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What a Bitch: The Complexities of Gender in Playwriting

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**WHAT A BITCH:
THE COMPLEXITIES OF GENDER IN PLAYWRITING**

by

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B.A., English, University of New Mexico, 2009

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

Harvesting pain to create difficult female characters that serve as the emotional catalysts for the plot is explored in my plays, *Caballos Muertos* and *Señora de la Pinta*. I discuss why I have chosen to reclaim the word “bitch” to describe angry Chicanas that have been a thematic necessity in my writing because of internal violence resulting from the colonization of the female body. I also reflect upon the use of contemporary feminist playwriting as an educational tool that teaches New Mexico history while at the same time allows for sensitivity concerning sexual identity and gender expression. Everyone is marginalized by looks, but the female aesthetic has a profound effect on individual societies which further complicates dynamics of love, culture and religion. I demonstrate how the shattered female body translates into emotional dialogue which organizes the force of action that drives the plot of my plays by incorporating sexual and cultural politics as well as folklore and superstition to exemplify how the oppressed female is in a constant state of ambivalence, identifying both as the person she is expected to be and the person that she really is. This is supported with historical events in New Mexico that shaped Chicano communities and the relationship they have with themselves.

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Introduction

As a gay Chicano I have been labeled with several disparaging terms throughout the course of my life. As a result I have a genuine understanding of marginalized people who have no choice but to combat emotional attacks and then face resentment for demanding respect as well as ridicule for having confidence. In the context of my work, reclaiming the word “bitch” has been a thematic necessity in my writing process because angry females who struggle with gender politics often serve as emotional catalysts that drive the action of my plays. Creative empathy, in the form of honest writing that cannot be held to facts like journalism, is a genuine comprehension of emotion that allows me, as a playwright, to hear the voice of a character and then write her story with integrity and honor. I use creative empathy in writing a bitch as my own re-appropriation of the female body in performance; a body that historically has been colonized and continues to struggle for equal footing and accurate representation on the stage. My first full length play, *Caballos Muertos*, was written using feminist play structure that defies Aristotle’s unified play structure and features a protagonist that is a beautiful yet unlikable woman to exemplify that we are all conditioned with demands and attitudes regarding the female aesthetic. This character, María, was written as a bitch to show the frustration that women face as a result of being objectified and persecuted for their looks. Also, I used creative empathy in writing my thesis play, *Señora de la Pinta*, which is based on Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King*, and was deliberately written with a gender bending, Chicana bitch, Josefina, that parallels Creon in the Greek classic. I wrote the play with the intended purpose of exploring and discussing sexual and cultural politics that cannot be compared to anything in the Aristotelian system; a system that was created within the confines of a misogynistic, slave-based economy.

Not surprisingly, I consider myself a feminist playwright despite the fact I am not female. I believe my plays follow the concepts of feminist playwriting because they ask dramatic writing to be sensitive to the uniqueness of sexual identity and gender expression in a way that offers reason to the complexities of love, religion and cultural practices. I also believe that feminist playwriting has allowed me to harvest emotion in a way that satisfies the need to vent my own frustration as a racial and sexual minority through creative writing. I relate the concept of harvesting emotions to the theories of Jim Linnell, who argues that emotion is the organizing force of plot, not a byproduct. In his book, *Walking on Fire: The Shaping Force of Emotion in Writing Drama*, Linnell states “the dramatic writer is an arsonist who takes tangled pieces of what is known and sets them ablaze to reveal what is at once deeply felt and unknown.”¹ His book continues to argue that emotion is of the utmost importance for writing a play with conviction that emotion is the central force of drama which brings everything together in a play. Trusting Linnell’s theory which suggests that it is the writer using emotion to fuel initial interest in the subject, I write a bitch with the belief that I understand what the fuel is behind her emotions and honestly acknowledge this fuel as toxins that need to be released from her core. *Caballos Muertos* and *Señora de la Pinta* were both written with bitches that struggle to contain toxic emotions and ache to free themselves from the gender binderies of their respective communities.

Through the course of this essay, I intend to discuss the process of writing a bitch for performance. I will use my thesis play, *Señora de la Pinta*, as well as my graduate assignment play, *Caballos Muertos*, to exemplify how I use the emotional wounds of a bitch to empower her as the organizing force of the plot. In both plays, my mission was to write females who are

¹ Linnell, Jim. *Walking on Fire: The Shaping Force of Emotion in Writing Drama*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011. Print. 10.

unlikable from a non-female perspective, connecting my work to ideologies of feminist playwriting in order to show how creative empathy is a necessity for creating a realistic portrayal of difficult women. Sexual identity and gender expression is the foundation for the research I have used in my writing process to depict angry Chicanas in New Mexico during the 19th and 20th centuries. I will explain how my writing process is emotionally driven by race and gender with the intention of asking an audience to step outside of its sexual and cultural comfort zones to better understand tolerance, while at the same time asking them to continue commanding respect for their own beliefs and ideologies. This idea includes the understanding that sex on stage is vital for supporting the narrative of my plays by utilizing a bitch to serve as the emotional catalyst. I will add to my theory that by allowing sensitivity to sexual identity and gender expression, a bitch can be recognized as a vessel that harbors internal violence rather than merely being difficult as a plot side-effect. I will begin the discussion with definitions of a bitch. I will also examine historical fictions of women in Greek theatre to reestablish unyielding views of women in art and reflect upon circumstances resulting from Greek masks as scriptive things that have allowed for connotations to solidify about the female body in theatre for thousands of years. Also, I will offer interpretation of male characters and their interaction with female characters to suggest that gender is the dominant force driving the search for emotion that all playwrights use to ignite the action of the plot. In other words, I will explain how the bitch is the underbrush that must be set ablaze in order for a play to combust. Further, I will briefly discuss complexities of sexual identity and gender expression in everyday performance to show how those complexities influenced the creative process of designing the emotional fingerprint of the bitch. I will reflect on feminist writers and performance experts for insight and I will connect that insight to my playwriting process. Lastly, I will convey how I believe the bitch is a venue

that encourages and educates audiences on gender politics by placing her on a parallel to different communities through art. This conclusion will explain how a bitch in theatrical pedagogies allows for empathy and understanding that can plant the seeds for social change, or, at the very least, offer food for thought that will have a lasting effect on the audience.

