the heart of the play while it also raises questions about racial and gender identity in connection to consumerism. The two tropes are, however, connected through Kim's fury: in her eyes, fat becomes the symbol of Sharon's failure as a mother. Underneath Kim's resentment for fat, and for everything else harmful and abject consumerism represents, are her own experiences, as an adoptee, of being commodified due to her race. The larger political issues causing her feelings of commodification – for instance global capitalism and the economic disparity between Korea and the US – are thus reduced to maternal blame. In the family of Sharon and Kim, the maternal blame makes any normative familial identity formations impossible, and also ties in the issue of race into the unresolved cluster of problems. Thus Kim's sense of racial identity, too, is contested due to the invisible workings of global capitalism within their family.

In her essay "Scenes of Misrecognition," anthropologist Ann Anagnost writes about the volatile issue of transnational adoption and argues that there is room within the phenomenon for unconditional love as well as for the fetishization and commodification

of the adopted child. Based on e-mail list postings by American parents adopting from China, her discussion concentrates on the adopting parents' struggle against the anxiety that their newly acquired family member is commodified in the process, a concern that is "aroused by the incontrovertible fact that as the child moves from one site of nurture to another, money has to change hands" (398). Anagnost's intention is not to criticize the parents or the practice of transnational adoption, but to elucidate the ways in which the imperceptible issues of global capitalism in fact cause the parents' unease. While the origins of transnational adoption and the adopting parents' motives are embedded in the liberal rhetoric of helping out the unfortunate, the anxiety Anagnost describes stems from global socio-economic affairs, for as Twila L. Perry points out, "in a sense, the access of affluent white Western women to children of color for adoption is often dependent upon the continued desperate circumstances of women in third world nations" (103).

Transnational adoption does certainly provide the adopted child better opportunities, but often the practice's humanitarian ethos takes no notice of "the relationships that exist between the United States and some of the countries from which internationally adopted children often come" (Perry 155), relationships that are based on US military and economic pursuits.

The fear of their child's symbolic conflation with a commodity seems also to derive from the parents' need to insist that familial affect exists independently from and is unaffected by consumerism. However, as Ann Anagnost convincingly argues, the two are hardly separable today. She points out that, beginning in the nineteenth century, family was constructed as "a sentimentalized haven from the uncertain contingencies of the marketplace," an ideology that demanded the "realm of [familial] affect... be kept

separate from the impersonal contract of market exchange” (411). By using the example of picture book construction as a privileged site of affect building, Anagnost argues that familial affect today is in fact often experienced through commodities and that “late-twentieth-century subjects find the realm of affect completely colonized by commodity consumption” (411). Thus the adopting parents’ anxiety seems not to be ungrounded. In addition to the clash between transnational adoption’s charitable rhetoric and the US and other Western countries’ policies that have helped create the disparate circumstances between the first and third world nations, the sentimentalized familial affect is itself soiled by commodity consumption. This is a condition transnational adoption, more so than other ways of building a family, highlights by bringing the issues of global capitalism in the realm of family.

Hit, with its farcical callousness, works at revealing how justified the fears about consumerism having infiltrated the family in fact are. Sharon adopts Kim following the charitable ideal of sharing resources, or so she says, but another reason is that she “wanted a companion” (25). During Luc’s frequent absences she needed company, a void Kim was supposed to fill. The deeply depressed Sharon over-consumes both alcohol and food, problems which adopting Kim –another act of consumption – obviously did not solve. In Kim’s experience, she is a comfort commodity that Sharon was able to purchase due to her economically privileged status, while Sharon sentimentalizes their family and repeats sentences about good old family life it has obviously never been. In order to deny that their family life is infiltrated by consumerism, Sharon keeps returning to the initial moment of adoption, which she has sentimentalized and which she connects to her favorite song “You light up my life.” At the end Act One’s dinner scene, after her

breakdown, Sharon starts singing because “[i]t’s the only thing left that makes [her] happy” (51). Kim, in agony, tries to stop her: “UGH. You make me ten years old again” (51). For Kim the song marks the moment when she was made into a comfort commodity, while for Sharon it signifies the formation of her family. Kim makes her feelings loud and clear in a punk version of the song, which she screams over her mother, who continues regardless:

You fucked up my life	Cuz YOU light up my life
you dragged me to a lame	
assed country where freedom	You give me hope
ain’t nothing but stuffing	
yourself with as much shit	You light up my days
as you can spend a measly	
paycheck on, where your being	
gets shaved down by the blades	
of capitalism and all circuits	
of your brain waves are jammed	
shut so you’ll snack and snack	
and snack and you hate	And fill my nights
yourself and others less	
fortunate, where neo-	
liberals think they’re helping	
but they’re only patting	with song
themselves on the backs	It can’t be wrong
you fuck up my life	
you fuck up my life	When it feels so right
you fuck up my life! (52)	

Kim turns the sentimental song utterly spiteful and not only attacks Sharon’s liberal politics, but also the US as “a lame assed country,” where freedom to consume equals the freedom of stuffing oneself thus connecting her unhappiness directly with consumerism and its despised symbol: over-eating. The scene’s humor stems from Sharon’s sense of entitlement, which her daughter’s protest is unable to disrupt.

According to Anagnost, the desire to adopt often has to do with the wish to construct a proper middle class identity as a parent and thus gaining access to full

citizenship: "[T]he position of parent, for white middle-class subjects, has become increasingly marked as a measure of value, self-worth, and citizenship... which fuel the desire for adoption as a necessary "completion" for becoming a fully realized subject in American life" (392). Sharon's sense of entitlement no doubt comes from her attempt at fulfilling this normative ideal, in addition to the more readily admitted charitable reason, which Kim attacks as "neo-liberals... patting themselves on the backs." While Sharon has idealized her reasons for adopting, the act is also inseparably linked to her materially privileged status: if she did not exactly buy a family, her wealth still made it possible. Thus the play suggests that in an effort to build a respectable middle-class identity by forming a family, Sharon adopts Kim, an act of consumption, which turns Kim into a comfort commodity. Kim's commodification is not Sharon's intension, however, but it is the inescapable side effect of world politics and the traffic of global capital that makes transnational adoption possible in the first place. By building her family – and hence her middle-class identity – in this manner, Sharon brings these global socio-economic issues within the family realm, while the racial difference between her and Kim is a permanent reminder of them. David L. Eng argues that it is precisely the racial difference between the adopting parents and the child through which the unspoken political issues can resurface. The problems are only enhanced by the peculiar position of the adoptee who is often separated from other immigrants by status, class and culture. Eng calls transnational adoption "one of the most privileged forms of diaspora and immigration in the late twentieth century" (1) for the economically advantaged life the adoptee is granted. Yet, economic privilege does not ease the problems that are fastened on the racial difference between the parents and their child.

