And What of the Night?: Fornes' Apocalyptic Vision of American Greed and Poverty

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> —Watchman, and what of the night?
> —The morning cometh, and also the night.
> (Isaiah 22:11-12)

> I fear for our future. I feel that we are becoming greedy and heartless. . . . When I first came to live in this country [in 1945] I was deeply moved by the spirit of compassion and concern for the underprivileged that I found here. Now I ask myself what has happened to this spirit. In these plays I ask that we give thought to what would happen to our civilization if we don't reverse the course we have taken.
> Maria Irene Fornes, *Night* Program Notes 44-45

In *And What of the Night?* (1990), a cycle of four one-act plays meant to be performed sequentially in one evening, U.S.-Cuban playwright Maria Irene Fornes traces the increasingly deleterious effects of poverty and greed in America from the Great Depression to 1998, a time after nationwide economic collapse. Through terse scenes of daily interaction, Fornes conveys her perception that poverty and homelessness at the end of the century differ fundamentally from the 'hard times' of the 1930s. In the first play about a single mother struggling to raise 'good' children without house or husband, Fornes dramatizes her sense that "during the Depression, people were homeless and living in the streets, but there was a sense of family, there was hope" (Marx 8). In the next two plays, Fornes

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Throughout this essay, double quotations (" ") are reserved for cites from other sources. I use single quotes (' ') to indicate coined or ironic terms.

contrasts the petty crimes that poor people commit in order to survive with the pervasive social damage caused by the acquisitive empty lives of the wealthy. By the time the cycle reaches the fourth play, most people are scavenging through rubble in crime-ridden streets, gravitating every evening to vast bureaucratized homeless shelters, outside the armed enclaves of a rich minority. In Fornes' epic, "night" comes for all characters rich and poor; even the most privileged lose their souls, their children, their self-respect, and their peace of mind.

In order to unsettle the assumptions that may blind audiences to the omens of imminent social and economic disaster, Fornes uses a wide range of strategies. She 'familiarizes' the daily lives, choices, and feelings of the poor, hoping to inspire the audience with understanding and empathy. She 'defamiliarizes' privileges and points of view too easily taken for granted, such as access to nourishing food or the belief that one's opinions represent 'the truth.' She concretizes theoretical insights with shocking images and creates characters who move across naturalized divisions, characters who seem to "be" one kind of person in one context and a very different "kind" of person in another setting.

In *The Conduct of Life* (1985), Fornes both complicated and clarified her portrayal of the maintenance and consequences of military and domestic violence by showing the daily lives of women in different class positions. In *And What of the Night*, Fornes examines changes in structural economic inequality in the U.S. by following the life stories of family members divided by gender and income/class differences. Without crossing her own line between art and politics, between revealing a problem or contradiction and "telling what to do about it [or] indicat[ing] what the next step should be" (in Mael 189), in *Night* Fornes presents her vision of a difficult but relatively compassionate past, a rapacious present, and an apocalyptic future.

In the first play of the cycle, "Nadine," we watch the daily negotiations of a single mother still destitute in 1938 to maintain her home and family. When the play opens, Nadine has lost one child to illness, given up little Ray for adoption, and baby Lucille is seriously ill. In order to feed her growing family without the aid of a husband, a 'family wage,' or even birth control, Nadine has turned to occasional prostitution. Her 16-year-old son, Charlie, scavenges clothing and personal effects from drunks and dead men and sells them to Pete, a small time mobster. Nine-year-old Rainbow, still too young to help out, comes to understand that her brother endures Pete's psychological and physical abuse to help feed and clothe her. And though Nadine may console herself that her children do not see what she does to feed them, of course in their small outdoor living space, they can hear her. However, it is not true, as Nadine laments, that

she has "nothing to give them or teach them," for all her children inherit her tenacious will to survive ("Nadine" 45).

Interestingly, Fornes explores "the spirit of compassion and concern for the underprivileged" that she fears Americans have lost, *not* by depicting the charity of wealthy characters for those less 'fortunate,' but by exploring how destitute yet hopeful Charlie emulates his caring mother rather than his heartless boss, Pete. As the play opens, Fornes shows us one of Pete's 'lessons.'

