

## "Make Us The Women We Can't Be:" Cloud Nine and The Female Imaginary

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In the second act of Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979), Victoria, Lin and Edward meet in a park at night to perform what they variously describe as "an orgy" and "a ceremony," a "sacred"<sup>1</sup> rite during which they invoke the appearance of Isis, the Goddess who can "give us the history we haven't had, make us the women we can't be" (308). If this scene is obviously self-reflexive in a manner that foregrounds Churchill's project as feminist playwright, it also possesses a metatheatrical dimension, lending a gendered inflection to what Herbert Blau identifies as the fundamental urge animating all theatre, whether drama, ritual or performance—the urge yielding the expectancy in Edward's question (which is also the audience's question), "Will something appear?" (308). Whether it will or not, we want it to; even more important, as Blau recognizes, *it* wants to.

Something there is that wants to appear. With all the critique of a recessive presence, the traces of that struggle are still there, and with it the telltale signs of an ineliminable sense of depth that, however rescored as surface, comes from the refractory presence of the actual body in performance. The body may have been assigned the role of a function or a carrier of signs, but there is something restive about it, unsurpassed, as in the transformations of hegemony itself—not a social logic, however, but the logic of an unquenchable longing to *be* there in its unmediated presence: authentic.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the subtlety and complexity of Blau's thought, the opposition between the body as "a carrier of signs" and the body as site of the "authentic" will only hold if we accept both that authenticity must *necessarily* refer to "unmediated presence," and make the leap from acknowledging the conventionality of the sign to seeing this conventionality as a *falsification* of an irreducible reality. If we think of authenticity, however, not as a metaphysical category of experience, but as a particular relationship to signifying practices, we no longer have to see the desire for authenticity at odds with a recognition of the

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semiotic nature of reality. To clarify this point, let me cite the following example. In an article defending Luce Irigaray against charges of metaphysical idealism and biological essentialism, Margaret Whitford asserts that, far from privileging a "real" female body beyond the limits of any signifying system, Irigaray offers a *construction* of the body within a "female imaginary . . . [that must] accede to *its own specific symbolization*."<sup>3</sup> As Whitford perceptively argues, Irigaray does not object to the status of the female body as "a carrier of signs;" rather, she wants to remove the body from its subjection to a *specific* sign-system—the patriarchal structure of representation exemplified by Freud and Lacan—in order to grant it the kind of resymbolization that can undermine the hegemony of phallogentrism. For Irigaray, then, the question is not how to transform the female body from "a carrier of signs" to an "unmediated presence," thus extracting the (corpo)Real from the snares of the Symbolic, but how to create what I would term an "authentic symbolization" of that body, one that will grant women the embodied subjectivity they currently lack.

I will return to the example of Irigaray later in this essay. For now, I want to suggest that, rather than either consigning the rhetoric of authenticity to the trashcan of history or viewing signification and authenticity as locked in irremediable opposition, we deconstruct the concept of the authentic. I have in mind here Judith Butler's sense of deconstruction: "To deconstruct is not to negate or to dismiss, but to call into question and, perhaps most importantly, to open up a term . . . to a reusage or redeployment."<sup>4</sup> By redeploying the concept of authenticity, linking it with rather than disjoining it from signifying practices, we can acknowledge a strategic value in a continued appeal to the term. For both Irigaray and Churchill, as I will argue, the desire for authenticity can only reach fulfillment within representation, since their "unquenchable longing to *be*" takes the form of a gender-specific (rather than an universalizable ontological) desire—a desire to effect a new discursive ordering and production of the body. In other words, their desire proves inseparable from "a social logic" and the structures of representation articulating that logic.