It is a clichéd joke that the playwright tells the psychiatrist that he (or she) hears voices, but like all clichés it holds a certain truth that has been duplicated repeatedly. The word “cliché” comes from the sound of the early printing press clanging as it made copies from the original. I, like a lot of other playwrights, am a cliché who claims to listen to the voices of my characters, and then I use the emotional tone of the voice to design a unique individual through an intricate process that also incorporates observation in life, empathy for those that are different than me, and research of subject matter. I believe that my methods of writing a difficult female character that expresses irritability and deceit can make for good drama because these qualities support the narrative of the play. The concept of an honest bitch is by no means an oxymoron because all interesting characters need to go through a change during the course of a play, so a bitch needs to have traits that do not blend into the essence of her personality in order for the change to occur. In simpler terms, the character is complicated like a real person so the reasons behind her unscrupulous actions need to be clearly defined during the course of action. In that way, the audience can see what she is really about and the necessary shifts in the play can be observed. In the case of Josefina, from *Señora de la Pinta*, I created a bitch with the intension of confusing the audience because her sex and gender are not clearly defined in the context of the emotions attached. Josefina expresses herself as a machismo Chicano, that ironically, has zero tolerance for men, further complicating her as a bitch, because she is a man that does not have a penis that is attracted to women, but is not a lesbian.

The process of writing a bitch for the stage has demanded that my heart as a playwright connect to the heart of the character so that her story can be told with clear understanding of the bitch as a complex individual. This connection has truth for me because I believe honesty is the most important ingredient for writing a play, since I am taking someone's story and retelling it as my own. I do not mean this literally, of course, since characters are not real people and I am clearly not a beautiful woman like María, nor am I a transman like Josefina. Nevertheless, their stories represent marginalized people who deserve to be honored with respect. I believe a play that lacks honesty is one-dimensional and prevents an audience from becoming fully attached to its themes, and a play with a detached audience has lessons that are easily forgotten. Playwrights tell stories for different reasons, but all writers want their work to be remembered. Honesty through creative empathy ensures that a play will be memorable. This is especially important for contemporary playwrights because we live in an era where storytelling trends are primarily for entertainment value rather than educational purposes, and the mass production of storytelling through video technologies has distanced the emotional connection between audience and performer.

I reflect on sexuality and gender politics as I see them in the real world: enigmas that cannot be defined, labeled or pigeonholed. Sexual identity and gender expression are as unique as a human fingerprint, so, for the purposes of this essay, the words "male" and "female" refer to biological sex of characters. Also, as I alluded to earlier, the definition of a bitch on stage in this essay is a female with a difficult and/or manipulating personality unless otherwise noted. Bitches in my work are obviously not nice; they are an angry force that is necessary in my writing to support the narrative of the play with an irritability that is unpredictable and relentless. Writing a bitch for the stage has no formal guidelines and, like the craft of playwriting, the

process can easily be derailed by unique circumstances that distract from the elements of a well written script. However, I would argue that a well developed bitch can be written to offer therapeutic qualities for the audience if the playwright is honest and provides logic for her complicated personality so that the spectator can relate to her actions. I believe this to be true because everyone at one time or another has hurt someone else as a result of misguided emotions that caused us to behave badly rather than rationally.

What is a Bitch?

According to the Oxford Dictionary, the formal definition of a bitch is a noun for a “female dog, wolf, fox or otter”². The Oxford Dictionary offers as a second, informal and derogatory definition of bitch as a “spiteful or unpleasant woman”³. The vulgarity of the word is believed to have begun in the 14th century with the comparison of sexual behaviors of women to that of female dogs in heat. Early use of bitch as a derogatory label for women in a theatrical context can be traced back to *The Chester Mystery Plays*⁴ of the 15th century which were based on Biblical content, and thus legitimized the insult in Western Judeo-Christian societies. This essay refers to the second definition of bitch, which although informal and derogatory, is more commonly used in contemporary society as the lasting result of emotional attacks on the female body.

By my own admission, I love a good bitch and it is my love for bitches that drives me to re-appropriate her on the stage. A well written, sassy bitch can invigorate the soul by allowing us to live vicariously through her manipulating tactics and malicious demeanor, giving us license

² “Bitch” Oxford- English.com 2011, <http://www.oed.com>. February 28, 2012.

³ “Bitch” Oxford- English.com 2011, <http://www.oed.com>. February 28, 2012.

⁴ *Chester Mystery Plays*, <http://www.chestermysteryplays.com/history/abouttheplays.html>. April 1, 2012.

to be queen during the performance. The 1950 film, *All About Eve* (based on the short story and radio play *The Wisdom of Eve* by Mary Orr), starring Bette Davis and Anne Baxter thrilled us with delicious evil as Margo was influenced by the unscrupulous Eve, who slithers like the serpent that deceived Creation's first woman of the same name. The Biblical Eve in the Garden of Eden became the world's first bitch because her weakness and inability to control her desires brought the burden of labor upon men. As punishment to her own sex, women were forever marred with a life of servitude (yet another definition of bitch) coupled with the physical curse of menstruation and childbirth cast by God upon her body. The starlet, Anne Baxter (Eve), finagles her way onto the Broadway stage, replacing the star, Bette Davis (Margo), as diva in a dramatic depiction of show business in the mid-twentieth-century. The film is filled with witty and cynical comments that fuel the rejuvenating bitchiness. However, what makes for a good bitch in my writing process does not come with the fantasy of getting everything glitzy with well crafted cattiness and squinting eyes, but instead from shaping emotions that are derived from oppression and hardship.

