Speak My Language:
An Analysis of Women's Use of Language In the Realm of Performance Art

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In the fast-growing, relatively new genre of performance art, women are struggling with language as a mode of female expression. They experiment with the patriarchal structure and etymology of verbal communication, in some instances assimilating traditionally male speech patterns (e.g. cursing, scatology, explicit sexual references) and in others creating a syntax and vocabulary--a "language," if you will--of their own. The former category of artists, the "Revolutionary School," reject feminist linguistic theory and decline to express themselves through alternative structure and invented or redefined vocabulary. The latter, the "Evolutionary School," embrace the teachings of theorists such as Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, utilizing language in unstructured, irrational ways.

The linguistic battle between a "female" mind and a "male" tongue extends beyond the purely artistic realm; it informs the most basic feminist criticisms of Western culture. Attacking the language itself as a flawed and biased instrument created by a single dominant group within society, Casey Miller and Kate Smith point out that human behavior is largely based on ideas handed down by language and symbol from earlier generations, and that, "considering that for the last five thousand years society has been patriarchal, that statement explains a lot" (102).

The very structure of language can be viewed as a tool which indoctrinates the native speaker in the beliefs of his or her culture. When that culture is created and described solely by men, it is a small wonder that the position of women, as described in the English language, is a marginal one at best. Miller and Smith point with

accuracy to assumptions inherent in the language that reinforce the subordinate position of women in this culture, describing the way in which "language makes (women) a lower caste, a class separate from the rest of man" (102). Except for words referring specifically to women--such as "mother" or "actress"--the English language defines everyone as male; within the language, man is the rule, woman the exception. Although the effects of growing up under a system of expression that defines your sex as an afterthought are inexpressible, they are visible in some of the problems women face when they attempt to address these difficulties. If language itself has a masculine bias, then any protest of the bias is compromised by being couched in the self-same language.

To some modern thinkers, language is an entity that both traps women in the role of Other, the perpetual outsider, and paradoxically, gives them a voice with which to challenge this definition. The contradiction inherent in women's use of "male" language is not easily dealt with. French feminists especially have attempted to construct a model of woman's language, theoretically free from phallocentric biases and masculine orientation. However, this is much easier to describe than to accomplish. Helene Cixous, in her article "Castration," characterizes the sex of the text as crucially different from the sex of the author:

> Most women are like this: they do someone else's--man's--writing, and in their innocence sustain it and give it voice, and end up producing writing that's in effect masculine. Great care must be taken in working on feminine writing not to get trapped by names: to be signed with a woman's name doesn't necessarily make a piece of writing feminine....It's rare, but you

> sometimes find femininity in writings signed by men: it does happen. (Moi, 108)

Most theorists associate "masculine" writing with a rigid, logical, and concrete style; the standard five-paragraph essay is possibly the apotheosis of this type of composition. Yet students are trained in this single writing style as if no other were possible. The difficulty in attempting to break free from "masculine" writing is best summed up by Toril Moi, as she describes the ironic effect of an imitation of masculine academic writing in an essay by Luce Irigaray:

> If as a woman under patriarchy, Irigaray has, according to her own analysis, no language of her own but can only (at best) imitate male discourse, her own writing must inevitably be marked by this. She cannot pretend to be writing in some pure feminist realm outside patriarchy: if her discourse is to be received as anything other than incomprehensible chatter, she must copy male discourse. (140)

Both Cixous and Irigaray attempt to define feminine writing by resorting to analogy and exclusion; they can't explain exactly what women's writing is, but can tell you very definitely what it isn't. Both women end up with a remarkably similar concept of women and women's writing based on the analogous likeness between women and water. Women should write in a fluid unstructured style, like their flowing, aquatic sexuality. Irigaray describes women's language as "continuous, compressible, dilatable, viscous, conductive, diffusible....powerful and powerless through its resistance to that which can be counted" (142).

The trouble with these representations of alternative styles of discourse lies with their basic assumptions of masculine and feminine as constants. "Male" and "Female" are biological divisions;

"Masculine" and "Feminine" are socialized constructs reflecting societal views of men and women. When the idea of femininity is used as the basis for a theoretical viewpoint, the result usually says more about the author's concept of femininity than about the female condition. It is almost impossible to use the word "feminine" without invoking cultural stereotypes of women. Furthermore, the eternal masculine/feminine dichotomy is only one example of the underlying binary world-view. This "two-valued orientation" (Hayakawa, 112) is the essential trap that theorists and performance artists must attempt to avoid. As defined by Hayakawa, it is the "penchant to divide the world into two opposing forces--'right' versus 'wrong,' 'good' versus 'evil'--and to ignore or deny the existence of any middle ground" (113).