The Commodification of Racial Difference

Josephine Lee, in an essay examining the ways in which Korean adoptee experience has been represented on stage, points out that adding to the adoptees' problems concerning race is the fact that the internationally adopted children's presence in the US "has been touted as proof...of American multicultural values" ("Asian" 105). The "different but equal" rhetoric of multiculturalism, however, similar to the concept of consumerist freedom, seems only to mask the social hierarchies based on racial difference rather than alleviating them. This is Grace Kyungwon Hong's point when she names global capitalism's "commodified fetishization of diversity" a "mode of universality" (143). In such a way, global capitalism incorporates cultural and racial diversity within its machinery by way of commodified fetishization and in the process disavows social hierarchies in the name of universality. The process is the same as what Anagnost calls a "suturing of cultural difference into the national culture in a domestication of a difference emptied of history" (391), a practice multiculturalism supports. To formulate Anagnost's point a bit differently: the domestication of difference and the emptying it from history lead to its easy commodification and has ensured that the political and economic factors of racial difference are masked. In terms of transnational adoption, this also results in the masking of the historical, political and economic imbalances between the two nations involved in the adoption.

The multicultural values have also, however, prompted the adopting parents to acknowledge the adopted child's ethnic identity. But when difference itself is commodified and "emptied of history," its acknowledgment remains necessarily superficial. In the two plays she examines, Lee notices a striking similarity: "The

adoptive parents are unable to adequately address their children's concerns about their own differences, in part because they lack both the vocabulary for any discussion of race and a way of understanding the strength with which it will figure in their children's lives" ("Asian" 113). The problem then that arises in these plays is not just that the parents are ignorant of the weight of racial difference, but that they "lack the vocabulary" to discuss it, both issues that multiculturalism's celebratory rather than analytical attitude to difference has advanced. Anagnost describes a similar problem in the adopting parents' well-meaning attempts to build an Asian cultural context for their child that frequently results in an artificial façade of Asianness at best. The problem is that Asia is often only present in the US as fast food and imagery of dragons and pandas, what Anagnost calls "culture bites" (413). These culture bites are safely contained cultural products, devoid of historical relations between Asia and the US, and as easily consumable as any other mass-produced commodities. Thus while the adopted child's ethnicity is taken into account by surrounding her with such products, it is also lifted out of the context of its historical and political circumstances. As a result, the adoptees often "experience race primarily as an aspect of their individual difference, rather than as familial or cultural identity" (Lee, "Asian" 103).

In *Hit*, Kim is the only character of Asian descent and, as Eng suggests is often the case with transnational adoptees, seems to have no contact with other Asians. Yet Asia is very much present in the play in the form of commodities. Kim's favorite food is Chinese Zankou chicken, and in the second act, after the ceiling of her apartment has collapsed, she lives with Mank in a karaoke palace. The karaoke palace, while it strongly connotes Asia, is also completely removed from its origins and commodified, much like

Kim's ethnicity. The play suggests that for Kim the use of these commodities is about building a cultural identity, which is, however, not only shallow but doesn't have anything to do with other Asians as a group. Yet these products – obvious “culture bites” devoid of history – also serve as Kim's only connection to Asia and thus shape her ethnic identity in terms of momentary, ephemeral consumption: the Zankou chicken is always fast food, and her stay in the karaoke palace is marked by eating take-out food from disposable plates constantly changing rooms depending on which one is in use by customers. When Mank complains, “Our life is so disposable. Everything paper... we don't even have dishes or real utensils,” Kim cheerily responds, “In case we up and leave” (57).

In the spirit of farcical exaggeration, Kim not only constructs her ethnic identity with the use of culture bites, but also treats her ethnicity as a commodity. In the beginning of the play, she tells Serena of “one of [her] cultural hooker gigs,” by which she means that she gets paid “500 dollars to don the Suzy Wong dress at some travel agent's theme party” (14). Here she not only negotiates her ethnic identity through commodities, but herself commodifies her ethnicity in order to sell it. She realizes her ethnicity is the foundation of her attractiveness, so she cashes in on her worth as an exotic object, thus “whoring” her ethnicity. The moment is marked by her lack of remorse: she connects to things Asian in a light-hearted, consumerist manner. The job she is hired to do itself relies on a recognizable culture bite: the Suzy Wong dress – silky and sleek – is known from the 1960 Hollywood film, *The World of Suzie Wong*. Set in Hong Kong, the popular film about a romance between a white American man and a Chinese prostitute

has become domesticated as a cultural referent devoid of any negative colonial connotations, to be used as a backdrop in a travel agents' party.

Kim rebels against her commodification as a family member throughout the play, and yet she also masochistically perpetuates her own objectification with her contested relationship to her ethnicity. It seems that her sense of cultural identity, which is devoid of history and group identification, influences her attitude to life altogether, which is markedly irresponsible and non-committal. When Mank complains that Kim "makes random choices out of nowhere," she responds: "Isn't it my spontaneity what you dig about me? That I can just up and go," but Mank protests: "Quite the contrary. It scares the shit out of me" (56). Thus, while Kim loudly criticizes the US, consumerism and Sharon as their poster child, she has in fact copied Sharon's consumerist habits and keeps perpetuating them: her "disposable" lifestyle exemplifies a whimsical consumerist attitude. In fact, she exemplifies a person who perceives everything, including racial identities, a matter of whim.

It is Serena, who finally attempts to safeguard racial identity from Kim's consumerist attitude. Throughout the play, Serena's role is that of a moral compass: she vehemently opposes Luc and Kim's relationship, she scorns Kim for the way she treats her mother and unlike all the other characters she is not seduced by greasy fast food. Yet, because her character remains largely undeveloped, her moral judgments threaten to be upstaged by the farcical ruckus. They are also watered down by her own whimsical treatment of Mank, whom she had left after a three-month relationship without ever notifying him. Nevertheless, the most interesting of Serena's opinions surfaces in a scene where she and Kim have a fight about racial identity after Kim claims to "know the pain

of being a nigger.” What ensues is a revealing fight about racial identity in the age of consumerism, though it is unlikely the depth of its ideas, against the farcical backdrop, would come across in performance.

