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Lesbian Solo Performance Artists Perform Gender Binds: De(Con)Structing Patriarchal Classical Lines

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Refusing marginalization, many solo performance artists use their immediate bodies in performance to make visible social oppressions at the intersections of race, sex, gender, and sexuality. Carmelita Tropicana's and Shawna Dempsey's performative work constitutes a liberation of the female body from limiting and constraining cultural prescriptions for gender and sexuality, and explores questions fundamental to human life and culture. The author's deliberation of their performances draws upon Judith Butler's theories on the performativity of gender.

KEY WORDS: solo performance artists; lesbian cultural representations; lesbian bodies; gender identity; Shawna Dempsey; Carmelita Tropicana.

Lesbian solo performance artists use technology to make the female body visible as a social text and to challenge frontiers of the personal. In this paper, I briefly analyze specific moments in performances and scripts by Carmelita Tropicana and Shawna Dempsey. Technological play illuminates their humorously "cutting" scripts and emphasizes the environment and sociopolitical factors that impact and circumscribe their lives. Foregrounding the use of technology, they encourage the spectator to see the "body as a social object, as a text to be marked, traced, written upon by various regimes of institutional (discursive and nondiscursive) power," as Elizabeth Grosz defines it (1994, p. 116); Grosz's argument that what is created are "textual traces that are capable of being written over, retraced, redefined, written in contradictory ways" (p. 117) is most useful. Contradicting many cultural givens that frame women's lives, Tropicana's and Dempsey's performances link the material body with experience of subjectivity and presence. Performing as Medusa, Dempsey (Dempsey and Millan, 1993) remarks, "Now this is a secret. My body holds my autobiography. All that I have suffered and longed for is stored beneath

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the skin, written down carefully on my back and thighs and hands. My story is written on my flesh" (p. 48). Dempsey's words exemplify Grosz's identification of the body as a "sociocultural artifact" (1994, p. 115). The stage becomes a microcosm of the larger society; performing alone on the stage, solo performance artists highlight the impact of sociopolitical and economic oppressions on the individual in a most salient and immediate way. Employing the rhetoric of body display, they take agency and productively "construct" their parts. Slides, photographs, and videos projected along with/layered onto the performer's body bring together past and present, time and space.

First I explore the performance piece "Milk of Amnesia" by solo performance artist Carmelita Tropicana (1995). Carmelita Tropicana is the stage persona of a Cuban-born writer and performance artist Alina Troyana. Tropicana moved to New York City from Cuba at the age of seven. In this performance piece, based on her trip to Cuba in 1993, she "performs" her resistance to assimilation, while showing how "North American" she has learned to become.

Alina Troyano, performing as Carmelita, names the spectator as crucial witness to the selves she embodies. She asserts that in "Milk of Amnesia"

> the boundaries are blurred. This is what identity is all about. We try to separate ourselves and put ourselves in little compartments. We don't even realize we are doing it, it's second nature. We are forced by society to create an identity with very defined boundaries (Román, 1995, p. 85).

Her split stage and lighting strategies evoke these "compartments," and resist such splitting dynamics. Slipping between male/female gender identifications, her real documented life and dreams/hallucinations, and focusing on lesbian/race/ethnicity issues, Tropicana's performance embodies the fluidity and infinitely multiplicitous nature of subjectivity. Complicating issues of identity, she states, "Carmelita has a life of her own. She speaks with an accent, she thinks differently than I do, but we are wonderful collaborators"; but she admits often "It's a power struggle" to define who is finally speaking (Román, 1995, p. 88). She notes that the extensive audiotaped sections of "Milk Of Amnesia" are autobiographical, tending to be "serious and pensive," while parts of the rest of the script are autobiographical also (p. 91). A most revealing comment regarding the split personality she embodies regards her 1993 trip to Cuba: "Carmelita wanted to go back to Cuba, but Alina was hesitant about this trip" (p. 90). She offers a body that doubly signals "interruption of signification itself" by producing her own meaning-making situations, with freedom to explore again and again parts of identity.

Highlighting the pressures in North America to leave the past behind and adapt to the new environment, Tropicana uses solo performances in acts of self-authorization, self-reproduction, and self-invention. Real and representation blur since the spectator can see her as Writer of her own scripts and also see her make her costume changes from male to female during the slide show of real autobiographical segments of her trip to Cuba and her childhood house (Figure 1),

Fig. 1.

while the audiotape runs. In "Milk of Amnesia" she plays a very femme Carmelita and a macho Pingalito Betancourt in man's hat, chomping a cigar and scratching his crotch—comic figures that interrogate constricting gender stereotypes. Calling himself the "Cuban Alistair Cooke," Pingalito voices his construction by popular media. And, he brings out his "audio-visual aid Number One, a placemat I pick up in a Las Lilas restaurant of Miami, titled 'Facts about Cuba'" (Tropicana, 1995, p. 97). Tropicana provokes spectators to recognize the blurring of self and representation, and thus creates awareness of visible markers of gender. The exaggerated costume and makeup Carmelita wears, and her excessively feminine behavior, paradoxically parody appropriate feminine dress and ideal body shape. These strategies simultaneously suggest the complex negotiations necessarily made by a woman in a male-dominated culture and by a lesbian in a heteronormative world. Performance spaces and production techniques reflect or suggest the inextricability of self and other, and make visible not just the frames of social roles but the structure of culture itself, with the spectator interpellated as part of that socio-cultural complex. Tropicana works against received history and invites the spectator as witness to the history of her own body as well.