If feminist theory finds a strategic value in the idea of an authentic symbolization, feminist theatre (indeed, any form of theatre) would seem to necessitate such a concept. Despite Blau's attempt to sever authenticity from signification and the onto-logic from "a social logic," his work as a whole repeatedly reminds us that the status of theatre as a representational activity confounds the very desire it provokes—the desire for full, "unmediated presence." There may indeed be "something . . . that wants to appear," but theatrical appearance exists in a fraught (if productive) dialectical tension with disappearance, a dialectic that plays itself out on the corporeal surface of the body. If we can locate the seductive power of theatre in "the refractory presence

of the actual body," we must, as Blau reminds us, also acknowledge that theatre stages "the mystery of its [the body's] vanishings;"<sup>5</sup> that we can never be certain whose "actual body" we see—the actor's, the person's, the self's, or the character's. Indeed, the representational logic governing much of Western theatre (particularly realism and psychological drama) demands the disappearance of the actor's polymorphous body, characterized by Josette Feral as a "semiotic bundle of drives,"<sup>6</sup> in order to secure the appearance of the character—a figure whose ontological and existential coherence we infer from its physical unity.

Elin Diamond observes that the presentation of dramatic character foregrounds "the *ideological* nature of representation."<sup>7</sup> While agreeing with this assertion, I would want to add that what makes theatrical representation ideological is not simply the repression of a drive-ridden body, but the play of appearance and disappearance that functions as a defining characteristic of such theories of ideology as those offered by Louis Althusser and Jorge Larrain. I will dispense with summarizing the details of Althusser's now-familiar theory, but I do want to point out that even though he admits "that an individual is always-already a subject" who is born into a pre-existing ideological system, Althusser presents his account of how the subject emerges within the field of ideology "in the form of a sequence, with a before and an after, and thus in the form of a temporal succession." When Althusser writes, "*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*,"<sup>8</sup> we can thus read him as asserting that the subject appears as the subject of (and subject to) ideology only through the disappearance of the "concrete individual."

For Larrain, what appears within ideology is appearance itself. Ideology "takes an aspect of reality, the appearances, and gives them an autonomy and independence which they do not actually have. In this sense ideology fetishizes the world of appearances, separates it from its real connections."<sup>9</sup> If there is something theatrical in ideology's fetishism of appearances (as Althusser implicitly recognizes when he locates the process of interpellation within the ideological "theatre"<sup>10</sup> of subject-formation), there is also something ideological in the very nature of theatre. Indeed, theatre cannot help fetishizing appearance, since appearance (always intertwined with disappearance) determines and becomes coextensive with, rather than simply forming one aspect of, dramatic "reality." Thus, to return to the question with which I began, when Churchill's Edward asks, "Will something appear?," we could counter with the question, since we are in the theatre, how could something—specifically, the body—not appear? Yet, such an answer would hardly respond to the question implied both by Edward's query and by *Cloud Nine* itself: if the body makes its appearance clothed in the mantle of signs, how can we be certain that its entrance upon the stage will yield what I have risked calling an authentic symbolization?<sup>11</sup>

This question reminds us that within the theatre of ideology (and the ideology of theatre), everything may be an appearance but not all appearances are created equal. Consider the opening moments of *Cloud Nine*:

*Clive*: [He presents *Betty*. She is played by a man.] My wife is all I dreamt a wife should be, And everything she is she owes to me.

*Betty*: I live for Clive. The whole aim of my life Is to be what he looks for in a wife. I am a man's creation as you see, And what men want is what I want to be. (251)

Betty's (dis)appearance before the audience reminds us that while women have never failed to appear within the ideological theatre that stages sexual difference, they have been cast in roles determined by the image-repertoire of masculine fantasy. Woman as Symptom; Woman as Fetish; Woman as Lack; Woman as Object of Desire; Woman as Exotic Other; Woman as, in Clive's words, "irrational, demanding, inconsistent, treacherous, lustful" (282)—these are only some of the significations inscribed on the text of the female body, significations that foreclose the representational options through which the body could "accede to its own specific symbolization."