It is my belief that Lillian Hellman uses the oppression and hardship of women in the development of her bitches because she draws upon the survival techniques of strong women. Her creation of Regina in *The Little Foxes* (1939) as the quintessential bitch for the stage remains unsurpassed in wickedness. However, my favorite Hellman bitch is too young to be considered a legitimate bitch. In *The Children's Hour* (1934) Hellman writes the character, Mary, to cause havoc for her schoolmistresses, Karen and Martha. Mary is an evil liar that tells her grandmother that Karen and Martha are lesbian lovers, but because she is a child, she is viewed as a brat rather than a bitch. Hellman more than likely wrote Mary through a process that involved relating her to unlikable females that she observed and possibly empathized with during her own childhood.

Mary is a bitch that will cause others pain out of determination to stop her own pain, which is exactly the kind of bitch that I wanted in the development of María and Josefina. The mission to stop the pain blinds them to the consequences of their actions and allows for their unpleasant disposition to support the narrative of the plot. In the case of *The Children's Hour*, Mary's lies spread to the community that in turn alienates Karen and Martha. This controversial play laid a heavy stone in the road that paved the way for feminist and queer theatre to be recognized as legitimate art, and it could not have been achieved without a bitch to offer fodder and reflection.

My views as a male feminist playwright are obviously not the norm, since it is common knowledge that male playwrights have been writing misogynistic plays that portray women as appropriated bitches since the Greeks. Nonetheless, as a gay Chicano, my need to write a bitch with dignity was crucial in the development of María in *Caballos Muertos* because early 19th century New Mexico was comparable to ancient Greece in that it was a slave-based economy where women were considered property. I cannot go back in time to change anything, but writing María in *Caballos Muertos* was my way of going against concepts of Greek society that excluded women from discourse and allowed for cultural fictions of females to take hold in the arts. I wrote against examples such as the notorious Helen of Troy who brought the civilized world to war because she was too pretty for her own good; therefore her body was to blame for the demise of society. I also wrote against the Greek example of the shamefully lustful Pheadra who brought destruction because she couldn't control her bodily desires and had an affair with her stepson while her husband was away, affirming the notion that women could not be trusted. However, what I find interesting is that, in several cases, the ancient cultural fictions of women on the stage can be modified and transformed with feminist ideologies in contemporary theatre simply by females embodying the roles that were written about them. Misogyny cannot be

removed from the text of Greek plays entirely through masterful acting techniques in performance, but allowing an actress to fully embody a female on stage gives power to the character by adjusting objectives through interpretation.

The question of males acting in female roles is partially responsible for the development of Josefina in my thesis play. Josefina is transgender (assigned female at birth, but identifies as male) and harbors toxins as a coping mechanism to survive the loss of her brother who was murdered. I originally tried to write the play with a central character that was female, but with a stipulation of a male in the role. After several aborted attempts, I came to realize that as a playwright I could not force gender and sexual identity on an actor, but instead had to trust the female body to speak for herself. Sue-Ellen Case offers observations on Greek female characters by recognizing the absence of female playwrights and the biased treatment of women in fiction and drama that shines light on a fascinating observation in her book *Feminist and Queer Performance: Critical Strategies*. Case points out that the Greek plays *Medea* and *Lysistrata* have become essentially new plays after the success of the feminist movement because shifts in performative gender codes have reshaped the characters: “I would argue, and hope that my examples might reveal, that it is precisely the abstraction of gender from sex that actually continues to inform these stagings rather than the embodiment of it.”⁵ Whereas I would agree with Case that the abstraction of gender from sex can inform actors and directors on Greek classics, I am a little hesitant to dismiss misguided embodiment of gender in Greek plays entirely. These plays were written for men about women, therefore they harbor connotations that linger in subtext. A well trained actress can compensate for the Greek playwright’s fictional

⁵Case, Sue-Ellen. *Feminist and Queer Performance: Critical Strategies*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. 2009. Print. 116.

depiction of women in a contemporary production using skills that enable her to emotionally connect with the character. However, the playwright's disconnection from female interests is still present, although hidden, because it would be impossible to write an honest depiction of someone who was viewed as inferior.

Perhaps I wanted a male in the role of a female who identifies as a male as a way of cheating. By cheating, I mean it could be that I was thinking about spectacle, and not trusting the written words of my play. It is possible that this kind of cheating started early connotations about the female body in theatre that began to solidify on the Greek stage with the use of masks. Masks enabled actors to perpetuate fictions of women with objects that satisfied their views of inferiority. Also, cultural fictions of women in art more than likely took hold on the Greek stage because playwrights in that society excluded women from intellectual discourse and would not have been able to write a female character that was not a misunderstood bitch. This misunderstanding is likely the result of men trying to convey the female presence on stage with the use of a mask as a visual aid. The Greek concept of wearing masks during performance has provincial irony in relation to this discussion since the Greeks wore masks to personify the emotional self of a character, but how could a patriarchal society emotionally personify a sex it oppressed? Indeed, how can an oppressor respectfully portray the oppressed on stage without resentment and ridicule?

The caricaturist quality of a mask can transform it from an object that is essential into a thing that is situational and subjective. As explained by Robin Bernstein, "An object becomes a thing when it invites a person to dance."⁶ Bernstein asks how material cultures produce

⁶ Bernstein, Robin. "Dances With Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race," *Social Text 101* (Winter 2009); Vol. 27, No 4.

meaning, giving way to the questions of how humans perform with racially meaningful, three-dimensional material culture. She likens gender constructs as well, observing that even when a caricature cutout scene of *Tarzan and Jane* does not determine a gender-transgressive performance, it can still imply one because it projects or implies a heterosexual couple, which in turn functions as a latent presence in the thing.⁷ Relating Bernstein's research to connotations about the female body on stage, I am left to believe that an ancient female mask as a scriptive thing with the latent presence of Greek attitudes toward sex endorsed assumptions about the female body that allowed for cultural fictions to grow. As I developed Josefina I began to understand that her body was female; which means if I were to write the part with the stipulation for a male to play it, I would be making the same assumptions regarding gender and would actually be counterproductive in liberating the female body from cultural fictions.