Nancy Armstrong (1988) explains the complex relationship between the body and society in terms of gendered identity formation. She states, we

> carry a body around in our heads that governs the ways we represent ourselves to the world, just as we go about in a body which we use to represent the world to ourselves. These two body images operate not as two independent units of meaning but as a single cultural formation (p. 3).

Tropicana's use of technology makes visible the "two body images" significant in negotiating cultural spaces. She foregrounds the multiple identity spaces she occupies, including her exilic Cuban background. My analysis traces Tropicana's resistance to exile from self, her search for identity and recognition of all the parts of her self by others, and her attempts to deal with memories, nostalgia, and losses. The phrase "No es fácil" imbues her works. Narrating her trip, she claims,

> It's not easy. I have come during the Special Period—that's what the government calls it. No gas, no electricity, no food. I look out the window. Cubans are all on bicycles. They look like skinny models (1995, p. 102).

The body is a text that "tells" the desperate situation many are in.

She explains further that "No es fácil" is a common Cuban expression meaning "oh, well; it's not easy." Applying this to her Latina lesbian identity, she notes,

> We have so many things pulling at our identity. . . . I was brought up to be the good girl. Through Carmelita I could be whoever I wanted to be. It didn't matter if I transgressed certain expected behaviors (Román, 1995, p. 92).

Explaining her concerns regarding the identities that different audiences could actually perceive—the "lesbians, the Latinos, the artists"—Tropicana remarks, "In New York, I am a woman of color. In Cuba, I was labeled white. All these

shifts of identity depend upon who is doing the seeing" (Román, 1995, p. 90). Geographic environment determines how others see her and also influences how she sees herself. She names the relevance of cultural and geographical context to the interpretation of skin color; exhibiting the "relative" nature of what so many consider natural fact, she makes visible the actuality that identity is relative. Near the performance end, she notes, "These are Star Trek glasses. They form rainbows around everything you look at. Am I looking at Cuba from an American perspective? No es fácil. It's not easy to have clear vision" (Tropicana, 1995, p. 109).

The potential that live performance has for making oppression visible and for contributing to social conscience and potential social change is major. Lynda Hart (1989) argues that the "physical stage space" can productively be used as a "political arena" (p. 8). Repetition of live performance foregrounds the body as endless text, always under revision and transition among the past, present, and future. Live performance art of an autobiographical nature, like this work, invites us to encounter the selves re-presented as materially situated. Voice, body, settings, and stage environment afford multiple and layered sites of meaning. Tropicana maximizes the layering impact in her dynamic performance. Live performances re-create meaning in time and in the body by literally re-membering and re-staging past history, in particular the history and origins of desire. Background songs such as Tropicana singing "Bubbles of Love," a merengue by Juan Luis Guerra, demonstrate the multiplicitous sensual impact live performances may have; taped songs trigger associated memories for performer and spectator and demonstrate social conditioning by popular culture. Well-chosen audiotape songs historically and geographically locate her script.

She positively highlights the dynamic presence and "life" in her Latina performance, which contribute to American culture. Through the Cuban cigar, Cuban music, references to the Tropicana nightclub ("Havana's legendary nightclub"), dance and music, she makes visible the many parts that contribute to American culture as it is at present. She does not just represent entertainment influences, but names many other people who populate North America and add to the culture; "Filipino nurses" attend to Carmelita when she has her accident. Tropicana identifies the cultural framing and conditioning of memory and of the individual's identity as well. She notes, "who knows where memories come from, movies, books, magazines" (Tropicana, 1995, p. 101). The tremendous impact of technological advances in media distribution contribute to an environment in which media shape and limit the possibilities for everyone, creating expectations.

The powerful influence of popular media is evident. Addressing the stereotypes of Latinas, she observes, "Notice the women in the telenovelas, the Latino soap operas: they are always defined by the men in their lives. Latinas are stereotypically linked with heterosexual romance. Carmelita has her romances but she's a lesbian" (Román, 1995, p. 87). She goes on to detail the further performative breakdown of cultural stereotypes that the very femme Carmelita enacts on stage: "The idea of a lesbian stereotype is a paradox given that lesbians have

been historically invisible. If lesbians were imagined at all it was mainly as butch. . . . Carmelita has been described as a butch in femme's clothes" (p. 87). In the performance, while the audience sees her change from her Pingalito clothes into those of Carmelita, Alina—in the Writer's voice-over—explains the freedom she has to create and re-invent her Carmelita identity on stage:

> I couldn't stand in front of an audience, wear sequined gowns, tell jokes. But she could. She who penciled in her beauty mark, she who was baptized in the fountain of America's most popular orange juice, in the name of Havana's legendary nightclub, the Tropicana, she could (Tropicana, 1995, p. 98).