I would emphasize the word "symbolization" in the preceding sentence. Certainly, when we see a male actor step forward as Betty, we register the non-appearance of the female body. Since, however, the theatrical body (as well as the ideological body) makes its appearance as always already "a carrier of signs," what remains absent from view is not an uncoded body in all its phenomenological plenitude, but a body coded in opposition to the dominant representational economy—a body that could occupy the site of difference rather than the place of the man-consolidating other of phallogocentric fantasy. By actively soliciting our gaze ("I am a man's creation *as you see*"), Churchill allows us to see women's role as the unseen within that economy. As Irigaray writes, "'Sexual difference' . . . is, now and forever, determined within the project, the projection, the sphere of representation, of the same . . . A man minus the possibility of (re)presenting oneself as a man = a normal woman."<sup>12</sup>

It is this "possibility of (re)presenting oneself as a man" that distinguishes Clive's disappearance from that of Betty. Clive passes along the following patriarchal wisdom to his son: "You should always respect and love me, Edward, not for myself, I may not deserve it, but as I respected and loved my own father, because he was my father. Through our father we love our Queen and our God" (276). Clive's invocation of the Name-of-the-Father reminds us of the play of (dis)appearances characterizing the phallogocentric order described (if not prescribed) by Lacan: the disappearance of the biological father and its

replacement by the Symbolic Father; the disappearance of the anatomical organ and its replacement by the paternal metaphor; the disappearance of the penis and its replacement by the phallus. Clive's "self-effacement," his designation of the signifying space labelled "father" rather than himself as the locus of authority, thus opens up a space between the individual and the subject position that always exceeds whoever occupies it.

If Clive's "disappearance" reveals that he does not possess power, but serves as a mouthpiece for the codes of cultural power speaking (through) him, it nevertheless allows him to situate himself on the side of power. Similarly, while it is true that, as a signifier rather than an anatomical fact of difference, the phallus resists any simple attempt to conflate it with the penis, it is also true that, for Lacan, possessing the penis allows men the kind of access to the phallus-as-transcendental-signifier that women can never totally attain. Since "it is through the phallic function that man takes up his inscription as all,"<sup>13</sup> we can see a fundamental asymmetry in the gendered disappearing act through which the subject enters (or fails to enter) the Symbolic order, the realm of representation. Clive can represent himself as a man, he can inscribe himself "as all," because he has a penis which can "disappear" and thus allow him to reappear in the subject position of the Symbolic Father. Betty, on the other hand, as a woman, is, in Lacan's terms, "not all." She can represent herself neither as a man nor as a woman since, according to the logic of phallogentrism, being a woman means failing to appear as a subject of representation. As Lacan writes, "There is woman only as excluded by the nature of things which is the nature of words."<sup>14</sup> Excluded from the Symbolic, Betty can only appear as the object of representation, as the "man's creation" we see in the play's opening sequence.

Betty's inability to appear as a subject within the dominant representational economy suggests what is at stake for Churchill in the appeal to Isis, "Give us the history we haven't had, make us the women we can't be." Blau calls theatre the scene of the body's "unquenchable longing to *be* there;" a feminist theatre practice, however, must determine the nature of "there" before approaching the questions of subjectivity and authentic symbolization. Whether or not one finds Lacan complicitous with the phallogentric logic he describes, his work details the ideological operations of the "there" in which women can never be—the representational economy that offers women a highly problematized relation to speech, language and subjectivity. Throughout the first act, Churchill repeatedly demonstrates the representational violence—that possesses very real cultural effects—to which women are subjected in their role as the "not all." If Betty, played by a male actor, lacks a body that can "accede to its own specific symbolization," Victoria lacks *any* body. Represented by a dummy in the first act, the "figure" of Victoria serves to link the female body's exile from authentic

symbolization to women's exclusion from "the nature of words" within the patriarchal Symbolic. Similarly, Ellen's declarations of lesbian desire are rerouted into the culturally-sanctioned paths of heterosexuality, marriage and reproduction. That she will marry the homosexual Harry Bagley provides yet another triumph for an ideology of gender and sexuality that refuses either to represent or tolerate the otherness of the other—an ideology that erases difference through the inscription of the (no-longer) other within what Irigaray calls "the project, the projection, the sphere of representation, of the same."