Addressing the complexities of love through gender expression is not something that is limited to Feminist and Queer playwriting. However, an unscrupulous bitch that lends support to the narrative of the story is rarely missing in a play with female characters. Arthur Miller writes a bitch as a secondary character in the form of a home-wrecker in *Death of a Salesman* (1949) to shatter the image that Biff has of his father and hence destroys the central character, Willy Loman. Again, it is the woman who, like the Biblical Eve that has done irreversible damage with a lasting effect on everyone, not the man who willingly participates in the intimate transaction. And, like the female dog in heat, it is the woman's sexual behavior that is to blame for men being unable to control their own bodies. However, what makes for a curious observation regarding sexual identity in this American classic is that Miller entertains the notion of gender as an enigma in the first act, as Willy Loman tells his wife, "You're the best, a real pal,

⁷ Bernstein, Robin. "Dances With Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race," *Social Text* 101 (Winter 2009); Vol. 27, No. 4.

you know that? On the road-on the road I want to grab you sometimes and just kiss the life out of you.”⁸ We know full well that Willy is a heterosexual man. He is more than heterosexual he is cisgender (a person that expresses his or her gender the way contemporary society expects them to through American ideologies of masculinity and femininity to endorse attraction to the opposite sex). What is interesting is that in these lines, he tells his wife that he values her like a pal making her a male spirit that he can identify with; in a sense he is involved in a bromance (nonsexual relationship between men) with his wife. I believe that Willy is a man that has complicated his love for his wife by loving her as he would a male friend. Would it be okay for a straight man to say to a male friend that he wants to kiss the life out of him? Not in our society! How does Miller keep Willy one hundred percent heterosexual? He uses the word, “just” to soften the romantic connection he has to his wife as a pal while at the same time the words, “just kiss” are used to profess his attraction to her. I would argue that Miller is fueling Willy Loman’s sexual identity with a delicate fanning of embers to show the complex dynamics of a straight man’s love through gender expression.

Señora de la Pinta

I chose to write *Señora de la Pinta* as well as *Caballos Muertos* in “Spanglish” for several reasons that include a personal belief that it is my native tongue in spite of the fact that Spanglish is a hybrid of Spanish and English and not really an actual language. I can endorse this sentiment by honestly saying that I did not know that English and Spanish were two different languages until I started school and still feel awkward saying certain expression completely in English. The reclaiming of Spanglish rests on a parallel of a bitch and gender politics to me because I am a Chicano belonging to a generation that was discouraged from speaking Spanish

⁸ Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. New York, NY: Viking 1949. Print. 1.580.

and, as a result, I am bitter because I feel that my identity has been modified by the American ideology of “English only”. Therefore, I chose to write Spanglish plays in protest of living in the ambivalence of an ethnic gay man that belongs to a colonized race and gender. Also, like the re-appropriation of the female body on stage, I believe that Spanglish deserves representation in contemporary American theatre because it offers a cultural connection to New Mexico that uniquely expresses my heritage as a New Mexican Chicano and has the right to demand the removal of cultural fictions.

A climactic drama, *Señora de la Pinta* is based on Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* with the Chicano emphasis on loyalty and honor. The play examines cultural and religious complexities pertaining to love in relation to sexual identity and gender expression, not only from the protagonist, Gringo, a Chicano ex-con, but from most of the cast, particularly the bitch that I use as the emotional catalyst. Like the citizens of Thebes, the women of a barrio are plagued with emotional unrest resulting in loss from a horrific prison riot modeled after the New Mexico prison riot of 1980.⁹ Gringo, like Oedipus, vows to find justice to better portray himself as a hero. However, unlike Oedipus who seeks the killer of King Laius to end the plague upon his city, Gringo’s goal is to honor his fiancé, Bon, by finding the killer of her son who she believes to have been lost in the riot. Her son, Tito was openly gay, which causes Gringo problems as a macho heterosexual Chicano who has difficulty with the concept of a homosexual lifestyle. Gringo is not necessarily interested in finding justice for Tito, but instead wants to punish the killer for bringing pain to the woman he loves.

Gringo is discouraged from finding the killer by Bon at the beginning of the play because she simply does not want to know who killed her son. This strays from Sophocles’ play

⁹ New Mexico Prison Riot of 1980, <http://www.newmexicohistory.org/filedetails.php?fileID=451>. April 1, 2012.

because Jocasta does not try to discourage Oedipus from seeking revenge until it is too late. However, Josefina, Bon's transgender daughter encourages Gringo to pursue the killer because she also identifies as a macho Chicano who values honor and loyalty above everything else. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Josefina pressures Gringo to find the killer because she was emotionally attached to Tito and, as a result, harbors more pain than she can take. When writing Josefina, I harvested the pain of bereavement and coupled it with gender frustrations to create an angry female who is unable to command respect from her community. Josefina further complicates Gringo's homophobic mentality because he is a master manipulator that knows how to control women and intimidate men, but has no idea how to have a lasting effect on a transman.

The use of mysticism is also clearly defined in both *Señora de la Pinta* and *Caballos Muertos*. I chose to write mystic themes because superstition is a cultural aspect of my writing, just like Spanglish. In *Señora de la Pinta*, I wrote the chorus as Lechuzas (owls), which are pets to Curanderas and I wrote the blind oracle of *Oedipus the King* as a blind Curandera in my play that is Bon's aunt, Tía Margarita. Gringo is literally warned by Margarita to abandon his search because the outcome will not be as victorious as he believes, but Gringo allows his machismo pride to guide his mission only to discover that he is the killer of the Bon's son, Tito. Gringo finds Tito was his former prison punk (yet another kind of bitch) that he inadvertently fell in love with. Gringo's love for Tito is epic because Gringo himself cannot understand how it is possible for a straight man to love another man. This love is further complicated because sexual intercourse was involved, which would make Gringo homosexual by most definitions including his own. However, Gringo does not identify as homosexual, so by contemporary definitions he is a man who has sex with men or MSM. The idea for this complicated relationship was inspired

by David Henry Hwang's play, *M. Butterfly* (1988) in which a man falls in love with another man who he believes to be a woman.