Deploying an interventionist humor, she takes on the "gay" boycott of Florida orange juice in response to Anita Bryant's homophobic remarks. Her humor includes frequent play on words. She states, "the slang word for dyke is bombera, firefighter. So maybe if I yell 'Fire,' 'Fuego,' would all the dykes come out now? I feel much better" (Tropicana, 1995, p. 107).

Wearing her "Easter bonnet with toilet paper on it," she confronts the audience: "Now you think this is performance art. Not true. A joke. Let me tell you, the Sunday *New York Times* magazine captured this reality with photographs of these hats" (p. 102) (Figure 2). Here, "reality" is created and confirmed by American mass media, and her performance art plays out the real experience shared by others. Returning to Cuba, she exclaims: "now that I know how to dress. I go in style" (p. 101). Linking dress and acceptability, she says she is going just as returning Cubans do with layers of clothing to get home through customs and meet the luggage weight requirement; the hat is decorated with hard-to-find consumer goods: "I'm a walking Cuban department store. Tampons and pearls, toilet paper, stationary supplies" (p. 102). She sharply critiques the United States's embargo on Cuba, and hints at the deficient material realities many newcomers to America have to build upon from the past; "they cannot weigh your body. The layered look is in" (p. 100), she quips.

Later in the performance, during the slide show of Tropicana's actual return to Cuba, the Writer narrates, "I am like a tourist in my own country" (p. 105). Returning to Carmelita as performer on stage, Carmelita re-members in flashback a childhood event. Pretending she is in the Cuban hotel lobby, she grasps a palm frond while imagining the Doctor saying, "Let go of your mother's hand"; in the fit of memory, Carmelita thinks, "No. Mami. No mamita. Please don't let go of me. I'm your child" (p. 106). Clinging desperately to the palm tree, she suggests desires for an anchored self and identity. Her performance evokes the child that once was, and provokes the spectator to understand the struggles made in "order to be" in the present. She says, "We are all connected, not through AT&T, E-mail, Internet, or the information superhighway, but through memory, history, herstory" (p. 108). She voices desire to overcome a split identity:

> I am called/A lesbishe cubanerin/A woman of color aquí/Culturally fragmented/Sexually intersected/But I don't esplit/I am fluid and interconnected/Like tie-die colors I bleed (p. 109).

Fig. 2.

Bleeding evokes the body's life and the survival of the body politic as well. Memory is performed on the body, and the body is performed as a container of history and memory. In a segment where she shadowboxes with a stuffed pig that is hanging from the stage ceiling, she blurs the childhood operation when her tonsils were removed with a pig whose throat is cut. A "stream of red glitter gushed down"—dust flowing from the hanging pig replaces the red of blood (p. 108).

The squealing pig with its throat cut and bleeding to death evokes social/psychic death in forced assimilation in a new country. The pig was told "we are going to cut your vocal chords so you don't squeal and disturb the neighbours so much" (p. 108). She demonstrates the politics of performance, using voice to challenge social oppression. Shadowboxing represents the conflicted territory of struggles individuals must negotiate, and Tropicana refuses to relegate the immediacy of body and experience to the shadows. Noting contradictions in negotiating diverse identities, the Writer interweaves mother and country roles in a play on gender referents: "Is Cuba my wife and America my lover or the other way around? Or is Cuba my biological mami and the U.S. my adopted mom?" (p.109). Speaking with a female voice connects nature and social construction in identity formation. The "milk" of the title connects a maternal image, the need for nurturance and protection, and memory, and forced amnesia.

Tropicana confronts medical and psychiatric institutions that powerfully shape, survey, and police individual behavior, often enforcing normalized heterosexuality. In one segment, Tropicana uses helium balloons that are pierced and broken to represent thoughts and bodies symbolically being punctured (Figure 3). With her balloon hat on, "Carmelita" identifies medical technology that often controls the mind and the body:

> they connected these wires to my brain, my computer, my mango Macintosh. The doctors, they monitor my every move. This is [pointing to deflated balloons] connected to my organizational skills, musical memory, and housecleaning ability (p. 100).