If this patriarchal ideology enforces heterosexuality, it demands that the female body appear only as the object of masculine desire. Unlike the other women in the first act, Mrs. Saunders refuses to accept a representational economy that denies women the opportunity to fashion a desiring female body. Declaring, "I do like the sensation. Well I'll have it then, I'll have it, I'll have it" (263), Mrs. Saunders attempts to convert her role as object of Clive's desire into a subject position through which the body can experience a *jouissance* beyond the phallus, exceeding the limits of patriarchal signification. Yet again, however, a woman must confront her status as the "not all," excluded from pleasure as well as from speech. During one sexual encounter, Clive "*disappears completely under her skirt*" (263), emerging only after he has reached orgasm:

*Clive:* I came.

*Mrs. Saunders:* I didn't.

*Clive:* I'm all sticky.

*Mrs. Saunders:* What about me? Wait.

*Clive:* All right, are you? Come on. We musn't be found.

*Mrs. Saunders:* Don't go now. (264)

Referring to the *jouissance* that women enjoy beyond the phallus, Lacan concludes that it is "impossible to tell whether the woman can say anything about it."<sup>15</sup> Both Mrs. Saunders and Ellen (and it is certainly no coincidence that Churchill calls for the two roles to be performed by the same actress) seek pleasure beyond the phallus—Ellen, in the lesbianism that would place in jeopardy both the physical and ideological reproduction of patriarchy, and Mrs. Saunders, in heterosexual activity that threatens to reveal Clive as a "real" man with a penis, not a Symbolic Father possessing the phallus, the Symbolic order's privileged signifier. *Pace* Lacan, these two women *can* say something about desire and pleasure, but they say it within a representational and ideological structure that will not recognize their speech, just as Clive ignores Mrs. Saunders' question, "What about me?"

Like "what do women want?," the question Freud said women could not pose since they themselves *were* the question, "what about me"—a question about desire, pleasure, subjectivity and the body—will only receive an answer through the elaboration of signifying practices that support a female imaginary. "You can't separate fucking and economics" (309), says Victoria in the second act, but you can separate the question of female sexual pleasure from a representational economy designed to reinforce the play of patriarchal power relations, and transfer it to a representational sphere in which the body can achieve authentic symbolization. Again, I would emphasize that such "authenticity" can only emerge from a signifying practice. When Victoria asks Isis to "*make* us the women we can't be," she implicitly acknowledges that any subject position in which women appear emerges through a representational practice; that the problem is not how to escape signification, but how to create an oppositional signifying space in which to answer the question, "what about me?"

Churchill had already articulated the need for such a space, an alternative representational economy in which opposition to patriarchal power relations could express itself, in *Vinegar Tom* (1976), a play set in the seventeenth century exploring how women seeking economic and sexual autonomy were labelled witches. Churchill shows that a representational category like "witch" possesses very real and very destructive effects when the representation finds cultural support in such institutions as the courts and the church—ideological apparatus that can compel women to live *and* die within the subject position of the witch. The cultural order empowered through these ideological and representational structures appears monolithic not so much because it forecloses resistance, but because it sets the terms in which resistance can achieve utterance. Before being hung, Alice gives voice to such resistance:

I'm not a witch. But I wish I was. If I could live I'd be a witch now after what they've done . . . Oh if I could meet with the devil now I'd give him anything if he'd give me power. There's no way for us except by the devil. If I only did have magic, I'd make them feel it.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the emotional intensity of Alice's speech, we cannot miss the irony of her desiring to occupy the very subject position that provides the "justification" for the exercise of power that will destroy her. Indeed, there is nothing in her words that could not help reinforce the power of a cultural order that will allow women to appear only to ensure their disappearance—the violent disappearance concretized in the bodies of the two hanging women dominating the stage throughout the final scenes of *Vinegar Tom*.

What *Vinegar Tom* and *Cloud Nine* suggest (indeed, what Churchill's work as a whole suggests), is that opposition to and transformation of social organization and the network of ideological apparatus supporting that organization cannot separate itself from the establishment of an alternative representational framework in which to produce new subject positions. Churchill's plays exemplify Irigaray's observation, "we can neither decide nor hope to liberate ourselves from a given order without changing the [representational] forms of that order."<sup>17</sup> For both Churchill and Irigaray, whatever else a feminist politics might entail, it presents itself as a politics of representation—a politics that contests patriarchal structures of representation at the level of cultural representation itself.

