REVELATIONS OF A GENEALOGY: BIBLICAL WOMEN IN PERFORMANCE DURING TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN FEMINISMS

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation treats dramatic representations of biblical women by women that have emerged in the last century within milieus informed by emerging and shifting feminisms. I begin my study with proto-feminist Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and then trace a genealogy of the dramatization of biblical women during twentieth-century American feminisms through the works of female artists. These performers and playwrights include Salome dancers, Florence Kiper Frank, Lorraine Hansberry, Marsha Norman, Madonna, and others. The goal of my project is to argue that theatre and performance provide what feminist theologian Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza describes as a “hermeneutics of creative imagination and ritualization” that “retells biblical stories and celebrates our foresisters in a feminist key.”¹ Feminist religious scholars like Fiorenza, as well as feminists such as Hélène Cixous and artists such as Sandra Cisneros, have urged similar re-visionings of biblical women towards feminists ends. These projects, however, tend to privilege critical and non-dramatic texts, particularly the creative writings of contemporary women that endeavor to rewrite biblical women through a feminist perspective. Marjorie Procter-Smith, a scholar of feminist liturgy, ritual studies, and performance theory, cites the need for historical reconstruction, but that which “involves not only remembering with the mind but also remembering with the body.”² While Fiorenza and Procter-Smith do not extend their claims to include drama in the reconstruction of feminine memory, the goal of my research is to

argue that theatre and performance fulfill this type of hermeneutic. My project asks “Does, or how does, theatre and performance provide an embodied ‘creative and imaginative hermeneutic’ to reclaim and reshape feminine religious and social identity?”

Dedicated to Jakob, Brian, and Carolyn

with a special dedication of Chapter 6 to Patty, Christine, and Anne
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INTRODUCTION

This project had its beginnings many years ago when I was an undergraduate in a New Testament theology course. One of the texts was Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Feminist Origins*. In this text, Fiorenza recounts women in leadership positions in the early church. Rather than write a traditional research paper, I decided to combine my interests in scholarship and performance to write the short play *First Witnesses* for our campus liturgical drama troupe. *First Witnesses* recalls some of the women of the Bible who were first witnessed to about Christ: Mary, the mother of Jesus; Martha of Bethany; Rebekah, the Samaritan woman; and the little known character of Lydia, a merchant of purple goods and convert of Paul. The character of Lydia held particular interest for me. As a theatre major with theology and business minors, I was drawn to this independent business “freewoman” whose house church in Philippi established one of the first Christian congregations in Europe.

As I moved further along in my studies, I continued to come across research imperatives regarding the memory of biblical women, such as those stated in Fiorenza’s hermeneutics of creative imagination and ritualization that calls for the remembering of our biblical foresisters in a feminist key, and Marjorie Procter-Smith’s call for remembering with the body as well as the mind. As I began to collect a bibliography of women writing, publishing, and performing biblical women through drama, theatre, and dance in the twentieth-century, I realized that performance, unbeknownst to scholars of feminist theology, and, to a large extent, theatre historians had been doing this all along. Throughout the twentieth-century, women had been re-membering biblical women through dramatic writing and performance. Furthermore, I noticed that plays about certain biblical women coincided with different periods or “waves” of feminism(s). My research
questions became how these performances interacted with the feminist periods in which they were written, whether they achieved the goals set forth by Fiorenza and Procter-Smith, and whether repeatable methods and techniques could be gleaned from these performances in order to benefit future feminisms through the long-term memory of biblical women.

Although some may think a connection between the Bible and feminism are counter-intuitive, there is no denying that biblical ideas have shaped and continue to shape attitudes toward women in both religious and secular society. For this reason, I, and feminist theologians in general, find it important to re-examine biblical narrative and to put it into dialogue with feminism. If, as performance scholar Diana Taylor maintains in *Archive and the Repertoire*, performances “function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity,” then it is important to understand the “social knowledge” and “sense of identity” that has been handed down through the performance of biblical women, as well as how current feminists may harness this “vital act of transfer” to continue to remember biblical women in order to reshape feminine religious identity.¹

These issues were certainly important to me as an undergraduate taking up the role of Lydia, a “freewoman” and early leader of the church, whose memory had been largely erased in a patriarchal tradition that felt threatened by any repeat performance. As a young actor, I came to my research and my performance of the role not only with academic questions, but with a personal curiosity of how I, too, could become a “freewoman.” Taking up Lydia’s memory in my performance, I, in some small way, experienced her transfer of knowledge within my own emerging sense of identity. Later, in my graduate studies, I took up the role of Lydia again, this

time in a more purposeful engagement with Taylor’s performance theory. Incorporating my role of Lydia in the original liturgical drama with the memoirs of my Great-great Aunt Lydia, my research questions concerned how my passion for the performance of the biblical Lydia could be understood within the context of the performance genealogy within my family’s Old German Baptist Brethren faith tradition in which women, quite literally, follow 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 in the performance of their daily lives: their head coverings, the length of their hair, their dress, their deference to their husbands. How did these two very different Lydias, the Lydia of Philippi and Lydia Blocher, perform the memory of the biblical woman? What kind of “social knowledge” and “sense of identity” did they hand down in their “vital acts of transfer?” And, what was transferred to me as I performed them?

Taylor distinguishes between performance such as theatre and dance and the performance of everyday life. For Taylor, the performance of the everyday operates “on another level” and “constitutes the methodological lens that enables scholars to analyze events as performance”: “civil disobedience, resistance, citizenship, gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity, for example.”\(^2\) However, in my research, I have found it unnecessary to “bracket off” performance like theatre and dance from performance of the everyday as “discreet foci of analysis.”\(^3\) Rather, performance of theatre and dance, likewise, constitute a methodological lens that enables me to analyze the performances of biblical women as very acts of “civil disobedience, resistance” and “citizenship” relative to “gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity.”\(^4\) Furthermore, I am interested in the intersections between theatrical performance and the performance of the everyday whether

\(^2\) Taylor, 3.
\(^3\) Taylor, 3.
\(^4\) Taylor, 3.
this be a lesbian Salomé dancer resisting the moral codes of society through a provocative dance, or my aunt dressed in a head covering performing her gender in resistance to the kingdom of this world, or my performance of the biblical Lydia as a resistance to my own family’s sense of what it means to be a woman modeled on the Bible.

I agree with Taylor when she states that “embodied practice, along with and bound up with other cultural practices, offers a way of knowing.”5 Indeed, theatrical performance bound up with religion—by definition the cultural practices by which we live our daily lives—offers a unique way of knowing. Furthermore, as my research will bear out, “performance and aesthetics . . . vary from community to community . . . Performances travel, challenging and influencing other performances.”6 For example, my performance of Lydia of Philippi challenges my Aunt Lydia’s performance of religion, gender, and identity, and vice-versa. These performances “are, in a sense, always in situ: intelligible in the framework of the immediate environment and issues surrounding them.”7 As I survey the performances of biblical women in this dissertation, I recognize that their biblical stories perform differently across different times and in different political contexts. Returning back to the title of Fiorenza’s work, which has been so germinal to my study, female performers have used the memory of biblical women to continually reconstruct feminism(s) throughout the twentieth-century. Each performance constitutes a new memory, a new theological reconstruction, and offers up the potential for a new feminist origin.

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5 Taylor, 3.
6 Taylor, 3.
7 Taylor, 3.
Methodology

In the spirit of re-membering, my study takes a genealogical approach similar to that of Diana Taylor by tracing a lineage and a repertoire of female artists who have used performance to explore the feminist potential of re-imagining and embodying biblical women. This project contributes to scholarly conversations in theatre and performance studies, women’s studies, and religious studies in three primary ways: 1. It recuperates the histories of a prolific but understudied body of female artists, placing them into a discursive category in ways that they have not been before; 2. Uses Diana Taylor, Katharine Brown Downey, and Sarah Ackerman as theory and methodology to connect scholarly conversations in theatre and performance studies, women’s studies, and religious studies; and 3. Considers a performative methodology within these fields of scholarship in order to extend the hermeneutic of feminist religious scholarship in new and helpful directions.

Primarily, this project serves to examine theatre as a hermeneutic of biblical interpretation and, particularly, feminist theology. My genealogical methodology responds to a research imperative posed by Wendy Zierler, and taken up in Chapter Five of my study, that asks how women may “live the [biblical] text” that, at times, has been used to harm or oppress them. Zierler proposes the need to find, and I would add create, “countertraditional text[s]” that “supply . . . additional interpretive moment[s]” to facilitate women’s ability to “live the text” of their religious traditions.8 I argue that theatre may be used to produce such “countertraditional text[s]” that, in turn, will enable women to enact and live with scripture without abandoning connections to their religious heritage.

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In deciding what to include in my study, I have chosen biblical subjects, playwrights, performers, and plays that represent a range of feminisms, professional status, and time periods. Specifically, I have chosen plays and performances that represent both radical and traditional feminisms; unknown or understudied playwrights such as Rita Benton and Florence Kiper Frank, as well as well-known artists like Karen Malpede, Lorraine Hansberry, Marsha Norman, and Madonna; and plays emerging from specific moments in twentieth-century American history, such as Salome at the turn-of-the-century, Ruth during the mid-century and Civil Rights Movement, Sarah plays of the 1990s, and Madonna at the millennium.

Obstacles to this research include my subject position in regard to the politics of Orientalism; the problem of discussing “embodied practice” through the archive; and the survey nature of the study. Any time someone from my subject position of Western Christianity approaches biblical texts, s/he necessarily enters into an Orientalist project of Western representations of Near Eastern texts. In entering this research, therefore, I acknowledge the critique of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and seek contemporary scholarship and methods that provide alternate readings of otherwise Orientalist material. For instance, Reina Lewis’ argument in *Gendering Orientalisms* that women, one degree removed from the male imperialist project, might in turn, approach Orientalism with transgressive feminist aims, and Daphne Brooks in *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* who employs W.E.B. Du Bois’ “double consciousness” as a method for understanding activist performances of race and gender in Orientalist dance.

Brooks’ discussion of “spirit dancing” also serves as a way to address embodiment despite the absence of actual bodies in this study. Likewise, I have employed Brian Massumi’s
theory of “movement-vision” with which to discuss, in particular, the dancers represented in this study, and to extend the conversation to actors on the stage, and everyday life, as well.

Finally, the survey quality of this study necessitates a generalist versus expert approach, perhaps leaving gaps in knowledge about any single historical event, performer, performance, playwright, or play. The outcome that this methodology provides, however, is an accumulation of case studies that reveals how biblical performance in the twentieth-century was not an anomaly, but participated alongside feminisms and theology. Furthermore, the corresponding survey of theories used to interpret this range of performances provides an inventory of theoretical and methodological tools by which to continue the study of performance as a creative hermeneutic in feminist and religious thought and practice.

While no methodology may be able to resolve the obstacles in this study entirely, my approach in using Orientalism and theories of movement, as well as my genealogical and survey organization of the study, aim to both acknowledge and, if not circumvent, then employ these obstacles in guiding this study in generative directions.

Literature Review

The scope of my study focuses primarily on twentieth-century North American biblical plays and performances of biblical women by women. Using Fiorenza’s concept of “foresister,” I will trace the genre of proto-feminist and feminist biblical plays over several generations beginning with seventeenth-century Creole Mexican poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and her Eucharist play *The Divine Narcissus*.

Recent decades have experienced a renewed interest in the work of Sor Juana. In addition to sources such as Octavio Paz’s definitive biography and critical commentary *Sor Juana, or, the
Traps of Faith and George Tavard’s Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Theology of Beauty: The First Mexican Theology, feminist theologians have responded to the work of these male scholars. Pertinent to my research, Frances Kennet has published the articles “The Theology of the Divine Narcissus” and “Sor Juana and the Guadalupe.” Furthermore, Latina feminists have looked to the Mexican poet to recuperate an image of Guadalupe that counters that of the submissive Virgin in contemporary Latino culture. In “Ignored Virgin or Unaware Women: A Mexican-American Protestant Reflection on The Virgin of Guadalupe,” Nora O. Lozano-Díaz describes how Latina feminist theology is coming to terms with the Guadalupe’s influence over Mexican-American women. Likewise, Stephanie Merrim, a leading feminist scholar, asserts in “The ‘Mexican’ Sor Juana” that “what Sor Juana most frequently wants Mary to be is the prototype of the Virgin Guadalupe.” Merrim’s text is essential in understanding feminist interpretations of Sor Juana’s Mariology, while her essay “Mores Geometricae: The ‘Womanscript’ in the Theatre of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz” explicates Sor Juana’s use of doubling and triangulation in her re-scripting or “woman-scripting” of women’s roles in colonial New Spain.

Beginning my genealogy with Sor Juana, who holds both historical and contemporary relevance within the fields of theatre, feminism, and theology, allows me to look for family resemblances and relationships (however distant) among later plays without implying an evolutionary or positivist model. Within my genealogy I will circumvent the use of terms such as “foremother” in order to avoid replacing a patriarchal construction with its matriarchal

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9 Stephanie Merrim, “The ‘Mexican’ Sor Juana,” Approaches to Teaching the Works of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Approaches to teaching world literature, 98 (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2007) 84.

10 Stephanie Merrim, “Mores Geometricae: The ‘Womanscript’ the Theatre of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1991).
counterpart. This is especially critical in regard to Sor Juana, who must not be perceived as the originator or mother of the American feminist biblical play, but valued for what she was, a sister (Sor) among women.

Moving to the twentieth century, I will discuss the loosening of biblical censorship as well as the subsequent return of biblical women to the stage during the height of fin de siècle Orientalism. In my research, I have collected a bibliography of over one hundred women publishing biblical plays between 1890 and 1930. Rose Glaymen’s 1930 dissertation Recent Judith Drama and its Analogues, documents over forty plays in which “the beautiful woman of the Bible . . . for patriotic reasons causes the downfall of a powerful man.”¹¹ Likewise, Katharine Brown Downey in Perverse Midrash: Oscar Wilde, Andre Gide, and Censorship of Biblical Drama, notes that American biblical plays are well-documented between 1870 and the 1920s. Furthermore, many of these plays revolve around biblical heroines, which Downey explains as “deriv[ing] in part from the movement for women’s rights in the period.”¹² These plays reflect a dynamic relationship between religion, theatre, and women’s movements in the early twentieth century, yet garner little critical attention. Downey herself does not continue in this line of research, but instead focuses on the well-known French symbolist plays Salomé by Oscar Wilde and Saul by André Gide.

Indeed, Salome is one of the most documented and controversial returns of the female biblical character to the stage. Following Oscar Wilde’s 1892 verse drama about the biblical character, American dance was taken with what Susan Glenn in “The Americanization of

Salome: Sexuality, Race, and the Careers of Vulgar Princesses” terms “Salomania.” Glenn gives a thorough genealogy of the Salome character in the early twentieth century. Although most of her study focuses on vaudeville interpretations, she mentions more spiritually-based work in the performances of Loie Fuller, Ruth St. Denis, and Aida Overton Walker. Other studies such as Toni Bentley in her book *Sisters of Salome*, provide similar overviews of the “Salome Craze” including biographical sketches and performance histories of turn-of-the-century Salome dancers. Bentley argues that Salome dancers both used and subverted male misogyny in order to gain a greater independence and social standing. Emily Apter in “Acting out Orientalism: Sapphic Theatricality in Turn-of-the-Century Paris” parses out a similar argument and explores the female performer’s use and subversion of what might otherwise be considered misogynistic.

Other artists, such as Florence Kiper Frank, whose plays were performed by the Provincetown Players and Chicago Little Theatre, did not treat the character of Salome directly, but borrowed from Wilde’s play in telling other biblical stories in which women precipitated the deaths of men. Kiper Frank’s one-act *Jael* concerns a Kenite woman who caused the downfall of the Canaanite general Sisera as foretold by the biblical prophet Deborah. The Chicago Little Theatre production of this play followed in 1914, the same year as Kiper Frank’s essay “Some American Plays from a Feminist Viewpoint.” Although Kiper Frank’s essay is often quoted in books and articles on early twentieth-century feminist plays, this viewpoint has not been applied to a study of her own plays. In response to Kiper Frank’s call for a feminist theatre “to set forth sincerely and honestly, yet with vital passion, those problems in the development and freedom of women that the modern age has termed the problems of feminism,” I propose that her own
dramatic work merits attention and may provide insight into an experimental form of feminist biblical drama in the early twentieth-century.  

Performances of Salome and the play *Jael* are examples of the genre, or genealogy, which Glaymen defines as “Judith Drama.” Plays about other biblical women, however, proliferated during the early twentieth and into the mid-twentieth century as well. Among them, plays about the biblical Ruth were popular. Treated by playwrights such as Rita Benton, author of *The Bible Play Workshop*, and Mina Maxfield author of *Ruth of Moab*, these plays are more representative of theatre from religious dramatic societies than from mainstream or experimental theatres. This does not, however, preclude them from addressing women’s issues.

Simultaneously, black church theatre began to thrive in the 1920s and, according to James V. Hatch in *A History of African American Theatre*, boldly “confront[ed] major issues for black women: voting, miscegenation, child-rearing, patriotism, and birth control.”  

My genealogy of Ruth plays, therefore, will briefly assess religious plays such as those by Benton and Maxfield, but will culminate in a close reading of Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 Broadway premiere of *A Raisin in the Sun*, which I will put forward as a Ruth play influenced by black church theatre.

Biblical plays, particularly those about women, wane in the second half of the twentieth century. Certain key productions, however, can be identified. Feminist playwright Karen Malpede’s first play *A Lament for Three Women* continues the Ruth genealogy as it loosely follows the biblical narrative. Malpede wrote the play while studying with and writing about the New York experimental theatre community, particularly Open Theatre and Living Theatre. As

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second wave feminism drew away from organized religion and, therefore, away from scripture, its theatrical impulse continued to take ritualistic and mythic forms as demonstrated by these theatre companies.

The 1990s bring a new genealogical strain of plays based on the biblical Sarah. The genealogy of Sarah plays briefly takes my study outside of America to Israel with Shulamit Lapid’s *Womb for Rent* (Cameri Theatre, 1990) and *Sarah* (Theatre Company Jerusalem, 1993). Because of my choice to focus on American plays, however, Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Marsha Norman’s *Sarah and Abraham* (1988, 1992) will comprise the bulk of this part of my study. *Sarah and Abraham* is typical of the late twentieth-century in that it combines the biblical story with contemporary themes. In this way, I will argue that Norman epitomizes Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s “hermeneutics of creative imagination,” a “process of biblical interpretation” that can grapple with the oppressive as well as liberating functions of particular biblical texts in women's lives and struggles.”\(^{15}\) Plays throughout my survey illustrate this grappling.

Finally, I will consider Madonna’s “The Beast Within,” a remix of her single “Justify My Love” set to passages read from the book of Revelation. Madonna’s performance of “The Beast Within” connects thematically to other plays in my study. For instance, allusions to the “Apocalyptic Virgin” of the book of Revelation can be found in both Madonna’s performance, as well as in Sor Juana’s characterizations of women in her Eucharist play. Furthermore, Orientalism is a notable theme of Madonna’s 2004 performance. In regard to Salome, Madonna

\(^{15}\) qtd. in Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, Heroes; Women’s Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 20. emphasis hers.
is reminiscent, as is mentioned in Glenn’s study, to the vaudeville and burlesque performers of the Salome character. Madonna provides an effective bookend to my study allowing me to bring my ideas together in a comparative analysis, as well as bringing the study into the twenty-first century.

In approaching these primary texts, I will draw from several disciplines, including theology, performance, women’s studies, and cultural studies to inform my methodology. The following texts provide a framework from which to build, guide, and reflect upon research subjects that are positioned at the convergence of several disciplines and within different political and historical contexts.

Susan Ackerman in *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* articulates the position from which I will approach the “biblical authority” of texts in this study. Ackerman rejects a purely historical methodology, as well as one grounded in literary formalism. Instead, she claims a middle ground using a history-of-religion methodology that studies how texts have been understood by specific cultures during specific moments of history without the need to defend or deny the validity of those interpretations. This approach is consistent with philosophical changes within theology that gave rise to the possibility of staging biblical plays at the turn-of-the-last-century. In her book *Perverse Midrash: Oscar Wilde, André Gide, And Censorship Of Biblical Drama*, Downey observes a similar impulse in the advancement of Bible “as literature” and the concurrent publication of theatre reformer J.G. Frazer’s *Passages of the Bible Chosen for their Literary Beauty and Interest* (1895), with Copeau’s call “to return the theatre to its religious character, its sacred rights and original
While Downey’s survey of biblical, literary and theatre theory provides a context for the emergence of the biblical play, her theory of “perverse midrash” provides a tool for analyzing Bible plays, including those by women, that appear to take an unorthodox stance on scripture only to “restore” what “orthodoxy has elided.”

One obstacle in the recuperation of this repertoire is its archival nature. Taylor distinguishes between the archive, made up of written texts, such as scripts, which have been given authority by their very publication, and the repertoire made up of embodied practices. In regard to my project, the repertoire includes the actual bodily performances of plays and, especially, dances surrounding biblical women, which leave no textual trace. Taylor explains that repertoire cannot be adequately recorded through text, making literary analysis problematic. To account for this, Taylor advises shifting critical methodology away from textual analysis toward looking at the “scenarios” from which performances arise. This involves incorporating a historical/cultural analysis of conditions that prefigure the performance of biblical plays and, therefore, informs their meaning for a given audience.

Scenarios may also be understood as organizing principles, other than literary, by which to interpret embodied practices. In my study, these scenarios include spirituality, movement, Orientalism, the Madonna, female genealogy, and double-consciousness. Likewise, Taylor writes that, “instead of focusing on patterns of cultural expression in terms of texts and narratives, we might think of them as scenarios that do not reduce gestures and embodied practices to narrative description. This shift necessarily alters what academic disciplines regard as appropriate

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16 Downey, 43.
17 Downey, 153.
18 Taylor, 28-33.
canons." In regard to the dancers included in this dissertation, many of their performances prefigure even filmed archives of their work. These performers’ memoirs such as Loie Fuller’s *Fifteen Years as a Dancer* and Maud Allan’s *My Life and Dancing*, however, contain detailed description of their dances, as well as the dancers’ philosophies on embodiment. While these memoirs are often dismissed in academic studies of the performers’ works as reducing these women’s embodied gestures to their archival description, out of necessity I include the personal statements and philosophies made in their memoirs within the canon of my research.

Other frameworks supporting my research include critical theories within feminism, post-colonialism and Orientalism. Although he is not a post-colonial theorist per se, I begin with Jean Baudrillard’s theory of “Simulacra and Simulations,” particularly in regard to his thoughts on Jesuit missionaries in New Spain and their transformation of indigenous religious figures into Catholic icons. Baudrillard argues that in the duplicitous replication of “simulacra,” the copy eventually serves as a stand-in for the real. The simulacrum becomes, in Baudrillard’s terms “hyper-real,” and takes on the authority of the original. Such is the case with the Catholic creation of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. While the theory of simulacra is most relevant to Sor Juana, the concept may be applied to any of the study’s dramatic representations (or simulacra) of biblical women more generally.

In regard to Orientalism, Edward Said (having, to use a colloquialism, “written the book” on *Orientalism*) critiques the phenomenon as a system of thought by which the West has come to produce knowledge about the East, and any territory for which the West has designs including

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19 Taylor, 16-17.

New Spain, in order to justify and maintain its imperial control. He maintains that Europeans, primarily the British and French, have created the binary opposition of East and West on geographical, ideological, and religious terms. Taking Marx’s statement, “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” as prescriptive, Western Orientalists, according to Said, have assumed authorship of Oriental representation which, necessarily and strategically, displaces and controls the voices of the colonized. In doing so, the West has characterized the East as geographically and sexually exotic, politically and intellectually inferior, and spiritually heretical. Said argues that such tropes have remained indicative to the Orientalist narrative throughout history and, indeed, hold true for both Sor Juana’s indigenous settings in her loa and *Divine Narcissus*, as well as the exotic Near Eastern settings for Salomania and later biblical plays.

Concerning women, Said traces the sexualization of the Orient to Edward Lane who proclaimed the Orientals’ “excessive ‘freedom’ of intercourse.” Said thusly frames the “Fatal Woman,” exemplified in representations of Salome, and points to the sinister nature of such fantasy, as well as to the androcentric nature of the Orientalist field. While critical of such chauvinisms, however, Said’s treatment of women is cursory at best. Reina Lewis’ *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* serves to deconstruct Said’s masculinist Orientalist scope. Her historical contextualization also provides

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22 Said, 167.
valuable information into the religious workings of Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, and occultism of the period. Although Lewis does not include an American viewpoint or female dramatists or performers, she is useful in providing theories and information in the study of female cultural production across disciplines.

Delimitations

I begin my study with seventeenth-century proto-feminist Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in order to locate my study uniquely within the Americas. The whole of my research, in fact, concerns American artists, beginning with the US-based Salome dancers of the early twentieth-century and extending into the twenty-first-century with the work of pop icon Madonna. Most research on biblical performances, including those by women, tends toward the Eurocentric. My study is uniquely American in that I position and discuss my subjects within the frame of post-colonialism and the construction of American feminist identity. Sor Juana, as arguably the earliest female playwright in the Americas to deal with issues of gender, religion, and nation, is an appropriate introduction to the subject and issues of my dissertation.

I have been chosen specific cases to represent a range of biblical types as well as feminisms. In each case, I have chosen a female type, or what Glaymen calls an “analogue,” that represents a major trend in biblical plays about women within a given time period; for instance, Judith plays (which include plays about biblical women like Salomé and Jael who are responsible for the death of men) in the early century and Sarah plays in the 1990s. Furthermore, case studies have been chosen to represent a range of feminisms, from progressive Judith plays to the more traditional feminisms of Ruth plays. Subjects have also been chosen to span the disciplines of theatre and dance, as well as their theoretical resonance with other chapters.
In limiting the scope of my study, I am not concerned with the Bible play in general, popular films of epic Bible stories, or large productions such as The Oberammergau Passion Play. While these genres undoubtedly hold cultural impact, I am interested how women have appropriated the impact of Bible plays toward the cultural production of feminist religious, social, and political identities.

This study uses a close reading of dramatic texts and archive of performances in an effort to construct a genealogy that draws insights into female playwrights’ and performers’ dialogues between religion, theatre and feminism. Biblical scholars will find research that supports performance as a creative hermeneutic, but will neither find detailed exegeses of scripture, nor a proscriptive articulation of a hermeneutic. Similarly, theatre scholars will find a detailed and contextualized description and analysis of specific dramatic plays, performances and performers, but will not find a comprehensive history of either the Bible play or feminist theatre. While it is the goal of this study to argue for the recuperation of a history of female performers, as well as for considering a methodology for a “creative hermeneutic of ritualization,” the scope and purview of the project makes a case for further study toward this end rather than aiming to provide a practical and working methodology.

Chapter Breakdown

My chapters are organized into an introduction, a body of six chapters, and a conclusion. For organizational purposes, my chapters loosely follow the chronology of proto-feminism, to first wave, second wave and third wave feminisms. In addition, each chapter examines a specific type, or analogue, of biblical woman popular during the representative period. Specifically, these include chapters on the Virgin Mary, Salome, Jael, Ruth, Sarah, and the Madonna.
Chapter I: Mariologies for the “New” World: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s *The Divine Narcissus*

I begin my genealogy with a close reading of Sor Juana’s auto-sacramental *The Divine Narcissus* and its reconstruction of the Western Virgin Mary within the colonial and indigenous culture of New Spain. As a female Creole poet, Sor Juana was concerned both with the positions of women and the indigenous within colonial culture. She was particularly concerned with syncretic icons such as Guadalupe, a Western assimilation of an indigenous goddess.

I assert that in *The Divine Narcissus*, Sor Juana uses the concept of simulacrum, a subject of her last poem, to problematize issues presented in Guadalupe. Like post-modern theorist Jean Baudrillard, Sor Juana is concerned with the “circuit of images” behind the Virgin. Unlike Baudrillard, however, she does not dismiss simulacra as empty theology. Rather, I will use Baudrillard’s concept of simulacrum in order to read Sor Juana’s work against the traditional andro/Eurocentric understandings of her work as articulated by Octavio Paz, George Tavard, Frances Kennet, and others.

In such interpretations, emphasis is placed on the play’s Greek and Spanish sources, and while the female divine is addressed, it is in reference to the Virgin Mary, a European manifestation. One reason for such bias is Sor Juana’s own distrust of syncretic icons. I will argue, however, that with *The Divine Narcissus*, Sor Juana works against Eurocentric interpretations of the Virgin by constructing a Creole Mariology that redeems Guadalupe’s divine and indigenous aspects while condemning her appropriated shadow side.

Like me, contemporary feminists such as Stephanie Merrim are less reluctant to connect Sor Juana to the Guadalupe. In fact, Merrim looks to the Mexican poet in order to recuperate an image of Guadalupe for today’s “Creole” culture. She does not, however, make direct
connections between *The Divine Narcissus* and Sor Juana’s construction of a Creole Virgin. To foster this connection, therefore engaging Sor Juana’s play within contemporary Latina feminist scholarship, I will use Merrim’s theories to argue for Sor Juana’s creation of a Latina Mariology within her play. In doing so, I join with emergent feminist re-readings of Sor Juana, while bringing in my own approach.

Chapter II: Salomania and the Theory of Disseverment

This chapter begins to explore the re-membering of biblical women through embodiment. The return of female biblical characters to the stage, following years of biblical censorship in Europe and the United States, began largely with the performance of Salome, the young girl responsible for the beheading of John the Baptist, and popularized by Oscar Wilde’s play and Richard Strauss’ opera. During the height of the Salome craze, New York City studios produced “150 Salomes a month” with at least 24 Salome acts on the vaudeville circuit. My research draws connections between Salomania and the emergence of twentieth-century feminisms, particularly in regard to female spirituality and sexuality. In this respect, I retrace the performances of four American Salome dancers—Loie Fuller, Maud Allan, Ruth St. Denis, and Aida Overton Walker. I examine how these marginalized minoritarians (as women, two lesbians, and an African American) appropriated the Salome figure toward personal and professional liberation. Furthermore, in combining this historiographic approach with a contemporary revisiting of critical texts through the lens of Brian Massumi’s theory of movement and affect, I

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consider how the legacy of Salome dancers may continue to contribute to feminist and theological projects today.

Particularly, I look at Brian Massumi’s theories in “The Bleed: Where the Body Meets the Image.” In this essay, Massumi appeals to theorists to employ “movement-vision” in order to “DISSEVER THE IMAGELESS FROM THE IDEAL” (emphasis his).24 This image of disseverment offers rich parallels to my case study of Salome. What does it mean to “dissever the imagelessness from the Ideal”? Could this be described as the Salome dancer’s virtual beheading of a saint as a separation (or disseverment) from society’s ideal of woman? Or, from the textual corpus of the Bible and Wilde’s play? Applying Massumi’s theories of movement to the phenomenon of Salomania, allows for the consideration of how movement, translated literally as dance, may offer a way for feminist theologians to “rethink body, subjectivity, and social change in terms of movement, affect, force and violence.”25 A case study combining the historical movement of Salomania and Massumi’s theory of movement may affect a generative response to Procter-Smith’s call for historical reconstruction that “involves not only remembering with the mind but also remembering with the body.”26

Chapter III: Progressive Era Feminisms in Florence Kiper Frank’s Jael

Similar in style to Wilde’s Salome is a genre Rose Ebey Glaymen describes as “Judith Drama,” wherein “the beautiful woman of the Bible . . . for patriotic reasons causes the downfall

25 Massumi, 66.
of a powerful man.”

Florence Kiper Frank takes up the subject of one such woman, Jael, in her 1914 play. Nevertheless, unlike Wilde’s Salomé, Kiper Frank’s Jael ends in the survival of the sexually transgressive woman. In this chapter, I provide a close reading of Kiper Frank’s Jael as her response to Wilde, as well as to the dramatic conventions of feminist plays in her time. As a result, Kiper Frank’s play exemplifies a unique genre of feminist biblical drama that can be understood through the lens of Katharine Browne Downey’s “perverse midrash.”

Downey’s “perverse midrash” is helpful in comparing Kiper Frank’s and Wilde’s plays. Downey uses Wilde’s Salomé to illustrate how the re-emergence of biblical plays challenged conventional readings of the Bible. She defines “perverse midrash” as “highly unorthodox reinterpretations of scripture,” bowing to the Hebrew precedent of midrash, “that, in the process of perversion, seek . . . to restore something in the text that orthodoxy has elided.”

Many of these plays like Wilde’s and Frank’s, sought to restore sexuality to spirituality. I argue that for female playwrights, retelling the stories of powerful and sexual women who brought down the regimes of “powerful men” became critical in women’s political and sexual liberation.

Additionally, Kiper Frank saw her liberation as a woman as inextricably tied to her identity as a Jew. In “The Jewish Problem in America,” Kiper Frank likens the “Woman Problem” to the “Jewish Problem.” She calls upon Judaism and its “daughter Christianity” to reevaluate the Bible and create “new forms in new rituals.”

I argue that in Jael, Kiper Frank uses theatre as one of these new forms.

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27 Glaymen, 13.
28 Downey, 153.
Moreover, in an article titled “Some American Plays from the Feminist Viewpoint,” Kiper Frank criticizes feminist plays of her time and calls for a poetic, non-realistic theatre that with “vital passion” treats what “the modern age has termed the problems of feminism.”30 Similar critiques are posed in Judith E. Barlow’s “Susan’s Sisters: The ‘Other’ Women Writers of the Provincetown Players,” Alma J. Bennet’s “A Critic’s Response to Stage Representations of the ‘New Woman’ during the Progressive Era” and Judith Stephen’s “Gender Ideology And Dramatic Convention In Progressive Era Plays, 1890-1920.” In comparing Kiper Frank’s “Feminist Viewpoint,” with the development of the “New Woman” and the “New Theatre,” I draw parallels that place religious plays such as Kiper Frank’s within larger feminist and dramatic movements. Kiper Frank’s article, read in connection with Downey’s “perverse midrash,” illuminates how Kiper Frank answers her own call for a feminist play and, as a result, typifies a new form of feminist biblical play for the twentieth-century.

Chapter IV: Ruth Plays and Traditional Feminisms

Although Glaymen’s Judith Drama and Kiper Frank’s Jael offer insight into early twentieth century biblical plays by women, their scopes are limited to one prototype. Another biblical character, Ruth, represents a traditional perspective concerning women and feminism. Not coincidentally, the two plays with which I begin the Ruth genealogy, Ruth and Boaz by Rita Benton and Ruth of Moab by Mina Maxfield, represent religious dramatic societies. These plays maintain the conservative feminism of separate sphere ideology. Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun, which I posit as a Ruth play, is often criticized on similar terms. As such, religion in

*Raisin* is reflected in the conflict between Lena, the fundamentalist matriarch, and Beneatha, an incarnation of the playwright.

My chapter provides a new context for approaching religion in *Raisin*. A *Washington Post* interview suggests that Hansberry intended the play for performance in a black church. Within this context, I explore the possibility that *Raisin* emerged from the tradition of black church theatre. Specifically, I show how Hansberry uses parallel structure with the Book of Ruth to provide a more nuanced reading of women and religious themes in *A Raisin in the Sun*. I argue that like Benton and Maxfield, Hansberry’s Ruth play is best understood within the purview of traditional feminisms that locate feminine power within the domestic sphere.

The final play within my Ruth genealogy is Karen Malpede’s *A Lament for Three Women* (1974). Like the Book of Ruth, the play explores the bonds between women in the wake of death and disease. This play is helpful in discussing the flexibility of biblical plays to serve both traditional and more radical feminism(s) as represented in Malpede. Indeed Malpede’s founding of the New Cycle Theatre that became part of the “Arts at St. Ann’s,”31 as well as Hansberry’s intentions to perform in a church, and the support of religious dramatic societies in the early twentieth century, provide testimony to a partnership between religious organizations and women’s theatre in recuperating a performative and spiritual voice.

Chapter V: Sarah Plays and Secular Jewish-Christian Feminisms

In this chapter, I explore Marsha Norman’s *Sarah and Abraham*, and other plays based on the biblical character Sarah, that examine social and secular issues. These plays reference the

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Bible in order to make social and feminist statements despite, or at times, in spite of, their sacred sources. Through a close reading of *Sarah and Abraham*, I argue that Norman succeeds at creating a contemporary feminist play based on a biblical woman by: 1) breaking from Realism 2) avoiding the creation of characters based on archetypes and 3) creating a dramatic climax based on a woman’s independent decision and not a decision of moral superiority or one which will put her under the control of patriarchy.

Additionally, in *Marsha Norman: A Casebook*, Linda Ginter Brown includes an interview with Norman in which the playwright recounts her fundamentalist upbringing and rejection of the biblical God for a feminist spirituality. Norman’s respect for spirituality, along with her knowledge of religion allows her, like Hansberry, to use critical theology to comment on institutional religion. In this regard, to theologically inform my chapter, I refer to an essay by Katherine H. Burkman, and Claire R. Fried in which they discuss religion in Norman’s play. Burkman and Fried describe Norman’s play as a “feminist midrash . . . draw[ing] on the tradition of involving the Hebrew Bible, as the ancient Jewish sages did, in explaining/defending/justifying their own life.”32 Using Burkman’s and Fried’s definition of midrashim, I discuss Norman’s play in comparison with other contemporary Sarah plays. For example, in his discussion of the plays *Womb for Rent* and *Sarah*, Dan Urian explains religion’s role in secular Israeli theatre. He states that secular women’s theatre is not religious, but “tends toward the radical . . . ‘investigating the possibilities of a gender based ritualized style of theatre which

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seeks the emotional, mythical, and historical keys to woman centered culture.”

Urian’s distinction between a radical secular feminism and a “feminine” religious women’s theatre is central in my discussion of American biblical plays which, likewise, reflect secularist and religious perspectives on theology, theatre, and feminism.

Chapter VI: Postmodern Revelations: Madonna, the Apocalyptic Virgin and “The Beast Within”

Pop icon Madonna provides an apt bookend to my first chapter on the Mariology of Sor Juana. Not only do both playwrights deal with popular images of the Virgin, but are written about in connection with Jean Baudrillard’s post-modern theory of simulacra. In connection with my larger study, Madonna has a strong affinity to the dancers of Salomania in her use of sexuality and biblical images. As such, Madonna has been described by some as a “Sacred Monster,” an appropriate image for my chapter explicating her performances of “The Beast Within.” In my final chapter, I argue that through the performance of her single inspired by the Book of Revelation, Madonna takes control over her socially constructed identity as a “Sacred Monster.” Using videos and concert performances as sites of inquiry, I review critical scholarship on Madonna’s performance of religion, and draw some conclusions regarding her feminist and/or theological efficacy.

Specifically, I reflect on the construction of Madonna as a “postmodern deity” by scholars using Baudrillard’s theory of “simulacra.” While many take a negative approach, Deidre E. Pribram argues that Madonna’s control over the images “may be a point of departure in the

articulation of postmodern feminism.”34 Earlier in my study, I discuss how Sor Juana reveals the politics behind the appropriation of religious images through simulacra; however, unlike Baudrillard, she reconciles these images in a creolized Mary. Likewise, I will explore whether the “circuit of images” that inform Madonna’s personas function similarly to reveal and reconcile tensions of female sexuality and spirituality.

Lucy O’Brien provides insight for interpreting Madonna’s 1993 and 2004 performances of “The Beast Within.” Using O’Brien’s text, it is possible to trace the pop singer’s relationship with religion from her Catholic upbringing to her conversion to Kabbalah. Using Massumi’s “movement-vision,” I will argue that through her embodiment of biblical women, whose interpretations have resulted in negative images of women, Madonna is able to move, change and subvert the relation between the subject (the Beast Within) and the object (the Sacred Monster) in a way that generates a positive and transformative force within her life, faith, and career.

In my conclusion I will discuss how the chapters above recuperate a genealogical repertoire of female performers and playwrights that satisfies Fiorenza’s call to retell the stories of our biblical foresisters in a feminist key, as well as Procter-Smith’s appeal to remember with the body, as well as the mind. The application of Susan Ackerman’s “history of religion” approach to the plays of this genealogy opens the inquiry of these biblical and dramatic texts to the possibility of contextualization, or what Taylor calls the “scenario” of a performance or play within its specific historical and social location. These midrash “perversions” of scripture reveal performative methodologies by which female artists have used the stories of biblical women to

“explain/defend/justify” their lives. \textsuperscript{35} Finally, I will consider what can be learned from the methodologies of the performers within my study, and what may be exorcised from a performative theological method in today’s discursive climate. Based upon conclusions drawn within the previous chapters, I will conclude my discussion with how these insights may begin to inform a hermeneutic of feminist religious scholarship grounded in performance that may prove useful to biblical scholars, feminists, and performers as well.

\textsuperscript{35} Burkman and Fried, 130.
My genealogical study, or “sisterhood,” of twentieth-century American female performers and playwrights who have taken up female biblical personages in the feminist spirit begins with seventeenth-century proto-feminist Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-1695). A Creole poet, meaning that she was born in New Spain but of Spanish descent, Sor Juana has become a beloved icon of Mexico who accommodates both an indigenous and colonial cultural and historical identity. Despite her humble beginnings as a “daughter of the church,” a polite euphemism for an illegitimate child, Sor Juana excelled in intellectual pursuits becoming a lady in waiting and poet to the viceroy before returning to the church to continue a life of intellect and theological contemplation.\(^1\) Sor Juana’s legacy includes her prolific poetry, theological treatises on divine love (Carta Athenagórica) and the rights of women (La Repuesta), three secular and three religious plays, and, perhaps most publically and vividly, her portrait on Mexico’s 200 pesos bill. Rather than her own iconic status, however, which is well-documented in other

\(^1\) It is rumored that Sor Juana became a “bride of Christ” in order to avoid the prospect of marriage. Her romantic poetry written (and commissioned) in admiration of noble women, as well as her relationship with the Condessa de Paredes, who was responsible both for the commission of The Divine Narcissus and the publication of many of her works, has led some to speculate that Sor Juana was a lesbian. Whether or not Sor Juana was a homosexual, a point that would be difficult to confirm, she has become a subject of lesbian hermeneutics in both scholarship (See Juan Carlos Bautista, “La sonrisa de Sor Juana,” Fem. 14.95 (1990): 13-16; and Judith Bennett, “Lesbian-like and the Social History of Lesbians,” Journal of the History of Sexuality 9.1.2 (2000) and creative work see Catrióna Rueda Esquibel, “Sor Juana and the Search for (Queer) Cultural Heroes,” With Her Machete in Her Hand: Reading Chicana Lesbians (Austin: U of Texas P, 2006) 66-90. While my study does not pursue this line of argument directly (although female relationships are integral to the loa and The Divine Narcissus), it shows how Sor Juana and her work have recently been recuperated in feminist, religious, and queer studies and is ripe for further inquiry.
sources, this chapter considers Sor Juana’s reflection on the iconography of the Virgin Mary in imperial New Spain, specifically its manipulation of the indigenous Aztec goddess into the colonial Virgin Guadalupe. I argue that in her *loa* and *auto-sacramental The Divine Narcissus*, Sor Juana uses her own creative manipulations of the icon to create a Creole and proto-feminist Mariology. In effect, Sor Juana reorganizes the scenario, or organizing principles, surrounding the Catholic icon. Sor Juana’s redirection of the scenario surrounding Mary is helpful in considering present contemplations on the Virgin’s (and other iconic representations of biblical women’s) place in society, feminism, theology, and the arts today.

Sor Juana’s Will and Testament to a Postmodern Age

In her essay “Colonial No More: Reading Sor Juana from a Transatlantic Perspective,” Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel quotes the poet’s final poem:

> What magical infusions did Indian herbalists of my homeland pour to enchant my lines? The image of your own idea is what you have praised, and since it is yours, it is indeed worthy of your applause. Celebrate that simulacrum of your own creation, so that the laurel will remain with you. ²

As I read these words, I cannot help but sense a twinge of sarcasm in Sor Juana’s last testament to her critics. Tongue in cheek, perhaps, this epigraph clearly testifies to the false pretense of authorial intent, willing the responsibility of interpretation to the critics. Scholar Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel uses this quote in her own reading of Sor Juana to illustrate the poet’s

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² Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel, “Colonial No More: Reading Sor Juana from a Transatlantic Perspective,” *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Sor Juana de la Cruz*, Approaches to teaching world literature Ser. 98. (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2007) 92.
“intrigue” with a “representational system that promotes ‘epistemological failing.’” Sor Juana’s *barroco* style, indicative of the diverse cultures of New Spain, invites paradox, multiplicity, syncretism, and layers of symbolism that resist singular interpretation. Martinez implies that Sor Juana revels in such ambiguity, leaving her critics to create mere “simulacra,” or representations of meaning in her work. While Sor Juana’s quote seems to acknowledge, encourage, and perhaps even “celebrate” simulacra, the concept has had a more ambivalent reception in contemporary and postmodern theory. Most notably, in “Simulacra and Simulations,” philosopher Jean Baudrillard defines the phenomena as “substituting signs of the real for the real itself.” These signs eventually take on more authority than the real, emptying the real of any authority. For Baudrillard, this substitution is problematic. Contemporary feminist critic E. Deidre Pribram, however, considers whether a woman’s manipulation of images “may be a point of departure in the articulation of postmodern feminism.” (I return to Pribram in Chapter Six in a discussion of the pop icon Madonna who, like Sor Juana, manipulates images of the “Madonna” toward feminist ends.) It is with this intent, held in tension with Baudrillard’s admonitions against simulacra, especially as it relates to religious iconography, that I approach Sor Juana’s *loa* and *The Divine Narcissus*. I argue that Sor Juana uses the concept of simulacra as a “point of departure” to destabilize colonialist religious iconography that had been used to rob the authority of the indigenous (and feminine) religious culture in New Spain.

Although Sor Juana and Baudrillard come from a different set of discourses, both the poet and philosopher recognize the “representational system” and “epistemological failing”

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3 qtd. in Martínez-San Miguel, 92. Frederick Luciani, *Literary Self-Fashioning in Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz* (Cranberry: Associated UP: 2004) 144.
4 Baudrillard, 170.
5 Schwichtenberg, 9 quoting Pribram, 208.
behind divine images. Regarding the use of religious symbols, Baudrillard asks “[W]hat becomes of divinity when it reveals itself in icons, when it is multiplied in simulacra? Does it remain the supreme authority, simply incarnated in images as a visible theology? Or is it volatilized into simulacra which alone deploy their pomp and power of fascination. . . ?”

Baudrillard’s insight into simulacra, especially in regard to colonialism and religion, is especially relevant to Sor Juana’s *The Divine Narcissus* in which Narcissus, a Christ figure, looks into a fountain and sees himself reflected in the female image of Human Nature, who I argue represents the Aztec goddess Tonantzin as well as Marian/Guadalupe images. In this religious play, Sor Juana grapples precisely with Baudrillard’s questions: What becomes of the indigenous Aztec goddess and the Western Virgin Mary when revealed through the icon of the Virgin Guadalupe? Is Guadalupe a visible theology or has it been “volatilized into simulacra,” an empty symbol of the “pomp and power” of Western colonization and cultural assimilation? Furthermore, what do these images mean for an indigenous culture colonized by the West and, in seventeenth-century New Spain, ministered to by Jesuit and Franciscan Catholic orders? Baudrillard offers his opinion of iconography: “It can be seen that the iconoclasts, who are often accused of despising and denying images, were in fact the ones who accorded their actual worth, like the iconolaters, who saw in them only reflections and were content to venerate God at one remove.” Although he is not speaking of Sor Juana or New Spain specifically, Baudrillard adds: “This was the approach of the Jesuits. . . . Behind the baroque of images hides the grey eminence of politics.”

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6 Baudrillard, 172.
7 Baudrillard, 172.
8 Baudrillard, 172-173.
appropriation of the Aztec goddess Tonantzin into the Virgin Guadalupe. Colonial religious authorities of New Spain denied the goddess, substituting Guadalupe, which the indigenous were “content to venerate . . . at one remove.” As a theologian, Sor Juana may not go as far as Baudrillard in saying that “the apparition of God in the mirror of images . . . no longer represented anything,” 9 but does acknowledge and examine the politics of “divine irreference” in her loa and The Divine Narcissus. I argue that through these plays, Sor Juana attempts to expose and correct “divine irreference” by shifting the power of representation from the Narcissistic colonists back to the indigenous. Sor Juana shifts this organizing perspective in order to provide a new scenario by which to understand Catholic Mariology in the “New World.” Sor Juana’s Divine Narcissus, as the title suggests, serves as both an earnest (divine) attempt at syncretism and a reflective (narcissistic) political critique, particularly in regard to Guadalupe who remains a contested but relevant figure today. In this chapter, I will use the theory of simulacra to consider both its pessimistic and more promising outcomes in regard to the assimilation of the Aztec Goddess Tonantzin into Marian/Guadalupe images.

Reflections of Divinity across Water: Sor Juana’s loa and The Divine Narcissus

Loa: Converting the Gaze

The Divine Narcissus and its loa, a shorter introductory play, were written for the Spanish royal court in 1688. Although a performance of the plays was never documented, if performed they would have been part of a larger annual Corpus Christi Festival in Spain. As part of the religious festival, the loa would serve as an introduction to the auto sacramental, a genre

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9 Baudrillard, 172.
of plays surrounding themes of the Eucharist, popularized by Spanish Golden Age playwrights Lope de Vega and Calderón de la Barca. If performed, Sor Juana’s play would give the court a glimpse into the cultural and religious enterprise of its empire on the other side of the Atlantic. Michelle A. González writes that at that time “[t]he society of New Spain was constructed in such a way as to mirror Spain.”

Figuratively, the Atlantic Ocean became a giant reflecting pool in which Spain saw Mexico in its own image. Sor Juana wrote her loa and auto sacramental from across this body of water for an audience who would use the play to reflect upon and legitimize the colonial conquest. However, contrary to the loa’s and auto’s function to legitimize the Spanish colonial gaze, Sor Juana attempts to subvert and reverse this gaze in her religious plays.

As a criolla, Sor Juana struggled with what Edward Said describes as a “paradox of identity.” She identified both with the indigenous among whom she was raised and the colonists with whom she shared privilege. Stephanie Merrim notes that like many Creole, Sor Juana was critical of Spanish colonists who had “bled dry the mines of Mexico” and “swarmed into her homeland.”

As suggested by post-colonial theorist Bill Ashcroft, “the responses of the colonized” were a “struggle to control self-representation.” Sor Juana’s plays, therefore, reflect her attempts at self-representation as both a Creole and in her official position of representing New Spain to the Spanish court. Said, a Palestinian born Christian living in “imperial” America, writes about similar experiences with the “paradox of identity.” In his post-colonial project, he

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11 Merrim, “‘Mexican’ Sor Juana,” 80.
attempts to “reverse the ‘gaze’ of the discourse . . . to ‘inventory the traces upon the . . . subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a fact of life.”13 I propose that Sor Juana does the same with New Spain’s indigenous culture. I assert that in the loa and The Divine Narcissus, Sor Juana uses the concept of mirroring in order to problematize the gaze on opposite sides of the water.

Sor Juana’s introductory loa is foundational in establishing or reversing the gaze so that the colonial audience is positioned to observe the auto through an indigenous gaze. Loas and autos in New Spain were traditionally used to convert the native culture.14 On the surface, the plot of Juana’s loa appears to portray this evangelical function. Occident and America, two allegorical characters represented by an Aztec couple, participate in a ritual dedicated to the “Great God of the Seeds” when they are interrupted by the Spanish characters Religion and Zeal. Zeal’s immediate instinct to kill the idolaters is subdued by Religion who observes a connection between the native ritual, in which sacrificial blood mixed with seeds is shaped into a mold of the god Huitzilopochtli and consumed by worshippers, and the Eucharist. Religion explains parallels between the Christian sacrament and the indigenous ritual upon which they interlope:

His [Christ’s] blessed humanity
is placed unbloody under the
appearances of bread, which comes
from seeds of wheat and is transformed
into His Body and His Blood;

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and this most holy Blood of Christ.\textsuperscript{15}

America, in turn, recognizes the parallel and is drawn to the ideas of this newcomer Religion:

\begin{quote}
[B]ut would the God that you reveal
offer himself so lovingly
transformed for me into a meal
as does the god that I adore.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Curious, Occident and America agree to learn more about this “God you say is in the bread.” Religion proceeds to invite Occident and America to see the \textit{auto}, “through allegory images/of what America must learn/and Occident implores to know.”\textsuperscript{17} Upon first observation, the \textit{loa} seems to fit the formula of conversion; being, Occident and America are eager to learn more about the Christian god. The Spanish colonial gaze, represented by Religion and Zeal, recognizes similarities between Christian and pagan religions and reigns the indigenous gaze into the colonizer’s perspective.

Scholars, however, suggest a more subversive reading of Sor Juana’s \textit{loa}. Martínez-San Miguel describes Sor Juana’s \textit{loa} as “an ambiguous Creole discourse,” explaining that the antithetical nature of baroque creates opportunities for the colonized to express their mixed feelings about colonization.\textsuperscript{18} She explains that this dissatisfaction manifests itself in the baroque, while seeming to “appropriate . . . literary tropes within a Euro-American imperial

\textsuperscript{15} Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, \textit{Loa to the Divine Narcissus}, trans. Patricia A. Peters and Renée Domeier, O.S.B., \textit{The Wadsworth Anthology of Drama}, 4\textsuperscript{th} ed., Ed. W.B. Worthen (Boston: Heinle, 2003) 4.111-116. (Because the \textit{loa} is a verse play, I am following MLA standards of citing passages by scene and line numbers.)

\textsuperscript{16} Sor Juana, \textit{Loa}, 4.124-127.

\textsuperscript{17} Sor Juana, \textit{Loa}, 5.6-8.

\textsuperscript{18} Martínez-San Miguel, 89.
network.” Similarly, Sor Juana appropriates the Spanish genres of the loa and auto to highlight the disturbing paradoxes she finds in the monarchy’s occupation of an indigenous culture. Martínez reminds the reader that these appropriations are not “passive,” but are “competitive resignifications of artistic motifs as proof of the intellectual and social equality between Europeans and Creoles.” Sor Juana’s appropriation of style is, therefore, not a submissive act, but an assertion of equivalence. Gwendolyn Alker invites discussion on “whether the liminal status of the loa gave Sor Juana a fitting arena to more rebellious themes.” While the loa appears to be a conversion play, subtextually it is meant to convert, or rather subvert, colonial ideologies.

Indeed, Martínez and Alker cite several “rebellious themes” that promote syncretism (as opposed to conversion) and female agency (as opposed to patriarchal colonial control) in Sor Juana’s loa. Both agree that Sor Juana is critical of Spanish evangelism, for example, Religion and Zeal are depicted as negative forces in the play. Occident and America, on the other hand, are portrayed as “rightful first inhabitants” with “Religion caution[ing] [Zeal] not to continue ignoring heathen idolatry.” Furthermore, Religion becomes an ally of America with the two female characters serving as primary agents in the loa. Martínez writes, “The Spanish and American couple end up legitimizing Aztec religiosity through syncretism.” Alker adds, “By the end of this loa, the two female characters of Religion and America seem to merge; both claim

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19 Martínez-San Miguel, 87.
20 Martínez-San Miguel, 87.
22 Martínez-San Miguel, 89.
23 Alker, 157.
24 Martínez-San Miguel, 89.
responsibility for the writing of the play.”25 These characters not only reflect the “paradox of identity” within the Creole playwright, but serve as mirror images uniting into one female (gynocentric) gaze. Furthermore, this gaze does not serve to reign the indigenous into the colonial perspective, but rather the opposite holds true: “the audience is led to see the similarities of the two rituals through the eyes of Aztec characters. In a masterful bait and switch, Sor Juana has turned her Spanish, and probably royal, audience into a metaphorical indigenous one, waiting to see the auto as their own expression of the ‘God of the Seeds.’”26 If actually performed, the Spanish would look into the mirror of the stage and see themselves as reflections of the indigenous; thus, not only reflected but constituted in the indigenous. In performance, this process of recognition is not only mimetic, but kinetic and strikingly resembles the central image of The Divine Narcissus, the narcissistic Christ (patriarchal Jesuit Spain) looking into the fountain (across the ocean) and seeing its reflection in Human Nature (a female, and as we will see, indigenous or Creole New Spain).

Sor Juana’s mirror motif, however, is often cracked by treating the loa and auto separately. Despite Sor Juana’s use of the loa to set up the auto sacramental as gynocentric and indigenous, interpretations of The Divine Narcissus lack this gaze and remain largely andro- and Eurocentric. Critical scholarship has tended to not look at Sor Juana’s Divine Narcissus from the perspective of the loa’s conclusion:

ALL: Blest be the day
When I could see
And worship the

26 Alker, 158.
This passage indicates that Occident, America, Religion, Zeal and the Spanish audience would “see” the following play *Divine Narcissus* through the worship of the Great God of Seeds. Rather scholarship on *Divine Narcissus* maintains a largely Western gaze. Emphasis is placed on parallels to the play’s Greek and Spanish sources: Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Caldérón’s *Eco y Narciso*, rather than on indigenous Aztec sources. The female divine is addressed, but in reference to the Virgin Mary, a European manifestation, rather than in relation to the *loa*’s America or the *auto*’s Human Nature, which I will argue represents Tonantzin and the Virgin Guadalupe. For instance, Octavio Paz holds to the accepted convention that the pool in *Divine Narcissus* is a symbol for the Virgin Mary.28 Others find Mary symbolism in the *auto*’s character of Grace29 or the fountain itself.30 Within this system (or scenario) of Mariology, Grace (a symbol of Western Christianity) leads Human Nature (the indigenous), contaminated with original sin, to the fountain where Christ is reflected.

In relation to the *loa*, Jonathan Ellis interprets this act as the baptism proscribed by Religion for Occident and America.31 It follows that Human Nature (and by association Occident and America) are purified by the fountain in what is obviously a Western conversion narrative. Through this reading, several objectives appear to be met: the indigenous are reconciled to Christ through baptism and the divine Christ is united with Human Nature. Yet, the balance leans

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29 See Kennet, “Theology.”
31 Ellis, 181.
toward a European interpretation. It is the Western myth, Christ and Mary, which is the agent of
salvation, the indigenous myth of the Great God of the Seeds is obfuscated. Discussions of The
Divine Narcissus based on Western myth and Catholic Marian ideology perpetuate the
narcissistic gaze by slighting reflections from the other side of the mirror, those with Indian
“infusion.”

Reflections on The Divine Narcissus

If Sor Juana’s intent at the end of the loa is to “see” a reflection of the Great God of the
Seeds in the auto sacramental, then a post-colonial reading of Divine Narcissus is in order. In the
last lines of the loa to the Divine Narcissus, Sor Juana appears to set up what Said describes as a
reversal of the gaze with the intent to “‘inventory the traces upon the . . . subject, of the culture
whose domination has been so powerful a fact of life.” 32 Occident and America look to The
Divine Narcissus to worship traces of “The Great God of the Seeds” through the European auto,
as well as to reveal traces of European culture that have been imposed upon them as colonial
subjects. In Sor Juana’s auto, “traces” of colonial power on the indigenous subject is seen most
evidently in the character of Human Nature. Like the colonists, Narcissus sees his own reflection
in the image of the woman and imposes upon her a Western male gaze. As Sor Juana seems to
desire to unify, or at least balance, the gazes of Mexico and Spain, I will begin to explore her
construction of a scenario organized around the principles of a Creole Mariology, including the
confluence of the Aztec goddess Tonantzin and manifestations of the Guadalupe, as a reflection
of the Western divine Christ. Sor Juana transforms Narcissus’s reflecting pool into a baptismal

font, cleansing the union of Narcissus and Human Nature, and offering a syncretic communion through the symbolic imagery of the Eucharist and her version of a creolized Mary. The creolized Mary, therefore, restores Tonantzin to the religious icon of Guadalupe, allowing the indigenous representation to reflect, or gaze back upon, its Western reference. This interpretation lends itself to an examination of the general ambivalence, and perhaps to Sor Juana’s own ambivalence within her Creole identity, concerning the desire to reconcile the “dual nature” of indigenous and Western, while repudiating the underlying politics of appropriation.

Frances Kennet has written articles about Sor Juana’s Mariology and her *auto sacramental*, but does not combine the two beyond the conventional readings already discussed. Like Paz and Ellis, she maintains a Eurocentric reading of the *auto* by seeing the image of the Virgin Mary reflected in the waters of the fountain. Although she opens her article “Sor Juana and the Virgin Guadalupe” with background on the Aztec Goddess Tonantzin (Guadalupe’s predecessor, also known as “Snake Woman,” “goddess of water,” and “grain goddess”), she claims that “Sor Juana did not speak of earth or corn goddesses in her three religious dramas.” In fact, Kennet argues “in her most accomplished play, *The Divine Narcissus*, [Sor Juana] . . . characterizes the deity as a generic ‘God of Seeds.’” Kennet concludes that Sor Juana meets “Catholic patriarchal language with a patriarchal pagan composite.” While it may seem a leap in gender to connect the “God of Seeds” to the “goddess of grain,” it seems less of a stretch to relate the “goddess of water” with the fountain of *The Divine Narcissus*. Yet, despite associating the Virgin Mary with the spring in her article “The Theology of the Divine Narcissus,” she does

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34 Kennet, “Sor Juana,” 310.
not go as far as to make a similar connection to the Mexican goddess Tonantzin turned Catholic icon, saying only “Sor Juana ignores the Guadalupe phenomenon in her own writings.”

However, perhaps it is Kennet who ignores Guadalupe images in Sor Juana’s *The Divine Narcissus*. For Kennet, the relationship between Sor Juana and the Virgin of Guadalupe, and therefore Tonantzin, is problematic. Kennet explains that the Aztec goddess was eventually appropriated into the Virgin by Spanish missionaries. In the sixteenth century, Franciscans were looking for a substitute for the female goddess. In 1531 at Tepeyac, where there had existed a stream and shrine to Tonantzin, an indigenous man named Juan Diego saw a vision of the Indian Virgin. This became a convenient opportunity for the Franciscans who encouraged her worship and changed her name from “La Criolla,” popular among the people, to the Spanish “Virgin of Guadalupe.”

Kennet joins other scholars in the opinion that the Virgin represented “the Aztec Tonantzin transformed into Mary.” It is the political appropriation of the indigenous goddess by the colonial power that offends Kennet. Behind the Virgin Guadalupe lies the “grey eminence of politics” to which Baudrillard refers. According to Kennet, the Franciscans intended to “obliterate” the goddess with the passive image of Guadalupe, a process Sor Juana assumingly rejected, choosing instead to offer “her [own] creation of a Mary figure outside of male control in its shaping.” Other scholars remain divided on Sor Juana’s treatment of Guadalupe, some in agreement with Kennet, while others such as Stephanie Merrim assert the opposite, writing that “what Sor Juana most frequently wants Mary to be is the prototype of the Virgin Guadalupe.”

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37 qtd. in Kennet, “Sor Juana,” 312-314.
38 Kennet, “Sor Juana,” 322.
39 Merrim, “‘Mexican’ Sor Juana,” 84.
Tavard enters the debate cautioning that “[o]ne should not infer … that this Mexican devotion has left no other traces in her writings,” finding a “hidden presence of Guadalupe in Juana’s thought and devotion.” Nevertheless, for Kennet, Sor Juana would have circumvented references to the Guadalupe in *The Divine Narcissus* and she, likewise, avoids addressing the issue in either of her articles.