This is the sort of rationale that allows Cixous and Irigaray to define feminine writing as composed of all the elements not present in masculine writing. Therefore, if logic, reason, and firm structural design are masculine qualities, then feminine language cannot use them and must be irrational, illogical, and fluid. However, as is evident in the writings of both scholars, sometimes embracing the irrational simply makes one difficult to understand. The problem of a uniquely "feminine" language is apparently an insoluble one, at least as long as the debate is couched in a "masculine" tongue.

Performance art as a medium, if indeed it can be classified by a term so imbued with an implication of the tangible, is still in its infancy. Attempting to define "performance art" is something akin to pinning down a cloud; and one's citing of the "beginning" of the

genre is entirely dependent upon that ephemeral definition. It is safe to say, however, that the generally recognized beginnings of performance art lie in the early 1970's (Mifflin 84). Women's issues were moving into the public eye, and women's rights were becoming more specifically defined. It was only natural that women would grasp hold of this new art form and run with it; women such as Laurie Anderson, Gina Pane, and Carolee Schneeman were among the first performance art pioneers (Haden-Guest 212).

Throughout history, women artists have been for the most part anomalies. They stand out in literature and art history texts largely because of their gender. Had women always enjoyed the social, legal, psychological, and intellectual freedom to pursue artistic endeavors, perhaps one could evaluate female artists based solely on their merits. But in genres such as painting, sculpture, architecture, and the like, this is but a utopian fantasy, a pipe-dream. Take for example the Renaissance painter Artemesia Gentileschi; she gains an offhand mention in most art history courses, but what is said? Usually no real criticism or discussion of style is offered. Often she receives only a thumbnail psychoanalysis attributing the misandry of her subject matter--frequently tableaux from the story of Judith and Holifernes--to her rape at the hands of a family acquaintance (Hartt 15-6). How can one explore at length styles and innovations (or the lack thereof) of women painters of the Renaissance if the category is limited to a few wives/daughters of pre-established artists and a handful of amateur portraitists? For possibly the first time in history, a genre of art has come into being that women can explore,

exploit, and manipulate side by side with their male counterparts: performance art.

Since female performance artists are in a position to be accepted as equals by both art critics and fellow male artists, they face different challenges than did their predecessors. They do not have to resort to deception with respect to their gender as did the pseudonymous writers George Sand and Isak Denisen, or stand by silently while their work is credited to male relatives or friends (i.e., the publication of Colette's novels under the name of then-husband Henri "Willy" Gauthier-Villars (Jong vii)). These pioneer women in the performance art field find themselves hardest hit by the same criticisms as male artists, the most notable and oft-heard being something along the lines of, "Is this really *art*?!"

The most famous case-in-point is the NEA grant-funding flap of 1990. It is interesting to note that, in the publicity surrounding this event, the names of two women rose to the forefront on the side of the artists--Karen Finley and Holly Hughes. Four artists were in fact denied funding, the other two being John Fleck and Tim Miller, both "out" homosexuals. The media flurry touched off by the funding decisions caused the popularity--or perhaps, infamy--of performance art in general to boom and unintentionally set up Karen Finley as the quintessential performance artist, the martyr to the ire of conservative Carolinian senators, the Joan d'Arc of the genre.

Finley's art is confrontational; she performs angry, in-your-face pieces about subjects ranging from censorship of art to sexual abuse to her father's suicide (Sante 35-6). It is not surprising then to

note that the language she uses is also confrontational. She is part of a "school" of women's performance artists who utilize language in a typically masculine way. These women achieve a certain equality in speech that women have heretofore been forbidden. Finley and her angry sisters--women such as Holly Hughes, Annie Sprinkle, and Diamanda Galas--aren't going to stand for any taboos.