Throughout this essay, I have linked Churchill and Irigaray not only because Irigaray provides a valuable theoretical framework through which to interpret Churchill, but because they share a politics of representation that bases itself on a return of the repressed—specifically, the return of what Irigaray calls "that repressed entity, the female imaginary." Victoria's longing for "the history we haven't had" testifies to the urgent need for this imaginary that, as Margaret Whitford remarks, "accede[s] to its own specific symbolization." Women, for both Churchill and Irigaray, lack history because they have been confined within *his(s)tory*, within a masculine imaginary that "imprison[s] us in enclosed spaces where we cannot keep on moving, living, as ourselves."<sup>18</sup>

A different history demands a different space, a different scene of appearance, a different coding of the female body, perhaps the most immediate "enclosed space" to which phallogocentric discourse confines women. Coded within this discourse as objects of loathing or objects of desire, objects of loathing *because* objects of desire, women's bodies function both as sites for the inscription of masculine power and as the vanishing site of that power. Such corporeal duplicity provokes the almost incoherent jumble of erotic longing, fear and sadism that characterizes Clive's desire for Mrs. Saunders: "Caroline, if you were shot by poisoned arrows do you know what I'd do? I'd fuck your dead body and poison myself. Caroline, you smell amazing. You terrify me. You are dark like this continent. Mysterious. Treacherous." (263)

It is hardly surprising that Clive locates the source of women's fascination, enigmatic terror and poisonous contamination in the vagina, which, as Irigaray reminds us, phallogocentric discourse represents only as a tear in the representational fabric; "a 'hole' in . . . [the] scopophilic lens." The vagina only appears as that which has always already disappeared; rather than a sexual organ that women possess, it is represented as a space proclaiming the absence of the penis and "*the horror of nothing to see.*" In an attempt to negotiate this "horror," phallogocentric discourse speaks of women's "'lack,' 'atrophy' (of the sexual organ), and 'penis envy.'"<sup>19</sup> Whether seen as terrifying and empowered or as



abject and envious, women are always viewed through the lens of a representational system that is neither monologic nor monolithic; that can become the site of ideological and hegemonic struggle. Irigaray reminds us that the (non-)representation of the vagina is itself susceptible to contestatory appropriation: "The 'no sex' that has been assigned to the woman *can mean* that she does not have 'a' sex and that her sex is not visible nor identifiable or representable in a definite form."<sup>20</sup>

I emphasize the words "can mean" to underscore the fact that Irigaray does not attempt to describe the reality of a female body lying buried beneath the weight of a distorting sign system. Rather, she acknowledges that the image of the body she will propose can only appear through acceding to meaning; through a female imaginary theorized in relation to the symbolic agency of language and representation. The female imaginary will both re-mark women's bodies and contest the process of specularization through which those bodies have yielded up their "truth" to an inquisitorial masculine gaze. The re-symbolized female body will occupy a site beyond sight, a space not referable to the privileged values of the male imaginary: "the privilege of unity, form of the self, of the visible; of the specularisable, of the erection (which is the becoming in a form)."<sup>21</sup>

Irigaray's concept of the female imaginary would seem to pose a challenge to the creation of a feminist theatre practice such as Churchill undertakes. I argued earlier that there is something ideological in the very nature of theatre, since it cannot help but fetishize appearances. Because these appearances belong primarily to the order "of the visible, of the, specularisable," we can identify theatre as a specific kind of ideological apparatus—an institution supporting phallogocentric culture. Rather than foregrounding the ontological gap between actor and character, conventional theatre encourages us to ignore this disjuncture and to forget that *how* we see and *what* we see are structured by the performance itself. By inviting us to accept the givenness of whatever occupies the field of vision, conventional theatre naturalizes and, as it were, "ideologizes" the process of looking—the process that objectifies the female body by coding it for "*to-be-looked-at-ness*."<sup>22</sup>