Guided by his mother's instructions, Charlie is trying to iron a wool suit that he had damaged by washing it. Having taken off his one set of everyday clothes in order to avoid soiling them with perspiration, Charlie stands ironing, clothed only in his boxer shorts when Pete walks in and asks gruffly, "Did you get some stuff?" ("Nadine" 4). Charlie nervously produces a paper bag of worthless odds and ends; Pete is dissatisfied and demands to see "the good stuff I heard you got" (5). But, Charlie hesitates to produce the "good stuff":

Charlie: I thought I could keep some of the clothes.

Pete: Who said?

Charlie: I thought I could keep them.

Pete: Did anyone say you could keep them?

Charlie: I thought I could.

Pete: How come you thought that?

When Charlie finally shows Pete the outfit he had hoped to keep for himself, Pete inventories each item, eventually asking, "Did you take the underwear?" When Charlie tells Pete that he left the man's undershorts to cover his nakedness, the following 'lesson by interrogation' ensues:

Charlie: He was naked.

Pete: So what?

Charlie: To cover himself.

Pete: So?

Charlie: He was cold.

Pete: You don't say.

Charlie: I mean that I felt sorry for him.

Pete: For what?

Charlie: To be lying in the street cold and hurt like that.

Pete: That's stupid.

(PETE puts the paper bag in the box) (7-8)

Even after Pete indicates that he is ready to leave, Charlie continues to explain his compassionate point of view. Standing dangerously within Pete's reach and covered only by his elasticized shorts, Charlie continues:

Charlie: I wouldn't want it done to me.

Pete: *(To the audience)* Hey everybody! Listen to this!
(To CHARLIE) Say it.

Charlie: What?

Pete: That you felt sorry for him and why.

Charlie: (*To the audience*) Because he was naked.

Pete: And what else?

Charlie: Nothing else.

Pete: That you felt sorry.

Charlie: I felt sorry.

Pete: And what else?

Charlie: Nothing else.

Pete: That you wouldn't like it done to you. Say it. That you wouldn't like to done to you.

Charlie: *(To the audience)* That I wouldn't like it done to me.

Pete: Hey! Don't leave him here with me! I don't need this guy.

(PETE takes the box and starts to exit)

Charlie: You didn't pay me, Pete.

Pete: *(As HE exits)* You shouldn't have done what you did.

Charlie: What?

Pete: Kept the clothes. You're lucky you didn't get your teeth kicked in! *(HE exits)* (8-9)

Despite such bleak scenarios, there is also humor and romance in this first play, particularly in Charlie's courtship and marriage to Birdie, a streetwise orphan befriended by Rainbow. The teens' sexual attraction soon blossoms into a romantic engagement despite their sordid circumstances. Scene 7 opens with Pete lasciviously pursuing Birdie around the dining room table. Our young hero, Charlie rushes to the defense of his intended, shouting, "I've had enough of you, Pete!" Given this chance to show up his young rival, Pete trips Charlie and then conks him on the head with his pistol butt, saying "That's what you get!" Before exiting, 'villainous' Pete turns once more and "shakes his genitals" at Charlie, yelling "And this!" ("Nadine" 31). But the scene ends, as Birdie kneels to cradle tearful Charlie in her arms. After Birdie kisses Charlie on the cheek, he asks, "Be my girl . . .", and she responds, ". . . I am" (32). She bends down to kiss him again as they are surrounded by the warm glow of a "special."

In this scene, Fornes both celebrates and parodies movie romances and their influence on the course of 'real life' love affairs. In addition, she presents a sympathetic portrayal of the resilience of young love, even among destitute and 'delinquent' youth—an infatuation which in this case leads to marriage. By invoking a movie reference shared by poor and middle-class viewers alike, she provides a bridge for her audiences to perceive that they share images and feelings with the characters in "Nadine."