During the fight, Kim insists she is “black as in not white. Black, as in dark parallel of life,” to which Serena responds: “That is not four hundred years. That is metaphor” (87-88). Serena summons up the collective history of African Americans in her effort to separate her racial identity from Kim, who has no sense of collectivity. For her, all identities are a matter of individualistic consumption. Serena: “You are the cultural hooker like you say. You hook onto whatever you like, be it for 5, 10, minutes then you off being something else,” Kim: “I got my own definition and you here policing me about how I can live my life” (89). Up against each other here are Serena’s sense of racial group identification, and Kim’s sense of individual freedom, an ideal that consumerism rests upon. This ideal is blind to history as well as matters of class. Serena points this out, too: “You been so privileged, living in an academic household and all its inclusion rhetoric that you think you can intellectualize your way into race, uhn uhn, no honey, that won’t do” (88). To Kim, identity, including racial identity, is a matter of self-definition. Contrary to Kim, Serena sees racial identity as embedded in class and group history. Because of it, not just anyone can claim blackness. Serena’s line of thinking suggests that Kim’s “inclusion rhetoric” threatens to obliterate class and history in favor of individualism and purchasing power. Kim, although highly critical of consumerism and its rhetoric of freedom, is blind to her own privileged position within its economy and her appropriation of its individualistic values, which her attitude to especially race exposes. Kim calls Serena “an authenticity officer” (88), while ultimately, I want to

suggest, it is not authenticity that Serena polices, but race from being separated from class and history.

Politicized Identities, Depoliticized Capitalism

In States of Injury, Wendy Brown traces the origin of the conflict Tuan hints at in the above scene – separation of class and history from racial identity – far back. She places it in the principle of democratic liberalism itself, which is based on individual liberty on one hand, and social equality on the other. Brown argues that there is an inherent paradox in this principle “between the individualism that legitimates liberalism and the cultural homogeneity required by its commitment to political universality, a paradox which stimulates the articulation of politically significant differences on the one hand, and the suppression of them on the other” (67). This paradox favors the articulation of particular, individualized identities, through which claims to equality are made. The process thus solidifies particularized identity as the locus of politics and hence resistance. In the US, the widespread politicization of ethnic identity, traceable to the cultural pride movements of the 1960s and 70s, produced various group formations based on the process Brown describes.

Part of this phenomenon was the creation of the umbrella term “Asian American” as a political category. Josephine Lee writes of its connection to Asian American theatre movement: “Theatrical activity by Asian Americans is intimately linked to the Asian American movement of the 1960s and after, in which an urgent call for political solidarity among minority groups took precedence over internal differences” (Performing 10). The intrinsic link between the political urgency behind the Asian American

movement and Asian American theatre explains the diversity of cultural heritages it includes: the term encompasses theatre done by groups with roots anywhere from India to Philippines to Japan. Frank Chin's plays *Chickencoop Chinaman* (1973) and *The Year of the Dragon* (1977) are often credited for marking the beginning of the movement. He was influenced by the Black Arts Movement and portrayed the Chinese American man rebelling against what Karen Shimakawa calls "the abjection of Asian Americans," that is, Asian Americans "as occupying the seemingly contradictory, yet functionally essential, position of constituent element and radical other" (3). This abjection of Asian Americans is often represented by the white America, in its effort to build the appropriate image of U.S. Americanness, through demeaning stereotypes. Chin's plays, like many others of the Asian American theatre movement, opposed such stereotyping "either by portraying that exclusionary process and the suffering of Asian Americans so excluded or by "disproving" the "false" stereotypes that are produced as a result of abjection, refuting them with the portrayal of "real" Asian Americans who do not conform to those types" (Shimakawa 77).

As I have argued in the previous chapters in connection to African American theatre, such representations do not, however, take into account that their protest in fact aims to occupy a societal subject position that affirms the normative, white and middle class values. Brown argues that the politicization of identities, which I interpret is the moving force behind such protest representations, is "a complex historical production" (States 54). This production might have initially helped mobilize minority groups in their quest for political agency, but it has increasingly become a tool for individuation. At the heart of this historical production is the suppression of matters of class and economic

status while the articulation of differences based on race, gender and sexuality is emphasized: “the enunciation of politicized identities through race, gender, and sexuality may require – rather than incidentally produce – a limited identification through class, specifically abjuring a critique of class power and class norms” (Brown, States 60).

Brown suggests that rather than an outcome of the particularization of identities, their production is in fact based on disavowing critical class assessment. This is because the claims made to equality through the production of politicized identities are based on the logic of exclusion from the principles of universal equality. This protest “thus reinstalls the humanist ideal – and a specific white, middle class, masculinist expression of this ideal – insofar as it premises itself upon exclusion from it” (Brown, States 65). Brown’s point is that the social equality the politicization of identities seeks rests upon bourgeois values and norms of social acceptance, which requires the suppression of class identification and which in turn causes “the demise of a critique of capitalism” (States 59). Thus the 1960s and 70s Asian American political solidarity, “a sense of collective identity...forged out of the experiences of groups with highly disparate backgrounds” (Lee, Performing 10), together with the Asian American theatre movement, might have helped advance depoliticized capitalism.

David Henry Hwang’s first play *FOB* (1979) is an example of an Asian American play that stages the importance of ethnic group identity by juxtaposing it with American individualism based on capitalist values. Rather than concentrating on intergenerational conflict like many plays about the immigrant experience, the play centers on three young Chinese Americans in a struggle with self-definition. Dale is an American born Chinese – an ABC – who loathes his ethnicity and wants desperately to assimilate. He wants to

dissociate himself from Steve - an FOB, Fresh Off the Boat – while both compete over the attention of Grace. She was born in China but has adapted to American life style enough to earn the respect of her materialistic and Americanized cousin Dale. Dale leans on his material wealth to emphasize his difference from Steve, whom he perceives as loathsome. He has to rethink his opinion, however, once he realizes that Steve is not the stereotypical poor immigrant, but very rich and savvy in American ways. Thus Chinese cultural heritage and American capitalism are constantly juxtaposed in a suggestion that these two are hard to integrate, because the American ideology of individuality and consumerism discourages group identifications. Yet, in a scene where the characters enact a bit of Chinese opera, the importance of cultural heritage and group identification becomes clear to Steve and Grace. There is no unambiguous ending of ethnic solidarity, however. Dale is left to lean on American individualism and to perpetuating racist stereotypes as the play ends with him repeating his mock lecture, which the play began with, on the definition of the terms ABC and FOB.