Such aversion, however, limits the possibilities of Sor Juana’s *auto*, which may actually serve as a point of departure for the poet to create her own vision of Mary within the play. The similarities between Human Nature, Tonantzin and the Virgin of Guadalupe seem too obvious to ignore. The contamination from which Human Nature must be purified in Sor Juana’s play might very well be the manipulation of the female divine by narcissistic Franciscans who created the Virgin in their own image. It is this gaze that Sor Juana may be trying to redirect in her scenario, forcing the Divine Narcissus to see his reflection in, fall in love with, and sacrifice himself for a creolized reflection of Human Nature in a pool that is both at once Tonantzin and the Virgin Mary.

Citing three of Sor Juana’s poems, Kennet identifies the sister’s problem with Guadalupe, as well as the poet’s corrective vision. In arguing that Sor Juana “sees exactly what is being done,” Kennett quotes what she identifies as a rare direct reference to the saint in one of the sister’s poems: “A Miracle composed of flowers, / Divine American Protectress/ Who appears as the Rose of Castile/ To become the Mexican Rose.” In this poem, Sor Juana recognizes the construction of the Virgin of Guadalupe for the benefit of Spain. Kennet contrasts this

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40 Tavard, 97.
41 qtd. in Kennet, “Sor Juana,” 316.
description to a *villancico* (hymn) in which Sor Juana constructs her image of the Virgin Mary whose characteristics “far outstretch those normally applied to her in orthodox Marian piety”:

   Wonderful Astronomer . . .

   whose skillful use of power

   has syllogisms just appear

   in logical design, in calculations clear.

   Oh Lady wise in ways

   of numbering the Stars

   for by your mysteries

   all planetary motions hold their courses . . .

   In whom was thus combined

   two Natures in one kind

   Divine and Human,

   and this flung wide the barriers to Heaven\(^{42}\)

This image of Mary, which Kennet asserts Sor Juana prefers over the Virgin Guadalupe, shares the objective of Grace in *The Divine Narcissus* to “combine” “Divine and Human” natures.

In Sor Juana’s play, these natures are represented by the characters of the “Divine” Narcissus (the allegorical figure for Christ) and “Human” Nature (the allegorical figure for Guadalupe/Tonantzin). In using the play to construct a scenario by which to organize her new Mariology, Sor Juana combines or reunites the Divine Narcissus (Christ) and the indigenous Human Nature (Guadalupe/Tonantzin). Using several biblical metaphors for Jesus, Sor Juana

\(^{42}\) qtd. in Kennet, “Sor Juana,” 317.
positions Narcissus as looking for something from which he has been separated. For instance, Narcissus refers to Human Nature as his “lost sheep” and, following the narrative of the biblical Song of Songs, searches for his lost love. Merrim reminds us that in the Bible, the lover in Song of Songs is a “‘black but beautiful’ woman.”

This reference distances Human Nature from a Westernized Caucasian version of Mary. Narcissus/Christ searches for a dark-skinned woman who has somehow been lost. The jealous Echo, an allusion to the character of classical mythology, endeavors to keep them apart by causing Human Nature to sin, therefore, poisoning her waters. Human Nature describes her condition:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{. . . I call my} \\
&\text{Sin muddy waters} \\
&\text{Whose dirty colors} \\
&\text{Interposed him and me} \\
&\text{So distort my being,} \\
&\text{So blemish my beauty,} \\
&\text{So alter my features,} \\
&\text{Were Narcissus to see me,} \\
&\text{He would deny his own image.}
\end{align*}
\]

Like the Aztec “goddess of water,” Human Nature has been polluted, her image “distorted” and features “altered” so that she is no longer recognizable.

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43 Merrim, “‘Mexican’ Sor Juana,” 84.
44 Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Divine Narcissus, Sor Juana Inés De La Cruz: Selected Writings*, trans. Pamela Kirk Rappaport The classics of Western spirituality Ser (New York: Paulist Press, 2005) 1.2.232-240. (Because the *loa* is a verse play, I am following MLA standards of citing passages by act, scene, and line numbers.)
If we see Echo, who pollutes Tonantzín and Mary’s waters as a shadow reflection of Human Nature, Juana’s political criticism becomes clear. Echo is another form of reflection: aural mirroring. It is generally accepted that Echo represents Satan in the auto. Paz affirms the classical reference to Echo, a nymph “[p]unished by Juno for . . . her assistance to Jupiter,” but attributes her to the “devil” in Sor Juana’s play.45 Stephanie Merrim joins the majority of scholars by defining the character as “Devil-Eco,” but sees in her, as well, another manifestation of the “dark-skinned” Virgin.46 Kennett mentions Echo in her article on The Divine Narcissus, but does not connect her with the “shadow side” of Guadalupe, known in Sor Juana’s day as Doña Marina, whom she discusses in her other article.47 Kennett describes Doña Marina as “the enslaved body of Mexico” and “the other Eve who betrayed the Indian nations by collaborating with Cortés.”48 Echo is not limited to the devil figure, but represents Doña Marina, the “shadow side” of Human Nature’s Guadalupe/Tonantzín (known also as “Snake Woman”). Sor Juana’s Echo is “enslaved” to Narcissus, just as the classical Echo is punished for assisting Jupiter, and Doña Marina is accused of aiding Cortés. It is this appropriation that poisons Echo, she laments:

Narcissus also from time to time
renders me mute,
by publishing his divine Being,
and rebuking me he cuts off my voice.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Where is my Pride? Why does she not appear?

45 Paz, 350.
46 Merrim, “‘Mexican’ Sor Juana,” 83.
Why does she not alleviate my hurt?
And my Self-Love, why does he not stir up
Or inspire my arguments?

I am struck dumb! Woe is me! 49

Pride, Self-Love and Echo are traditionally interpreted as an unholy trinity. 50 However, it strikes me as odd that Sor Juana, often spoken of as a “proto-feminist,” would demonize these attributes in a woman. Judith Kirkpatrick agrees writing, “Eco is not a negative figure associated with Satan through evil. Eco and Satan are joined with the mutual bond of having been silenced by men and through the necessity of discovering a way to speak in spite of that control.” 51 If read as the “shadow side” of the goddess figure, Echo is rendered mute when Pride and Self-Love are stripped from her and another “divine Being” is published. Echo represents the appropriated side of Tonantzin or “La Criolla,” who the Spanish renamed the Virgin of Guadalupe. Echo is forced to speak the colonist’s language, words that are not native to her, but that she merely copies. This is the real threat to Human Nature; to become an Echo, or simulacrum, of the Divine Narcissus. Echo (not the pride and self-love of the character, but the pride and self-love of Narcissus whom

49 Sor Juana, *Divine Narcissus*, 4.10.1436-1449.
50 For an overview of interpretations of the Pride, Self-love, Echo and Echo, Human Nature and Narcissus triads see Merrim, *Mores Geometricae*, 112-116. These arguments largely situate Sor Juana within the theology of divine love present in her poetry and her adherence to the conventions of dramatic literature of the Spanish Golden Age, specifically parallels between the characters of *The Divine Narcissus* and Calderón’s *Eco y Narciso*. An alternative argument in regard to Sor Juana’s disruption of gender referenced in Merrim is Echo as the archetypal *mujer varonil* (masculine woman) of Golden Age literature. My research, however, attempts to rest the play from some of these well-documented arguments, which compare the work to Western theology and dramatic conventions, in order to open up interpretations of the play specifically within the context of colonialism and the appropriation of indigenous images of female divinity.
she echoes) muddies the water, causing its surface to become opaque, so that Narcissus sees (and hears) only his own image, unable to see and incorporate his reflection with what is on the other side of the water.

Through her “circuit” of images, a term I borrow from Baudrillard, Juana reveals the politics behind the appropriation of religious images; however, unlike Baudrillard, she reconciles these images in the water and emerges with her own distinct version of a creolized Mary. For instance, we find Human Nature at a fountain on a “flowery bank” that has not yet been polluted. Human Nature compares the spring to Esther, who in the Hebrew Bible spares her people from persecution by concealing her Jewish identity and marrying the Persian king. This can be seen as symbolic of the Virgin obscuring her Mexican origins in a forced marriage to the Spanish crown. Grace then asks the spring to “Let my ruin be restored.” I read this as Human Nature, like Esther in the Bible, revealing her indigenous origins and asking that she and her people be restored.

In another instance, Narcissus arrives “with a sling, dressed as a shepherd,” evoking an image of the biblical David. This image is furthered as Narcissus sing/speaks passages of scripture in the style of Psalms, thought to be written by David, thus reinforcing this allusion. David is an appropriate symbol of the colonial in The Divine Narcissus. As a biblical figure, he is both heroic and problematic, a warrior and a womanizer. In scripture, David spies on Bathsheba from a rooftop as she bathes below and is resolved to “get her” later. Likewise, in the play, Narcissus (as an allusion to David/Colonizer) looks into the fountain and sees a reflection

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52 Kennet, “Theology,” 12.
53 Sor Juana, Divine Narcissus, 3.7.1176.
54 Sor Juana, Divine Narcissus, 3.8.
of a woman. Visually, Sor Juana poses a threat similar to David’s through Narcissus’ gaze into
the image of the feminine Human Nature, but happily resolves the image in his benign dialogue.

As Narcissus peers into the fountain, he says:

Here I am at last. What is this I see?
What sovereign beauty
affronts with its pure light
the sapphire blue of heaven?
Shining as its turns, the sun
all along its shining path
as it travels from east
does not scatter in signs and stars so much light, so many sparks
as does this one fountain.

Heaven and earth conspire
to surround her with a fiery glow,
the heavens with its lantern,
the meadow with its flowers.
Everything in the heavenly spheres
serves as her adornment.
But no, such beauty
without equal, surpasses all
the diligence of the earth
or heaven to fashion. 55

Unlike the biblical David, Narcissus’ gaze is adoring but not territorial. In this way, Narcissus as shepherd can also be read as Juan Diego, the farmer who first saw the Virgin at the spring of Tonantzin, the goddess of water. Likewise, Narcissus’ vision of Human Nature at the fountain is also reminiscent of the woman of Revelation often associated with the Diego appearance. Kennet describes Diego’s vision as “an extraordinary iconic mixture of Indian maiden and the Apocalyptic Virgin, dark-skinned, with stars around her head, sun rays emanating from her figure, a pair of eagle wings under her hem, her feet resting triumphant on a crescent moon below.”56 Sor Juana “restores” the Virgin from her pollution by colonizers (represented by the impure gaze of David), by infusing Diego/Narcissus’ vision with the “heavenly” language and astronomical themes reminiscent of her villancico, which Kennet suggests she uses to construct her own image of Mary. Reading Human Nature as the Guadalupe, Divine Narcissus becomes a play about conversion, not of “natural” Indios, but of Narcissus’ gaze in order to clearly see the divinity of a Mexican Mary whose appearance had been clouded and appropriated by the colonial male gaze. Sor Juana’s purified Human Nature defies the “diligence of the earth or heaven to fashion.” 57

55 Sor Juana, Divine Narcissus, 4.9.1326-1345.
56 Kennet, “Sor Juana,” 313. It is interesting to note that biblically the “shadow side” of the “Apocalyptic Virgin” is the “Whore of Babylon,” who similar to Echo, sits on the waters of “nations and languages,” “rules over the kings of the earth” and from whom the beast (the colonizers) “will take away everything she has.” (Revelation 17:15-18). I return to this image in Chapter Six and my interpretation of Madonna’s single “The Beast Within” as the Apocalyptic Virgin.
57 Sor Juana, Divine Narcissus, 4.9.1344-1345.
A final image of Mary adds to what Baudrillard calls an “uninterrupted circuit” of biblical references. After the “baptism” and purification scene, Narcissus dies in a parallel narrative to Christ’s death and resurrection. Scene fifteen is a reworking of the appearance of Christ to Mary Magdalene in the Gospel of John. Narcissus appears to Human Nature “as the Resurrected One.” He asks, “How, my bride/ do you not know me/ if my divine beauty/is like no other?” Here, the gaze returns to the feminine. It is no longer Narcissus looking into the fountain for his reflection, but Human Nature who looks at Narcissus for recognition. Furthermore, as an allusion to Mary Magdalene, Human Nature is not a reference to a divine or allegorical abstraction of the feminine, but is a real woman, a human being. Visually, this woman is not Mary Magdalene of the Bible, but is the dark-skinned beauty for which Narcissus has been searching. I am reminded of Johannes Stradanus’ woodcut of “America” featured in Michel de Certeau’s *The Writing of History*, where Amerigo Vespucci “discovers” the reclining America in a pastoral scene similar to the garden. In Sor Juana’s portrait, however, the female speaks. Agency is returned to the woman; she must recognize and accept “her adored husband” (albeit another patriarchal relationship). As she does, Human Nature expresses apprehension, “Oh, Lord, do not leave me; /the Serpent, my enemy will return to deceive me!” As I have suggested, this enemy is Echo/Snake Woman/Doña Marina the shadow side of Human Nature/Tonantzin/Guadalupe, whose threat is to merely copy the language and reflect the images suggested by a male colonial gaze.

Narcissus has some words of warning for Echo: “No matter, to counter your cunning/I will give her/help in danger, /and a shield for her defense. . . . For this fragility/my immense

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love/has anticipated remedies/so that if she falls/she can herself pick up."

This remedy is in the form of the Eucharist, to which Kennet reminds us is added “the azucena,” the white flower of Mary and Mexico, as the “bread of the Host.” The body of Christ is represented in a symbol of a Mexican female form. Furthermore, agency is once again placed with the woman, so that “she can herself pick up” once Narcissus leaves. Or, read through a post-colonial lens, so that New Spain can rule “herself” once the colonists leave.

While Kennet and other scholars claim that Sor Juana’s comments on the Virgin of Guadalupe were made by omission, the character of Human Nature as the Virgin meets the poet’s larger theological objective, articulated by Kennet as:

> With her sense of the sacred in nature—her concern for the pillage of her motherland and the violation of its indigenous people—she dared to give a poetic, prophetic glimpse of the harmony that must exist between man and woman, humanity and nature, and all of creation with the divine, before the Christian message can truly be said to have been realized on earth

By placing in the fountain, not a Western Mary, or an indigenous version of Bathsheba, but a vision of Creole female divinity, Sor Juana succeeds in uniting the images of man and woman and indigenous and Western divinity with equal reflection. A body of water separates them, “an ocean for its offering/erected altars of glass,” but unites them in baptism and the sacrament.

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62 Kennet, “Sor Juana,” 323.
63 Sor Juana, *Divine Narcissus*, 5.16.2089-2090.
Conclusion

In her “Conclusions” to “Sor Juana and the Guadalupe,” Kennett makes a point to address current theological efforts to “liberate the Guadalupe” drawing some “arresting points of comparison with Sor Juana’s resistance.” She cites a passage from V.P.’s Elizondo’s ‘Mestizo Worship’: “Finally, she [the Guadalupe] initiated and proclaimed the new era which was now beginning. . . . The sign of flowers, which she provided as a sign of her authenticity, was for the Indian world the sign which guaranteed that the new life would truly flourish.”64 This, indeed, seems “arrestingly” similar to the symbolism of the azucena in *The Divine Narcissus*. Yet, Kennett dismisses the “fervor of New Spain’s first-generation Guadalupanismo” and hears “Sor Juana’s words echoing in the struggle of present day feminist theologians working now to address . . . incarnational theology.”65 I agree, but hear this “echo” as well from Sor Juana’s *Divine Narcissus* as a relevant recuperation in current attempts to liberate Guadalupe. Human Nature/Guadalupe is baptized and purified in the spring of Tonantzin/Mary and emerges not with the Rose of Castile as in the legend of Juan Diego, but with the white flower of Mexico. The power of the image is resignified, restoring its “actual worth” and power of representation to indigenous origins and, conversely, removing, or at least revealing, some of the political manipulation behind the colonizer’s copy.

Current Sor Juana scholarship treats the *loa* and *auto* independently. In understanding them as mirror images, however, certain themes can be seen reflected in both. The *loa* determines the gaze of the *auto* as the indigenous looking into *The Divine Narcissus* for a

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65 Kennet, “Sor Juana,” 322. emphasis mine.
reflection of itself. Furthermore, the characters of America and Religion focus the gaze as feminine. Through her loa and auto, Sor Juana attempts to unite this gaze with that of a male, colonial, and ecclesiastical power (a divine narcissus). This is just one of many interpretations sustainable by Sor Juana’s baroque form, and I am reminded that it can only be a simulacrum of her true intent. Reflections in Sor Juana’s plays are fathoms deep and scholarship has only begun to break the surface, which is itself is clouded by years of history, ideology, and previous discourse. This chapter is as informed by post-colonial, postmodern and feminist theory as it is by “traces” of Sor Juana. It is my hope, however, that these insights may, in turn, lend themselves to Latina feminist theology and what Gonzalez calls an “un-covery” of a “lost theological form” in Sor Juana’s play.

González quotes María Pilar Aquino for a workable theological method: “The great European invasions did not discover but rather covered whole people, religions, and cultures and explicitly tried to take away from the natives the sources of their own historical memory and power. . . . [W]e seek to un-cover the truth and bring to light our collective will to choose a different path.”66 At the beginning of this essay, I reflected on Baudrillard and his question of what happens to divinity when it is multiplied in simulacra. Sor Juana’s play is certainly an illustration. Christ and Tonantzin are copied in a relentless “circuit” according to the gaze of the authority, or the playwright, or scholar according to what they wish to see. It raises the question of whether there is anything, a “visible theology,” under the surface, or whether we are content to “venerate” the image “at one remove.”67 Some, like Kennet, may not be. Others such as Nora O. Lozano-Díaz in “Ignored Virgin or Unaware Women” argue for an “un-covery” of the Virgin

66 qtd. in González, 19. emphasis hers.
67 Baudrillard, 172.
of Guadalupe, who has become an undeniable cultural icon, apart from her religious identification. She acknowledges the patriarchal and oppressive history of the figure but, as Religion cautions Zeal to not ignore indigenous religion in the loa, Lozano-Díaz advises that “this is not an excuse to continue ignoring the Lady of Guadalupe and the effects she has on the lives of Mexican and Mexican-American women in general.”68 She cites the work of Mexican-American feminist writer Sandra Cisneros whose project it is to restore Tonantzin and the “pantheon of other mother goddesses of fertility and sex” to the Virgin.69 By taking a different discursive path, I hope to have uncovered how Sor Juana may have dealt similarly with the threat of Tonantzin’s assimilation by Western images of the divine in the loa and The Divine Narcissus. González adds that Sor Juana’s “sacramental dramas are designed to point up the limits of the ‘discussion in the schools’ in theological debate and to plead gracefully for drama as a more appropriate form for the communication of theological truths.”70 It is this “lost theological form,” theatre as theological discourse, that González “un-covers” in Sor Juana. Sor Juana did not use drama to convert or proselytize, as so much religious theatre has done and continues to do today, but instead to problematize theological issues and show their limits and “epistemological failings.” As a proto-feminist and proto-American, Sor Juana grounds a genealogical study of American female artists who have taken up Fiorenza’s directive to remember our biblical foresisters in a feminist key. Through her redirection of the scenario surrounding the “conversion” of Tonantzin into the Virgin Guadalupe, Sor Juana uses the

69 Lozano-Díaz, 213.  
70 González, 13.
concept of simulacra to render a “circuit of images” that exposes traces of colonialism on the biblical Mary that, in her opinion and in a post-colonial reading of her play, undermines the possibilities of a feminist theology or Mariology. Similar to Sor Juana, female artists in the twentieth-century have continued to use the arts to “un-cover” or expose (perhaps Salome dancers most literally) andro- and Euro-centric traces on images of biblical women, and the influence that these images have on contemporary women’s bodies and lives. Furthermore, in response to this “un-covery,” female artists in this study have employed simulacra in order to create alternative scenarios of biblical women that are endowed with a feminist authority and hold the potential to disrupt masculinist “circuits of images,” which have been harmful to the feminist project. Specific to the biblical Mary, like Sor Juana’s creation of a Mariology that retains the power and memory of an ancient goddess alongside the Catholic Virgin Mary, artists like modern dancer Ruth St. Denis in Chapter Two and post-modern pop-icon Madonna in Chapter Six look to Mary traditions of the past in order to “uncover” the potential of the “virgin” to empower female sexuality in the present and the future.
CHAPTER II: SALOMANIA AND THE THEORY OF DISSEVERMENT

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz may be considered as this study’s first, but not only, transatlantic performer. The transatlantic performer, according to Daphne Brooks, is a conduit for “cross-pollination” of “social and cultural anxieties . . . cyclically imported and deployed onto bodies in performance.” 1 Sor Juana’s loa and Divine Narcissus, as I argue in the last chapter, concern colonial and imperialist anxieties as reflected across water—the waters of the imperialist baptismal font and the Atlantic Ocean—and upon images of female divinity. As a Creole poet, with connections and allegiances to both the indigenous population of New Spain and the Spanish crown, Sor Juana was a conduit of “social and cultural anxieties” across these bodies of water. Missing from Sor Juana’s equation as a “transatlantic performer,” however, was the actual “body in performance.” Because a performance of the loa and Divine Narcissus was never recorded, if indeed they were performed before Sor Juana’s intended audience, these plays require speculation about how the cultural anxieties in Sor Juana’s loa and auto might have been projected onto the performing female body. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, however, the performance of Oscar Wilde’s Salomé and the subsequent phenomenon of Salomania, provide a case study for how the embodiment of the biblical woman Salome served as a medium for cultural and social anxieties of the time which, according to Brooks included colonialism and imperialism as expressed through Orientalism, but also “industrialization, scientific advances, and theological queries” as well. 2 The transatlantic performer played a large role in the Salomé phenomenon. This chapter looks at American female performers who “cross-

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1 Brooks, 25.
2 Brooks, 23.
pollinated” American spiritualism and the French avant-garde to become quintessential transatlantic performers. In doing so, these Salome dancers both embodied and transgressed social and cultural anxieties concerning female sexuality, spirituality, and race in the early twentieth-century.

Based on accounts of the biblical niece and step-daughter of Herod who danced in exchange for the head of John the Baptist, Salome was a popular femme-fatale in late-nineteenth-century art and literature. Women, however, had very little agency over the culturally produced image. This changed with Oscar Wilde’s verse drama *Salomé*. Stage diva Sarah Bernhardt anticipated becoming the first actress to take Wilde’s title role until the English censor put a stop to the play’s scheduled 1892 premiere. The play eventually debuted on the more libertine French stage at the Théâtre de l’Œuvre in 1896 with Luna Munte as Salome. Toni Bentley writes that “Wilde…liberated Salome onto the stage where, for the first time, real women added their own ideas, not to mention their bodies, to the masochist’s fantasy female.” Resurrected through the dancing body of a woman, versus the flat paint or words of an artist, “Salome took on three dimensions and was publicly transformed . . . into a distinctly female fantasy.” Contemporaneous with Wilde’s *Salomé*, female burlesque performers and music hall dancers on both sides of the ocean began to actively reclaim this historically marginalized and misogynized figure. For example, when Mademoiselle Dazie’s New York studio began to teach the controversial “Dance of the Seven Veils” “to her fellow Ziegfield Follies and numerous other

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3 William Tydeman and Steven Price, *Wilde—Salomé* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1996) 184. *Salomé* once again debuted as an opera by Richard Strauss at the Royal Opera House in Dresden, Germany, in 1905 and in the United States at New York City’s Metropolitan Opera in 1907, where it received a cool reception, and only one performance, presumably for being too “hot.”


5 Bentley, 26.
professional entertainers [, a rush] of female performers flooded the vaudeville circuits with the dance.”6 At the height of “Salomania”—also referred to as the “Salome Craze” 7—Dazie claimed to produce over “150 Salomes a month”!8 This chapter, however, focuses on just four Salome performers—Loie Fuller, Maud Allan, Ruth St. Denis, and Aida Overton Walker. In this chapter I join scholars who have debated whether if for female performers, the role of Salome may have subverted and transgressed some of the confines of her previous male interpretations. In addition, I use a distinctly American critical lens. Each of these women was born and studied in America (more specifically the United States and Canada) before travelling abroad in an effort to legitimate their careers through the “high art” movements of French avant-gardism and modern dance. As Americans, the guiding principles behind these women’s works may have differed from their European counterparts. Particularly, the influences of American spiritualism and Delsarte’s “System of Expression,” although bearing resemblances to the European avant-garde, differed radically in their aesthetic rationale, therefore causing confusion among critics and scholars who study American Salome dancers within a Euro-centric modernist framework. I then engage Daphne Brook’s argument about how ideas of spiritualism may contribute to a feminist understanding of Salome performances as holding the potential to transgress boundaries of gender, sexuality, and race in the early twentieth-century. Finally, I put these early twentieth-

6 Brooks, 330.
8 Brooks, 330.
century understandings of the relationship between movement, spirituality, and the body into
dialogue with contemporary post-modern principles of movement and affect as a way to bridge
the gap between theological and secular feminisms. As desire producing machines, or “affective
bodies,” female dancers embodied the role of Salome as an intervention into the flow of male
desire, as well as to produce and fulfill sexual, spiritual, cultural, and social desires within
themselves. While I am not the first to make this argument, in approaching the subject through
Brian Massumi’s theory of affect and movement, versus a purely historiographic lens, I examine
the affective properties and possibilities of dance and performance toward both social and
spiritual transformation.

Salome: The Fetish

On her own merits, Salome hardly seems to warrant the attention she has received in
religion, art, literature, and feminist studies. She has most certainly outgrown her description in
the gospels as an unnamed “girl” who, in reward for dancing before the king and his guests, is
encouraged by her mother Herodias to ask for the head of John the Baptist (Matthew 14:1-12,
Mark 6:14-29). Nonetheless, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries this
impressionable “girl” had grown into what Bram Dijkstra describes as an incestuous temptress
responsible for the downfall and emasculation of men.

Megan Becker-Leckrone refers to this progression as “The Fetishization of a Textual
Corpus.” Fetishization results in the idea of Salome as a womanly body versus a fictional
character. Becker-Leckrone argues that, as a historical subject, the woman we have come to
identify as Salome does not exist. Salome is not a woman, but is an accumulation of texts from
over a millennium of cultural imagination. Becker-Leckrone describes this fetishization as
operating under a “disavowing logic” that “in spite of knowledge [creates] a disingenuous belief.” In other words, the critic “knows very well that a story and a woman are not identical, but just the same he [she] figures them as if they are.” Becker-Leckrone writes, “the ‘Salome Effect’—is not the essence or secret of Woman it is a condition of the narrative.” In defining the “secret-effect,” she explains that it is the gospel’s incomplete narrative and the midrashic impulse to “bridge the gap[s]” and “show what is concealed” that is the real allure of the Salome narrative. This “midrashic impulse” is part of a larger Jewish tradition in which “gaps” or “incomplete narratives” in scripture are imaginatively reconsidered and result in either formal Midrashim that illuminate the scripture, or cultural interpretations considered less formally as “midrash.” Such midrashic impulses often arise “in moments of cultural crisis” and look to scripture to restore the “significative function” of its stories.

Certainly, gaps in the gospels of Mark and Matthew have been made complete by the imaginations of historians who have given her the name Salome (taken from an account in Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities*) and the Dance of the Seven Veils (introduced by Wilde and inspired by the ancient Ishtar myth in which the goddess must strip naked in order to enter the

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10 Becker-Leckrone, 240.
14 Downey, 151.
Becker-Leckrone argues that it is this illusory completion of the narrative that falsely assumes the accumulated interpretation as an “historical object.” She claims that this false interpretation of a character as “historical object” often works to the advantage of the critic’s (or artist’s) argument at the risk of fetishization. For example the fetishized “historical Salome” as sadistic seductress (rather than the gospel’s impressionable young girl) has been used, both theologically and artistically, to promote sexism in the idea of the sinful nature of Woman. In a similar manner, the fetishization of Salome has been used to support a host of other destructive “-isms,” such as Orientalism, primitivism, and anti-Semitism.

Dijkstra writes that “In the turn-of-the-century imagination the figure of Salome epitomized the inherent perversity of women: their eternal circularity and their ability to destroy the male’s soul even while they remained nominally chaste in body.” Furthermore, that the character of Salome was Eastern, and specifically Arab and Semitic, racialized this “inherent perversity” and exploited the common stereotypes of the hypersexualized brown body. Likewise, in his essay “Black Salome,” David Krasner asserts that primitivism, working alongside Orientalism, “emerged as a reaction to an increasing alienation from an industrialized world,” that in turn “led to a ‘fetishization’ of the primitive” and “afforded Western culture a sense of superiority to other groups.” To this end, Salome performances can be read as containing,

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15 See Philip Wilkinson, Illustrated Dictionary of Mythology. (New York: DK, 1998). Ishtar was a Babylonian goddess of love, sex and war. In her descent into the underworld, she was required to remove a piece of clothing before entering each of the seven gates. Thus, by the end of the journey, she was naked. Adopted by Wilde for his Salome play, and subsequently Strauss’ opera and vaudevillian acts, the “Dance of the Seven Veils” associated with the myth eventually took on the elements of a striptease.
17 Krasner, 195.
sensationalizing, and denigrating social and political impulses of the late nineteenth and early
twentieth century, namely feminism, racial uplift, and a rising Zionism, that threatened the
West’s “sense of superiority.” Wilde’s “textual corpus” took on a life and dance of its own, what
might be referred to in affect theory as a “body without organs” animated by a large network of
cultural producers.18

This chapter continues to look at the fetishization of the Salome corpus not only in
relation to the text, but to female dancers as well. The fetishization of Salome is compounded
when dancers, actual “womanly bodies,” begin to inhabit the textual myth. Such fetishization
results in a disavowing logic that knows that the dancer and Salome are not identical, but have
figured them as they are. This logic has, at times, worked to the advantage of women who use
the Salome persona to advance their careers, their sex, and their sexuality; while, at other times,
the logic has worked to a woman’s disadvantage, for example in the libel case of Maud Allan to
be discussed later in this chapter, and her indictment under Salome’s perceived transgressions.

Likewise, Salome’s “secret-effect” or “midrashic impulse” has extended to contemporary
critics who, by “filling in the gaps” of intertextual analysis, have “disavowed” or “concealed”
important gaps that may not fit their argument. Specifically, in regard to twentieth-century
modern criticism, there has been the tendency to “disavow” and “conceal” themes of spirituality

Deleuze and Guatarri use “bodies without organs” as a concept to discuss the “virtual” potentials
of individuals (bodies with organs) as well as the desires produced in culture (by desire
producing machines) that behave similar to human bodies, but are nonetheless virtual. In regard
to Salome, culture’s desires and fears of female sexuality produced and animated Salomania, a
“body without organs.” In turn Salome dancers, “bodies with organs,” animate the virtual body
of Salomania.
and the influence of American spiritualism in the textual and dancing bodies—the written memoirs and the performances—of early twentieth-century Salome dancers.

“Dancing on the Threshold”

In her book *Salome in Modernity*, Petra Dierkes-Thrun situates the Salome phenomena as “dancing on the threshold” between *fin de siècle* and modern aesthetics. According to Dierkes-Thrun, the rise of modernism “can usefully be understood as ‘a set of responses to problems posed by the conditions of modernity’ in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. In the case of the Salome theme, such problems include the crisis of faith, the aesthetics controversy, stereotypes of femininity, the fascination with sexual perversity, and the rise of modern individualism.”¹⁹ In regard to the creation of Salome’s “textual corpus” at the turn of the century, Dierkes-Thrun describes four aesthetic models, or scenarios, which emerged in response to these crises. The first is Stéphane Mallarmé’s dramatic poem “Hérodiade,” for which he took Loie Fuller as his inspiration. According to Dierkes-Thrun, Mallarmé responded to the “aesthetics controversy” with his feminine ideal of “aesthetic beauty” created through the “corporalization of affect.”²⁰ Dierkes-Thrun’s second Salome model cites Gustave Flaubert’s *Salammbô* and *Trois Contes* as examples of religious mysticism’s “sensual sublime.” Flaubert’s interpretation of Salome, therefore, responds to the crisis of “fascination with sexual perversity.” It follows that,

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²⁰ Dierkes-Thrun, 59. Dierkes-Thrun describes the “corporalization of affect” in terms of “Wagner’s ideal of stimulating all of the senses in a total work of art [which] spoke to the symbolists’ search for new principles by which to immerse readers in intense experiences of aesthetic beauty—the perfect corporalization of affect through words.”
in Flaubert’s interpretation, Salome’s lust for John the Baptist corresponds with the “fusion of sexual lust with a desire for the divine.” Dierkes-Thrun’s third model similarly responds to the crisis of perversity. Joris-Karl Huysmans’ portrayal of Salome in Á Rebours as a decadent “femme fatale” reflects the “fin de siècle conjunction of the mystic and the neurotic.” In addition to the crises of aesthetics, femininity, and perversity, each of these models likewise responds to modernism’s “crisis of faith.” Each model stands at the threshold of a fin de siècle fascination with the spiritual realm, while beginning to consider the modern “postreligious” understanding of the “world after the death of God.” Dierkes-Thrun’s thesis is that Oscar Wilde, while drawing influence from these models, takes the final step in Salome’s dance across the threshold to “modernism’s central project of transforming metaphysical sublimity into physical and artistic sublimity” and its subsequent “replacement of traditional metaphysical, moral, and cultural belief systems with literary and artistic discourses that develop utopian erotic and aesthetic visions of individual transgression and agency.”

Dierkes-Thrun aligns the “rise of modern individualism” with the modernist aesthetics of transgression as understood through the critical theory of Michel Foucault. She explains that “according to this understanding, transgression is not a stepping outside of power or overthrowing it but, rather, the testing and engaging of moral, aesthetic, sexual, and other cultural discourses, paradoxically affirming while also challenging them and expanding them.” She concludes, therefore, that while “Wilde’s play continues to be examined almost exclusively...

21 Dierkes-Thrun, 25.
22 qtd. in Dierkes-Thrun, 37. See Ellis Hanson, Decadence and Catholicism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997) 109.
23 Dierkes-Thrun, 18.
24 Dierkes-Thrun, 2-3.
25 Dierkes-Thrun, 9.
through the lens of *fin de siècle* aesthetics,” he “developed and exacerbated his literary and artistic influences to a point that also marks a radical departure from his predecessors . . . in the development of twentieth-century modernism and modernist aesthetics.” According to Dierkes-Thrun, Wilde creates his own transgressive textual corpus for Salome by affirming, challenging, and expanding the limits of previous *fin de siècle* models.

Likewise, and perhaps ironically, Dierkes-Thrun and others look at Salome performances “almost exclusively through the lens” of modernist aesthetics and, in doing so, do not recognize a uniquely American and spiritual model that “marks a radical departure from [these European] predecessors.” Dierkes-Thrun’s argument often requires a dismissal of spirituality and religiosity. For instance, in her discussion of Maud Allan’s *Vision of Salome*, she interprets the character’s final “Revelation of Something far greater” and her “rejoicing towards Salvation” as “a dutiful turn toward religious orthodoxy. Perhaps to appease her critics” that results in an “unconvincing interpretation of Salome’s soul in need to submit to a higher source.” This ending, however, is only unsatisfying when understood within Dierkes-Thrun’s modernist project. Dierkes-Thrun does not consider that Allan’s ending to *Vision of Salome* may not be a “dutiful turn . . . to appease her critics,” but may in fact be consistent with the creation of her own “utopian erotic and aesthetic visions of individual transgression and agency.” Dierkes-Thrun does not recognize that, for this artist, transgression “is not a stepping outside . . . or overthrowing” of religious orthodoxy, “but, rather, the testing and engaging of moral, aesthetic,

26 Dierkes-Thrun, 9.
27 Dierkes-Thrun, 9.
29 Dierkes-Thrun, 2.
sexual, and other cultural discourses” surrounding religion, therefore “paradoxically affirming while also challenging them and expanding them.”

Like other Salome dancers discussed in this chapter, Allan was raised within a religious tradition. Moving from her native Canada to California at an early age, Allan and her family were members of Emmanuel Baptist Church. Furthermore, in her autobiography *My Life Dancing*, Allan writes about her work in spiritual terms. Toni Bentley observes that Allan never describes her Salome dance as sexual, but instead says in an interview, “Every time I appear, until the spirit gets into me, it is as though I were about to undergo martyrdom.” Likewise, Wendy Buonaventura notes that the dancer “publicized herself as a respectable artist whose work was drawn from biblical and classical sources.” Allan also references spirituality within the context of Francoise Delsarte, whose “system of expression” was popularized in the United States by Genevieve Stebbins. In *My Life and Dancing*, Allan writes that Delsarte’s “teaching rests on the inseparability of body and spirit. . . . he compared the human being with a musical instrument. . . . The player of this instrument is the soul, which is designed to transpose the movements of the body into music.” Contrary to Dierkes-Thrun’s understanding of Allan’s *Vision* as displaying “a profound understanding of the modernist sublime, the connection of physical ecstasy to a nonreligious, entirely human apotheosis,” Allan’s own articulation of her

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30 Dierkes-Thrun, 9.
31 Bentley, 51.
32 qtd. in Bentley, 62. This relationship between the “spirit” and “martyrdom” can also be found in letter from one of Allan’s fans’ quoted in the autobiography *My Life Dancing*: “Dear Miss Allan, I beg to thank you for your thoughtful reply; alas! I fear the artistic eye is lacking in many of us. St. John the Baptist is a sort of patron Saint to mission-spirited folk, and his martyrdom moves the depths of our being.” See Allan, 102-103.
34 Allan, 65.
aesthetic seems to define it as, paradoxically, affirming a religious project by challenging and expanding the bounds of spirituality within, perhaps, modernism and the material body itself.\(^{35}\)

Granted, the verity of *My Life and Dancing* has been questioned. Dierkes-Thrun comments that “Scholars have generally either ignored or dismissed *My Life and Dancing* as a highly unreliable, fabricated text. . . . Nevertheless, [she writes] there is no reason to assume that Allan lied outright about her aesthetic rationale and understanding of *The Vision of Salomé*, the work she regarded as the cornerstone of her career; and the autobiography provides important clues to her own understanding of her art.”\(^{36}\) Likewise, that there is no reason to “ignore or dismiss” spirituality in Allan’s work as merely “unconvincing” or as an appeasement to critics. Rather to do so is to appease “modernism’s central project of transforming metaphysical sublimity into physical and artistic sublimity,” while ignoring possible competing projects and aesthetics.\(^{37}\) While it is entirely possible, and perhaps inevitable, to read Allan’s and other Salome dancers’ performances through Wilde’s modernism, or one of the other models proffered by Dierkes-Thrun, to do so at the expense of spiritual or Biblical readings diminishes a fuller understanding of these works. Scholarship’s dismissal of religion and spirituality in Salome performances is not a project of the dancers themselves, but rather arises out of an incompatibility with twentieth and twenty-first century modern and postmodern aesthetics, as well as a discourse predominantly grounded in European male models.

Indeed, confusion over how to reconcile the religiosity of American Salome performers, specifically Loie Fuller, within *fin de siècle* and modern aesthetics began with the dancers’

\(^{35}\) Allan, 100.
\(^{36}\) Dierkes-Thrun, 97.
\(^{37}\) Dierkes-Thrun, 3.
contemporaries. For example, in providing the forward to Fuller’s memoir *Fifteen Years Dancing*, religious skeptic Anatole France writes:

This brilliant artist is revealed as a woman of just and delicate sensibility, endowed with a marvelous perception of spiritual values. . . . But the subject of conversation which comes closest to her is religious research. Should we recognize in this fact a characteristic of the Anglo Saxon race, of the effect of a Protestant education, or simply a peculiarity of temperament of which there is no explanation? I do not know. At all events she is profoundly religious, with a very acute spirit of inquiry and a perpetual anxiety about human destiny. Under various guises, in various ways, she has asked me about the cause and the final outcome of things. I need not say that none of my replies was couched in a manner to satisfy her. Nevertheless she has received my doubts serenely, smiling at everything. For she is distinctly an amiable being.\(^{38}\)

Just as Fuller receives France’s doubts, I am amiable to the beliefs of Salome dancers as articulated in their aesthetics and France’s question of whether this religious sensibility is a peculiarity of these dancers’ religious backgrounds. In doing so, I enter the American Salome dancers’ religiosity into a discourse with Dierkes-Thrun’s symbolist and modernist models. This dialogue is especially important in light of Dierkes-Thrun’s comment that while “No matter how hard Allan tried, no attempted reinterpretation of Salome’s desire as spiritual or religious yearning could hide Salome’s or Allan’s transgressive force from audiences.”\(^{39}\) Rather, I

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\(^{38}\) qtd. in Loie Fuller, *Fifteen Years of a Dancers Life, With Some Account of Her Distinguished Friends* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1913) viii-ix.

\(^{39}\) Dierkes-Thrun, 100.
consider that Allan was not trying to hide behind religion and spirituality, but was instead interested in using unorthodox spirituality and the religious story of Salome as a form of transgression within orthodox systems. In other words, for Allan and the other dancers in this chapter, “spiritual or religious yearning” was a transgressive aesthetic that challenged religious, social, and modern orthodoxies. Dierkes-Thrun acknowledges that Allan’s project was somewhat successful to this degree when she states, “it also suggests that even a spiritual interpretation of Wilde’s princess held feminist potential for contemporaries.” To use Dierkes-Thrun’s metaphor of “dancing on the threshold,” Salome dancers teeter between critical theology, popular religion, the occult, and secularism. While it is possible within the modern and postmodern project to strip biblical stories and characters of any religious, spiritual, and transcendental quality, in deference to the physical, material, and transgressive; it may also be possible to ask how these biblical narratives may be recuperated for those who, like some of the original Salome dancers and their audiences, entertain biblical and spiritual belief as a method of transgression, as well for skeptics on the secular side of the threshold.

Orientalism as Transgressive Spirituality

Bram Dijkstra’s *Idols of Perversity* catalogues the sexually violent and anti-Semitic details of over thirty-one Orientalist art and literary works inspired by the biblical figures of Judith and Salome, including works by Wilde, Huysmans, Mallarmé, and Lorraine. As Edward Said discusses in *Orientalism*, and more specifically in regard to Flaubert’s novels *Herodias* and

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40 Dierkes-Thrun, 100.
Salammbô, these images functioned to justify and bolster Western feelings of superiority. According to Said, Romantic Orientalism influenced writers such as Matthew Arnold and Oscar Wilde. Said notes that occultism, transcendentalism, and symbolism took similar interest the biblical Orient. Like the Romantic Orientalists, these movements were interested in the relationship between the mystical and material. While the symbolists, such as Mallarmé in his interpretation of “Herodiade,” were interested in translating the mystical through the material through the “aesthetics of beauty” and the “corporalization of affect,” the occult and spiritualists sought to channel the mystical through the corporeal body. The problem, according to Said, is that whether “interpreting” or

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42 Said, 181.
43 Said, 114.
44 Said, 115.
“channeling” the mysticism of East, it is actually the West that takes possession of its representation.

Western, and particularly male, translations of the mystical into corporal forms focused on the sexualization of the Orient. Said cites Huysmans’ and Nerval’s interpretation of Salome as examples. Said thusly frames the “Fatal Woman,” exemplified by these representations, as imaginative pilgrimages to a “more libertine” sexuality than could be found in Europe.45 Said points to the “peculiar (not to say insidious)” nature of such images as well as to the androcentric nature of the Orientalist field to conclude that “Orientalism itself . . . was an exclusively male province. . . . [W]omen are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing.”46 Furthermore, Said makes no mention of female Salome dancers (who portray themselves as being contrary to stupid or passive in their autobiographies), but rather focuses his study primarily to literature. In this regard, Americans are, likewise, out of Said’s literary scope. He argues that “Americans had no real imaginative investment in Orientalism.” He writes, “the American Transcendentalists saw affinities between Indian thought and their own; a few theologians and Biblical students studied the biblical Oriental languages,” but claims that within the American “avoidance of literature . . . what seem[ed] to matter far more . . . are ‘facts,’ of which a literary text is perhaps a disturber.” 47 However, by dismissing women, Americans, and artistic mediums outside of the purview of literature from his study, it is my opinion that Said misses some important perspectives on the relationship between women, Orientalism, and the power of the arts,

45 Said, 190.
46 Said, 207.
47 Said, 290-291.
particularly dance, as a powerful “disturber” of biblical and cultural convention. By focusing on the literary archive, Said dismisses Americans and dancers from the scenario of Orientalism.

Said’s purely negative, androcentric, and European literary readings of an Orientalist Salome do not account for the marginal performers—women, Jews, lesbians, and people of color—who were drawn to the role. For these performers, Salome must have held some potential as a site of resistance. Reina Lewis in *Gendering Orientalisms* argues that Orientalism is more fluid than Said admits. She writes, “imperial meanings are not inherent in texts, but are produced through the various and mediated mechanism of reading: this also means, of course, that oppositional readings may be performed on the same ‘imperialist’ texts by a different community of readers.”48 Female performers and spectators exemplify a “different community of readers” from the white dominant heterosexist hegemony. Following Lewis’ rationale, female artists may have read the imperialist Salome myth differently, even oppositionally. Women may have used the Salome myth to produce and satisfy different desires than their male counterparts. According to Bentley, while men looked to the East for the exoticized female, women looked to Orientalism as an alternative to Western Christian morality while preserving a sense of sexuality and spirituality.49 It seems logical within Dierkes-Thrun’s (Foucault’s) model of transgression that female Salome dancers would look at biblical subjects through the lens of Orientalism as a way to “paradoxically affirm” their biblical counterparts, while also “challenging” and “expanding” notions of female spirituality and sexuality within Western Christian morality. Such a process of interpretation is consistent with Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s “hermeneutics of creative

49 Bentley, 23.
imagination,” which encourages a “process of biblical interpretation that can grapple with the oppressive as well as liberating functions of particular biblical texts in women’s lives and struggles.”

Like Lewis and Bentley, Emily Apter in “Acting Out Orientalism” counters claims that Orientalist representations of women at the turn-of-the twentieth century were necessarily repressive. While Apter does not disavow that Orientalist representations supported essentialist or stereotypical views of women as highly sexualized, “monstrous superhuman beings,” she argues that these stereotypes simultaneously functioned in female performance to “pose a threat” to repressive readings. This process, according to Apter, “at once fetishized and mobilized [both the Orientalist stereotype and the performer] in conceptual and visual space” in such a way that it was appropriated by queer and feminist artists (like Fuller and Allan). While male artists and spectators envisioned the “exotic” Salome dancer as containing and exploiting female sexuality, spirituality, and raciality, the female Salome dancer used the biblical character to “‘pretend” these repressed identities “into existence” and to cross sexual, gender, religious and racial divides. A closer look at American female Salome dancers will demonstrate how these women embodied the biblical figure in order to perform their repressed identities, as well as preserve their personal sense of the spiritual and sexual amidst male-dominated modernist, materialist and misogynist discourses.

50 qtd. in Bellis, 20. emphasis hers.
52 Apter, 18.
Loie Fuller’s Salome (Paris, 1895, 1900, 1907) and American Spiritualism

Loie Fuller’s “Serpentine Dance” caught the attention of the French symbolists when she arrived at the Folies-Bergère in 1892. It had been just one year since Fuller developed her signature dance, as she would have it in her autobiography quite by accident, in a New York production of the play *Quack MD* about a hypnotist’s influence upon a young widow. In her autobiography, Fuller comments, “Hypnotism at that moment was very much to the fore in New York.” Fuller used her popular knowledge of hypnotism, combined with her expertise in technical theatre to inform the scene that would give rise to her “Serpentine Dance.” Being as well known for her advances in lighting as for her dancing, Fuller advised the director on how to produce the scene’s “indeterminate illumination.” She also claims to have provided the Orientalist costume, a Hindu silk skirt, “comparable to a spider’s web” that was given to her as a gift by two soldiers before they returned to India for duty. She writes, “It was entirely suitable for the hypnotism scene, which we did not take very seriously.” Fuller describes the resulting effect:

At the end of the play, on the eve of the first presentation, we gave our hypnotism scene. . . . Dr. Quack made a mysterious entrance and then began his work of suggestion. . . . entranced—so at least it looked—with my gaze held by his, I followed his every motion. My robe was so long that I was continually stepping on it, and mechanically I held it up with both hands and raised my arms aloft, all the while I continued to flit around the stage like a winged spirit. There was a sudden exclamation from the house: “It’s a butterfly! A butterfly!” I turned on my

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53 Fuller, 25.
54 Fuller, 28.
steps, running from one end of the stage to the other, and a second exclamation followed: “It’s an orchid!” To my great astonishment sustained applause burst forth. . . . At last, transfixed in a state of ecstasy, I let myself drop at his feet, completely enveloped in a cloud of the light material.55

This was apparently all of the “hypnotic suggestion” that Fuller needed to resurrect her career. Later, alone in her room, she tried to recreate the effect, this time taking it quite seriously:

Unconsciously I realized that I was in the presence of a great discovery, one which was destined to open the path which I have since followed. Gently, almost religiously, I set the silk in motion, and I saw that I had obtained undulations of a character heretofore unknown. I had created a new dance.56

Albeit hyperbole, this anecdote suggests a relationship between male figures (the doctor in the play and male critics throughout Fuller’s career) and Fuller and her dance: 1) Dr. Quack’s seeming suggestion of Fuller’s movements may be compared to male critics’ “quack” interpretations of Fuller’s work and 2) her subversion of these suggestions to create something altogether different, self-possessed, and “almost [if unorthodox] religious.” Specifically, I examine the influence of American spiritualism and French symbolism on Fuller’s performances of Salome, and her, perhaps, unconscious attempt to destabilize normative and/or destructive images of female sexuality attributed to the biblical figure. Indeed, in this way she creates a new

55 Fuller, 30-31.
56 Fuller, 33. Qtd. in Kari-Anne I nnes, “Loie Fuller from ‘La Fée Lumiére’ to ‘La Fée Élécriticité’: Cybernetic Logic, Embodiment and the Electrical Woman,” The Projector: Film and Media Journal, 10.1 (2010): n. pag. W eb. (In this article, I discuss Fuller in relation to fears of female embodiment using some of the same quotes as in this section.)
dance that distinguishes her interpretation from the male interpretations of Salome that proliferated at the turn of the twentieth-century.

The relationship between Fuller’s performance and spirituality, specifically American spiritualism, began early in life. Her debut performance occurred at the age of two before a Sunday meeting of the Chicago Progressive Lyceum with an impromptu recitation of the children’s prayer “Now I lay me down to sleep.” Born into a spiritualist family, Fuller’s background reflects the influence of American unorthodox movements, including those that practiced mesmerism, perhaps preparing her for her role in Dr. Quack. In spite of witty anecdotes in Fifteen Years of a Dancer’s Life that seem to make light of this connection, Tom Gunning cites that critic Giovanni Lista observes that “mesmerism and mediumistic phenomena were a key inspiration for [Fuller’s] art.” Indeed, spiritualism may have provided the medium and platform that had enabled Fuller, as both a child and an adult, to consider a life of public performance as a woman.

Spiritualism, loosely associated with Protestant Quakerism, afforded relatively higher positions of power for women than did more orthodox and Protestant denominations. In Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America, Ann Braude writes that, excepting Quakers, “the first large group of American women to speak in public or to exercise religious leadership” was the spiritualists. Her book “documents the existence of 200 or so women whose careers as trance speakers during the 1850s and 1860s can be followed in the

Spiritual press.” Some of the reasons spiritualism afforded women greater voice were its beliefs in the individual’s direct access to “divine truth” and a “rejection of male headship over women.” Braude concludes, “The prominence of women within Spiritualism resulted from a staunchly individualistic form of religious practice. Feminist scholars have found that women have been able to exercise leadership where religious authority derives from direct individual spiritual contact or experience rather than from office, position, or training.” While modernism often lays claim to the rise of individualism, the spiritualist movement seems likewise individualistic. However, whereas modernism privileges the material, spiritualism offered individual women a strategy to circumvent the power hierarchies that existed in the material and patriarchal world.

While a full examination of spiritualism and its likely influence on Fuller is beyond the scope of this study, Daphne Brooks in her book *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* provides a general understanding of how spiritualism served as a transgressive model in late nineteenth-century American performance and politics. Fuller, transforming herself through the whirling of white silk fabrics into images of flowers, butterflies, and Salome, resembles what Brooks describes as a “spirit dancer” or “spirit rapper” in which a “most often white and female spiritualist [medium] . . . captures and reanimates marginal ‘characters’ across the great racial, cultural, and spiritual divide.” Brooks observes that this act of “spirit dancing” was as political as it was spiritual. For example, during the period of abolitionism, when the nation was embattled in debates surrounding the purity of race, religion

59 Braude, 6.
60 Brooks, 14.
and gender, female spirit-dancers caused great stir when they claimed to be possessed by “the negro,” “old maid” and “Indian chief.” These “miscegenous encounters” unsettled white religious leaders, such as Reverend Hiram Mattison. In his pamphlet *Spirit Rapping Unveiled!* (1853), Mattison expresses deep concerns that “the spirit dancing body ‘contaminates,’ confounds and confuses’ putatively impermeable racial and cultural borders. Accordingly, Mattison’s attempt to ‘unveil’ these rappers manifests a deep-rooted anxiety of loss . . . of social categories.”61 In Brooks’ understanding, the movements of these dancing women attempted to blur and destabilize the definitions, codifications, and hierarchies of race, gender, and class toward progressive political and spiritual purposes. It is no surprise, therefore, that the daughter of spiritualists, Loie Fuller, would bring “spirit-dancing” and the role of Salome to the stage during the rise of first-wave feminism.

Salome was one of the most infamous marginal female characters to be divined by dancers in the late nineteenth-century. Like the spirit-dancer, Fuller would serve as a medium for an “imaginative encounter” between the extra-biblical and literary figure of Salome and a larger cultural audience in her 1895, 1900, and 1907 performances. Furthermore, within the context of feminism, Ann Cooper Albright in her book *Traces of Light: Absence and Presence in the Works of Loie Fuller* posits that each of Fuller’s Salome performances reflects “a different feminist strategy for confronting and intervening in misogynist representations of sexualized women.” For example, “Fuller’s first Salome revised the traditional narrative to create a mystical, ‘chaste,’ younger Salome, who dances to try and save John the Baptist. Here she replaces the deadly

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seductress with a more positive role model.”⁶² Like the “spirit-dancer,” Fuller’s taking on of the character of Salome allows her to transgress culturally imposed representations of female sexuality and power. On the other hand, Fuller’s Salome brought damaging criticisms upon the dancer, such as Jean Lorrain’s assessment of her as a “Salome for drunkards.”⁶³ As Brooks warns, there is a “fine line between disrupting the master narratives . . . and simultaneously capitulating to a familiar and debilitating caricature.”⁶⁴ Criticisms of Fuller’s Salome dances seem largely the projection of “cultural anxieties” upon the dancer’s body with the effect of creating a “debilitating caricature” of the dancer among her fickle symbolist critics.

Loie Fuller premiered her first Salome in 1895 at the Comédie Parisienne to a disappointing run. Arriving in Paris in 1892, Fuller had captured the attention of symbolist Stephané Mallarmé as the icon of his danseuse, described by the poet as “the embodiment of the symbol . . . always a symbol, never a person . . . not a girl, but rather a metaphor.”⁶⁵ Likewise, Eugen Wolff defined his ideal of modern womanhood as “an experienced but pure woman, in rapid movement like the spirit of the age, with fluttering garments and streaming hair.”⁶⁶ In light of these descriptions, Fuller exemplified what symbolist critics considered the ideal woman. In

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⁶³ qtd. in Gunning, 30. Qtd. in Innes, “Loie Fuller,” n.p.
⁶⁴ Brooks, 213.
⁶⁵ This Mallarmé quote appears in most scholarship on Fuller. Albright points to an alternate reading posited by Julie Ann Townsend in which “In Mallarmé’s model, art would ideally include the material body and the metaphysical Idée.” Qtd. in Albright 45. Albright contends, however, that because of interpretations to the contrary we are “left . . . a legacy of ignoring Fuller’s corporeality and the emotional ‘impressions’ she wished to convey” See Albright, 39.
relation to Dierkes-Thrun’s models of Salome, Fuller’s 1895 performance capitulated to Mallarmé’s standards of feminine “aesthetic beauty” and Wolff’s idea of the “perfect” and “pure” woman as an intervention against Huysmans’ and others’ femme fatale. For example, Richard and Marcia Current describe Fuller’s dance as “by no means voluptuous or bloodthirsty,” but rather “quite spiritual and chaste. Frustrated, Herod orders John’s decapitation. Only then does Salome dance for him, and does it in the hope of dissuading him from carrying out his order.” Fuller’s Salome is innocent and chaste; her desire is spiritual versus sexual. The guilt of John the Baptist’s death and the sexualization of Salome lay with the male gaze of Herod, as well as the gaze of male artists upon the literary figure.

However, whereas Fuller’s “chaste” Salome succeeded in providing an alternative to the fin de siècle demonization of the pseudo-biblical figure, she was less successful in trying to “to reshape her identity as an abstract dancer into one of an equally gifted expressive mime.” Albright explains that Fuller’s embodied Salome disappointed symbolist expectations of the danseuse as being a “symbol, never a person.” She explains that it was this shift in Fuller’s style, from the abstract to the sensual, which caused negative reactions in reviews. As an example, Albright sites Jean Lorrain’s changing review of Fuller’s Salome as beginning positively: “Mystery! The colors and nuances of light illuminate and dim in turn, developing into

68 Albright, 85.
69 Rhonda K. Garelick, Electric Salome (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007) 94. Rhonda Garelick gives a similar account, noting that Fuller’s performances drew criticism because, “Instead of disappearing into enormous floating lengths of fabric in every scene, as Salome, Fuller frequently permitted spectators to see her actual body dancing. . . . ‘Seen up close by the public,’ wrote one review, ‘in a specific setting with defined action, [Fuller] loses all charm and mystery.’” Qtd. in Innes, “Loie Fuller,” n.p.
spirals and then suddenly billowing like wings.” However, as this figure becomes more recognizable as the character Salome or the physical woman of Fuller, Lorrain writes, “It was disappointment. . . heavy, ungraceful, sweating and with make-up running . . . she maneuvers her veils . . . like a laundress misusing her paddle.” Albright concedes that these poor reviews, most notably by the symbolists, have overshadowed other positive statements, such as the preview that appeared in London’s *Figaro* and was quoted in the American *New York Times* that praises “Her dance to the sun, her religious dance, [and] her dance of desperation” that “were all remarkable expressions of the mind, and had such an effect on us that when she fell at the sight of John the Baptist’s head, we all rushed toward her and kissed her.” The tendency of contemporary scholarship to focus on Fuller’s negative reviews may be as much about the privileging of symbolist discourse within Fuller scholarship as it is about her actual Salome performance. Albright concedes that “most scholars chalk up” Fuller’s failed attempts “to play Salome to a bizarre lapse in Fuller’s usually astute professional judgment.” However, rather than dismissing Fuller’s Salome performances entirely, Albright asks “What strategic uses of the veil are implicated in these stagings? And what, indeed, was she interested in uncovering, or rather discovering, in herself and in her work by ‘becoming’ Salomé?” Or, what was she covering as a woman? Examining Fuller’s Salome performances within the context of American spiritualism may provide some answers to these questions, as well as providing insight into her feminist strategies.

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70 qtd. in Albright, 127.
71 Albright, 126.
72 Albright, 115
73 Albright, 116.
According to Current and Current, Fuller promoted her Salome dance as participating in a long religious performance genealogy. For example, Fuller once remarked: “I have only revived a forgotten art, for I have been able to trace some of my dances back four thousand years ago: to the time when Miriam and the women of Israel—filled with religious fervor and rapture—celebrated their release from Egyptian captivity with ‘timbrels and with dances.’” Current adds that “Loie thought of herself as already following in the footsteps of the biblical dancer Miriam when she decided to play the part of another biblical (or pseudobiblical) dancer—Salome.” Fuller’s description of a tradition of “religious fervor and rapture” among a community of women lends itself to comparison with the spirit-dancers of spiritualism. Within the context of Brook’s description of “spirit dancing,” Fuller “capture[d] and reanimate[d]” Salome, thus allowing this inter-“national character” to enter the veil and “set [Fuller] to dancing.” In turn, according to Albright, the dance was meant, in part, to intervene in the phenomena of the “femme fatale” among Huysmans’ and others’ interpretations of Salome. Consequently, Huysmans himself did not care for Fuller, writing in his journal after a Folies performance: “Loie Fuller—strange. Mediocre dancing. After all, the glory goes to the electrician. It’s American.”

Huysmans’ distaste for Fuller arose partly out of the competing aesthetics between French symbolism and Fuller’s “American ingenuity.” Indeed, Fuller’s 1895 Salome departs from the symbolist ideal of woman and, instead, upholds an American ideal. Although she is often quoted as saying, “I was born in America, but I was made in Paris,” Fuller retained a strong

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74 qtd. in Current and Current, 79.
75 Current and Current, 79.
76 Brooks, 14.
77 Current and Current, 54.
78 Garelick, 114.
sense of American identity in her dancing as well as in her popular image. In regard to
American women, Fuller wrote in an unfinished essay titled “America and Americans” that the
American woman “is a real, natural work of Art herself. . . . A thousand stories could be told of .
. . women in American (sic) on diff’t scales—competent, strong, and brave, intelligent.” Albright offers this description as Fuller’s “mythic portrait of a modern ‘American’ woman” in
which she (both Fuller and the modern woman) “negotiates her various identities” and insists on
transmutability. Spiritualism offered such transmutability in its practice of spirit-rapping and
served as an important strategy and example of “American ingenuity” within the early feminist
movement.

In America, the spiritualist movement was challenging and transforming ideas about
women from within the dominant ideology of the “cult of womanhood.” The cult of womanhood
“asserted that woman’s nature was characterized by purity, piety, passivity, and domesticity.
While this ideology held that women were especially well suited to religion . . . it nevertheless
required them to defer to men in all religious matters.” Spiritualism’s transgression from the
orthodoxy of the “cult of womanhood” into the unorthodox occult was its ability to embrace “the
notion that women were pious by nature. But, instead of concluding that the qualities that suited
women to religion unsuited them to public roles, Spiritualism. . . . lauded it as a qualification for
religious leadership” and went public with female trance speakers, spirit-rappers, and spirit-
dancers. Fuller’s chaste Salome bears similarities to these spiritualist women; she is portrayed

79 Albright, 85.
80 qtd in Albright, 110.
81 Albright, 110.
82 Braude, 82.
83 Braude, 83.
as pious, but is unafraid and unabashed in the public performance of her spirituality. Fuller’s Salome, however, was not a reaction to the “cult of womanhood,” but a reaction to the femmes-fatale of Salome art and literature. Fuller appealed to the symbolist ideal of the danseuse with her spiritualist ideal of a pious spirit-dancer in an effort to displace the image of Salome as a seductress. In effect, Fuller attempted to liberate the image of Salome through spirit-dancing much as spiritualist spirit-dancers were attempting to liberate themselves from orthodox religion.