The doctors try to restore her memory, and her memories reveal lesbian desires as a child. She gestures towards a possible site of early social construction of sexuality: "When I think of Soraya, my nurse, giving me a sponge bath or rubbing Keri lotion on my chest it [balloon pops] pops uncontrollably" (p. 100). She performs and remembers the uncontainable desires in her history. Songs help her to regain her impossible memories: "Remember, walking in the sand, remember her smile so inviting, remember. . . ." (p. 100). Sensual embodied memories, re-covered through her art, are crucial to her present ability to claim a lesbian identity as well as her Cuban identity. One balloon is for language skills; she points to it and says, "What language is dis? Is this the language of Jung and Freud? Oh herren and herrleins pierce me with your key. Let me not be a question mark anymore" (p. 100). Evoking the "talking cure," her performance is inflected by the practice of psychoanalysis, using its language of memory and repression. Tropicana's mordant humor attacks the psychoanalytic theories that frame women's minds and bodies. The heavy hats she wears connect the weight of history and the weight of personal pasts with the present. Crossing an "ocean of years" (p. 100), Tropicana's performance connects time and space. She expresses the feelings of connection through and to the body, particularly the body's sensual role in overcoming the "amnesia" created by traumatic events that block memories.

Fig. 3.

SHAWNA DEMPSEY

Shawna Dempsey is a Winnipeg-based artist. Along with her collaborator Lorri Millan, she creates performance pieces, videos, street art, and she also lectures and teaches. Dempsey and Millan label their work "Feminist, Costume-based Performance Art," and describe their experimental approach as "live presentation

in which artists use their bodies to communicate ideas in a visual manner, while not adhering to traditional narrative conventions" (Dempsey and Millan, 1995, p. 23). Technological strategies foreground the "visual" disruption of social norms. Their experimental works dissolve genre and temporal boundaries. "Mary Medusa" (Dempsey and Millan, 1993) combines a published written script, live performance, a text to accompany the performance that the spectator can take home, videos, slides, and audiotapes.

Dempsey's use of her body and material realities as the centre of her performances is an act of resistance to oppressive traditional narrative texts; she invites the spectator to make equivalent acts. Offering "ideas" without the traditional narrative trajectory of active male hero dominating and possessing a passive female object foregrounds the impact of social norms on the body. Dempsey exemplifies Grosz's (1994) analysis of the "spiral of power-knowledge-pleasure"; Grosz argues that "The body is that materiality, almost a medium, on which power operates and through which it functions" (1994, p. 146).

"Mary Medusa" is primarily about woman and power. Dempsey connects power with the female body, performance, and self-definition. "Like most North American women, we have grown up feeling both alienated from our bodies and defined by them. We use our work to 'solve' this internal paradox" (in Bennett and Patience, 1992, p. 9), she asserts. The "Mary/Medusa" performance engages issues of power. The artists' statement notes:

> work with the Medusa myth/icon began as an exploration of women with power (who has power? do we have power? where can we get some?)... Medusa was attractive to us because of her ability to turn men into stone.... The ways we control and are controlled are essential tools in the maintenance of our consumptive machine (Dempsey and Millan, 1993, p. 42).

Connecting "control" with "machine" suggests mechanical institutionalized forces of power that Medusa threatens by turning "men into stone." Passive, submissive female behavior in the past allowed the "machine" to continue to operate and continually reproduce the heterosexist, male dominated status quo with woman as commodity to be exchanged and consumed. Proposing to disrupt the machine's operation, Medusa states:

> This machine feeds on opposition: male/female, black/white, homo/normo, have/have not. This machine's appetite is seemingly without bounds. But what of our appetite? What if we no longer control, or worse yet, lose control of ourselves? What if we "lose it" and turn our heads and our snakey locks against status quo economics, sexual politics, and morality? Well, it could get messy.... (Dempsey and Millan, 1993, p. 42).

Claiming women's appetites and desires (for food, for sex, for intimate connections with other women), Dempsey stages a calculated act of madness that "messes" with the "status quo."

The Medusa hairpiece she wears in this performance, created out of a multitude of plastic snakes, suggests the plasticity and artificially-constructed nature of

historical and mythical texts. Similar to Tropicana's "hats," Dempsey's artificial "locks" insinuate the very weight of the cultural baggage she is carrying, including the weight of history, which has immense impact on the psyche and body in the present. Proposing change by allowing Medusa to write her own script, speak with her own voice, and powerfully take control by disobediently "losing" control of herself, Dempsey enacts "symbolic violence." In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1979) describes the development of the age of "Man-the-Machine" in which the "human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges" it into a disciplined and obedient form. "Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, 'docile' bodies" (p. 138). I would suggest that Dempsey performs a body that is neither obedient nor "docile," while at the same time making visible the subjection many women experience. Physicalizing the rearranged and "subjected" body, Medusa refuses to comply with social constraints.

Provoking women to resist self-defeating acts of using the same old male-constructed language and repeating the same history and same scenes, Luce Irigaray (1985) deploys similar machine imagery. She cautions:

> Words will pass through our bodies, above our heads. They'll vanish and we'll be lost. Far off, up high. Absent from ourselves: we'll be spoken machines, speaking machines. Enveloped in proper skins, but not our own (p. 205).