Josephine Lee interprets *FOB* suggesting “racial and ethnic identification as a possible mode of resistance to capitalistic values,” while the play “refrain[s] from easy parables of psychological redemption in which the characters would learn simple lessons about the need to stick together” (Performing 175). Albeit not simplistic, the play does locate possible resistance to capitalistic values in ethnic group identity. And yet is also uses Asianness as a commodity within the capitalistic value system. *FOB* takes place in a Chinese restaurant, which Grace’s father owns. Dale lacks respect for the cheap restaurant, and thus evaluates it according to the capitalistic system while ignoring its cultural or communal value. Much of the play’s humor stems from Dale and Steve

competing with each other in order to prove their normative masculinity. In one such scene they embark on a Chinese hot sauce eating competition, and in another they compete with the size of their cars. Both are used to prove masculine identity, which is thus negotiated through commodities, both American and Chinese. Yet Asian cultural capital also exists outside consumerism offering a point of group identification, which cannot be measured in monetary value. This becomes clear in the Chinese Opera scene, in which Steve embodies the spirit of Gwan Gung, the god of fighters and writers from Frank Chin's *Gee, Pop!*, and Grace that of Fa Mu Lan, a character from Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Hwang explains in the introduction to the play that these characters are the Chinese American versions of old Chinese legends, and "this fact testifies to the existence of an Asian American literary tradition" (3). Thus Grace and Steve find their group identification in an Americanized version of Chinese cultural history, which still exists outside the consumerist values. Hwang's point is to insist on a uniquely Asian American culture as the location of group identification and a locus outside of consumerism.

In locating resistance in ethnic group identity, *FOB* is markedly a product of its time and exemplifies how theatre was used in the production of politicized identities based on ethnicity. But in its acknowledgment of the competing consumerist individuality and masculine identity, it is also looking ahead in recognizing the power of normalization: Dale and Steve's different attitudes towards ethnic group identity are erased in their competition to assert a normative gender identity. Further, the hot sauce eating competition shows the masochistic extend to which subjects are willing to act against their best interest in order to achieve the normative ideal, while the competition

about car size exemplifies the narcissistic fulfillment to be gained from consumerist symbolic rivalry. Though Hwang's play still separates such self-inflicted violence and consumerist pleasure from the political value in ethnic group identification, Brown's theory renders them all as examples of normalization. She situates her argument in terms of Foucault's theory of disciplinary society: "[T]he emergence of politicized identity [is] rooted in disciplinary productions but oriented by liberal discourse toward protest against exclusion from a discursive formation of universal justice" (58). While the politicization of identities aims at universal justice and political inclusion, Brown argues that already the production of such identities is an effect of the disciplinary, normalizing machinery because the values behind it, or the subject position it aspires to occupy, are normative.

An important part of Foucault's theory, and which further connects it to the present discussion of consumerism, is his understanding of the disciplinary effects co-existing with the more visible system of rights. He argues that it was the rise of the bourgeoisie to power in the seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe that brought along the disciplinary power, which "has been a fundamental instrument in the construction of industrial capitalism and the type of society that is its accompaniment" ("Two" 105). This power, however, co-exists with the old principles of sovereignty and a system of rights:

[T]he theory of sovereignty, and the organization of a legal code centered upon it, have allowed a system of right to be superimposed upon the mechanisms of discipline in such a way as to conceal its actual procedures, the element of domination inherent in its techniques, and to guarantee to everyone, by virtue of the sovereignty of the State, the exercise of his proper sovereign rights. ("Two" 105)

These two systems superimposed on each other obscure the domination inherent in the disciplinary power's working by emphasizing the equal rights guaranteed to all by the sovereignty.

Michelle Everson delineates a similar masking of societal inequalities in the creation of the legal concept of “consumer citizen.” Writing about the foundations of consumer law in Europe, she points out that the law is based on the principle of “contractual equality.” Originating in the nineteenth century, this principle protects the privacy and equality of partners in an act of private commerce but as it became the basis of consumer law its presupposition of equality was carried along: its premise on the equality of partners obscures capitalism’s inherent power relationships as consumer law now in fact presupposes societal equality. Everson argues that embedded in this logic is a “legal conundrum,” which... “inherently [denies] the existence of a differentiated group of consumers” (100). Thus consumer law and the concept of consumer citizen – a category Everson points out is “distinct from, say, workers, family members, or voters” (99) and which has become the principle way of citizen address – in their part perpetuate the fiction of egalitarianism. At the same time, the disciplining function of consumerism remains hidden beneath its rhetoric of rights and freedom. Brown argues that it is precisely this “disciplinary power [that] manages liberalism’s production of politicized subjectivity by neutralizing (re-de-politicizing) identity through normalizing practices” (States 59). The contradictory aims of the two systems Foucault writes about – that of rights and of discipline – thus manage to obscure the politics at the heart of the protest of for example emphasizing ethnic group identity by its normalizing effect on identities. The end result is a “re-de-politicization” of identities and a continued de-politicization of capitalism.

Much of this normalizing takes place precisely through consumerism, as it is the key vehicle for advancing depoliticized capitalism, and as I argued earlier in the chapter,

a big influence on identity construction. Thus the politicization of identity, while seeking to advance social equality, in fact helps to conceal and enhance economic inequality inherent in the global capitalistic system. Brown also criticizes the widely accepted notion that “freedom... is a matter of consumption, choice, expression: an individual good rather than a social and political practice” (13). Paired with consumerism, the concept of freedom, Brown suggests, has become separate from the social and political sphere. The scene between Kim and Serena discussed in the previous section brings up this issue of consumerist freedom as well. Kim’s irritation with Serena “policing” her appropriation of black racial identity speaks of her experiencing this as limiting her personal freedom. She says she has “her own definition,” a phrase that betrays the ways in which she sees self-definition and the construction of identity, and thus consumption, constituting her freedom. Serena setting limits to this practice is a threat not only to her freedom but also to her individuality and thus she sees it as “policing.” But as discussed above, Kim’s freedom to define herself also helps obliterate matters of class and history, which are of value to Serena. The problem at the heart of this interaction is the common assumption that freedom is constituted by consumerism whereby it, too, becomes detached from issues of class and history, and thus depoliticized.

The Burden of Gender

It is telling of the invisible workings of the disciplinary machinery that consumerism’s harmful effects are mostly imperceptible, while its role in identity construction and its ability to grant freedom are celebrated. Wendy Brown suggests that the “injuries to the human body and psyche enacted by capitalism – alienation,

commodification, exploitation, displacement... – [can be]... discursively normalized and thus depoliticized, [while] other markers of social difference may come to bear an inordinate weight” (*States* 60). *Hit* captures this contemporary condition particularly well. While Kim openly ridicules consumerism, she is also blind to its influence in her life and the depth of the problems it causes. She knows to attack the consumerist snack and stuffing culture in her punk song, and yet she remains blind to the manner in which it has affected her attitude towards her mother. The last scenes, which exemplify the play’s problematic, abrupt shifts between psychologically revealing moments and farcical commotion, reveal Kim’s real feelings for her mother. After hearing the news that Sharon has found out about her and Luc’s relationship, Kim is taken over by worry that Sharon has hurt herself, disclosing her history as Sharon’s caretaker after her numerous suicide attempts. Kim’s extreme resentment towards her mother turns out to originate in her feelings of abandonment whenever Sharon was with Luc: “Figured it was the moan, the way he made her moan. Why couldn’t I make her feel that good? Anything to get her stay with me, but she, she would inevitably leave” (86). Kim’s confession to Serena suggests that in the end Luc is only the receiver of Kim’s displaced affection for her mother while Sharon remains the recipient of Kim’s disappointment and fury.