Fuller’s “channeling” of the innocent girl in the Gospel of Matthew may have had a similar liberating effect in the personal life of the music hall dancer. The role of Salome allowed Fuller go public with her body on the stage, while veiling her off stage sexuality. Fuller was both concealing and revealing her sexual identity. It is well known among scholars, and likely known among Fuller’s social circles, that she maintained a long-term lesbian relationship with companion Gabrielle Bloch. However, channeling Salome through the male symbolist gaze, which valued her as a symbol of aesthetic beauty rather than as “a person,” Fuller was able to transcend sexual codification. Fuller’s embodiment of the male ideal of feminine aesthetic beauty allowed her to veil her homosexuality, while at the same time giving her a venue for sexual self-expression. The symbolist’s desexualization of her performance provided Fuller a “chaste” image that allowed her to live quite openly in the closet. Furthermore, as in spiritualism, Fuller’s career in dance allowed her to live independent of male authority both monetarily and artistically. While Fuller appealed to androcentric values of feminine beauty, her performance of Salome, in its small departures from symbolist aesthetics, was an expression of Fuller’s individualism.

Fuller’s three Salome performances are, likewise, individual in character. For example, her 1900 World’s Fair performance of two movements from her 1895 Salome pantomime—The
Fire and The Lily—departs from her expression of American spiritualism, and participates in French Orientalism. Rhonda Garelick in *Electric Salome* observes that Fuller had intentionally distanced her 1895 Salome from prevailing Orientalist images. The prime example, noted by Garelick, was Fuller’s replacement of the Oriental symbol of the lotus flower, associated with the Egyptian goddess Isis, with a garland of white roses, representative of the Christian Virgin Mary. Garelick concludes, “By replacing the sultry lotus with not one but a whole garland of white roses, Fuller insisted not only on Salome’s sexual purity, but also her proximity to Christianity and, implicitly, on her distance from the Orient.” Furthermore, Garelick associates Fuller’s complexion and the white rose as a possible comment on the “purity” of “racial whiteness.”

Ironically, Fuller’s racial whiteness would be used to promote Orientalism at the 1900 World Fair. If Fuller chose to distance herself from Orientalism in 1895, she placed herself at its apex in 1900. Garelick explains that a driving impetus behind the 1900 World’s Fair was to drum up enthusiasm for France’s Imperialist projects: “the general public evinced little interest in the country’s conquests. Concerned by this apparent apathy, officials of the World’s Fairs of 1889 and 1900 sought to promote awareness and acceptance of the Empire.” The result was a league of “native” pavilion displays, as well as the use of Oriental dancers to provoke interest in the exotic cultures of the colonies. Fuller’s “whitened” version of Salome was a welcome feature and served to appease critics concerned with the overall sensuality of Oriental dance. Garelick explains that “provocative entertainment was acceptable, then, when provided by white European women within a traditional French context, but offensive when performed by women

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84 Garelick, 96.
85 Garelick, 68.
of color from North Africa and other colonial venues.” Garelick continues that “la belle Fatima, a generic undulating colonized woman . . . melded in the popular imagination with . . . Salome, the biblical princess whose dance brings down a prophet.” Fuller, then, stood in for the “native” body and made images of colonization acceptable for the more conservative among the Fair’s European audience, while simultaneously providing a cautionary tale regarding female, and particularly, Eastern sexuality. Consistent with Said’s definition of Orientalism, Fuller’s 1900 World’s Fair performance displaced Eastern female bodies, relegating them to side show exhibitions, while projecting onto the representation of these bodies, the anxieties and ambitions of Western Imperialism.

Fuller’s World’s Fair performance also seems contradictory in terms of feminism through her appropriation as an icon of the arts nouveau movement. Both Garelick and Albright draw connections between the “curvilinear elegance” of the decorative arts movement and its proclivity towards natural themes and Fuller’s “wafting veils,” and “organic mobile forms.” Indeed, arts nouveau artists took up Fuller as their subject, most famously, Raoul Francois Larche’s sculpture of the dancer—“a decorative phantasmagoria of sinuous folds of silk seductively revealing a spiraling female body.” In regard to feminism, however, Albright finds tensions between art nouveau’s memorialization of Fuller and what the dancer might have been trying to achieve. Albright argues that the Arts Nouveau “was consciously staged as part of a governmental response to a growing anxiety about the new woman. . . . Rather than encouraging women to become mobile and extend their influence into the public world, art nouveau captured

86 Garelick, 89.
87 Garelick, 73.
88 Garelick, 81.
89 Albright, 103.
the image of motion, but contained it within an increasingly domestic realm."⁹⁰ In its association with the decorative arts and the domestic sphere, the arts nouveau movement, according to Albright, was meant to freeze, capture, and confine women’s movement to lamps and furniture displayed in the private sphere of the home. Albright comments that these frozen images of feminine movement suggest a “profound cultural unease with women’s new found social mobility.”⁹¹ Fuller’s constant and fluid movement in her dances, however, seems to work against the fixity of art nouveau by exercising and celebrating her mobility. Albright argues that:

One of Fuller’s most successful dances at the 1900 exposition was ‘Le lys’ (The Lily [excerpted from the Salome pantomime]). . . . Long an important symbol in Christianity (the lily is the official flower of Easter symbolizing the purity and innocence of the Resurrection), and in France (the fluer-de-lis was ubiquitous on the insignia of French aristocracy) . . . . Fuller consciously played with this continuum of symbolic meanings in her dance while Loie Fuller portrayed a lily—that loaded image of a domesticated flower that circulated through art nouveau—she also physically embodied it, enacting a transformation that projected an open, changing and ultimately strong female body.⁹² Albright suggests that Fuller consciously worked against the ideology of art nouveau that forever memorialized and fixed her movement in art and sculpture sold at the fair. Fuller’s relationship to the symbolists, Orientalism, and the arts nouveau seems to follow a pattern of her

⁹⁰ Albright, 104.
⁹¹ Albright, 104.
⁹² Albright, 108.
transgression or challenging of conventions regarding women and Western spirituality, but that is easily appropriated by those same opposing conventions.

Fuller’s third performance of Salome may be similarly understood as the dancer’s reaction to both her own and, more generally, women’s representation in modern and popular culture. Fuller’s performance of a chaste Salome in 1895 and 1900 differed radically from her 1907 performance in which Albright describes Fuller as portraying the gamut of Salomes, from the religious sublime to the femme fatale, across the five dances that made up le tragedie de Salome performed at Théâtre des Arts. Garelick describes the performance as “an over-the-top extravaganza complete with 4500 feathers, 650 lamps, and 15 projectors. This Salome was an overly voluptuous temptress who entwined herself in strings of pearls, performed a writhing dance with a six-foot-long artificial snake . . . and even allowed a brief glimpse of herself naked silhouetted behind a screen.” 93 She compares Fuller’s 1907 Salome with Wilde’s play and the paintings of Aubrey Beardsley. Albright draws comparisons with Fuller’s final movement “The Dance of Fear” and Moreau’s painting L’apparition: “In the midst of a furious storm, the head of John the Baptist appears in the sky, driving a tormented Salome into a ‘dérile infernal.’” 94 Albright finds it ironic that it was this 1907 performance and its “return to the stereotype—the seductive and powerful Salome of Moreau—that was proclaimed ‘feministic theatre’” 95 in periodicals of the time. 95 After all, this portrayal of Salome seems contrary to Fuller’s 1895 performance, which has been interpreted as recuperating the pseudo-biblical character’s innocence from misogynist interpretations.

93 Garelick, 93 n63. Qtd. in Innes, “Loie Fuller,” n.p.
94 Albright, 138.
95 Albright, 139.
Several scholars, including Albright, have suggested possible feminist meanings for this second full Salome performance. Albright finds value in a forty-five year old woman asserting her body and affirming her sexuality on the stage, titling her chapter on Fuller’s Salome “Performing Femininity with a Vengeance.” Emily Apter, on the other hand, provides a queer reading of Fuller’s 1907 Salome. According to Apter “‘Orientalism . . . evolved into feminist and lesbian camp. . . . Not only were women empowered or accorded sexual license through association with the dominatrix characterologies . . . but more interestingly, their agency was enhanced by ‘being’ these avatars both on stage and off . . . moving their larger-than-life thespian personas into the choreography of erotic everyday life.’”96 For Albright, Fuller is an uneasy example of lesbian camp. She writes, “Although Fuller is often cited as one on a long list of turn-of-the-century lesbian public figures, she does not fit into the seductive stereotype of the trendy Sapphic personality cruising the literary salons in Paris . . . Never self-identified as a lesbian, the traces of her erotic connection to women is always (dis)placed into another ‘light’—one that alternately reveals and conceals.”97 For Albright, Salome’s 1895 performance might have just as well expressed Fuller’s homosexuality, concealed in the image of a chaste Salome and revealed, or at least expressed, in her fluid and transmutable images of feminine aesthetic beauty and sensuality if not overt sexuality.

I add to Albright’s and Apter’s interpretations a reading of Fuller’s 1907 Salome through a spiritualist understanding of women’s sexuality. Piety was not the sole feminine ideal among spiritualists; rather the tradition based on transmutability was also connected to the concept of “free love.” Ann Braude qualifies the term by saying that “free love” did not mean indiscriminate

96 qtd. in Albright, 141.
97 Albright, 142.
sex among spiritualists, but that the sexual obligation within the institution of marriage often left women obliged to engage in loveless sexual encounters. “Free love,” then, “meant the freedom of women to refuse their husband’s sexual encounters.” More broadly “free love,” “referred to the belief that the morality of sexual intercourse depended on freely experienced compelling mutual desire—that is, love—not on whether the parties were married.” Fuller’s relationship to Gabrielle Bloch, therefore, would not have necessarily been viewed as transgressive among spiritualists as it would among conventional religion and society at the time. Furthermore, spiritualism as advocated by prominent lecturer Lois Waisbrooker, “insisted that the true woman had sexual feelings and that her purity was compromised by society’s insistence that she deny them.” In addition, “Waisbrooker believed that women’s emancipation required both the restraint of male passion and the release of female sexual impulses.” Fuller’s 1907 Salome likewise insisted, “with a vengeance,” upon her sexual impulses, as well as drew attention to the misogynist nature of unrestrained male desire through Herod. Salome’s relationship to John the Baptist could also be interpreted through Waisbrooker’s assertion in *The Occult Power of Sex* that the “forces that made spirit communication possible also powered the sex drive” and that “[t]his same force was the source of religious enthusiasm.” This association between sexuality and “religious enthusiasm” may explain Fuller’s attraction to a model similar to Flaubert’s “sensual sublime.” Fuller’s sexualization of Salome, therefore, may be understood, like her Salome of 1895, as a reaction against the continuum of existing Salome models and scenarios. However, unlike her Salome of 1895, Fuller does not produce a woman of sexual purity to foil

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98 Braude, 128.
99 Braude, 128.
100 Braude, 138.
101 Braude, 138-139.
misogynist interpretations; rather she produces the scenario of a woman of sexual insistence and religious sublimity to foil, perhaps, Wilde’s modernist Salome, which Dierkes-Thrun observes as attempting to replace “metaphysical sublimity” with the “physical and artistic.”

If a spiritualist interpretation of Salome offers to recuperate spirituality at the threshold of the modern abyss, it should be emphasized that spiritualism and Fuller do not sacrifice “individual transgression and agency.” Rather, Braude writes that spiritualists held “individual sovereignty” as one of their guiding principles. It was “the same individualism that encouraged mediumship that called into question all social relations that placed one person in a position of authority over another” this included a “critique of marriage” because “it conflicted with women’s self-ownership.” It is this “self-ownership” that, in Apter’s terms, moved Fuller’s “larger-than-life thespian personas into the choreography of erotic everyday life.” In fact, it was Fuller’s individualism and not her “return to the stereotype [of] the seductive and powerful Salome of Moreau” that drew the reviewers of Fémina and Le Temp to proclaim it as “feministic theatre.”

The other evening . . . I had as it were, a vision of a theatre of the future, something of the nature of a feminist theatre. Women are more and more taking men’s places. They are steadily supplanting the so-called stronger sex. . . . Just watch and you will see woman growing in influence and power; and if, as in Gladstone’s phrase, the nineteenth century was the working man’s century, the

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102 Dierkes-Thrun, 3.
103 Dierkes-Thrun, 2.
104 Braude, 118.
105 qtd. in Albright, 141.
106 Albright, 139.
twentieth will be the woman’s century. I have been at the Théâtre des Arts, Boulevard de Batignolles, at a private rehearsal. . . . There on that evening when I saw her rehearse Salome in everyday clothes, without costume, her glasses over her eyes, measuring her steps, outlining in her dark robe the seductive and suggestive movements, which she will produce to-morrow in her brilliant costume, I seemed to be watching a wonderful impresario, manager of her troupe as well as mistress of the audience . . . On the stage another woman in street dress, with a note-book in hand, very amiable, too, and very exact in her directions and questions, took the parts of John the Baptist, half-nude, of Herod in his purple mantle. . . . These two American women, without raising their voices, quietly but with the absolute brevity of practical people. . . . these two women with their little hands fashioned for command were managing the rehearsal as an expert Amazon drives a restive horse.¹⁰⁷

Although I have omitted a long passage describing the artistry of Fuller’s five dances, it is evident that what M. Claretie notices as “feministic” within Loie’s rehearsal is the self-possession of Fuller as an individual, as well as her relationship with another woman, who I speculate is Gabby, on the stage. Within the rehearsal, Loie and Gabby inhabit the parts of Salome and John the Baptist and rehearse scenes of sexual and spiritual desire that, although hidden by the veil of the stage rehearsal, reveal themselves in the “choreography of erotic everyday life” together.¹⁰⁸ It is the spectacle of two self-possessed women working together to

¹⁰⁷ Fuller, 282-287.
¹⁰⁸ Apter, 24.
transgress the power structures within an androcentric and heterosexual culture that Claretie finds both transgressive and transfixed. Fuller’s spiritualist background both affirms and advocates the performance of such individual transgression.

As Anatole France observes, Fuller’s art was to her a “religious project” and one in which religion, spirituality, and sexuality were not in conflict, but in harmonious balance. Viewing Fuller’s Salome dances as influenced by spiritualism, aids in understanding the perplexities that arise when her works are interpreted strictly through symbolist or modern aesthetics. Rather than symbolist interpretations that divorce Fuller’s spirituality from her physical body, or modern interpretations that dismiss her religious project, a spiritualist understanding begins to recognize Fuller’s Salome as an embodied theology—like the one proffered by Marjorie Procter-Smith—that aligns the body, mind, and spirit towards feminist ends.

Maud Allan’s Salome (London, 1908, 1918) and Delsarte’s System of Expression

Canadian-born and California-raised dancer Maud Allan debuted her own Vision of Salome at the Théâtre des Arts in Paris in 1907. She would find her permanent home, however, at the Palace Theatre in London in 1908 where her Vision of Salome ran for 250 performances. Before gaining fame as London’s leading Salome, Allan studied piano in Berlin and published the sex manual Illustriertes Konversations-Lexikon der Frau in 1900. Although she would publish her memoir My Life and Dancing in 1908, Allan managed to keep much of her personal life private until a 1918 libel trial against Noel Pemberton Billing divulged some personal, and some painful, information including an insinuation of Allan’s bi-sexuality and

109 Dierkes-Thrun, 85.
revealing the family-secret of a brother executed for the murder of two women. Maud Allan’s popularity, the complexities and inconsistencies between her public performances, writings, and private life, and the subsequent turn against her make her compelling for this study. Contrasted with Loie Fuller, an American Salome in Paris, Maude Allan provides an example of an American Salome in London, and the influence of another spiritual philosophy in Francoise Delsarte’s “System of Expression.”

Loie Fuller would claim Salome dancer Maud Allan as one of her progeny; however, most scholars deemphasize Fuller’s influence, admitting that Allan studied only briefly under the senior dancer and that Fuller may have advised Allan on her 1908 Salome dance. Although the relationship between the two dancers is tenuous, the parallels between the American Salome dancers’ articulation of dance as a spiritual and physical expression, reveals their shared intent to set themselves apart from literary models offered through Mallarme, Flaubert, Huysmans, and Wilde. Dierkes-Thrun speculates that, whether or not Fuller had a direct influence on the younger dancer, “Allan knew Fuller’s piece well, and it is possible that Fuller’s innocent, childlike, spiritually seeking Salome influenced her somewhat in conceiving of her own version.”

Bentley, too, notices a departure from Wilde and a similarity between Fuller’s and Allan’s girlish personas, writing that Allan is “more in accordance with Mark and Matthew than with Wilde, that Salome was merely an innocent child who is conned to ask for John the Baptist’s head.” However, to contemplate any further on the shared themes between these two dancers, may risk falling prey to what Allan writes in My Life and Dancing as to how the

110 Dierkes-Thrun, 85.
111 Bentley, 61.
meaning of her “Vision of Salomé” “has been dimly guessed by some, hinted at by others, and perhaps more widely misunderstood . . . than any dance in [her] collection.”

In the chapter of her autobiography titled “Salomé,” Allan attempts to dispel any misinterpretations surrounding her dance, writing that, if for no other reason, her book gives her “the opportunity to explain what is the meaning that I wish to convey.” In Allan’s account, the story begins with the young Salome in a heightened state of anxiety over her mother’s scandalous marriage to Herod, as well as the ominous predictions of John the Baptist as a result of the affair. Caught in the middle of this horrible triangle, Salome dances at Herod’s bidding and asks for the head of the prophet upon her mother’s command. Overcome by her deed, Salome flees the scene. “Drawn by an irresistible force,” she recounts the day’s events and contemplates the dismembered head of John the Baptist for an answer as to the mystery of what she has done. At this moment, Salome discovers a “superior power” in John the Baptist, one that awakens her “childish heart” to the “spiritual guidance of the man whose wraith is before her.”

Nevertheless, this salvation is momentary as Salome realizes that by following her mother’s earlier command, she has killed her redeemer. Hence, falling into a heap, it is Salome who, like John the Baptist, is sacrificed in “the atonement of her mother’s awful sin!” Beyond a description of her dance, Allan provides little more interpretation, stating earlier that “How I

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112 Allan, 120.
113 Allan, 120.
114 Allan, 125.
115 Allan, 127.
116 Allan, 127.
dance and why and what is my intention in my dance, no one can say for certain. I least of all.”

Despite Allan’s caution that critics have been “wrong wrong wrong” about the meaning of her work, scholars have not resisted in producing their own theories regarding The Vision of Salome. For example, Bentley reads the story autobiographically with Herodias standing in for Allan’s own overbearing mother and John the Baptist standing in for her brother—who had been hanged for the murder of two women. Bentley describes Allan’s scene with John the Baptists’ head (a departure from her predecessor Fuller) as a morose kind of family portrait. She explains that “when his [Allan’s brother Theo’s] body was delivered to Isabella [his mother], she kissed Theo’s lips and talked to him for hours—just as Salome had communed with the dead John the Baptist.”

On the other hand, Dierkes-Thrun explains the added scene as a borrowing from Wilde. This parallel to Wilde’s play sets up Dierkes-Thrun’s comparison between Wilde’s and Allan’s transgressive individuation and “modernist sublime.” Dierkes-Thrun, like Bentley, incorporates Allan’s biography into her comparative analysis. Specifically, she articulates how Allan’s libel case against the Vigilante Society for associating Allan with the “Cult of the Clitoris” parallels Oscar Wilde’s trial over “gross indecency.” Allan defended her reputation by suing Noel Pemberton-Billing, the publisher of the journal, for libel, but lost when

117 Allan, 10.
118 Allan, 10.
119 Bentley, 53. Bentley’s parallels are quite extensive. For example, she explains that “in her [Isabella, Allan’s mother] last interaction with her living son, she placed a locket with a picture of Maud around his neck, the neck which was broken by the noose” and that Isabella took his ashes everywhere with her and pleaded with Maud to build monument to her brother. Bentley interprets the Vision of Salome as that monument. Within her autobiography, Allan remains mute on her family history only to say that some horrific event had influenced her dance. Allan never spoke publically about her brother’s alleged crime and execution until it was revealed in the 1918 trial as evidence of her own “perversity.”
her association with a production of Wilde’s *Salome*, her brother’s alleged sex crimes, and her knowledge of the female anatomy in her 1900 illustrated sex study for women, turned the trial against her and condemned her in the court of public opinion. While these two interpretations of *The Vision of Salome* provide some compelling background and biographical information for understanding Allan’s performance, I am more interested in how “spirituality” figures into Allan’s aesthetics, the criticism and accusations of her detractors, and her defense of her work.

In “The Turn of the Century Salome Era: High- and Pop-Culture Variations on the Dance of the Seven Veils,” Richard Bizot describes Allan as hitting upon “a highly marketable formula, composed of sexuality and pseudo-spirituality . . . wrapped up in the rhetoric of High Aesthetic purpose.” This “High Aesthetic purpose,” as with Fuller, may be linked to the symbolist ideal of the *danseuse* and abstract feminine beauty, whereas the “pseudo-spirituality” to which Bizot refers is likely a veiled reference to the philosophy of Francoise Delsarte. Delsarte was an opera singer turned vocal instructor whose philosophy and methods were popularized in America by former student Steele MacKaye and his student Genevieve Stebbins. Delsarte’s method of aligning body, mind, and soul in “harmonious balance” in order to produce pure expression was especially popular among American female modern dancers such as Allan, Isadora Duncan, and Ruth St. Denis. Allan is direct in her attribution to Delsarte for his idea of the “inseparability of the body and the spirit” in her chapter “The Human Body My Instrument.” Other critics also recognize the influence of Delsarte on Allan’s works. Allan’s contemporary T. Grein writes: “Good old Delsarte . . . forgotten in Europe, is having his day. For the Duncans and Maud

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121 Allan, 65.
Allans, *what else are they* but Delsartians. If proof were needed it would be easy to harmonize their every movement with the doctrines of the French aesthete and the fact that both ladies hail from the American continent where the Delsartian theory is taught in many girls’ schools.”

That Delsartian technique was taught to young girls in American studios, makes it important in the study of early American women’s movements. Although I will not “harmonize” every of Allan’s movements with “the French aesthete,” I consider here a few examples within the contexts of Allan’s overall work, her *Vision of Salome*, and her attitudes toward the suffragist movement.

First and foremost, Delsarte’s “System of Expression” rests on the belief “that the beginning and the end [of art] are in God.” Delsarte’s aesthetics, therefore, stand in stark contrast to other aesthetic schools of the time, including the French symbolists and the advent of modernism. In his address to the Philotechnic Society of Paris, Delsarte describes his opposition to such movements, particularly the *Beaux Arts*, as “atheism disguised under the precious title of a new science and which they pretend, to-day, constitutes the basis of aesthetics.” For Delsarte, aesthetics extended beyond an appreciation and attainment of beauty: “Art in itself . . . is not what you should love in art. . . . It is and ought to be in our eyes but a means, a sublime means without doubt, but only a means, nothing but a means” to “the source itself of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.” For Delsarte, a true artist could not be an atheist. Furthermore,

123 Genevieve Stebbins, *Delsarte System of Expression* (New York: Werner, 1887) xii.
124 Stebbins, xxi-xxii.
125 Stebbins, xxiv.
God and art are accessible “only to the pure in heart.”

Delsarte provides an alternative to fin de siècle and modernist aesthetics that, not unlike spiritualism, puts art, the artist, and aesthetics in direct contact with the divine source. Here, a parallel with spiritualism begins to develop in which the artist serves as a medium between art and the divine. Delsarte states, “Art is, then, definitively, a mysterious agent, of which the sublime virtues work.” These “sublime virtues” are articulated as “the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.” Human beings are manifestations of these virtues. Man [and woman] “made in the image of God, manifestly carries in his [her] inner being as in his [her] body, the august imprint of his [her] triple causality.” In other words, “Man [and Woman] feels, thinks, and loves” in correspondence to “the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.” Feeling, thinking, and loving, serve as apparati “to manifest special activities” such as Art. In systemizing Delsarte, Genevieve Stebbins translated these “special activities” into physical expression. Indeed, Delsarte’s “law of correspondence” continues in relation to physical movement. He explains in that “each spiritual function responds a function of the body; to each grand function of the body corresponds a spiritual act.” Loie Fuller expresses something similar in Fifteen Years when she writes, “[T]he body expresses the emotion it has received from the mind. The mind serves as a medium and causes these sensations to be caught up by the body.” As a result “the type of art of which [Delsarte is] speaking purifies that life, illumines the mind, makes perfect and sanctifies the soul; then it embraces, consumes and transfigures it to

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126 Stebbins, xiii.
127 Stebbins, xx.
128 Stebbins, xx.
129 Stebbins, lvi.
131 Fuller, 70-71. Qtd. in Innes, “Loie Fuller,” n.p.
identity with things divine.”¹³² These are the basic philosophies, vastly different in theory from their European symbolist and modernist counterparts, to which young female dancers were exposed in American studios. Genevieve Stebbins, for instance, published Delsarte’s “System of Expression” in 1887 and includes exercises in “The Harmonic Pose of Bearing” and the “Principle of the Trinity” as foundations for the “Gamut of Expression in Pantomime.” Young girls, therefore, were trained that their movements need correspond with what is good, true and beautiful, and that their bodies upheld the potential to purify, illuminate, and sanctify the soul. It is easy to see how this might be problematic to a contemporary feminist study of the “system” in that it seems to reinscribe the values of the “cult of womanhood.” However, whereas Stebbins equates movements proceeding from the abdominal or vital zone of the body with the “vulgar or sensual,” the Salome dancers seem to transgress this limited definition of “purity” and use the system to illuminate and sanctify the idea of a sexual or sensual purity and spirituality.¹³³

Allan, and other Salome dancers, although not usually spoken of in terms of purifying the soul (especially in regard to the “male gaze” of their spectators), often speak of their own work as spiritual, sublime, and sanctifying. For example, Allan defends the “sensual appeal of the dancer’s body that define[s] her art . . . as a necessary tool for aesthetic creation.” She writes, “The dancer’s body is her instrument, the raw material, just as the violin is to the violinist, and clay is to the sculptor. Is it really possible to cover up this raw material when it is precisely this that brings about the desired artistic effect?”¹³⁴ Allan justifies her naked body using Delsartian aesthetics to sanctify the sensual. Similarly, Allan defends her work within a religious and

¹³² Stebbins, xxiii.
¹³³ Stebbins, 45.
¹³⁴ qtd. in Thrun, 97.
spiritual project. Like Fuller, Allan positions dance within a genealogy extending from ancient Egypt, to the Greeks, to Hebrew dances surrounding Jepthah’s Daughter, the daughters of Shiloh, Judith, and, of course Salome. Likewise, she responds to criticism (and praise) from religious communities by engaging them in discourse. For example, among her chapter “Criticisms and Letters,” Allan includes a visit with Archdeacon Sinclair about concerns over her Salome performance, as well as letters from the rector of an English parish, a Church-man, an admiring Quaker, and an academic schooling her on the “Salome of History.” Allan’s response to the Archdeacon is to discuss with him the “genuineness of [her] work” and to convert “him to the idea of [her] dance.” She leaves her first meeting with the Archdeacon on friendly terms and later returns to meet his wife. Likewise, Allan reprints several letters sent to her from people of the church that praise her “commemoration of the beheading of S. John the Baptist” as “inspiring” and another who rejoices in her “high ideals and pray[s] that [she] may ever be protected from what would lower them.” These letters serve to address criticisms of her work as immoral or blasphemous and to protect her from detractors who would have her make changes to the “high ideals” of her work. For this reason, Dierkes-Thrun suggests that these stories may not be entirely true, but fabricated in order to appease Allan’s critics. Whether fact or fiction, the ideas expressed in the letters show the dancer’s attempts to engage in a larger dialogue concerning religion, sexuality, and performance.

Allan’s final letter in “Criticism and Letters” encapsulates ideas of religion, beauty, and women that surround Allan and the philosophies of Delsarte’s Expression. From a Quaker man,

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135 Allan, 17-18.
136 Allan, 98.
137 Allan, 102-103.
the letter opens with what today might be taken as an alarming reinscription of the “cult of womanhood.” The letter reads, “As the devil could not stay in the presence of the Lord, so no bad thought can stand before a good woman, if she has the power of expressing her nature.” On the one hand, women are put in a precarious position of controlling good and evil by way of their “nature”; on the other, the letter encourages the self-expression of women. The writer continues in situating Allan’s Salome as an example of “expressing her [Allan’s] nature” and, in doing so, becoming an expression of the divine:

Impressive is thy Salomé, I cannot doubt that I was still more impressed by thy own character—thy rendering—for whatever else an artist depicts himself. . . . Having this great gift of expression mayest thou ever faithfully guard the God whose temple thou art. How shall they worship Her whom they have not yet seen, and how shall they see without an artist?

Here, a connection is made between the artist, God, and the expression of the artist as a rendering of divinity. A woman, in using her body to express herself, guards her own divinity. Furthermore, the female artist allows the divine to be seen, expressed, and known in female form. A feminist reading of the theology behind Delsarte’s expression would note the possibility of Allan’s dance for recuperating the feminine divine. The problem in this articulation, however, is its dependence on the moral superiority, as well as the moral burden, of the “cult of womanhood.” Woman is the gatekeeper of morality. For example, the letter’s author writes, “A woman is to a man the shrine where the Highest is visibly manifested, and her beauty of form, when expressing beauty within, can drive the evil out of him quicker than anything else in the

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138 Allan, 105.
139 Allan, 105.
world—excepting love itself.”¹⁴⁰ In this statement, a woman is made responsible for the morality of men and, by logical extension, society.

The letter closes with the author recounting his own memory of meeting his wife. Visiting the Alps, he catches sight of a woman naked on the rocks: “I had almost a fear of her, but she had none of me, though brought up as a Puritan, was Nature’s child, and as such, and as an artist would have been delighted with thee.”¹⁴¹ In this passage, the author expresses the possibility of being both “pure” in the Puritanical sense, and natural—unafraid and unashamed of one’s nakedness. Nakedness is no longer associated with sin, but is redeemed as something associated with purity. The Quaker’s letter is a good example of how the discourses and practices surrounding Delsarte’s “System of Expression” held both the potential to liberate women from sexual repression, while, in turn, bound them to the ideals of beauty, purity, and morality that burdened them as responsible for the morality of society. This placed the dancer in the position of both freely expressing her sensuality, while being responsible for the feelings, whether noble or otherwise, aroused in the male spectator, critic, and culture.

In turn, Allan’s understanding of the aesthetics of “the Good, the True, and the Beautiful,” influence her opinions “On Women” which stand in stark contrast to the first-wave feminist suffrage movement, as well as to contemporary feminism. In her chapter “On Women,” Allan responds to a letter as a way to distance her from the movement. In the letter, a self-proclaimed “militant suffragette” criticizes Allan for stating in an article that “Women should influence rather than dictate.”¹⁴² Allan launches into a rebuttal that is largely consistent with her

¹⁴⁰ Allan, 105-106.
¹⁴¹ Allan, 106.
¹⁴² Allan, 110.
aesthetic philosophy. For example, she writes, “As regards the question of votes for women, I believe that a woman can do more from an elevated position in the world of art, by bringing all that makes home beautiful into her husband's and children's lives, than she could by casting a dozen votes before the time is ready.”\(^{143}\) For Allan, like Delsarte, Art is the agent or means of change. A woman is elevated by submitting herself to the “sublime virtues” of Art, and thereby, like the Quaker’s wife, gains the submission of men to her higher ideals. The suffrage movement, quite simply, conflicted with Allan’s personal aesthetics, it was not “beautiful,” but was full of “breaking windows and throwing stones” that would not, in Allan’s opinion “bring a woman what she wants and needs,” but rather were tactics that she felt were “calculated to damage rather than to further the cause” and “above all, to depart from that refining ideal which woman should maintain.”\(^{144}\) While Allan does not outright condemn the cause behind the women’s movement, she rejects its tactics.

Allan’s “refining ideal” surrounding women’s advancement strongly emphasizes education. Allan maintains an equal education for men and women as a precursor to the right to vote. She writes that real differences exist between the sexes, precisely because of unequal education and training. These differences, which according to Allan include women’s emotional composition, make them unsuitable for certain offices, such as politics, law, and medicine, leaving them most suitable for the “Home.” Still, this most important of office of being wife and mother, according to Allan, requires a greater education and intellectual stimulation than provided to women. She writes that although she is “sufficiently old fashioned to believe that the rightful destiny of every woman is to be the wife and mother,” she believes that a woman

\(^{143}\) Allan, 111.
\(^{144}\) Allan, 118-119.
“cannot be a real wife to her husband, or a real mother to her children in the best and highest sense unless she is intellectually and educationally on a level with them.”

Allan herself only lived up to one-half of her ideal, elevating herself through art; however, never becoming a mother. Amy Koritz observes that “Allan’s lifestyle violated the dominant ideal of woman as mother and homemaker” and implies that the dancer’s emphasis on motherhood in her memoir was a tactic meant “to underplay her transgressions.” To accommodate her lifestyle within her argument, without disclosing specific reasons, Allan recognizes “with some sadness” that, like her, “not to every woman can happy wifehood and motherhood fall” and, for this reason, women must be sufficiently educated to “be their own breadwinners and stand alone.” Furthermore, Allan acknowledges that with the proper education, women may one day achieve the equality which they seek in order to be “on the level” with men outside of the home. She writes, “The differences upon which I have insisted may be due to long generations of training and environment. It may well be that, in years to come, when the improved education of women has become more general, when the greater freedom of their mode of life, with its accompanying broadening of mental outlook, has wrought changes, these differences may be modified.”

Generally, Allan’s attitudes toward women’s rights fall well within separate sphere and “cult of womanhood” ideologies.

For this reason, contemporary feminists have had a difficult time reconciling Allan within feminist studies. On the one hand, Allan’s memoir espouses ideologies that keep and valorize

145 Allan, 114.
147 Allan, 115.
148 Allan, 116.
women’s subordination to men. On the other hand, “Allan did contribute to the legitimization of women in the performing arts and the further broadening of opportunities for middle-class women, wittingly or not.” Dierkes-Thrun and Amy Kortiz speculate that “Allan’s need to profess her disapproval may have been that the association with the suffragettes threatened Allan’s popular success among conservative middle-class mainstream audiences, who were still mostly opposed to women’s suffrage. Amy Koritz points out that Allan’s public orthodoxy in gender matters ‘was perhaps essential to Allan’s success in society, if not in art.’” It is true that Allan was caught in a triangle between the patronage of English government officials and the suffragettes. The figure of Salome, and especially images of Allan’s Salome, was becoming a popular symbol among the suffrage movement. Dierkes-Thrun and Davinia Caddy explain that “as a widely recognized ‘archetype of the sybaritic, bodily and sexual,’ Salomé became a potential ‘vehicle for appropriation by . . . feminism’; she was ‘a powerful symbol in the age of the femme nouvelle’ because her self-reliance and open rebellion against the patriarchal status-quo.” Dierkes-Thrun notes anxiety among opponents of the suffrage movement over Allan’s relationship with high-ranking government officials, including the prime minister. Dierkes-Thrun documents political sketches and cartoons in The Referee and the Pall Mall Gazette that reference Maud Allan as Salome, including one of Prime Minister Herbert H. Asquith, with whom she was rumored to have an affair, wearing Allan’s distinctive costume. Having her image used on both sides of the suffragette movement, put Allan in an awkward position. It is,

149 qtd in Dierkes-Thrun, 108. See Walkowitz, para 7.
152 Dierkes-Thrun, 105.
therefore, entirely possible that Allan’s renunciation of the suffragettes in her 1908 memoir, was a tactic of self-preservation.

Nonetheless, the consistency of Allan’s feminine ideal across the *Vision of Salome*, the Quaker letter in “Criticism and Letters,” and her response to suffragettes in “On Women,” lead me to conclude that she was, in part, sincere in her attitudes toward women. Returning to *Vision of Salome*, it is important to remember that the women within the narrative, Herodias and Salome, both have significant influence over two powerful men. The villain Herodias abuses her power, using her influence over her daughter and her daughter’s influence over Herod to have John the Baptist, who subsequently has the power to destroy Herodias’ reputation, executed. As a foil to Herodias, the tragic heroine Salome discovers a “superior power” in John the Baptist and, in the end, seeks the “spiritual guidance of the man whose wraith is before her.”\(^{153}\) Salome’s tragic flaw is in misplacing her feminine influence to satisfy her mother and step-father, rather than aligning herself to the truth, good, and beauty of John the Baptist. Similarly, much of the letter from Allan’s Quaker admirer concerns a woman’s influence over a man. For example, the Quaker describes his wife as an inspiring figure like “Wordsworth’s Lucy,” concluding the “The hearts of men that fondly here admire fair seeming shows, may lift themselves up higher, and learn to love with zealous humble duty the eternal fountain of that heavenly beauty.”\(^{154}\) Much of the sentiment expressed in the *Vision of Salome* and the Quaker’s letter supports Allan’s statement that “Women should influence rather than [like Herodias and the suffragettes] dictate.”\(^{155}\) The idea is that women are in a position of influence over men and, if true to their

\(^{153}\) Allan, 127.

\(^{154}\) Allan, 106.

\(^{155}\) Allan, 110.
good natures, this influence will prove favorable toward the women. In her letter “On Women,” Allan writes that “In conclusion, I should like to say that men have in the past, step by step, removed many of the obstacles that have stood in the way of woman's freedom. Our condition has changed immeasurably for the better. . . . For, after all, no man is free from the influence of some woman.” All three of these sources within My Life and Dancing support the conclusion that Maud Allan, whose image was taken up by progressive feminists, was at best a reluctant feminist who believed that women’s positions would change only upon living up to the “sublime virtues” of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful in their influence over men, who would be their saviors.

Ironically, despite her retractions, Allan’s influence on the suffragettes could not be denied and would be used by a man who would serve to condemn her on the very grounds of spirituality. Allan’s legal problems began in 1917 when she took the role of Salome in a production of Wilde’s play at the Independent Theatre Society of London. Dierkes-Thrun explains that in the time following Allan’s 1908 Salome tour, the character’s association with the suffragette movement continued to grow in strength. She cites the 1911 production of Wilde’s Salomé by British suffragettes at the New Stage Players at the Court Theatre as cementing this association. According to Judith Walkowitz, “‘While feminist actresses may have had a number of professional motivations for staging this performance, they brought Salome under the sign of the Militant Woman, rendering her a new icon for the expanding militant operations of the Women’s Social and Political Union, which had stepped up campaigns . . . in the streets of

156 Allan, 117.
Central London.‖ In 1917, Allan’s “refining influence” could no longer disassociate Salome as a symbol of militant suffragettes. Dierkes-Thrun observes, along with Felix Cherniavsky that “the decision to produce Salome in the spring of 1918 was politically unwise’ in the prevailing cultural climate of wartime paranoia.” Allan’s reprisal of the role caught the attention of The Vigilante which “launched a vicious media attack against Allan” that culminated in an article “entitled ‘Cult of the Clitoris’” and “insinuated that Maud Allan and Grein sought to spread homosexual and moral corruption in Britain in order to aid the German enemy from within.”

In the libel suit that followed, Billing “tried to forge a connection between sexual perversion and the ideas of ‘beauty’ and ‘spirituality’ in the play, between immorality and aesthetics.” In examining a witness by the last name of Cooke, Billing’s asked “Is it customary for sex perverts to describe as beautiful and glorious all their perversions?“ and “for them to read into the distinctly physical arts something spiritual?” Cooke replied, “Spiritual, poetic, beautiful, pure love; those are their expressions.” The association between spirituality and so-called perversion was exacerbated in the testimony of Lord Alfred Douglass, who had testified against Wilde in his indecency trial and reprised his role to testify against Allan, saying: “With these sort of people evil is their good; everything is topsy turvey; physical is spiritual; spiritual is physical, and so on; it is a perversion, an inversion, of everything.”

157 qtd. in Dierkes-Thrun, 106. See Walkowitz, para 60.
159 Dierkes-Thrun, 109.
160 Dierkes-Thrun, 117
162 qtd in Dierkes-Thrun, 117. See Kettle, 178.
statements would turn everything that Allan had said and written about the spirituality of her
dance topsy-turvy.

As Brooke’s suggests, spiritualism and spirit-rapping or spirit-dancing in particular, held
the potential to blur lines of gender and sexuality. Homophobia, therefore, created a deep distrust
of spirituality. Under these conditions, Allan’s defense of Salome worked against her.
Throughout her career and the trial, Allan had defended Salome on moral and spiritual grounds.
She “portrayed Salome as . . . a lover of beauty and purity,” saying, “‘Salome fell in love with
the holiness and beauty of this man . . . And she feels the insult of this man who treats her as a
wanton and a harlot which she was not.’”163 While Allan consistently maintained that neither she
nor Salome were “harlots,” but that their sexual and spiritual desires were true, good, and
beautiful, the rising public sentiment that associated the spiritual with the “perverse” condemned
her.

This anxiety over spirituality has continued into the modern era, although not due to
spirituality’s association with homosexuality. Rather, modern scholars prefer materialist readings
such as Dierkes-Thrun’s project of “transforming metaphysical sublimity into physical and
artistic sublimity.”164 However, to do so reifies, if for different reasons, the sense of suspicion
and paranoia over spirituality generated by the conservative Vigilante Society, but this time from
the academy. Instead, investigating the spiritual claims of Salome dancers like Allan, may allow
for a richer discussion of the inherent problems within their aesthetic philosophies, like what
Dierkes-Thrun describes as regressive feminism, while allowing for the consideration of how

163 qtd in Dierkes-Thrun, 116. See Kettle, 71-74.
164 Dierkes-Thrun, 3.
women have used different interpretive methods, including spiritualism and Expression to renegotiate their sexual identities within early feminism.

Aida Overton Walker’s Salome (1908, 1912, New York City), African Spiritualism and “Double Consciousness”

In *Bodies of Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1859-1910*, Daphne Brooks compares African spiritualism with the upper class phenomenon of Anglo spiritualism, describing the latter as “‘haunted’ by African religious practices . . . and [an] ‘African way of way of remembering (black) bodies and the ‘socially dead.’”165 For Aida Overton Walker, the first black Salome, the “spirit dance” of this pseudo-biblical woman would become a way of re-membering the black body onto the white dominated stage where it had been pronounced as culturally and socially dead. Rather than join in the white narratives of Salome as the veiled Semitic seductress whose desires threatened the lives of men, Brooks positions Walker as participating in an alternate Pan-Africanist discourse surrounding “mystic consciousness” and the veiled black woman of arts and literature.166 Brooks looks past usual allusions to Moreau, Huysmans, and Wilde as idols of inspiration for Salome dancers, instead drawing connections between Walker and W.E.B. Du Bois’ *The Soul of Black Folk*, Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins’ *Of One Blood*, Henry Ossawa Tanner’s painting *Salome* and Meta Warrick Fuller’s sculpture “Ethiopia Awakening.” Through these sources, Brooks develops a “politics of ‘diasporic consciousness’ and the female black body” by which to interpret Walker’s 1908 and 1912 Salome performances. She writes, “Walker introduced her ‘veiled lady’ into a busy field of black

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165 Brooks, 15.
166 Brooks, 329.
cultural images preoccupied with this icon of ‘mystic’ consciousness” that was quite different from the white discourse surrounding Salome.  

For example, Brooks links Walker’s veiled Salome to W.E.B. Du Bois’ “spiritualist rhetoric” of “double consciousness” in *The Souls of Black Folk* and Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins’ novel *Of One Blood.* In *The Souls of Black Folk,* Du Bois describes the “spiritual world” of black America in terms of being caught between “two worlds within and without the Veil,” writing in his chapter “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”:

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness.

This description of the veiled black American as descending from a long line of Eastern and ancient figures befits the genealogy of such bodies within twentieth-century Orientalism—the Egyptian, the Indian, the Greek and Roman, and the Negro all being popular subjects among Orientalist artists and performers. The veiled figure of a black Salome, therefore, was a logical progeny within this lineage and was easily appropriated as an icon of Du Bois’ “double

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167 Brooks, 329.
168 Brooks, 291.
consciousness.” Particular to the Salome dancer, like the black American, she was, in general, “looked on” with “contempt and pity.” As a woman she, too, experienced a “double consciousness,” perceiving herself through the eyes of others while, at the same time, trying to subvert the gaze into something that matched her own self-perception. This effect must have been particularly acute for black dancer Aida Overton Walker. However, as Du Bois articulated in his longer essay, the black American had the gift of a “second-sight” and the opportunity to leave “the white world, [stepping] within the Veil, raising it that [audiences] may view faintly its deeper recesses, —the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls.”

By taking up the Salome dance, Aida Overton Walker did just this; stepping into the Veil of Salome, she left behind the white world’s interpretation of the pseudo-biblical figure in order to reveal deeper spiritual meanings behind her “Dance of Seven Veils.” It is important, therefore, to understand Walker’s dance within the scenario, or organizing principle, of double consciousness.

Walker was not the first, or the only, artist to regard Du Bois proposal for taking up the spiritualist veil. According to Brooks, Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins’ further capitalized on Du Bois suggestion of the veil as “a kind of occult tract” with her heroine Dianthe, a singer in the novel Of One Blood, who playing “dual roles as diva and spiritualist medium” resists the passivity usually associated with female mediums. Brooks explains that “Dianthe’s voice . . . undermines the dominant presumption in spiritualism that the ‘success of spirit communication depended on the ability’ of the mediums ‘to give up their own identity. . . .’ The scene instead demonstrates how the heroine uses her own voice as a tool of ‘the Veil’ which contributes to individual and

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collective agency.” Likewise, both white and black Salome dancers resisted becoming passive mediums by using their bodies to transgress social and sexual norms, therefore contributing to their individual agency and, perhaps, through “Salomania” their collective agency as well. Brooks suggests, however, that for the black Salome, “the intersection of spiritualism and the African diasporic liberation movements” offered something more. Brooks observes a key difference between white and black Salome dancers. For white dancers “the veil, the idealized and clichéd colonial garment, is only worn to be removed, to be co-opted as an instrument spectacularizing the act of uncovering.” While white dancers used the veil to uncover and destigmatize the female body, Brooks suggests that Walker’s Salome intended to do quite the opposite. In taking on the persona of Salome, Brooks argues that Walker simultaneously joined and diverged from the white-dominated craze of Salomania in order to “(re)cover” the black female body from exploitation by “eschewing the conventions of the imminent striptease spectacle . . . so that she might dance along the axis of diasporic consciousness with other black veiled icons of the period.” Walker did not emulate the scenario of white burlesque Salomania, but rather reacted to this craze through the emulation of veiled icons within her culture. It is with through the scenario of double consciousness that she entered the Salome field.

The other “veiled ladies” within black culture at the time included Henry Ossawa Tanner’s painting Salome and Meta Warwich Fuller’s sculpture “Ethiopia Awakening.” Brooks argues that these images, as well as the philosophies of Du Bois and Hopkins had significant influence on Walker’s portrayal of Salome. For example, she notes that “Tanner’s 1902 portrait .

171 Brooks, 324.
172 Brooks, 324.
173 Brooks, 337.
captures the ambiguity of veiled consciousness. Swathed in shimmering, diaphanous gowns, Tanner’s heroine sways demurely in the twilight of racial and visual indeterminacy. This image of a woman in a “diaphanous gown” and its effect of “indeterminacy” is conscious both of Loie Fuller’s play with material and “indeterminate illumination” and the “spirit dancer’s” blurring of racial and gender boundaries. Furthermore, Meta Warwick Fuller’s “Ethiopia Awakening” and its depiction of a “noblewoman . . . emerging from the cloth of papyrus of the dead” holds some thematic parallels to Salome, as a young noblewoman, and her associations with death. Consequently Walker’s stage name Aida (born Ada), is in reference to the “imprisoned Ethiopian princess” of Verdi’s opera by the same name. To some degree, Walker’s stage identity can be read as commenting on her own imprisonment by and awakening from aesthetic expectations and appropriations of the black/brown female body in white dominant culture. Understood in connection with Pan-Africanist ideology and its manifestations in black art, Walker’s veiling can be interpreted as “a radical expression of resistant black identity.”

Walker entered the well-established phenomenon of Salomania in 1908 when her Salome dance was added to the repertoire of Bandanna Land, an African-American minstrel show produced by her husband George Walker and his stage and business partner Bert Williams. In much the same way that Lewis and Bentley argue that women subverted the politics of Orientalism, and Du Bois argues that black Americans see through the veil of double consciousness, the Walkers and Williams used minstrelsy and blackface as a “nascent black

175 Brooks, 329.
176 Brooks, 329.
177 Brooks, 329.
178 Brooks, 340.
theatre strategy” for “racial uplift politics.”

Brooks summarizes the philosophy of the Williams and Walker Company. If dominant white culture viewed the black body “for the purposes of mass consumption and collective desire,” as well as “an imaginary site of contact and conflict,” the black performer had the opportunity and responsibility to “encounter” and “turn” “the gaze back onto white performance culture by melding rigorous imitation with surreptitious bastardization, and bold parody into new forms.”

On the surface, the Walkers’ and Williams’ performances played in to sensationalized images of the “negro,” but subversively the company challenged racial divisions by employing African-American performers and playing to Broadway houses which, although segregated, nevertheless enabled black audiences to “cross-over” into what was then a predominantly white “New York social life.”

Aida Overton Walker’s 1908 performance of Salome provides a case study for what were admittedly both “reactionary” and “resistant cultural performance strategies.” According to Brooks, Walker saw dance as a way for black women to gain social mobility and employment. Brooks quotes Walker’s 1908 article “Opportunities the Stage Offers Intelligent and Talented Women” published in New York Age as “stress[ing] the practical benefits of theatre as a singular field in which ‘colored women’ could have ‘the advantage of travelling’ and in which they could additionally meet ‘a number of people of different classes.’” Brooks emphasizes that both Walkers were active in “racial uplift,” especially where the politics of black representation on the

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179 Brooks, 215.
180 Brooks, 26.
181 Brooks, 28.
182 Brooks, 218.
183 Brooks, 220.
184 Brooks, 21. Walker’s Salome dance was added to the Bandanna Land production when her husband George took ill and was unable to perform.
185 Brooks, 283.
stage was concerned. Not blind to their complicity in the reification of black stereotypes, both Aida and George Walker wrote avidly and frankly about the predicament of the black body in performance for publications such as *Colored American Magazine, New York Age*, and *Theatre Magazine*. Together, the couple (cake)-walked the “fine line between disrupting the master narratives of theatrical ‘race’ performance and simultaneously capitulating to a familiar and debilitating caricature,” in what they viewed as a radical politics for the time.

Specifically, Walker’s “Salome, Dance of the Seven Veils” would respond to a craze that had become a scenario by which white performers Orientalized and primitivized brown and black sexuality. Salome dancers, even those performing in opera and modern dance, were complicit in the performance of a form of black-/brown-face to the detriment of the image of black female sexuality. Despite claims of feminism and sexual liberation, portrayals of the highly-sexualized Salome conflicted with the image of femininity that black activists were proffering as the “New Negro Woman.” Brooks quotes activist Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in articulating “‘a politics of silence’ regarding black female sexuality as a reaction against sexualized stereotypes . . . [which] necessitated that ‘black women, especially of the middle class, reconstruct and represent their sexuality through its absence–through silence, secrecy and

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186 Brooks, 213, 217. George Walker was emphatic that white actors in blackface were “counterfeit” to Williams’ and Walker’s “natural” blackness or, as advertised in *Vanity Fair*, “Nature’s Black-Face Comedy.” To the contemporary critic, these “natural” minstrels still read as unabashed “black-face comedy”; however, Walker saw them as the only and “necessary entrance for African Americans to cultivate employment” and self-representation on the stage.

187 Brooks, 213. The Walkers were well-known for popularizing the cakewalk among white dancers and audiences. Ironically, the cakewalk was based on “an old plantation dance in which promenading slaves mockingly imitated white cotillions.” See Susan Glenn, “The Americanization of Salome: Sexuality, Race, and the Careers of Vulgar Princesses,” *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots Of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000) 113.
invisibility.”

Brooks notes that Walker’s Salome was potentially dangerous in that its association with burlesque could serve to reinforce sexualized images of black women. Walker’s taming and technical refinement of the Salome dance, however, served to establish a more discreet, though not invisible, image of black sexuality, while simultaneously enabling Walker to cross the color line into the white-dominated forms of modern and classical dance.

Critical reception of Walker’s Salome stressed her subdued sexuality. The often-quoted review by black art critic Lester A. Walton of the *New York Age*, suggests an admiration for Walker’s “desire to make ‘Salome’ a cleaner dance and void of suggestiveness,” but registers disappointment that “in doing so she gives a version that is mild in comparison.” Other critics continued to draw general comparisons between Walker and the promiscuity of other Salome dancers. Krasner quotes one critic as stating, “Miss Walker’s Salome is something like the others, being more modest, but quite as meaningless. . . . [T]here is nothing of the hoocha-ma-cooch effect which adds a suggestion of sensuality to the exhibitions of other Salomes.” Similarly, a Boston reviewer observed that Walker’s “dress is not so conspicuous in its absence.” Apparent in reviews of Walker’s Salome, the characteristic which audiences found surprisingly absent from the dancer whose skin “may have been of a hue resembling” the “original Salome” was the primitivist notion of “hoocha-ma-cooch” sexuality. Rather, “the

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188 qtd in Brooks 332.
189 qtd in Krasner, 201. See also Brooks, 338.
190 qtd. in Krasner, 201.
191 qtd. in Krasner, 201.
192 Brooks, 330 citing an unsourced clipping from Williams and Walker file, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.
only colored artist who [had] ever been known to give this dance in public . . . [gave] a graceful and interesting version of the dance.” 193

While Brooks provides a compelling and plausible contemporary reading of Walker’s “Salome, Dance of the Seven Veils,” reviews and reactions of the performer’s era did not seem to perceive her performance as radical. Most of the reviews note Walker’s departure from the overt sexuality of other Salome performances, but perceive this choice as good-taste rather than radical politics. Krasner argues that fellow performer Williams’ parody of Salome in the same production of Bandanna Land may have deflected Walker’s political impact. Williams’ is described by Brooks as wrapped in gauze, barefoot in the custom of modern dancers of the time, and producing a watermelon instead of a head on a silver platter. 194 Krasner concludes that this burlesque of the white modern dance form and the reification of the black stereotype, “undermin[ed] the seriousness of Walker’s intent.” 195 Contrary to Krasner, Glenn and Brooks speculate that this undermining may have been intentional. The Williams and Walker Company was in the precarious position of having to please black audiences, who may have appreciated the black-nationalist undertones of Walker’s Salome, and white audiences who would have been uncomfortable with this political economy and more accepting of Williams’ caricature of a black Salome. 196 Williams’ undermining of Walker’s “serious intent” may have been tactical in order to distract white audiences from her subversive politics. This would explain the seemingly

194 Brooks, 333.
195 Brooks, 200.
196 See Glenn, 110-112 and Krasner, 199. Blackface and whiteface “drag parodies of Salome” were popular on vaudeville stages during the Salome Craze and would have been something that white audiences had come to expect.
innocuous critical reviews of Walker’s performances. On the other hand, Williams and Walker may have been playing out a rivalry within the company. Either way, the contrasting performances of Walker and Williams illustrate Lewis’ observation that male and female performers manipulated Orientalism, as present in the Salome myth, toward different ends and to be read differently by different audiences.

Walker’s Salome may also be “read differently,” but to similar ends through Jose Esteban Muñoz’s theory of “disidentification.” Walker disidentified with Orientalist and primitivist performances of the Salome figure as parodied by Williams, while at the same time disidentifying with Williams’ blackface comedy. She appropriated the “damaged stereotypes” of Salome (the gendered, racialized, and spiritual other) in order to “recycle” “them as powerful and seductive sites of self-creation.”197 With her Salome, Walker moved away from (or disidentified with) the black minstrelsy in order to achieve her professional goal of becoming a black dancer of classical and modern forms. Likewise, Walker attempted to disidentify black-nationalism from minstrelsy, which served to reify primitivist notions of the black body, to more sophisticated forms, which politically encroached upon the white dominated performance terrain. Brooks observes that Walker was “emblematic of the sort of ‘New Negro woman’ who used performance strategies . . . to imagine how performance culture might serve as a site of revision and self-making for black women and their overdetermined bodies in the cultural imaginary.”198 Walker created her Salome to be in line with the image of black womanhood encouraged in “racial uplift” ideology. Her Salome de-emphasized the character’s sexuality, instead

198 Brooks, 286.
emphasizing the skill and technical achievement of the African-American dancer on par with her white upper- and middle-class contemporaries. Walker “work[ed] on and against dominant ideology” in order to “transform a cultural logic from within.”\textsuperscript{199} Rather than eliding or dismantling the Orientalist and patriarchal images of gender and race, Walker, in line with Muñoz’s argument, exposed, transcended, and transfigured these images through disidentification. In order to survive and excel in the early twentieth-century world of professional dance, Walker would take on the role of Salome, but in a different manner than either her black minstrel or white modern dance counterparts.

Walker eventually achieved her personal and professional goal of crossing the dance world’s racial divide by becoming the first African-American Salome to perform in Strauss’ opera in 1912. Following the death of her husband\textsuperscript{200} and the dissolution of the Williams and Walker Company, Walker was free to create the role independently of William’s minstrel parody.\textsuperscript{201} Walker debuted as the Salome dancer in Strauss’ opera at the Victoria Theatre in New York City upon the invitation of Oscar Hammerstein. While Walker’s style of dance remained truthful to her original 1908 choreography, critics framed her classical performance as a novelty, billing her as “the first colored performer who [had] ‘ever attempted to execute classical dancing’ or who was “capable of graduating from [the negro vaudeville] environment.”\textsuperscript{202} Glenn concludes that Walker’s tepid reception at Victoria Theatre proved that she was “unable to transcend the categories to which black performers had been consigned.”\textsuperscript{203} Brooks disagrees,

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\textsuperscript{199} Muñoz, 11.
\textsuperscript{200} George Walker died in 1911.
\textsuperscript{201} Krasner, 205.
\textsuperscript{202} qtd in Glenn, 117.
\textsuperscript{203} Glenn, 117.
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criticizing Glenn for being “limited by [her] relation to white audiences.” Instead, Brooks argues that Walker was not necessarily trying to align herself with white audiences and artists, but instead used her body politically as an intervention into the scenario of white culture and its representational practices concerning the black body.

Brooks once again aligns Walker’s second Salome performance with “racial uplift, black nationalist, and black women’s cultural discourses” and judges it, accordingly, as successful:

By breaking the color line in modern dance and performing her own version of Salome, Walker staged her own coup of dominant cultural forms and recentered them in the context of all-black theatrical narrative. . . . [The] veiled lady created yet another alternative image of black women on the stage, and it enabled her to further unseat the grotesque coon song caricatures of black femininity. . . . Walker’s Salome signified her own claims to ownership of artistry and representation of her own body in dance.

Indeed, Walker’s Salome performances did not catapult her into the white world of classical and modern dance, nor was that, according to Brooks, Walker’s desire. For Brooks, it is enough for Walker to have opened the door to opportunities for African Americans in mainstream entertainment and to expose white audiences to a representation of a black body that defied their stereotypical expectations. An alliance with white female modern dancers on behalf of gender or racial-uplift was unlikely. As part of the white dominant culture, modern female dancers shared many of the cultural and racial prejudices of their male counterparts. For instance, Isadora

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204 Brooks, 334.
205 Brooks, 335.
206 Brooks, 333.
Duncan, often considered a pioneer of modern dance and emulated in Walker’s style of barefoot dancing, had particularly harsh views about black dance forms. Krasner notes that in her autobiography, Duncan writes that “‘the ape-like convulsions of the Charleston,’ like the ‘inane coquetry of the ballet, or the sensual convulsion of the Negro,’ are antithetical to the noblest forms of dance.” Rather than desiring to defect or ally with the world of white dance, Krasner agrees with Brooks that Walker’s Salome was “an artistic response appropriate to her white contemporaries,” as well as an intervention into restrictive representations and expectations for the black dancer. Sadly, it is unclear how far Walker could have taken this intervention as the dancer passed away from kidney failure at the age of 34 in 1914.

As did her contemporary Du Bois, Aida Overton Walker adopted the black veiled woman, through the persona of Salome, as a way of exercising her “double consciousness.” Walker stepped within the veil of Salome both to disrupt the consciousness of white desire for the eroticized black female body, and to redirect this consciousness onto “the era’s increasing fascination with women’s bodies as conduits of black liberation politics and desire at the turn of the century.” Salomania offered an opportunity to take up a literal veil in complement to Du Bois figurative veil in order that by “raising it [audiences] may view faintly” the “deeper recesses” of Walker’s greater struggle as an African American dancer within the white field of modern dance. Walker and her contemporaries Tanner, Hopkins, and Warwick Fuller, offer a different understanding of the “veiled woman” than does the lineage of Moreau, Huysmans, and Loie Fuller. Often described as a “spiritual” dancer, Walker’s spirituality—arising and

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207 qtd. in Brooks, 205.
208 Brooks, 206.
209 Brooks, 329.
responding to the Pan-African diaspora—has often been exorcised through the haunting of Anglo-spiritualism that dominates the discourse surrounding Salome dancers in the early twentieth-century. It is through the scenario of African-spiritualism and “mystic” and “double consciousness” that Walker can be more fully understood as both participating in and transgressing racial, gender, and sexual boundaries.

It would be an oversimplification, however, to binarize female dancers of the early twentieth century into the simplistic and constructed categories of black and white. Rather, it is possible to view fin de siècle dancers as a network of bodies fulfilling the role which Brooks describes as the “spirit-dancer” and African spiritualist: “Toiling at the intersections of the spirit and the flesh. . . . Opening up the body to serve as a conduit of transpersonal contact, communal desire and knowledge.”211 Both black and white performers used dance to channel and challenge the cultural spirit of Salomania. White dancers conjured Salome to express and fulfill socially transgressive sexual and spiritual desires. Likewise, Brooks describes Walker in spiritualist terms as a:

Pan-Africanist medium and narrative agent of black feminist desire. . . . She both signifies the veil ideology of diasporic consciousness . . . and manipulates that loaded trope so that it comes to represent at once a suggestion of both spiritual and the corporeal in relation to New Negro womanhood . . . rather than just ‘living in the veil,’ she dances in it, making the black female body a source of visceral, visible, aesthetic agency and desire.212

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211 Brooks, 16.
212 Brooks, 330.
For both black and white dancers, the movement of the spirit through the corporeal body, served as a site of contact and contestation with the affective flows of the larger cultural body.

Ruth St. Denis’ Salome (1931 Ashville, NC), Madonna (New York, 1934) and Christian Science and Orientalism

Taking her stage name from Saint Denis, who when martyred by decapitation picked up his own head and delivered a final sermon, this aptly named Salome dancer came to the role late in her career.²¹³ Ruth St. Denis had occasions to play the role twice before, but Oscar Hammerstein had rejected St. Denis’ Salome as not “racy enough,” and Max Reinhardt dismissed her in his 1907/8 German production due to her “excessive meddling and opposition to Wilde’s original story line.”²¹⁴ St. Denis, therefore “did not revisit the role of Salomé until 1931”²¹⁵ when she appeared in a production of Wilde’s play in Ashville, NC.²¹⁶ Despite St. Denis’ seeming reluctance to play the role of Salome, she shares much in common with other American Salome dancers, including a spiritual and religious focus to her work, her Delsartian training, and a preoccupation with the relationship between sexuality and spirituality.