Fornes' darkly comic send-up of saccharine depictions of the noble poor and their humble circumstances evolves into a parodic melodrama when Nadine finds

that Pete is her only source of money to buy medicine for little Lucille. Having witnessed Nadine's failed attempts to reason with Pete and then to seduce him, we now see Charlie abasing himself, literally grovelling before Pete, to secure a loan. When Pete insists that he hasn't any money, Nadine resorts to force and threatens him with a knife. Although uninjured by Nadine, Pete begins to convulse; while he gags and coughs Nadine removes his gold jewelry. He then produces wads of money, which she eagerly takes, all the while rebuking him, "It's too late, Pete. God's not going to forgive you." As Pete continues to gag, Nadine comforts Rainbow and Charlie saying, "Everything's going to be alright," even though we know that Lucille will not be "alright" even if she recovers from this illness. Fornes closes her melodrama with Nadine, the suppliant mother turned conquering hero, in the center of a 'happy family' tableau.

In "Nadine," Fornes highlights the vestiges of maternal love and familial connection that Nadine manages to preserve and to instill in her children. The play also demonstrates the range of tactics a poor family may use to survive: Nadine flatters, whores, demands, and finally uses force; Charlie walks the precarious line between self-assertion and keeping his job; Rainbow asks questions and learns that it may be necessary to endure abuse to care for loved ones; and Birdie works and watches for opportunities to move up in the world. For the rest of the cycle, Fornes follows the divergent fortunes of Nadine's children in order to underscore the deeply personal as well as economic interconnections between people of seemingly separate social classes.

In "Springtime" (set in 1958), Fornes focuses on the intersection of poverty with sexism (and homophobia) in the sad tale of Rainbow's love affair with Greta, a German lab technician. When Greta contracts tuberculosis, Rainbow immediately turns her tiny room into an infirmary and resorts, almost automatically, to petty thievery in order to pay for Greta's treatments. However, as Greta had feared, Rainbow is soon caught—by a "nasty" man who makes her agree "to do something for him" in order to avoid being sent to jail ("Springtime" 9).

For a while, things go better for the lovers: Greta seems to be getting stronger, Rainbow has settled into working for Ray, and the women reaffirm their love for each other, pushing aside Ray's growing influence in their lives. In Scene 5, Rainbow laughs away Greta's fear that if she dies, Ray would replace her in Rainbow's heart. In Scene 6, Rainbow recounts for Greta Ray's "brotherly" advice that she should "choose to love a man," and her logical defense of her sexual preference, "It doesn't make a difference to anyone else, but of course, it makes a difference to me" (12). Fornes successfully mainstreams this lesbian couple by making no comment and presenting them as 'normal.' She introduces a dissenting (and discredited and disembodied)

homophobic voice only after the audience has followed the joys and trials of the women through five scenes.

However, Ray continues to dominate first Rainbow's, and then Greta's, thoughts and conversation. Their relationship begins to unravel after Greta discovers photos of Rainbow's work for Ray—the seduction of powerful men for blackmail purposes—and she is not consoled by Rainbow's heartfelt explanation that she does "that . . . because [Greta] must have treatment. I don't mind. It's for you" (18). The final blow comes when Rainbow's feeling that Greta is keeping things from her and no longer "adores" her is confirmed—when she discovers that Ray, who had argued against her lesbianism, has been seducing Greta. The audiences' knowledge that Ray is actually Rainbow's half-brother only adds a further twist to this man's rapacious need to insert himself into Rainbow's home life and to destroy the women's relationship.

Like Nadine and Charlie, Rainbow has no ambitions to advance in the criminal world or to make money. She turns to petty thievery and prostitution not to procure illicit drugs for herself, but to obtain legal and prohibitively expensive medical treatment for a loved one. But fortitude and endurance based on love for another lose their value when the love dies or is destroyed, and since she cannot love "only halfway," Rainbow leaves Greta to the strains of "Melancholy Baby." Rainbow's death (not shown in the cycle) is foreshadowed in a love letter that Greta discovers after she has gone. The lights fade on the set, leaving a spot on the Singer who with sad irony, repeats, "Smile my honey, dear, as I kiss away each tear. Or else I shall be melancholy too" ("Springtime" 26).