In this serious conversation with Serena that momentarily changes the farcical tone, Kim describes the roles in the family: “Going through the motion of family does not a family member make. You wanna assign the roles of nuclear family? OK. OK. Sharon was the child, Luc was the mother and I was the servant and jester. I was the one to cheer the nurturer’s pain” (85). Kim perceives Luc as the nurturer and Sharon receiving all the care and attention, while she remains an entertaining addition to the relationship. The

absence of the expected familial affect makes Kim deny her family really is one. Moreover, she repudiates the structure of the conventional family because she never experienced the affective labor she associates with it. It is very telling that in her own structuring of her family, there is no father. Her nuclear family is made up of a mother, a child and a surplus person, a servant or a jester. Yet it is immediately obvious that the actual surplus person is Luc, who was only occasionally present. By assigning the role of the mother to him, Kim reveals the displacement of her affect for Sharon onto him, which then finds an outlet in sexuality, in Kim and Luc's fourteen-year long affair. Kim's constant and violent critique of Sharon and her attack against the family Sharon has constructed make it obvious, however, that the affect for the mother was and is still there, even if she mostly denies it.

Kim's indignant attitude towards her mother is telling of the manner in which the cluster of unspoken political issues behind transnational adoption can easily get fastened on maternal blame. David L. Eng argues that often "female subjectivity and maternal blame become the site for working out a host of material and psychic contradictions associated with the practice of transnational adoption" (1). Although Sharon is farcically monstrous and deserving of blame, it is revealing how Kim idealizes Luc. The "affective responsibility" (27), as Eng calls it, falls on the women of the family, and the psychic pain and blame is circulated only among them, while Luc escapes the burden of affective labor. In his essay, Eng traces the psychic conflict in question here to Freud's discovery of the little girl's powerful love for the phallic mother prior to her attachment to her father, and the subsequent cultural demand of letting that love for the mother go. On the road to normative heterosexual femininity, according to Freud, the little girl must shift

her affection away from the beloved mother to the father. This shift turns the love for the mother into intense hatred as the little girl blames her mother for her own feminine and thus culturally disadvantageous position. In the case of transnational adoption, “the endless cycle of maternal vilification” (Eng 27) is only made more forceful because racialization is attached to the dilemma. Thus the racial difference between the mother and daughter, and the hidden political and economic factors behind transnational adoption, become a powerful cluster finding an outlet in maternal blame.

At the end of the play, in an abrupt return to a full-blown farcical mood, Kim’s worry for her mother’s safety is quickly dissolved: Sharon is found singing karaoke with Luc, who is sickly green and only able to blabber after eating all the fat. Sharon, full of spite and venom, puppeteers Luc’s limp body and sarcastically speaks for him, making lewd suggestions to Kim. She then physically attacks Kim and the scene proceeds with farcical violence combined with vicious insults. While Sharon chokes her, Kim provokes her mother further: “(KHUH) You can’t even kill yourself (KHUH) you think you can kill me?” (95). As an answer Sharon sticks the karaoke microphone into her daughter’s mouth: “Here, you little cocksucker. Take that. That how you like it?” (95) While de-sentimentalization of family life and its infiltration with consumerist values are staple themes in the theatre, *Hit* exceeds comic norms: the exaggeratedly violent relationship between Sharon and Kim illuminates the cultural tendency to vilify the mother, rather than just reinforces it. Sharon is acutely aware of this cultural tendency as she tells Kim: “It’s my motherly duty to be tortured by you” (24).

The psychological drama, though it never quite gains a solemn depth or even the main focus because the farcical elements cancel it out, nevertheless manages to reveal the

inherent hierarchies within consumer culture and its presumed equality: as the mother and daughter are doomed to circulate the effects of consumerism as psychic pain in the family, Luc enjoys the affection of both and yet manages to escape without responsibilities. While both Sharon's whiteness and her economically privileged status – her middle-class citizenship – place her high up in the hierarchy of global capitalism, her gender simultaneously weighs her down, especially as she brought the issues of global capitalism into her home by adopting a differently racialized child. All those inequalities that consumerism works so hard to mask become amplified in Kim's fury and in the culturally enforced "maternal vilification," while the affection for the mother finds no outlet. Thus Sharon's privileged way of forming a family comes to bear "an inordinate weight," as Brown puts it, and the issues affecting the situation – global politics, economics and history – are covered up by depoliticized consumerism. For Kim, Sharon's obesity then becomes an easy target representing everything visibly sour within consumerism as she constantly equates stuffing oneself with consumerist freedom. Yet, she also vehemently defends her own consumerist freedom of self-definition to Serena. Such blindness and displacement of issues, while appropriate tools for a farce, are also symptomatic of the pleasures consumerism has to offer on one hand, and its ability to obscure the inherent inequalities in de-politicization on the other.

The play ends without a resolution to Kim and Sharon's relationship. But the epilogue suggests an escape for the younger generation: Mank, Serena and Kim drive off east, perhaps to New York, together. They promise to "rid the clutter bits" (102) and "From this moment on... to breathe the truth from every pore" (103). The moment hints at a new beginning, or perhaps a formation of a new kind of family, as the play ends with

the three only just missing an accident and witnessing the hit as they “continue driving into their brave new worlds” (104). Yet the clichéd line about “brave new worlds” and the freedom of the road, a familiar cultural product from numerous movies, also seems to imply that consumerist life is inescapable. The movie ending about the infinite freedom of the road – Mank: “Here we are, the whole road before us. What better?” (103) – is a commodified version of freedom, and the play ending in such a way signals its own self-consciousness of the commercial nature of not only movies, but of theatre: like the theatre of Jean Genet discussed in the introduction, *Hit* is aware that its cultural criticism cannot operate outside the “debased, inauthentic world of commodity exchange” (Lavery, “Between” 230).