Distinguishing her from the other American Salomes, however, is her openness in billing herself as an Oriental dancer. An examination of St. Denis’ works through the lenses of Said’s Orientalism and Lewis’ Gendering Orientalisms, illuminates the ways in which Salome dancers

²¹⁴ Bentley, 46.
²¹⁵ Diereks Thrun, 210. See Tydeman and Price, 139-40.
²¹⁶ Bentley, 46.
reinscribed the Imperialist project, as well as used Orientalism toward their professional and personal advantage in the early twentieth-century.

Certainly, each of the Salome dancers in my study falls well within Said’s critique of Orientalism. Each performed representations of the East that contemporary readers and viewers would find disturbing. For example, Loie Fuller featured black male performers in some of her dances and in her memoir referred to the ceremonial King of Djoloff in Senegal, whom she met while visiting the Colonial exposition in Marseilles, as a “Handsome Savage.”

Likewise, in her libel case against Pemberton-Billing, Maud Allan defended Oscar Wilde’s play testifying that Salomé’s desires for John the Baptist were “spiritual, expressed in Orientalist terms” and “blamed the habits of ‘the Eastern world’ for the excesses of the play.” As for St. Denis, she made a career of representing the Eastern body in what she called “translations” for Western audiences: “As she explains her work, she uses the dancing of a people as a basis on which to compose a translation of that people's point of view and habit of thought.” Each of these examples demonstrates the Imperialist tendency to take possession of Eastern representations and to subordinate the Orient as exotic, sexualized, and inferior. Despite the Salome dancers’ intent to liberate female sexuality from a sexually repressive Western morality by “translating” the biblical character of Salome through her Eastern complement, these dancers essentially occupied the role of the Oriental Salome for the purposes of their own personal and political conquests. Said writes:

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217 Fuller, 172-173.
218 Dierkes-Thrun, 116.
To the Westerner . . . the Oriental was always like some aspect of the West . . . for example, Indian religion was essentially an Oriental version of Germano-Christian pantheism. Yet the Orientalist makes it his work to be always concerting the Orient from something into something else; he does this for himself, for the sake of his culture, in some cases for what he believes is the sake of the Oriental.²²⁰

These female Salome dancers were as guilty of this as their Orientalist male counterparts. The Salome of Salomania was an Oriental version of the pseudo-biblical character that had developed within the Western Christian tradition.

As a self-professed Oriental dancer, Ruth St. Denis was not oblivious to her appropriation of Indian dance. Although she “steeped herself in the learning of India and Egypt and the other countries she sought to bring to her audiences” and believed that “she was in complete harmony with the art and religions of the Orient,” her intent was not to represent Eastern culture. As her husband and fellow dancer Ted Shawn writes, “an exposition of Indian dancing would be quite beside the point. . . . Nor do [the dances] pretend to exploit the complete range of Indian choreography; Miss St. Denis herself would be the first to disclaim any such intention.”²²¹ Rather, St. Denis intentionally modified and “translated” the Eastern culture for Western audiences, playing to what Said observes as the West’s superiority complex and its Imperialist tendencies. A letter from the London Sporting Times, “written by a retired English army officer who had seen much service in India,” illustrates Said’s point:

²²⁰ Said, 67.
Miss St. Denis gives us very nearly the real thing in her dances or rather, let me put it thus: she gives us the real thing, refined and improved. The nautch she takes part in, with Indian musicians to play and chant, and a rajah looking on and applauding, is far more interesting than any nautch I ever saw in India. To the Europeans, meaningless stamping and wriggling which goes on for a quarter of an hour at a time, is eliminated, and Miss St. Denis, with rings on her fingers and bells on her slim brown ankles, does just the nautch steps which a European audience can understand and appreciate.222

St. Denis’ husband, Ted Shawn, complements the testimony of the soldier with hearsay from the natives themselves: “The Maharajah of Kuch-Behar, the Maharajah of Kapurthala, and the Gaekwar of Baroda, men who in India have given many a nautch of their own, saw Miss St. Denis, and have expressed their intense admiration.”223 These quotes from Shawn’s hagiographic biography of his wife titled Ruth St. Denis: Pioneer and Prophet, serve to legitimize St. Denis’ project from the perspectives of both the Occident and Orient, while professing St. Denis’ superiority in refining and improving the “real thing” for a European audience. St. Denis’ Oriental dance, then, can be judged to support the imperialist project of occupying and “refining” the East.

While it cannot be denied that St. Denis participated in the Imperialist project, perhaps some value can be taken from what the Orientalist dancer was trying, in Said’s words, to “concert” the Orient into for the sake of herself and her culture. In other words, without denying the problematics of St. Denis, something may be gained from viewing her Orientalist project not

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222 Shawn, 40.
223 Shawn, 40.
from the perspective of Eastern culture, to which she may do disservice, but from the Western culture and its causes that she serves. After all, as Said observes, these performances have “less to do with the Orient than [they do] with our world.”

From her early upbringing, St. Denis was influenced by what Said describes as a Romantic Orientalism that looked to the East in order to escape the modern materialism of the West. The tension between materialism and spiritualism in St. Denis’ childhood was expressed through her mother’s interest in Christian Science and its guiding principles of “mind over matter,” its belief in “an infinite Spirit that left no room for evil,” and a reliance on the Holy Bible. St. Denis’ early exposure to this form of Western spiritualism was further supplemented through her mother’s lessons to her in the Delsarte method, and an introduction to Theosophy through family friends and acquaintances. In Divine Dancer, Suzanne Shelton explains that “The Theosophists, like the Christian Scientists, were influenced by the mid-century cults of Spiritualism and Mesmerism, but while Mrs. Eddy [the founder of Christian Science] drew on the Holy Bible, the Theosophists borrowed the basic Indian religious doctrines of karma, reincarnation, and a Divine Absolute.” From an early age, therefore, St. Denis was immersed in a dialogue, albeit one-sided, between Western and Eastern spiritualisms.

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224 Said, 12.
225 Shelton, 10.
226 Ruth St. Denis, Ruth St. Denis, an Unfinished Life: an Autobiography (New York: Harper, 1939) 2-7. St. Denis’ mother was a deep influence on the dancer. Before meeting Ruth’s father Tom Dennis, Emma Dennis, had graduated medical school. Once married, the two lived for a time at the Perth Amboy arts colony where they were introduced to Steele MacKay, a disciple of Delsarte responsible for bringing the movement to the United States. Mrs. Dennis maintained her association with the Delsarte method through a contact in New Haven by the name of Madame Poté. Recognizing Ruth’s aptitude for the arts, Mrs. Dennis instructed her daughter in the method.
227 Shelton, 10.
Several experiences in St. Denis’s adolescence extended this dialogue between the West and East to the arts. Shelton writes that “in the winter of 1892, Ruthie experienced what she later called ‘the real birth of my art life.’ The occasion was a Delsarte matinee, presented on behalf of the National Christian League for the Benefit of Social Purity at the Madison Square Theatre. The artist was Genevieve Stebbins.” Through Stebbins’ performance, St. Denis began to associate the exercises and values taught to her by her mother with the possibility of their expression in dance. In her autobiography, St. Denis writes, “Through Miss Stebbins I glimpsed for the first time the individual possibilities of expression and the dignity of truth of the human body.” Soon, however, this idealism associated between Christian “social purity” and the expression of the human body would be challenged. St. Denis writes that her interest in dance soon raised concerns among family members who convinced her mother to send her to study under evangelist Dwight Moody at the Northfield Girl’s Seminary. Moody preached against the arts, saying that “theatres only stimulated and gratified ‘the most corrupt desire of the soul.’” St. Denis confronted “the vinegar cruet,” as she referred to him, on his stance against the arts by supposedly calling him “a narrow-minded old bigot.” Although St. Denis appeared to take a moral victory over Moody in this instance, the impact of not just this one evangelist, but Western Christian orthodoxy’s attitudes toward the body, sexuality, and social purity had a lifelong impact on St. Denis and her work. Shelton observes that the “central conflict” in St. Denis’ “life and art” was “the tension between aestheticism and moralism. . . . In personal terms,

228 Shelton, 14. See also St. Denis, 16.
229 St. Denis, 16-17.
230 St. Denis, 12-13.
231 qtd. in Shelton, 17-18.
232 Shelton, 18 and St. Denis, 12-13.
she struggled with the fear of her own sexuality. Artistically, she sought a purer expression of God in her dancing.” St. Denis writes of this tension and her initial aversion to Christian aesthetics (choosing to express her art through Orientalism for much of her career) in her autobiography:

I understood, with my intellect, the spiritual foundations in Christian Science: first, the perfection of God, then his projection as a perfect mental abstraction or idea . . . but I seemed persistently unable to connect this with other aspects of my life. The orthodox churches, the Catholic and Episcopalian, which had ritual and color, shocked me by the horrible disparity between their aestheticism and the misery and spiritual ignorance of thousands of their parishioners. This caused deep resentments in my soul. The metaphysical church dissatisfied me because I believed it cold and passionless. Not until years later was I able to reconcile two seemingly irreconcilable elements which were not only present in my objective world but were also in my philosophy.

In fact, St. Denis did not express her Western faith through Western or Christian likenesses, such as her Salome, Judith, Miriam, Magdalena and Madonna performances until late in her career. Rather, as Bentley suggests of female Orientalists, St. Denis looked to Eastern religions as an alternative to Western Christian morality, especially concerning issues surrounding sexuality and the female body.

St. Denis drew on her childhood influences of Theosophy and its allusions to Eastern spiritualism to inform her dancing. The novel *The Idyll of the White Lotus* given to her by a

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233 Shelton, 237.
234 St. Denis, 106.
family friend about a “young priest in ancient Egypt whose visions of the ‘Lady of the White Lotus’ threatened the religious establishment and cost him his life,” had a “tremendous influence” on St. Denis’s choreography and her “inner life.” St. Denis would use Orientalism as a way of, not threatening, but challenging the Western religious establishment. Her husband Ted Shawn, a fellow dancer and himself a former seminarian, describes St. Denis’ project as an “attempt in the Occidental world to preach a religious doctrine through the medium of the dance.” Concerning the tension between spirituality and sexuality in Western orthodoxy as opposed to the spirituality “preached” by St. Denis’ and Shawn’s aesthetics, Shawn writes:

But as yet the dance has not come to its own high place among the arts. It has been grievously retarded by Puritanic disapproval. For this divine impulse must be manifested through the human body—which has been hated and distrusted according to Christian teaching . . . so religionists down to our day have assumed that the beauty and grace of the body could never be significant of the high and the ideal, but are subtle snares for the sensually minded. On the contrary, the sex-consciousness of all who study the dance seriously as a spiritual manifestation, will be purified through the destruction of false modesty and through the gaining of a concept of the purity and beauty of the body. As people grow more religious, as they think, talk, live their religion, and as the love of beauty and the manifestations of it become recognized elements in true religion, they will grow more expressive and their expressions will utilize the body.

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235 Shelton, 11.
236 Shawn, 33.
Such was the ministry of St. Denis for both herself and her Western religious culture, to purify “sex-consciousness” by re-conceptualizing the relationship between purity and the body. In order to do so, St. Denis would initially look away from Western orthodoxy, believing it to have used “purity” “in a mistaken and negative sense, instead of in its true meaning of ‘unadulterated.’”  

In order to recuperate “purity” within Western religious traditions, she would turn toward the Orient. Shelton notes that “In her later years Ruth carried with her two dog-eared books—a Bible, and an anthology of Sankara’s writings.”

St. Denis’ foray into Oriental dance began when, on tour with David Belasco’s company, she spotted an Egyptian Deities cigarette poster in a Buffalo, NY, drugstore. In her autobiography, St. Denis describes the Orientalist poster writing, “I saw a modernized and most un-Egyptian figure of the goddess Isis,” but that “[t]his seated image of Isis, a superficial, commercial drawing for a cigarette company, opened up to me in that moment the whole story that was Egypt. . . . It was, however, not merely a symbol of Egypt, but a universal symbol of all the elements of history and art which may be expressed through the human body.” Perhaps this poster had prompted memories of St. Denis’s childhood novel *The Idyll of the White Lotus*, but, for whatever reason the dime store poster would become her source of personal and professional revelation: “I would become a rhythmic and impersonal instrument of spiritual revelation rather than a personal actress of comedy or tragedy. I had never before known such an inward shock of rapture.”

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238 St. Denis, 382.
239 Shelton, 95.
240 St. Denis, 52.
241 St. Denis, 52.
a strange combination of impersonal, low-brow burlesque Orientalism infused with high-aesthetics and spiritual revelation.

St. Denis’ career was built on Orientalism. Her most famous dances included titles such as *The Incense*, *The Cobras*, *Radha: Mystery Dance of the Five Senses*, and *Egypta*. Like other female solo dancers in this chapter, St. Denis traveled to Europe to make her name. She toured in England, Germany, and Paris before returning to the United States in 1909 as a reputable and famous solo dancer who traveled with an entourage of “authentic” Hindu dancers, including those actually from India, as well as St. Denis’ family members painted in brown face. 242 In 1914, St. Denis met Ted Shawn. Shelton and others note that Shawn added an element of American popular dance to St. Denis’ repertoire. In 1915, the couple opened the Denishawn School of Dance and Related Arts whose most notable student was modern dance pioneer, Martha Graham. During the Denishawn years (1915-1932), the couple and their students continued to perform and tour, including a tour to India. Eventually, however, the marriage between St. Denis and Shawn soured and they returned to their solo careers, reuniting for occasional performances, and maintained the public façade of a married couple. 243

On her own, St. Denis would embark on what she called her “third life.” St. Denis made a conscious effort to remove herself from the work of modern dance. She writes in *An Unfinished Life*, “My separation from the modern-dance movement was made on purely psychological

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242 Shelton, 96. This ensemble was, of course, problematic and fairly exploitative of the Hindu dancers. The language disparities made it difficult for St. Denis to communicate with her dancers, as well as Jim Crowe laws which at times made it impossible for St. Denis to eat and lodge with the rest of her company. St. Denis made some attempts to foster a sense of equality and ensemble among the company, but was aware of the disparities between her and her dancers.

243 The Denishawn school and the couple’s Tedruth home caused friction with St. Denis as she began to lose a sense of her own identity and career by being subsumed into the couple.
grounds, and in a rising crescendo of opposition. . . . But still more important to me was a purely personal withdrawal of myself from the materialistic atmosphere emanating from this new school of thought and action.” 244 Shelton explains that throughout her career, St. Denis had resisted the “modern temper, with its radical individualism, relative values, and emphasis on novelty and change,” choosing instead to define her dance through her belief that “art linked the observer with the divine” and “that dance led the performer to God.” 245 Her emphasis on career had, at times, confused St. Denis’ material and spiritual ambitions. As her career matured, St. Denis began to see her initial ambition with some clarity. In her autobiography, she writes, “During all these days of excitement and adulation I never forgot that in these performances I was doing something different. The spiritual levels of my life flowed underneath. . . . my own realizations, derived from Christian Science, were holding even in these confusions, pleasant as they were,” and that, “the end of the story is not yet, and I have swung slowly around to becoming an instrument for our Christian realizations to be manifested in terms of the dance.” 246 The “third life” of St. Denis’ career, therefore, would focus on applying what she had learned through Eastern spiritualism and performance to her Western Christian faith, particularly surrounding the image of the Madonna.

In her career, St. Denis had several opportunities to perform dances inspired by Western Christian and Jewish traditions, for instance the role of Jephthah’s Daughter (1906-1908), Judith (1913), 247 Miriam, the Sister of Moses (1919), 248 and Salome (1931). Her real inspiration to

244 St. Denis, 327.
245 Shelton, 69.
246 St. Denis, 86, 92.
247 See “Mrs. Lydig Gives a Play Premiere,” New York Times 26 Jan. 1913. The headline reads that the performance would be offered “in Oriental setting in Drawing Room” with Mme. Yorska
return to “Christian temple dance,” however, came from one of Shawn’s experiments, “an entire church service performed in rhythm.” She writes, “The creative success of this religious dance was of great significance to me in the evolution of dance in America.” St. Denis believed that tone, color and rhythm could “release the spiritual consciousness” of an individual toward a “total spiritual awareness” not limited to any “one sect or one religion.” On tour, she began to hypothesize about a “temple building” and “temple dances” that would synthesize the arts and religion with the “body” as “the beginning and final instrument of expression . . . that would bring humanity into a closer and more harmonious relationship with the One who created our bodies as well as our souls.” Finally, in 1931, St. Denis founded the Society of Spiritual Arts on the “Great Principle” of Christian Science, “that our concept of Life must be spiritual and not material.” The Society’s initial meetings were organized around general exercises and discussions on topics of spirituality and dance, and eventually developed into “temple nights.” During temple nights, “acolytes,” dancers who composed St. Denis’ Rhythmic Choir, met to develop programs modeled after Shawn’s idea of services done in rhythmic dance. St. Denis

248 Shelton, 156. Written by close friends Constance Smedley and Max Armfield with Shawn in the co-starring role.
249 St. Denis, 221.
250 St. Denis, 222-224. See also Shelton, 242. In An Unfinished Life, St. Denis relates how Shawn’s troupe was invited to perform at Guthrie’s church. “In 1917 Shawn presented A Church Service in Dance for the First Interdenominational Church in San Francisco. . . . On his 1921 tour the same suite of dances earned him the censure of the local clergy . . . but he performed his sacred dances, surrounded by the city police force. . . . During the same period, Dr. William Guthrie sponsored rhythmic dances in his parish, St. Mark’s-in-the-Bouwerie in New York City.” See St. Denis, 222-224. See also Shelton, 242.
251 St. Denis, 338.
252 St. Denis, 338.
253 qtd. in Shelton, 238.
observed that, “Almost without my control the temple was seeking to relate itself to the orthodox church. The rhythmic choir began evolving into a rhythmic pageant, to be performed before the altar of churches. I believed that the churches needed the revivifying interest and those who agreed with me welcomed it.” One of St. Denis’ earliest “Christian temple dances,” the Masque of Mary at the Riverside Church in New York, was aimed at revivifying the Madonna.

St. Denis’ Madonna performances and her writing surrounding them articulate her feminism and how she saw dance participating in the transgression and transmutability of religious orthodoxy. During her years of performing Eastern goddesses such as Ishtar, Isis, and Radha, St. Denis had longed to develop a piece surrounding the Madonna writing, “In the future I had hoped to produce a fourth conception: Mary, the Madonna. This treatment of our Christian goddess was to be done in a modern and not a traditional manner, having many elements which had not been developed in the Christian symbology.” St. Denis’ project, therefore, could be seen as intentionally revisionary and transgressive in the sense that it would challenge the boundaries of the Madonna tradition without replacing it. Similar to Sor Juana, St. Denis sought to revise the scenario by which the Madonna could be understood and, likewise, drew upon non-Western goddess imagery in her revision of Christian symbology.

St. Denis’ primary concern with regard to Mary lay in her virginity and the sexual guilt felt by so many of her devotees. St. Denis had experienced guilt herself confessing, “I have always sought to justify the outward actions of my emotional life to an inner ideal. . . . Had I accepted lesser planes of activity, mere self-indulgences . . . I would not have suffered.”

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254 St. Denis, 364.
255 St. Denis, 241.
256 St. Denis, 367.
Denis could never seem to relate her external, physical and sexual needs as an adult with her inherited Puritanical spiritual ideals. St. Denis, then, sought to revise these “ideals” through the Catholic Mary, with particular emphasis on dismantling the valorization and equivocation of virginity as “purity.” She writes:

It is true that our Christian theological concepts have attempted to bring in the feminine principle through the image of the Virgin. But has not the emphasis on her purity influenced us to believe that the act of life between a man and a woman is carnal in itself. . . . In a word, this virginal conception of the feminine principle has laid a ban upon the act of intercourse, a disapproval, and a pronouncement of evil, which in my mind has done incalculable harm to the children so conceived and brought into the world. ²⁵⁷

St. Denis held firm to the belief that defining the feminine principle through the ideal of virginal purity was harmful and distorted sexual relations between men and women that was thus handed down to their children. St. Denis’ solution was to redefine the “feminine principle” and correct this genealogical misperception through her dance, the Masque of Mary.

St. Denis’ description of the Masque of Mary reveals how her Oriental influences were employed in revising Western orthodoxy. In St. Denis’ masque, the “dance of veils” takes on a different context than in Orientalist Salome dances; however, the function of using the veils to reveal something that has been concealed, in this instance by religious orthodoxy, is retained. Like the Eastern Ishtar myth that inspired Strauss’ “dance of the seven veils” and St. Denis’ own performance of the goddess, St. Denis’ Madonna sheds or dons a veil at each stage of her

²⁵⁷ St. Denis, 382.
progression to fulfillment. St. Denis describes her masque in *An Unfinished Life*. She begins with the “White Madonna” dressed in white, the color of “purity,” as the “feminine principle”: “The White Madonna is the total being of Woman, passive, waiting, hidden behind the heavy veil of time. She is the being of creative love.” This figure of the White Madonna is ambiguous. The passive “total being of Woman” appears as an allegory of gender essentialism. Yet, this Woman and her “creative love,” now hidden by the veil of time, are poised for action—waiting to be exposed. Rather than read the White Madonna as St. Denis’ ideal for Woman, I take this figure as a starting point for her critique and revision of the problematic feminine principle of “purity.” As St. Denis’ dance progressed, “her white veil slipped from her head and, dropping to her feet, revealed her in soft Madonna blue. This was the color of the divine ecstasy of love—luminous, humble, and yet exalted.” In the dropping of the first veil (white for purity), St. Denis’ choreography reveals the color of the “divine ecstasy of love.” Here, St. Denis begins to recuperate ecstasy with the divine. Ecstasy is not “carnal” or a “pronouncement of evil,” but is exalted. In the next stage of progression, “After a plastique of the shepherds she assumed the red veils of the nativity. This color symbolized the experience of birth, the descent into human consciousness of life, and the bringing forth of the Divine Child.” Although this passage may be read to support problematic gender essentialism—motherhood—the “birth” offered by here extends not only to the child, but to the woman herself. The woman is born into full “human consciousness” only after she experiences the “divine ecstasy of love.” Furthermore, in the subsequent birth of the Divine Child, St. Denis recuperates the genealogy of “children so

258 St. Denis, 365.
259 St. Denis, 365.
260 St. Denis, 365.
conceived and brought into the world” that she sees as tainted by the sexual guilt of their conception.\textsuperscript{261} In St. Denis’ revision of the myth, virginity is replaced by “divine ecstasy” and, therefore, produces a “divine child.” It is this new concept of the act of conception that I believe St. Denis presents in her final stage of the masque:

As the wise men and the shepherds fell away from the center of the altar, making a gorgeous grouping of color around the Madonna, the last veil of the series was put upon her by her attendants. She now wore the gold robe of fulfillment. Robed in this symbolic color, and taking the child in her hands, she held him in front while she was borne aloft on the shoulders of the shepherds; and in a last exultant gesture Mary made her supreme presentation to the world in the person of the Divine Child.\textsuperscript{262}

The fulfillment of Woman and the presentation of the Divine Child are made possible only when the veil of passive virginal purity is dropped and divine ecstasy is put on. It is noteworthy, that the only veil to be stripped of the Madonna is White, the color associated with purity. All of the other mantles are put upon the Madonna. The resulting image of the new “feminine principle” embodied by this Madonna is not the Virgin, but an experienced and fulfilled woman adorned in the vibrant colors of blue, red, and gold. It is the scenario of a fulfilled Madonna that St. Denis exults and replaces for the White Madonna as the “total being of Woman.”

By today’s standards, St. Denis’ revisionary tactics are problematic. St. Denis’ “fulfillment” of the Madonna remains essentialist and heteronormative in its idealization of childbirth and motherhood. Perhaps the biblical narrative, for which the artist needs to account

\textsuperscript{261} St. Denis, 382.
\textsuperscript{262} St. Denis, 365.
for the birth of Jesus, makes this problem difficult to avoid. St. Denis recuperates the ecstasy of love when the result is a divine child, but the divine ecstasy of sexual pleasure in and of itself, is not addressed but remains “hidden by the heavy veil of time” —perhaps a veil for a Madonna of a later generation to take up, or strip off, depending on your perspective. It is this mantle that I will take up in Chapter Six concerning 1990s pop icon Madonna and her performances of “Like a Virgin” and “The Beast Within.” Ironically, like Allan, St. Denis proffers a feminine ideal of motherhood that she, by choice, would never fulfill. Still, in both cases, the dancers attempt to destigmatize and revalorize sexuality in a way that would be acceptable by social standards of their time, if not necessarily congruent with their personal lifestyles. Looking beneath the mantle of motherhood, St. Denis, at the very least, demands an image of the feminine ideal within the orthodox symbology of the Madonna that demands both ecstasy and fulfillment.

As regressive or benign as St. Denis’ masque may appear by contemporary standards, Shelton notes that the masque was originally “scheduled to debut in New York’s Holyrood Episcopal Church during the Christmas season of 1934” but was canceled due to the concerns of the congregation. Shelton explains that Rutgers Presbyterian Church subsequently “invited St. Denis and her Rhythmic Choir to stage Masque of Mary” and that “a week after this debut the Rhythmic Choir repeated the program for more than seventeen hundred worshippers at the Riverside Church in New York.” Shelton adds that with these performances “Ruth had established a new stage persona, the madonna, and a new era in her career.”

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263 St. Denis, 365.
264 Shelton, 242-243.
chronicles the performance of St. Denis’ Rhythmic Choir at the 1940 New York World’s Fair and a study of her Blue Madonna (the color of the “divine ecstasy of love”) in 1950.\textsuperscript{265}

Although Salome played a small role in St. Denis’ repertoire, the larger context of her career in Orientalism illuminates how Salome dancers appropriated Eastern spirituality as a way of challenging Western Christian orthodoxy. As Said suggests, to the Western Salome dancer, the spiritualism of the Orient was \textit{like} some aspects of Western Christian spiritualism. Yet, the Salome dancer made it her work to “concert” or dance “the Orient from something into something else” for the sake of herself, for the sake of her culture, and for the sake of female sexuality and spirituality.\textsuperscript{266}

\textbf{Conclusion: The Corporality of Affect and the Theory of Disseverment}

Although predating the Salome Craze, the Reverend Hiram Mattison might have anticipated its mania in \textit{Spirit Rapping Unveiled!} (1853) when he worried that a “damned mob of rapping women might, in fact, harbor some essential ‘electric affinity.’”\textsuperscript{267} Nearly one-half-century later, at the 1900 World’s Fair in Paris, Loie Fuller would perform two movements from her 1895 Salome as the proclaimed “Fairie Éléctricité.”\textsuperscript{268} Bedecked in Orientalist costume and surrounded by black male performers, Fuller was the dancing embodiment of the Orientalist

\textsuperscript{265} Shelton, 250, 268. St. Denis was also asked to start a dance program at Adelphi University “with particular emphasis on research into the dance as an instrument of religious worship.” See Shelton, 248.

\textsuperscript{266} Said, 67.

\textsuperscript{267} qtd. in Brooks, 18.

\textsuperscript{268} Loie Fuller’s “electric” moniker refers to her use and reputation for technical innovations in lighting for the theatre. Her routines often featured splashes of color, shapes, and lighting effects projected onto her silk costumes. She is as famous, if not more so, for her technical contributions to the theatre as she is for her dancing.
spirit of the fair. In *Electric Salome*, Rhonda Garelick describes the fair’s intentional association between Imperialist and scientific advances. She writes that science was the “handmaiden to Imperialism” and that the “fée éléctricite” became a “spirit embodying all the promise of a new century.”

Fuller, therefore, embodied global anxieties surrounding colonialism, science, technology, race, and the female body. Certainly, Mattison was correct in his observation that women held a strange “electric affinity” for producing, communicating, and containing social anxieties.

Affect theory may provide a way to illuminate Mattison’s concept of “electric affinity” associated with Salomania, bringing it into a contemporary context for current feminist and theological applications. Brian Massumi broadly defines affect as the “ability to affect and susceptibility to be affected.”

Affect, like spirituality, or Mattison’s “electric affinity,” is the ineffable connection between the mind and body that allows us to affect and be affected. While “affect” is considered as an emerging theoretical concept during the twenty-first century, this word held cultural currency at the turn of the previous century as well. Indeed, the music of Wagner, to which Fuller choreographed parts of her 1895 and 1900 Salome performances, sought to stimulate “all of the senses in a total work of art.”

Dierkes-Thrun summarizes the symbolist project, inspired by Wagner’s “total work of art,” as a “search for new principles by which to immerse readers in intense experiences of aesthetic beauty—the perfect corporalization of affect through words.”

Furthermore, Dierkes-Thrun singles out Mallarmé’s poem “Heroidiade,” in which he

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269 Garelick, 68-69.
270 Massumi, 61.
271 Dierkes-Thrun, 59.
272 Dierkes-Thrun, 59.
describes his Fuller-esque ideal as exemplifying this style. Fuller, then, took this “corporalization of affect” to a new level when she used her actual body to “immerse” spectators “aesthetic beauty” and to stimulate the senses of her audiences.

For the Salome dancer, this affective capability was set into process through what Brian Massumi defines as “movement-vision.” Re-viewing Salomania through Massumi’s movement-vision provides the potential for a contemporary understanding for how dance can affect movement toward a feminist spirituality and/or theology. In “The Bleed: Where Body Meets Image” from Movement, Affect, Sensation: Parables for the Virtual, Massumi beckons the theorist to

Find a logic for the corporeal (body and image) that does not oppose it to the virtual. . . . Find a logic for the virtual (imagelessness and potential) that does not remove it from the real. . . . Dis-sever, instead, the imagelessness from the Ideal.

For an incorporeal materialism. . . .

See the flesh suffuse with artifice, making it as palpably political as it is physical.273

Massumi’s image of disseverment is too rich to resist in a case study of the Salome “parable.” Furthermore, Massumi structures his chapter under the organizational principles or subheadings of—Scenario—Action!—Scenario—and ends the essay with the final line (or direction) to “DISSEVER THE IMAGELESS FROM THE IDEAL” (emphasis his).274 Understanding “scenario” as an organizing principle, Massumi’s directive may help to define a repeatable logic

273 Massumi, 66.
274 Massumi, 67.
behind the Salome dancers’ performances of disseverment in relation to the “cult of
tohood,” and their resulting movements toward New Womanhood(s). Furthermore, the
example of Salomania informs how narratives of biblical women can be used to affect positive
change in the lives and status of women within contemporary feminist theologies.

Massumi equates “imagelessness” with the virtual. Likewise, Megan Becker-Leckrone
reminds us that the character of the dancing Salome is a “textual corpus,” an imaginative
“bleeding” of the biblical character and other literary sources. There is no “real” or “actual”
image of Salome, save for the one created by interpretation. In this sense, Salome may be
considered “imageless.” Massumi directs his readers to, “Find a logic for the corporeal (body and
image) that does not oppose it to the virtual” and to “Find a logic for the virtual (imagelessness
and potential) that does not remove it from the real.”

Performance seems to satisfy this logic. The taking in or taking on of a role does not oppose the virtual (character) with the real
(performer), nor does the virtual (the character of Salome or any other biblical character and
the potential that this role holds for the performer) remove it from the real (the life of the performer).
In fact, it is in the bleed between the virtual and the real, where Massumi locates the potential for
movement or change. This metaphor of the performer may be extended to women in general.
The power behind the narratives of biblical women lie in their potential to “bleed” between the
fictional character and the real lives of the readers, without opposing or denying these “real”
lives. Salomania was an affective and effective movement for a diverse range of women because
it allowed for the incorporation (or embodiment) of a diverse range of virtual or desired images
of biblical womanhood to bleed with the performers’ “real” lives. As I have shown in my

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275 Massumi, 66.
sampling of Salome dancers, for all of their similarities, each dancer inhabited the narrative in a unique way(s) according to her individual purpose(s) and ideologies behind performing the biblical figure at any given time. For instance, Fuller’s Salome changes along with her intentions from her 1895, 1900, and 1907 performances.

According to Massumi, movement is “a continuous displacement of the subject, the object and their general relation.” To be in constant movement is to resist codification. In relation to Salomania, the dancers in this study resisted being codified in different ways; for instance, it can be argued that Fuller resisted codification as a lesbian, while Allan resisted codification as a suffragist. More specifically, Aida Overton Walker resisted codification as a black vaudeville dancer by displacing her subject position as an African American away from the object, the exoticized Salome, and then working to change or transform their relation. Change, according to Massumi, is “that which includes rupture but is nevertheless continuous,” therefore, he argues that movement is change. Likewise, Salome dancers can be seen as putting their bodies into movement in order to resist the codification of the Salome image and to rupture societal perceptions of the female body, sexuality, spirituality and race.

Dance exemplifies the “movement-vision” described by Massumi. A dancer is in constant movement, constant physical transformation. Massumi writes that “movement-vision” is “an opening onto a space of transformation in which the de-objectified movement fuses with a de-subjectified observer.” Dance provided this “space of transformation” for Salome performers. Although objectified by their audiences, these dancers challenged images of femininity, sexuality

276 Massumi, 51.
277 Massumi, 51.
278 Massumi, 51.
and spirituality through their movements. The Salome dancers de-subjectified, or took power away from their observers, by claiming their bodies as acting subjects and agents (versus passive mediums) of transformation. The Salome dance allowed women to express their sexuality and spirituality from an autonomous female perspective.

In this way, Salome dancers “dissevered” the virtual character of Salome from society’s ideal(s) of aesthetic feminine beauty or the femme fatale. Salome’s transgressive dance and her virtual beheading of a saint served as a separation (or disseverment) from society’s ideal woman, as well as from the codified textual corpus of the Bible and Wilde’s play. Furthermore, dance may be understood as an “incorporeal materialism.” The dancer’s body embodies or materializes otherwise incorporeal ideas, fears and desires and reproduces these sensations in the bodies of their audience. Dance relates to what Massumi defines as “blank mimicry.” Dance “mimick[s] in the flesh” the incorporality—or the movement, affect, sensation, and “palpable politics”—surrounding the image of Salome in the early twentieth century.\(^{279}\) The dancer is understood as what Massumi calls an agent of Mesoperception, a “corporeal transformer” who translates “input . . . into movement and affect.”\(^{280}\) Dancers Loie Fuller, Maud Allan, Aida Overton Walker and Ruth St. Denis translated sexual desire, coupled with stereotypes of female sexuality, into the figure of Salome, a self-possessed woman who dissevers corrupt ideals of femininity from the minds (heads) of a patriarchal society. The act of the dancer’s body meeting the image of Salome causes a bleed between the performance of entertainment and the performance of reactionary politics.

\(^{279}\) Massumi, 64.  
\(^{280}\) Massumi, 62.
Applying Massumi’s theories of movement and affect to the scenario of Salomania allows for the consideration of how movement, translated into dance, may allow feminist theologians to “rethink body, subjectivity, and social change in terms of movement, affect, force and violence,” albeit the simulated or virtual violence of disseverment. Salomania within the context of Massumi’s theory of “movement, affect and sensation,” responds to feminist Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s call for a “hermeneutics of creative imagination and ritualization” that “retells biblical stories and celebrates our foresisters in a feminist key,” as well as Marjorie Procter-Smith who cites the need for a historical reconstruction that honors the past with a concern for the present and future, adding that memory “involves not only remembering with the mind but also remembering with the body.” This prompts the question of what a theological method for the feminist interpretation of biblical women might look like in terms of Massumi’s movement and affect?

First, as Becker-Leckrone suggests, we must not fetishize the “textual corpus” of biblical women, but recognize that the women who have been handed down to us through scripture are not bodies, but come to us in textual form. We must recognize that these women are “virtual” characters who should not be placed in opposition to the lives of contemporary women, but for whom a logic might be sought to harness the potential of their virtuality to liberate women in real life. We must recognize that the power of biblical women lies in their ability to bleed into the real lives of a diverse range of women, to be read, experienced and embodied in different ways by different audiences and performers, and toward different ends. We should recognize that movement is change and that our relationship to these women is always to be moving in order to

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281 Massumi, 66.
282 Fiorenza, 790. Procter-Smith, 37.
resist codification and to affect continuous and positive change in the physical, emotional and spiritual lives of women. This requires us to dislodge these imageless women from any notion of the Ideal.

Furthermore, we must remember our biblical foresisters in both body and mind. This requires us to “mimick in the flesh” the “palpable politics” surrounding images of women from the biblical past and their connection with the present.\(^{283}\) I will return to this theme as I continue to examine female artists who have used performance in order to take up the biblical personas of Jael, Ruth, Sarah and the Madonna “in the flesh.” In each of these cases, the playwright or performer invokes the memory of a biblical woman in order to confront contemporary politics that play upon the lives of women—the cult of womanhood, civil rights, domestic violence, and career as just some examples. In particular, like the Salome dancers who were contemporaneous with her, Florence Kiper Frank makes palpable the anxieties of World War I America in her play \textit{Jael}, about a militant biblical heroine who defies codification under the early twentieth-century’s “cult of womanhood.” Lorraine Hansberry, like Aida Overton Walker, draws upon African spiritualism and Pan-Africanism in order to animate her female characters Ruth, Lena, and Beneatha in their struggle for integration in mid-twentieth-century America. Pop-icon Madonna, like Ruth St. Denis and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz before her, calls upon the virtual-ness of the Virgin in order to consider the religious icon’s potential for a post-modern feminism. In these scenarios, the artists as agents of Mesoperception serve as “corporeal transformers” translating “input” from society “into movement and affect” toward social change.\(^{284}\) These artists seek out

\(^{283}\) Massumi, 64.
\(^{284}\) Massumi, 62.
the politics that affect the bodies of women past and present, “for the cuing is collective,” and perform them to some sort of resolution before a public audience.\textsuperscript{285}

\textsuperscript{285} Massumi, 66.
CHAPTER III: PROGRESSIVE ERA FEMINISMS IN FLORENCE KIPER FRANK’S *JAEL*

While Salomania took burlesque and music halls by craze, biblical censorship laws in England, and their residual impact in the United States, largely kept biblical women off of professional stages. Wilde’s play premiered in France in 1896, but did not see the boards in London until 1905 and not on a public stage until 1931. Poetic verse dramas about biblical women, however, continued to proliferate in literature among such venerated writers as Christian Frederick Hebbel (*Judith*, 1841) and Maurice Maeterlinck (*Mary Magdalene*, 1910). Women writers were also a large part of this literary discourse. For inspiration, these writers turned not to the problematic figure of Salome, but to other powerful women of the Bible. Many of these plays, written to be read rather than performed, were published in popular women’s literary magazines and, as such, maintained the status quo in terms of gender. Nevertheless, some plays made it onto independent stages free from state censorship. As this chapter will examine, these plays were often progressive in nature, challenging censorship laws by dramatizing the Bible and often appropriated by first-wave feminism. The transatlantic influence and cultural exchange operating between England, France, and the United States with Salomania, likewise, existed in the exchange of biblical verse plays. In particular, in this chapter I will look at Florence Kiper Frank’s play *Jael* produced at Chicago Little Theatre in 1914 and its relationship to biblical plays, anti-censorship, and the feminist movement in England and the United States. Unlike Salomania, which relies heavily on “repertoire” to disrupt cultural norms, but does not translate well into the archive (other than first-hand accounts by the performers, century-old performance reviews, and speculation by contemporary scholars); literary and dramatic Bible plays, provide
archival materials from which to discuss how women writers re-visioned scriptural sources toward feminist ends. Therefore, Taylor’s “scenario” in this chapter refers primarily to the historical contexts and literary principles that gave rise to these plays. This chapter will briefly survey the archive of plays written about biblical women by women at the turn-of-the-twentieth-century with a close reading of Florence Kiper Frank’s *Jael* as a way of understanding some of the literary strategies employed by women, especially regarding the cultural impact of biblical morality on women’s sexuality, spirituality, and Western feminisms.

In the early twentieth-century, Orientalized images of women elicited one of two responses: adulation or fear. For some, like Samuel Kaplan of *The Little Review*, an oriental theatrical experience at the Chicago Little Theatre, considering itself a “Temple of a Living Art,” was enough to move them to religious ecstasy. Kaplan writes: “‘Hosanna!’ I felt like shouting, when the curtains slowly concealed the mysterious stage. I am still under the spell of the oriental atmosphere, not yet cooled off for objective criticism.”¹ Others, like Charles Collins of *The Chicago Evening Post*, who reviewed Florence Kiper Frank’s play *Jael* about a biblical woman who slays the Israelite’s enemy Sisera, recoiled from such avant-garde theatre, writing: “Jael elocuted like a banshee, and Sisera declaimed like the ghost of Hamlet’s father. Half an hour of this sort of thing, with the stage so dark that I could barely see the characters, broke down my powers of theatrical endurance and I fled.”² As with Salomania, it was often biblical women of

the Near East (Salome, Jael, Judith, Delilah) who embodied the anxieties of the West at the fin de siècle of the last century. In these cases, the transgressive nature of Orientalism was compounded by its biblical subjects, which had been banned from English public stages for centuries and were only recently being reintroduced through independent theatre houses in Europe. In the United States, such plays, while not officially censored as in England, nonetheless experienced their own brand of suppression on commercial stages. For example, Richard Strauss’ opera Salomé, based on the poetic drama of Oscar Wilde was “[d]iscarded [b]y [the] Chicago Opera” both in 1911 and 1922.³ Wilde’s original play itself had been banned in London in 1892, and was therefore produced at the Théâtre de l’Œuvre in France in 1896, and then in private halls in England before becoming what is today the definitive model of decadent theatre. Nonetheless, it is a lesser-known play, Florence Kiper Frank’s Jael, performed at the Chicago Little Theatre in 1914, which is the subject of my study. A poet, literary critic, and dramatist, Kiper Frank wrote the play for the Chicago Little Theatre, which took its influence from European avant-garde forms like those produced at the Théâtre de l’Œuvre where Wilde’s Salomé premiered. In the American Midwest, it was Kiper Frank’s play that literary critics Richard G. Moulton and Richard Burton praised as “a contribution to American dramatic literature of the first importance” ⁴ and on whose bill The Cornhill Booklet claimed to have “proved that the ‘Little’ had established a tradition.”⁵ Although Kiper Frank’s play did not have as large an overall

⁴“The Experimental Drama,” “The Little Theatre, Chicago” The Cornhill Booklet. 4.2 (1914): 83.
⁵Kiper Frank’s Jael was on a triple bill with St. John Hankin’s The Constant Lover and Lord Dunsanay’s The Lost Silk Hat. The columnist writes, “The staging of all three plays lived up to the ‘Little’s’ reputation for beauty, simplicity, and illusion, and the production as a whole had artistic significance; it also merited attention as the first production since the theatre was founded.
impact as Wilde’s play, I argue that it remains considerable within the frameworks of American experimental theatre and feminist aesthetics in the early twentieth-century. Using Katherine Brown Downey’s term “perverse midrash” to describe plays “highlighting perversity in biblical texts and revealing culture’s repressed fears,” I argue that Jael is an example of the genre— influenced, but often eclipsed by Wilde’s play—as it addresses society’s repressed fears of the Jewish intellectual and of the women’s movement as a strategy to recover the spiritual-sexual nature of the New Woman. First, I consider the relationship of the New Woman and Kiper Frank’s feminist viewpoint in the early twentieth-century to explicate connections between French symbolist biblical plays like Wilde’s Salomé and American experimental theatre. Then, I locate Jael specifically within American Jewish discourse and the context of Downey’s concept of “perverse midrash.” In the third section, I compare Jael and Salomé to illustrate how Kiper Frank sets an orientalized version of the New Woman in ancient Palestine in order to reveal modern anxieties concerning Jewish nationalism and feminism, while recuperating a female spiritual sexuality that had been “perverted” by these anxieties.

Florence Kiper Frank, although fairly well-known and well-received among the literary circles of the early twentieth-century, is best remembered—when briefly mentioned in the contemporary archive at all—for her poems “A Girl Strike Leader,” “The Movies,” and “The Jewish Conscript,” published in journals and popular literary magazines such as Nation, Poetry, Poet-Lore, The Forum, McClures, The Little Review, The Liberal Review, and others. Less is written about her plays, including the one-act Jael performed at Chicago Little Theatre and her

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in which, through their absence in Europe, the Browne’s took no part of any kind’ their lieutenants proved that the ‘Little’ had established a tradition.” See “The Experimental Drama,” 83.

6 Downey, 177.
comedy *Gee-Rusalem!* appearing in the Provincetown Players’ third New York season on the same bill as plays by Edna St. Vincent Millay and Eugene O’Neill. The titles of Kiper Frank’s representative poems and plays reflect her deep interest in politics, popular culture, and the Jewish intellectual and women’s movements of the first-quarter-century. For instance, “A Girl Strike Leader” provides a portrait of the typical heroine of the garment worker strikes that were prevalent among Jewish immigrant communities in Chicago where Kiper Frank lived. Equally political, “The Jewish Conscript” compares the Jewish soldier sent to battle his brethren in Russia (noting that a quarter million soldiers in the Czar’s army were Jewish) with the martyrdom of Christ. Furthermore, both of her plays consider Palestine under growing Zionist and anti-Zionist sentiment in the American Jewish community. Born in Kansas, but raised in Illinois and a distinguished graduate of the University of Chicago, Kiper Frank was deeply entrenched in the intellectual, political, and literary circles of her time. Included among her coterie were husband Jerome N. Frank, a Chicago lawyer and political advisor, who eventually became a New Deal government official and U.S. Court of Appeals judge, and the couple’s associates, among them, Carl Sandburg, Floyd Dell, Max Eastman, and Sherwood Anderson. Yet, despite her political and literary connections, a sustained study or appreciation of Florence

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8 According to Walter E. Vokomer, Kiper enjoyed a higher social status than her husband when they married in 1914. In light of her biblically inspired work, it is also noteworthy that Kiper studied briefly at Lassell Seminary in Massachusetts before attending University of Chicago. See William Henry Hills, *The Writer: a Monthly Magazine for Literary Workers* 24 (1912): 166; and, Walter E. Vokomer, *The Political Philosophy of Jerome N. Frank* (University Microfilms, 1974).
Kiper Frank pales in comparison to her contemporaries. She is most often referenced in regard to two of her essays “Some American Plays from the Feminist Perspective” and “The Jew as Jewish Artist.” Scholars Judith E. Barlow, Alma J. Bennett, Cheryl Black, Keith Newlin, and others, quote the former article in discussions of the New Woman and theatre of the early twentieth-century, but seldom apply Kiper Frank’s theories to her own plays. The same holds true of the latter article in regard to her works of poetry. Perhaps Kiper Frank’s obscurity is due in part to being overshadowed in marriage to a prominent politician like Frank. Such is the ironic turn for the critic who lamented the absence of a “married woman with a vocation” among the dramatis personae of the modern theatre. Kiper Frank’s legacy is likewise eclipsed by the male contemporaries with whom she shared billing—Maurice Brown, Eugene O’Neill, and as I will argue in regard to her biblically-inspired play Jael, Oscar Wilde.

New Women of the Bible Play

Plays about biblical women were common in popular literature when Kiper Frank wrote Jael. Katharine Brown Downey notes that American biblical plays are well documented between 1870 and the 1920s. Furthermore, many of these plays revolve around biblical heroines, which Downey explains, parenthetically, as “deriv[ed] in part from the movement for women’s rights in the period.” Likewise, Rose Ebey Glaymen in her 1930 dissertation Recent Judith Drama and its Analogues documents over forty published plays in which “the beautiful woman of the Bible

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13 Downey, 89.
for patriotic reasons causes the downfall of a powerful man." The lists Judith, Jael, Delilah, Esther, Jephtha’s Daughter, Jezebel and Bathsheba as examples of biblical women who, like their early twentieth-century counterparts, affirm the power of their sex and campaign for political gain in a male-dominated society. Such plays about biblical women, many of them by women, were published in popular literary magazines. For instance, Amelie Rives’ *Herod and Mariame* was published in *Lippincotts Magazine* (1888) and enjoyed a favorable review in *The Critic* (1901), and Florence Wilkinson Evans’ *David of Bethlehem* and *Mary Magdalen* were published by the McClure and Philips Company (1904). The publication of biblical plays in literary magazines was not, of course, limited to female writers. Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* appeared in *Poet Lore* (1907), which also printed C.F. Hebbel’s *Maria Magdalena* in 1914, the same year of Kiper Frank’s play. Furthermore, *Drama* journal published several biblical plays in the years surrounding Kiper Frank’s *Jael*, including *King of the Jews* (1916) by Chicago Little

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14 Glaymen, 13.
15 Glaymen provides a comparative analysis of early-twentieth-century biblical plays. Glaymen’s third chapter deals specifically with Jael plays. Of the plays considered, four including Kiper Frank’s are by women: *Jael* by Florence Guignard Gibbs (1904); *The Sanctuary of Womanhood or Jael* by Florence E. Ben-Oliel (1914); and *Jael* by Manta S. Graham. Those written by men include *Jael, the Wife of Heber, the Kenite* by Oliver J. Booth (1901) and *The Coming of Sisera, or Jael, the Wife of Heber the Kenite* by Paul M. Davey (1908). Glaymen provides a romantic motive for Frank’s and Gibbs’ Jael characters, while Booth, Davey and Graham are described as revenge plays. Ben-Oliel’s play exemplifies strong “separate sphere” and anti-rape ideologies in that Sisera is killed because upon entering a woman’s tent, he is automatically subject to death. With the exception of Ben-Oliel, these manuscripts are unpublished making comparison difficult. See Glaymen, 41-45.
Theatre founder Maurice H. Brown. Some of these plays, like Kiper Frank’s, would be produced on professional and independent stages. In England independently produced biblical plays often challenged censorship laws that forbade the Bible on stage. In fact, it was female playwright Gwen Lally’s *Jezebel* that claims to be the first biblical play licensed for production by Lord Chamberlain in March 1912. Over a decade later, in May 1927, Sally Bruce Kinsolving’s *David and Bath-sheba* was performed at the Grove State Theatre in Greenwich Village, New York City, featuring known actor A. Winfield Hoeny. On the West Coast, Constance Smedley Armfield’s *Miriam* was performed at the Greek Theatre, University of California, Berkley, by modern dance pioneers Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn in 1920. Though not an exhaustive list of biblical plays published or produced in the early twentieth-century, this modest bibliography shows that Florence Kiper Frank’s play is one in a larger body of work that has received little study, but may represent a lost genre in the scholarship of first wave feminist plays. While these plays were not all politically progressive and indeed some reinscribed what

22 Gwen Lally, “Author’s Note,” *Jezebel* (London: A.L. Humphreys, 1918) 5. The fact that Lally’s play that was the first licensed by Lord Chamberlain furthers the association between female artists and the genre. About Lally’s play, Glaymen describes the plot of *Jezebel* “def[y]ing the Oracle” that condemns her and her husband for Jezebel’s idolatrous worship of Astarte. Coincidentally, Jael in Frank’s play is also a devotee of the goddess. Furthermore, Glaymen writes, “We pity Ahab for his passive idealism which dreams of music in the streets . . . while the misery of his subjects increase. We admire Jezebel’s fearlessness in defying the prediction of the oracle, at the same time that we dislike her pleasure-loving nature which has corrupted the kingdom.” Interestingly, Glaymen praises Jael’s political action and woman-centered religion, although her criticism reveals a persistence of fear regarding “pleasure-loving” female sexuality. Glaymen, 86. See also Allardyce Nicoll, “The Minority Drama,” *History of English Drama 1900-1930, Part I*, (New York: Cambridge UP: 1973) 233, n2. Nicoll concurs that Lally’s play was given a “copyright performance” saying “obviously it had been written with the hope that it might be accepted for public presentation.”
24 “Synthetic Drama is the New Art of the Stage,” *Current Opinion* (1913-1925) 71.1 (1921): 64-65.
today are understood as flawed feminisms (i.e., separate sphere ideology, the cult of womanhood, and the moral superiority of women), certainly the variety of perspectives proffered by the plays reveal how the *fin de siècle* biblical play engaged in critical debate, often, as I will argue in the case of Florence Kiper Frank, discursively with first wave feminisms.

Nevertheless, despite their proliferation of plays, these female would-be dramatists are eclipsed by works of their male contemporaries. For example, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw the productions of grand Orientalist operas such as Karl Goldmark’s *The Queen of Sheba* (1866) and Camille Saint Saën’s *Samson and Delilah* (1877). Most notable was Oscar Wilde’s play *Salomé* whose English premiere was preempted by the censor Lord Chamberlain in 1893, reinvigorating the “Bible on Stage” controversy in the press, and whose eventual premiere at the French Théâtre de l’Œuvre followed by Richard Strauss’ 1905 opera have been written upon extensively. Furthermore, *Salomé* is most often considered within the context of Wilde’s ambitions toward the symbolist movement, particularly in its associations with Joris-Karl Huysmans’ *À rebours*, Stéphane Mallarmé’s “Herodiade” and Gustave Flaubert’s *Salammbô*, all treatments of the Salomé theme. The exhaustive scholarship that has been done

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25 Like Kiper Frank, many of these women were also married to prominent men, to which their individual impact and reputations might have likewise been deferred. Furthermore, these women were theologically educated and members of exclusive literary and cultural coteries. Florence Wilkinson Evans was an established poet, novelist, and suffragist who contributed to *McClure’s* and *Poetry* magazines, among others, and was married to Wilfrid Muir Evans, an English artist known for drawing the frontispiece for President Woodrow Wilson’s *In Our First Years of War*. Wilkinson was also the daughter of William Cleaver Wilkinson, an author and ordained Baptist minister. Kinsolving was published in *Poetry*, *The Reviewer*, *The New York Sun*, and *The Baltimore American*, along with four volumes of original poetry. She married Reverend Arthur Barksdale Kinsolving, was granddaughter of U.S. Confederate Army Officer and Virginia Senator Charles Bruce, and niece of Maryland Senator and Pulitzer Prize winner William Cabell Bruce. See “Evans, Florence Wilkinson,” *Women’s Who’s Who of America*, ed. John William Leonard (New York: American Commonwealth Company, 1914) 279; and “Biographical History,” Sally Bruce Kinsolving Collection, Enoch Pratt Free Library Special Collections.
regarding Wilde’s Salomé in relation to the symbolists is too vast to review for my purposes in this chapter. However, the result of these works, as well as images of Salomé in the fine arts, rendered the image of biblical women in the fin de siècle age as Orientalist femme-fatales, symbols of feminine aesthetic beauty, and the embodiment of the sensual sublime. And, while much has been written about Salomé’s “Dance of the Seven Veils” and its influence on modern dance in the era of Salomania that followed Wilde’s play, virtually nothing has been written in regard to the possible shared influences between Wilde’s interpretation of the biblical narrative and the literary biblical plays being published in popular magazines both prior to and following Wilde’s Salomé. While I do not intend to diminish the cultural impact of Wilde and any of the aforementioned associations, I offer that looking at Wilde’s play within the context of female literary dramatists, such as Florence Kiper Frank, may provide yet another opportunity to consider Wilde’s influence. Furthermore, while there may be less of a direct influence between women’s popular biblical plays and Salomé than, say, the symbolists, the comparison may be nonetheless mutually informative.

Wilde was no stranger to the milieu of popular literary magazines, which were a primary outlet for the publication of women’s writing, as well as biblical verse dramas. In 1887 he became editor of Woman’s World, formerly known as Lady’s World before he reorganized the magazine as “a progressive, largely feminist journal covering a wide variety of cultural, literary

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26 For a recent study, see Dierkes-Thrun.
28 For studies on Wilde’s influence on modern dance, particularly in regard to Salomé dancers, see Bentley and Glenn.
and political topics." Furthermore, many of Wilde’s critical reviews, poems, and novels were published in popular monthly journals such as his novel *Pictures of Dorian Gray* featured in *Lippincott’s Magazine* in 1890. In addition, Wilde was a regular contributor to *Pall Mall Gazette, The Drama Review, Nineteenth Century,* and others. Indeed, Paul L. Fortunato grounds Wilde’s modernist aesthetics in consumer culture, particularly in his association with “female aestheticism” and popular women’s journalism. Fortunato argues that female aesthetes used consumer culture as a vehicle of self-creation, while not necessarily a vehicle of feminism.

“Female aestheticism,” according to Fortunato, was ambivalent about feminism and relied instead on the “feminine” arts of charm, surface effects, and decadent excess. Although these qualities have certainly been used to describe and interpret Wilde’s *Salomé*, this particular play puzzles Fortunato, who writes, “*Salomé* is something I do not address directly. It is different from the other 1890s plays in that it is very plainly an attempt to make a serious progressive aesthetic statement . . . in line with consumer modernism.” He adds, “I am not saying that Wilde was alone in his movement towards mixing straightforward, popular writing and more philosophically and aesthetically-sophisticated ideas. Indeed, I would argue that such a mixture is a mark of the better journalist-critics” among the “more recognizable names George Bernard Shaw, William Archer,” etc. Noticeably absent from Fortunato’s “journalist-critics,” are women. Some of Fortunato’s problems with categorizing *Salomé* may be eased when Wilde’s

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30 Bristow, xxxvi.
32 Fortunato, 150.
33 Fortunato, 28.
play is considered within a larger body of work written by popular female artist-journalists like Florence Kiper Frank who, alongside and no doubt influenced by Wilde’s *Salomé*, were transforming the popular biblical drama sometimes associated with female aestheticism into a vehicle of both progressive and, in some cases, feminist aesthetics. Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* and Florence Kiper Frank’s *Jael* serve as reference points from which to consider this possibility. I single out Kiper Frank and her play *Jael* from the many other plays within the genre of biblical verse drama by women specifically because she has fulfilled the roles of both feminist journalist-critic and a woman writing for the stage.

Kiper Frank begins her article “Some American Plays from the Feminist Viewpoint” with the claim: “Every play on the American stage, with perhaps a few negligible exceptions, has its say on the feminist question.” She clarifies, however, that American playwrights do so unconsciously in their portrayals of “contemporary social life” and laments that Americans “have at present no Ibsens, Shaws, Bjorsons, Strindbergs, Brieuxs”—all male playwrights of Europe who she observes as more consciously and directly addressing issues of feminism. Kiper Frank takes as her article’s project a conscious and deliberate look at the current works of American theatre for their relevance to women’s issues stating that “it is of interest to the feminist to hear what the present writers of the theatre have to say about American women.” Kiper Frank surveys some of the repertoire generated by American playwrights, lambasting several obviously misogynist plays before moving on to more constructive criticisms of what might have been considered feminist plays at the time. She regrets that Eugene Walter “deserted [his] original intention to accomplish a ‘strong’ situation—i.e., a nocturnal visit of the wife to the rooms of the

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employer.” On the other hand, she lauds Rachel Crothers as a modern feminist who has not “missed in [her] objective drama that uses the new woman for protagonist . . . a glimpse of that tumultuous battlefield, her own soul.” She goes on to eschew Realism and encourages playwrights such as Percy MacKaye to “appreciate the possibilities of pure fantasy divorced from any attempt at realism” and “employ his true poetic gift in an illumining of the feminist question by means of poetic drama.” Kiper Frank sheds light on her own stance regarding the “feminist question” when she states: “The literature that will be written by woman as a revealer of that so-called mystery, herself, will probably not sentimentalize femininity. She knows that there is no sacrosanct or magic quality in femaleness, either for angelic or demoniac power.” Kiper Frank rejects the notion of female moral superiority and the cult of womanhood so often associated with first wave feminism; but what she finds particularly disheartening, in her contemporaries’ characterization of women, specifically in plays by married female playwrights like Marion Fairfax, is the absence of a “married woman with a vocation.” Ironically, Kiper Frank is likewise criticized for such an omission. Judith E. Barlow observes that the playwright failed to produce such a character in her 1918 Provincetown play Gee-Rusalem.

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40 Kiper, “Some American Plays,” 927. Not intending to suggest that Jael be read autobiographically, or that the play reflects Kiper Frank’s personal feelings toward her own marriage, it is worth noting that the article “Some American Plays” appeared in Forum magazine one month before her wedding, with the production of Jael following in October of the same year. Whether Kiper Frank was able to achieve a balance between marriage and vocation in her personal life is a matter of speculation, for while she continued to publish sporadically after her marriage, it is unclear whether her vocation or her husband’s political and law career took precedence.
41 Barlow, 284.
Nevertheless, Kiper Frank follows much of her own advice in the biblical drama *Jael*, which provides her with several opportunities to rectify some of the criticisms put forth in her article and employ her own gifts in illuminating “the feminist question by means of poetic drama.” In *Jael*, Kiper Frank creates the “strong situation” of a soldier, fresh from the battlefield, who takes refuge in a married woman’s tent and presents her with the choice of following her sexual desire or obeying her “womanly” conscience. Furthermore, *Jael* succeeds in featuring two married women with vocations (in the sense of callings from God) in the characters of Deborah and Jael. The poetic drama also allows Kiper Frank to heed her directive to Percy MacKaye and divorce herself from American social realism in order to explore the realm of fantasy—in the case of *Jael* an Orientalist fantasy that is at once inspired by and yet challenges the Orientalist notion of a “magic quality in femaleness, either for angelic or demoniac power.”

Consistent with her dissatisfaction with American plays and their portrayal of women’s issues and in keeping with Chicago Little Theatre’s proclivity toward poetic works, Kiper Frank models *Jael* on European forms. Stylistically, Kiper Frank’s poetic drama most resembles French symbolist plays. Symbolists frequently turned to the Bible as seen in Mallarmé’s poem “Hérodiade,” Rivière’s nativity play *La Marche à l’Étoile*, and Grandmougin’s *Cain* and *Le Christ*. Of course, Wilde’s *Salomé* brought the most sustained criticism of the symbolist biblical play. Possible reasons for the strong reemergence of biblical plays in European theatre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are addressed by Katharine Brown Downey. In

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44 Downey, 43-52.
Perverse Midrash, Downey discusses several fin de siècle trends that allowed such an upsurge. These include biblical reform such as German historical criticism and the “Bible as literature” movement, as well as theatre reform through symbolist drama. Downey suggests that symbolist drama and the revival of medieval mystery plays provided fertile ground for the biblical play in the theatre: “These two movements differed, the one trying to innovate by returning to ancient ritual and myth, the other trying to reform by reviving a body of successfully spiritual work, but both manifested an underlying impulse to recover a lost experience of transcendence and restore it to the modern theatre.”

Katherine Browne Downey supplies some other reasons for the resurgence of biblical drama. Another European trend that likely influenced Kiper Frank was German historical criticism popularized by William Robertson Smith, a Scottish Orientalist. Smith argued that biblical texts were particular to their “historical and cultural contexts” and, therefore, could not be literally applied to a modern context. Concurrently, the idea of “Bible as literature” was being introduced by literary critics such as Matthew Arnold, about whom Kiper Frank included a poem in her 1915 collection, and Richard Green Moulton, author of Bible as Literature and editor of the Modern Reader’s Bible, whom Kiper Frank acknowledged for his aid with the verse form of her play, and whose praises of Frank’s play are reported in The Cornhill Booklet.

These trends in biblical criticism destabilized the sacrosanct nature of scripture, which provided dramatists ample opportunity to creatively explore biblical texts. Furthermore, many theories of

46 Downey, 22.
47 Downey, 16-17. See Florence Kiper Frank, “Matthew Arnold,” The Jew to Jesus: and Other Poems (New York: Mitchell Kennerly, 1915) 27. See Florence Kiper Frank, Jael (Chicago: Chicago Little Theatre, 1914) 3. Because Kiper Frank’s play is a one-act and there is only one known publication of the play, I have chosen to cite passages by page number.
biblical reinterpretation focused on Semitic texts, pertinent to the exploration of Frank’s *Jael* based on “The Song of Deborah” from the Hebrew Bible. Throughout her study, Downey notes that material from the Hebrew Bible was less susceptible to censure than that from the New Testament and, therefore, was the subject of more plays and scholarship. The creative tradition of midrash, long practiced in Judaism, likewise afforded more flexibility in the interpretation of these texts.