Dempsey rewrites and reconfigures myths and history in a strategic embodied effort to be at home in the skin and connect words and bodies, refusing loss. Suggesting the self-alienation produced by embodied experience in an environment and a culture that marks non-submissive women as "mad," "dangerous," and/or "abnormal," Medusa states:

> My story is written on my flesh./And yet my flesh is a stranger to me. I look and I look and I can't find it anywhere. My body is lost and I can't find it. My self is missing. And I miss myself. Terribly (Dempsey and Millan, 1993, p. 48).

Medusa's lament, "my flesh is a stranger to me," articulates the embodied self-alienation many women suffer.

"Mary Medusa" engages women's bodies and prescribed roles in both a contemporary environment and an historical perspective. In one section of the "Mary Medusa" performance, on a totally dark stage, we see only Medusa's head in the light (Figure 4). The FLOATING HEAD's query, "Is a woman without a body in fact a woman?" (p. 46) performatively foregrounds culture's perpetual emphasis on woman's body, on woman as body, and the correlational rationalized denial of woman's intellectual capacities. The space of feminist performance art compellingly accents the materiality of the body, while Medusa's facial body language, accompanied by her modulated and carefully dictioned voice, performs and achieves agency, authority, and "embodied" subjectivity. Her head "floating" in the dark suggests the darkness and negativity of cultural scripts that construct

Fig. 4.

the female body and mind, and also insinuates the possibility that in this darkness "Mary/Medusa," and all women, might actively change the scripts and re-create their spaces in a fluid trajectory of coming-into-being otherwise. This bodiless head interrogates both the hierarchical and value-laden male/female, mind/body dichotomies grounding Western philosophical thought; enacting a mobile and shifting self challenges the patriarchal notion of a fixed, stable, sovereign subject position. This Medusa is definitely not mute, and she is also not without reason; therefore, through a "cultural" act, she creates a disturbance by refusing to "fit" her pre-assigned role in the heteronormative family scripts.

The image of a woman's disembodied head challenges conventional gender consignments that are grounded in physical anatomical sex organs by making the sexed body absent. Dempsey's ironic and heady question, "Without a body does a woman in fact exist?" (1993, p. 46), interrogates the ontological basis of meaning and subjectivity by critiquing male-defined cultural givens. Medusa's bodiless state renders her literally *no*body, since she is no longer a sexual object for male domination. "Mary Medusa" physically illustrates the fact that threatening bodies are controlled violently. Interpolating from the script, the spectator is provoked to acknowledge that containment of the female body often constitutes a significant action in cultural scripts. Catherine Keller (1986) usefully reveals the violence entailed in perpetuating the male hegemony through "perpetual decapitations" (1986, p. 58). Keller discusses the female body as the site of violence and oppression in the Perseus/Medusa myth; she suggests, "it is by 'killing' the monster that the male establishes her monstrosity and his heroism" (p. 62). In Medusa's re-telling of her experience, masculine power is represented as constructed but total: "They

manufactured heroes and gods at an alarming rate. One raped me, one cut off my head" (Dempsey and Millan, 1993, p. 44). She depicts both sexual and total bodily possession. The "Medusa Raw" video represents the inscription of violent cultural scripts on women's body, since female flesh is damaged and openly revealed in that state after rape and beheading. On the social and psychological level, violent male acts cut women off from desire and also alienate women by separation and denying contact with each other: Medusa admits, "I don't know where my sisters are. After my decapitation it was difficult to keep in touch" (p. 45). As well as identifying the systematic cultural forces dividing women from each other, being placed by men on an idealistic pedestal is exposed as isolating and as objectifying.

Like Tropicana, Dempsey satirically engages misogynist Freudian texts. The "Mary Medusa" script plays on the Freudian theory that fear of the female genitals is a normal occurrence in male childhood development. Complex psychoanalytic factors come into play when the love and desire are expressed woman to woman, representing women without sexual allegiance to men, and thereby dismantling the scripts of lack and loss. Interweaving Medusa's words of lesbian desire through the script and foregrounding phallic-looking columns topped by women's heads, Dempsey cuttingly parodies Freud's phallogocentric theories (Figure 5). Performance offers powerful cultural re-visions. Subversively, the Medusa and Athena talking heads "*superimposed on pillars at Delphi*" graphically form a vision that takes on the look of a penis or phallus. This physical imagery (putting a woman's talking head in unexpected places) blurs sexed bodies and troubles gendered constructs and misogynist cultural texts that are the pillars of Western thought and which perpetually shaft women. Medusa usurps the voice of an oracle/seer. She reveals hidden knowledge, and gives authoritative opinions on her own experiences. Appropriating agency and subjectivity, she interrogates the violent cultural shaping she endures and suffers from: "they look right through me. . . . I just feel invisible. . . . But there must be a middle ground. I feel like I spend my days vogueing, maintaining these poses that are unnatural to me. And for what? I'm merely an architectural detail. . . . it's demeaning, to be so insignificant, to be so dwarfed by these weighty phalluses"; then Athena queries, "How much does your average phallus weigh, anyway?" (p. 49). Maintaining "unnatural" poses suggests that she is culturally shaped into performing a heterosexual masquerade that does not correspond to her own sense of "real" identity and "real" self, constituting a split subjectivity—a reading that reverses traditional notions that by nature all women are heterosexual. "[U]nnatural" poses imply forced performances that are "demeaning" to enact and pretentiously directed at the male gaze.