Finley intends to make her audience uncomfortable; she wants to hurt them, and hurt them she does. Her pieces create an atmosphere of pain, sorrow, and often degradation. Finley's use of language is more accessible to the scholar than some other performance artists, as she has compiled her performance texts in an "anthology" of sorts, Shock Treatment. The reader/viewer is immediately struck by her words; language is one of the tools she uses to elicit from the audience various disturbing emotions. In her piece, "I'm An Ass Man" from "Quotes From A Hysterical Female," she recreates a scenario in which a man, walking in the subway, spies a woman he wishes to have sex with; forcing himself on her, he discovers she is menstruating and is disgusted:

> How could you do this to me, woman? How could you do this to me? How could you be on the rag on me? I'D BE THE BEST FUCK IN YOUR LIFE! THE BEST PIECE OF COCK IN YOUR LIFE, GIRL! THE BEST RAPE IN YOUR LIFE! (51)

These words are not those of a woman; they are the words of a perpetrator of violent crime, words which come bursting out of his victim in anger and hatred.

Finley often assumes a male role, as when she graphically describes a man raping his mother in the piece, "The Father In All of Us" from "The Constant State of Desire:"

> ...I'M NOTHING BUT A MOTHERFUCKER! ...I pull down her panties and I look at her fat rumpled ass like a piece of uncooked bacon...Then I mount my own mama in the ass. That's right, I fuck my own mama in the ass 'cause I'd never fuck my mama in her snatch! She's my mama...After I cum, I come out of my mama. I want my mama to want me but she don't ever want me. (18-9)

One cannot read this passage without wincing; imagine Finley herself performing it. It is not so much the portrayal of a man by a woman which we find "shocking;" it is the language she uses when she "is" that man. Of her language in pieces like these, Finley says, "I use a certain language that is a symptom of the violence of the culture. If I talk about a woman being raped, I have to use the language of the perpetrators" (Juno 41).

This is not to say that Finley cannot use language in any way other than to spout crudities. If her pieces cited above are hate-filled, ugly, and over-masculine in tone, her poetic piece, "The Black Sheep," is beautiful, personal, and androgynous in its language:

> ...it doesn't hurt quite so much,
> In our world, our temple of difference.
> I am at my loneliest when I have something to celebrate
> And try to share it with those I love
> But who don't love me back.
> There's always silence at the end of the phone.
> There's always silence at the end of the phone. (142)

However, this piece was written for a public sculpture installation--a monolith located in a shantytown. Its purpose is to be a memorial and a comfort to the homeless of the area. Finley did, however, perform a public reading of the piece in "We Keep Our Victims Ready." (Juno 43). It is not that Finley herself is incapable of using

language in a way other than the double-Y-chromosome, barroom-brawl style she adopts for her performance pieces; this sort of speech is a conscious choice. Through her language, Finley refuses categorization. She will not allow gender to prevent her from using words and images to create a mood--often a very disturbing one.

Diamanda Galas, on the other hand, uses the same mode of expression in her performance pieces that she uses in her everyday life. She is another woman artist in the Revolutionary School, the school of language assimilation, and perhaps she is one of the most controversial. Since her language, vocabulary, and powder-keg ideas do not get toned down in the least in the translation from stage to "real life," it is much easier for the "Jesse Helms contingent" to write off all of her work as extremist ravings. However, this is not the case.

All of Galas's work is centered around the AIDS epidemic; her pieces both advocate AIDS-related education and speak from the soul of pain and loss caused by the disease. Galas dedicated her artistic work to the cause of AIDS in 1986 upon the AIDS-related death of her brother, Philip-Dimitri (Yates). She is disdainful of those who offer her pity, or who attempt to restrict the broad scope of her work:

> My brother *despised* cheap sentiment. He despised parlor-room sympathy. He was a strong man, a genius, a great writer. He was a fucking *homosexual* ...Kiss my ass--it's not wonderful. I'm not a noble person, my brother wouldn't want your fuckin' journalistic sympathy, and not only that, he just called me from Hell the other day and told me he's never been fucked so good in his life! So kiss my ass! Do you understand? (Juno 12)

Galas uses the same sort of shock tactics on-stage as she does in interviews. She often curses, shrieks, or douses herself in blood. She is not easy to listen to, as her work recreates the horror and pain of the disease itself.

She is far-reaching in terms of the language she assimilates and/or manipulates in her artistic pieces. In her "Masque of the Red Death," she utilizes not only her own writings, but also performs several Psalms and Lamentations from the Old Testament, an excerpt from the Gloria Mass, a Greek song written by her brother, she quotes pieces by Nerval, Baudelaire, and Corbiere (Galas). In the piece, "Vena Cava," she uses fragments of schizophrenic language and excerpts from her brother's plays (Kitchen).