What most likely motivated Kiper Frank to take up the symbolist form of poetic biblical drama, however, was her relationship to the Chicago Little Theatre. After the theatre’s first season, founder and producer Maurice Browne announced that the group would produce “classical and modern plays . . . with preference for poetic and imaginative” works. According to Rachel Whitfield in *A History of Chicago Little Theatre*, the Théâtre de l’Œuvre (which premiered Wilde’s *Salomé*) and André Antoine’s Theatre Libre held particular import for little theatres in the United States and provided models for emerging amateur art theatres. Kiper Frank’s *Jael*, therefore, can be seen as an example of poetic drama arising from the Chicago Little Theatre’s experimentation with French avant-garde forms.

To the historical scenario of Downey’s survey of fin de siècle trends that contributed to the rising popularity of the biblical play, I would add the English and American women’s movements. In London, the production of biblical plays in independent theatre houses took an oppositional stance to censorship within the commercially licensed theatre. The same can be said for plays featuring the New Woman. Katharine Cockin in *Women and Theatre in the Age of*

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48 Dukore, 25.
Suffrage notes that plays in which female characters contradicted gender norms were often denied licensure.\textsuperscript{50} Biblical and feminist plays, therefore, became politically charged as they protested such censorship and were likely fare for experimental “free theatres” (theatres free from government control) such as the Independent Stage Society with which the Chicago Little Theatre held an honorary association.\textsuperscript{51} Another London “free theatre,” The Pioneer Players under the direction of Edith Craig, frequently performed religious plays. During the same year as Frank’s \textit{Jael}, Craig produced Hrosvit’s \textit{Paphnutius} and A. D’Este Scott’s adaptation of \textit{The Daughters of Ishmael}.\textsuperscript{52} Cockin explains that the players’ production of religious material “demonstrated the society’s interest in poetic drama and, in the case of Hrosvit, in plays written by women.”\textsuperscript{53} Furthermore, “the suffragists’ appropriation of religious discourse, with its emphasis on martyrdom, sacrifice and comradeship endorsed an oppositional political position.”\textsuperscript{54} Like Edith Craig and The Pioneer Players, Kiper Frank was deeply committed to the women’s movement and likely familiar with its use of religious iconography.

Yet, as Judith E. Barlow points out, Kiper Frank’s Provincetown play \textit{Gee Rusalem!} was not overtly feminist, but satirized “the single new woman, Freudian psychology, and the eugenics movement—and perhaps Zionism and communism as well.”\textsuperscript{55} In “Susan’s Sisters: The

\textsuperscript{51} For affiliation, see Kiper Frank, \textit{Jael}, 33.
\textsuperscript{52} Cockin, 200.
\textsuperscript{53} Cockin, 127.
\textsuperscript{54} Cockin, 127.
\textsuperscript{55} Barlow, 284. Barlow notes that the play’s critique of Zionism followed the Balfour Declaration of 1917, which “pledged British support for a Jewish homeland in Palestine.” See n90, 299. According to Barlow, the play’s characters, all members of the same family, represent multiple viewpoints on Judaism from Zionism to anti-Semitism to intermarriage. See 285. Robert Károly Sarlós explains that the lead character, Sylvia Levy, eventually repudiates the faith
‘Other’ Women Writers of the Provincetown Players,” Barlow suggests that female Provincetown playwrights deferred to satirical comedy because they “sensed a covert strain of antifeminism among male colleagues . . . and therefore found it difficult to present a serious, positive portrayal of the New Woman.”\(^{56}\) If Barlow is correct, then while Kiper Frank called for sincere feminist drama, her peers’ fears may have impeded her success. This pressure within Kiper Frank’s own intellectual and artistic circle was coupled with the mainstream commoditization of the New Woman into less threatening images such as the “Gibson Girl,” therefore diminishing the New Woman’s efficacy as a symbol of the counter-culture.\(^{57}\)

The New Woman was an ill-defined and contentious figure when Kiper Frank was writing. Talia Schaffer in “‘Nothing but Foolscamp and Ink’: Inventing the New Woman” argues that the term was “invented in the \textit{fin de siècle} feminist press . . . where it named a utopian feminist vision of the future.”\(^{58}\) She notes, however, that when the term “migrated to the mainstream press, its meaning changed.”\(^{59}\) By the 1890s, the New Woman was most often lampooned as “the unsexed, terrifying, violent Amazon ready to overturn the world.”\(^{60}\) Kiper Frank would exploit this turn-of-the-century image in her play \textit{Jael}, in which a woman seduces

\(^{56}\) Barlow, 290


\(^{58}\) Schaffer, 40.

\(^{59}\) Schaffer, 40.

\(^{60}\) Schaffer, 39.
and then violently murders a military enemy. However, by the following decade when *Jael* was written and produced, the image of the New Woman had further metamorphosed into something closer to what we are familiar with today. Alma Bennet describes a common reaction of playwrights to the phenomenon:

> One effect of the theater’s response to the upheaval in society was the introduction of new characters into the plays of the day. One such new character, the new woman—educated, independent, not necessarily confined to the home . . . became a frequently occurring character . . . Many playwrights very cautiously introduced such characters, never permitting them to challenge to any great extent the prevailing social codes. The new woman may exert her independence in varying degrees, but usually capitulates to and reinforces the existing social hegemony through a change of heart, modified behavior, or even death. 61

Bennet reaffirms that Kiper Frank wrote “Some American Plays” out of her “her concern for American playwrights who lagged behind European writers ‘in regard to the woman movement.’” 62 Kiper Frank, therefore, may have been reacting to these two images of the New Woman, the terrifying Amazon warrior and the tentative independent woman, in her plays. Her use of satire in *Gee Rusalem!* could have been intended to reveal the absurd abatement of the independent woman, while the perversion of *Jael* revealed the exaggerated fears of the New Woman, even as it restored some of the symbol’s political prowess.

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61 Bennett, 219.
62 Bennett, 219.
Perverse Midrash and “The Woman” and “The Jewish Problem[s] in America”

Florence Kiper Frank’s strategy is consistent with what Downey defines as “perverse midrash,” “highly unorthodox reinterpretations of scripture that, in the process of perversion, seek to conserve, or perhaps more accurately, to restore something in the text orthodoxy has elided, obscured, or even hidden.”  

Kiper Frank’s creation of midrash is well within her Jewish tradition. The term derives from the Jewish tradition of biblical explication in which scriptural stories are imaginatively retold. Downey surveys several definitions for midrash of which James Kugel’s is most helpful to my study:

Generally, midrashic motifs arise from a single problem in the [biblical] text, usually a troubling word or a textual peculiarity, and the expansions seek to explain these anomalies . . . . Midrash arises in moments of cultural and intellectual crisis, and it calls for attention to a text that appears to have lost its significative function.  

If we consider Kiper Frank’s Jael as midrash, the play’s motif can be understood as arising out of the crises of feminism, against which scripture was used to reinforce the patriarchal systems oppressing women, and Jewish intellectualism, for which scripture had “lost its significative function.”

To the term midrash, Downey adds the descriptor “perverse.” Perversity has, of course, become associated with socially perceived sexual deviance. Its first definition, however, is

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63 Downey, 153.
64 Downey, 151.
65 Downey, 151.
simply to “willfully . . . go counter to what is expected.” 66 The word’s sexual connotation is, therefore, ironically, a cultural perversion of the word itself. Although Downey uses this double meaning to her advantage in the exegesis of Salomé, she qualifies her own use of the term through Harold Bloom’s definition, which is more consistent with the word’s original meaning. Bloom defines the “perverse poet” as simply “turned the wrong way in relation to the precursor.” 67 Although Bloom’s theory is usually applied to drama as a literary genre, I will “go counter to what is expected” and address Florence Kiper Frank’s “perversion” of the biblical text as both a poet and playwright. As she was primarily a popular writer, it is perhaps reasonable to first approach Kiper Frank’s work through dramatic literary theory. 68 It is necessary, therefore, to bestride literary and dramatic theory when examining works such as Kiper Frank’s Jael. Thus, I turn Bloom’s theory of “perversion” toward Kiper Frank’s play, just as Kiper Frank turns the genre of biblical drama “the wrong way” from both its dramatic and theatrical precursors—biblical dramas written by female aesthetes in popular literature that tended to uphold the cult of womanhood on the one hand, and those by male symbolist artists such as Wilde who depicted the depravity of female desire on the other.

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67 Downey, 152.
68 In “Between the Acts” from The American Play: 1787-2000, Marc Robinson discusses early twentieth-century “popular forms” ranging from the nondramatic literary genres of fiction and poetry to popular dance and burlesque that began to “close in on themselves leav[ing] an opening for drama” that “engage[d] popular culture in order to argue with it, or that succumb[ed] to its seductive rhythms the better to resist them.” Biblical poetic dramas such as Jael and the Salome burlesque “craze” that followed Wilde’s play and Strauss’ opera may serve as examples. Robinson offers that the “decade’s most rewarding drama isn’t confident of its identity as drama: it exists between genres,” and, therefore, has fallen “between the acts” or “between the cracks” of literary and theatre criticism. See Marc Robinson, “Between the Acts,” The American Play 1787-2000 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 216-220. Coincidentally, Robinson begins his chapter with a close reading of Wallace Steven’s play Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise published in Poetry magazine in 1916.
Bloom’s process of perversion includes three phases: *clinamen*, *tessera*, and *kenosis*. *Clinamen* “misreads the precursor as an act of creative correction,” *tessera* “retain[s] the terms of the parent poem but means[s] them in a different sense,” which results in *kenosis*, “the movement toward discontinuity with the precursor.” 69 Downey’s theory of perverse midrash follows a similar pattern. Whereas Bloom’s *kenosis* moves away from the precursor, however, perverse midrash returns to the biblical text “to recover something that has been lost and restore it to modernity.” 70 For Kiper Frank, this recovery concerns sexual and spiritual experiences, particularly of women, that have been suppressed, or “perverted,” both biblically and culturally.

In order to expose these perversions, Kiper Frank chooses to frame her play within the biblical context of Judges 4-5. In Judges 4, the prophet Deborah, upon the divination that a woman shall deliver Israel from its adversaries, accompanies the commander Barak into battle against the Cannanites. During the fight, the enemy leader Sisera flees into the tent of Heber the Kenite, where Heber’s wife Jael sedates him with warm milk before driving a stake through his temple. The battle concludes in Judges 5 with the “Song of Deborah” sung by Israelite women in praise of their heroes Deborah and Jael. In terms of Kugel’s definition of midrash, Frank addresses the “peculiarity” and “anomaly” of two strong women exercising their god-given power in a time of war, which is of relevance to first-wave feminism’s struggle for political rights on the verge of World War I.

A final marker of perverse midrash is that plays of the genre intend to reveal “culture’s repressed fears.” 71 Through *Jael*, Kiper Frank responds to society’s repressed fear of the

69 Downey, 152-153.
70 Downey, 153.
71 Downey, 177.
intellectual Jew and the New Woman by depicting a heroine of great strength and power. Jael’s status as a Jew, however, is uncertain. The tent that she shares with her husband, described as a Kenite who is at peace with Israel’s enemies, is pitched between the Israelites and their adversaries.  

Jael’s identity is conflicted. Likewise, although Kiper Frank’s writings display a strong commitment to cultural Judaism, they also express a conflict of her Jewish identity. Her tent is likewise pitched between her Jewish heritage and her desire to participate in modern culture. In her 1923 article “The Jew as Jewish Artist” written for Poetry magazine, Kiper Frank writes:

> I cannot become convinced that what the Jew has to say in the modern world he [she] will say as a Jew . . . And here it seems to me he [she] becomes significant as a symbol. For if genius can only grow out of the deep ground, then perhaps genius . . . will be no more . . . . This de-nationalized Jew, this de-religionized expatriate of spiritual solidity—looking back perhaps with nostalgia, perhaps feeling about into this new world with a curious, rising excitement, is—it seems to me—the modern intellectual.  

In this passage, Kiper Frank expresses some of the anxieties of being an American Jewish artist in the early twentieth-century. Rubinstein suggests one reason why Jewish artists may not have

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72 Alice Ogden Bellis comments that Kenite is meant to denote dark skin, thus describing Jael as a “dark-skinned woman.” This is noteworthy in light of Kiper Frank’s somewhat pejorative views on race (consistent with her time) and what Martha H. Patterson refers to as the “New Negro Woman.” Although the scope of this paper does not extend to discussions of race and Orientalism, these areas are ripe for further inquiry into this play and its relationship tp Aida Overtom Walker’s and Lorraine Hansberry’s Pan-Africanism in Chapters Two and Four of this study. See Bellis, 119 and Patterson, 50-79.

been able to say what they wanted as Jews, was because of bias among publishers. For example, Rubinstein insinuates that even the magazine *Poetry*, founded by Kiper Frank’s acquaintance Harriet Monroe, was complicit in the “vaguely anti-Jewish, Anglo-American modernist movement,” for its lack of including Yiddish poets. Such was the insider/outsider territory that Kiper Frank negotiated as a Jewish writer. The Jewish intellectual was an expatriate, not unlike the character of Jael, living on the margins of Anglo-American modernist society.

Nevertheless, if a Jewish artist wished to express her or himself in particular as a Jew, Chicago provided ample opportunity. In her article “Illustrating the Jewish Left,” Sarah Abrevaya Stein documents that the Jewish population of Chicago surged between 1895 and 1915 and that “no fewer than 13 Jewish publishing presses operated [in the city] between the turn of the century and the 1940s.” Furthermore, “Chicago boasted Yiddish theaters as well as Jewish cultural centers, journals, and political organizations” that were “highly integrated into the fabric of Chicago” and its radical politics. The marginalization of the Jewish voice, therefore, could not be entirely blamed on Anglo-modernists. As Alvin H. Rosenfeld writes in “Promised Land(s): Zion, America, and American Jewish Writers” and as implied in the title of Kiper Franks’ essay “The Jew as Jewish Artist,” “most [Jewish writers] choose not to see themselves first and foremost as ‘Jewish writers’ but simply as writers, whose Jewishness may be more or less relevant to what they do when they sit down to work.”

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74 Rubinstein, 453.
76 Alvin H. Rosenfeld, “‘Promised Land(s)’: Zion, America, and American Jewish Writers,” *Jewish Social Studies* 3.3 (1997): 112.
however, this attitude was compounded by growing anxiety over Zionist and anti-Zionist
sentiments in the American Jewish community itself.

As global persecution of Jews mounted, particularly in World War I Russia, some felt the
need for a Jewish homeland in Palestine to which the vulnerable Eastern European Jews could
seek sanctuary. While this sentiment was felt most acutely in Europe, feelings toward Zionism
were more ambivalent in mainstream America, particularly among the affluent Jews to which
Kiper Frank belonged. Rosenfeld observes that as early as 1897, following the “first Zionist
Congress in Basel . . . the American Hebrew Congregations issue[d] a statement that included the
following: ‘We are unalterably opposed to political Zionism. Zion was a precious possession of
the past. . . . America is our Zion. Here, in the home of religious liberty, we have aided in
founding this new Zion.’” 77 Rosenfeld explains that Jews in America felt that the United States
was already their Promised Land. German Jews, in particular, had long established themselves in
the United States. Circumstances were not as fair for the recent wave of Russian Jewish
immigrants fleeing to the United States among the growing hardships in their homeland. In a
paternalistic relationship fraught with class, ethnic, and social tensions and inequalities, both
Jews of German and Russian descent saw it as their collective responsibility to make the United
States their Promised Land and chose their battles accordingly. In a similar argument, Robert
Wistrich contends that assimilationists who had made their way in America even viewed
Zionism as dangerous in that “any acknowledgement of a ‘Jewish nationality’ could only
undermine this painfully acquired status and raise the specter of dual loyalties.” 78 Kiper Frank

77 Rosenfeld, 115.
78 Robert Wistrich, “Zionism and its Jewish ‘Assimilationist’ Critics,” Jewish Social Studies 4.2
speaks from this anxiety when, in “The Jew as Jewish Artist” she exposes a nostalgic connection with a homeland of the past, and perhaps, a sense of homelessness in the lack of a Jewish state, but seems to encourage a curiosity in the modern “new world.” The Jewish artist must “de-nationalize” in order to speak as a modern intellectual.

Yet, this does not mean that Kiper Frank had nothing to say as an American Jew. In fact, much of what Kiper Frank says, she says as a Jew. Her works *Jael, Gee-Rusalem!*, and her collection of poetry *The Jew to Jesus*, openly disclose her Jewish location.\(^79\) Rachel Rubinstein in “Going Native, Becoming Modern” suggests that, “[f]or [Kiper] Frank, if the Jew has nothing to say, poetically, ‘as a Jew,’ he may very well have nothing to say as an American either.”\(^80\)

Rather, Kiper Frank’s Jewish identity does not arise from a Zionist impulse, but from Jewish intellectualism. Regarding the New York intellectual (which Kiper Frank would eventually become by way of Chicago), Rosenfeld comments that “some developed an image of themselves as intellectuals living within a tradition of alienation and estrangement and managed to transform their own vaunted marginality as Jews into a part of the American intellectual mainstream. They remained engaged in leftist politics, or became passionate anti-communists, or devoted Yiddishists, or critics of the literary modernism they earlier embraced.”\(^81\) It is from this

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\(^{79}\) This last mentioned poem, “The Jew to Jesus,” also reflects Kiper Frank’s position as an assimilationist. Jewish assimilationists often aligned themselves with Protestantism, which shared their view of the United States as the “New Zion.” Kiper Frank’s husband once said in a 1941 article “Red, White, and Blue Herring,” that “the religion practiced by American Jews ‘is closer aligned to liberal Protestantism than to Jewish orthodoxy.’” Although Jerome Frank’s political views cannot be directly assumed by Kiper Frank, his policies remained unmoved by his Judaism, including his actions, or lack thereof, regarding the Rosenberg trial and immigration policies towards Jews during WWII. See Leonard Dinnerstein, *Uneasy at Home: Antisemitism and the American Jewish Experience* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987) 66-67.

\(^{80}\) Rubinstein, 435.

\(^{81}\) Rosenfeld, 118.
perspective that Kiper Frank expresses her marginality in “The Jew as Jewish Artist,” her anxieties about American Jewish involvement in the European conflict as seen in “Jewish Conscript,” and her alignment with leftist and feminist politics in “Girl Strike Leader.” In response to the ambiguous position of the Jewish writer, Kiper Frank advises that “[t]he position of the intellectual Jew in a modern complex society is by no means an easy one to maintain. But why should you ask for ease?”  

It seems surprising, then, that Kiper Frank chooses to write a play like Jael set in ancient Palestine. However, in keeping with the impulse of perverse midrash to expose society’s repressed fears, this “scenario” provides Kiper Frank with the organizational principle by which to exploit cultural anxieties surrounding Zionism. Furthermore, the setting of the play as participating in Orientalism makes it as much, if not more so, modernist as Zionist. In effect, it is on this modernist and not necessarily Zionist landscape that Kiper Frank perverts both the American Jewish aversion to Zionism and Orientalist portrayals of women in order to expose and explore anxieties concerning both the “Jewish question” and the “Woman question” in the early twentieth-century.

Indeed, in her August 1913 Forum article “The Jewish Problem in America,” Kiper Frank conflates the “Jewish Problem” and the “Woman Problem.” For her, these two oppressions are inseparable. Consistent with her other articles on Judaism, Kiper Frank is adamant that the Jews are not a race or nation, but are a social group comparable to women. Recognizing the social construction of both groups she writes, “Both Jew and woman are in America conscious of

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the loosening bonds that for so long have repressed the development of the individual in a blind
effort to compel him [her] to conform to his [her] group.”83 Social forces had confined and
persuaded both Jew and woman to adopt what she deems an “artificial code of living.” In turn,
Nature’s “stern penalty,” says Kiper Frank, is the socially-induced weakness and hysteria of
nerves associated with both groups.84 She warns both the “anti-Semite and the anti-feminist”
against thinking that the “present limitations . . . are congenital.”85 Instead, she warns that Jews
and women have become conscious of their condition and would turn their false associations
against the oppressor in the radical forms of rebellion. Kiper Frank prophesies that “[t]he next
few years will see a growing solidarity of woman, a solidarity that will at times and places take
on the aspect of a clearly defined sex war.”86 While Kiper Frank’s politics make her weary of
war in general, as displayed in her poem “The Jewish Conscript,” she has no qualms in evoking

84 It should be noted that the Jewish inclination toward hysteria was common in anti-Semetic
propaganda. While Kiper Frank seems to refute such eugenics in “The Jewish Problem in
America,” at other times she promulgates congenital arguments in order to differentiate Jews, as
a social group, from races such as African-Americans. See “The Dilemma of the American Jew.”
I have chosen, in light of Kiper Frank’s stance in “The Jewish Problem in America” and the
satiric nature of perverse midrash, to interpret hysteria in *Jael* as parodic of anti-Semitism.
However, in the play’s parallels to Wilde’s *Salomé*, and consequently Strauss’ opera by the same
name, it is equally productive to consider Kiper Frank’s reification of anti-Semitic sentiment,
particularly that against the Eastern European Jew. Critical studies of Strauss’ *Salomé* (1905)
have suggested that the opera’s Orientalism and the hysteria of the title character appealed to the
predominately Jewish German avant-garde in order to differentiate, and thus distance themselves
from the exoticized and eroticized Eastern Jew. This, in turn, aided in the identification and
assimilation of the Western Jew into Western culture. For more information, see Carmen
Tammel Skaggs, “Modernity's Revision of the Dancing Daughter: The Salome Narrative of
Wilde and Strauss,” *College Literature* 29.3 (2002): 124-139; and Sander L. Gilman, “Strauss,
the Pervert, and Avant Garde Opera of the Fin de Siécle,” *New German Critique* 43 (1988): 35-68.
86 Kiper, “The Jewish Problem,” 151.
the metaphor to rally her gender in battles of social equality. In her poem “The Song of the
Women,” she writes:

We have visioned a distant vision that has lured us with its gleam
And the marching lines and tramping feet are hot on the trail of a dream
We have visioned a social justice that shall know the end of might
The poor and the weak and the thwarted we have seen in living light

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This is the song of the women, sung to the marching feet,
Mothers, and daughters of mothers, out in the crowded street,
Yea, the mothers of mothers, white with the passing years—
This is the chant of the women, and wise is he who hears. 87

Certainly, Kiper Frank employs the image of the militant woman in her perverse midrash *Jael.*
The final image of a heroine to the Israelites standing over a slain Gentile man evocatively
manifests culture’s repressed fears of Jewish nationalism and female sexuality. The last line of
Kiper Frank’s previous poem, “This is the song of the women and wise is he who hears,” is
underscored in this provocative image which serves as an organizing principle of her feminist
perspective.

Kiper Frank’s choice to write a play set in ancient Palestine may also have to do with
what Nadia Valman finds as the *fin de siècle* association between “the Eastern woman” and “the

87 Kiper, *Jew to Jesus,* 9-10.
position of women in late-Victorian England.” According to Valman, a circle of liberal and feminist thinkers were employing the ancient and barbarous Near East as a metaphor for the modern condition of marriage. Amy Levy’s 1886 article “Middle-Class Jewish Women of To-Day” serves as Valman’s point of departure. Valman writes:

The author laments the destiny of the modern Jewess, who is taught to suppress “her healthy, objective activities . . . her natural employment of her young faculties” and “to look upon marriage as the only satisfactory termination to her career.” . . . Levy imagines Jewish women as unhappily imprisoned in the past, “beating themselves in vain against the solid masonry of our ancient fortifications, long grown obsolete and of no use save as obstructions.” Jewish society, in this account, resists and impedes modernity; it is “more Oriental at heart than a casual observer might infer . . . a society constructed on . . . a primitive basis.”

For Valman, “Levy’s ‘Oriental’ Jews . . . represent what would have been for liberal feminist thinkers a paradigmatic ‘survival’ of ‘barbarous’ society.” Understood within this context, Kiper Frank’s nostalgic setting of Palestine can be understood as an organizing principle that allows the playwright to comment not only on the dangers of a Jewish homesickness for an ancient homeland, but upon modern middle-class Jewish marriage as well; both are “ancient fortifications, long grown obsolete and of no use save as obstructions.” Indeed, Jael’s predicament is at once barbarous and modern: a woman unhappy in her marriage falls in love

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89 Valman, 112.
90 Valman, 113.
91 Valman, 112.
with the enemy general, Sisera, and kills him because her passions cannot be fulfilled under Jewish law and modern social mores. As perverse midrash, Kiper Frank reveals the anxieties of the modern woman in marriage, as well as anxieties over female sexuality and feminism through her biblical setting.

As a “Jewish Artist,” Kiper Frank responds to these cultural, religious, and social anxieties by taking a critical look back on a nostalgic nationalized and religionized Hebrew text “with a curious, rising excitement” as a “modern intellectual.” In “The Jewish Problem in America,” she writes: “we are indeed barren of faith did we not know that the newest age makes and can always make newest Bibles for its needs. The same ardor for social righteousness that burned in the prophets, the same exquisite sympathies that flowered in Jesus, the demands of a new time must recreate in new forms and in new rituals.” Kiper Frank’s own ardor for social righteousness and a progressive American Jewry may have led her to recreate the story of Jael in the “new form” described by Downey as perverse midrash. Downey explicates her definition of perverse midrash through a close reading of Oscar Wilde’s Salomé. Incidentally, Kiper Frank’s Jael resonates with themes and language found in Wilde’s Salomé. Both plays portray a biblical woman who is responsible for the seduction and death “of a powerful man.” At times Kiper Frank even borrows poetry from Wilde’s Salomé over the biblical text. In many respects, the two plays invite direct comparison; however, I limit the scope to parallels necessary in understanding Jael as an example of perverse midrash and a feminist form.

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92 qtd. in Rachel Rubinstein, 435.
93 Valman, 149. Again, Kiper Frank employs the name of Jesus in an alliance of progressive Judaism and liberal Protestantism.
94 Both plays are also consistent with what Rose Glaymen qualifies as “Judith Drama.” See Glaymen, 13.
Perversions of the Bible and Wilde’s Salomé in Kiper Frank’s Jael

A comparison of Kiper Frank’s Jael and Wilde’s Salomé begins with their symbolic settings. The opening of Jael makes use of the setting as a metaphor for the unconscious in much the same way as does Wilde’s play. Downey explains Iokanaan’s cell in Wilde’s play as “a repository for repressed sexual and violent desires.” She supports this symbolism by Ewa Kuryluk’s association of Wilde’s cistern with “the nineteenth century interest in caves and grottos as metaphors for the unconscious.” Similarly, the setting of Kiper Frank’s play is “the interior of Jael’s tent, darkened by the approach of a thunderstorm.” Like a cave, the tent represents Jael’s unconscious, a site where she displays the qualities of “hysteric nerves” and “unrest” that Kiper Frank attributes to women in her earlier article. As Jael stands at the opening of her tent with the battle looming in the background, her handmaid Abigail admonishes her to move saying, “Stand not so still in the doorway / I am afeard of the black clouds – and of / Thee also.” Abigail associates fear with Jael, a metaphor of society’s fear of the desirous or “hysterical” woman. Jael confirms this unease replying, “Yea, thou art fearful of me, / Who am a black storm on the desert.” With this, Kiper Frank makes explicit Jael’s connection to the storm and the battlefield as metaphors for her inner state. In this image, the playwright creates

95 Downey, 102.
97 Kiper Frank, Jael, 5.
98 Kiper Frank, Jael, 6.
99 Kiper Frank, Jael, 6.
“that tumultuous battlefield, her own soul,” the metaphorical landscape that she recommends to feminist playwrights in “Some American Plays.”

In Kiper Frank’s play, Jael’s unconscious soul evokes a state of sexual repression. Jael tells Abigail:

   My heart is terrible within me.
   As a dark storm it croucheth,
   That has not yet burst
   Nor disclosed its lightnings.

Desire is the source of the dark storm within Jael’s soul; it is her sexuality that Abigail fears. Later in the play, Jael similarly addresses Sisera saying:

   For thou art fearful of me, Sisera,

   Look at me, Sisera! Look into mine eyes!
   Hast though no knowledge of the fierce strength of desire?

   Art not my lips made for love,
   And the twin breasts for loving!

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In regard to the form of perverse midrash, Jael confronts not only Sisera’s apprehension, but culture’s repressed fear of female sexuality.

In keeping with symbolist plays, Kiper Frank continues to use the convention of physical and natural phenomena to convey the metaphysical. Abigail reports a storm approaching from the North. Jael answers: “The trees trembled and then were still / The great oak shivered and now is silent.”\(^{103}\) Jael’s observations of the natural world can be interpreted as announcing the approach of divine prophecy with the “great oak” referencing the prophet Deborah who held court under a palm and Jael whose tent is also pitched under a “great tree.”\(^{104}\) The prophet or “great oak . . . now is silent,” but the biblical prophecy, “for the Lord will hand Sisera over to a woman” will bear true.\(^{105}\)

In the play, Jael acknowledges this divine hand in the Canaanites’ defeat, admonishing Sisera with the line “Was it not Jahveh himself / Hath fought from heaven against thee!”\(^{106}\) However, whether the Lord or Jael is more responsible for Sisera’s ultimate demise is worth exploring. In Exodus, the Lord leads the Israelites from the land of Egypt by way of a “pillar of

\(^{103}\) Kiper Frank, *Jael*, 6.


\(^{105}\) Judges 4:9.

cloud.” Yet, it is Jael who is associated with the cloud of Kiper Frank’s play. Reporting on the battle outside of the tent Abigail exclaims, “A black cloud of men when the lightning flasheth. . . . Like to a smitten cloud they flee.” Of course, it is Sisera who will flee to the “smitten cloud” of the “dark storm” in Jael’s heart.

The shared allusions between the trees of Deborah and Jael and the clouds of Jahveh and Jael represent the “communion” of the spiritual and physical worlds. This is most obviously manifested in Jael’s proclamation as Astarte, the ancient Semitic goddess of “sexual activity, fertility, maternity, love and war” and the female counterpart of the male deity Baal, the “storm god” and “rider on the clouds.” Revealing herself to Sisera, Jael says, “Yea, I am Astarte of the temples of love and the flaming torches / of the secret thoughts of lovers and the longings thereof and the madness!” Jael becomes a physical and sexual incarnation of this spiritual entity. The play ends, not with clouds associated with the male god, but with “murmurings,” “cries,” and the “flare of torches” from the male attendants outside the tent, now Astarte’s temple. The feminine god and spirituality has taken authority over the masculine. In addition to Astarte, the feminine symbolism of torches also relates back to Deborah. In The Women’s Bible, Elizabeth Cady Stanton explains that the scriptural phrase “Deborah of Lapidoth” does not singularly refer to the husband’s name, as it is often interpreted, but also “signifies ‘lamps’” and Deborah’s “special illumination and communication with God.”

107 Kiper Frank, Jael, 11-12.
109 Kiper Frank, Jael, 23.
depends upon the communion of the sexual, spiritual and militant. The cloud, symbolic of patriarchal religion and the male god Baal, both of which repress female sexuality, is replaced with the torches of Astarte, a Semitic goddess, and Deborah, an Israelite prophet, judge, and soldier.

Astarte and Abigail can be interpreted as examples of Kiper Frank doing what Bloom calls *tessara*. Kiper Frank retains the plot of her precursor text Judges, but through the insertion of these characters, makes the narrative mean something different. Both women can be read as references to other personae in the Bible. Abigail refers to a woman by the same name in 1 Samuel 25 who becomes David’s “good” wife. Quite the opposite, the temple of Astarte is referenced in 1 Samuel 31 as the place where Saul’s armor was placed after his death. In the Hebrew language, the goddess of Astarte is referred to as Ashtoreth, a derivative of the word “shame” and reviled as an idol. In Judges, war comes upon the Israelites when “new gods,” such as Astarte, are chosen. Serving as foils, Abigail and Astarte represent the poles of sacrosanct and cult femininity—“angelic or demoniac power”—criticized by Kiper Frank in

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111 Alice Ogden Bellis characterizes and then problematizes Abigail as David’s “good” wife as opposed to Michal who “rebels against injustice.” See Bellis, 18.

112 “Astarte,” *The Encyclopedia Americana International Edition*. See also Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women In Judges And Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998). Ackerman begins with a close reading of Judges 4 and 5 and these chapters’ depictions of the female warriors Deborah and Jael. She compares these figures and their relationship to Yahweh with the Canaanite warrior goddess Anat (for which Ackerman notes Astarte is sometimes substituted) and her brother-consort Baal. Ackerman suggests that Deborah and Jael represent Yahweh’s earthly consorts which mirror the dynamic between Anat and Baal. Ackerman argues that the Anat/Baal myth, to varying degrees, “allowed the Bible’s authors to overturn their culture’s stereotypes concerning appropriate gender activities in order to present militaristic portraits of Jael, of Deborah and of the tradition’s kindred women.” See Ackerman 28. Ackerman’s insights are especially helpful in considering Frank’s use the Canaanite to challenge if not “overturn . . . culture’s stereotypes” about Jael’s twentieth-century counterpart in the equally mythological New Woman.

113 Judges 5:8.
“Some American Plays.” Abigail and Jael/Astarte are perversions of the “cult of womanhood,” Abigail as the angel and Astarte as the goddess/demon.

The foil of these two ancient and Eastern women is also consistent with Nadia Valman’s assessment of Orientalist settings used by feminist writers as a metaphor for the barbarous state of modern marriage. Abigail is indicative of what Amy Levy laments as the “destiny of the modern Jewess, who is taught to suppress ‘her healthy, objective activities . . . her natural employment of her young faculties’ and ‘to look upon marriage as the only satisfactory termination to her career.’” Abigail takes on the qualities of her biblical counterpart and provides Kiper Frank’s criticism of the cultural norm that proclaimed the moral superiority of the female sex and often confined them to the role of the “good” wife. Jael, on the other hand, is reminiscent of Levy’s Jewish woman “unhappily imprisoned in the past, ‘beating [herself] in vain against the solid masonry of our ancient fortifications, long grown obsolete and of no use save as obstructions.’” Jael disapproves of Abigail’s embodiment of the Biblical ideal. She accuses Abigail of having a “woman’s heart . . . meek and altogether fearful . . . mild and desirous toward her husband.” Abigail, in turn, approaches Jael as the Amazon associated with fears of the New Woman when she asks, “Hast thou no woman’s heart within thee? Art thou as a man? Hast thou no desire toward bearing and suckling?” Jael counters, saying that she desires children, but not from her husband Heber. She desires a “warrior child” with “hair on his head as

115 Valman, 112.
116 Valman, 112.
117 Kiper Frank, Jael, 6.
118 Kiper Frank, Jael, 6.
black as the shadows of cedar” and “mouth a red pomegranate cut from the feast of Astarte.” Because Jael refuses to submit to the “cult of womanhood,” Abigail accuses her of being unwomanly. Jael, however, chooses to define her womanhood and motherhood based on her own desires and the cult of Astarte. As the soldiers flee the battlefield, Jael expels Abigail from her tent saying:

Out, out, Abigail!

Hither cometh he to me, Jael,

Who shall be blessed among women

Into the storm, Abigail!

Be not afraid!

(Striking her breast.)

Here is a tempest darker. Jael expels “the cult of womanhood” from her consciousness. Furthermore, Kiper Frank is faithful to the verse in Judges, “Jael, who shall be blessed among women” but adds “be not afraid.” This phrase echoes the words spoken by the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary on the night of annunciation. Jael expels the virgin and the standard for what is “good” and “pure” from her tent saying “be not afraid.” At the same time, Jael can be said to become a perversion of the

Madonna image as “blessed among women.” In this way, Kiper Frank fulfills her resolution in
“The Jewish Problem in America” by remaking the biblical text for modern needs.

As Abigail is ejected from the tent and Sisera enters, the stage directions describe a
change in Jael and a subsequent subsiding of the storm. The meeting between Sisera and Jael
accounts for the second half of Kiper Frank’s one-act play. Beginning as violent toward Jael,
with Sisera striking her twice for speaking to him in a defiant tone, fortune soon turns in the
woman’s favor. Jael’s subsequent seduction of Sisera suggests strong parallels to Salomé’s
seduction of Iokonaan in Wilde’s Salomé. Both encounters use the language of Songs of Songs, a
book of the Bible that metaphorically conflates the spiritual and sexual; however, at times Kiper
Frank borrows from Wilde over the biblical text. Jael describes Sisera’s “gods of the groves”
in terms of the garden in Song of Songs. There are “budding vineyards . . . fountains of living
waters . . . pomegranates are in flower / and the lilies drop liquid myrrh.” The maidens of
Astarte are said to “laugh at the gods in the groves” as Jael seduces Sisera into a “madness as
thou knowest, Sisera / who art overcome with love, / And with kisses of the mouth shalt kiss
me.” This kiss references both Salomé’s words to Iokanaan, “‘Suffer me to kiss thy mouth’

122 Luke 1:27-28. Bellis notes that this title is given to just three women in the Bible: Jael, Judith
and Mary. See Bellis, 122.
123 In her contemporary commentary, Nolan Fewell explains how Jael’s status changes within the
biblical story: “the reader, or listener [or spectator] to the tale, seeing a general at war come into
a woman’s tent, fears for the woman, not for the man. Yet, when the outside world of national
battles comes into her domestic space, Jael takes up a domestic ‘weapon of opportunity’ and
becomes a heroine. . . . When the greater world of national battles intrudes into her domestic
space, this Kenite becomes one of the ‘mothers’ of Israel.” See Fewell, 97-98.
124 It has been a common idea among biblical scholars for a while now that Song of Songs is an
allegorical conflation of the spiritual and the sexual. For Downey’s particular take on this, see
Downey, 142.
125 Kiper Frank, Jael, 22.
126 Kiper Frank, Jael, 23.
and ‘I will kiss you’” and Song of Song’s “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.”  

Sisera follows with a description of Jael in terms similar to those by which Salomé describes Iokanaan, saying, “the hair upon thy head is as the purple shadows of grape clusters,”

comparable to Salomé’s “Thy hair is like clusters of grapes.” Both sexes are mad with desire. Sisera, however, can be read in the place of Salomé with his desire directed at the sexualized prophetic figure. Sisera is overcome and falls asleep from the intoxication of Jael’s “sweet smelling spices . . . as with wine of the pomegranate.” Kiper Frank shows the danger and perversion of idolizing woman as a goddess, while at the same time disturbing the gender order. Consistent with perverse midrash, Kiper Frank takes the cue for her “perversion” of gender order from the biblical text. In the original text as well as Kiper Frank’s use of lines from Song of Songs and Salomé, Sisera is put into the position of the woman.

Remembering Jael’s allusion to the Madonna, the image of Sisera being lulled to sleep also recalls suffrage iconography. In a discussion of Olive Schreiner’s symbolist short story “Three Dreams in a Desert” and Cicely Hamilton’s play *Jack and Jill and a Friend*, Katharine Cockin writes, “Woman must break away from man who is at her breast, in order to achieve her

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129 qtd. in Downey, 107. See Wilde, 1964, 12.


131 Deryn Guest, *When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Biblical Hermeneutics* (London: SCM Press, 2005) 128. Contemporary theologian Deryn Guest describes the scriptural story as the “active seduction and penetration of the feminized Sisera by a masculinized Jael.” Guest theorizes that the change from the feminine text of Judges 5 to the later androcentric text of Judges 4, may have been an effort to conceal feminine homoeroticism, or at least female solidarity. She suggests a recuperation of Judges 5 (commonly titled “Deborah’s Song”) in which women’s relationships are exalted, from Judges 4 (alternatively titled “Deborah and Barak”), in which the heroine is identified through her relationship to a male, through a “hermeneutic of hetero-suspicion.”
own freedom. . . . As in many women’s suffrage texts the power-relation is reversed, and there is
a momentary allusion to Madonna and child.” 132 In Kiper Frank’s play, as well as in the Bible,
Jael attempts to subdue Sisera with milk. Furthermore Jael, according to the stage directions,
“wills him [Sisera] to slumber,” who says “[w]ith dreamy indistinctiveness,” “Yea, truly, thy lips
are made for love, / And the twin breasts for loving.” 133 This imagery is evocative of a woman
putting her child to sleep with mother’s milk. As noted by Cockin, the man is infantilized and
woman must break away from this dependency, in Jael’s case violently, thus subverting her role
as mother.

While Sisera is asleep, Kiper Frank once again perverts the gaze and reverses the gender
power-relation; however, this time it is the Oedipal gaze usually directed from man/son to
woman/mother, now directed from woman/mother to man/son. Looking upon the drowsing
Sisera, Jael describes him in the terms she wishes for her child: hair as “black as the shadow of
cedars,” eyes as “[b]lue as the pools of Kishon” and “mouth a red pomegranate cut at the feast of
Astarte.” 134 These lines echo Salomé’s words to describe Iokanaan: hair “like the cedars of
Lebanon . . . nothing in the world is so black,” 135 eyes “ like black lakes,” 136 and a mouth “like a
pomegranate cut in twain.” 137 Whereas Wilde perverts the biblical text by changing its delivery

132 Cockin, 94.
133 Kiper Frank, Jael, 25. See also Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Women in Scripture: a dictionary of
named and unnamed women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/ Deuterocanonical books, and
the New Testament, eds. Carol Meyers, Toni Craven and Rosa S. Kraemer (Boston: Houghton
“offer[ing] maternal nurturing before she strikes.” Fewell agrees, saying that Jael “mothers
Sisera to death” and “treats him with maternal care.” See Fewell, 69-70.
134 Kiper Frank, Jael, 27.
135 Wilde, 1964, 12.
136 Wilde, 1964, 10.
137 qtd. in Downey, 107. See Wilde, 1964, 12.
from between two lovers to between a seductress and prophet, Kiper Frank perverts the line by delivering it between a sexualized mother and a son figure.

This sexualization draws attention to the figure of Sisera’s mother. Jael praises Sisera’s mother for producing a warrior child, while regretting that he must return to her. Here, Kiper Frank departs from Song of Songs and returns to Judges 5:28-30, where Sisera’s mother waits for her son and assumes that his tardiness is a result of “finding and dividing the spoil [of war]—a girl or two for every man”—an allusion to rape. In “The Jewish Problem in America” Kiper Frank acknowledges the assault of women during war writing, “from the earliest Biblical times . . . women have not infrequently been violated by conquering nations.” Although Sisera’s mother is often interpreted in a sympathetic light, Kiper Frank’s treatment is more ambivalent. Jael both loathes and loves the mother of Sisera, crying in turn “I hate thee mother of Sisera” and “Nay I love thee.” The ambivalence toward Sisera’s mother is not lost on Kiper Frank. Jael says “[w]ith malicious mimicry,” “Why tarry the wheels of his chariot!” As Sisera’s mother awaits her son’s return, he has entered Jael’s tent with questionable intentions. Kiper Frank’s previous sexualization of Jael as a mother aids in highlighting the perversity present in the biblical text in a mother’s acquiescence to her son’s sexual conquests. In this episode, Kiper Frank problematizes culture’s notion of a pure and desexualized mother figure.

138 Judges 5.30.
139 Kiper, “The Jewish Problem,” 145.
140 Kiper Frank, Jael, 28.
141 Contemporary feminist theologians have continued to interpret Sisera and his mother in a less sympathetic way than Cady Stanton and other contemporaries of Kiper Frank. Nolan Fewell writes, “graphically violent and rapacious imagery colors Sisera’s downfall with poetic justice . . . [t]he one who would threaten their women, and perhaps threatened them in the past is himself ravaged by a woman.” See Fewell, 70. Sisera’s mother is, likewise, an important figure in the story. In direct contrast to the hero Deborah, a “mother of Israel,” this mother of Cannan is not
In a final perversion of the biblical text, Jael does not kill Sisera out of patriotic duty to the Israelite people (remembering that her play is not Zionist, but a metaphor for the ancient and modern “barbarous” attitudes toward women), but because society’s laws will not permit her sexual relationship with him: “I shall return to the Israelite cities / there, if any woman may be found in sin, / we shall stone her with stones at the gateway.” \(^{142}\) If their relationship were consummated, both Jael and Sisera would face stoning by the Israelites. Jael continues, “They shall not throw stones at thee Sisera! / Rather would I slay thee as thou sleepest.” \(^{143}\) Jael would rather kill her lover than endure society’s judgment; it is the repressed sexuality of religion and society and not Jael’s sexuality that places Sisera in danger. Although Kiper Frank’s is not a play of the “cult of womanhood,” Jael’s actions are a perverse interpretation of a woman making a moral choice. By killing Sisera, Jael avoids committing adultery and slays a political enemy. It is society’s morality, therefore, that appears as the real perversion; the moral choice results in the man’s death and the conversion of Jael to a cult idol. Consecrating the mallet and tent-pin that will kill Sisera, Jael intones, “Astarte, goddess of love, hear me! / Astarte of the flaming torches- / Of the secret things of the heart of woman!” \(^{144}\) After Jael slays Sisera, she opens her tent

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144 Kiper Frank, *Jael*, 29. Nolan Fewell elaborates on the method of Sisera’s death by saying that she “drives a tent peg through his mouth (raqaq = ‘parted lips,’ often translated mistakenly as ‘temple’).” See Fewell, 69. Although Kiper Frank stays with the conventional reading, the literal
saying, “They come—the multitude of Israel! They come to seek Sisera of the host of the Gentiles . . . Come, Barak, come/ And I will show thee the man whom thou seekest.” 145 Unlike Wilde’s *Salomé*, Kiper Frank’s play ends in the survival of the sexually transgressive woman. According to Downey, Wilde’s *Salomé*, contrary to the biblical narrative, is portrayed in such a way that her “demise is the only satisfactory resolution to the issues that the play raises.” 146

Many suffrage plays also end in the heroine’s death. In *Jael*, however, Kiper Frank does not pervert the ending, but returns to the biblical narrative at the point of Jael’s exaltation. The final image succeeds in what Downey argues is the purpose of perverse midrash, Kiper Frank restores the spiritual, national, and sexual identity of her female protagonist by revealing the repressed fears of society through an unorthodox retelling of scripture.

The lesson contained in the final image evokes the militant suffragette described in “The Jewish Problem in America”:

> We are taking woman more and more on her own merits and demerits as a human being. She is ceasing to be the goddess and the meek angel. The militant suffragette may have rudely rubbed the bloom from the illusion of a gentle womanhood. . . . The boasted chivalry of men to women has been stripped clean of its romantic veils and has been found to present rather a ghastly face. . . . Justice is now the cry, not worship. 147

146 Downey, 102.
As a military hero, Jael presents a ghastly figure. At once, she embodies all that 1914 society feared, the sexualized and nationalized woman who would cause the downfall of men; and yet, she would demand justice and rise victorious as a national heroine. The character’s militant strength was an important factor to the suffrage movement. Katharine Cockin notes that “[s]ince women were thought to be physically weaker than men and a citizen’s duty was to defend the country at a time of war, women were disqualified from citizenship.” Jael was a biblical indictment of this fallacy. Similarly, Jael also resembled the militant nun that Cockin identifies in many suffrage writings including the plays of Christopher St. John. Cockin writes that “St. John’s nuns are militant, politicized and woman-identified, resisting oppression which is maintained through the government, religion and the control of sexuality.” According to Cockin, the resistance to marriage or heterosexual relationships, whether through chastity or murder, appears to be an important theme in early feminist plays. She goes on to argue that “the militant martyr questions the conventional descriptions of religious discourse in the suffrage movement as necessarily suggesting the ‘moral superiority of women.’” Kiper Franks’ Jael does not endorse moral superiority or martyrdom, instead she uses religion as Cockin suggests many feminist dramatists did, that “appropriations by some suffragists of the domestic and the spiritual may now be regarded—to an extent, at least—deconstructing, not propagating, separate spheres ideology.” Downey’s theory of perverse midrash illuminates how such deconstruction operates in Kiper Frank’s play, as well as how Kiper Frank’s play operates within the larger scenarios of early twentieth-century feminism.

148 Cockin, 74.
149 Cockin, 130.
150 Cockin, 132.
151 Cockin, 133.
In “Some American Plays from a Feminist Perspective,” Kiper Frank criticizes American theatre’s treatment of the women’s movement. She calls for a poetic, non-realistic theatre that with “vital passion” treats what “the modern age has termed the problems of feminism.”

Downey’s “perverse midrash” is useful in understanding and interpreting how Kiper Frank answered her own call in the biblical play Jael. Kiper Frank’s perversion of the biblical text illuminates some of the problems of modern feminism—the fear of female sexuality and the dualism of woman as either a morally superior “angel” or a sexually threatening “demon.” Furthermore, Jael’s Hebrew origins exploits society’s anti-Semitic fears as discussed in Kiper Frank’s essay “The Jewish Problem in America,” as well as the dangers of nostalgia when considering ancient Israel within a modern paradigm. Such orientalizing of the “other” in order to reveal culture’s anxieties and fears continues to illuminate, in part, performances which hearken to the orientalism of the Near and Middle East. Beyond recuperating Kiper Frank’s play into the corpus of feminist drama, my aim has been to place it in the context of the American biblical play and women’s movement. Studies such as Rose Glaymen’s work on Judith plays and Downey’s observation that at least some biblical plays reflect an interest in the women’s movement imply that Jael should not be taken as an isolated event. It cannot be overlooked that women of the fin de siècle and early twentieth-century were looking to scriptural sources for organization principles by which to revise the patriarchal system that had dominated them. Alice Ogden Bellis in “A Brief History of Feminist Studies of Hebrew Scripture” provides some milestones: women began to be admitted to the Society of Biblical Literature in 1894 and Elizabeth Cady Stanton published The Woman’s Bible in 1898. However, while women within

religious organizations made some headway, Bellis concedes that “in the early twentieth-century . . . [t]reatments of women in the Bible came from women outside the profession.”153 These women included artist-journalists, critics, and dramatists like Kiper Frank who were engaging in creative and discursive revisions of the Bible on and through the stage. Such contributions and merit further study in regard to early twentieth century feminist theatre aesthetics as well as feminist discourse.

Oscar Wilde’s Salomé and the Salomania dance phenomenon that followed dominate scholarship concerning Orientalism, the Bible, and feminist re-visions of female sexuality in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century. A preoccupation with the veneration of the pseudo-biblical character of Salomé, however, may have contributed to what Marjorie Procter-Smith would describe as the “liturgical amnesia” of other biblical women and artists. What Kiper Frank and women writing biblical plays for literary journals and independent stages add to this genealogy is the memory of biblical characters and female artists that extend beyond the Salome archetype and the dance phenomenon. To the archetype of Salome, female dramatists discussed in this chapter add other heroines of the Bible who are able to overcome powerful men in order to earn their place in biblical history.

Nevertheless, in concert with Ruth St. Denis and her performances of Hindu goddesses, and similar to Sor Juana’s creative manipulation of the ancient goddess Tonantzin, Florence Kiper Frank also restores non-biblical female religious figures to their former glory. Each of these women manipulates masculinist Orientalist tropes that have been used to malign and diminish the sexual and spiritual character of “the other” into modern goddesses that align the

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153 Bellis, 5.
spiritual and physical. For example, Florence Kiper Frank restores the ancient Semitic goddess of Astarte who had been associated with “shame,” idolatry, and the death of Saul to the heroine of Jael and the goddess’ original significance as the goddess of “sexual activity, fertility, maternity, love and war”\textsuperscript{154} I discuss a similar recuperation of the goddess tradition in Chapter Five in regard to Marsha Norman’s \textit{Sarah and Abraham}. Norman, supported by research, characterizes Sarah as a priestess who was “regarded as Goddess incarnate” and whose “oracles and utterances were” considered “those of divinity.”\textsuperscript{155} In this way, we begin to see Sor Juana, the Salomé dancers, Florence Kiper Frank, and Norman as participating in Schussler Fiorenza’s project to remember biblical foresisters (and their manifestations in sister religions) in a feminist key. Furthermore, that Kiper Frank’s drama was actually performed, coincidentally by her sister Miriam Kiper (named after a Hebrew prophetess), the biblical foresister \textit{Jael} is remembered with the body, as well as the mind.

It must be said, however, that the ulterior motive of these literary “Sisters of Salome” were not only to restore their biblical foresisters to the cultural memory, but to stake out a place for their memory as artists as well. These dramatists wrote alongside well-known male artists, like Wilde, not only in an effort to revision biblical women into more forward thinking feminist and artistic aesthetics, but, as writers, to earn their reputations in a male-dominated and largely European-dominated literary culture. So far, the women in this study have not only had to distinguish themselves and justify their credibility as female artists, but as Americans as well. In keeping with the trans-Atlantic movement exemplified in Sor Juana’s exchange of influence

between the Spanish royal court and the autos sacramentales of Calderon and de Vega, and the American Salome dancers’ subsequent interpretations by European male literary critics, Kiper Frank’s *Jael* bears influence from religious and biblical plays being produced by feminist and independent theatres in England, as well as the influence of French symbolists. However, differences between Kiper Frank’s play and these European influences, namely her position on Zionism from an American Jewish perspective, make her play uniquely American. More so than the Salomé dancers of the last chapter, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and her stake in colonialism, and Florence Kiper Frank and her position on Zionism, mark uniquely American positions not only within feminism, but within global politics as well. In addition, Kiper Frank’s perverse ruminations on the Jewish homeland of Palestine, interpreted through her politics as a nostalgia for the past, demonstrates a “hermeneutics of creative imagination and ritualization” that respects Procter-Smith’s need for historical reconstruction that honors the past, but with a concern for the present and future.¹⁵⁶

As this genealogy continues into Ruth plays, I will return to the themes of remembering biblical women as both a recovery of cultural liturgical memory, as well as, in the cases of Lorraine Hansberry and Karen Malpede, the beginnings of theatrical careers for the artists. Likewise, there is the continuance of biblical themes being used, as Kiper Frank used them, to address American issues of social justice, namely race in the early Civil Rights Movement in Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, and domestic violence in Malpede’s *Lament for Three Women*. As the study moves into Sarah plays produced in the United States and Israel, the issue of Zionism will be brought up again from the other side of the trans-Atlantic crossing, providing a

¹⁵⁶ Fiorenza, 790. Procter-Smith, 37.
different social and historical view than Kiper Frank’s pre-World War II American Jewish perspective.
CHAPTER IV: RUTH PLAYS AND TRADITIONAL FEMINISMS

While early twentieth-century plays and performances about biblical women who took the lives of powerful men seem to support radical feminism, other female playwrights chose to dramatize biblical women, like Ruth, who represent more conservative or traditional feminisms. The biblical character Ruth is a popular heroine of biblical plays who illustrates female behavior in the domestic, versus political, sphere. Not surprisingly, Ruth plays come out of more orthodox religious dramatic societies and mainstream theatre movements, rather than from the unorthodox spiritualisms and experimental theatres that informed Salomania and Kiper Frank’s *Jael*. Ruth is largely a story about the bonds between women, the widowed Ruth and her widowed mother-in-law Naomi, who struggle to survive in a society that works against their independent social statuses as widows. Unsurprisingly, however, it is the women’s alliance with patriarchy through the character of Boaz that saves them from economic and emotional devastation. The character of Ruth, and the plays which she inspires, characteristically support a scenario informed by Victorian values, veiled as traditional feminism, of women’s moral superiority, separate sphere ideology, and mutuality between the sexes. While these values have come under scrutiny by contemporary feminists, they initially served to elevate the equality of women domestically, if not politically and sexually, as an important part of first-wave feminism. In this chapter, I look at two early twentieth-century Ruth plays—*Ruth and Boaz* by Rita Benton (1922) and *Ruth of Moab* by Mina Maxfield (1928)— and their context among other Progressive Era plays, followed by a trajectory of Ruth plays through the mid-twentieth-century—Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and Karen Malpede’s *Lament for Three Women* (1974)—and their strategies and criticisms within first and second wave feminisms.
In *American Feminist Playwrights, a Critical History*, Sally Burke locates the beginning of American feminist drama in the Colonial and Revolutionary periods. While plays written by female playwrights during and following these periods were not overtly religious or aimed at proclamation, there was strong emphasis placed on reform and virtue. Prior to the advent of feminist drama, the perspective of performance was dictated by the “male-gaze,” with women in the support or amusement of men. The medievalist double standard of Woman as the inferior and fallen Eve, and the morally superior Virgin Mary prevailed. The Enlightenment further distanced women by defining them as “Other.” ¹ Feminist dramatists reacted by striving to present women through a female versus male-gaze. While this perspective liberated women to characterize themselves, as I have shown through the characters of Salome and Jael, it retained the patriarchal views of women as “Other,” especially in regard to a woman’s morality. According to Helen Chinoy, “[w]omen dramatists and actors spoke of themselves as ‘reformers’ who would grace the theatre with their own ‘pure and blameless lives’ or with the ‘benign influence of a noble womanly spirit.’”² In order to raise the standing of their sex, many female playwrights capitalized on the ideology of women as “Other” being morally superior to men. Playwright Susanna Rowson openly promoted such philosophy. “It has always been my endeavor,” wrote Rowson, “to place social virtues in the fairest point of view, and hold it up, to merited contempt, to their [men’s] opposite vices.”³ These statements summarize the scenario of traditional feminist drama—as opposed to the radical or experimental feminist theatre practiced by the militant suffragettes and theorized by Florence Kiper Frank and discussed in the last chapter.

² qtd. in Burke, 14.
³ qtd. in Burke, 14.
In her essay “Gender Ideology and Dramatic Convention in Progressive Era Plays, 1890-1920,” Judith L. Stephens notes that most first-wave feminist drama “was a tradition marked by ties to religion, family, and a sense of moral duty.”4 Stephens warns that the scenario of the “morally superior woman” often led to women making morally correct, but socially oppressive decisions. She expounds upon the failure of morally superior “otherness” through the principles of “compensation” and “recuperation.” Stephens defines “compensation” as the “presentation of imagery and ideas that tend to elevate the ‘moral value’ of femininity,” while “recuperation” is “the process of negating and defusing challenges to the historically dominant meaning of gender in particular periods,” which, therefore, recuperates patriarchal systems.5 Stephens argues that while compensation “appeared to champion the feminist cause,” that “by adhering to standard dramatic conventions” such as Realism it actually caused recuperation “which served to reinforce the status quo.”6 In Burke’s chapter “Feminisms: The Debate over Realism,” the author presents arguments from feminists who reject Realism as a way to overcome the ideology of Woman as “Other.” This argument is summarized in a claim by Sue-Ellen Case that

Realism, in its focus on the domestic sphere and the family unit, reifies the male as sexual subject and the female as the sexual ‘Other. The portrayal of female characters within the family unit-with their confinement to the domestic setting,

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5 Stephens, 283.
their dependence on the husband, their often defeatist, determinist view of the opportunities for change—makes realism a “prison house of art’ for women.”

For instance, in plays with a female protagonist, the climactic decision was frequently a moral one. The proper moral choice often led to the woman being placed back into a patriarchal situation in which her power was regulated to the domestic sphere at the expense of all other “compensation.” Case’s argument is consistent with dramatic interpretations of biblical women. Biblical women lived in highly patriarchal societies and, in preserving these structures through a commitment to dramatic Realism, any attempt at feminist and religious drama is defeated. Case’s argument also explains why many of the dramas depicting biblical women after the “first wave” of the women’s movement depart from Realism. In conclusion, while Burke maintains that there is a place for Realism, she warns of its dangers and calls for “modified realist structures.”

Dramatic Convention and the Traditional Bible Play

Emphasis on morality and social reform appealed to emerging religious playwrights in the twentieth-century, including women who looked to performance as a way to intervene in negative readings of women in scripture, as well as a way of addressing important social issues. Biblical plays were especially compatible with “moral superiority of women” ideology. In line with Stephens’ theory of “compensation and recuperation,” biblical plays both compensated female authority within church and society, while, unfortunately, maintaining (or recuperating) traditional religion’s patriarchal structure. Furthermore, Realism appeared to affirm the religious

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7 qtd. in Burke, 191.
8 Burke, 210.
truth, reality, and authority behind dramatizations of scriptural happenings. While Progressive Era dramatic conventions were not necessarily transgressive, at the very least, they allowed women within traditional orthodox denominations to argue for moral authority (and even moral superiority) within traditional patriarchal structures.

Likewise, religious dramatic societies and publishers took notice of the possibilities and problems inherent in the Bible’s return to the stage. The Committee on Religious Drama of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America (1924) and the Drama League of America (1927) were influential in setting the standards for biblical plays. By publishing criteria for religious plays and sponsoring playwriting contests with categories such as “Non-sectarian Bible Play,” the committee and the league expressed and enforced the dramatic conventions of the biblical play in the early twentieth-century.

In the Preface of Rita Benton’s award-winning (non-biblical) religious play *Carrots May Be Golden*, Mrs. A. Starr Best articulated the standards by which the Committee on Religious Drama chose its plays in “regard to religious message, dramatic technique, literary quality, and educational merit.” The Drama League, representing publisher Longmans, Green and Company, expounded upon these criteria for quality religious drama:

First, it must have a thought—a real idea—something whose production makes the play worthwhile; second, it must be properly expressed according to the accepted canons of dramatic art; third, it must so influence these acting it, that its

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9 Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, Committee on Religious Drama. *Religious Plays, 1924* (New York: Century Co., 1925) vii. Also qtd. in Kari-Anne Innes, “Prodigal Daughter Project,” formerly my personal web site in which I began a similar discussion of the conventions of the modern biblical play. This section is a rewrite of my post, no longer available online.
effects will move them to good; four, it must be true to life. . . . Merely to deal with Bible materials does not make a religious play, nor does the form which it possesses, or its language.\textsuperscript{10}

The moral tone of the committee’s and league’s standards to move audiences to “good effect” was not simply a reflection of the plays’ biblical or religious source materials, but resonated with the larger moral sentiments of the Progressive Era, as articulated by Burke and Stephens. In fact, far from encouraging a return to biblical source texts, the Drama League discouraged reaching back into what it considered the “dead and forgotten past” of scripture. Instead, the league sought “a play of modern life that would take up our problems and throw light of Christian ethics on them.\textsuperscript{11} However, in its early years, the league’s awards went to biblical plays, two of which were about women, \textit{Pharaoh’s Daughter} by Professor and Mrs. Allison Gaw and \textit{Esther} by Sonia V.M. Daugherty.\textsuperscript{12}

The Committee on Religious Drama expressed a similar lack of confidence in the body of work from which it had to choose writing:

\begin{quote}
We present our selections with diffidence, for we are conscious of many weaknesses and frequent failings to attain a high standard of art. We have considered scores of manuscripts written by devout and sincere persons who had something to say and wanted to say it in dramatic form . . . . Most of such plays were guiltless of any plot or characterization or emotional content . . . depend for
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[11] Preface, x.
\item[12] Preface, x.
\end{footnotes}
their interest upon some miracle or magic . . . and the dearth of religious plays of ethical and social import is nothing short of amazing.\textsuperscript{13}

The committee’s impatience with “miracle or magic” coupled with the league’s insistence that plays be “true to life” suggests that publishers of religious drama shaped their standards for the biblical and/or religious play in relation to prevailing schools of Realism. Chosen plays, although admonished for hearkening back to a “dead and forgotten past,” were prized for their realistic versus magical themes. For example, titles of plays emphasized characters’ occupations and social status, \textit{Lydia—Seller of Purple} and \textit{Peter the Jailer}, rather than their saintly accomplishments. Therefore, the reverential treatment of religious figures in biblical plays arose from the characters’ “ethical and social import,” rather than from their spiritual import within religious traditions. The moralistic tone of biblical plays was as much a product of the dramatic conventions of Realism, and its concern with modern morality, as it was a reflection of religious sources.