In "Nadine" and "Springtime," Fornes examines the stranglehold of poverty and others' greed on the lives of the poor, especially poor women. Wary that her portrayal of the entangled oppressions of the poor might support middle-class audiences' tendency to identify with the wealthy and to work toward securing a place among the privileged for themselves and their families, with "Lust" Fornes focuses on the downside of avarice for the upper managerial classes, revealing the corrosion that corporate greed works on the personal and business lives of the rich—an aspect of the poverty/greed dichotomy too often left out of social protest drama. Eschewing didacticism, Fornes exploits and then subverts popular interest in glamorous representations of the wealthy, such as television's *Lives of the Rich and Famous*, *Dallas*, and *Dynasty*.[1] I find it no accident that "Lust"'s setting "from 1968 to 1983" parallels shifts in American concerns: from social change in the 60s, through personal change in the 70s, to personal gain in the 80s.

In twelve terse, enigmatic scenes and an extended dream sequence, Fornes uses both realist and surrealist techniques to present the demise of a dynasty and the dehumanizing cost of greed and exclusion, of insatiable desire and killing

competitiveness. More than simple exposé or social protest, "Lust" exemplifies Fornes' facility for concretizing theoretical insights in order to fix in our mind's eyes the bonds between men of power, the displacement of women, the devaluation of interpersonal relations, and the impoverishment of language and feeling by categorization and habitual dispassion.

As the play begins, Ray, now an executive, meets with an older CEO, Joseph. While they discuss Ray's request that Joseph contribute to the education of a boy Ray has befriended, Joseph initiates and consummates sex with Ray on his office divan, never missing a beat in their negotiations. Ray has to repeat the key words "financial" and "fund" several times before Joseph deigns to understand the nature of his request and only agrees to "advise" the foundation to help the boy after sex has been consummated. Even then Joseph bases his consent on his trust in Ray's judgment that a scholarship for the boy "would be a good investment" ("Lust" 1-3).

After completing their business, they are interrupted by Joseph's daughter, Helena, who seems mentally unbalanced, perhaps sedated. She stays only long enough to announce that Ray (and her father) are "wild like earth full of worms . . . worms that shout" in contrast to her earth which "doesn't have living creatures in it" (4). In an action reminiscent of Julia's paralysis in *Fefu* and Rainbow's swoon at the beginning of "Springtime," Helena falls to the floor, saying, "It is a bitter thing" (4). She then rises with Ray's assistance and declares with "strange urgency" her love for her father. Joseph hesitates and then clumsily kisses her on the cheek. As soon as she has left the office, Joseph asks Ray to marry her; after a moment of consideration, Ray accepts.

I was not shocked or offended by Fornes' discreet but unmistakable presentation of casual, consensual sex in the workplace or even her 'familiarization' of 'sodomy':

Ray: By the way, I enjoyed that very much.

Joseph: I did too. Any time you feel up to it again, give me a ring. I thought it was quite pleasant. Very natural.

Ray: I thought so too. ("Lust" 3)

The scene remains with me, however, because of Fornes' bold staging of the exclusively male-male nature of corporate deals and of the colonization of sex and interpersonal relations under the rubric of "business." After Joseph has wrapped an afghan around their waists and positioned Ray in front of him, Ray asks casually, "Is this ordinary, is this the way you conduct business?", and

Joseph assures him, "Yes, frequently. This is frequently the way I conduct business. It doesn't interfere with business" (2). The homosocial nature of their dealings is only furthered when Joseph gives his 35-year-old daughter to Ray, almost as codicil to their previous agreement. When Ray agrees to marry Helena, Joseph thanks him, for it is apparent that although Joseph describes Helena as "elegant, like her mother," "well-made, like a horse or piece of art . . . that took time and craft and breeding to make" (10), she is emotionally damaged and totally dependent on "some else's earning ability" for her survival (12). Helena functions not as a prize but rather, like a rickety old estate or fragile heirloom, as a mark of the family's distinction whose maintenance is a burden and responsibility that Ray, the adopted heir of the aristocratic line, must now shoulder.

Joseph thus precludes women from active roles in his business—the exchange of power between male generations. In producing Ray as his business successor and son-in-law, Joseph has managed to father a "son" and heir without the aid of a woman; but as we will see, Joseph's consummation produces "a crazy son," an Oedipal son who will displace the father by usurping his only love—his business. Ironically, Ray's sole explanation for his restless drive is that he inherited a fever, an insatiable hunger from Nadine, his impoverished mother.