"They look right through me. . . . I just feel invisible" also satirizes Freudian notions of the female genitals as "nothing to be seen," paradoxically provoking the male fear of castration. Speaking of "weighty phalluses," Dempsey parodies Freud's theoretical privileged view of the masculine "far superior equipment" in "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes"

Fig. 5.

(Freud, 1925) and his notions that women's genitalia are "nothing to see" (p. 252). Lacan's (1977) theory of the phallus as the "Transcendental Signifier," a metaphysical entity beyond material experience, is also put in comic perspective. Contradictorily, Lacan also chooses the phallus as the "privileged signifier. . . . because it is the most tangible element in the real of sexual copulation" (1977, p. 287). His misogynist and heteronormalizing comments invite the question "to whom is it the most tangible element?", as does Dempsey's performance, opening up lesbian female-embodied desires as real. In "Medusa's Head," Freud (1923) claims that "The hair upon Medusa's head is frequently represented in works of art in the form of snakes, and these once again are derived from the castration complex" (p. 73). If the snakes symbolize castrated penises, Dempsey's costume, representing Medusa's head framed by huge hair of writhing snakes, playfully reappropriates and brings back into vision that terrorizing threat. Her embodied acts supplant

woman as myth, as cultural, ideological object. Dempsey exposes Freud's frequent use of art and literature to ground his theories, and she also emphasizes the cultural construction in operation and the reliance on cultural representations to "prove" his supposedly objective scientific truths. Culture, truth, and subjectivities are inextricable. Medusa's words sharply cut through the traditional prescriptions for "femininity" to perform as masochistic self-mutilation. Medusa says to Athena:

> Funny, eh? Being without a body is the closest I've come to having the perfect figure, and yet still I feel inadequate. I guess you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. Have a body (Dempsey and Millan, 1993, p. 49).

"My body is lost and I can't find it. My self is missing" is literalized in the segment of the "Mary Medusa" performance labeled "Classical Lines—Women and Architecture." The "Classical Lines" of Greek myth and history create Medusa and destroy her threatening powers by cutting off her head and architecturally forming her mind/body split. "Classical Lines" suggest repetition of classical lines in literature and in clothes fashion—trends that survive across time and constrict women physically and psychically in the present. The question becomes, Why change the old patriarchal scripts if they still work? Dempsey embodies and voices the need for change. In this part of the performance, a slide shows "Medusa's disembodied head superimposed on a wall of Greek text" (Dempsey and Millan, 1993, p. 48) (Figure 6). Medusa's talking disembodied head saying "My body is lost" suggests the plurality of losses inscribed on the body by history and cultural scripts, and represents a mosaic memory. The slide exemplifies Foucault's (1977) argument that the body is "totally imprinted by history" (p. 148).

The writing is literally and symbolically on the wall of Dempsey's flesh for all to see and read. Layered representations—the slide of Dempsey portraying Medusa against a screen within a performance, combined with Dempsey's voice reciting her text—make real the complex plurality and pervasiveness of historical and cultural texts and representational formats impinging on experience. Dempsey's acts of self-definition dismantle patriarchal society's traditional circumscriptive definitions of women's experiences by male "experts"—such as writers, historians, physicians. She interrogates the "clean lines" between self/other, history/present, myth/reality, and the posed or performed and the authentic, natural self. Denuding performed images that had posed as authentic, and yet hinting at a pre-cultural body, Dempsey embraces postmodern debunking and nostalgic essentialism simultaneously. Her strategies make the Petrarchan fragmented female body literally visible as well as symbolic. Medusa is at once there and also simultaneously her image appears as projections in various ways and against different cultural "texts"; there is the effect of a palimpsest that is readable in her remapping of the female body and voice—both can be neither restrained nor possessed.

Fig. 6.