Josefina's determination to find her brother's killer continues after Gringo realizes that he is responsible for Tito's death and decides to stop searching. However, when Josefina solves the mystery and confronts Gringo with Bon present, the realization that Gringo was once sexually involved with Tito causes Bon to take her own life just as Jocasta did when she realized that she was married to her own son. Gringo then begs the Lechuza Chorus to dig out his eyes after seeing the truth because he is no longer able to look at himself.

The process of developing characters for *Señora de la Pinta* as with *Caballos Muertos* required that I examine complexities in everyday performance as concepts that society takes seriously. In the case of *Señora de la Pinta*, the complexities of Josefina's gender in everyday performance would require understanding consequences of exclusion because of her crossing of gender boundaries. For example, a sports-loving woman can maintain femininity if she watches football, but should she decide to try out for a professional football team, there would be a shift in her expression of gender. Her heart is in the same place whether she is a sports fan or an athlete, but there is a shift in her performative role should she actually play the game. Of course, not everyone will look at this woman as a confused transgendered spirit who aches to express masculinity, but not everyone will be accepting of a woman playing a traditionally man's game. Laurence Senelick makes reference to this concept in *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* in supporting Walter Benjamin's essay on Baudelaire, "The notion that working in a factory masculinizes a woman more than working in the fields smacks of romantic pastoralism: to be a 'real' woman one has to be close to nature. It voices the chivalrous but ultimately

confining concept that once woman enters the public sphere, she forfeits her distinguishing ‘refinement.’”¹⁰

As I developed characters for my own version of *Oedipus the King*, I began to dig deeper into the text of the play, and explored performative gender codes on stage as a concept that asks questions about ourselves and how we view the sexuality of others. This exploration made me wonder about connotations regarding the only female character in *Oedipus the King*: Jocasta, being the character Bon, in *Señora de la Pinta*, is modeled after. I wrote Bon, not as a dutiful wife who is obligated to obey her husband’s commands, but as an independent woman. I did this because the independent female has always been affiliated with the bitch because the dynamics of her actions become blurred when she is fully accountable for those actions. The bitch’s kindness is often mistaken as weakness and her strength is threatening, making it impossible for her authority to be anything other than bitchy. Bon is a woman who is wise from life experience, but chooses to ignore the truth rather than face the consequences of knowing it. She finds comfort in not knowing. Bon expresses her gender with feminine maternal strength that is gentle unless provoked. In this way she differs from Sophocles’ Jocasta who falls into the same category of strong female characters personified as bitches like Medea and Lysistrata. However, Bon is similar to Jocasta in that she harbors the burden of responsibility for bringing pollution to her barrio just as Jocasta did with the city of Thebes. The difference is that Bon’s sex betrays her with complexities of love that conflict the rules of the Catholic Church, the barrio’s portal to the God and the universe. Bon and Jocasta both can be traced to the root of conflict for the plays; Bon believes that she has fallen victim to the wrath of God because of her previous love life

¹⁰ Senelick, Laurence. *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre*. New York, NY: Routledge. 2000. Print. 327.

whereas Jocasta falls victim to the gods with a love life that is riddled with the universal taboo of incest.

I wrote these characters to be female spirits that are exposed as disobedient using their bodies to express insubordination through performative gender codes. Bon went against the rules of Catholicism by marrying outside the church and Jocasta defied her husband, Laius, who ordered her to kill her baby. By contemporary American standards, Bon's love arguably transcends the rules of Catholicism making her likable, and releases her from blame for the conditions that plague the world of *Señora de la Pinta*. By the same standards, Jocasta's unconditional love for her baby makes her respectable despite the fact that she caused her husband's prophesied death and brought about the demise of the city of Thebes. However, in both plays, it is love that causes these characters to take their own lives as they both assume the role of bitch by accepting responsibility for the despair of their respective communities.

Both characters kill themselves in shame because they cannot accept the truth once it is revealed to them. Bon takes her life believing she is releasing her son's soul to the universe, but Jocasta takes her own life as an assumption of responsibility rather than blaming Oedipus for any of the miserable conditions that trouble Thebes. However, neither character is completely pure at heart without humanistic flaws. Bon has a foul mouth and rejects authority, and Jocasta tries to manipulate Oedipus by asking him to stop searching for the killer of Laius instead of incriminating herself by revealing their incestuous marriage. Bon and Jocasta are spirits, like Oedipus, who cannot escape their damning fate, yet empathy is directed to Oedipus and Gringo because female disobedience allows for their suffering to be seen as self-inflicted and justified.

I have long wanted to write a gender bending play that would explore performative gender codes on stage as a concept that asks questions about ourselves and how we view the sexuality of others. The course of action in *Señora de la Pinta* tells a man's story about the complexities of love. However, I ached to write a bitch that came with unanswerable questions of sexuality and gender using cross-dressing as a "front" to exemplify society's confusion at the core of sexual minorities.¹¹ I quickly discovered that trying to filter light onto something that cannot clearly be seen made for a very challenging writing endeavor. Nonetheless, throughout the writing process I consistently wanted a manly woman on stage. I wanted to express poetic justice for the butch female spirit; the female spirit that innately embraces the role of her oppressor and demands the right to share his masculinity through mannerisms and appearance. I decided after reading *Oedipus the King* that this manly bitch should parallel Creon as next in line for the throne. In this role, Josefina, also takes the pressure off the character that parallels Jocasta by prompting Gringo to realize he is the killer he has been looking for. In writing this I decided that I would allow the bitch to have her emotional shift when she unintentionally informs Gringo that he is the killer. This is apparent in my play because, unlike Jocasta who figures out the mystery first, Josefina is oblivious when she provides Gringo with the vital information, when she lovingly remembers Tito's birthmark.