Moreover, as the play represents consumerism producing masochistic subjectivities, there is not only any escape from it, but the subjects do not even desire to escape its subjugating power, as they are, in Butler’s words, “passionately attached” to it. The reason behind the passionate clinging to consumerism and its subjugating power is narcissism: it is about the survival of the self that was created in subjection, in the formation of identities by acts of consumption. Butler argues that “[the] desire to survive, “to be,” is a pervasively exploitable desire” (7). It is this frailty, I argue, that consumerism’s disciplinary power depends on and utilizes to maximum effect. But while everyone is affected by consumerism’s subjugating power, global capitalism’s invisible hierarchies make sure that its effects are worse for some than the others. By concentrating on the poisonous relationship between a mother and a daughter, *Hit* insists this is so especially for women. Kim, while she loudly criticizes consumerism, nevertheless goes about constructing her identity, just like her mother, with commodities.

Thus for example Kim's ethnic identity is not only commodified as a result of transnational adoption, but also as a result of her building it through ephemeral consuming experiences. She thus reproduces the condition she vehemently criticizes – her commodification dating back to the adoption – in her own consumerist practice, and keeps circulating the pain associated with it. The unresolved issues stemming from the adoption are thus not only attached to maternal blame, but also to consumer practices and are endlessly reproduced. *Hit* thus provides a theatrical example of the ways in which, through the subjugating power of consumerism, white women as well as women of color might participate in global capitalism's fetishization and production of race and gender difference regardless of its harmful effects.

Re-politicization of Consumerism through Masochism?

By using the dysfunctional family at the heart of the play as an example, *Hit* builds an acute analysis of contemporary consumerist life. Tuan's usage of Asian commodities as "culture bites" also pushes its cultural criticism of race beyond transnational adoption, albeit it is the play's main trope. As Anagnost suggests, today difference itself is commodified, which is a problem not limited to transnationally adopting families. *Hit*'s blunt representation of commodified difference shows identities as shaped by consumerism and vulnerable to market forces. Simultaneously the play renders questionable the politicization of identities: it criticizes the use of identities constructed by ahistorical and apolitical culture bites as the locus of political resistance. The play suggests that unless the historical, political and economic forces shaping identities are revealed, their integrity is more than questionable, which is what Serena's

attitude implies. But since identities today are an effect of the normalizing machinery, such a revealing is not possible without the unveiling of the politics behind consumer capitalism itself. This is the direction *Hit* hints at by offering no redemption from the relentless consumerism.

In such a way, the play constantly gestures at cultural criticism, though it is never explicit about it. It goes about building its political stance with the farcically claustrophobic atmosphere, which strongly connotes masochistic entrapment. Masochism seems an appropriate metaphor for behavior under consumerism, because it, like consumerism, deals with identity. But while the invisible control of consumerism is made possible by consumers' alleged freedom to construct their identity, the function of identity in masochism is craftier. Masochism is a formalistic way of "acting out of cultural identity" (Noyes, 151) – a reinforcement of stereotypes – but it is also a theatrical satire of them. That is, while masochism can be seen as an example of the way the Foucaultian disciplinary machinery molds the individual, it is also a particular kind of reaction to such power, because it can make the workings of its invisible machinery visible. In this double bind can be found the possibility for representing cultural criticism against constitutive forms of power such as consumerism. This criticism has to do with revealing the depoliticized nature of consumerism by utilizing masochism's capability, quite paradoxically, to expose, and in doing so, to re-politicize consumerism. A closer analysis of *Hit*'s cultural criticism bridges this re-politicization of consumerism to the suggestion that the politicization of identities à la the 1960s and 70s cultural movements has only helped advance the de-politicization of consumer capitalism. It might well be that the future of political theater is not in advancing politicized identities, but in

revealing the politics behind depoliticized consumerism in ways that *Hit* does.

However, as the cultural criticism of Jarry's *Ubu Roi* was lost on its audiences, any production of *Hit* might face a similar fate. Michael Holland writes of the demands of *Ubu Roi* on the audiences: "Jarry's play elicits a response from us on what normally are two mutually exclusive levels: hilarity and disgust... on the one hand, and, on the other, rational engagement with a coherent plot" (46). *Hit*, too, functions simultaneously on these two levels but in addition engages in cultural criticism far more complicated than Jarry's late nineteenth century play. Further, its criticism hinges on the spectators' ability to laugh at themselves, indeed on their masochistic involvement in the consumer culture. What might obstruct the audiences from finding the consumerist masochism funny is its inherent connection to narcissism. That is, since consumerism plays a part in the subject's construction of his/her identity, the subject forms, in Butler's words, a narcissistic attachment to its constitutive power. Yet since the narcissism consumerism fuels seems to be its *modus operandi*, Tuan's attempt at making fun of it, regardless of how well it might read in performance, is no insignificant achievement.

CONCLUSION

9/11 and the Return of the Old

The spirit of terrorism is never...to attack the system through power relations. This belongs to the revolutionary imaginary imposed by the system itself, which survives by ceaselessly bringing those who oppose it to fight in the domain of the real, which is always its own.

Jean Baudrillard, "The Spirit of Terrorism"

There is no doubt that the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 in New York had a lasting impact and caused many a change in the Western world. One of these changes was the newly reinvigorated interest in oppositional political activism. The Bush administration's military response to the attacks and its launching of the ambiguous "War on Terror" did not result in a safer country as its propaganda would have it, but in rabidly diminishing civil liberties. These insults against the basic rights of citizens, which had for a while been taken for granted, in their turn brought political activism back onto the US cultural landscape. Street protests, the pet strategy of the 60s and 70s, were suddenly organized in much larger numbers than in decades not only in President Bush's backyard, but also around the world. In the midst of the world becoming more and more virtual and digitalized, intentionality and the belief in the power of masses of people to instigate political change – or at least the willingness to give it a try – seemed to reappear.

The re-emergence of political activism also revived the belief in theatre's ability to provide a forum for cultural and political intervention, a belief that had greatly diminished in the 80s and 90s. In her editorial for the Contemporary Theatre Review's 2006 issue on radical theatre, American playwright Caridad Svich notes how "[i]n the

wake of 9/11, the war in Iraq, and the natural tragedies in Asia and the US, the rise of a new political theatre has surfaced” (276). Aleks Sierz, in his essay in the same issue, points out a similar development in the British theatre scene: “In terms of political theatre, 2002 was a turning point. After a couple of years during which the energy seemed to have drained out of new writing, the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2002 and 2003 connected again with global politics” (303). Interestingly, however, just like the street demonstrations opposing the Bush administration, the newly invigorated political theatre scene turned back to the strategies of the 60s and 70s. Svich takes note of the “steady return to street performances, guerrilla theatre, and anti-theatrical events situated in non-traditional spaces” (276), forms of theatre that in the introductory chapter I criticized for their uncomplicated belief in societal progress and their veiled reliance on Enlightenment principles.