In the ten-minute videotape “Medusa Raw,” as Medusa is interviewed about her past, she appears in various locations. Through editing, the interviews are cut up into fragments, suggesting the split-self Medusa undergoes, as well as the fragmentation of historical records in contrast to the traditional notion of history as linear progress. Interspersing oral testimonies from “the Medusa/woman as bride, mother, and business woman,” Dempsey and Millan “focus on the roles allowed women and the impossible narrowness of these roles” (1993, p. 44). Notions of male physiological supremacy and comparative sizes embodied in queries concerning the “weight” of the “average phallus” provoke recognition of Dempsey’s celebration of the enormous size of female desires and sexual response. In the role of Mother, Medusa speaks of the “elusive female ejaculation” that “gushes”; she says, “I/Leak” (p. 50). A female body that “gushes” recalls the above-mentioned need to get “messy” and challenge the status quo—in this case, interrogate cultural

construction of the female body as messy, disorderly, impure, uncontrollable (ironically, physiological female bodily reactions that are "natural" and that "naturally" are essential to continuance of the human race). All-too-material effusions of the female body, replete with explicit sexual overtones, dismantle abstract man-made idealic representations such as statues of the Virgin Mary. A "self" out of control, "As it bursts/Busts/At the seams,/Grows too big for my britches" (p. 50) interrogates women's sexual containment and fragmentation from their desires—notions inherent in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories. Medusa articulates the gendered constraints of her own corporeality. Dempsey's vocal expression of overabundance and uncontainability, voiced from a mother's body in a house dress, oven mitts and bandages, symbolizes and literalizes exile and alienation from the self, the body, and desires. Her performances constitute the ongoing pursuit of a recuperation of body and desire. A "self" that is "too big for its britches" gestures towards a refusal of oppression. "Leaks" and seepage occur between the private and public, the real and imagination, bringing the inside out, and challenge the "cutting" hierarchical dichotomies such as male/female, mind/body that frame women's lives. The graphic "Medusa Raw" videotape begins with a shot of a "bewildered bride, spinning in a meat locker" (p. 44). Woman viewed as "raw" fresh meat, a sexually-inflected commodity such as Luce Irigaray (1985) theorizes, is literally/symbolically bound, hung up, and spinning around in a meat locker. Asserting that women are "Socially . . . 'objects' for and among men," Irigaray notes in *This Sex Which Is Not One* that the "trans-formation of women's bodies into use values and exchange values inaugurates the symbolic system" (p. 189).

The performance "shows" the cultural containment and the confusion caused by the violence inherent in binding gender and other social conventions for women. In the next shot, two fully-clothed brides waltz together. Then one is seen hitchhiking on the highway, ending with a close-up shot of the waltzing brides. This ending dismantles the traditional closure of heterosexual marriage. Visibly cutting up traditional heteronormalized scripts offers a "parody of the idea of the natural and the original," as Judith Butler reiterates in *Gender Trouble* (1990, p. 31). Two brides dancing together visibly question whether the groom was ever needed; they bring "into relief" ceremonial frames and expose them as social constructs—particularly damaging ones since they frame not only families but desire as well. Dempsey parodies the traditional bride and groom's first wedding dance, but the "copy" of expected behavior evokes the original, highlighting the difference and the bodies acting.

Breaking out of binding restrictions and roles, the bride snaps a garter, swings "her veil like a lasso" (Dempsey and Millan, 1993, p. 45), throws "her hose at camera," and pops "off her 'pearl' buttons on bodice of [bride's] dress" (p. 46). Parodying women's submissive, helpmate roles in traditional westerns, swinging "her veil like a lasso" (p. 45) actively situates the bride as a catcher rather than a passive female waiting to be caught. The action also recalls Lacan's (1977) statement

that "the signifier of the phallus plays a central role beneath a transparent veil" (p. 251). Joyous and deliberate removal of her veil by the bride transgressively challenges phallocentric mysteries and dominating discourses—inappropriate behavior indeed, as the bride defiantly takes control and active agency in determining her appearance, how she is seen, and who shares her desires.

Failing to represent the fashionable, ideal female body and dress provokes patriarchal violence in disciplinary fashion. Evoking the martyrdom of Jesus as an analogy to the suffering women are subjected to, Dempsey uses reverse technology to reverse the videotape "Medusa Raw"; thus, she visibly creates a Foucauldian "counter-discourse." Dempsey appears as Medusa physically nailed to the cross; then she climbs down from the cross and throws away her crown of thorns (p. 44). Medusa refuses to be a martyr or to be tied to any man-made cross. A close-up slide shows her "hand uncurling revealing nail through palm" followed by a slide of "Medusa untying herself from cross" (p. 46). These images of self-mutilation and self-rescue evoke traditional iconography of Jesus comically (but stridently), and represent the sacrifices involved in occupying ongoing cultural scripts. The images suggest the potential power of understanding the sources of power and actively desiring transformation. Refusing to be contained within restrictive, binarized roles for woman as "repulsive or revered" is "all about control."

A slide of "Medusa's head on a platter, mouth stuffed with an apple" symbolizes the violence inherent in the containment of woman's body and sexual appetite within "normal" domesticity (p. 46). A satire on notions of women's desire as animal-like, needing restraint, the scene evokes historical paintings that represent a stuffed pig's head on a platter. Medusa's head has been cut off violently; she is silenced; and she cannot move; in this state of mind/body separation she cannot satisfy appetites of her own. The active sins of transgressively eating of the apple of self-knowledge and then voicing the experiences effect immediate retribution and punishment. Dempsey portrays the domestic realm and women's containing roles as nurturer. A Thanksgiving platter of food requires a woman's thankless selflessness and denial of her needs.