As one reviewer rightly noted, *Night* targets "spiritual disintegration" rather than capitalist schemes (Marx 8). From scenes of Ray's and Helena's married life, we learn that Helena's mother never held her and that her father "always wished for a son and not a daughter" (47). Her resulting mental confusion and lack of self-love draw further humiliation from Ray who compares her unfavorably with animals who would never "be passive if there was food anywhere within their reach" (11). When Helena makes the point that "humans can't just sniff and find food . . . [that] food is many steps removed from man's reach" and that "for some people, survival is not so clear," Ray dismisses the truth of her insight with the judgment, "it's sub-human" (11-12).

Soon after, Helena 'dares' to interrupt Ray's "work" and he responds by grabbing the nape of her neck and forcing her down to the floor. In this moment, we can literally see the combined forces of sexism and class hatred pressing Helena down. Ray berates her:

> I don't need you for anything whatsoever. I go home to you each day. But I could go to an empty apartment as well. . . . I've never said "I love you." . . . You are like an insect smashing itself against my windshield. I don't hear you. And I don't see you! And I don't want to hear you! Or see you! (11)

As she crawls toward the divan, Ray takes Helena's previous insight about human survival and turns it against her.

> Animals are beautiful and refined and delicate. . . . They know how to obtain sustenance and shelter. They not only exercise when they need to chase after prey or get away from an animal that gives them chase, but they know when they need exercise and run and play for no other reason than to keep in shape. (16-17)

If we understand "keeping in shape" to include mental and emotional well-being, Ray's remark about the need to "run and play" may inadvertently point to one of the causes of Helena's malaise: interference with and devaluation of the creative "play" necessary for a strong sense of self.[2] Like Fornes' middle-class characters in *Fefu*, *Abingdon Square* and *Conduct*, Helena's life of relative economic privilege has provided her with the leisure time for self-creating and self-affirming "play," but she has been denied the necessary encouragement and active engagement of supportive parents or other mentors. Meanwhile, the knowledge she has gained from formal education and life experience has been denied or devalued. With this portrait of Helena, Fornes debunks the popular conception that wealthy women necessarily enjoy high status and an easy life, while showing the damage that gender division and the drive for monetary gain and social status work on familial relations. However, Fornes also grants Helena moments of clarity and self-confidence in her own perceptions.

Having attended the theatre with Ray, Helena criticizes the play they had seen, despite Ray's remark, "You didn't [like the play]? . . . That's odd . . . I liked it" (12-13). Helena protests the playwright's use of "false words which have no thinking behind them" (13), words used only to categorize and identify others by their social position or potential business utility. Although Ray defends such words for practical uses, Helena maintains that "a lot of these words are a hoax. People feel good using them but they feel a little cheated later, debilitated." Fornes makes it clear that Ray is no match for Helena in analyzing language or interpersonal relations either onstage or in 'real life.' After raving to Joseph, just the scene before, against human addiction to technology and "the new," Ray contradicts himself by countering Helena's argument with the lame adage "new words for new times" (13).

Like his father-in-law, Ray thinks of nothing but work, taking infrequent vacations only to refresh himself for more work. We never see Joseph, Ray, or Helena enjoy the fruits of their amassed wealth. On vacation, Helena sleeps with a young boy not for her own pleasure but in a futile attempt to move Ray to jealousy. However, in the sequence entitled "Ray's Dream," his single-minded

focus on work is belied by a series of fantasized sexual encounters between Ray and a young mechanic, his own image in a mirror, a foot fetishist, and an Edwardian girl. These tabooed sexual fantasies devolve into a nightmare in which Ray must watch as stereotypical "Chinese movie" characters burn $100 bills in an unexplained "religious ritual." Even in his dreams, Ray's lust for money overshadows his increasingly perverse sexual desires.

The only human succor in these empty lives appears when Birdie is hired "to look after" Helena. Ray has made a connection back to his original family and Helena has finally found a supportive listener and someone for whom she can also feel compassion:

(HELENA looks down at her dress, adjusts it and adjusts her hair)

Helena: *(To BIRDIE)* Am I all right?

Birdie: Yes.