Writing the cross-dressing character, Josefina, who calls herself "José" for *Señora de la Pinta* resulted in my getting lost several times and then going back and starting at the beginning because, as I alluded to earlier, for me, writing a play is hearing voices in the dark without seeing the spectacle before my eyes. The aesthetic of a cross-dressing bitch on stage reiterated the question as to whether or not a male would be better suited to portray an angry female who does

¹¹ Front (Erving Goffman) the various elements such as setting, costume, voice, gesture, and so on that support the performance of a social role.

not identify as a woman. Originally, the thought behind this casting concept was to create a grand manifestation like Caryl Churchill's play, *Cloud Nine* (1979), in which several characters crossed-dress in theme with Churchill's statement about imperialism. In *Cloud Nine*, the character, Betty, is played by a man in drag during the first act to signify she is everything men desire, since her social identity is imaginary. Churchill gave me fodder for writing, but her approach matched Imperialistic Britain with special qualities that didn't match a Chicano-themed, New Mexican adaptation of *Oedipus the King*. Still, I wondered, since the character I was creating would be ambivalent with gender, if a male could literally show the abstract, or the nonrepresentational, element that defines who she is internally. However, I feared that the camp element of drag, a woman dressed like a man, would lighten the load of the character's emotional distress because historically women playing men on stage has been a novelty unlike the concept of men playing women which is a practice we have accepted since ancient times. I continue to hold the conviction that a male playing a female that identifies as male is an interesting casting choice, but I was not certain that it would serve the play with the symbolic value I was hoping for.

I took into consideration Laurence Senelick's definition of drag kings in *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and the Theatre*; "Drag kings tend to portray 'men's men': Coarse, womanizing boors clad in velvet lounge jackets or baggy soccer shirts and shorts, grungy contrast to the glittering bitches and bimbos preferred by drag queens."¹² Senelick's definition aided in my process because a bitch expressing herself as a bold "men's man" on stage would better convey the complexities of her actions. The character would then be a female expressing

¹² Senelick, Laurence. *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre*. New York, NY: Routledge. 2000. Print. 492.

gender through a man's image, rather than a manly image dictating gender. As Senelick writes "Cross-dressing in the theatre thus engages with more than concerns about gendered personal identity: it invokes aspects of divinity, power, class, glamour, stardom, concepts of beauty and spectacle, the visible contrasted with the unseen or concealed."¹³ Senelick's theories reminded me again that I needed to trust my writing and allow the actress to conjure the emotion of a woman who identifies as a man.

Writing a difficult cross-dressing female who identifies as a man was a delicate process that I knew would receive mixed reactions from spectators. I wrote Josefina as a character that mirrored a machismo Chicano who was hot tempered and eager to fight, and yet accepted his female body for what it was; being a man to Josefina had nothing to do with a penis. The concept is not unfathomable when considering Judith Butler's now-familiar "performativity" the notion that the Codes act, not the subject. Josefina's refusal to be a woman does not mean she is freely released from the expectations of others who identify her based on her anatomy. Nonetheless, Josefina will never be able to meet societal expectations because her unique gender codes are not able to conform to satisfy those around her. Thus, she is complicated and difficult. Butler argues "a prior and volitional subject", the performative "constitutes as an *effect* that the very subject it appears to express."¹⁴ In simple terms, it is gender acting and not the biological sex of an individual. I developed Josefina with the intension of giving a clear representation of a young woman who expresses pain like a hot-blooded Chicano, as a feminist statement that men can be bitches too. However, as I developed Josefina through creative empathy and research, I kept wondering what constituted Butler's use of "volitional?" Is it an outward willingness to

¹³ Senelick, Laurence. *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre*. New York, NY: Routledge. 2000. Print. 492.

¹⁴ Butler, J. "Critically Queer" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 1:1(1993): Print. 17-32.

participate, or is volition in terms of gender identity, more like cards in a deck that are shuffled into place over time, allowing for the “Joker” or a “wild card” here and there that causes a slight quirk within the performative gender norm? In other words, how many feminine traits does a female need in order to be a woman?

I wrote both Josefina as well as María as characters that are self-conscious, constantly seeking a misplaced identity regarded as the Other. The Other is also explained by Judith Butler: “[s]elf-consciousness seeks a reflection of its own identity through the Other, but finds instead the enslaving and engulfing potential of the Other.”¹⁵ It is a safe assumption that the concept of Other should then be present in all complicated female characters, including the masculine lesbian, because gender has been colonized since before the Greeks. To be colonized implies that there has to be a constant state of ambivalence that never allows the oppressed to have control over identity because two separate personas are in conflict; the true identity of the individual and the identity that is being enforced. Our bodies cause us to be marginalized and our aesthetics can be both empowering and weakening. Butler suggests that it is the visual of the human body that navigates our lives. She says, “It is the aesthetic of the human body that both empowers us and weakens us because society uses our looks to explain the mundane way in which social agents constitute social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign.”¹⁶

Embracing the imagination is vital in the playwriting process because imagination can never be wrong as it is self defined. Therefore, you can write about anything you please and no

¹⁵ Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay of Phenomenology and Feminist Theory, *Theatre Journal*, Vol 40, No.4 (Dec., 1988), Print. 519.

one can say you are wrong. Feminist playwriting allows freedom to stray from the constraints of structure and reinvent storytelling. However, feminist playwriting is by no means a thoughtless spew of emotion onto a page. Logic and craftsmanship are involved to construct an intricate and personalized story that is truly unique. The complexities of gender in playwriting are comparable to English grammar because grammar has specific rules that dictate what is correct, but every rule seems to have an exception so if you follow the rules too closely everything that should be right is suddenly wrong. The same thing could be said about sexuality because there is no such thing as “always” in gender although certain aspects may seem to be quintessential. Nevertheless, everything in a given sexual identity challenges something else, and the conflicting differences within can serve as fuel for emotional unrest that has allowed for me to develop a complicated bitch.