The body literally becomes a text to be read by the self and by others. In "Mary/Medusa: A Testimonial," Medusa states:

> I undertook a variety of experiments designed to prove or disprove my existence. I later learned to name these: anorexia, bulimia, slashing. Several near-death experiences reassured me that I was alive (p. 54).

In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf (1990) asserts that while women have "breached the power structure" in the last decade, "eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest-growing medical specialty" (p. 10). Literally capitalizing on cultural obsession with women's bodies, medical technology creates an ideal body through unnecessary surgery and drugs, and the unnatural ideal "thin" female body is achieved through controlling and health-endangering techniques such as having the teeth wired shut. "Mary Medusa" includes a slide of

a "*woman's mouth, her teeth wired shut, projected on bride's skirt*" (p. 48). Teeth wired shut literalize the bride's and all Mary/Medusa's cultural and historical silencings, while also suggesting the potential that she might be unable to express herself when the wires are cut. Dempsey represents woman as so dangerous that she must be literally restrained: "Steel braces lock her jaws shut. Lock jawed. Once a week the wires are loosened so that she can brush her teeth. Oh, so simple isn't it? And yet so effective. Never before has controlling what goes into your mouth been so easy" (p. 48). Dempsey's portrayal of steel braces that lock the jaw shut is an attack on anorexia/bulimia, and notions of the ideal *svelte* body. "Never before has controlling what goes into your mouth been so easy" is followed by "Or, for that matter, controlling what comes out of it. And herein lies the real beauty of this little device. Not only will you be svelte. You'll be silent" (p. 48). In a circular reading, not being able to eat or speak produces a death trajectory on many levels, not simply one of literally being rendered speechless. Rejecting this general silencing of woman in culture, and double erasure of lesbian desire, Dempsey's words and body take up valuable cultural space.

Grosz (1994) details the cultural norms that result in "self policing" subjects engaged in continual "self-surveillance" (p. 144). The gleam of Medusa's metal braces suggest the violence and the unreal scenarios women subject themselves to in attempts to attain a male-defined beautiful body. As well, Dempsey's performance links social obsession with controlling women's bodies, appetites, and desires, and names the self-hatred communicated in acts of bulimia, and slashing—the "near-death experiences" Medusa recounts. Undermining ingrained cultural structures requires emphatic and defiant embodied acts. The metalized female mouth evokes notions of the "vagina dentata" and threats of male castration, particularly since the image is projected onto the crotch area of the bride's gown. Earlier, the bodiless Medusa comments, "I think that men find it daunting that my only hole contains a significant amount of dental work. Not that I'm Freudian or anything" (Dempsey and Millan, 1993, p. 49).

In a final act of threatening defiance, Medusa as the Business woman (dressed only in silk blouse and control-top panty-hose) kneels on the floor and crushes a chocolate cake between her thighs, to end the performance. Highlighting performance of lesbian desire, Dempsey complies with Teresa de Lauretis's (1984) evocation to construct "another frame of reference, one in which the measure of desire is no longer just the male subject" (p. 8). Medusa depicts the performance process as comically but seriously empowering and actually erotically satisfying in "Mary/Medusa: A Testimonial." Voicing gender-specific pleasure, Medusa says, "Deep, successive orgasms welled inside of me, night and day, making it impossible to worry. I felt unashamedly sensual" (p. 56); she refuses shame and foregrounds the sensuous body:

> True, my desire did surprise me: its strength was unmistakable, unmutable, HUGE. But I did not hide from it, or the images it brought. I felt proud of the power between my thighs (p. 56).

Not hiding from her pleasure, or "the images it brought," Dempsey's Medusa testifies to her self-found pleasures and resists Freudian and Lacanian theories that claim there is only one libido (male), and that assume the feminine repression of sexuality. Having "huge" desires satisfied by a chocolate cake, she asserts, "Inappropriate appetite, but she doesn't give a fuck and why should she?" (p. 52). Medusa satisfies her own desires with a chocolate cake, thus denying male ownership of women's bodies or desires.

Carmelita Tropicana's and Shawna Dempsey's solo performances are powerful acts that take agency, and create knowledge and understanding. Technology facilitates their organization of their material and the lives they represent, creating meaning for the spectator. Life and art, real and representation, merge and converge as they recall, re-visit, recuperate, and re-imagine the past, making an embodied spectacle of present "realities." The robust wit as well as the pathos they convey, combined with the gallery of selves they portray, inspire direct empathy. In solo performances, the body is not metaphorical but real, and the materially-present body can be used most effectively to address history and contemporary social situations. Explicit artifice lays out for the spectator a satiric interrogation of the oppressive heterogendered scripts women must negotiate. Dempsey and Tropicana dramatize the way the individual, the self, is caught up in the processes of cultural machinery.

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