Helena: Do you hate me?

Birdie: No, I don't hate you at all. (36)

Even when Helena confirms her suspicions that Birdie is part of Ray's extended family and that she is in love with him, Helena responds with forgiveness and pity for Birdie.

Although Birdie becomes Ray's lover, perhaps her support helps Helena withstand the final dissolution of any pretense of familial love and support. In the course of Joseph's complaint to Helena that Ray (the husband he chose for her) is taking away his business, Joseph selfishly confesses, "I've never talked to you about the things that are important to me . . . my work. . . . I have not loved anything the way I love my work" (43). Once Ray has entered and silently confirmed Joseph's fear that there is nothing he "can do to prevent [Ray from] taking everything away," Joseph projects his own sense of helplessness onto Helena:

You are a master of your own life, Helena.

(There is a pause. HE waits for a response.)

Exercise your free will. Animals can do better than you, Helena. . . . Animals manage to work their way around us even if it appears that

> they are dependent on us. . . . We also don't need to bemoan our lack of freedom in regard to any other human being.
>
> *(pause)*
>
> Haven't I taught you to love yourself?

Helena: [retaining her composure] No,—father. (44)

By including Birdie as an onlooker in this scene, as a watchful servant-cum-mistress (of the house), Fornes underscores the shift of power from old money with its genteel facade into the hungrier hands of climbers from the 'lower classes'.[3] Fornes also draws a portrait of the limits of individual liberty and the social constraints on freedom of choice—even for males born into relative privilege. Joseph exacerbated the precariousness of his position by failing to make his daughter a valuable and valued class ally. By not exempting her from his prejudice that women are "another species" and by assuming that Ray shared his class values, Joseph further divided himself (by both gender and class) from those nearest him.

In the penultimate scene, after his suicide attempt is foiled by Ray, we hear Joseph moaning in anguish. He walks faltering, leaning heavily on Helena's arm as the set changes catastrophically: Walls and doorways whirl unsteadily and disappear, accompanied by wrenching organ music and swirling light. As Joseph steps away from Helena into a void, his clothes are torn away by invisible forces, leaving his aged body vulnerable, covered only by plain white boxer shorts. No death with dignity here, Joseph ends his corporate life ignominiously and alone. For her final monologue, Helena stands center-stage as Ray listens, sitting silently in a chair down-right. Helena resolutely faces her father's sexism but also uses his words to put Ray in his place:

> He told me he always wished for a son and not a daughter. . . . He said he wanted a son just like me because he loved me. He knew it was possible that a son could have resembled you instead of me. . . . That he could be a misfit. A crazy son. Someone who, like you, is distasteful in every way. But he said that he still wished I had been a boy. (47)

Lest we think that Fornes has left a loophole for enterprising adventurers from the 'lower classes' to replace a rotting aristocracy; in the fourth play, "Hunger" (set in 1998), we see Ray reduced to a crazy street scavenger, banished

from the fortified Compound in which a few business and political elites have sequestered themselves. Like most people in society, Ray must now vie for a sleeping spot in shelters such as the cavernous warehouse administered by his now senile half-brother, Charlie.

Fornes' focus shifts to Birdie, the last of Nadine's extended family. Birdie, now solidly middle-class, has been allowed to leave the Compound to find Ray, who allegedly took something of value when he left. As "Hunger" opens, Charlie is explaining to Birdie that Ray probably won't meet her because he spends his days surreptitiously sifting through rubble looking for things that he can sell. When Birdie asks Charlie if he remembers who she is, he answers, "No. Things are very different now. I don't think that much any more. Not often. . . . It's different now. The way a person thinks. The way a person is" (5). We soon see that Charlie has become the perfect small-time bureaucrat: he doesn't remember his past, he enforces rules with only a vague understanding of their reasons or consequences, and he is content to work in exchange for goods such as his hand-me-down suit. His memory serves him only well enough to feed his pride and wonder that he "ended up having a good position . . . and yet Ray, who went so far when he was young, is scrambling for a piece of bread" ("Hunger" 5-6). Charlie's former compassion has been buried by his new officiousness; when Birdie asks him if he ever helps Ray, Charlie flatly answers, "No. . . . When is he going to settle down? . . . He's too restless. . . . Sometimes he comes in the middle of the night and he wakes up everyone" (7). Birdie's questions soon exhaust Charlie, and since Ray has not come, Birdie leaves, promising to come back later.