Among the schools of Realism, Romantic Realism and Poetic Realism most influenced biblical drama. In \textit{Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama since 1870}, Oscar Brockett and Robert R. Findlay define Romantic Realism as “idealized subjects . . . mounted in extremely detailed and historically accurate settings and costumes.”\textsuperscript{14} Romantic Realism’s proclivity for idealizing its subjects was, no doubt, attractive to playwrights’ of religious drama who desired to depict historical biblical personages as heroes or, in the case of female protagonists, morally superior heroines. In \textit{Bible Play Workshop}, Rita Benton seems to

\textsuperscript{13} Religious Plays 1924, vii.
address the Committee on Religious Drama and the Drama League’s concern over the conflict between Romantic Realism, history plays, and “modern life” when she states, “the value of a Bible play lies in its connection with reality, truth. These stories are stories of real struggles . . . they are permeated with truth.” Benton carefully frames her argument for the historical Bible play within prevailing definitions of Realism. For Benton, the “ethical and social import” of biblical drama, as promoted by the committee, arises precisely out of its connection with historiocity. She writes: “To me, this is the chief value of Bible plays for us today. It is because almost every Bible story may be raised above its casual connection with old time Children of Israel and have vital meaning for us today. Perhaps if all of the old tales have such significance, it may because they have lived.” Benton provides a counter-argument to the league’s dismissal of historical plays by insisting upon the historical truth of biblical scripture and its relationship to the problems and struggles of modern life.

Romantic Realism with its interest in history, however, is not synonymous with biblical literalism. Similar to the Jewish tradition of midrash, the religious dramatist must “supply obvious gaps in the narrative.” Benton justified these imaginative leaps through “Poetic Realism,” proffered by German dramatist Otto Ludwig, and exemplified in biblical plays such as Friederich Hebbel’s Maria Magdelena (1844) and Herod and Miriamne (1850). By definition, Poetic Realism “aimed at portraying life but only insofar as life was artistically significant and

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17 Benton, Bible Play Workshop, 16. Qtd. in Innes, “Remembering Rita Benton” 32.
appeared to possess intrinsic value . . . to discover positive values in everyday life.” Certain “historical truths,” therefore, could be ignored or embellished in order to raise their “poetic truth” and “value” for “everyday life.” Romantic Realism and Poetic Realism allowed Benton, and other playwrights writing biblical dramas to produce plays that were “artistically significant” and “true to life,” while honoring the historicity of the Bible. In doing, these writers satisfied both the Realist criteria of publishers and the biblical fidelity expected of the traditional biblical play.

The Act of Recuperation: Compensation and Recuperation in Two Ruth Plays

Rita Benton and Mina Maxfield were notable female religious playwrights among the religious dramatic societies and publishers during the first half-century. Benton published over twenty religious dramas including *Ruth and Boaz* in 1922 and won the 1931 Drama League—Longmans, Green and Co, Playwriting contest in the category of Religious Play for her non-biblical play *Carrots May Be Golden*. Mina Maxfield similarly received an honorable mention and publication of her play *Ruth of Moab* in the 1927 Longmans, Green, and Company contest.

The source texts for both plays is The Book of Ruth, which tells the story of three widows, a mother and her two daughter-in-laws, struggling to survive without their sons and husbands. While one daughter-in-law, Orpah, stays in her homeland, the other, Ruth, follows her mother-in-law, Naomi, to the matriarch’s homeland. Working to support herself and Naomi in the threshing fields, Ruth meets her deceased husband’s kinsman, Boaz. Naomi encourages a relationship between Ruth and Boaz and, after bargaining with the elders, Ruth and Boaz marry.

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While there are feminist attempts in both Benton’s *Ruth and Boaz* and Maxfield’s *Ruth of Moab*, each suffer from the “compensation and recuperation” posited by Stephens. In both plays, the playwrights try to “compensate,” or improve the status, of the biblical heroine by, at first, positioning her as an independent woman, rather than as a social victim in her status as a widow. However, in keeping with the realism of the biblical story, Ruth’s marriage to Boaz at the play’s conclusion “recuperates” a system of patriarchy which places her under a male authority, rather than her own. In treating these plays, it is my intent to “recuperate” the works of these women, in the most positive sense, by retrieving the plays from the archive; and, compensating, in the sense of commending, these female playwrights for addressing biblical and social inequalities between men and women, while at the same time being aware of how the plays “recuperate,” in the most negative sense, a patriarchal dramatic structure within their modern contexts.

For example, by choosing to set *Ruth and Boaz* within a realistic historical context, Benton maintains many of the traditional patriarchal constructs endured by women in ancient biblical times. Benton attempts to rectify this inequality and modify the realistic structure through an image of mutuality. Benton’s remedy expresses itself in the Progressive Era idea of “separate but equal” spheres for men and women. Although subsequent generations of Americans have come to see this division as hardly being equal, with women subjugated to the domestic sphere while men’s power is protected in the public sphere, Benton's *Ruth and Boaz* presents separate sphere ideology as the ideal for fruitful relationships between a man and woman.

In her Prologue, Benton quotes a poem by Whittier that likens Creation to a fruitful relationship between a man and woman:

> To see our Father's hand once more
Reverse for us the plenteous horn
Of Autumn, filled and running o'er
With fruit and flower and golden corn
Our common mother rests and sings, Like Ruth among her garnered sheaves;
Her lap is full of goodly things; Her brow is bright with autumn leaves.²⁰

Immediately, the reader is introduced to a fruitful relationship between man and woman—the Father, presumably God, and the “common mother,” a reference to Mother Nature. The Father and Mother work in tandem, but with significantly different roles, to provide a “goodly things” for God's children. Benton continues to embellish upon this metaphor throughout the play. The drama contains an abundance of fertility symbolism and the celebration of the motherhood of earth and of women. Associated with the common mother, Ruth becomes the “everywoman” of Benton's drama. Like the common mother, Ruth must find a “Father's hand” in order to be productive. As in the biblical text, the fulfillment of a woman in Benton’s play is dependent upon her role as wife and mother. For instance, Naomi feels either “full” or “empty” on the basis of having or not having a husband and sons and Orpah’s motive for returning to Moab is to find a husband. Ruth's motivation, however, appears to be different. Ruth chooses to stay with her mother-in-law not to find a spouse, but to pursue her faith. Nevertheless, in keeping with themes of compensation and recuperation, both the biblical narrative and Benton's play eventually reward Ruth’s moral decision to be faithful to her mother-in-law with a husband. The relationship between Ruth and Boaz, then, becomes a prototype for a fruitful relationship between a man and woman. Boaz, as a lord and landowner, represents patriarchal power. As the

ideal patriarch, he divides labor equally among men and women in the operation of his fields. In
defined roles, the men reap and the women glean and bind. Together, the sexes harvest a land of
plenty where none go hungry.

The final scene of Benton's play takes the most liberty with the biblical text toward a
feminist end. As Boaz begins to offer an omer of Barley to God as a thank-offering, an Elder
stops him saying, “Let the woman offer it, for it is writ: ‘If a stranger sojourn with thee and will
offer an offering made by fire, it shall be of sweet savor to the Lord.’” 21 Ruth then fires the grain
and the elders sing, “The Lord—make the woman—who is come—unto thy house—Like
Rachel—and Leah—which two—did build the house of Israel.” 22 With these words, Benton
honors two additional women, Rachel and Leah, as the mothers of Israel. The ending of Benton’s
play is seen through a female gaze and establishes what Luce Irigaray would term a “maternal”
or “female genealogy.” While understanding Benton’s play through a scenario of compensation
and recuperation reveals its flaws concerning feminism, understanding the play through a
scenario of “female genealogy” recuperates some of its feminist efficacy.

Irigaray argues that patriarchy favors a “paternal genealogy” as “an exclusive respect for
the genealogy of sons and fathers.” 23 She writes when “patriarchy is established, the daughter is
separated from her mother and, more generally, from her family. She is transplanted into the
genealogy of her husband.” 24 Such privileging, Irigaray argues, “obliterates” a “maternal

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21 Benton, Ruth and Boaz, 124.
22 Benton, Ruth and Boaz, 124.
24 Irigaray, 199.
genealogy.”

Like Fiorenza and Marjorie Procter-Smith, Irigaray advocates for the recuperation of a “divine” genealogy that honors mothers, daughters and sisters. Irigaray writes:

Without relationships between both natural and spiritual mothers and daughters, that are relationships between subjects, without cultural recognition of the divinity of this genealogy, how can a woman remain the lover [*l’amante*] of a man who belongs to the line of a Father God? And does not the latter need a Mother God? The two genealogies must be divinized in each of the two sexes for the two sexes: mother and father, woman and man.

The Book of Ruth, in its emphasis on the relationship between Ruth and Naomi takes strides in establishing a “maternal genealogy.” The Elders’ song in Benton’s play—with its invocation of the “spiritual mothers” Rachel and Leah—goes even further than the biblical narrative in divining a female genealogy alongside a male genealogy in *Ruth and Boaz*. One quote from Irigaray, in particular, resonates with the final wedding scene: “Humanity might begin to wash itself clean of a sin. A woman . . . with her mother, sharing with her the fruits of the earth she/they have blessed, could be delivered of all hatred or ingratitude towards her maternal genealogy, could be consecrated in her identity and her female genealogy.” Benton’s imagery of the “common mother” and the “fruit and flower” at the opening of *Ruth and Boaz* not only celebrates the fruitful relationship between man and woman, Father and Mother, but seems to consecrate Ruth within Irigaray’s female genealogy as well as her ecofeminism:

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25 Irigaray, 126.
26 Irigaray, 186.
27 Irigaray, 46.
For Irigaray, nature, like women, belongs to the material world which has to be transcended in the pursuit of the ideal. The consequences of this transcendence have been harmful to both the natural world and to women. Irigaray rejects any kind of transcendence which depends for its ascension on the unacknowledged maternal or natural base.²⁸

Prefiguring Irigaray’s project, Benton restores the “maternal and natural base” with her valorization of Ruth and Mother Nature’s participation within a divine genealogy and the optimal harvest of God’s bounty.

Furthermore, Benton compensates Ruth by giving her a role in offering the sacrifice. Ruth’s function in this priestly act of worship would have been controversial for both the Israelites and in many twentieth century worship settings, which excluded women from leadership in both word and sacrament. Benton will not allow Ruth, as a woman, to be subjugated to male dominance in the act of worship. Nor does Benton allow Ruth to disappear into the background of the story, as does the biblical narrative. In the Bible, the narrative ends with Ruth giving her and Boaz's son Obed to Naomi. However, in Benton's play, Obed's birth is merely hinted at, and the focus remains on the marriage between Ruth and Boaz, equal both in sex and—as Ruth is a foreigner—race. Ruth remains an equal partner. While Benton's play contains remnants of a patriarchal culture, it leans toward the celebration of mutuality. Ruth and Boaz uplifts the traditional role of woman as wife and mother, but takes compensating aims in retelling the story with a focus on mutuality and restoring a female and maternal genealogy. Wife

²⁸ Irigaray, 163.
and mother in Benton's play are not subject to male authority, but participate with males toward God's bounty.

Mina Maxfield's *Ruth of Moab* provides a very different interpretation of Ruth, presenting as feminist in the early part of the play, but resolving toward a very patriarchal end. The play's first scene “Journey” is about Ruth's decision whether or not to follow Naomi to Moab. Proposals from two suitors tie Ruth to Moab. Ruth, however, is not tempted by this security. She states, “I no longer fear the gods of Moab . . . for sometimes I feel that Naomi's Jehovah calleth me. . . . this longing for something better than what our gods have given me. Perhaps it is because of my love for Naomi, because she bore a son that was my husband.”

Like the whole of Maxfield's play, this statement both challenges and affirms patriarchy. Ruth's reason for her loyalty to Naomi, “because she bore a son that was my husband,” reinforces a woman's worth as dependent on her role as Mother, particularly the mother of a son. On the other hand, Ruth's decision to leave behind the security of her suitors and to make the risky move to Bethlehem is an independent decision. Rejecting a proposal from her suitor Garguana, Ruth answers him, “Let me go in peace! If I loved thee I would go to thy tents—go, if thou wert a pauper and not a prince! Blood as fierce as thine own flows in my veins—a will as strong as thine own must be obeyed. If I sat in thy tents unwilling, hate would grow and grow and consume us both . . . gentleness without strength were scarce a virtue.”

By rejecting a marriage of convenience and asserting her will to pursue “something better,” Ruth makes a feminist

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30 Maxfield, 191-192.
statement. She also challenges society’s conception of women in her dismissal of gentleness as a virtue. The moral superiority of woman is redefined through the addition of strength. Maxfield upholds, but redefines the virtues that make women morally superior to men.

Regarding the moral weaknesses of men and their abuse of power, the playwright does not shy away from showing the dangers of a reality created by the “male gaze.” Maxfield opens her third scene, set in Bethlehem upon Ruth’s arrival in the fields, with men describing her saying, “her hands are small,” “she has doves eyes,” and “Her voice is sweet.”31 This objectification of Ruth leads to violence as one of the men says, “If her face is like her form, ‘tis beautiful indeed. Let us see thy face damsel.”32 The men begin assaulting Ruth, trying to unveil her until disrupted by one of Boaz's men. As Boaz enters the scene, he immediately falls in love with Ruth. The interaction between Ruth and Boaz closely follows their scriptural meeting. Boaz admires her for her virtues of dedication to her mother-in-law and bravery in coming to a strange land. As soon as Ruth departs, however, Maxfield resorts to Boaz describing Ruth in the language of the male spectator, admiring Ruth for her “lips . . . as threads of scarlet” and with the “voice of the bulbul.”33 Despite her brave actions, Ruth is reduced to images drawn by the male spectator.

“The Vow” and “The Wooing” scenes again illustrate Maxfield's attempt to take a feminist perspective in the Ruth play, but ultimately fails through recuperation. In the biblical narrative, Ruth has little say in her betrothal to Boaz; instead she is depicted as a pawn in a marriage arranged by Naomi. In Maxfield’s play, however, Ruth is the initiator of the

31 Maxfield, 203.
32 Maxfield, 203.
33 Maxfield, 208.
relationship. After falling in love with Boaz, but discouraged by his betrothal to the Judge’s Daughter, Ruth confesses her love before Naomi. Naomi then tells Ruth of a Jewish law that would allow Ruth to make a claim upon Boaz, calling it both Ruth’s “right” and “duty” to pursue him. Ruth exclaims, “That right and duty should be so sweet!” Here, Maxfield reverses the patriarchal system by giving Ruth the authority to claim Boaz as her husband. Ruth is given the power to initiate the relationship. She then prepares herself for the wooing saying, “What ecstasy that love and duty so sweetly mingle!” This is a scene of sexual and social empowerment. However, later in the play, the playwright creates a climactic decision in which the biblical heroine must make a correct and moral decision. For this, Maxfield borrows the conflict of the biblical narrative; there is a kinsman closer than Boaz who may claim Ruth, the elder Hanniel. If he claims her, she must accept. Maxfield heightens the conflict by introducing the character of Ishme, a Moabite suitor to Ruth, who offers to take her back home. Will Ruth flee or will she honor her vow to redeem a name in Israel? The answer is clear within the dramatic convention of the period; Ruth will make the morally superior choice. Ishme asks “Thou wilt marry the old man Hanniel?” and Ruth answers, “If thou wilt be the will of Jehovah, I will marry him.” Ruth’s following the “will of Jehovah” out of her sense of moral duty is an example of compensation and recuperation that reinforces patriarchal structures. In that Ruth holds power in relation to Boaz and refuses to be “rescued” by Ishme, there is compensation. In that Ruth’s moral choice to follow God leads her back into a patriarchal structure in which she is traded as chattel, there is recuperation. The very system that Maxfield reverses in giving Ruth control in

34 Maxfield, 216.
35 Maxfield, 220.
36 Maxfield, 214.
37 Maxfield, 227.
the Boaz relationship, she reinforces by confronting the character of Ruth with a climactic
decision in which she morally chooses to be put back under the control of a patriarchal system.

Furthermore, Maxfield ends her play with biblical reference to Boaz taking Ruth to be his wife. Boaz says to the Elders, “Moreover, Ruth the Moabitess, wife of Maholon, have I purchased to be my wife. Ye are witnesses.”³⁸ Boaz’s statement that he “purchased” Ruth, a quote from biblical scripture, is emblematic of how the patriarchal structure of the biblical narrative can undermine an otherwise feminist example of a biblical character. Although Mina Maxfield’s play begins by portraying Ruth as an autonomous woman embarking on a journey to realize “better things,” because of an adherence to biblical language and structure, by the play’s conclusion she is made the property of her husband and maintains a patriarchal genealogy. Ruth’s independence and self-ownership is obliterated. In maintaining Realism, the playwright maintains a patriarchal perspective.

Rita Benton’s and Mina Maxfield’s Ruth plays are consistent with first-wave feminism and early twentieth-century dramatic conventions. Although a woman’s moral superiority, separate sphere ideology, and Realism appear today as flawed in regard to feminism, in their time, these were employed to gain, at the very least, an equal footing between men and women in the private sphere, while addressing, through Realism, social ills that threatened women’s well-being—for example, Ruth’s status as a vulnerable widow in a patriarchal. While biblical, poetic, and romantic, Realisms ultimately participated in what Stephens describes as the regressive, versus progressive, process of compensation and recuperation, Benton and Maxfield each try to modify realist structures offered by the Bible by modifying Ruth’s courtship and relationship to

³⁸ Maxfield, 249.
Boaz and giving her greater autonomy and self-will. While biblical plays of the early twentieth century were prone to traditional feminisms, the cause of their compensation and recuperation lie not exclusively within the Bible, but were indicative of the larger episteme surrounding first-wave feminism.

Traditional feminisms, defined by their emphasis on morality and the domestic sphere, continue to play a large role within the Christian framework and related debates on gender equality. As such, criticisms like compensation and recuperation, and those regarding Realism and the domestic sphere, continue to follow biblically-inspired plays well into the twentieth-century. For example, Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, which I interpret as a Ruth play, has been criticized as maintaining racial and female stereotypes, especially in regard to the matriarchal Mama Lena Younger and her faith. However, Hansberry continues to modify the realist biblical structure by removing Ruth from her biblical context. Hansberry’s Ruth narrative is set in Chicago and takes on the social context and problems of housing and segregation during the early Civil Rights Movement. The relationship between women in *Raisin*, as in the Book of Ruth, compensates and emboldens the women’s domestic authority to challenge social injustices, while their relationship to Walter Younger diminishes the women’s status and possibilities both within and outside of the home. Furthermore, Karen Malpede in *Lament for Three Women* continues to modify the realist structure by placing Ruth and Naomi outside of the home and separated from interaction with male characters all together. In this sense, Malpede compensates feminine power present in the biblical narrative through focusing entirely on the relationship between women without recuperation of patriarchal male narratives. Returning to the contemporary feminist theory of Luce Irigaray, the remaining two Ruth plays illustrate Irigaray’s criticisms of mother-to-son genealogies in favor of mother-to-daughter genealogies that
recuperate a “woman-to-woman sociality.” The scenario, or organizational principle, surrounding traditional feminism in *A Raisin in the Sun* and *A Lament for Three Women* becomes about female alliances within traditional roles without deference to male authority.

Influences of Black Church Theatre and the Book of Ruth in Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*

It has been a half a century since Lorraine Hansberry’s Broadway premiere of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Because the play was written during the early Civil Rights movement, scholarship has rightly focused on its historical-cultural moment and sociopolitical aspects, specifically issues of segregation and racial discrimination and, more generally, the dynamics of a black urban family. That Hansberry drew inspiration from her family’s eviction from an all-white Chicago neighborhood has become definitive in autobiographical readings of the play. As such, religion in *Raisin* is often interpreted through Hansberry’s atheism and pan-Africanism, reflected in the conflict between Lena Younger (Mama), the fundamentalist matriarch, and her daughter Beneatha, an incarnation of the playwright. Such interpretations of religion, however, particularly in regard to the character of Lena, have been reductive. George C. Wolfe’s satirical composite of “Mama” in “The Last Mama on the Couch Play” serves as an example.

In an essay commemorating the 25th anniversary of *Raisin*, Amiri Baraka, who was initially critical of the play, offered a “reevaluation.” Regarding the character of Lena, he confessed that critics had failed to see “the actual woman Hansberry created – and what tradition

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39 Irigaray, 192.
she in fact upholds.”41 I provide my own “reevaluation” of this tradition by providing a new context or scenario for approaching religion in *A Raisin in the Sun*. In a *Washington Post* interview, producer Philip Rose suggests that Hansberry originally intended the play for performance in a church. Within this context, it is possible that *A Raisin in the Sun* may have emerged within the tradition of black church theatre that proliferated in New York City and Greenwich Village where Hansberry lived. Specifically, Hansberry uses parallel structure with the biblical Book of Ruth to underscore female characters and themes that are often neglected in deference to Walter Lee and the play’s significance to civil rights issues in the 1950s. What emerges from this reevaluation is that in its contemplation of the lives of women, *A Raisin in the Sun* utilizes a common biblical trope, and, in doing so problematizes the stereotype of a mammy character so often attributed to Lena Younger.

As a person, Lorraine Hansberry can be characterized as a devout atheist. She was devoted to the idea that there was no God. Yet, religion plays a large role in *A Raisin in the Sun*, especially in regard to the character of Lena. To an audience informed by biblical narrative, and if we take Philip Rose’s word for it Hansberry’s intended church audience would have been such an audience, the parallels between Lena and the Book of Ruth are quite clear. Those familiar with the biblical narrative would recognize connections between the widow Naomi and daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth, and Lena and her daughter Beneatha and daughter-in-law—also named Ruth. Given such a deliberate choice in aligning her character’s stories and relationships with those from the Bible, why would a self-professed atheist rely so heavily on

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religion in her play? The answer lies in the playwright’s particular regard for religion. Hansberry respected faith, remarking in an interview:

This is one of the glories of man, the inventiveness of the human mind and the human spirit. . . . And it gives us strength. I don't attack people who are religious at all, as you can tell from the play; I rather admire this human quality to make our own crutches as long as we need them. The only thing I am saying is that once we can walk, you know, then drop them.  

Hansberry viewed religion as a tool of and for the human spirit. For her, faith was “inventive.” Yet, some scholars are quick to “drop” religion from discussion concerning Hansberry’s own creative influences. Anne Cheney writes in her study on Hansberry, “Historically, the spiritual, social, and emotional center of black life was the Protestant church. . . . Grand-daughter of a Tennessee bishop, Lorraine Hansberry would have seemed more within the mainstream of black American writers had she found meaning and commitment within organized religion.”

I caution against this assumption that, as a playwright, Hansberry failed to find meaning within her inherited religious tradition. While atheistic, Hansberry was well-versed in literary and mythic traditions of black Americans—Christian and African—and incorporated them into A Raisin in the Sun as recognizable tropes. Furthermore Hansberry’s marriage to writer Robert Nemiroff suggests that Jewish traditions were accessible to her as well. Consistent with the black Protestant tradition, Hansberry was less susceptible to what Telia U. Anderson in “‘Calling on

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42 Robert Nemiroff and Lorraine Hansberry, To Be Young, Gifted and Black; Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words, adapted by Robert Nemiroff with original drawings by Miss Hansberry and an introduction by James Baldwin, preface by Jewell Handy Gresham Nemiroff (New York: Vintage, 1995) 185.
the Spirit’: The Performativity of Black Women’s Faith” calls “the traditional European
dichotomy of the ‘sacred’ and ‘secular.’”

Similar to Daphne Brooks’ observations on African
spiritualism and double-consciousness in the works of early-twentieth-century performers,
Anderson distinguishes between Anglo-American and African-American understandings of
spirituality. Anderson recognizes the “openness and adaptability of African faiths to syncretism”
and “the identification of a personal, corporeal relationship with the divine.”

Therefore, Hansberry’s religious position in Raisin, as ghosted through the character of Beneatha, with her
faith in human miracles and interests in Africa, is not as out of line with black Protestantism as
some have suggested.

Beginning work on Raisin in 1956, Hansberry did not anticipate becoming the first black
female playwright on Broadway. Anecdotal evidence indeed suggests that theatre performed in
black churches provided Hansberry’s impetus for writing A Raisin in the Sun. In 1952, she met
future producer Philip Rose when both were budding artists and activists in New York City.

In the Post interview, Rose remarked, “No one was doing black plays then. And what few were
being done were done in the basements of black churches.”

The article recounts that Hansberry “hungered to see blacks on the stage, so they [Hansberry and Rose] went to a church production.

Walking along a Manhattan street after seeing the play, Hansberry turned to Rose, ‘I can write

44 Telia U. Anderson, “‘Calling on the Spirit’: The Performativity of Black Woman’s Faith in the
Baptist Church Spiritual Traditions and Its Radical Possibilites for Resistance,” African
American Performance and Theatre History, eds. Harry J. Elam, Jr. and David Krasner (New
45 Anderson, 116.
46 Wil Haygood, “45 Years Ago, a Raisin’ to Cheer; Revival of Hansberry Play Stirs Memories
47 Haygood, N01.
better than that,’ she said, I [Rose] replied ‘Well, why don't you then?’”\(^{48}\) When Rose told Hansberry that he was interested in *A Raisin in the Sun*, he recalls, “She thought I meant I was going to do it in a church or something.”\(^{49}\) Later, when Broadway producers began making what Hansberry considered unreasonable demands, including replacing Claudia McNeil as Lena, the playwright reportedly told Rose, “Look, when I first met you, we were going to do it in a church. So let’s go ahead and do it that way.”\(^{50}\) Hansberry did not immediately write for the mainstream modern theatre, but as is proposed here, for a black church audience.

Although it is not possible to know what black church play Hansberry attended, Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch’s *History of African American Theatre* provides a historical context of the tradition in the twentieth century. Hatch describes women as the “driving force” behind plays performed in “schools, churches and lodges” during the “black Little Theatre Movement” of the 1920s. He adds that their plays boldly “confront[ed] major issues for black women: voting, miscegenation, child-rearing, patriotism, and birth control.”\(^{51}\) Church Gospel musicals based on familiar scriptures and featuring neighborhood choirs reached their height of popularity with the 1930 Broadway production of *Green Pastures*.\(^{52}\) Coincidentally, Langston Hughes, from whose poetry Hansberry drew inspiration for *Raisin*, would write four Gospel musicals in the 1960s.\(^{53}\) Other companies took up residence with city churches. Mt. Zion Lutheran Church housed Harlem’s Penthouse Theatre while in Hansberry’s neighborhood the Village Presbyterian Church.

\(^{48}\) Haygood, N01.
\(^{49}\) Haygood, N01.
\(^{50}\) Haygood, N01.
\(^{52}\) Hill and Hatch, 381.
\(^{53}\) Hill and Hatch, 382.
and Brotherhood Synagogue supported the Greenwich Mews Theatre.\textsuperscript{54} Hatch notes that the company was significant because it practiced integrated casting and had the reputation of featuring black actors, including Claudia McNeil who originated the role of Hansberry’s Lena. In 1955, a year before Hansberry began work on \textit{Raisin}, the Greenwich Mews opened black playwright Alice Childress’ \textit{Trouble in Mind}, in which a black actress “refuses to play” a “mother’s character . . . as a mammy stereotype.”\textsuperscript{55} While this is by no means an exhaustive survey of black theatre performed or supported by churches, these examples illustrate how Hansberry’s work would have fit well within either the sacred or secular black church theatre traditions, especially in regard to the consideration of women’s issues.

Furthermore, Telia U. Anderson uses Hanberry’s play as an example of how “black women can set up ‘church’ anywhere.”\textsuperscript{56} She writes:

Mama goes to church right at home, intoning the gospel on her knees and invoking the spirit to set right what has drastically and ineluctably gone wrong.

Playing the role of preacher, Mama attempts to cure her daughter’s agnosticism, making her repeat antidotally, ‘In my mother’s house there is still God. In my mother’s house there is still God. In my mother’s house there is still God.’ Black women embodied the roles of wife, sister, daughter, and mother, combined them with a \textit{personal} spiritual experience of God in Christ, and understood themselves to be ministers in their own homes.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{54} 421 West 145\textsuperscript{th} Street, New York City, and 141 West 13\textsuperscript{th} Street, Greenwich Village. See Hill and Hatch, 363-364.
\textsuperscript{55} Hill and Hatch, 364-365.
\textsuperscript{56} Anderson, 115.
\textsuperscript{57} Anderson, 127.
In effect, Hansberry sets up church with her play. Just as Beneatha begrudgingly respects that God exists in her mother’s house, Hansberry acknowledges that God existed in the “house” of her audience. Mama’s actions serve as an example of “a radical Africanist performance strategy that accesses and enacts a personal and corporeal divine authority.” Anderson adds that this strategy is often invoked as a challenge to patriarchy, including “the growing hostility toward debasement of black women. Defending their names, these women [resist] grotesque descriptions of black women as mammies, whores, sapphires and tragic mulattoes.” A reading of A Raisin in the Sun within the scenario of black women’s church may serve to recover the character of Mama from her subsequent critical reception as a mammy, as well as resist some of the patriarchal artistic control that Hansberry encountered in production.

It is significant that Hansberry originally intended Mama as the central character of the play. Langston Hughes’ poem “From Mother to Son” inspired an initial working title The Crystal Stair. Producer Lloyd Richards recalls, “When I first read it, it was centered around Mama. Lorraine had already been told her play should be centered around Walter Lee. And I confirmed that. I spent a year working with her on that.” Richard’s quote suggests that the Broadway manuscript most familiar to critics is significantly different from Hansberry’s original, which was decidedly more woman-centric. Actor Sidney Poitier similarly took issue with Hansberry’s original focus. In The Measure of a Man: A Spiritual Autobiography he writes, “[S]he had a certain mindset about women and their potential, especially black women in America. She wrote

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58 Anderson, 115.
59 Anderson, 128.
60 A more familiar reference to Hansberry’s focus on the Mama character is the play’s dedication, “To Mama: in gratitude of the dream.” See Cheney, 65 and Catherine Scheader, They Found a Way: Lorraine Hansberry (Chicago: Children’s Press, 1978) 47.
61 Haygood.
a play about a matriarch faced with this dilemma. But in that formulation the son is just a n’er do well. . . . I simply couldn’t do it that way, because in my mind the dramatic possibilities were so much greater the other way.”62 Hansberry received pressure to reduce the role of Mama in her play from both producers and talent. Hansberry’s original manuscript was compensatory in that it focused on relationships between women, but was quickly recuperated, or Irigaray might say “obliterated,” into an androcentric Broadway system by it producers and actors. However, if, for the sake of argument, we assume Mama as Hansberry’s original central character, the plot parallels the biblical story in the Book of Ruth.

The Hebrew story revolves around the widow Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth. Like Lena, Naomi is a widow who relocates for her family's welfare. Naomi returns from Moab, a once fruitful land where her husband sought fortune, to Bethlehem, her homeland and now the more prosperous city. Like Naomi, Lena also moves twice. Lena's first move, from the South to North, is made to avoid “being lynched … stay alive and still have a pinch of dignity too.”63 Her second move, from Chicago's Southside to Clybourne Park is, like Naomi, for the sake of her family. Lena tells Walter Lee, “Son, I just tried to find the nicest place for the least amount of money for my family.”64 In both cases, the widows take their families into an environment where they are minorities. Naomi takes Ruth, a Moabite woman, into an Israelite country. In Raisin,

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63 Lorraine Hansberry, A Raisin in the Sun, ed. Robert Nemiroff, 30th Anniversary ed (New York: Samuel French, 1987) 1.2. (Because Raisin may be considered common literature with multiple copies and editions being published, I am choosing to cite the play by act and scene to aid to assist readers in locating the passage.)
64 Hansberry, Raisin, 2.1.
Lena takes the Youngers into a community where “there ain't no colored people.” Both the biblical Naomi and the play's family face significant oppression and threat in their new communities. In scripture, Naomi’s daughter-in-law Ruth seeks protection through Boaz, a landowner who tells his men not to “touch” the woman. In Raisin, a member of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association makes the family “aware of some of the incidents that have happened when colored people move into certain areas.” These incidents include what Mrs. Johnson reveals as “colored people that was bombed out their place.” Both Naomi and Lena make the brave and necessary decision to move their families into potentially hostile environments in order to live more prosperous lives.

Other similarities exist between the widows Naomi and Lena. Both have lost sons. Naomi's two sons died after moving to Moab. Similarly, Lena has lost her son Claude to poverty and is under threat of losing another. In reaction to Ruth's consideration of an abortion, Lena pleads with Walter Lee to spare the family: “I'm waiting to see you stand up and look like your daddy and say we done give up one baby to poverty and that we ain't going to give up nary another one—I’m waiting. . . . If you a son of mine tell her!” With Walter Lee’s reaction, Lena risks disowning her son, forfeiting a grandchild, or both. Naomi and Lena share in the sacrifice of sons.

Hansberry's Lena, however, does not share in Naomi's disillusionment. The biblical

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65 Hansberry, Raisin, 2.1.
66 Hansberry, Raisin, 2.3.
67 Hansberry, Raisin, 1.2. This scene between Lena and Mrs. Johnson was cut from the original Broadway production, as well as in most subsequent productions. See Robert Nemiroff, “Foreward to this New Edition.” A Raisin in the Sun and The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window. ed. Robert Nemiroff (New York: Plume, 1987) xv.
68 Hanberry, Raisin, 1.2.
Naomi changes her name to Marah, meaning bitter. She states, “for God has made my lot very bitter. I went away full and the Lord has brought me back empty.”

Hansberry incorporates the theme of bitterness, but attributes it to other characters, not Lena. The opening stage directions of Act Two, suggest the song “This Bitter Earth” to accompany Ruth's ironing. Later in the scene, George confronts Walter Lee saying, “You're all wacked up with bitterness man,” to which Walter Lee replies, “And you—ain't you bitter man? . . . Bitter? Man, I'm a volcano. Bitter? Here I am a giant—surrounded by ants.”

Bitterness surrounds Lena, but she does not succumb. Hansberry reverses the biblical narrative; the child is overwhelmed with bitterness while the matriarch struggles to lead her family out of its despondency.

Daughters in the Book of Ruth and *A Raisin in the Sun* are also comparable. In the Bible, Naomi shares her journey with her daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah. The two Ruths make an obvious comparison. However, Beneatha and Orpah deserve some attention. Although Beneatha is Lena's daughter while Orpah is Naomi's daughter-in-law, both serve similar functions. At a crucial point in the biblical narrative, Naomi tells the women to return to Moab. Ruth refuses saying, “For wherever you will go, I will go; wherever you will lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God, my God.”

Orpah, however, returns home to which Naomi

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70 This direction appears in the thirtieth anniversary acting edition of the script which editor Robert Nemiroff explains “combines the author’s interpretive directions with the staging insights of two great directors [Lloyd Richards and Harold Scott].” See Hansberry, *Raisin*, 7. Other editions, including the twenty-fifth anniversary edition, include the more generic direction “She [Ruth] has the radio going.” See Nemiroff, Robert, *A Raisin in the Sun and The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window*, ed. Robert Nemiroff. (New York: Plume, 1987) 76. It is not possible for me at this time to determine whether this is an original direction or, more likely, was added in subsequent productions.
71 Hansberry, *Raisin*, 1.2.
72 qtd. in Klein, n.p. See Ruth 1.16-17.
says to Ruth, “See, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and her gods. Go follow your
sister-in-law.”73 Similarly, Beneatha refuses to follow her mother's God and longs to return to
“her people.” Although she engages in the family's move to Clybourne Park, her aspirations are
toward medical school and her sympathies are toward Africa. Like Orpah, who only temporarily
follows her mother-in-law, one can speculate the same for Beneatha. At the top of the Act Two,
she dons a Nigerian headdress and shouts “OCOMOGOSIAY!” in what the stage directions
describe as a “dance of welcome.”74 Just as Anderson describes Mama as invoking the church
under her own roof, Beneatha intones the spirit of Africa. If she is not yet there bodily, her spirit
has begun the journey.

Unlike their sisters-in-law, both Ruth characters remain faithful to their mother-in-law. In
each story, the matriarchs fall into doubt and Ruth urges them to remain faithful to their

74 See also Brooks. Beneatha’s dance at the top of Act 2 is an illustration of the “double-
consciousness” that Brook’s finds expressed in Aida Overton Walker’s “spirit-dancing.” Lena
and Beneatha represent the different perspectives of the “two worlds within and without the
Veil.” See Du Bois, 3. If Lena represents the Anglo-spirituality of fundamental Christianity
acculturated by the African-American culture, then Beneatha’s African dress and dance is “a
radical expression of resistant black identity.” See Brooks, 340. It is noteworthy that Beneatha
expresses this resistance, and intones the spirit of Africa, like the “spirit dancers” described by
Brooks, through dance. Both dancer Aida Overton Walker and Hansberry, through the character
of Beneatha, use “double consciousness” to “(re)cover” the black female body from exploitation
in that they provide an image of African-American spirituality that opposes itself to an image
created or influenced by white America (such as the stereotypical image of Lena, a maid—an
occupation thrust upon her through white oppression, and a Christian—an Anglo faith). Like
spirit dancers, Beneatha uses the African welcome dance to oppose and to liberate herself from
these images. This illustrates Marjorie Procter-Smith’s proposition to remember through the
body as well as mind. Hansberry will use the “spirit dancer” again in her play Les Blancs, which
features the character of an African “Woman Dancer” who appears “magically . . . as an
extension of the protagonist’s mind,” “exists in the realm of the ideal” and is described as
“black-skinned and imposing” wearing only “a leather skirt” and a “girdle of hammered steel.”
See Lorraine Hansberry, Les Blancs. Adapted by Robert Nemiroff. (New York: Samuel French,
1972) 10, 16, 112. This description of the “Woman Dancer” bears similarities to the Orientalized
Salome dancer of the early twentieth-century.
journeys. In the Bible, Ruth is given the famous words quoted above. In the play, Ruth pleads with Lena exclaiming:

Lena, no! We gotta go. Bennie—Bennie—(She crosses to BENEATHA.) Tell her we can still move. . . . ( . . . at this moment when all has collapsed, when Beneatha and Walter and even Mama have given up, she will not let go:) I'll work, I'll work twenty hours a day in all the kitchens in Chicago! I'll strap my baby on my back if I have to . . . .75

The biblical Ruth and Ruth Younger seek to sustain their mother-in-law in a foreign city; one will humble herself gleaning the fields in Bethlehem, the other cleaning kitchens in Clybourne Park.

Ruth is the only biblically named character in A Raisin in the Sun and I am not the first to draw parallels between the two women. In her article “The Drama of Lynching in Two Blackwomen's Drama, or Relating Grimké's Rachel to Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun,” Angeletta KM Gourdine explains Hansberry's “specific dramatic strategy.”76 For Gourdine, “through the genre of drama, blackwomen expose the encoding of racial subjugation in the gendered text of black male experience.”77 She argues that female characters are subjugated by “gendered text,” text written by men or about male experiences. The Book of Ruth is an example. Although largely about women, tradition attributes its authorship to Samuel and

75 Hansberry, Raisin, 3.1.
76 Angeletta KM Gourdine, “The Drama of Lynching in Two Blackwomen's Drama, or Relating Grimké's Rachel to Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun,” Modern Drama 41:4 (1998): 533. In her article, Gourdine discusses some of the same passages as in this paper, but in relation to Grimke’s Rachel. I will limit my discussion of Gourdine to her treatment of lynching in blackwomen’s drama, in general, and in reference to the Book of Ruth, specifically.
77 Gourdine, 533.
subjugates the experience of its female characters to the male prophet. To some extent, Hansberry’s play may also be considered a “gendered text” in that producers forced the subjugation of Mama’s character to Walter Lee's male experience. Gourdine argues that “playing” texts liberates women and their experiences. She writes: “the act of ‘play’ transforms them into representations not of the text or script, but of the lives associated with the physical forms that move across the stage. . . . In a sense, drama provides the viewer with an opportunity for imaging or imagining the actuality of the story that the script contains.” By putting the story of Ruth and Lena/Naomi on the stage, Hansberry liberates them from the text and into reality. The playwright liberates the women from the stereotypes imposed on them by their texts and “imagines” them as they appear in society in the 1950s. Ruth, therefore, is not a generic or stereotyped “good and faithful daughter-in-law,” but an “actual” person facing specific battles and decisions concerning money, motherhood, and marriage.

Similar to how Gourdine describes the liberating function of women’s performance from the subjugation of male “gendered text,” Anderson explains that “in the charismatic spiritual tradition, women do not allow the preacher the last word. Women subvert the scriptocentrism of the holy space by emptying the text of predetermined meaning and filling it with an organic, physical significance, which reinterprets and redefines its original ‘objectivity.’” In the spirit of this tradition, the interpretation of Raisin as a dramatization of the Book of Ruth, disallows Hansberry’s male producers from having the last word. The play’s narrative is emptied of its conventional meaning and exposes the original’s “objectivity,” or lack thereof. The

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78 This is a commonly debated attribution of authorship. For a summary of contemporary commentaries and popular interpretations of Ruth, see Klein.
79 Gourdine, 533.
80 Anderson, 120.
dramatization of the biblical story about female experience evens the focus of the play. Gourdine explains how Hansberry uses the structure of the biblical narrative as a reversal or “revision of the lynching story.” Lynching is metaphorically defined by the scholar as any force that chokes “black progress,” including motherhood for “blackwomen” and an ambiguous future in regard to their children:

Hansberry's revision of the relationship between lynching and motherhood is indicated by Ruth's manner . . . in concert with her biblical foremother. . . . Ruth bears a son . . . and gives him to Naomi. . . . Like the biblical Ruth, Ruth Younger provides Lena Younger with Travis, who offers the woman a ray of hope. It is for him that Lena purchases the home. . . . Travis is the first to learn of the new home. . . . The new house confirms that Travis belongs to Lena. In fact, Ruth has transferred her child to Lena, and his lynching will be prevented.

Ruth's giving over of Travis to Lena recalls the biblical Ruth's giving over of Obed to Naomi and completes the actualization of the biblical narrative. Through this actualization, Ruth’s motherhood and Travis’s future are redeemed from the forces of lynching by the force of hope.

Reading Hansberry’s play through the dramatic structure of the scripture provides a play about black life, male and female. The Lena/Naomi-Ruth/Ruth paradigm balances the Walter Lee plot.

*A Raisin in the Sun* includes one final religious symbol. In her last words to Ruth, Mama says about Walter, “He finally come into his manhood today, didn't he? Kind of like a rainbow

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81 Gourdine, 541.
82 Gourdine, 535.
83 Gourdine, 541.
after the rain.”84 The rainbow symbolizes promise in the Jewish-Christian tradition. Interestingly, Hansberry qualifies this religious sign with a line about “manhood,” consistent with “the identification of a personal, corporeal relationship with the divine” discussed in Anderson.85 The playwright’s use of religion in A Raisin in the Sun, therefore, is not a matter a particular faith, but of her “dramatic strategy” to create a play about human promise fostered by the actions and words of women, and for a black church audience.

The question remains, however, why an atheist like Hansberry would appeal to a “dramatic strategy” that relied on religion at all? As a Marxist, wouldn’t her political ideologies have been fundamentally opposed to religion, especially given the long and complex history of African Americans and the Christian Church? Perhaps this is one reason that some who shared Hansberry’s political sympathies, like Amiri Baraka, initially dismissed the play as “part of the passive resistance” and appealing to the bourgeoisie “middle class.”86 However, in his “reevaluation” of the play, Baraka conceded that “We missed the essence of the work—that Hansberry had created a family on the cutting edge of the same class and ideological struggles as existed in the movement itself among the people.”87 Indeed, Hansberry created a play not about her personal ideology, although she was ghosted in the character of Beneatha, but about a realistic African American family, quite possibly her own. This family unit, like many others, was politically engaged not only in the pursuit of equal rights, but in its internal ideological conflicts over religion and politics as well. If we accept A Raisin in the Sun as semi-autobiographical, then we must accept that there was still God in Mama’s house, as well as in the

84Hansberry, Raisin, 3.1.
85Anderson, 116.
86Baraka, 19.
87Baraka, 19.
theatrical “house” and domestic houses of Hansberry’s intended audience. Hansberry’s audience for *Raisin* was not a Marxist contingency, but the black church which was at the heart of the black family and, not inconsequently, at the center of the Civil Rights Movement in 1959.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry disidentifies with Marxist ideology and mobilizes the biblical trope of Ruth for sociopolitical purposes, insofar as the parallel structure creates a narrative of familial and political strength. Nevertheless, Hansberry’s broader strategy, to reference Hansberry’s interview on faith, was to “drop” religion when it was no longer helpful. Such was the case in *Les Blancs* (The Whites), “originally subtitled ‘The Holy Ones.’”

In her article “African/American: Lorraine Hansberry’s *Les Blancs* and the American Civil Rights Movement,” Joy L. Abell argues that Hansberry’s unfinished play was a response not only to misreadings of her politics in *Raisin*, but to growing divisions over religion in the Civil Rights Movement as well. At the time Hansberry wrote *Raisin*, the Movement was dividing along generational and religious lines. Amiri Baraka writes that “[w]hen *Raisin* appeared the movement itself was in transition. . . . The baton was ready to pass from . . . the ‘Freedom Movement’ (when its real muscle was always the Lena Youngers and their husbands) to the Walter Lees and Beneathas. . . .”

Likewise, in *Les Blancs* Hansberry drops the “crutch” of religion in favor of the militant’s baton. Similar to Orpah and Beneatha, Hansberry would turn

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90 Baraka, 18.
from her mother’s house and God in search of a different source of strength.

Hansberry’s perspective on religion in *Les Blancs* differs radically from *Raisin*. Set in colonial Africa, the play concerns two brothers, Tshembe and Abioseh (read loosely by Abell as Malcom X and Martin Luther King), and their conflict in how to live out their father’s African legacy. Although he himself is atheistic and lives abroad with a European wife, Tshembe accuses his brother of assimilation for choosing Catholicism over traditional religion. Hints of how Beneatha feels toward Christianity, but cannot say in her mother’s house, are fully articulated by Tshembe, who refers to the church as “a cult . . . which kept the watchfires of our oppressors for three centuries.” In *Les Blancs*, Hansberry exposes religion as a tool of colonial indoctrination. Persuaded to join in an uprising against the Catholic mission, Tshembe kills his novitiate brother. *Les Blancs*, in stark contrast to *Raisin*, confounds family and religion as sites of resistance. Whereas *Raisin* employs a biblical trope as a narrative of family strength, *Les Blancs* is a Cain and Abel story in which religion is a divisive force to both family and liberation.

In her article, Abell summarizes *Les Blancs*’ position within a changing political climate, specifically in regard to religion. She writes:

> Although the Movement’s origins and support were rooted in black churches, the ideology presented within those churches was European, not African, in origin. Hansberry’s representation of . . . misplaced faith in the power of the church to promote equality may in part reflect some American activists’ growing unhappiness with the presence of religion in the battle for civil rights.

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91 Abell, 463.
92 qtd. in Abell, 463.
93 Abell, 463.
Like Hansberry’s *Raisin*, inspiration for the Civil Rights Movement began in black churches. However, in keeping with the larger Movement, as well as her personal beliefs, Hansberry acknowledged the limitations of the Christian church for achieving liberation. *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Les Blancs* represent opposite ends of the spectrum regarding religion and the Civil Rights Movement. Taken together, these two plays also reinforce Hansberry’s dramatic strategy. Hansberry invokes religion for sociopolitical purposes until it can eventually be “dropped.”

As a playwright, Lorraine Hansberry acknowledged religion as an inherent, albeit, “invented” dynamic of the “human mind.” Hansberry’s different treatments of religion reveal her own use of it as an inventive tool. Whether by incorporating religious tropes that draw upon the strength of family, or by exposing the abuses of the church in colonial Africa, Hansberry astutely observed the sociopolitical relevance of religion in society and applied it as a dramatic strategy in her plays. Furthermore, Hansberry recognized that at certain times and in certain situations religion “gives us strength.” Certainly, a reading of *A Raisin in the Sun* in light of the Book of Ruth strengthens the meaning of her already powerful play. This strength is drawn, however, not from religion per se, but through the strategically parallel stories of biblical and contemporary women, who in their commitment to one another provide a narrative of “human” strength.

Criticism of *A Raisin in the Sun*, like that of the original Broadway production, often subordinates female characters through attention to Walter Lee. Understanding *Raisin* as a scenario of “female genealogy” offers an alternative interpretation that affirms Lorraine Hansberry’s original intent to write a female centered play consistent with the black church theatre tradition. Reading *A Raisin in the Sun* as emerging from, or at least inspired by, black church theatre, as well as her family’s eviction from an all-white Chicago neighborhood, allows not only for a balance between male and female characters within the play, but between
sociopolitical and religious readings as well.

Mystery, Mysterium and Mysterion in Karen Malpede’s *Lament for Three Women*

In *The Death of Character*, Elinor Fuchs remarks that following WWI, religion and spiritual themes in the theatre went underground. She quotes Maurice Tuchman as saying, “To use the word spiritual in the late 1930s and 1940s . . . was near-heresy and dangerous to an artist’s career.”94 Fuchs follows with Richard Gilman’s assessment of August Strindberg’s *To Damascus* (written in 1898) as the “formal ‘turning point in the history of the stage’ but whose ‘Biblical quotations and occult verbiage’ are ‘not always appropriate materials’.”95 Even in the late nineteenth-century, despite the proliferation of biblical plays as addressed in earlier chapters, biblical materials were generally garnered as inappropriate. According to Fuchs, this sentiment grew stronger throughout the early twentieth-century.

Nevertheless, plays published by the Committee on Religious Drama and its Drama League prize in the category “non-Sectarian Bible play,” not to mention the founding of the Religious Drama Society of Great Britain in 1929 and its popular tradition of the Canterbury Festival, reveal Tuchman’s and Gilman’s statements, as well as Fuchs’ conclusion, to be only partially true. While the modern theatre proper may have rejected biblical themes as “appropriate” material, religious drama continued alongside and, perhaps, fairly independent of

mainstream modern theatre. Thus, Fuch’s assertion that “modern drama never shed its mystery impulse,” but that “[it] continued to be expressed in the dramatic texts of expressionism and surrealism, in revolutionary Marxist theater, in the metaphysical theater of the absurd and beyond,”96 merits consideration. For instance, Lorraine Hansberry’s Raisin in the Sun serves as an example of Marxist-leaning theatre that bears the impulse of, if not direct reference to, biblical themes, imagery, and characters.97 Likewise, Fuch’s sees such residual “mystery impulse” as part of a progression toward a “new allegorisis of postmodern ‘conceptual’ performance, in which the spectator becomes the organizer and interpreter of patterns, but now without the mediation of a shared set of [biblical] references.”98 Fuchs follows this progression through to the postmodern theatre with regard to theorist Antonin Artaud and practitioners Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson, with brief mention, for the purposes of this chapter, Joseph Chaikin of the Open Door Theatre. These theorists and theatre practitioners, even more so than “devout atheists” like Hansberry, further divorced mysticism from its biblical and religious referents, but nonetheless retained a deep interest, in “the long struggle in Western metaphysics

96 Fuchs, 37.
97 Fuchs uses Brecht’s The Baden Play for Learning as an example of how the playwright was drawn to religious dramatic forms and themes “as implausible as the project of dressing Marxist doctrine in Christian eschatology might seem at first glance.” See Fuchs, 45. In asking, “What is the purpose, then, of drawing so faithfully on Christian dramatic forms?,” she answers with a statement by Hardison “that in the mystery cycles, ‘every event has a past extending back and future extending forward’” to conclude that “The mystery form permits Marxist playwrights to attach a merely human historical project to a Christian sense of time . . . Christian history is assimilated to a revolutionary . . . futurism.” See Fuchs, 46. While I do not read A Raisin in the Sun as a mystery play per se, I agree that Hansberry borrowed biblical tropes on which to hang Marxist ideology for imagining a revolutionary future, in this particular instance, the revolution of the Younger family amid the historical project of the early Civil Rights Movement.
98 Fuchs, 50. emphasis mine. Likewise, I have added the word biblical to clarify what shared references I am referring to in this chapter.
between body and mind, action and reflection.” 99 Karen Malpede, the playwright of this chapter’s fourth Ruth play *Lament for Three Women* emerges from these schools of thought, having written her 1974 play after working with the Living Theatre and Open Door Theatre. In *Lament*, with its heavy reliance on “pattern” over direct reference, Malpede anticipates Fuch’s understanding of mystery in the “new allegorisis” of “postmodern conceptual performance” and contributes to the postmodern possibilities for what Procter-Smith calls “a feminist enlargement of our liturgical imagination.” 100

Fuchs opens her chapter “Signaling through the Signs” with a quote from the “great mystic-theorist of the theater, Antonin Artaud, who wrote that artists must be ‘like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames.’” She continues with a description of such an artist: “Her entire Being is compressed into this moment only. She has no leisure for mere speech . . . She relies on the urgent, mute signal, on the total signifying of the pain-vivified body. . . . The artist-victim’s absolute presence is almost unbearably intensified by proximity to its other, the absolute absence of death.” 101 Fuch’s description of the artist-victim’s “presence” as being on the verge of death, but “never more intensely alive,” might well describe the *mise en scene* of Malpede’s *Lament*. 102 *Lament* opens with three women awaiting the deaths of a father, husband, and son dying “of cancer in a room close by.” Malpede notes that “anyone who watches them does so from a distance.” 103 Although these women “have been sharing one another’s grief for

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99 Fuchs, 69.
100 Procter-Smith, 36.
101 Fuchs, 69.
102 Fuchs, 69.
103 Karen Malpede, *Lament for Three Women, A Century of Play by American Women*, ed. Rachel France (New York: Richard Rosen, 1979) 204. (Because *Lament* is a one act and not marked by lines numbers, I have chosen to cite passages by page number.)
the past six months,” there is a sense of urgency in their stories. Malpede writes, “These women are not filling time. They are obsessed with its passage. Each second brings them closer to the death of the men who have been at the center of their lives.”

Perhaps Malpede’s *Lament* suits Fuch’s description of presence so nicely because the playwright observed and wrote about director Joseph Chaikin and his Open Theatre. Fuchs describes Chaikin as one of several artists who “created theaters and theater pieces that took on [Artaud’s] vision.”

Malpede wrote *A Lament for Three Women* following her work with Chaikin and, likewise, exhibits many of the traits that Fuchs finds in mystically-inspired, but biblically removed “postmodern conceptual performance.”

Now an established feminist playwright and theatre scholar, Malpede’s first play was *A Lament for Three Women*. According to Rachel France, the play broke the writer’s “11-year creative silence . . . where, by exploring her own feelings . . . she eventually came to look ‘far into the source of woman’s sorrow and rage.’”

Malpede’s religious upbringing was one source of this sorrow. Biographer Cindy Rosenthal writes that throughout most of her adolescence and young-adult life Malpede felt like a “‘displaced’ Jewish woman” caught between her mother’s “upper-middle-class Jewish family” and her father’s “working-class Italian Catholic family that was vehemently anti-Semitic.”

Dedicated to her mother, *Lament* is about Malpede’s unresolved feelings after her father’s death.

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104 Malpede, “Lament,” 204.
105 Fuchs, 69.
In the play, whether or not in real life, these feelings revolve around issues of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in the lives of three biblically named women Rachel, Ruth, and Naomi. Like the biblical Book of Ruth, the play explores the bonds between women in the wake of death and disease: physical, psychological, and sociological. However, consistent with Fuch’s “postmodern conceptual performance,” the biblical referent to the Book of Ruth (evidenced by the character names Ruth and Naomi) is disrupted by the substitution of Rachel for the second daughter-in-law Orpah. Malpede omits this character and substitutes the name of another Jewish matriarch, Rachel.

In the Bible, the character of Rachel is, ironically, also the victim of substitution. Rachel’s father Laban prevents her marriage to Jacob by substituting his daughter Leah at the couple’s wedding. Thus, Malpede is the second of this chapter’s Ruth playwrights, along with Benton, to invoke the memory of Rachel and Leah. Furthermore, Malpede invokes Rachel’s name upon her victimhood, rather than at the moment of her exaltation as beloved matriarch, Alice Ogden Bellis contends that “[m]ost modern feminists will undoubtedly feel that Rachel and Leah were victimized by their father.” Malpede uses this assumption to inform the “victimization” theme of her play. Likewise, Malpede uses the character of Rachel to interject a feminist reading that overcomes this victimization. For instance, Bellis finds some feminist compensation in the Bible in Rachel’s stealing of her father’s god statues before departing to live with Jacob, who eventually takes her as his second wife. Nunnally-Cox interprets the statues as representing “the leadership of the family” and “that by taking the gods, [Rachel] takes the power of leadership into her hands.” Cheryl Exum and Nancy Jay believe that “the gods

109 Bellis, 86.
represent the line of descent reckoned through the mother.” In these readings, Rachel appears as a figure that challenges patriarchal authority and attempts to restore what Irigaray would call a “maternal genealogy.”

In Malpede’s play, the character of Rachel has also been victimized by her father, but through an incestuous relationship. Likewise, Malpede’s Rachel serves as a catalyst to convince the other women, Naomi and Ruth, to abandon their ties to the men in the other room by removing the men from life support. Direct parallels between biblical characters and the Naomi, Ruth, and Rachel of Malpede’s play, however, are impossible to make. While the women and their biblical counterparts share in the loss of male relatives, the details of Malpede’s story are far removed from the biblical narrative. Malpede’s characters and the biblical characters are imperfect metaphors that connect generations of women, rather than serving as shared referents. Malpede departs from Realism that traps the characters from the earlier Ruth plays of Benton and Maxfield from repeating the climatic decisions of their biblical antecedents and, therefore, recuperating and reinforcing patriarchal social structures.

Consistent with Fuch’s post-modern conceptual performance, rather than directly and realistically aligning the characters with their biblical counterparts, Malpede organizes her scenario on the patterns that connect these generations of women in order to break those destructive patterns. In her notes to Lament, Rachel France quotes Malpede in saying that “her work [is] an attempt to break ‘the silence which keeps us complicit in our own destruction.”

*Lament*, all three generations of women are caught in the pattern of domestic violence. Rachel, in an incestuous relationship with her father, tells Naomi, valued in her Jewish family solely for producing the son who is now dying: “The pattern that you make extends itself from you through Ruth [herself a victim of molestation and marital abuse] to me.”¹¹² Hesitating to break the bond (and bondage) of motherhood, Naomi says to Rachel: “My life is a pattern and no matter what that pattern has been based on it’s a pattern in the cloth itself. Not a fashion that can be put on or taken off at will. One doesn’t change the way the threads have come together without unraveling the entire piece of cloth.”¹¹³ In *Lament*, Malpede brings voice to the pattern of domestic violence in an attempt to unravel it. Malpede’s characters are less individual or historical than “emblematic” of this pattern. In her introduction to *Three Works by the Open Theatre*, Malpede explains her understanding of Chaikin’s concept of the emblematic: “The emblem connects actor and audience at this moment and connects the living and the dead through time. Maybe the only immortality is in the patterns the emblems recall. We die. The patterns persist. They alone give evidence of shared humanity.”¹¹⁴ Malpede’s emblematic characters connect the contemporary characters of Naomi, Ruth and Rachel with the biblical women by emphasizing the patterns that connect their lives and serve as an example of what Fuch’s describes as the “new allegorisis” in postmodern performance. The women of Malpede’s play recognize the patterns that operate in their lives and decide to disrupt those patterns. Each character slowly realizes the impediments that their bonds with the men of the play have placed on their individual freedoms and their relationships with other women. At the play’s conclusion, the women vow to break from the

attachments that keep the men alive. They symbolically and literally detach themselves from the unhealthy bonds of patriarchy.

Malpede’s play is essentially about breaking bonds with patriarchal structures, including the bonds between the patriarchal biblical narrative and the narrative of her play. Malpede breaks these bonds by restoring a maternal or female genealogy between the women. Irigaray describes this move as “creating a woman-to-woman sociality”:

> Without rites and myths to teach us to love other women . . . to live with them, mutual destruction is a permanent possibility. We need values we can share if we are to co-exist and create together. And it is important for us to exist and love one another as women if we are to love the other—man.\(^{115}\)

In Malpede’s *Lament*, the women let go of their terminally-ill relationships with men in order to reconnect with their fellow women. Rachel says, “My father’s sickness worked the life-force in reverse.” In the play’s final image, “[t]he three woman lament together . . . pass[ing] through all shades of grief and brave exaltation.” They sing, “Let our lament go out/Let the song of our sorrow be heard./ Let the weight of our sorrow/be shared/by the world.”\(^{116}\) Malpede’s *Lament* is the ritual and the biblical story is the myth that teaches women to love one another. In her book *Women in Theatre: Compassion and Hope* Malpede speaks in similar terms to Irigaray. In regard to Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* and her “vibrant, asserting, caring characters” of “mother, sister, and wife” as “conveyors of the life force,” Malpede writes:

> As it becomes clearer and clearer that women’s theatre is about the interrelated lives of a community, true heroism may come to be seen as the strength in one

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\(^{115}\) Irigaray, 192.

that gives another strength. Then the single dominant hero and his sacrificial act will recede before the vibrant making of community. 

Likewise, in Malpede’s play, the literal sacrifice of the “single dominant hero,” referred to in male terms, recedes into the background of the story of three women sharing each other’s sorrow and giving each other strength. In this sense, Malpede breaks the patriarchal bonds of theatrical convention with its single dominant hero, in order to provide an alternate scenario for women’s theatre that privileges “woman-to-woman sociality.”

Malpede’s break with theatrical models of the past includes her notes to actors. In Three from Open Theatre, published in the same year as Lament, Malpede describes the company’s acting style as presentational saying, “The actors do not use emotional recall. . . . In order to develop freely, the actor has to be rid of the limits of his or her emotional past. . . . Abandonment, receptivity, repetition—in place of recall—make this experience possible. . . . The testimonies are structured as confessions and accusations.”

The actors’, as well as the characters’ abandonment of the past, being receptive to new experiences, and repeating or recalling the past in light of these new experiences, releases the actor and character from the past, allowing them to make new bonds going into the future. Such a process is useful in contemplating Procter-Smith’s call to remember the past, “in light of the present and with a sense of responsibility for the future.”

In “Something Missing: Memory and Imagination,” Procter-Smith notes the tension between “memory and imagination” as “opposing concepts.” She writes, “Memory, after all, is

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117 Malpede, Women in Theatre, 163-164.
119 Procter-Smith, 46.
concerned with the past—an interpreted past, certainly, but real events in any case. . . . Indeed, imagination is sometimes used as a way to escape from painful memories or rejected past. However, . . . the two concepts are in fact deeply related to one another.”

Certainly, Malpede does not use imagination to escape the painful past, but rather her play is full of “direct” and graphic accounts of women’s abuse at the hands of men. Procter-Smith writes, “Our imaginations as women have been ‘colonized’ by patriarchal culture, a process Adrienne Rich calls ‘arts of survival turned to rituals of self-hatred.’ Anamnesis for women requires the creation of feminist imagination, which permits women to appropriate our past and to envision our future in ways that reject self-hatred and make survival possible.”