What then has caused this return to old forms of political theatre that postmodernism scornfully viewed as naïve? It seems that the type of political theatre I traced in the introduction to Jean Genet’s *The Blacks* has again proven too abstract and its formal experimentation not immediate and urgent enough for the tangible concerns awakened after the collapse of the World Trade Center. Accordingly, Svich claims that “[f]orm for form’s sake alone is not what is at stake in this new generation of writing and performance, but rather the search for and making of community” (277). Juxtaposing formal experimentation with an emphasis on community, Svich echoes the concerns that in the 1980s put activist theatre and the postmodern style experimenting with the means of representation at odds with each other. Interestingly, community building appears to be the immediate result of even more “conventional-political” performances, to reiterate

one of the categories Janelle Reinelt and Gerald Hewitt named, which has also proved popular at the new wake of political theatre. An example is David Hare's *Stuff Happens* (2004), based on interviews of the key people in the Bush administration, which concentrated on tracing the steps that led to the invasion of Iraq. It had a successful run in London, followed by Los Angeles and New York's Public Theatre. With the obvious aim to expose the fraudulent reasons the Bush administration gave to justify their attack on Iraq, the play seems to have a direct political aim. Yet, as Jenny Hughes poignantly argues, such journalistic ordering of data and its representation on stage "privilege a presentation of the world as ordered, liberal and reasonable over the chaos, incoherence and fantastic of war and terror" (153). This type of theatre, then, seems to serve the purpose of reassuring the audience of the survival of order and reason, and, I would like to add, of the capacities of the autonomous, reasonable subject amidst the chaotic globalized world. Similar to activist theatre aiming to strengthen the notion of community, such journalistic theatre's usefulness seems to lie in providing a public forum for processing that which is unfathomable and hence serves a healing function for the community.

I recognize that these old forms of political theatre resurfacing at an uncertain time serve an important purpose and I believe that such community-building theatre is a response to real need and is indispensable for serving that function. But I also maintain that these forms' effectiveness by themselves in instigating political change in the world of global capitalism is questionable, as they seem to operate only on one level. Jenny Hughes further points out that the new British wave of old political forms lost some of their newly found popularity following the series of bombings in the London metro in

July 2005. While “George W. Bush, Tony Blair, greedy capitalists, Osama bin Laden, terrorists, the distorted views of those who constructed a case for war” had been an easy target for political theatre makers, the “‘lads from Dewsbury and Leeds’ [who were behind the metro attacks] cannot be opposed the same way” (Hughes 161). Hughes argues that the diminished popularity of the old theatrical forms in the British political theatre scene following July 2005 is symptomatic of a “need for a more complex, multilayered response, exposing the limitations of existing theatre and performance forms and practices” (161). I could not agree with Hughes more. What is encountered here, it seems to me, is not only the irrationality of the suicide attacks, but the incapacity of the old theatrical means alone to represent resistance to the complex and perplexing effects of global capitalism that do not necessarily provide clear-cut enemies to protest against.

The problem with both the Bush administration reaction to 9/11 and with the political theatre protesting against these reactions is that they attempt to respond coherently and rationally to incoherent and contradictory problems. That is, the Bush administration’s concrete reactions of warfare to the events that did not in fact delineate a clear enemy seem symptomatic of the need to make sense of events that essentially escape symbolization. Kristiaan Versluys points out how 9/11 has come to be interpreted as “a limit event, an event so traumatic that it shatters the symbolic resources of the individual and escapes the normal processes of meaning-making and cognition” (980). Though Versluys discusses individual reactions to trauma, a parallel exists to cultural responses to the event, which, while certainly concretely devastating and deadly, was also highly symbolic: a small group of unknown terrorists were able to destroy the heart and the symbolic center of global capitalism in a country that was perceived as impenetrable.

The growing tensions within the globalized world, which had long been theorized as mediated and totally disembodied, in a short moment pierced through and materialized, and then vanished again. This instant, oddly hovering between the material and the symbolic, caused, however, a very tangible chain of reactions. It seems that to political theatre makers, due to their need to make meaning out of the traumatic events, the Bush administration's tangible deeds and its global imperialism have become an easier target of protests rather than the invisible movements of global capital whose side effects had momentarily erupted into full visibility in all their violence.

In his response to 9/11, Jean Baudrillard argues that the conflict at hand was "a fundamental antagonism, but one which shows...triumphant globalization fighting itself." Turning the gaze away from America vs. Islamic fundamentalism, or Good vs. Evil, Baudrillard sees the conflict rooted in the Western hegemony, which had grown so powerful it could only be resisted by symbolic violence, not force. Using language very similar to Foucault's theorization of resistance that is given birth to by the same power it resists, Baudrillard reads terrorism as "the shadow of any system of domination, [which] is ready everywhere to emerge as a double agent. There is no boundary to define it; it is in the very core of this culture that fights it." As Baudrillard describes it, terrorism as an act of resistance that defies definition and logic (as it is rooted in the subject's self-annihilation) is also, I suggest, strikingly similar to the function of masochism as resistance. Both forms, though capable of causing tangible bodily harm and deaths, have their real power in the capacity to cause ruptures on the level of representation. It is precisely their ability to defy logic and reason, their inexplicability that bestows them

with their disruptive power. In their illogical defiance, they are momentarily capable of materializing the constitutive contradictions within the hegemony.

To make myself clear, my purpose is not to advocate acts of terrorism or masochism, but to merely point out that in the face of hegemonic power, resistance, as Foucault theorized, might take a paradoxical form, which seems unfathomable to those in dominance. This parallel I draw between masochism and terrorism, I realize, functions only on this abstract level while in most ways they are dissimilar. And while I am suggesting that masochism might be utilized in the theatre for political ends, I do not propose the same of terrorism. My point is merely to draw attention to their similarly illogical way of resisting hegemonic power. As I discussed in chapter two, Frantz Fanon, in The Wretched of the Earth, described a similar phenomenon among the colonized, whose suicidal behavior the colonizer interpreted as irrational and hence as justifying their domination. In the colonial context, the masochistic behavior of the colonized was not capable of causing disruptions, but the way it bewildered the colonizer speaks of its capacity to undermine logic and the rules of representation. Masochism, in all its forms, in its perplexing three-part structure of simultaneous pleasure, defiance and adjustment to unbearable conditions, constitutes such a challenge, on the level of representation, to hegemonic power. Throughout the dissertation I have been suggesting that political theatre that utilizes this challenge of masochism is better capable of resisting the dispersed yet hegemonic power of global capitalism and its ability to inspire self-discipline than political theatre's old forms. In other words, in order for political theatre's social criticism to be more effective, it needs to adapt a way of resistance that disrupts the dominant power's own logic and laws of representation rather than

attempting to fight against it with the tools it has provided. Forceful defiance, claims made to equality based on victimization, and even that of cohering chaos are such tools, which is why I argue that political theatre using the strategies of the 60s and 70s is likely not to prove effective in its aim to instigate change.