In Scene 2, we discover Ray, agitated and mumbling, chiding his shelter-mate Reba for not cherishing his dreams as a lover should. When Charlie appears, clipboard in hand, Ray tries to get approval for his system of personalized tokens to mark their places in the line to get into the shelter. Without ever understanding Ray's idea, Charlie refuses to consider it further because he doesn't "have a form for that" (14). Once Charlie has refused, Reba feels safe to share her opinion, "I didn't think it was going to work, Ray. . . . Things like that don't usually work. . . . You see my arm is broken. . . . And I wondered Charlie, if I could get some help" (15). Although Charlie can write a requisition for medical care that may or may not be honored, Reba has learned never "to put anything on paper" and that "if you see something happen, say you didn't see it," because "if you tell the truth they won't let you in through the door. If you tell the truth you end up arrested" (16).

When Birdie returns to the bleak Beckettian landscape of the shelter, Ray and Reba huddle together, their minds on their separate problems, while Charlie fumes and erases the form he had begun to fill out for Reba. Birdie is hesitant

about walking among the shelter 'residents' while dressed in clean expensive clothes, fearing that they will blame her for her difference and "vent their rage on her" (18). But they do not see her as inherently different with secure or inalienable rights, instead they recognize that her privilege is temporary, constructed, and that she is only one step away from their condition. After Birdie gives away the food she brought, Charlie issues her a regulation blanket. She shrinks away but doesn't leave the shelter, as if she has no place left to go. World-weary Reba befriends Birdie, explaining "A moment ago you felt you were different. But it won't take too long before you feel just like us" (23). Before Birdie can resist, a loud bell tolls, signalling the delivery of "rations," for which the poor must show their humble appreciation by kneeling. Dazed by the realization that she is not fundamentally different from the poor wretches she sought to aid, Birdie obediently falls into line, as an automaton-like stone angel proceeds excruciatingly slowly toward the kneeling supplicants. With a mechanical twitch, the angel tosses their rations (the bloody entrails of animals) onto the floor, before retreating in the same dispassionate, inexorable manner. Birdie gags and faints while Reba, who is long past self-assertion, rouses her indignation for Birdie's plight and ironically calls after the stony minister of charity,

> Next time would you bring her something she can eat? Something she likes. . . . Bring her some bread and coffee and some juice and cream! . . . And some fruit! I think fruit is good—when you feel the way she does—listless. And I think she should have something hot. Instead of coffee she should have something more nourishing! Pea soup, or perhaps chicken soup is more digestible. And also a little red wine. I understand it's good to pick you up.
>
> *(And then turning to BIRDIE)* Would you like a little liqueur? (23-24)

The lights fade, except for a dim pool of light in which Fornes' tenderly watchful singer reappears to reprise the final chorus of "Melancholy Baby" while Ray weeps and howls over Birdie's slumped body.

And thus no one escapes Fornes' apocalyptic vision—all are connected by love, lust, and economic interdependence; all will fall if the current system continues. Neither Ray's drive and rapacity, nor Birdie's slow and steady climb into the middle-class can save them from the fate of a society so divided by class and gender, and so socially and economically irresponsible.

Notes

1. While working on *Night*, Fornes was approached by a German producer who informed her that German audiences were no longer interested in plays about American poverty. They wanted to see representations of American wealth. *Dallas* was the most popular American television show in West Germany during the mid-1980's.

2. I discuss the gendered differences in access to self-creating "play space" displayed by various characters in Fornes' later plays in my dissertation. The basic concept was developed by Lisa Ruddick (English Dept., University of Chicago) through a feminist reading of psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott's object relations theory and clinical observations.

3. A similar shift of power from 'gentlemen' of business to 'uncouth yobs' is well-handled in Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money*. However, I find Churchill's play less effective than *Night*, perhaps because its exclusive focus on the risky, 'sexy' dealings of traders and managers allows audiences to forget the destructive social consequences of insider trading for common people around the world.

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