Caballos Muertos

Set in New Mexico during the era of the Santa Fe Trail, *Caballos Muertos* is a play about living with heartbreak. Two young Chicana sisters, Guadalupe and María, destroy each other over the love of an American trapper in a dark fairy tale that is narrated by the ghost of their little brother. Their brother, Juanito, died an unnatural death as a sacrificial consequence of colliding love spells, cast by a wicked bruja hired by the sisters. The unscrupulous bruja knowingly cast the same spell for the two sisters, each having no idea that the other sister had feelings for the man whom she loves. The bruja is bitter about Americans taking over the local economy and believes that María and Guadalupe deserve to suffer loss for wanting an American instead of one of their own primos from the Spanish Land Grant.¹⁷ The detrimental spells lead to the American trapper, Henry, killing the sisters’ abusive father, Antonio, as family secrets surface. The murder

¹⁷ Spanish Land Grants, http://www.nmcpr.state.nm.us/archives/land_grants.htm (April 1, 2012)

occurs when the spells cause Antonio to manipulate Henry into marriage with the kinder, overweight Guadalupe even though he is in love with the beautiful yet hardened María, who subsequently becomes committed to an arranged marriage with Antonio's young amigo, Arturo. The import and export of cultures and traditions fuel a world of political turmoil that aids the evil forces of black magic, causing havoc in the lives of everyone who comes into contact with sisters, including the bruja. When the curse which the sisters have brought upon their family has damaged the heart of everyone, a questionable reconciliation occurs where they reunite as comadres who are forever marred by betrayal and disappointment.

Caballos Muertos was my maiden voyage in feminist playwriting, and coincidentally, writing it was instinctual for me as I have difficulty concentrating in a linear fashion. Writing a non-linear play that structurally matches the concepts of feminist playwriting, as well as feminist play structure came naturally to me. The structure of *Caballos Muertos* rejects linear action and complications in forward motion that lead one event to the other, instead it is scrambled with scenes that go backwards and forwards in time because María's experience is broken and disjointed. This form of playwriting is typical of feminist play structure which goes against Aristotle's unified play structure that dictates the organizing principles of traditional playwriting following the path of complication to climax to resolution. Feminist play structure is a nonlinear narrative that ambiguously combines fragmentary scenes and deliberately avoids phallogentric play structure. Writing in this way was a choice that I unknowingly made to exemplify María as a fragmented soul who is constantly disturbed by the demands of her world. Also, Aristotle's unified structure is representative of the male experience and way of thinking (hence phallogentric), but the female's innate ability to multi-task represents her experience of the brain being in several places, but still achieving goals. In retrospect, not all females claim multi-

tasking skills, but perhaps these females that cannot multi-task possess a “volitional wild card” in their deck of gender traits. In any event, using feminist play structure allowed me to develop María as shattered, which makes her unpredictability loathsome and bitchy.

In this play, conceptions for a bitch came through a process of observing intimate female friends that have become emotional enemies with each other due to colonized bodies. It is unfortunate, but true that some women have been conditioned to turn on each other as result of self-loathing. I wanted to experiment with the objectification of the female aesthetic that places gender in yet another ambivalent state in playwriting so as to tell a story of a female who would be seemingly privileged and adored by everyone for her beauty despite of the fact she would be manipulative and deceitful. The character, María is, indeed, a bitch, but she is a bitch that has been made through social conditioning in the same way her gender expression has been formulated and developed. María’s beauty is a curse like the deformities of William Shakespeare’s, Richard III, of *King Richard III*. Richard III is a protagonist-villain who has been marginalized because of his body, as María has, but he justifies his evil deeds as result of internal violence resulting from being a hunchback and ugly on the outside. María’s issues with looks may appear to be the opposite because she struggles with beauty, but the internal violence, just as Richard III’s, is driven by others who cannot get past her looks.

As the story of *Caballos Muertos* unfolds, it is revealed that María’s demeanor is derivative of the sexual abuse her father, Antonio, subjects her to. The abuse has tainted her perception of what it means to be a beautiful woman, because she feels that her looks are responsible for her abuse. Therefore, she is conditioned to resent her body for bringing the abuse upon her. María resents affection and admiration from the Chicanos of her village because she sees them through the same lens that she views her father. However, when María becomes

acquainted with the gallant American, Henry, she is suddenly able to dismiss her resentment for men in general because she is attracted to his difference; a fair complexion and light hair despite of the fact that he is an unscrupulous individual. I would argue that this exemplifies how the physical can misrepresent the emotional, adding another layer to a complex expression of gender. María initially trusted Henry, solely on the basis of his looks, despite of the fact that she resents Chicanos who cannot see past her own physical aesthetic. Writing María's sexuality was difficult because I was indeed trying to be sensitive to the shattered female who is frequently subjected to rape, while at the same time illustrating the razor sharpness of those shattered pieces. I tried, in vain to write María as a troubled soul with dark secrets who exhibits her anger, but I could not get anyone to empathize with her until I wrote a scene in which her father was forcing himself on her. I chose to write this graphically as the climax of the play because I was afraid that if the audience knew her secrets too soon they would forgive her too early and thus make her a heroine rather than a manipulating villain who just happens to be the protagonist and a cisgender female.