Audre Lorde, in her famous 1979 speech “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” brought up a very similar problematic: “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable” (110-111). What I interpret Lorde’s challenge to mean in the context of political theatre is that in order for its critique to be useful, it cannot use the racist patriarchy’s or global capitalism’s methods of representing resistance. These will only allow “the most narrow perimeters of change.” Yet I don’t mean to suggest that this resistance should take place outside the dominant cultural practices, in alternate spaces as Baz Kershaw would have it. Keeping in mind Grace Kyungwon Hong’s argument that “women of color feminist practice must be situated *within* a genealogy of liberal capitalism, as naming the crises and erasures of that genealogy” (xii), I argue that contemporary political theatre is most effective when it works from within the dominant culture it opposes, while revealing its contradictions and its self-disciplinary effects. This is precisely how masochism as a paradoxical form of resistance works. The plays I have used as examples in this dissertation – Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus*, Adrienne Kennedy’s *The Ohio States Murders* and Alice Tuan’s *Hit* – utilize masochism’s disruptive power to draw attention to the crises and contradictions within, to use Hong’s phrase, the genealogy of capitalism and liberal democracy, from colonial times to the present.

In chapter two, I traced the ways in which *Venus* connects slavery and the nineteenth century Europe's habit of exhibiting the colonized to the capitalist enterprise of theatre. The play illuminates history's reverberating effects especially in the tradition of realistic theatre that places all its spectators in the invisible, objective position of the imperial subject. Parks's decision to portray the exploited heroine as masochistic is instrumental in exposing the audience's position of power: the discomfort the protagonist's masochism produces in the audience prompts it to examine its own viewing practice rather than finding reassurance in defiance or victimization. The *Venus*'s masochism, in other words her refusal to attempt to occupy the subject position of autonomy, also foregrounds the nineteenth century egalitarianism and the right to own property to be based on the concept of the autonomous subject. The ostensibly universal availability of this subject position disavows social hierarchies based on race and gender, a contradiction *Venus* not only exposes but ridicules with ironic humor. I also showed Parks's play as connecting the disavowal rooted in nineteenth century to the contemporary situation by exposing the ways in which the race and gender based hierarchies are still repudiated. But because racial and gender difference today is fetishized rather than disavowed, the contemporary audience desires to idealize The *Venus*, not to witness her acting masochistically. By portraying The *Venus* as co-operating with the people in charge of her exhibition as well as laughing out loud with pleasure in moments of clear discomfort, the play draws attention to how the contemporary fetishization of difference similarly disavows racial and gender hierarchies as the nineteenth century tendency to universalize. The play thus utilizes masochism's disruptive power in order to illuminate contradictions within liberal democracy and

capitalism and does this from within the Western theatre tradition as it both uses and distorts its means of representation.

Adrienne Kennedy's *The Ohio State Murders* revisits the 1950s, a time of backlash in American racial tolerance right after World War II and just before the Civil Rights Movement. Through its heroine's highly subjective account of her own memories as a student, as I argued in chapter three, it is capable of elucidating the ways in which the black middle class aspirations to escape the legacies of the past, including the ways in which black women were perceived as sexually lenient, produced a powerful desire in African Americans to be included in the national fabric. The play does not represent this desire merely as a wish to assimilate, but as a yearning to occupy the position of middle class respectability, which the play exposes as unattainable for blacks in the 50s. I interpreted Kennedy's play showing the ways in which this desire for inclusion coincides with a longing for a romanticized and coherent gender and class identity, a project which racial difference, however, continually disrupts. The play acknowledges that such an identity is a fictional construct and an ideal, but it insists that in the 50s its perpetual unavailability was capable of producing masochistic effects in a black middle class woman, with reverberations well into the present day. By illuminating these masochistic effects and by connecting them to the present, the one-act asks valuable political questions about the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement and about the alleged equal rights promised to African Americans in its aftermath. The play's usage of masochism as a roundabout way of expressing anger, rather than staging open defiance, has an unsettling effect on the audience and is thus better able to convey the affective impact the 50s racial climate had on its protagonist.

Alice Tuan's *Hit* concentrates solely on the era of global capital and its universal mode of fetishization of difference, which Hong argues "is most clearly articulated through the rise of consumerism" (xiv). Tuan's farce uses transnational adoption as its main trope and as an example of a consumerist practice that is based on the fetishization and commodification of difference. Its black humor stems from the anxieties the fetishization of difference is capable of producing when it enters the realm of middle class family life, which is ideally thought to be a safe haven from the effects of global capital. But *Hit* shows otherwise. My discussion in chapter four foregrounded the ways in which the play draws an analogy between masochism and life dominated by consumerism. By the use of this analogy it is able to ridicule and to re-politicize the popular fiction of consumerist freedom. I also interpreted the play's depiction of the commodification of racial difference as gesturing towards a criticism of the separation of racial difference from the issues of class and history, a practice transnational adoption epitomizes. The play's packaging as a farce, however, puts the pressure on the audience: it has to recognize contemporary consumerism's inherent masochism and to be capable of laughing at its own pleasurable entrapment.

I have used masochism in this dissertation in order to tease out cultural criticism in plays that on the surface seem apolitical or even reactionary. But as a way of ending, I want to propose that masochism might also be used as a theoretical paradigm outside the theatre. As such, it could prove more fruitful for investigating both the material effects of social hierarchies and for theorizing subjectivity in the postmodern world of global capital than the discourses that render women and people of color dichotomously as the Other. Peggy Phelan, writing about the use of poststructuralism in feminist performance

theory, observes the limits of the theory's usefulness in reorganizing the laws of representation: "Redesigning the relationship between self and other, subject and object, sound and image, man and woman, spectator and performer, is enormously difficult. But perhaps more difficult still is withdrawing from representation altogether" (179). The way I have shown the plays in this study to use masochism seems to gesture a way out of the problem Phelan articulates, a problem that haunted feminist theatre criticism in the 90s. Masochism, as a paradoxical form of resistance and a simultaneous idealization of dominant power, does not attempt to withdraw from representation but rather works at disrupting its laws in order to illuminate its constitutive contradictions. Masochism is capable of doing this, as I point out in the introduction in connection to Freud's study of masochistic fantasies, by undermining the efficacy of such binary oppositions Phelan lists. Because of it, it seems a more efficient way of tackling the complexities and incoherences of the post-9/11 world than the dichotomous and reductive concept of the Other.

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