Malpede appropriates the story of Ruth and, in dialogue with Rachel, rejects the self-hatred that perpetuates domestic violence, therefore, making survival possible.

In regard to memory, Procter-Smith contends “the spiritual consequences of this restored memory are not backward-looking but forward-looking. . . . Rather than seeking to return to a ‘golden age,’” as in the case in the earlier biblical plays of Benton and Maxfield, “this model makes transformation possible.” She continues that “anamnesis is not mimesis,” “to put it as simply as possible, feminist liturgical anamnesis is the active remembrance of our collective past

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120 Procter-Smith, 36.
121 Procter-Smith, 37.
122 Procter-Smith, 48.
123 Some definitions of anamnesis relevant to the project of remembering biblical women through contemporary women’s bodies include: “the recollection or remembrance of the past; reminiscence”; the “recollection of the Ideas, which the soul had known in a previous existence, especially by means of reasoning”; and “a prayer in a Eucharistic service, recalling the Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ.” See dictionary.com, definitions 1, 2, 5.) Definition two demonstrates a particular affinity for the efforts behind occultism and spiritualism in Chapter Two.
as seen through women’s eyes and experienced in women’s bodies.” By placing the “pain-vivified” bodies of three women telling their collective stories of domestic violence through emblematic characters that trace such patterns back to biblical-foresisters, Malpede does not simply recreate the ‘golden age’ of patriarchal biblical society, but instead recreates the story in a way that transforms the biblical narrative through a gynocentric lens with concern for past, present and future women’s bodies. Procter-Smith notes the importance of both this kind of “historical recovery and imaginative work.”

It is through this relationship between historical reconstruction and imagination that Procter-Smith argues that Christianity may claim a feminist “mysterion.” Procter-Smith defines “mysterion” as derived from the Greek meaning “‘something on which silence must be kept,” which “in Christian usage . . . came to mean that which God revealed to humanity through Jesus Christ.” Procter-Smith, as well as James White, have expanded the meaning of the word to suggest “revelation” and “the idea of the imagination [as] helpful for grasping this revelatory aspect.” Procter-Smith advances “feminist mysterion” that “claim hieratic status for [the] experiences of women, and claims that through them God chose to reveal God’s self. In this instance, the usual meaning of ‘mystery’ serves well, for these aspects of women’s lives have been obscure and silence about them has been imposed. But in the Christian adaptation of the term, we may also say that they are now being revealed.” Similarly, I argue that Malpede’s

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124 Procter-Smith, 53.
125 Procter-Smith, 54.
126 Procter-Smith, 54.
127 Procter-Smith, 55.
128 Procter-Smith, 57.
adaptation the lament as a “formal expression of mourning in verse or song,”\textsuperscript{129} puts an end to the dark mystery, and silence, of domestic abuse in both the past and present, while revealing how Procter-Smith’s concept of feminist \textit{mysterion} and Fuch’s concept of postmodern \textit{mysterium} may combine to provide a model for feminist biblical performance.

Through emblematic characters, rather than direct allusions to biblical referents, and her focus on pattern rather than historical Realism, Karen Malpede is able to promote both memory and imagination in her debut play \textit{Lament for Three Women}. In this way, Malpede overcomes the obstacles of Realism and its by-product of “recuperation” that frustrates the feminist efforts of her dramatic foresisters. Benton, Maxfield, Hansberry and Malpede each present plays in which women’s traditional roles of mother, sister, and daughter can be understood in relation to the biblical Ruth narrative. With the exception of \textit{Lament}, in which the off stage male characters are killed by the female protagonists, each of these plays is largely about bonds between women, rather than an alliance between women in their collective conflict with men. As such, Benton, Maxfield, and Hansberry may be said to compensate women in their relationships to one another, while, and at the same time recuperate oppressive patriarchal structures in their resolution toward a “single dominant hero.”\textsuperscript{130} Malpede’s work, however, represents a more radical politics of the personal in which women’s alliances are imperative for bringing down patriarchal structures.

Taken together, Benton’s \textit{Ruth and Boaz}, Maxfield’s \textit{Ruth of Moab}, Hansberry’s \textit{A Raisin in the Sun} and Malpede’s \textit{Lament for Three Women} provide their own genealogy of Ruth plays in the twentieth-century. This chapter traces how these plays and their playwrights worked both within yet transgressed the twentieth-century conventions of patriarchy, separate sphere

\textsuperscript{130} Malpede, \textit{Women in Theatre}, 163-164.
ideology, and dramatic Realisms in order to remember the foresisters of Ruth, Naomi, and Orpah/Rachel in a feminist key. Throughout this genealogy, female playwrights modify realist structures in order to recuperate what Irigaray promotes as a “female genealogy” and “woman-to-woman sociality.” Furthermore, in breaking with realist structures and focusing on patterns connecting women’s lives, Malpede works toward what Elinor Fuch’s describes as post-modern conceptual performance (or postmodern mysterium) and what Marjorie Procter-Smith describes as feminist mysterion, a work of memory and imagination that unveils the pattern of silence concerning women and reveals the mystery of feminist potential within the biblical narrative. Malpede succeeds in this by tracing the patterns of violence and “woman-to-woman sociality” performed upon and by female bodies throughout generations, what Diana Taylor might call an “embodied repertoire” or “behaviors that get transmitted through performance” of everyday life, as well as the stage.131 Taylor notes that “embodied and performed acts transmit knowledge”132 and are “an important system of knowing.”133 These four Ruth plays, therefore, represent a performance genealogy that traces how the Ruth narrative has played upon and transmitted knowledge across women’s lives during the twentieth-century. Chapter Five continues this genealogy, but in regard to the biblical matriarch Sarah. Like the playwrights of Chapter Four, in her play Sarah and Abraham Marsha Norman continues to modify the realist structures of both biblical narrative and theatrical convention. Similarly, she recuperates a maternal and female genealogy that reveals patterns shared between, and the embodied repertoire passed down from, biblical foresister and the contemporary woman.

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131 Taylor, 298.
132 Taylor, 21.
133 Taylor, 26.
CHAPTER V: SARAH PLAYS AND SECULAR JEWISH-CHRISTIAN FEMINISMS

Thirty years after Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* and twenty after Karen Malpede’s *Lament for Three Women*, Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Marsha Norman workshopped her biblical play *Sarah and Abraham* at the Actors Theatre of Louisville in 1988 and premiered its production at George Street Playhouse in 1992. Similar to Malpede and Hansberry, Norman sets her play in the present using contemporary characters to inform their biblical counterparts. Unlike Hansberry and Malpede, however, Norman does not drape biblical narrative in metaphor. In other words, *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Lament for Three Women* are like the Book of Ruth, but do not directly reference the biblical narrative. Norman’s comparisons are more overt in that the biblical narrative of *Sarah and Abraham* is set as a play within a play in which Norman’s protagonists, married actors Kitty and Cliff Wells, take the biblical roles of Sarah and Abraham in a regional theatre production of a new play titled *Abraham the Patriarch*. At the same the time Norman was writing *Sarah and Abraham*, two Israeli plays, Shulamit Lapid’s *Womb for Rent* produced at the Cameri Theatre in 1990 and *Sarah* at Theatre Company Jerusalem in 1993 likewise incorporated the Genesis biblical narrative. Each of these plays are reactions to, or are made possible by, feminist biblical research surrounding the Sarah tradition in the late twentieth-century. Concurrent with these productions, feminist biblical scholar Savin Teubal’s *Sarah the Priestess* and *Hagar the Egyptian* challenged traditional notions of “Abraham the Patriarch.” Plays in this chapter participate in this larger discourse on the Sarah tradition that was emerging from Jewish feminism in the last decades of the twentieth-century. In this chapter, I explore the playwrights’ contribution to this discourse through what Katherine H. Burkman and Claire R. Fried describe, in reference to Norman’s play, as “feminist midrash . . . draw[ing] on
the tradition of involving the Hebrew Bible, as the ancient Jewish sages did, in explaining/defending/justifying their own life.”

The biblical narrative of Sarah and Abraham, however, is atypical for application to one’s own life. The couple, with Abraham following the voice of his God, wanders the desert for many years. Childless, they hire a maid, Hagar, to serve as a surrogate. Sometime after the baby, Ishmael, is born, Sarah becomes pregnant. Eventually, the strain between the two women and their children becomes too much and Sarah banishes Hagar and her young son to the desert, where they are provided for by an angel. Ultimately, God tests Abraham by asking for the sacrifice Isaac, his and Sarah’s son. God spares Abraham from completing the act; however, Sarah disappears from the narrative, popularly believed to have died of heartbreak.

In her introduction to *Sarah and Abraham*, Marsha Norman recounts her confusion over the biblical story as inspiration for her play: “[A]s I sat at church five times a week, reading the Bible because it was there, I couldn’t figure it out. How, or why, or how exactly did Sarah give her maid to her husband?” This question, along with a litany of others, complicates feminist

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2 Marsha Norman, *Sarah and Abraham* in *Marsha Norman: Collected Plays*. (Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, 1998) 274. Norman’s reference to frequent church going and regular Bible reading are likely a reflection upon her upbringing, rather than out of a strong personal devotion to organized religion. Raised by fundamentalist parents, Norman subsequently rejected any notion of the biblical God, opting for a general spirituality. Like Hansberry, Norman acknowledges the importance of religion stating, “Everybody needs someone, some group of beings who are more powerful than you because you can’t help but feel small.” However, Norman rejects what she understands the “vengeful, restrictive, oppressive God as presented by the Old Testament, as created, as written by that group of people who wrote the Bible.” Norman’s respect for spirituality along with the religious education provided by her background allow her, like Hansberry, to critically reflect upon institutional religion with what I am calling a “devout
readings of the biblical matriarch: What can justify Sarah’s cruelty to Hagar and the banishment of this young mother and her son to the desert? Why, if Isaac’s birth was so miraculous, would Sarah remain silent as Abraham prepared to sacrifice their son? What can explain/defend/justify this behavior? Early women’s activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton offers her hypothesis in the *Woman’s Bible* when she asks,

> Does anyone seriously believe that the great spirit of all good talked to these Jews, and really said the extraordinary things they report? It was, however, a very cunning way for the Patriarchs to enforce their own authority, to do whatever they desired, and say the Lord commanded them to do and say thus and so. Many pulpits even in our day enforce their lessons of subjection for woman with the same authority.

As Stanton observes, the biblical figure of Sarah has been used to biblically justify the subjection of women in regard to matriarchy, matrimony, and motherhood. Taking a line from Norman’s play, traditional readings of Genesis present “How marriage used to be” with the woman following the man at all costs—including her religion, her position, and her child. It is for this

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4 Norman, 1.2. (Because there are multiple editions of this play in anthologies and acting versions, I am citing passages by act and scene for easy reference.)
reason, that feminists have approached the narrative through a hermeneutics of suspicion.⁵ Meanwhile, in twentieth-century mainstream society, as ideas of marriage were becoming challenged and a woman’s autonomy from her husband became a real possibility, Sarah’s actions and inactions became increasingly unthinkable. Only since Sarah’s actions have become socially untenable have feminist readings of her begun to arise.⁶ As Jewish feminism gained momentum in the late 1970s, new readings of Sarah began to emerge. Through the recuperation of non-canonical texts found through biblical archeology and the rabbinical Midrash of antiquity,⁷ Sarah has been re-characterized from her position as matriarch to something quite the opposite, a priestess who “struggles to preserve a non-patriarchal system involved with the forces of nature

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⁶ I speculate as to the resurgence of interest in the Sarah tradition in the late twentieth-century. Other reasons may be changing concerns among women. At the turn of the century, gaining access to birth control was more of an issue than the biblical Sarah’s concerns over infertility, the postponement of pregnancy, and the complications of surrogacy, which may certainly be seen as concerns in the latter part of the century.

⁷ For a distinction between midrash and Midrashim, I refer to the definitions by Peter A. Pitzele: “The Midrash—used with the definite article and a capital ‘M’—is both a product and a process classically associated with the exegetical works of the rabbis of late antiquity. . . . In the Midrash the written text is closely examined for meanings and insights that will enrich our understanding and enhance our relationship to the Bible. . . . In a more generic sense, however, midrash—now in lowercase—may be extended into later ages and to our own. From a more liberal perspective midrash may include extra-literary acts of interpretation such as movement, song, visual art, and drama, which, like their classical forbears, serve to illuminate meaning in the biblical narrative.” Peter A. Pitzele, Scripture Windows: Toward a Practice of Bibliodrama (Los Angeles: Torah Aura Productions, 1998) 11-12.
and their relevance to the community.”8 It is by approaching the Sarah narrative through this scenario that Sarah’s actions become comprehensible to contemporary readers and questions such as “how” or “why” regarding Sarah can be answered with any satisfaction. Such is the context of Norman’s play. Norman explains, “I began to read some of the feminist theologians and scholars on this subject and discovered that, in fact, the Bible was simply one version. There was great evidence that Sarah was a personification of strong matriarchal culture under siege. . . . And I really became interested because I felt (sighs), well, it made a lot of things I was confused about suddenly clear up.”9 While characters in Sarah and Abraham may claim that “It’s the Bible version we’re after”10 and “Feed it to me . . . Right from the Bible,”11 it is the extra-canonical sources that “feed” Norman’s dramaturgy. This chapter examines how Norman’s play participates in contemporary feminist theological discourse surrounding Sarah and how the playwright produces a play that contemplates how a contemporary woman might assimilate this new information to “explain/defend/justify her life.”12 Specifically, how does the recuperation of Sarah as “priestess” inform contemporary issues of career, marriage, fidelity, and motherhood? In this chapter, I provide an overview of contemporary feminist discourse on the Sarah tradition, how Norman relates this information to her audience through a contextual theology offered by the medium of theatre, similarities between Norman’s play and other Sarah plays of the 1990s, and an assessment of reviews of Norman’s play through the lens of the feminist theologies

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8 See Teubal, 135.
10 Norman, 1.2.
11 Norman, 1.5.
discussed in this chapter. As a result, I suggest theatre’s possibility as a “secular synagogue” (or sanctuary) that brings secular and theological feminisms into dialogue.  

Virgin Territory: Biblical Scholar Turned Playwright

The premise of Norman’s *Sarah and Abraham* surrounds a regional improvisational theatre company’s rehearsals for a new play *Abraham the Patriarch*. Among the cast of characters is the director Jack, serving as an allegory for an androcentric and patriarchal God, who seemingly controls the world of the stage and all of its players.  

This allegory continues with the roles of Sarah and Abraham played by Kitty and Cliff Wells, whose marital well-being is tested by their competing careers, and the return of Monica Mars, “a younger actress, formerly a member of this company, now a movie star,” who plays the role of Hagar, “the pagan princess from Hell.” Leading the company in its interpretation of the Genesis text is Virginia Mason, a “world famous Biblical scholar and soon-to-be-playwright from the University of Wisconsin.”

In their essay “Marsha Norman’s *Sarah and Abraham* ‘The Moon is Teaching the Bible,’” Burkman and Fried explain the allegory behind Virginia’s name as “suggestive both of virginity (Virginia)—she is in a sense the novice of the group but also a source of wisdom—and of building (Mason)—she is helping to construct a new fiction that is built on what may be hidden

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13 This term is borrowed from Dan Urian, *The Judaic Nature of Israeli Theatre: A Search for Identity* (Canada: Harwood, 2000) 5-6.

14 Burkman and Fried describe this character as “the ‘God’ who has cast Cliff as Abraham, and he is invested in an amusingly clichéd vision of how the drama should work itself out in traditional patriarchal terms on stage” 124. In his review of *Sarah and Abraham*, Gerald Weales also refers to Jack as a reference to God. See Gerald Weales, “Coming Apart: ‘Marriage’ & ‘Sarah & Abraham.’” *Commonweal*. April 10, 1992.

15 Norman, 1.1.

16 Norman, 1.1.
in the biblical tale.” Virginia revises the scenario by which the narrative of Sarah is generally understood. Marsha Norman may be seen as a counterpart to Virginia, she is a “virgin” to biblical scholarship, or rather, a Pulitzer-prize winning playwright and “soon-to-be” theologian from New York City. In this section, I examine Virginia’s allegorical function as a stand-in for Norman and the playwrights’ process of leading a company of actors from an androcentric understanding of the biblical text of *Abraham the Patriarch* to a more balanced gender-perspective in Norman’s *Sarah and Abraham*. While I draw heavily from Burkman and Fried, as well as other feminist biblical scholars, my intent is not to simply repeat their work by reviewing Norman’s dramaturgical sources and strategies, but, in doing so, to demonstrate the affinities between playwright and biblical scholar as a way of promoting an understanding of theatre as a “hermeneutics of creative imagination and ritualization.”

If Virginia is a virgin of the theatre, admitting, “I’ve been a big fan of this company for so long. But I don’t really know much about the theatre,” the actors of Norman’s fictional theatre company are equally naïve about the Bible. Jack introduces the actors to Virginia saying, “I thought since none of us know jack shit about the Bible, we should have Virginia do the writing on this one.” Likewise, he introduces Virginia to the company’s process saying, “It’s easy, You’ll see. We pick a subject, then we improvise until we get to know the characters and how

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18 Fiorenza, 790.

19 Norman, 1.1.

20 Norman, 1.1.
the story goes. Then you pull the whole thing together and write the scenes.”

Thus, the rehearsal process of *Abraham the Patriarch* begins as the actors, prompted by Virginia, improvise on passages from Genesis. While Jack assumes Virginia’s role as a passive one, simply transcribing the actors’ improvisations, it becomes apparent that Virginia’s role is more subversive in disturbing the patriarchal narrative that Jack intends to tell. As the rehearsal process progresses and actors begin to question the motivations of their characters, Virginia responds with information taken from contemporary feminist biblical scholarship. For instance, in Act One, Scene Two, Virginia begins rehearsal with some background on the characters:

SARAH [KITTY]: And what did Sarah do all day?

VIRGINIA: *(Looks at Jack, then answers.)* She was a High Priest.

HAGAR [MONICA]: A High Priest of what?

JACK: Let’s just call it the old Mesopotamian Moon Worship.

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SARAH: I didn’t know that. How do we know this? Does everybody know this?

VIRGINIA: Just the academics, mainly, but word is leaking out. There’s a whole canon of Sarah stories, and hundreds of thousands of coins from the time with her picture on them, and several huge statues found in the temple at . . .

Cut off by Jack, who senses that Virginia is wandering out of biblical territory, Virginia’s sentence might be finished by scholar Savina J. Teubal’s study *Sarah the Priestess: The First*.

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21 Norman, 1.1
22 Norman, 1.2. Coincidentally, Sarah is the third woman of this study whose image is featured on money—Sor Juana on the 200 pesos bill, the Coin of Salome, and Madonna as the “Material Girl”—documenting both literally and figuratively how women have been perceived as cultural currency for centuries.
Matriarch of Genesis. Based on details from Genesis, Teubal explains that the biblical matriarch was a member of a unique religious order. Norman uses Virginia, in her new role as dramatist to “leak” research from the archive of academia into the repertoire of the acting company.

Details that have for so long perplexed scholars surrounding the biblical Sarah, Teubal argues, can be easily explained when considered within the context of her status as a religious devotee. Teubal’s major claims concern Sarah’s presumed barrenness and her relationship with her maid Hagar. Rather than a biological reason for Sarah’s childlessness, Teubal speculates, and Jack in Norman’s play summarizes, that “priests could have households and husbands, but no sex.” Instead of bearing her own children, a priestess could “build up” her household through a handmaid, thus explaining Sarah’s giving over of Hagar to Abraham. Regarding Sarah’s eventual pregnancy with Isaac, Teubal explains that the only way for a priestess to conceive was through supernatural forces, usually as a result of the priestess performing the “Sacred Marriage” rite with a priest-king such as the Pharaoh or Abimelech from the Genesis narrative.

Furthermore, marriage favored the priestess. Within marriage, a priestess was “regarded as Goddess incarnate; her oracles and utterances were those of divinity.” Teubal quotes God’s command, “Whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says,” as biblical evidence of Sarah’s priestly status within her marriage to Abraham, who Teubal characterizes as “Sarah’s consort.” Sarah’s subsequent rejection of Hagar also stems from a priestly code in which the priestess may demote...

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23 Norman, 1.4.  
24 Teubal, 102-106.  
25 Teubal, 119.  
26 Teubal, 96-97.  
27 Teubal, 106.
a maid to slave status if the maid challenges the priestess’ authority and position. In other words, Hagar’s dismissal is likely the result of her relationship with Sarah, rather than her relationship with Abraham. Teubal concludes that the book of “Genesis is indicative of the existence of a social system that was slowly being supplanted by patriarchy. . . . Sarah is symbolic of woman’s struggle against a male culture that finally prevailed and eventually subordinated women.” As religion became increasingly monotheistic and patriarchal, goddess religions were prohibited. She writes, “Over four thousand years later, this same despair and this same struggle is being experienced by women in both social and religious spheres. But we are not alone. Sarah is there, standing on the threshold, waiting to be returned to her rightful place in history. . . . The Sarah tradition gives us an insight into the potential of women’s roles to affirm women,” a project in harmony with Irigaray’s “woman-to-woman association” discussed in the last chapter.

Using the character Virginia as both dramaturg and a dramaturgical device, Norman combines the processes of feminist biblical exegesis and playwriting to bring Sarah across the threshold of the stage. Throughout the rehearsal process Virginia “leaks out” and “feeds” the Sarah tradition to both actors and the audience in order to upset the patriarchal picture of marriage. Furthermore, her dramaturgical process follows the principles of feminist exegesis. Athalya Brenner in the Feminist Companion to the Bible and Wendy Zierler in “In Search of a Feminist Reading of the Akedah” (the binding of Isaac) cite Jonathan Culler’s three-moment process of feminist interpretation as a guide to feminist theological exegesis: “The first involves

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28 Teubal, 104.
29 Teubal, 136.
30 Teubal 140-141.
‘a personal identification with the discussion of female literary characters.’ In the second moment, the reader identifies and opposes the ways in which a text has previously been read by a male-biased readership. In the third, s/he looks at the social and political values expressed not by previous readers, but by the text itself, exposing the androcentric values, ‘that are found to condition a text, are expressed in it, and perpetuated by it.’”31 Zierler adds a fourth moment for texts that, even when following Culler’s process, “do not result in a useful or empowering feminist re-reading.” She suggests that “one may need to go further than these three interpretive stages to identify a countertraditional text that resonates with one’s feminist values, that provides one with a way to live the text and encounter God within it. One may need to supply an additional interpretive moment.”32 I argue that Norman’s play offers such an “additional interpretive moment.” Norman uses countertraditional texts, such as Teubal’s study and other feminist texts, in a process of interpretation that engages in what Schussler Fiorenza defines as a “hermeneutics of creative imagination and ritualization” that “retells biblical stories and celebrates our foresisters in a feminist key.”33

Norman’s *Sarah and Abraham* provides a fictional case-study for how the process of theatre-making may lend itself to a creative hermeneutic. Beginning with the first step of Culler’s feminist interpretive process, it is fairly obvious to see how the craft of acting may foster a moment of “personal identification” with female biblical characters. In her role as playwright, Virginia encourages these kinds of moments by prompting the actors to empathize

32 Zierler, 11.
33 Fiorenza, 790.
with their characters. A scene between Monica (Hagar), Jack, and Virginia illustrate this process particularly well. Sarah’s dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael to the desert is one of the episodes in the Genesis narrative that feminist scholars have found difficult in producing a feminist or “useful re-reading.” In Norman’s treatment of this moment Monica, the actress playing Hagar, experiences similar concerns about her character. Rather than being cast out to the desert, she feels that it may be Hagar that wants to leave.

JACK: Virginia, can Sarah let Hagar go?

VIRGINIA: No, she can’t. It would be a major diplomatic embarrassment to the Pharaoh.

SARAH: And you can’t go out into the desert, because you might lose the baby.

HAGAR: And once I have the baby, there’ll be some other reason I can’t leave, won’t there? . . . I’m a prisoner here! You’re using me to hold onto your husband.

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34 Tikva Frymer-Kensky argues that Sarah actually “frees” Hagar and Ishmael by sending them into the desert. See Reading the Women of the Bible. (New York: Schocken, 2002) 236. According to Teubal, the relationship between the first wife (a naditu) and the surrogate (sugetu) was complicated. The first wife held authority over the second and took the sugetu’s children as her own. This adoption was guaranteed by contract, so that the first wife may never “repudiate” the child. In the case of a divorce, “both women could retain their children and be provided for” (103). It is unclear how the custody of Ishmael might have been legally enforced following the banishment or freeing of Hagar. Since Sarah would have been forbidden to repudiate the child, however, and because there was no divorce, custody would not have automatically gone to Hagar, it can be assumed that Sarah restored Hagar’s “mother-right” by allowing her custody of Ishmael. Norman’s play re-establishes Hagar’s “mother-right” in a different way, but the end result is the same concerning a woman’s right to motherhood, a key theme in Norman’s play.

35 Norman, 1.7.
As Monica begins to empathize with Hagar’s perspective, she realizes the different options and motivations that the traditional narrative may take. Within Norman’s dramatic structure, the actor’s response to a motivation that conflicts with the biblical text facilitates Culler’s second moment where the reader discovers and then challenges androcentric readings of the text. In this scene, Jack articulates the androcentric reading of the scripture, which Hagar immediately challenges:

JACK: Abraham loves you. But you can’t leave the camp before the baby is born.

HAGAR: Why not?

JACK: Because if Sarah doesn’t adopt the boy, then he won’t be legitimate.

HAGAR: I don’t care whether he’s legitimate or not!

JACK: Well, Abraham does. *This* is the baby the voice told him he would have. This baby will grow up and be Ishmael, the ancestor of Mohammed, the founder of Islam.

HAGAR: I don’t care who he grows up to be. I can’t say these lines.

ABRAHAM: Are there particular lines you’re…

JACK: Abraham, shut up.

HAGAR: Don’t you know what’s going to happen to this baby when I have it? Sarah is going to take him away! Here she stands, everybody treating her like some kind of goddess, and all the time, she’s planning to
steal my child. (*Tearing off her pregnant padding.*) Now when in this
goddamn play do I get *anything* except screwed?\(^{36}\)

The above exchange accomplishes several things in a feminist re-reading. First, Monica
identifies with Hagar and defends the biblical personage against her manipulation by patriarchy.
Abraham is, in effect, “shut up.” The scene then shifts from being androcentric, focusing on
Abraham/Ishmael/Mohammed, to being gynocentric, recognizing the relationship between Hagar
and Sarah as central. As a result, Monica demands a rewrite. This, in turn, provides Virginia with
the opportunity to incorporate feminist biblical scholarship that recuperates a gynocentric point
of view otherwise lost in the biblical narrative.

**JACK:** (*An offering.*) How about a new scene where . . . if you go back
and apologize to Sarah, God will give you whatever you want. . . .

Virginia, can Abraham . . .

**VIRGINIA:** (*Thinking quickly.*) Yes, he could. The Bible says an angel of
God came to see Hagar in the desert.

**JACK:** Great, Abraham will come find you.

**HAGAR:** And say what?

**JACK:** And say whatever you want. . . . Virginia, what does Hagar want?

**VIRGINIA:** You want a promise that Ishmael won’t have to worship the
moon.

**HAGAR:** Yeah. It’s weird to worship the moon.

**VIRGINIA:** You want him to follow your religion, not Sarah’s.

\(^{36}\) Norman, 1.7.
HAGAR: Keep talking.

VIRGINIA: When Abraham learns you ran away, he goes out into the desert and finds you, and promises you that Ishmael can worship the sun instead of the moon. And to prove it, he promises to have the boy circumcised, like your brothers and your father in Egypt.

HAGAR: And what else.

VIRGINIA: And himself too. Abraham has to circumcise himself too.

HAGAR: And what else.

VIRGINIA: *(Can’t think of anything else.)* And all the men in the tribe.

HAGAR: Okay. That’s good. It means I stand for something. 37

The scene, rewritten to satisfy the demand for a woman’s point of view, now “resonates with [Monica’s] feminist values.” 38 The alternate interpretation of Abraham’s motivation for circumcision balances the interests of men and women within Norman’s revised story. Abraham’s decision is not made solely because his god commanded him to do so, but is motivated out of deference to Hagar’s religion as well. Furthermore, Hagar’s status as Ishmael’s mother is reinforced through the boy’s rite of passage into her cultural heritage (her maternal and female genealogy). In this exegesis a gynocentric reading of the narrative is restored to be read in conjunction with the androcentric scripture of Abraham.

Norman’s dramaturgy continues in this skillful application of feminist hermeneutics until each of Teubal’s evidences for Sarah’s status position within the Sarah and Abraham narrative is recuperated. Jack’s play *Abraham the Patriarch* is transformed, through methods of feminist

37 Norman, 1.7.
38 Zierler, 11.
biblical exegesis, into Norman’s *Sarah and Abraham*, and, as a result, returns Sarah to her place in history. As biblical scholar turned playwright, Virginia combines the hermeneutics of feminist biblical interpretation with the creative hermeneutics of the theatre, allowing Norman, in turn, to approach the story of *Sarah and Abraham* as a playwright turned biblical scholar.

**Bibliodrama: In the (Interpretive) Moment**

While Virginia may be a stage-virgin, the dramatic techniques she employs are not entirely unknown to biblical interpretation. In many ways, Norman’s play reads as an example of Bibliodrama, a method of dramatic role play that combines elements of Jacob L. Moreno’s psychodrama with the Jewish tradition of midrash. Individuals take roles within a biblical story and bring their individual life experiences to the enactment of the narrative. Although I do not suggest that Norman knew of Bibliodrama when writing *Sarah and Abraham*, I posit that her play may be considered “bibliodramatic” and, therefore, can serve as an example of what Zierler suggests is an “additional interpretive moment” for considering how performance can illuminate feminist biblical scholarship. For example, Manfred Oeming’s definition of Bibliodrama in *Contemporary Biblical Hermeneutics* mirrors Jack’s description of his rehearsal process: “We pick a subject, then we improvise until we get to know the characters and how the story goes.”

Likewise, Oeming summarizes the Bibliodramatic process:

> The group starts with reading out loud the biblical text to enter into the world of the text and gain a first impression of the characters. . . . The next step can consist of a scenic representation of the script . . . followed by a period of reflection. . . .

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39 Norman, 1.1.
The group leader has the authority to break into the action, ask specific questions, stop a scene or make the participants play a certain section over again.\textsuperscript{40} Such process of Bibliodrama is often used in small group or therapeutic sessions led by someone trained in the Bible or psychotherapy and, ideally, both. While emphasis is placed upon process rather than a final artistic product, Norman’s \textit{Sarah and Abraham} certainly shows how Bibliodrama may achieve both. If Virginia, as biblical scholar turned playwright, is able to recuperate feminine history hidden in the biblical text, as a group leader of Bibliodrama, she is also able to recuperate the narrative so that, in Zierler’s words, it “provides one with a way to live the text and encounter God within it.”\textsuperscript{41} In this section, I consider the Bibliodramatic moments of Norman’s play in order to illustrate how this method may facilitate feminist applications of the biblical narrative.

Theoretically, Bibliodrama draws from psychotherapeutic models of the mid-twentieth century and theologically bridges the gap between modernism and contemporary postmodernism. In \textit{Body and Bible: Interpreting and Experiencing Biblical Narratives}, Bjorn Krondrofer reflects upon the history and theories of Bibliodrama. Regarding dramatic “play” itself he writes:

play seems to provide an ideal model for postmodernity—the representation of culture as scattered and polymorphic, as \textit{simulacra}, and as incomplete and creative. Indeed, we have lost a universe that has hitherto provided coherent meaning systems and given us a sense of being protected by a sacred canopy. This


\textsuperscript{41} Zierler, 11.
loss has not only unleashed great anxieties, but also released powerful creative
ergies. . . . As individuals and communities, we have played with new forms of
experiencing ourselves in relation to our traditions, cultures and realities.42

Krondofer acknowledges that the fundamentalist reaction to the loss of grand narratives and
“coherent meaning systems” has made it difficult for play, and particularly dramatic play, to
make headway in mainstream biblical hermeneutics. He notes that although, “beginning in the
late 1940s, some liberal theologians . . . affirmed the validity of play for contemporary
theological discourse. . . . respond[ing] to the modern estrangement from doctrinal theology”
and even “more conservative play theologians . . . proceeded largely within proper theological
categories,” but that curiously, “most play theologians . . . never partook in actual play processes
which rely on bodily participation.” 43 He continues that these play theologians, therefore, can
offer encouragement and support to practitioners, but practical “inspiration and stimulation”
comes largely from “psychotherapies, dance, and experimental drama.”44 Among the most
influential theatre artists cited by Krondofer, largely because of their experiments in theatre and
ritual, include Alfred Jarry, Antonin Artaud, Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski and Julian Beck and
Judith Malina’s “Living Theatre.” Whether based in progressive or conservative ideologies, or in
the disciplines of theology or performance, Krondofer defends the power of play to engage new

42 Bjorn Krondorfer, “Introduction,” Body and Bible: Interpreting and Experiencing Biblical
43 Krondorfer, 21. For further exploration of play theology, Krondorfer cites David Miller
Rahner (1972), Josef Pieper (1952, 1973) and Jurgen Moltmann (1972). Among contemporary or
late twentieth-century scholars of bibliodrama, Krondorfer cites Antje Kiehn (1987), Gerhard
Mercel Martin (1976 and 1985), Walter Wink (1973), Joseph Power (1979) and Samuel Laeuchli
44 Krondorfer, 21.
contemporary realities, but does not dismiss its ability to recuperate tradition as well. He quotes Victor Turner in saying that “play draws material from all aspects of experience, both from the interior milieu and the external environment. . . . Play deals with the whole gamut of experience both contemporary and stored in culture.” It is Bibliodramatic play, therefore, of the kind illustrated in Norman’s Sarah and Abraham, that may satisfy contemporary demands for a contextual theology, one which “connects the text and life contexts of participants through reinterpreting the Bible in present realities,” recognizing that “the Bible has different meanings when it is addressed to people living in different situations” and “seriously consider[ing] the diversity of readers and contents, especially those who have been marginalized by Western-Christianity-led biblical hermeneutics.”

Feminists would certainly argue that women are one of those communities marginalized by Western biblical traditions. Bibliodrama, therefore, may be a method by which women can enter into, challenge, recuperate, and reform these traditions for application to their unique life circumstances. Peter A. Pitzele, a leading practitioner of Bibliodrama in the United States writes, “Among contemporary feminists the Bible is, by and large, anathema. . . . Bibliodrama is, if not a feminist methodology, then a method of interpretation that lends itself to a feminist project.” Certainly, Bibliodrama is a method of interpretation that lends itself to Norman’s feminist project in Sarah and Abraham. Bibliodrama provides a technique by which to revise the scenario (the contexts and principles) by which biblical stories are understood and embodied.

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As an example of Bibliodrama, almost immediately within Norman’s play, the actors become comfortable in their biblical roles and “[allow] their personal biographies to interact with the text.” Norman, of course, has the advantage of creating dramatic characters and circumstances that facilitate an especially appropriate casting of her Bibliodrama. Sarah’s status as priestess and Abraham’s ambition to follow his god toward a life of prosperity and patriarchal status, directly relates to conflicts of career and status within Kitty and Cliff’s marriage. Although neither Kitty nor Cliff are particularly religious, each worships their career. While the biblical Sarah and Abraham serve different gods, Kitty and Cliff serve different ideas of how they want to pursue acting. Kitty is a gifted actress likened to Meryl Streep, but is happy to stay in regional theatre. Cliff, on the other hand, feels he is being called (as God called Abraham) to the coast to become a star. Sarah and Abraham’s conflict of faith, therefore, has the potential to enlighten Kitty’s and Cliffs’ conflict of career. Jack, as director (of the play as well as the Bibliodrama), facilitates the actors in making these connections and engaging in the Sarah/Abraham conflict within the context of their own marriage. He approaches Cliff in playing the role of Abraham by appealing to his insecurity over status inequality with his wife.

JACK: I feel we’ve kind of gotten into a rut here, you know, show after show, Kitty Wells was brilliant, Kitty Wells was profound. . . . but this is going to be your show Cliff. . . . I want you to play Abraham. . . . I mean, who do we remember from this story. Sarah? No. Hagar? No. Abraham. Yes. Abraham the

48 Oeming, 95.
Patriarch. That’s you, guy. And I’m sure I don’t have to tell you what a role like this could do for your career.⁴⁹

Similarly, Jack instructs Kitty that “Cliff is your Abraham” and ”O.K. Now Sarah, darling. There he is. The love of your life.”⁵⁰ As the actors improvise with the scriptural text, they begin to identify themselves in the roles of Sarah and Abraham, and, in turn, use these revelations to bring resolution to issues within the context of their real-life marriage. In this manner, Norman’s play uses conventions of Bibliodrama to expand upon Biblical scripture and reveal conflicts between Sarah/Kitty and Abraham/Cliff that make their marriage susceptible to the Hagar/Monica affair. These conflicts involve contemporary marital issues. The following excerpt illustrates the way in which Norman’s Bibliodrama marries scriptural analysis with modern experience in order to bring revelation:

ABRAHAM: That's what Abraham is feeling. Sarah's a prude. This is her town and she knows it. That's why he wants to get away. They worship her here.

SARAH: He knew that when he married her.

ABRAHAM: Well maybe he didn't know how tired he'd get, walking up the hill to talk to her.

SARAH: She'll meet him wherever he says. It's not her fault she's a priestess. But they're depending on her now. The whole tribe.

ABRAHAM: If she doesn't want to be a priestess, why doesn't she quit?

SARAH: Would that make him happy?

ABRAHAM: She isn't interested in making him happy.

⁴⁹ Norman, 1.1.
⁵⁰ Norman, 1.1, 1.2.
SARAH: Yes, she is too.

ABRAHAM: Then why doesn't she go with him to the coast?

SARAH: She does go with him to the coast, didn't you read what Virginia gave us? . . . They run smack into this famine, just like Sarah said they would. . . . The Pharaoh needs a priest, they say, and he likes them pretty. . . and I spend the next month in the harem . . . when Pharaoh finds out I am your wife and not your sister . . . he gives me back to you as fast as he can . . . Only, by then, you're so mad at me, for being right about we never should have come here, that you fuck this maid, and you keep on fucking this maid until she gets pregnant.\(^{51}\)

Although the couple hesitates to confront their marital problems head-on, their improvisations on the biblical text make them come to terms with their rocky relationship. It is Cliff who feels tired and inadequate in the shadow of Kitty’s spotlight, and Kitty who loves her husband but is unsure whether relocating to the West Coast would solve or exasperate their problems. In a conventional Bibliodrama, this moment might be considered a therapeutic breakthrough. However, for Norman, it is a way of modernizing and de-mythologizing the biblical characters for a contemporary and largely secular audience. Rather than a play about a man and woman who must follow the literal voice of God to another land, an event most people will not encounter, the play becomes one about a couple who must face different “callings” in their careers, an event most relationships will experience.

Scripture within this contemporary context allows the couple, and the audience, to confront issues of career and adultery. Another instance in which Norman employs Bibliodrama

\(^{51}\) Norman, 1.3.
to parallel her actors’ lives with those of the biblical characters concerns the relationship between Hagar/Monica and Abraham/Cliff. In Norman’s play, Monica and Cliff begin an affair. After learning of the affair, Kitty must decide whether to confront the couple, possibly ending her marriage, or to let the affair continue. The question which drives Norman’s play, “How, or why, or how exactly did Sarah give her maid to her husband?” is answered in a Bibliodramatic scene in which Sarah gives Hagar to Abraham and, contextually, Kitty gives Monica to Cliff. Basing the scene on the conventional premise that Sarah gives her maid to Abraham so that he may have an heir, and not being completely satisfied with that answer, the playwright Virginia prompts Kitty/Sarah for further motivation:

VIRGINIA: But as a High Priest, you cannot bear his child.

SARAH: No. But I could take their child as my own, could I not?

VIRGINIA: Yes, that is your right.

SARAH: Then that is what I’ll do.

VIRGINIA: Why, my Lord?

(Sarah struggles to find the answer, looking at Abraham, who has turned his back on her, pretending not to pay attention)

SARAH: (Finally). My Abraham is a comfort to me.

In this scene, a plausible motivation for why a wife may allow her husband to take another woman is given, because he is a “comfort.” Norman suggests that Sarah’s/Kitty’s deeper reason for allowing the affair is to save her comfortable marriage. The only way for Kitty to keep her

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52 Norman, 274.
53 Norman, 1.5.
husband is to allow the affair. Once again, Norman uses contemporary human experience to enlighten the biblical text.

Another key conflict between the Kitty/Cliff and Sarah/Abraham marriages is the decision to have children. Similar to Teubal, Norman explains Sarah’s “barrenness” as a choice to postpone pregnancy. For Sarah, the choice emerges from her faithfulness to a religious order that forbids procreation. For Kitty, it is the devotion to her career that has delayed motherhood. During an improvisation, however, Kitty’s true desire to have a child is revealed:

ABRAHAM: You don’t want a child.

SARAH: I always wanted a child.

ABRAHAM: Then why didn’t you say that.

SARAH: I wanted to tell you but you weren’t home. 54

Just as in the scriptural narrative, Sarah/Kitty’s desire to have a child is impeded. However, in both narratives the women eventually become pregnant. Borrowing from Teubal, Norman parallels Sarah’s miraculous pregnancy (by way of divine intervention) with Kitty’s affair with Jack (the allegorical god of the play). The mysterious paternity of Kitty’s child is revealed in a Bibliodramatic scene where Sarah reveals to Abraham that she is pregnant:

ABRAHAM: Is it my baby?

SARAH: I don’t know Abraham. Maybe it is. Maybe it isn’t. You’re living with a slave girl anyway, why do you care?

ABRAHAM: You’re my wife!

54 Norman, 2.8.
SARAH: Oh please. After all the women you’ve had over the years, where do you get off telling me I can’t have an affair and have a baby.\textsuperscript{55}

In this scene, Kitty affirms her right to self-determination regarding her sexuality. Earlier in the play, Kitty similarly defended her affair through the persona of Sarah:

SARAH: Are you afraid the audience won’t like me if I’ve had a lover? I mean, I \textit{know} Abraham didn’t want her. But the Pharaoh was a different kind of man. He wasn’t afraid of her power. Maybe he even got off on it. Sarah would’ve liked that. . . . So what if she risked herself for once? Would that be so terrible?\textsuperscript{56}

Within Kitty’s argument, is a modern woman grappling with the sexual confinement of marriage and her demand for sexual freedom, or at least its possibility. As a result, she likewise liberates the biblical Sarah, or at least the thought of Sarah’s sexual liberation, from the restrictions of a religious order that demanded her celibacy. Norman invites the audience to contemplate this possibility with Kitty’s question, “Would that be so terrible?”

While Jack consoles his actors that “the audience can forgive your passion,” it is more difficult for commentators to interpret Abraham’s truly “terrible” action, and Sarah’s subsequent inaction, in the near sacrifice of Isaac.\textsuperscript{57} Consequently, this serves as the climactic scene in both the biblical narrative and Norman’s play. In her article “In Search of a Feminist Reading of the \textit{Akedah},” Zierler explains that, in regard to Sarah, the problem is “the presence of absence.”\textsuperscript{58} She writes that “if Chapter 21 begins with God’s ‘remembering of Sarah’—her promised pregnancy and the subsequent birth of Isaac—the opening of Chapter 22 constitutes a forgetting.

\textsuperscript{55} Norman, 2.8.
\textsuperscript{56} Norman, 1.4.
\textsuperscript{57} Norman, 1.6.
\textsuperscript{58} Zierler, 10.
Abraham, Isaac, the servants, the angel of God, and the ram all appear in the ensuing verses, but Sarah, who loomed so large in the preceding chapter . . . has now gone missing from the narrative.” Zierler goes on to trace how rabbinical Midrash and contemporary feminist scholars have dealt with Sarah’s absence. A common rabbinic explanation is that “Sarah died from . . . grief” when she learned of Abraham’s plan. Norman, in part, adopts this perspective in her play as Jack explains, “Sarah is dead. Right. She saw it. In a dream or something. She didn’t know you let the boy go. She thought you killed him. . . . And she died.” However, because the role of Sarah is doubled with Kitty, Norman is able to “play” with some other feminist readings, or what Zierler calls countertraditional “interpretive moments” that seek “alternative voices” when “former readership do[es] not result in a useful or empowering feminist re-reading,” such as the absented, silenced, dead and buried Sarah. Using Zierler’s summation and critique of contemporary feminist re-readings of the Akedah as a guide, Norman’s play considers alternative feminist readings through their Bibliodramatic connections to the life of the contemporary Kitty and, as a result, offers Norman’s “interpretive moment” to “explain/defend/justify [Kitty’s] life” on feminist terms.

Similarly, Zierler considers the alternative feminist readings of Alicia Ostriker and Phyllis Trible in relation to the Akeda. Ostriker contends that Genesis 22 is “a narrative of gender politics which inscribes the ‘binding’ of the sons to the theocentric word of the fathers. . . . [T]he meaning of the Akedah ‘is to be found not in the end of the practice of child sacrifice but in the

59 Zierler, 11.
60 Zierler, 12.
61 Norman, 2.11.
62 Zierler, 11.
63 Burkman and Fried, 130.
establishment of the father-right’ over the prior institution of mother-right.” In this reading, Abraham, by taking and binding Isaac, sacrifices Sarah’s mother-right in having a voice in Isaac’s well-being. It follows that the biblical authors, likewise, strip Sarah of her rights by scripturally silencing and burying her presence. Trible, on the other hand, argues for Sarah’s separation from her maternal attachment to Isaac. Trible characterizes attachment as “idolatry,” “In adoring Isaac, Abraham turns from God. . . .To relinquish attachment is to discover freedom.” (This detachment is similar to the women in Malpede’s play “relinquishing their attachment” to the men in their life in order to “discover freedom.”) For Trible, absenting Sarah from the narrative absences her from this opportunity for detachment and, and therefore, from her freedom from “maternal ties.” Sarah needs to be present at the sacrifice in order to detach from Isaac and her role as mother. Zierler, however, takes issue with this reading, asking:

As feminists looking for ways to read and relate to the Bible, do we want to remake our matriarchs . . . after the hyper-individualized model of solitary men, or do we, rather, want to identify ways in which feminine interdependence and the ‘self defined through connection’ can find spiritual expression and meaning in our most sacred canonical texts?

Instead, Zierler “believe[s] that Sarah’s absence from the Akedah narrative allows her to endure in the story as an alternative to the Abrahamic theology of detachment.” For Zierler, Sarah

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66 Zierler, 19
67 Zierler, 19.
lives on in the love, or attachment, that Isaac continues to feel for his mother in the passage “— and Isaac was consoled after his mother’s death.” Through this “interpretive moment,” Zierler provides an alternative model of “love” versus detachment for those who “want to live and love God with our children.” Zierler’s model comes closest to the “interpretive moment” offered in Norman’s play. Norman establishes Kitty’s independence not from her detachment from motherhood, but through her detachment from the idol of a marriage based on careerism.

With Kitty’s choice to pursue motherhood over marriage and career, Norman re-establishes Sarah’s and Kitty’s “mother-right,” and, therefore, a female or maternal genealogy. In her interview with Linda Ginter Brown, it is clear that Norman’s contention with the biblical God and the Abraham narrative stems from its relationship to patriarchy and its treatment of women and children. Norman views the Abrahamic religion as violently patriarchal stating, “I can’t get behind any system which says ‘I’m going to kill my son’ for whatever reason!” By this statement, it is evident that the Akeda moment within Norman’s play and her assertion of Sarah’s voice or “mother-right” at this moment of crisis is critical to the playwright. Elsewhere in the interview, Norman states, “I find that the God that ignores women, that kills babies, that vicious, violent creature is somebody I don’t want to have anything to do with. I think that, on the other hand, there is extraordinary power that we all feel that is best embodied in our care for each other, in our love for our children, and in our desire to see our society grow.” It follows from this statement, that Norman sees the maternal as an alternative metaphor for a higher power. The power of the Sarah narrative within Norman’s play lies in the recuperation of this

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68 Zierler, 22. See Genesis 24.77.
69 Zierler, 21.
70 Brown, 175.
71 Brown, 174.
maternal metaphor. By asserting Kitty’s decision to have a child, or her “mother-right,” Norman supplants the patriarchal metaphor in exchange for the maternal.

This is a risky business for Norman who writes during a time when motherhood is often seen at odds with feminism. Indeed, one of the criticisms surrounding Norman’s play is Kitty’s decision to put motherhood over her career. Burkman and Fried write, “Because Kitty/Sarah opts to give up her dramatic career and her husband to focus on her soon-to-arrive baby, one might conclude that the play is antifeminist.”72 While Burkman and Fried ultimately disagree with such a conclusion, finding that the play’s “Sarah as Priestess” argument dominates any androcentric reading; to the contrary, Gerald Weales of Commonweal contends that Kitty’s decision to favor motherhood undermines the play’s feminist potential. He writes that while “there are feminist undertones in the momentary alliance of Sarah and Hagar, or the performers who play them against Abraham and God, or the actor and the director, but there is antifeminist suggestion in the assumption that a woman is wisest to give up priestly power or theatrical fame to bear a child.”73

There are several ways of responding to this debate. First, the play makes clear that Kitty has “always wanted a child”74 and prefers a career in regional theatre over “theatrical fame.” From the beginning of the play it is Cliff/Abraham who wants to move to the coast and Kitty/Sarah who resists. In Act One, Scene Two, Cliff says, “I mean, if Abraham doesn’t make his move pretty quick, he might be out here in the middle of nowhere. . . . All Abraham wants to do is move to the coast.” To which Kitty/Sarah responds, “Where everybody leaves everybody

72 Burkman and Fried, 122.
73 Weales, 19.
74 Norman 2.8.
and nobody gives a shit.”75 Unlike the biblical Sarah, Kitty refuses follow her husband or his god (in this case his career) to another land. Weales assumes that the “feminist suggestion” is that it is wisest for Kitty to give up motherhood to pursue “power” or “fame.” The conundrum is that if Sarah chooses to follow her husband’s dream to pursue a career in New York, it may be considered “antifeminist;” whereas if Kitty chooses not to follow her husband, but to stay in regional theatre where she is content to raise a child on her own, it may likewise be considered “antifeminist.” In this “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” moment, it may be wisest to follow in the self-determination of one’s own desires.

Secondly, Norman allows Kitty to respond to such assumptions. For example, Jack echoes Weales’ concerns as he persuades Kitty to follow the company to New York:

JACK: Don’t you want to be a star?

SARAH: Cliff wants to be the star. He’ll do whatever you say.

JACK: You’re damn right he will, and I’ll make him the biggest star anybody ever saw, and you’ll have your baby.

SARAH: Yes.

JACK: And the baby will grow up and leave you. And resent all the sacrifices you made for him.

SARAH: I know that.

JACK: So what’s the point?

75 Norman, 1.2.
SARAH: The point is everybody leaves me anyway Jack. So I want to be with the baby while I can.76

In this scene, it is clear that the choice to follow Cliff and company to New York would be against Kitty’s desires and, therefore, antifeminist. Burkman and Fried agree that in her decision to stay behind, “Kitty is beginning to separate from Cliff, to develop her independence” and that “What we see working itself out under and through the multiple conflicts that emerge over Sarah/Kitty’s pregnancy is the independence that this moon child gives to Kitty, if she will just have the courage to claim it.”77

What unites the Sarah/Kitty narrative is its recuperation of Sarah’s “mother-right” from biblical suppression, and the recuperation of Kitty’s “mother-right” within contemporary feminist assumptions. Although they disagree with Weales on whether it is necessarily antifeminist to choose motherhood over fame, Burkman and Fried agree with his assessment that the alliance between the play’s three female characters is Norman’s strongest feminist strategy. The climax of this alliance occurs during a rehearsal of the Akedah. Jack sets up the Akedah as “a kind of test of whether Cliff will go with them to New York, creating yet another parallel to God’s test of Abraham’s allegiance.”78 The women, however, depart from the biblical narrative. Burkman and Fried note that “Hagar warns Sarah in improvisation that the sacrifice of Isaac is about to take place and should be resisted.”79 The women then insert themselves into the Bibliodramatic scene that follows. During Cliff’s over-zealous enactment of Isaac’s sacrifice, all three women vocally protest, with Virginia stopping the action by “catch[ing] Abraham’s arm.”

76 Norman, 2.10.
77 Burkman and Fried, 125, 128.
78 Burkman and Fried, 127.
79 Burkman and Fried, 122.
Burkman and Fried observe that “Perhaps what the three women share is Kitty’s insight at this climax: ‘He’s a child. You’re not mad at him . . . You’re mad at me.’ Such an interpretation seems justified, since Cliff is annoyed when Kitty tries to interfere in the scene—‘What is with you?’ he exclaims. ‘Can’t I have one scene in this play?’”80 Within this Bibliodrama, the women once again rest the scene away from its patriarchal focus and recuperate the women’s voices silenced in the biblical narrative. For the contemporary characters, the climactic scene draws alliances between Jack and Cliff who will depart for New York, and Sarah who will invoke her “mother-right” to stay behind and raise her child.

Norman’s Bibliodrama achieves what Zierler describes as a fourth interpretive moment. Unsatisfied with merely “identifying (with) female characters and exposing the androcentric biases of the text or its former readership,” Sarah and Abraham offers an “additional interpretive moment” that “provides one with a way to live with the text.”81 For both Norman and contemporary feminist biblical scholars, in order to be able to “live with the text” of Genesis 22, the female voice must be recuperated within the context of the Akedah. This “additional interpretive moment” in Norman’s play is facilitated by a Bibliodrama by which Kitty, Virginia, and Monica articulate women’s voices that the biblical authors elide. In regard to specific feminist readings of the narrative, Norman’s play is consistent with Sarah Ostriker’s desire to reassert Sarah’s “mother-right” into the narrative. Sarah is not silenced at Mount Moriah. Instead Kitty reinstates Sarah’s “mother-right” as she articulates her desire that her child not be sacrificed on behalf of Abraham’s god or Cliff’s career. For Trible, the requirement is “that Sarah be featured in the climactic scene” and that, like Abraham, she be tested. However,

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80 Burkman and Fried, 127.
81 Zierler, 11.
whereas Trible’s test for Sarah is that “she find liberation from possessiveness, that she free Isaac from maternal ties, and she emerge a solitary individual, non-attached.” Norman’s test for Kitty is that she emerge as a “solitary individual” by separating herself from the romantic, marital, and professional ties that were a “comfort” to her. This is consistent with Zierler’s contention, in agreement with Judith Plaskow’s *Standing at Sinai*, that the self “detached from and in opposition to others is a core part of the mythological, psychological, and political basis of patriarchy.” In contrast, Plaskow, Zierler, and Norman offer an alternative “against this separative notion of self” in a “feminist affirmation of the communal character of selfhood” characterized by “connection” rather than “detachment”—for Kitty, it is a connection to her desires, connection to other women in the play, and connection to her future child. In this context, Kitty’s decision to have a child is not an “antifeminist suggestion,” but is instead a rejection of feminism as defined by Jack and Cliff, and perhaps Weales and Trible, in exchange for a feminist alternative or “interpretive moment” proffered by Plaskow, Ostriker and Zierler.

The tension between detachment and connection may also be characterized in the form of Bibliodrama itself. Kitty’s decision could not be realized without both her connection to Sarah, as well as her separation from the biblical character. While the biblical Sarah’s experience informs Kitty’s decision, she will not let the patriarchy that led Sarah to follow her husband’s god/career lead her life. Kitty separates herself from the biblical narrative in order to make her own decision. This is not, and the technique of Bibliodrama is not, “what would Sarah do?” In the end, the “Abraham the Patriarch” and *Sarah and Abraham* narratives stand alone. The women’s interventions are, ultimately, not able to change the patriarchal nature of the biblical

82 qtd. in Zierler, 17. See Trible, 285.
83 Zierler, 18.
narrative. A review of Jack and Cliff’s *Abraham the Patriarch* reads “Cliff Wells’ transformation from tribal househusband to noble patriarch is nothing short of miraculous. Before our very eyes, the pagan age of mystery and moon worship ends, and the sun rises on the world as we know it.”

Neither Norman’s play within a play, nor Bibliodrama, can change the patriarchal biblical narrative, but can change how, as individuals and as feminists, one can live with and within it. The ending is not perfect, but in Kitty’s last words, “That’s all right. It’s O.K.”

The Secular Synagogue

Perhaps Kitty is right when she states, “So, Jack. Why are we doing a Bible story? People hate the Bible.” Norman’s attempt to put biblical narrative on the stages of American mainstream theatre has received a lukewarm reception with American critics. For Burkman and Fried, “the least convincing part of Norman’s *Sarah and Abraham* is the play-within-the play itself. Since this is finally shaped more by Jack/God than anybody else, the final scene (played out without interruption as a performance) seems too narrated, too conventional and too humorless.”

Weales, too, finds particular fault with Norman’s biblical scenes. He comments that there is simply “too much” going on and the “biblical folderol—judging by what we see of it” “is not likely to ring any bells in New York . . . let alone make a star of Abraham.” Norman herself is not fond of the Bible. When asked by Linda Ginter Brown if she believes in God, Norman answers, “The one of the Bible? (firmly) No.” She continues, “I feel that spirituality is

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84 Norman, 2.13.
85 Norman, 2.13.
86 Norman, 1.1.
87 Burkman and Fried, 130.
88 Weales 19
at the very center of me, but it has nothing to do with a vengeful, restrictive, oppressive God as presented by the Old Testament, as created, as written by that group of people who wrote the Bible.”

Dan Urian observes a similar tension in Israeli theatre. His study, *The Judaic Nature of Israeli Theatre: A Search for Identity*, looks at how theatre “in the 1980s and 1990s . . . became an arena for different and opposing ideological conflicts concerning the Jewish identity of Israeli society and culture.” Furthermore, these “ideological conflicts” existed primarily between “total believers” and “total secularists” in regard to the place of religion in Jewish identity. Urian writes that in mainstream Israeli theatre “there is considerable overlap between the non-believers and those who make up theatre audiences, for whom theatre is a unique gathering place: ‘a secular synagogue’” and therefore “a confrontation is thus created in a public and ‘holy’ arena . . . against those with a high level of self-conviction, particularly over a possibility that worries many secularists—the return to ultra-Orthodoxy” (secularists in America may similarly worry over a return of religious fundamentalism). But, perhaps more so than in American theatre, the Israeli secular stage is an expected and acceptable arena in which to debate the social implications of biblical narrative.

It comes as no surprise, then, that at the same time Norman was developing her play, *Sarah and Abraham*, two other Sarah plays appeared on the Israeli stage. In “So Sarah Laughed to Herself,” Urian considers Cameri Theatre’s production of *Womb for Rent* and Theatre Company Jerusalem’s (TCJ) *Sarah* in relation to the biblical Sarah’s significance to

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89 Brown, 174.
contemporary Israel and to women’s theatre more generally. Like contemporary feminist biblical scholars, Urian begins by discussing the patriarchal aspects of the biblical narrative, including Sarah’s relative absence once Isaac is born and her merciless act of exiling Hagar and Ishmael.92 Similarly, he notes an absence of “women, oriental Jews, and Palestinians” from Israeli theatre, both as subjects and as playwrights.93 For these reasons, he emphasizes the importance that these contemporary plays by women “give to the Hebrew-Jewish myths from a female aspect.”94 The importance of Norman’s play also lies in its ability to recuperate the “female aspect” of the biblical narrative. This imperative, however, seems more important in Israel where religion contributes more strongly to the national identity and therefore women’s place within society, than in America where Norman’s use of biblical narrative seems almost superfluous to critics. Israeli women’s theatre, therefore, may better illuminate how theatre can be used as a creative hermeneutic that bridges secular and religious feminisms. In effect, Israeli women’s theatre, like Hansberry, Malpede, and Norman, changes the scenario by which biblical narratives about women are understood and embodied by shifting emphasis away from religious contexts and toward secular understandings.

In “Feminist Theatrical Criticism of Judaism,” Urian details how secular Judaism functions within Israeli women’s theatre. He explains that the secular female dramatist may use religious references to critique religious institutions and/or to reclaim “lost” women in Jewish history. For example, Urian claims that Lapid’s Womb for Rent is written to reveal some “embarrassing details” about the patriarch and matriarch of the Abrahamic religions.

Specifically, Lapid exposes Abraham and Sarah’s shared blood lines, Sarah’s extramarital activities, and Lot’s scheme to secure an inheritance by entrapping Abraham through Hagar. These details, therefore, “embarrass” the religious institution that has sanitized, idealized, and legitimized the Sarah and Abraham master narrative. Secularly, Lapid’s play works on a domestic level that is almost identical to Norman’s. In the Cameri production, the roles of Sarah and Abraham were played by divorced celebrity couple Hannah Marron and Yossi Yadin. Urian contends that the audience read the marital woes of Abraham and Sarah through the ghosting of the famous couple’s well-publicized divorce, with sympathy directed toward the actress. For example, the males in the play are portrayed, to borrow Urian’s term, as “wretched,” making the women appear justified in their actions. Norman’s portrayal of the complexities of heterosexual relationships is perhaps more equitable. Burkman and Fried assess that that “although this [Kitty’s independence] involves quite a bit of humor at the expense of the male characters, the playwright is not insensitive to the dilemmas of the male caught in the middle, living in the shadow of his wife’s success and seeking to ‘have it all.” Nonetheless, Norman’s casting of Kitty and Cliff within her play within a play, functions similarly to Lapid’s casting of divorced couple Marron and Yadin. Both plays ghost the biblical narrative through the circumstances of contemporary marriage in order to bridge religious and secular concerns.

Urian contrasts mainstream Israeli theatre’s Womb for Rent with the fringe production of Theatre Company Jerusalem’s (TCJ) Sarah (1993). Whereas, Womb for Rent is similar in situation to Norman’s Sarah and Abraham, TCJ’s Sarah is similar in its incorporation of improvisational theatre styles. If Marron and Yadin mirror Kitty and Cliff Wells, then the

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96 Burkman and Fried, 129.
theatrical processes of TCJ align themselves with the processes of Norman’s fictional improvisational company. Urian argues that these processes are indicative of a feminist stance. He writes, “The identity of the women’s theatre has developed from its objection to the central, patriarchal mainstream and its consequent choice of alternative characteristics”; these include “its organizational point of view, this theatre has no hierarchy: its female participants share their ideas, the writing, acting and directing. They are assisted by guest directors and additional actors/actresses.”\(^97\) Urian’s description of TCJ’s process echoes the rehearsal process of Norman’s fictional theatre company. The women of the play (Virginia, Sarah/Kitty, and Hagar/Monica) are able to subvert Jack and Abraham’s authority largely through improvisation and collaboration.

Urian describes such methods as taking an “interrogative” stance toward the Torah. TCJ productions interrogate, or pose questions, of sacred literature regarding its stance on women. TCJ incorporates workshops and audience feedback to deconstruct the original story and posit an alternative woman-centered narrative. Urian describes TCJ’s production of *Sarah* in post-modern terms with the audience and actors gathered intimately in the performance space, reading texts off of large screens, while the fragmented character of four Sarah’s (from the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, the Midrashim and a contemporary Sarah) enact their similarities and differences.\(^98\) This fragmentation of the figure of Sarah into multiple identities, whether through the separation of actor and character, or through the different representations of Sarah among multiple source texts, serves as a common thread among the productions offered by Norman, Lapid and TCJ.