Though both of these pieces have a distinctly ceremonial feel to them, Galas spouts her shocking obscenities in the self-authored sections. For example, her "Second Invocation: Sono L'Antichristo," from the "The Divine Punishment" act of "Masque of the Red Death" retains its litanic rhythm but uses such phrases as, "I am the scourge. / I am the Holy Fool. / I am the shit of God. / I am the sign. / I am the plague. / I am the Antichrist" (Galas). Language is a tool she manipulates quite well--the audience is just as uncomfortable listening to her shrieking and wailing of the Psalms as it is hearing her religiously chant her own blasphemous statements.

Though the text of Galas's pieces seems to be split down the middle between her own writings and her interpretations of the writings and ravings of others, all of the language she utilizes somehow ends up being confrontational and (borderline) offensive. Take for example the seemingly innocent repetitive exchange in

"Vena Cava" where Galas asks herself, "What time is it?" and then responds *ad nauseam* , "How are you feeling?" This excerpt is quite terrifying in performance when one understands that the first voice is the voice of her brother who, in AIDS-related delirium, believes himself to be speaking with the Devil, and the second voice is the impassive voice of a medical aide.

Galas's abrasive offstage personality and her sacrilegious, controversial performance pieces combine to make her a cult phenomenon. She often receives critical acclaim, but just as often bears the brunt of righteous anger--usually from Christian zealots. Her language coupled with her religious imagery is most often the source of condemnation by establishments such as the Catholic Church: "In 1990 forty Italian newspapers branded her 'blasphemous,' 'cursed,' and 'sacrilegious' after her performance at the Festival delle Colline" (Juno 7). Galas however will not compromise her speech or herself in order to make her art more "palatable" for the masses.

Contrasting sharply with the approaches of Finley, Galas, and others like them are women artists like Fiona Templeton, Beatrice Roth, and the trio Thought Music. These women have a vastly different approach to language and syntax. In their work, artists of this ilk--the Evolutionary School--break down the rigid structures of our patriarchal language, bending the rules and playing word games. These women speak of experiences and convictions no less intense than those spoken of by the Revolutionary School--Templeton's "Strange to Relate" struggles with narcissism and the creative

process, Roth's "The Father" describes the loss of a parent, and Thought Music's "Teenytown" addresses the life-experience of ethnic women in andro- and Caucaso-centric society. However, their language leads one around in circles or off on tangents rather than slamming one into the wall of their message.

Templeton's performance of "Strange to Relate" is an odd mix of a conversational style recalling the comedienne and an almost campy routine of performer/audience interaction. She tells the story of her attempt to write a journal, often deviating from her train of thought in odd, cynical tangents. The narrative is periodically interrupted each time Templeton says the word, "you." Whenever she utters this word, she slaps herself on the forehead, gestures to an object, and invites the audience to chant along with her, "This is [the floor]," or, "This is [my head]" (Champagne 167-84). At times she frantically runs from one side of the stage to the other, arguing word order with herself:

> The boy threw the egg against the wall. The egg broke.
> No. The egg broke. The boy threw the egg against the wall.
> No. The ice cube melted. I sucked the ice cube.
> And no. I sucked the ice cube. The ice cube melted. (178)

Her piece is as disjointed and as confusing as the creative process itself. The convoluted, repetitive, "illogical" speech she uses reflects the composition of thoughts expressed through a rigid, structured, "rational" language. Her piece is a female perspective of a woman's struggle to put her "female" ideas down in a "male" language.

Roth's style is practically stream-of-consciousness. She blends sentences together in a conversational, fragmented style: "His teeth

were small and perfect he had them all upon his death of course he was only sixty when he died still in those days if you had all your teeth at sixty" (Champagne 38). She haphazardly throws together words to create a feeling or an image, rather than carefully assembling them into a concrete, easily understood point. She describes her emotional estrangement from her mother with the sentence, "Something ontological no such fissure in her claustrophobic distance with the mother" (39). Roth confronts her audience, but she does so in a convoluted, almost devious way. She talks of shocking things, but in a style such that the viewer might only catch it several minutes later. She explains her Elektra-esque jealousy of a woman her father loved in a metaphor about chopping foodstuffs in preparing her father's favorite tarts (41). One isn't initially offended; realization comes upon reflection.