Paula Vogel's character, Li'l Bit, in her Pulitzer Prize winning play, *How I Learned to Drive* (1997) is very much like María because she also shoulders the blame of betrayal and abuse and holds her body directly responsible. However, Li'l Bit is not a bitch in *How I Learned to Drive*, and her abusive uncle, Peck, is not like Antonio who abuses María in *Caballos Muertos*. Uncle Peck appears to be a loving, congenial man that genuinely cares for his niece. This is a brilliant move on Vogel's part because it instills the creepiness of finding a pedophile likeable. Nevertheless, his inappropriate sexual advances force Li'l Bit to disconnect from her inner identity and behave according to how another person interprets her body. Vogel's Li'l Bit tells her story of molestation through a personal narrative that is non-chronological in sequence so as

to convey the isolation and recovery that is associated with her incestuous experience. However, Li'l Bit is never able to fully escape from her past allowing for a problematic ending to the play. By my interpretation, Li'l Bit is trapped in a body that has betrayed her by its appearance. I created a similar problematic ending in *Caballos Muertos* by having María try to use her body as a vessel for escape from her abusive father. Maria's body fails to be enough to get her out of her destined fate thus reiterating that the female aesthetic holds little power outside of the bedroom.

In using a paradigm that suggests the female body is assessed and legitimized on the sole basis of what it looks like in order to foster the oppression of women, I can then argue that everyone (both men and women) suffers from the effects of patriarchy because we are all conditioned with those demands and attitudes regarding the female aesthetic. This paradigm can be flipped and applied to the queer image in contemporary American theatre because characters like Josefina are also assessed and legitimized on the basis of biological sex. In that regard, it is sex that fosters the oppression of gender because we are expected to behave according societal norms delegated to (not by) our respective sexes. In *Caballos Muertos*, Antonio is a gender victim because his sex and environment dictate that he should dominate his daughters as a way to express his masculinity. This particular character is confused by the expectancy of his own gender role and the gender roles of his daughters in the absence of his deceased wife; he seeks domestic needs of labor from his oldest daughter, Guadalupe and sexual needs from the desirable María. The dynamics of Antonio's relationship to his daughters is similar, though not intentionally so, to Maria Irene Fornés' *The Conduct of Life* (1985) where the central character, Orlando, victimizes the women in his life according to how he views their significance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that feminism is a concept in theatre rather than a theme that is limited to female playwrights. The ability to shape emotion through creative empathy is a universal talent all playwrights should possess in order to make it possible for us to capably tell stories that are not necessarily our own. Feminism is widely misinterpreted as another word for lesbian and it shoulders connotations of anger and rebellion, but in all actuality it is merely a critique of the dominant male culture that excludes women from the social condition. Of course this critique extends itself to the movement to win political, economic, and social equality, but essentially it is a basic, critical analysis that allows for dialogue. However, I proclaim that since the Greeks misrepresentations of women on stage have been widely acceptable throughout history, the effort to understand sexuality and gender has not been explored enough. In addition, I believe further exploration of sexual identity and gender expression in contemporary feminist plays aids in the inclusion of female characters with stories of their own, female characters who are intergraded into the story as bitches that serve as emotional catalysts rather than segregating them within the text of the play as bitches who serve as obstacles for male protagonists.

Playwriting, like all art forms also comes with an assumption that some people will love your work and some people will hate it. The same can be said about sexual identity and gender expression, some people will accept everything as a different normal and some people won't accept anything that strays from social conventions. As I developed Josefina, my goal was to provoke an audience into thinking about the intimate and private details that design someone's emotional fingerprint. By writing a story that would allow them to look through a lens that doesn't present itself very often on the stage, I would demystify conceptions of gender by

acknowledging that there are no right or wrong answers. The complexities of gender in my writing process are the substance by which my characters directly affect the narrative of my plays. I hope that when traditional conventions of sexual identity and gender expression are deliberately challenged, the audience will have no choice but to think about individual circumstances that may be foreign to them.

I have no doubt the gender codes defined by one's respective society can complicate the design of her emotional fingerprint, making her a bitch. With the understanding that everyone is different, dramatic writing can indeed familiarize an audience with the unknown. Playwriting cannot explain gender issues because, in addition to gender and sexuality being an enigma, art is interpreted differently according to the individual. Therefore questions will forever remain unanswered. However, through familiarity, fear is gradually released and coexistence becomes reality through creative empathy.

Gender issues are sensitive and easily dismissed in conversation because of a direct connection to the subject, but when the issues are woven into art the spectator is able to have a double relationship to the self. This double relationship allows an openness which can inform us about ourselves and influence a spectator, planting the seeds for social change. Also, familiarity with others who express their gender differently allows us to recognize aspects from our own surroundings that could be seen as different or abnormal. This recognition can be the playwright's greatest tool in addressing gender issues in a play because it asks the audience to see itself as different. Writing a character like Josefina allows for both male and female spectators to recognize complexities of their own gender mirrored in what they see on stage. Spectators may not welcome such recognition, but the playwright is presented with the opportunity to question gender's complicated rules as they apply to the audience. This

recognition creates dialogue, which in turn allows the spectator to be more familiar with the emotions of characters instead of just the body.

I would like to symbolically end where I began because sensitive issues concerning race and gender forever go in circles. A playwright's heart must connect with the heart of a character so that her story can be told honestly through creative empathy. The honesty of the play and its character support the narrative, and allows the audience to entertain the issue even if they disagree with the themes of the playwright. It is not without reason to believe the playwright's willingness to understand a gender issue can be passed on to an audience if the writer genuinely cares about the subject and writes a character with honesty and not opinion.

An honest depiction of angry females questions cultural fictions we hold onto because creative empathy allows for a connection to her personal history while at the same time uses her anger to shape the emotional force of the play. Writing an honest bitch for the stage, then, aids in social change because emotion is honored, allowing her difficult personality to be justified. In answer to concern over the power of playwrights in writing another's story, it must be understood that the process of writing performative race and gender roles for characters who do not really exist will indeed be difficult or a "bitch" because the complexities of gender in playwriting requires a detailed revision process in order to ensure proper sensitivity is given to the subject. The truly delicate part of this writing process is making sure that sensitivity offers reason to things that don't make sense while at the same time not hurting the subjects they represent.

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