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These different representations destabilize any “essentialist” idea of a stable and fixed matriarchal Sarah. Similar to Bibliodrama, these improvisational and group devising methods offer the dramatist multiple tools for interrogating biblical narrative on the stage.

Likewise, Norman’s intent to recuperate women’s stories from “complete invisibility” works alongside TCJ’s mission for “a new Judaism”—a Judaism in which there is a well-deserved place for women . . . to set out against the injustice inherent in the sub-human status demonstrated by the Torah toward women.”99 It follows that the company’s repertoire includes plays about Sarah, Esther, and Bruria that recover the Jewish heroines’ stories, while at the same expose and critique the patriarchal nature of the scriptural sources, much as Norman does in her play.

The objective of these methods, however, is not religious. Rather, “Theatre Company Jerusalem tends toward the radical which proposes a feminist counter-culture . . . characterized . . . as ‘investigating the possibilities of a gender based ritualized style of theatre which seeks the emotional, mythical, and historical keys to woman centered culture’.”100 Considering themselves secular Israelis, members of TCJ disassociate Jewish content from religion, seeking a “knowledgeable connection” to their Jewish history by entering the theatre as an alternative to the synagogue. Aliza Elion-Israeli, a member of TCJ, explains that “the concept ‘religious’ means little to me . . . and then I understand that it is impossible to create Hebrew theatre without referring to the Hebrew myths.”101 In Israel, at least, it is impossible to separate one’s cultural and national identity from its religious history, although it is not impossible to separate

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from religion itself. The overarching goal of TCJ is feminist, not religious. Religion is used to forward a secular and feminist agenda. The goal is not to promote women within a religious community, rather, it promotes the opposite—the position of women in a secular society, which has often been jeopardized by religiosity. TCJ’s plays interrogate and deconstruct, rather than construct religious identity. Norman appears to have a similar agenda. She states, “The Bible is written. It’s a piece of writing. The people who wanted the kind of power they wanted, who desired to shape the society in the way they wanted to shape it. . . . I will not take on faith what we have been told about how things are, you know? I want to know. In Sarah and Abraham, what I was really looking at was what she was doing. Who was she?”

In the age of postmodernism, however, I suggest a “both/and” approach to claiming performance as a “hermeneutics of creative imagination and ritualization” within the feminist religious community. In other words, a critical interrogation of the biblical narrative, does not necessitate a flat rejection of the Bible in favor of secularism, just as “belief” does not necessitate a rejection of skepticism and suspicion of biblical narrative. Rather, much of feminist theology seems compatible with an “interrogative method.” For instance, feminist theologian Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza argues for a “process of biblical interpretation [emphasis hers] that can grapple with the oppressive as well as liberating functions of particular biblical texts in women's

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103 Fiorenza, 790.
lives and struggles.”\textsuperscript{104} Sarah plays within this chapter epitomize such “grappling.” Similarly, Marjorie Procter-Smith in “Something Missing: Memory and Imagination” argues that contemporary women suffer from “liturgical amnesia” meaning that the experiences of women within our tradition have been forgotten. She proposes a “feminist reconstruction of our common liturgical memory” and a “feminist enlargement of our liturgical imagination.”\textsuperscript{105} She asserts that the church has suffered from restricted imagination when dealing with women, often resulting in an archetypal memory that is “faulty or incomplete,” and which reinforces patriarchy.\textsuperscript{106} Lapid’s, TCJ’s, and Norman’s plays reveal such faults in contemporary archetypal memory. In conclusion, Procter-Smith offers a call to artists, writing: “Essential to this process are not only biblical interpreters who give presence to and voice to the women from our biblical heritage and historians who do the same for women of our more recent past, but also poets and artists who ‘form the quality of light’ by which we begin to see the future by which we wish to move.”\textsuperscript{107} By focusing a spotlight on the “secular synagogue” of the stage, we may begin to see alternative models for the formation of feminist religious identity. The secular stage may be a sanctuary or “safe place” from which to begin the quest for a feminist theological creative hermeneutic. These plays, Norman’s \textit{Sarah and Abraham}, Lapid’s \textit{Womb for Rent}, and TCJ’s \textit{Sarah}, each display an affinity between secular and theological feminist interrogative models of religious identity, formation, and re-formation that prove helpful in seeing and understanding performance as a creative biblical hermeneutic.

\textsuperscript{104} qtd. in Bellis, 20
\textsuperscript{105} Procter-Smith, 36
\textsuperscript{106} Procter-Smith, 37.
\textsuperscript{107} Procter-Smith, 56.
The Sarah plays of this chapter continue the projects of Irigaray and a recuperation of a female genealogy and woman-to-woman sociality, and Marjorie Procter-Smith’s feminist mysterion—the revelation of hidden histories and feminist potential in biblical narratives. Both Norman and Theatre Company Jerusalem are concerned with recuperating female biblical history, as well as imagining a future for women living with these texts today. Furthermore, techniques such as Bibliodrama and improvisational devising processes like those used by Theatre Company Jerusalem, provide ways of engaging feminist memory in imaginative processes that involve the body. Chapter Six engages discussions of the body more directly as it returns to the medium of dance and the genealogy of Mary that began in Chapter One with Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and continued in Chapter Two with Ruth St. Denis. In the concluding chapter, I consider the performance of pop icon Madonna as a feminist intervention into the Bible that advances the genealogy of biblical women into the postmodern age with the kind of conceptual performance discussed by Fuchs, as well as incorporating the postmodern theories of “simulacra” introduced by Jean Baudrillard and the “movement-vision” of Brian Massumi.
CHAPTER VI: POSTMODERN REVELATIONS: MADONNA, THE APOCALYPTIC VIRGIN AND “THE BEAST WITHIN”

Madonna’s work furthers a genealogy of artists such as Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Salome dancers of the early twentieth-century and offers performers, feminists, and theologians some critical insights into a performative method of feminist theological inquiry and reform for the twenty-first century. Capitalizing on her name’s allusion to the Virgin Mary, Madonna, like Sor Juana and Ruth St. Denis, has used both her persona and performances to suggest alternate Mariologies to those of conventional society. To say that throughout her career, Madonna has stirred debate in both feminist and religious circles is an understatement. From her name, to her conversion to Kabbalah, to dedicating a concert to the Pope, Madonna has used religion to provoke controversy and publicity while proclaiming her own unorthodox theologies. Nevertheless, Madonna’s popularity and commercial success have sometimes made it easy to dismiss or diminish her work within academic study. In the 1990s, Madonna scholars debated the singer’s use of religious symbolism and her appropriation of African-American spirituality in her “Like a Prayer” video, while Madonna’s 2006 performance of the crucifixion in “Live to Tell,” prompted a sanction of her Confessions tour from the Pope. Although many scholars place Madonna’s work within the postmodern intersection of high and low culture, her contributions are often taken at their superficial value—the objectification of the female body, the irresponsible incorporation of religious iconography, and the appropriation of racial, cultural, and sexual identities. This reputation has led to scholar’s branding Madonna as a “Sacred Monster,” a position I argue is generative for understanding performance’s capabilities as a creative hermeneutic. Another of Madonna’s theologically provocative performances, apropos for
explicating Madonna as a “Sacred Monster,” but which has received less discussion, is “The Beast Within.” This single based on passages from the book of Revelation was performed on video as well as her on her 1993 Girlie Show and 2004 Re-Invention tours. I argue that as an astute artist, Madonna parodies, reveals, and takes power over her socially constructed identity as “Sacred Monster” through her performance of the “The Beast Within.” In this way, Madonna succeeds in that Procter-Smith describes as “feminist mysterion,” revealing what is hidden or elided in scripture and using both her mind and body to imaginatively shape this “revelation” toward a feminist end.

Laurie Schulze, Anne Barton White, and Jane D. Brown’s “‘A Sacred Monster in Her Prime’: Audience Construction of Madonna as Low Other” provides a thorough survey of how Madonna is constructed within high/low culture. The essay takes its inspiration from J. Hoberman’s statement that Madonna is either “worshipped [as] a postmodern deity” or “shunned and despised [as] a contemporary monster.” Despite monstrous criticism from conservative religious figures including two Popes, American Family representative David Wildmon, and one woman writing under the penname of the Antichrist, several theologians have defended Madonna’s religiously-inspired performances. Scholarly criticism on Madonna is generally

more mixed. Some scholars are proclaimed by fans as pro-Madonna scholars, while others are ambivalent or even self-proclaimed “Madonna Haters.” In any case, the “academic Madonna boom” extended into the 1990s. 3 The performer’s twenty-first century conversion to the Kabbalah and her taking of the name Esther has not garnered as much critical attention, but there appears to be a consensus of opinion that she practices a popular and commodified version of the Kabbalah, and that more education into the classical form is necessary for incorporating mysticism meaningfully in her work. 4

Schulze, White and Brown deconstruct this “Sacred Monster” dichotomy by describing Madonna in terms of the “low other,” defined by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White as a “symbolic and cultural construct. . . . Something [that] is designated as bass, gross, freakish”; for example, Madonna as “whore,” “anti-feminist,” and “sacrilegious.” Furthermore, Stallybrass and White argue that in the process of constructing this “low other,” “each [perspective] assumes a higher social, moral, or aesthetic ground from which [the low-Other] can be [viewed] as unworthy of emulation.” 5 Academia often moves to this higher-ground, taking positions within the ivory tower from which to diminish Madonna as an artist and object of serious study. For Schulze, White and Brown, however, the accumulation of these low images, with each argument

3 See Scwichtenberg and Hulsether. Hulsether establishes four approaches to Madonna within feminist studies: 1) “Madonna Haters” who characterize the performer as “morally bankrupt” and “utterly materialistic”; 2) those who criticize her for reinforcing sexual stereotypes; 3) the “honest critic” who acknowledges Madonna’s use of irony, but deems it “too thin a foundation for oppositional politics”; and 4) the “academic Madonna boom” including “debates about which cultural discourses she reinforces and which ones she destabilizes.” See 78-79. The Scwichtenberg text provides essays across this spectrum.


competing to out-debase Madonna in terms of talent, social worth, and morality, “paradoxically” place Madonna in a “‘symbolically central’ position.” Therefore, the negative discourse surrounding Madonna has taken on cult-like status with Madonna at the altar of the “Sacred Monster” or, I will argue, “The Beast.” Certainly, these dominant images of Madonna present a challenge to my task of positioning her as “worthy of emulation,” or at least of consideration, in a performative method of feminist theology. While I do not categorically dismiss or deny negative claims, I feel that they can be evaluated and contextualized in a way that opens the subject of Madonna as a generative site of feminist and theological inquiry without elevating her to the level of a “post-modern deity.” Rather, Madonna and her performances may instead be a way of grappling with the idea of a “post-modern deity” itself (a subject too complicated for the scope of this dissertation, but one for continued inquiry).

The “Sacred Monster” essay ends with the caveat that the “argument about whether Madonna’s texts are feminist . . . depends on the uses to which these texts are put and on the contexts in which they are interpreted and inscribed.” Condemnation of Madonna that ignores the different scenarios in which she can be studied, suffers from the qualities of “‘mainstream’ epistemology” critiqued by feminist Lorraine Code; that is to say, blanket criticisms of Madonna lack “particularity and contingency.” The construct of the anti-Madonna scenario relies on a universal interpretation, as well as a universal audience of her oeuvre as a whole. Schulze notes that the “universal” interpretation of Madonna positions her as “low culture,” stating that “[a]s Patrice Petro (1986), Tania Modleski (1986) and Andreas Huyssen have pointed out, when the

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6 Schulze, White and Brown, 16.
7 Schulze, White and Brown, 31.
high culture versus the mass culture distinction is invoked a ‘gendering’ strategy that attributes ‘active masculine values to high culture (art) and ‘passive feminine’ characteristics to mass culture (entertainment) is often at work.”9 Dominant negative criticisms of Madonna rely on this feminization of the artist. Madonna does not exhibit the “passive feminine” and is ostracized. Furthermore Schulze notes that “Madonna’s fans are characterized as consumers. The gendering strategies that assign allegedly masculine qualities to art and feminine qualities to low art . . . are deployed with respect to audience as well.”10 Audience members are “[i]nevitably . . . thought to be at risk and are described as ‘weak-minded women’ and/or ‘weak minded children and adolescents’” in need of rescue by the religious right and/or radical feminism.11 Madonna is pitted as an aberration. Consistent with Code’s critique of mainstream epistemologies, these arguments fail to take their gendered “subjectivity into account.”12 Such a perspective fails to realize that, as a female artist, Madonna’s knowledge production may not fit within the masculinist paradigm of popular music. It also gives little critical agency to the feminized audience. Code urges careful attention be paid to such subjectivities and balanced with the pursuit of an ever elusive objectivity.

Similarly, Elizabeth Grosz “address[es] the explicit sexualization of knowledges.”13 She writes, “If women are to be granted a position congruous with but independent of men, the

9 Schulze, White and Brown, 18.
10 Schulze, White and Brown, 19.
12 Code, 18.
female body must be capable of autonomous representation."\textsuperscript{14} Perceptions of Madonna change, or attain balance, if her embodied performances are viewed as autonomous of the masculinization that Code describes. For example, Grosz describes several ways in which knowledge is produced through the “interaction of power and bodies.”\textsuperscript{15} More specifically different bodied subjects produce different and specifically unique knowledges.\textsuperscript{16} The knowledge that Madonna produces through her undeniable assertion of bio-power is unique to her and cannot be applied to a universal knowledge or audience. Grosz also observes that the body serves as “a surface on which social law, morality, and values are inscribed.”\textsuperscript{17} Hoberman’s “Sacred Monster” reveals the extent to which Madonna’s body has been inscribed by the “interaction” of differing “power and bodies.”

The result of such social inscription, according to Stallybrass and White, “is a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire in the construction of subjectivity: a psychological dependence on precisely those others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level.”\textsuperscript{18} This “conflictual fusion of power” gives rise to Madonna as the “Sacred Monster” who is at once feared and desired. It is this power that fuels what Tim Anderson describes as “aesthetic machinery,” the ability to “create and control cultural ‘popularity’ marked by class, race, and gender.”\textsuperscript{19} In response to how criticism has constructed her, Madonna has taken control of her own aesthetic machinery. In “Is She or Isn’t She,” Amy Robinson suggests

\textsuperscript{14} Grosz, 203. 
\textsuperscript{15} Grosz, 196. 
\textsuperscript{16} Grosz, 195. 
\textsuperscript{17} Grosz, 196. 
\textsuperscript{18} qtd. in Schulze, White and Brown, 16. 
that the Madonna machine is fueled by the “wanna-be phenomenon” in which the “spectator petitions the performer . . . in the name of an identification that the performer deploys as persona.”20 In this sense, the spectators project what they “wanna be” onto Madonna, who accepts the image and exploits it for profit. Throughout her essay, Robinson explores how, in her opinion, Madonna does this by courting her fans’ “identities [race, gender, sexual orientation] as a component of her own.”21 Conversely, Madonna likewise petitions her spectators, as well as her critics, through her onstage personas. For instance, Madonna’s dedication of “Papa Don’t Preach” to the Pope on the Who’s That Girl world tour exemplifies how she constructs and deploys her persona in such a way that it petitions (in the sense of challenges) orthodox views on women, sexuality, and spirituality.22 Furthermore, Robinson’s “wanna-be phenomenon” extends to critics, scholars and religious figures who have cast Madonna as they want her to be—“The Sacred Monster.” In other words, the “aesthetic machine” works in both forward and in reverse. Spectators and critics petition Madonna to adopt or confirm certain personas in order to suit their critical purposes; just the same, Madonna has petitioned her audiences and critics to see her in

21 Robinson, 340. Robinson makes her point through a piece of “gossip discourse,” as Robinson terms it, which has contributed to the artist’s negative reputation for appropriation. She writes, “Both of Madonna’s ‘unauthorized’ biographers claim that the success of her first single release, Madonna, depended on the record producer’s decision to leave her face off the cover . . . A former Warner executive is alleged to have said ‘Would black radio stations continue to play her records and young black audiences buy them if they were confronted with the fact that Madonna was not one of them?’” See Robinson, 340. Robinson’s anecdote suggests that Madonna and her handlers wanted black audiences to feel that Madonna was “one of them.” It is possible given this scenario to see Madonna as piece of “aesthetic machinery,” manipulating identification simply to sell records.
certain ways throughout her career. Madonna’s aesthetic machine relies upon what Grosz describes as this “interaction of power and bodies.”23

What does this mean to Madonna’s religious image as a renegade Catholic and Jewish mystic? Does Madonna merely don these personas as, in Robinson’s words, “eccentric advertising”? If so, this paints a rather disingenuous and sinister portrait of the artist. Considering the amount of criticism and censorship Madonna has received on account of her use of religious iconography in performance, it seems a rather poor business decision for the savvy “Material Girl.” Before jumping to such conclusions, it is necessary to study the particular and contingent contexts in which Madonna has used religion, as well as how these uses have produced unique knowledges and inscribed the artist in certain ways that can be evaluated as either being seductive and destructive, or, generative for feminist and theological purposes. It is worth pausing here to inventory some of the iconography in her “Like a Prayer” video before interrogating how she employs iconography in “The Beast Within.”

One of the most extended critical debates on Madonna’s use of religious iconography regards her “Like a Prayer” video. A brief and comparative look at Amy Robinson’s and Mark Hulsether’s interpretations of the Madonna video summarizes the primary issues and the divergence of opinion behind the pop icon’s use of iconography. Both scholars agree on the basic plot, “Having witnessed a white gang’s attack on a white woman and the false arrest of a black man, Madonna portrays herself as a tormented white savior whose testimony could (and will) emancipate the black male victim/Christ figure.”24 (Hulsether might de-emphasize the notion of white savior and black victim, noting that the ultimate savior figure, a statue of a saint/Christ-like

23 Grosz, 196.
24 Robinson, 351.
figure, is black.) This is just the first of many differences between the two readings. Robinson’s main argument rests with the character of the black female gospel singer. The character played by Madonna encounters this woman twice in the video. First, after witnessing the false arrest, the white woman goes to the church to pray on what action to take. As she descends into a dream state, she literally falls into the arms of the black female gospel singer who encourages her to, in Robinson’s words, “do the right thing.” The Madonna character then goes to submit herself at the feet of the black savior, a statue in a church altar. In doing so, Robinson (working off of bell hook’s designation of Madonna as a “plantation mistress”) argues that “the black woman is then subject to displacement: her authorizing function is visually replaced by the image of Madonna kissing the feet of the black male saint.”

For Robinson, and other feminist scholars who have commented on the video, this “displacement” is indicative of a “conventional raciality” that, according to Valerie Smith, “erases the specificity of the black woman’s experience, constituting her as the point of intersection between black men’s and white women’s experience.”

The second point of interaction between the white character and the black woman occurs when, as interpreted by Robinson:

[the] black woman . . . sings on the solo line, “I’ll take you there.” Gently pressing Madonna’s head down to the floor, the two women dance together, as Madonna, in her own words, “reaches an orgasmic crescendo of sexual fulfillment intertwined with the love of God.” It is this erotic dance of spiritual and power inequity that launches Madonna out of her dream and into the church pew where

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26 qtd. in Robinson, 352.
the Christ figure lies on top of her and tenderly kisses her awake. . . . In both scenes the black woman serves as a conduit for the sacrilegious heterosexual encounter—a scenario that eclipses the foundational character of her role.27 Both encounters between the white woman and the black female gospel singer offend Robinson’s feminist sensibilities on racial and “sacrilegious” grounds. (Robinson assumes that the “heterosexual encounter” between the white woman and black Christ figure is “sacrilegious.”)

Hulthesur interprets the interaction between the white and black woman similarly, but not as negatively. He titles his interpretation “What Would Jesus Do (In a Video about Racism as Rape)?” Hulthesur defines his ideal feminist-liberation video as one that would, in terms of liberation theology, “emphasize Jesus’ human solidarity or identity with victims of oppression; place the cross in the context of sociopolitical persecution; and call Christians to ‘take up the cross’ and turn toward solidarity.”28 In feminist (theological) terms, it would “promote female leadership and practical responses to sexual violence . . . . [It might] stress the importance of the erotic, and human passion and mutuality more generally, for conceptualizing faith. Certainly, it would not place human bodies in opposition to ‘real issues of faith,’ as if sexuality and spirituality were antithetical.”29 Hultheser necessarily believes that “Like a Prayer” fulfills these requirements. For Hultheser, “Madonna sings ‘I hear you call my name,’ and it seems clear that the ‘you’ is the Christ figure and the ‘call’ is to solidarity.”30 The controversial, self-stigmatization by Madonna is interpreted as her “taking up the cross.” The “black female preacher” who “presides” in the video “lays hands on her in a commissioning scene. A prone

27 Robinson, 353.
28 Hulthesur, 83.
29 Hulthesur, 83.
30 Hulthesur, 84.
Madonna kisses ‘Jesus.’ Like many saints and songwriters before her, her faith includes an erotic dimension.” Hultheser interprets the black woman as a preacher (not just a singer) and, therefore, as a feminist statement of religious authority, in stark contrast to hook’s, Robinson’s and Smith’s interpretation of the encounter between the white and black women as an image of “spiritual and power inequity.” Hultheser’s interpretation is a call to “solidarity” not “conventional raciality.” The erotic dimension is not “sacrilegious” but saintly.

The two scenarios provided by Robinson and Hultheser reveal the wide disparity in critical studies of Madonna. While I do not disagree with Robinson that Madonna is a highly manufactured and marketed commodity, I ask if it is possible to admit this and still find liberating and spiritual images in her work to the benefit of a feminist liberation theology? Indeed, Hulsether’s interpretation of Madonna’s video complements the philosophies of previous chapters such as the sexual-spiritual nature of spiritualism, encounters of transgressive miscegenation through “spirit-dancing,” and the call for “woman-to-woman sociality” as presented in Hansberry and Irigaray. It is worth noting that it was these very themes that similarly unnerved critics in the past. However, it is within the scenarios of feminist religious authority, woman-to-woman solidarity, and saintly sexuality that I approach Madonna’s use of iconography in “The Beast Within” in order to imagine a future for feminist liturgical imagination with performance as its creative hermeneutic.

Lucy O’Brien provides ample background for interpreting Madonna’s 1993 and 2004 performances of “The Beast Within” within their Catholic and Kabbalah contexts, respectively. With O’Brien’s text, it is possible to trace the pop singer’s relationship with religion and

31 Hulthesur, 84.
32 Robinson, 353.
performance from her Catholic upbringing to her conversion to Kabbalah. A common pattern along Madonna’s journey of faith is what dancer Carlton Wilborn describes as a “battle” between Madonna, herself, and her critics. On the Blond Ambition tour Wilborn danced the priest to Madonna’s penitent “in a sober song cycle that move[d] from ‘Like a Prayer’ through ‘Live to Tell,’ ‘Oh Father,’ and ‘Papa Don’t Preach’” and says, “It’s about her trying to find her way with religion. A side [of her] kn[ows] she need[s] it, another side [is] resistant.” Madonna confirms Wilborn’s assessment in a comment made in response to negative Italian press on the same tour. O’Brien reports that Madonna described her show as a piece of theatre taking the audience on “an emotional journey,” stating, “I do not endorse a way of life but describe one, and the audience is left to make its own judgments.” (Madonna, it seems, expects her audiences to be critically active, versus the “passive audience” assumed in mainstream epistemologies.) Indeed, audiences as well as critics have made their own judgments, often conflicting, in regard to Madonna’s infusion of religion with sexuality.

Madonna’s Mariology

Madonna’s own relationship with religion began with her birth into a Franco-Italian Catholic family. Her French mother, who died when Madonna was six, was active in the church and Mariology. The artist’s “Madonna” persona is largely a critical response to—or like Sor Juana and St. Denis, a revision of—the Mariology to which she was exposed as a child. O’Brien writes that “[a]t the time of Madonna’s birth in the late 50s . . . [American Catholicism

34 qtd. in O’Brien, 151.
35 See Code.
36 O’Brien, 12.
was experiencing the] height of a booming Marian cult. . . . A form of popular Catholicism, Marian devotion was a ‘lived religion’ that came from village-centered European immigrants, such as Madonna’s Italian grandparents.”37 As theologian Paula M. Kane writes,

In the 1950s, Mary had come to represent conservative ideals of womanhood. . . . Periodicals such as Immaculate Heart Crusades and Our Lady’s Digest, focused on Marian crafts and etiquette. . . . Part of Madonna Sr.’s schoolgirl reading would also have been Saint Francis de Sale’s Introduction to the Devout Life, a seventeenth-century Catholic text that contained instructions on how to preserve one’s chastity and purify the soul. . . . Madonna Sr. would have found her daughter’s pursuit of sexual expression deeply shocking. . . . Madonna’s reaction to her mother’s piety was radical, choosing to cut off identification with her from the start.38

Madonna disidentified with “her mother’s piety.” She recognized a repressed sexuality within the Catholic faith rather than purity and chastity. O’Brien gives the example of Madonna observing that “When a nun took her vows, it was as if she was marrying Christ. She would lie prostrate before the altar . . . as a declaration of love for the Holy Spirit.”39 Lying at the foot of the altar is something Madonna interprets as sensual. In terms of “feminist mysterion,” Madonna exposes the hidden (or repressed) sensuality of this spiritual act by incorporating it into her performances, such as lying before the altar in her aforementioned “Like a Prayer” video.

37 O’Brien, 222.
38 qtd. in O’Brien, 222-223.
39 O’Brien, 14.
Madonna’s childhood observations were carried with her into maturity. O’Brien explains that when Madonna came of age in the 1980s, Mariology was waning; however, Madonna “still felt there was a fundamental split between the ‘virginal and holy’ [the sacred] and ‘low down dirty’ [the beast]. She told writer Paul Zollo: ‘You have to put the two together with people. You have to let both of them surface. And it has so much to do with being honest with yourself and the people you’re with.’”  

Madonna’s intent in her performances, therefore, is not to blaspheme or to dismiss the Virgin Mary, but to recuperate religion’s latent sexuality. Therefore, when Madonna performs “Like a Virgin” or “Like a Prayer,” in which she is overtly sensual, she is performing the “love for the Holy Spirit” that she observed in the act of sisters taking their vows to Christ. Madonna, in effect, performs and exposes what she observes as repressed sexuality. As Madonna’s contemporary Tori Amos has stated, “‘She [Madonna] introduced the new paradigm that the Virgin Mary may have been spiritual and sexual. . . . she was christened Madonna and she saw the gift in song called ‘Like a Virgin.’ It represented the resurrection of the Virgin Mary as a woman. We have long equated spirituality with a denial of the sexual being, but Madonna challenged this.’” (Ruth St. Denis might have taken issue on which “Madonna” dancer was the first to challenge the spiritual/sexual dichotomy of the Virgin, but it is clear that the latter had the most impact at the end of the twentieth-century).

Madonna has also challenged the bounds of conventionality in her controversial uses of the crucifix and other Catholic devotional objects. O’Brien (also Catholic) reminds the reader

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40 qtd. in O’Brien, 133-134.
41 O’Brien, 14.
42 qtd. in O’Brien, 340.
that such objects are viewed within the Catholic faith as having transformative powers. When Madonna uses these objects, therefore, she is attempting to transform attitudes toward Catholicism and sexuality. Mary Lambert, the director of two of Madonna’s videos, affirms that “Madonna wears a crucifix because it means something to her. . . . ‘Madonna is a very religious person in her own way.’” Madonna’s performance of religion, however, has not always been read with critical sophistication, but has been assumed to be idolatrous, at best, and heretical, at worst, resulting in the images of the “Sacred Monster” and “Beast Within,” or what I call the Apocalyptic Virgin.

Indeed, after the publication of her Sex book, Madonna’s career seemed headed toward an apocalyptic crisis. Critics, as well as fans, did not take to the artist’s most explicit images as of yet, filled with sadomasochism, rape fantasies, bestiality, and other social and sexual taboos.

In his New York Times Review, Michiko Kakutani wrote, “Whereas Madonna’s videos once celebrated sex as a liberating, joyful force, this labored, calculated book carried the grimmer message that sex is about power, domination, and pain.” D. David Bourland, Jr., however, came to Madonna’s defense stating that criticisms of the book from both the “feminist left” as “hard core pornography” and the right as a “corrupting influence” were overblown and writing (albeit tongue-in-cheek): “Had the reviewers . . . managed to read the material in Sex with care, I suspect that they would have included comments along these lines . . . ‘While some might call it

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43 O’Brien, 127.
44 qtd. in O’Brien, 127.
hypocrisy, others should applaud the grain of redemption shown in this sordid book.” 46
Nevertheless, general opinion sided with reviewer James Kilpatrick, who characterized the book as exposing “the hard face of a middle-aged whore.” 47 Madonna was transformed into a kind of Jezebel, not unremarkable, we should note, one of three female beasts in the book of Revelation. In the passage from Revelation, the angel of God admonishes the people for “suffering” the woman who called herself a “prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication.” 48 Upon Jezebel’s refusal to repent, God prophesies that she will suffer “great tribulation.” 49 Madonna’s career was in a moment of tribulation when she admitted “The Beast Within” and began atoning to her critical mass.

Madonna’s first concert performance of “The Beast Within” was on her 1993 Girlie Show Tour. O’Brien frames The Girlie Show tour largely as a response to Madonna’s waning popularity after the critical failure of her Sex book about which the pop icon stated, “Up until then I was just being a creative person working and doing things that inspired me and I thought I would inspire other people. After that I suddenly had a different point of view about life in general. Sex was my fantasy and I made money off of it. That is a no-no. . . . It’s all part of a strong woman in control terrifying people.” 50 As Madonna suggests, strong women who are in control of their sexuality are often “terrifying” to people in a way that displays and destabilizes dominant images of women as weak, passive, or feminine; however, there is also the

46 D. David Bourland, Jr., “Sex: A Review of Reviews,” ETC: A Review of General Semantics 50.1 (1993) 97. In this quote Bourland speculates about what critics from the right could have said about the main character’s reaction to her male partner’s sexual infidelity.
47 qtd. in Bourland, 97.
48 Revelations 2.20.
49 Rev. 2.21.
50 qtd. in O’Brien, 193.
responsibility for these strong women to then recuperate, recover, and stabilize the resulting alternative vision within the imaginations of dominant culture. Madonna terrorized her audience with sexual images of power, but refused to contextualize or stabilize these images in a way that would satisfy her critics. As was evident in Madonna’s *Sex* book, fear-mongering on either side of the gender divide serves to further reify negative stereotypes of female sexuality.

O’Brien argues that the Girlie Show tour intended to recuperate Madonna’s image by presenting a more “elegant” and “sophisticated” Madonna than the singer’s previously released *Sex* book. Rather than set the concert in a contemporary sex club, Madonna’s performance was set in the context of early twentieth-century vaudeville and burlesque, concurrent with the height of Orientalism and Salomania. O’Brien describes Madonna’s Orientalist flair commenting that:

> What resonated most was Madonna as an early 1900s showgirl, holding herself taut in an Indian-style headdress for the intricate moments of ‘Vogue.’ Or Madonna in a top hat and tails aping Marlene Dietrich in the film *Morocco.* . . . There was also the sequence for “Bye Bye Baby,” where reminiscent of the Japanese cross-dressing all-female dance company Takarazuka, Madonna and backup singers . . . dressed as bawdy Victorian gentlemen and grabbed the lady dancers.\(^5^1\)

This style references Madonna within the terrain of the Salome dancer, who I have argued that similar to Madonna, was subverting a monstrous image of the sexual “New Woman” into a more “elegant,” “sophisticated,” and I would add spiritual image. The empowered woman, not losing

\(^5^1\) O’Brien, 195-196.
her threatening power entirely, nonetheless subverts the diabolical image into something more desirable. Madonna uses this strategy in The Girlie Show Tour.

Like the early 1900s dancers, sexual orientation is a central, although less closeted, theme and attraction in Madonna’s performance. O’Brien writes, “After the upset of her Sex book, Madonna was going firmly for the gay vote, appealing to her most loyal audience. Critic Peter York told O’Brien, ‘She isn’t really a fag hag, she’s got a gay sensibility herself . . . ‘She knows what the gay boys are thinking and she’s exploited them mercilessly.” Although I would not characterize Madonna’s artistic direction as “merciless,” I agree that Madonna has exploited dance in order to cross and blur the boundaries of sexuality, much as Daphne Brooks suggests spirit-dancers did in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century. Although O’Brien attributes part of Madonna’s motivation to recuperating and/or retaining the large gay demographic of her fan base, there is no reason to doubt that Madonna did so out of her own convictions as well.

For example, in the number proceeding “The Beast Within” on the Girlie Show Tour, Madonna performs a song in remembrance of a friend who died of AIDS and beckons people “to care” before leaving the stage for a costume change. The ensemble is left alone to perform “The Beast Within,” comprised of Madonna’s recorded recitation of passages from the Book of

52 Lesbian performers who closeted themselves in the “veil” of Orientalism and more specifically the role of Salome include Loie Fuller and Maud Allan. See Chapter Two.
53 Qtd. in O’Brien, 195. Fag hag is a slang term for “a heterosexual female who seeks out or particularly enjoys the company of male homosexuals.” See Dictionary.com. Peter York defends Madonna against this pejorative term, claiming that Madonna need not live vicariously through her gay friends, but that she has the sensibility herself. After all, Madonna is famous for describing herself as a gay man trapped in a woman’s body.
54 See Brooks who argues that “spirit dancers” of the early twentieth-century used dance to channel those of other races and genders in order to blur the constructs of race and gender.
Revelation over a mix of her single “Justify My Love.” The performance features two principal male dancers, one white and one black, dressed in army fatigues along with an ensemble of same sex and interracial couples dressed in S&M gear. These couples proceed to writhe, fight, and grind in simulated (violent) sex acts on stage. One of the men tries to climb a net, which I will argue symbolizes the cross, that extends vertically the from the stage floor to the cat-walk, but is then pulled down by the mob of dancers. On the surface, it is easy to understand how Peter York could conclude that the piece exploits a subpopulation of homosexual culture. However, as Schulze maintains, the “Sacred Monster” and, I argue, “The Beast Within” can only be understood within its particular context. Accounting for the context of The Girlie Show, as well as O’Brien’s exegesis of religious symbolism in Madonna’s performances, a more complex reading of “The Beast Within” performance emerges. The placement of the song following a number about AIDS, coupled with O’Brien’s mention that many of Madonna’s dancer friends died or were dying of the disease, and the homosexual nature of this performance, in particular, suggests that the Girlie Show Tour performance of “The Beast Within” is about the beast(s) surrounding AIDS, as well as, if not more so, than the beast of the Sex book which was haunting the performer’s career.55

Re-Inventing “The Beast Within”

One of the more controversial uses of religious imagery in Madonna’s works, including Sex and this performance of “The Beast Within,” is her use of the crucifix in connection with S&M. According to O’Brien, the relationship between the cross and sadomasochism has to do

55 For a specific reference to Madonna’s friends who dies of AIDS, see O’Brien, 135.
with the self-punishment of religion. In a photograph from her book *Sex*, Madonna “lies horizontal, with bound hands and feet, under a tall, bare cross. . . . According to the Spanish art historian J.E. Cirlot: ‘Placed in the mystic Center of the cosmos, [the cross] becomes the bridge or ladder by means of which the soul may reach God . . . The cross, consequently, affirms the primary relationship between the two worlds of the celestial and the earthly.’”

Madonna’s setting of Revelation to the song “Justify My Love,” along with the crucifixion imagery of a man climbing the net, subverts the otherwise condemning lyrics taken from the Bible and petitions the audience “to care.” The net extending from floor to ceiling represents the bridge from the earthly to celestial world, or from humanity to God. As the male dancer climbs the net signifying the offering of himself to God, he is pulled by the quarreling people below and gets tangled in the net in a crucified position, perhaps the most explicitly overt reference to the cross. The quarreling people prevent the man from reaching God. The crucified position remains intact as the man is removed from the net, symbolizing a martyred character being removed from the cross.

Madonna’s connection of sadomasochistic themes to religious self-punishment signifies that the performance concerns the themes of hatred and judgment that gets in the way of the individual’s ascent or well-being. In the case of AIDS, secrecy due to the stigma associated with homosexuality contributes to the violent spread of the disease. Wilborn, a lead dancer in the tour performance of “The Beast” describes the piece as being about “the ways we hold things within us that can kill us,” saying, “If we don’t come face-to-face with it, it will destroy us.”

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56 qtd. in O’Brien, 169.
57 qtd. in O’Brien, 194.
“Beast Within” reflects not only an individual’s dangerously repressed sexuality, but the judgments upon sexuality, in general, that cause such repression.

Taking her lyrics from the book of Revelation, Madonna’s beast warns against “false Apostles” (the religious right), “anyone who slays with the sword” (the military-industrial complex), and the “cowardly, faithless, the polluters, murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters and all Liars” (everyone else). Madona’s context makes explicit that those who judge will likewise be judged. While the song encourages hope and charity, “To the thirsty I will give water without price,” it also tolerates “evil.” Madonna quotes the passage: “Let the evildoers still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.” It is my opinion that Madonna is not really indicting anyone specific in the lyrics, except those who “worship the beast saying ‘Who is like the beast and who can fight against the beast?’” In my reading, this may include anyone who pays homage to evil by expressly looking for it and judging it in others, say, in the gay community or in Madonna herself. These “haters” are the beast worshippers uttering blasphemy.

Such a message of tolerance, however, was questioned when Rabbi Abraham Cooper, of the Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies, questioned Madonna’s inclusion of the verse, “I know your tribulation and your poverty and the slander of those who say that they are Jews, but they are not, they are a synagogue of Satan.” The Rabbi explained that “The imagery of ‘Jew as devil’ has led to untold violence against the Jewish people and slander against

59 Madonna, “The Beast Within.”
60 Madonna, “The Beast Within.”
61 Rev. 2.9.
Judaism over the course of the last 2,000 years” and that the song could “contribute to those who seek to promote anti-Semitism.” Madonna responded in a letter clarifying her purpose, writing, “I certainly did not have any anti-Semitic intent when I included a passage from the Bible on my record. It was a commentary on evil in general. My message, if any, is pro-tolerance and anti-hate. The song is, after all, about love.” Although, within the context of the performance, the verse was not intended as anti-Semitic, the Rabbi’s valid concerns reveal the tenuous line between subverting interpretations of the scripture and reifying their harmful inherited messages. Once again, Madonna was called to “Justify [Her] Love” in her use of religion.

Ironically, Madonna’s next live tour performance of “The Beast Within” would be as a Jewish convert. According to O’Brien, Madonna was introduced to Eastern mysticism by then boyfriend and screenwriter Andy Bird, and later, introduced to the Kabbalah Center by her friend Sandra Bernhard. The 2004 Re-Invention tour marked Madonna’s conversion to Kabbalah. At this stage in her life and career, Madonna’s reinvention had everything to do with her new faith. O’Brien quotes choreographer Alex Magno as saying, “before the Re-Invention tour, she was a completely different person again . . . . She was tamed, not a wild beast anymore.” Magno’s comment provides an interesting frame through which to interpret Madonna’s video and Re-

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62 Madonna’s quick reprieve by the rabbi left her with little else to say about the inclusion of this particular biblical passage in the single “The Beast Within.” More recently, Madonna has come under criticism for her sympathetic portrayal of Wallis Simpson, rumored to be a Nazi sympathizer, in the movie W.E., which Madonna directed. In the 2011 film, Madonna evades Simpson’s anti-Semitic associations in favor of telling the love story between Wallis and the Prince of Wales. In both cases, Madonna overlooks the possibility of anti-Semitism in her subjects in order to pursue the larger over-arching theme of love. Critics were further perplexed by what to make of the Kabbalah-Madonna when she thanked Leni Riefenstahl and John Galliano, infamous for their own anti-semitic statements, in the film’s closing credits. See Patricia Treble, “THAT Woman is Back,” Maclean’s 124.39 (Oct 2011): 68-70.

63 O’Brien, 223.

64 qtd. in O’Brien, 283.
Invention performance of “The Beast Within.” While The Girlie Show Tour performance was about “The Beast Within” as it concerned social issues like AIDS and the beast of intolerance, its performance on the Re-Invention tour focused entirely on the artist and the taming of her own “beast(s) within.”

Photographer Steven Klein, whose X-STaTIC PRO=CeSS (2002) photo shoot and subsequent exhibitions of Madonna provided the images for “The Beast Within” video and its live performance on the Re-Invention tour, describes the collaborative effort as one in which “Madonna deconstructed her own myth." 65 Regarding the photo shoot, he writes “Madonna’s always been more of a performance artist to me . . . So I created a landscape for her to respond to, using things she’s explored in the past, like the wedding dress, the pole, fire, death, the bed, religion.” 66 Images from past videos include a prairie wolf, similar to the bestial images in the “Express Yourself” video, and a white wedding dress like the one used in “Like A Virgin.” O’Brien notes the significance of the wolf as “a symbol of evil, the chaotic and destructive potential of the Universe.” 67 The theme of evil takes on a new significance with the Kabbalah. In reference to the Hollywood Center where Madonna studies and worships, Yossi Klein Halevi writes, “The crux of belief at the Kabbalah Centre . . . lies in its ‘cosmic battle against Satan.’” 68 The wolf of the video, therefore, could be assumed to symbolize universal evil and the video, in part, can be interpreted as the “cosmic battle” against Satan.

The evil in the Re-Invention of “The Beast,” however, works on a personal level as well as a cosmic one. Halevi lists another key element of the Kabbalah as a surrendering of the ego.

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65 O’Brien, 280.
66 qtd. in O’Brien, 280-281.
68 Halevi, 18.
Madonna’s deconstructing of the Madonna myth may, likewise, be read as a deconstruction of her ego. O’Brien describes the fiery destruction of a symbol that had at one time defined Madonna: “A pristine white wedding dress [from “Like a Virgin” . . . sits on a tailor’s dummy. In a series of images, we see the dress devoured by flames until there is nothing left but charred, blackened pieces of lace.”69 Once again, Madonna subverts a critical image from her past in order to reinvent herself. She is no longer like the Virgin. In fact, O’Brien notes that albums recorded after Madonna’s conversion to Kabbalah “are all about her systematically dismantling images that no longer served her—the virgin/whore tease, the fame-hungry star, the blond ambition virago.”70 Simultaneous to dismantling these images, Madonna must also “re-invent” her image by providing an alternative.

O’Brien describes what she considers the “most striking image” of the video in which Madonna is dressed as a queen “wearing a jeweled mask, a dark red damask crinoline, and an ornate headdress. Her face implacable behind and animal-like mask, she looks part Elizabethan, part magical high priestess” and “beneath this glittering showbiz exterior, she seems to say, I can show you what is corrupted.”71 With this image, Madonna resembles a composite of the Beasts from the book of Revelation. It is this image that replaces the “virgin” of the past. Several “beasts” are alluded to within the book of the Bible, three of them female. The scriptural beasts are generally understood by metaphors for cities, but are personified through misogynistic descriptions of women. It is fruitful, therefore, to consider how Madonna emulates and comments upon these images in her videos and performances. The first reference to a woman in

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69 O’Brien, 281.
70 O’Brien, 281.
71 O’Brien, 282.
Revelation is the infamous Jezebel.72 Upon her refusal to repent, God prophecies that she will be “cast . . . into a bed” along with “them that commit adultery with her” and will suffer “great tribulation.”73 Klein’s image of Madonna tied to a filthy bed wearing only her bodice and underwear, is evocative of the punishment placed upon Jezebel for seducing God’s servants to fornicate. The second woman of Revelation is the Apocalyptic Virgin. She is “clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.”74 This woman gives birth to a “man child, who was to rule all nations” and was “caught up unto God, and to his throne.”75 This woman flees the wrath of the devil who is angry with her for bearing the child and is hidden in a cave for two thousand years before she is given eagle’s wings to continue her escape. Madonna, whose career emerged roughly two thousand years after the birth of Christ, may perceive herself as giving flight to the repressed Virgin-mother. The third woman of the apocalypse is the “great whore that sitteth upon many waters” where she is “arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication.”76 Madonna’s costume mimics this “purple and scarlet” dress ornamented with gold, stones, and pearls like the one worn by the “whore” of Babylon. Here, Madonna takes on the persona of the Beast. Taken together, these images reflect the decadent “material girl,” “whore,” and “heretic” images of Madonna’s past. This reading, of Madonna as a whore-beast, however, lies in tension with her voice-over as the Word of God. In her performance, Madonna creates a paradox of good and evil, sexuality and

72 Rev. 2.20.
73 Rev. 2.21.
74 Rev. 12.2-3.
75 Rev. 12.5.
76 Rev. 17.1, 4-5.
spirituality, and power and condemnation, leaving the audience to contemplate the awesome power of these opposites whose binaries and essentialisms are disrupted and blurred through Madonna’s dance.

Madonna’s recuperation of the Apocalyptic Virgin is similar to both Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’ and Ruth St. Denis’ recuperations of the Virgin. Sor Juana incorporated images of the Apocalyptic Virgin, “dark-skinned, with stars around her head,”77 into a Mariology for the “New World” that incorporated indigenous goddess worship that had been suppressed by the colonizers. Similarly, like the Apocalyptic Virgin who hides away for two thousand years, Sor Juana’s character Echo wanders aimlessly, repeating the words of her oppressor, until she is restored through the waters of Human Nature, a counterpart to the “Whore of Babylon,” who sits upon the waters of nations holding their abominations, in this case the disgraces of colonialism, in her cup. Likewise, St. Denis provides her own image of the transformation of the White to the Gold Madonna, not as a whore, but as a sexually and spiritually fulfilled woman. Each of these women uses the Apocalyptic images of Revelation in order to put to end “virginal” associations between female sexuality, spirituality, and cultural power.

A Star Renamed

In a final gesture of exorcism, Madonna changes her name from the Catholic allusion to the mother of Christ to the Hebrew “Esther,” appropriately translated “star” in Persian.78 In addition to a “star,” and the biblical Jewess who saves her people in the book by the same name, in Kabbalah Esther also signifies “a disseminator of the power of the seventy-two names of

77 Kennet, 2003; “Sor Juana,” 313.
78 Huss, 619.
Tracing the name back through my genealogy, Sor Juana refers to the restorative spring of *The Divine Narcissus* as Esther, which I interpret as restoring the indigenous fertility or mother goddess to Human Nature. Likewise, the restoration of Esther’s goddess status holds remarkable similarities to Salome dancers’ “Dance of the Seven Veils,” which was inspired by Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love, sex and war. Like Ruth St. Denis, whose Madonna dropped the white veil of purity in her progression to fulfillment, these dancers recalled the Ishtar myth in order to shed social stigmas and to reveal their own sense of spiritual and sexual identities. Each of these women, from Sor Juana to Madonna, exercised Esther’s ability to call upon the various names of God. Like Esther’s god of 72 names and Sor Juana’s Tonantzin/Guadalupe/Mary, the God(dess) cannot be essentialized, she has more than one name, identity, and manifestation.

For Huss, “Madonna’s cultural production – in this case, a much-publicized choice of name—refers simultaneously to her role as a Kabbalah disseminator and as postmodern goddess.” Madonna, now Esther, holds on to her “star” and “promiscuous mother goddess” status while taking on a different role. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* provides a reading of the book of Esther as a “coming out” story, both in terms of religion in the traditional reading and sexual orientation using a queer reading. Like Queen Esther of the Bible, Madonna “comes out” as Jewish in order to save “her [appropriated] people,” those suffering the injustices of AIDS, and bring justice to their persecutors. I refer specifically to her recent work in Africa to bring awareness to the AIDS pandemic, as well as to her previous work surrounding the disease within the gay community. The name Esther may, in fact, be an apt description of the

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79 Huss, 619.
80 Huss, 619.
singer who has increasingly “come out” as an advocate of social justice and used her star status toward philanthropic ends. As the current “wanna be” phenomenon moves on to younger generations (i.e., Lady Gaga), Madonna’s aging “wanna bes” or “wanna beasts” may now look to a more mature “queen” and advocate in Esther.

It is possible, therefore, to interpret Madonna’s “The Beast Within” performance as an exorcism of past personas and a movement or transformation toward something more sustainable in her career and for her audience. Through her performances on The Girlie Show and Re-Invention tours, Madonna exorcised images that threatened an early end to her career. Critics, however, have sometimes disparagingly referred to these “re-inventions” as re-appropriations of others’ identities, i.e., “mercilessly” appropriating from black, gay, and now Jewish communities. I propose, however, that Madonna’s shape-shifting may be understood in more critically positive light through Brian Massumi’s theory of movement-vision. Massumi ends his chapter, “The Bleed: Where Body Meets Image,” from Movement, Affect, Sensation: Parables for the Virtual, with the instruction to “DISSEVER THE IMAGELESS FROM THE IDEAL” (emphasis his). It is possible to see Madonna as disseeing the image of the “Madonna,” both in regard to the Virgin Mary as well as the image of herself, from the ideal of the holy virgin or the anti-ideal of the beast. Furthermore, Madonna’s continuous re-invention of her image can be seen in terms of disrupting the formation of any ideal or essentialism in terms of her identity-politics. Earlier in his chapter, Massumi beckons the reader to “See the flesh suffuse with artifice, making it as palpably political as it is physical” adding that “the artifice is always cued,

81 Massumi, 67.
and cuing is collective.”82 Madonna takes cues for change from her audience and embodies them in a way that is “palpably political.” As a dancer and performer, Madonna exemplifies what Massumi describes as movement-vision, a “continuous displacement of the subject [Madonna, woman], the object [the Virgin Mary, ideal woman, the whore, the beast] and their general relation. . . . It is an opening onto a space of transformation in which the de-objectified movement fuses with a de-subjectified observer.”83 Although Madonna, as well as her namesake, has been objectified by audiences, the pop icon takes the position of an acting subject and, through constant movement, challenges ideal images of woman, race, religion, and sexuality. As a dancer, Madonna is in constant movement, constant physical transformation. Therefore, the relation between her, her audience, and the biblical personas she portrays is in constant and contextual transformation. Viewed in this manner, Madonna’s re-inventions can be viewed as an instrument of change versus as an appropriation any ideal. Madonna’s movement-vision, on the contrary, accommodates change and resists codification and essentialisms. Using Massumi’s movement-vision to understand Madonna’s performances of the Virgin and “The Beast Within” as exorcisms, it is through the embodiment of biblical women whose interpretations have helped to construct negative images of woman that Madonna is able to move, change and subvert her relation between the subject (The Beast Within) and the object (the Sacred Monster) in a way that generates a positive and transformative force within her life and career and in the lives of her “wanna bes or beasts.” To this end, Madonna’s goals are in line with feminist theology and feminism more generally. While Madonna does not forfeit her sexuality, she demands its integration with and inclusion of her spirituality. She recognizes, however, lest she be

82 Massumi, 66.
83 Massumi, 51.
essentialized and marginalized by these images, that she must constantly be in movement toward a new vision and the re-invention (versus rejection) of old models.

Conclusion: Revelations of a Genealogy

Madonna is the last artist in my genealogy of twentieth-century American performers who have taken inspiration from women in the Bible. Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to explore how these women and their performances have contributed to what Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza defines as a “hermeneutics of creative imagination and ritualization” that “retells biblical stories and celebrates our foresisters in a feminist key” or as Or N. Rose phrases a similar project in relation to the Kabbalah, that balances the “wisdom of the past with the imperatives of the present.” Although the goal of my project has been primarily historical, not intending to posit a method of performative inquiry, my study poses the question of how Madonna relates to the other performers in this genealogy and what kind of legacy these women leave for the twenty-first century. What can be kept and what should, like “The Beast Within,” be exorcised from a performative theological method? It is through such questions that I, and others, may be able to begin to articulate, recognize, critique, and develop a performative method of feminist theological inquiry for today.

Madonna’s first genealogical connection with my larger study is her thematic interest in the Virgin Mary and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s similar interest in Mariology. Both Sor Juana and Madonna explore the “shadow sides” of the Virgin in relation to proto-feminist and feminist concerns. These shadow sides point to images of the Virgin Mary that have been used to

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84 Fiorenza, 790.
politically or sexually oppress women. Using Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra to illuminate Sor Juana’s shadow sides of the Virgin, specifically in regard to her character of Human Nature as a simulacrum of the Virgin de Guadalupe, the Virgin Mary, and the Aztec goddess Tonantzin, it can be seen how Sor Juana reveals the politics behind the appropriation of religious images. However, unlike Baudrillard, Sor Juana reconciles this “circuit” of images into a distinct version of a creolized Mary that recuperates the feminine power of the indigenous culture. Similarly, the “circuit” of images that make up the pop icon Madonna (as yet another shadow-side of the Virgin), function to recuperate contemporary female sexuality and spirituality.

In the sense that Madonna’s image is constantly changing, the icon of Madonna, like her namesake, may be considered as a simulacrum. Given the idea that Madonna’s on-stage persona stands in for any sense of a “real” Madonna, several scholars and theorists have written about the pop star in terms of simulacra. She is an icon, an enigma, a simulacrum. Amy Robinson uses simulacrum to describe Madonna’s controversial appropriation of racial and queer identities. Likewise, other postmodern feminist scholars such as Cathy Schwichtenberg and E. Deidre Pribam each employ Baudrillard in their arguments surrounding Madonna as both a cultural product and producer. While Robinson’s essay takes a negative perspective on Madonna’s appropriation through simulacra, Pribam “argues that Madonna’s simulated, seductive techniques display a large measure of control over her own images—a model that ‘may be a point of departure in the articulation of postmodern feminism.’”86 While I agree with Robinson that Madonna is a highly manufactured market commodity, I find Pribam’s position more generative in that it does not negate the value of simulacra for producing liberating and spiritual

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86 Schwichtenberg, 9 quoting Pribram, 208.
images in Madonna’s theologically-driven works, as well as in performance more generally. For example, Madonna’s reinvention of her mother’s 1950’s Virgin served as a point of departure for her construction of her sexually-liberated “Like a Virgin” persona. Rather than taking a purely negative stance on Baudrillard’s simulacrum, for instance, that it exposes that there is nothing “real” behind religion, and particularly behind the Madonna’s constructed “image,” Madonna, Sor Juana and St. Denis expose how patriarchal forces have constructed the Madonna, and how the female divine may be recuperated and reconstructed by and for the benefit of women. For example, how Madonna speaks out against rape in “Like a Prayer.” The intent behind these subsequent simulacra—Sor Juana’s creolized Mary, St. Denis’ Blue Madonna (the color of the “divine ecstasy”), and Madonna’s “Like a Virgin,” is for them to take on more spiritual and cultural authority than the androcentric originals.

Another genealogical line may be drawn between Madonna and the Salomania dancers of the early twentieth-century. According to Lucy O’Brien in Like an Icon, Madonna’s early inspiration was modern dance pioneer Martha Graham. Graham’s connection to Salomania, the early twentieth century dance craze, is not only apparent in her performance of Herodiade (the mother of Salome) and Judith (another biblical woman responsible for the beheading of a powerful man), for which she became famous, but also through her dance pedigree. Graham studied briefly with the Denishawn studio founded by Ruth St. Denis and her husband Ted Shawn. Family resemblances between Madonna’s work and the Salome dancers, especially in regard to her performances of “The Beast Within,” include: being fin de siècle phenomena of different centuries, the incorporation of Orientalist tropes, a performative response to society’s desire and fear of female sexuality, and holding a deep connection between spirituality and sexuality. Furthermore, Madonna’s inheritance of her mother’s French Catholicism similarly
connects her to a lineage within the French avant-garde. French Catholicism was influential in late nineteenth and early twentieth century decadent literature, including Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* and Andre Gide’s *Saul.* Madonna’s genealogical connections between the themes and Mariology of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Ruth St. Denis, and the modern dance pioneering of Salome dancers, serve to place her in a long tradition of female artists who have used biblical figures to challenge societal perceptions of women and religion.

Another property of dance as it relates to spirituality and Madonna’s reputation for racial and sexual appropriation is what Daphne Brooks describes as “spirit dancing” or “spirit rapping.” Drawing upon African spiritualism and the ability to communicate with the dead, the spirit-dancer, “most often [a] white and female spiritualist who captures and reanimates marginal ‘characters’ across the great racial, cultural, and spiritual divide . . . contaminates,’ ‘confounds and confuses’ putatively impermeable racial and cultural borders.” This practice influenced early modern-dancer and spiritualist, Loie Fuller, who transformed her body into lilies, butterflies and even the figure of Salome through her manipulation of white silk fabric. Likewise, Fuller used her “spirit dance” to confound her sexuality, while Walker used hers to blur racial lines, Lesbian dancers such as Fuller and Maud Allan were especially attracted to spiritualism and Salomania. Ironically, or perhaps strategically, this heterosexist dance form allowed these dancers to express their sexuality under the guises of religion and heterosexuality, while engaging in fairly open lesbian relationships in their private lives. Orientalist dancers often took on the personas of Eastern characters in a way that “confounded and confused” race and sexuality. Today, such performances, like those of Madonna’s “Like a Prayer” video, are read as

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87 See Downey.
88 Brooks, 15.
appropriation. While I do not deny that this is problematic of Orientalist dance, and/or Madonna’s appropriation of other identities through dance, I agree with David Krasner when he says in “Black Salome” that these performances cannot be easily dismissed and may warrant more complex readings. A more complex consideration of Orientalist dance as “spirit dance” reveals its intent to disrupt, confuse and blur racial economies, as well as to penetrate “racial and cultural borders.” In this sense “spirit-dancing” may be associated with Brian Massumi’s “movement-vision” as a way to avoid codification. Regarding Madonna as a “spirit dancer” of the new millennium, provides a lens to view some of her efforts to cross and blur racial, gender, spiritual, sexual, and cultural divides.

In engaging the critical discourse surrounding this genealogy which ends with Madonna, it seems that a few guiding principles have enabled a generative study of Madonna as a theological performer. First, from Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, we gather that the stories of biblical women should be “told in a feminist key.” We learn from Schulze, Lewis, and Apter, however, that different feminisms will view Madonna and perhaps performance as theological inquiry differently. This does not mean to abandon the project, but perhaps to consider how the performance of biblical women will be read by different audiences. Thomas Nakayama and Lisa N. Penaloza, who have written about different readings of Madonna in terms of race, recognize that in the “postmodern mainstream” of critical opinions, there is no one “correct” reading, but that different “readings contain both potential points of resistance and means for reaffirmation of the status quo.”89 Whether in interpreting the contributions of Madonna, or considering the

performance of biblical women more broadly, we must learn how to read and take advantage of these “points of resistance” while being careful not to “reaffirm the status quo” of gender, racial, sexual, and social inequalities.

Mark D. Hultheser reminds us that workable critical, and I would add, performance methods will “analyze religion in relation to specific sociopolitical contexts . . . [to] overcome specific injustices.” Madonna does this throughout her repertoire, although not always acknowledged by her critics, as she uses the same song, “The Beast Within,” to address very different and specific contexts (the “beast” of AIDS, and her own personal “Beast Within”). This need not be understood as “simulacra” or reinvention for the sake of reinvention, but can be seen as an attention to the changing social contexts and meanings of a text within changing sociopolitical contexts. The importance of analyzing the performance of religion within its specific sociopolitical context has been most apparent in this study in readings of A Raisin in the Sun. While the 1959 play and Claudia McNeil’s performance of Mama Lena has been criticized as being regressive in terms of race and protest, it is necessary to analyze the play within the context of the positive association between the black church, particularly black church women’s theatre, and activism in the early Civil Rights Movement.

Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between deconstructing and reconstructing biblical narrative within specific sociological contexts from relativism. A genealogical study does not necessarily make changes to religious tradition, rather it provides a “history of religion” by which to study how a tradition has been understood within different historical times and sociopolitical contexts. For instance, a genealogy may mark a history of how certain biblical

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90 Hultheser, 83.
women have been understood, misunderstood, suppressed and liberated at different points of time and place within the Jewish and Christian traditions. As Diana Taylor explains, “Archival memory works across distance, over time and space. . . . What changes over time is the value, relevance, or meaning of the archive, how the items get interpreted, even embodied.”91 A genealogical study of biblical women and their performance does not intend to change the archive, in this case scriptural text, but to document and perhaps change how these archival texts can be understood and embodied. What changes in a study such as this is not the patriarchal biblical texts themselves, but the scenarios by which these texts can be interpreted and embodied within different, and perhaps more gynocentric, contexts.

Lastly, and I think most importantly for continued research and discussion, is Brian Massumi’s call to “rethink body, subjectivity, and social change in terms of movement,”92 to, as Brooks observes, capture and reanimate marginal characters and to use movement and performance to blur harmful social codifications and destabilize essentialisms. Marjorie Procter-Smith notes the need to remember with both body and mind. Performance is unique in that it acknowledges this union as a site for knowledge production. Marsha Norman’s bibliodramatic Sarah and Abraham and the improvisational devising processes of Theatre Company Jerusalem, testify to the potential of performance to create new insights and meaning among its participants. Rather than playwrights and performers creating new meanings for their audiences, another possibility is for the audience to become participants in the performance, as with Bibliodrama, and create new meanings in specific circumstances for themselves. Performance, however, is largely undervalued as a site of knowledge production outside of its own disciplines. An alliance

91 Taylor, 19.
92 Massumi, 66.
between performance studies and feminist theology in the recuperation of our biblical foresisters seems like a generative site for both historical research and future inquiry.

In the meantime, what I hope to have done with this project is to trace a genealogy of women who have used performance as creative, critical, and feminist inquiry into the Bible. Furthermore, I have posited several contemporary critical theories—simulacra, spiritualism, movement-vision, dismemberment, perverse midrash, female genealogy, woman-to-woman sociality, mysterion, and bibiodrama—by which to comprehend and further these inquiries. Drawing attention to these women, their works, and their methods, begins to build a case-history and theoretical foundation for how theatre and performance have fulfilled Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza’s call for a *hermeneutics of creative imagination and ritualization*” that “retells biblical stories and celebrates our foresisters in a feminist key,”93 as well as Marjorie Procter-Smith’s call for remembering with the body and the mind. This study, however, takes this discussion out of the strict purview of liturgy and extends the project to the secular sanctuary or synagogue of the stage. Furthermore, this study begins to contemplate how the body, with stage performance and dance in particular, can facilitate feminist interventions into conventional readings of scripture. Salome dancers’ intervention into *fin de siècle* femme fatale aesthetics, Kiper Frank’s intervention of feminist aesthetics into American experimental theatre, Sor Juana’s, St. Denis’ and Madonna’s intervention into constructs of the “Virgin Mary,” Walker’s and Hansberry’s intervention of African spiritualism into the struggle for racial equality, and Norman’s intervention of female voices into the narrative of “Abraham the Patriarch,” each illustrate how playwrights and performers have intervened into harmful narratives surrounding biblical women

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93 Fiorenza, 790.
and used their performing bodies and “movement-vision” to expose patriarchy and re-vision the memory of biblical women for specific feminist purposes. What this genealogy reveals is a long repertoire of biblical plays that have actively participated alongside feminist theology and feminist movements, but which have not yet been archived as such. This dissertation provides an archival account of a selected repertoire of feminist biblical plays for further examination and, perhaps, provides a legacy for a future progeny of artists, feminists, and biblical scholars.
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