Thought Music, comprised of Laurie Carlos, Jessica Hagedorn, and Robbie McCauley, present their piece "Teenytown" in a jaunty, finger-popping style that is antithetical to the convictions they are espousing. They sing and dance in several ethnic styles--gospel, girl-group, tribal. They knockabout in a slapstick manner, telling racist and sexist jokes. They adopt the characters of men, of whites. Often the lyrics to the songs jar gratingly against the styles, as in the Supremes-esque number, "Pork" (parenthetical lyrics sung by backup singers):

> I once lost a friend from eating pork. (pork)
> Everybody was hungry, it was a late-night munch, (pork)
> It was a soul-food restaurant, real commercial, (pork)
> But conscious enough back then to ask if you wanted
> beef or pork ribs... (pork)
> When I said "pork" to the waiter, her eyes (pork)

> Went up outta sight. With serious Black bourgeoisie
> Nationalists back then, you didn't eat pork. (Champagne 97)

In the opening number, Hagedorn and McCauley play sentence games, restating the same idea over and over with synonyms:

> H: My husbands had to be white. I was too sexy.
> M: I am bewildered by some of the stuff that surfaces.
> H: My husbands had to look white. I was too outspoken. I played the piano. I liked to dance.
> M: I am shocked by the incidents that occur... (Champagne 96)

Thought Music's actions often appear to be those of three performers having a great time with their work. The language they use, however, makes the audience feel uncomfortable and ill-at-ease, though in a different sense than the women of the Revolutionary School. The audience wants to laugh right along with the troupe, but cannot bring itself to do so. The performers incorporate cruel racist humor and absurd stereotypes into their speech--this groups them with the Revolutionaries. However, enough of their text structure involves word games, syntactic foolery, and circular rather than linear structure that one must also consider them as candidates for Evolutionaries. Thought Music are perhaps representative of artists who bridge the gap between these two schools.

One would assume that all of these artists would share a commonality of language, given a commonality of gender, of subject matter, and of perspective. It follows that there would be a universal language spoken by these women in the realm of their art. Taking into account the boiling anger of Karen Finley and the sex-separationist ideals of Galas, it is shocking that they use traditionally

masculine language, moreover that they revel in that usage. These women, if "true feminists" they be, should surely follow Cixous et al. in their linguistic expression. However, this is evidently not the case. Their approaches to language are vastly different, both from one another and from their sister artists of the Evolutionary School--themselves all quite varied.

The two linguistic approaches to the text of women's performance art are as different as night and day, Conservative and Liberal, even (dare we say?) man and woman; it seems a virtual impossibility to conceive of a merger between the two.

On the one hand, we have the Revolutionary School, those who believe that confrontation and antagonization will snap the deadened society out of its reverie, that in order to affect real change one must first revile the general public and give it a verbal kick in the teeth. In some cases this is successful. There are surely those in the audience of Galas's "Plague Mass" or of Finley's "The Family That Never Was" who leave the performance stunned, speechless, and filled with a desire to do something to help alleviate the horrors that have assaulted them in the theater. But there are also those who leave in disgust after the first ten minutes, who tunes out the artist and write her off as a bitter victim or a "psycho bitch." On the other hand, there are the Evolutionary School, those who believe that women's experience cannot be explained or given a voice in the language of men. Perhaps in their playful rearranging of language, in their creation of new rules, new syntax, and new vocabulary, they will appeal to those who reject the more vitriolic, scatological artists. Their alternative approach to language accepts the theory that

women must create a speech of their own in order to express their ideas and experiences. Thought Music alone of the artists discussed bridges this gap in the text of their art--and there does indeed need to be a compromise reached. A universal language of women, though as yet impractical in terms of everyday usage, needs to be established artistically.

Admittedly, there is a vocabulary which up until recently has been socially denied to women. There should be no taboo words, no taboo subjects; vocabulary and subject matter must be equally accessible to both sexes if a sphere of merit-based equality is to be set up. This freedom of speech is necessary not only artistically but also socially.

However, the concept of a "feminist-based" linguistic structure is valid as well, at least within the realm of performance art. The creation of a totally "female" language is an impossible task--women will always need to communicate with men, so even if a mode of expression peculiar to women were established, it could only be utilized within the realm of one's own gender. Rather, it is more practical to suggest that women performance artists work towards "feminizing" their usage of language, altering the syntax and linear structure slightly. These changes should not be so extreme as to nonsensicalize the text; however, a slight nudge of the language in a more woman-oriented direction is a step on the road to a compromise between women's need for a personal mode of expression and our androcentric language.

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