If theatre necessarily organizes itself as a realm of appearances that appeal to the logic of the gaze, how can Churchill, or any feminist theatre practice, intervene in its operations without to some extent recuperating the fetishism of the visible? To suggest an answer to this question, let me repeat my earlier remark that by calling for a male actor to play Betty in the first act, by *showing* us a "woman's" body unable to achieve authentic symbolization, Churchill lets us see women's role as the unseen within the dominant representational economy. Furthermore, by foregrounding the highly theatrical and non-mimetic nature of the "impossible objects"<sup>23</sup> she places in our visual field, Churchill turns vision

against itself by encouraging us to recognize the limits of the gaze outside the theatre. Like Brecht before her, Churchill seeks to stand the ideology of theatre on its head; to show the operations that produce what Larrain calls the ideological separation of "the world of appearances . . . from its real connections," rather than reinforcing the autonomy of appearances. *Cloud Nine* suggests both that what can be seen in the field of vision that "discovers" the truth of the female body is a function of the field's ideological structure and the body's ideological structure, and that what can be seen determines what must remain unseen.

Like Irigaray, however, Churchill does not merely critique the ideological structures governing the representation of sexual difference. Rather, she dramatizes the self-inscription of a female body that resists enclosure within the various representational categories to which patriarchal culture would confine it. In Betty's speech describing her sexual awakening, and in the image concluding the play—the embrace between the male actor who plays Betty in the first act and the actress who plays her in the second act—Churchill stages the female imaginary, in which the body can both appear and, in Irigaray's words, remain irreducible to "*a definite form.*"

This last point is particularly important; while both Irigaray and Churchill attempt to undermine the hegemony of the masculine gaze, the specific object of their critique is less the act of looking in and of itself than the ideology of the gaze, an ideology investing the gaze with the power to reduce multiplicity, fluidity and excess (in terms of which they code the female body) to the contours of "a definite form," a corporeal essence subjected to the interminable surveillance of patriarchal culture. Michel Foucault concisely identifies the role of the gaze as an ideological support of phallogentrism in his discussion of "the structure . . . of invisible visibility . . . [The gaze] chooses a line that instantly distinguishes the essential; it therefore goes beyond what it sees; it is not misled by the immediate forms of the sensible, for it knows how to traverse them; it is essentially demystifying."<sup>24</sup>

Against this logic of the "demystifying" gaze, both Irigaray and Churchill offer a logic of (self-) exchange and flux, a logic of the touch. Irigaray elaborates this logic through the trope of the "two lips." It is the "contact of *at least two* (lips) which keeps woman in touch with herself, but without the possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is touched . . . [Woman] *is neither one nor two* . . . she cannot be identified either as one person, or as two." In this female imaginary, no amount of specular power can reduce the "two lips" to a single entity with "a definite form." At the same time, however, the ceaseless contact of the lips excludes the possibility of conceptualizing them as two (hence divisible into one). Within this imaginary, the female body can finally achieve an authentic symbolization; it can "be there" as a female body

rather than as "the negative, the underside, the reverse of the only visible and morphologically designatable organ . . . : the penis."<sup>25</sup>

Rejecting "a definite form," the lips can neither appropriate nor be appropriated; emphasizing contiguity without absorption, they locate female sexual pleasure in a continuous auto-erotic exchange that allows the body to discover its irreducible otherness without becoming bifurcated into subject and object. Dispensing with the mediating agency of either the anatomically real penis or the Symbolic phallus, the female imaginary offers a *jouissance* that contests and works to supplant the dominant representational and specular economies: "Woman 'touches herself' all the time, and moreover no one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact. Thus, with herself, she is already two . . . that caress each other."<sup>26</sup>

Like Irigaray, Churchill also supplants the logic of the gaze with an auto-erotic *jouissance* that defies specula(riza)tion. In the second act of *Cloud Nine*, Betty, now played by a woman, leaves Clive, but only arrives at a sense of her own specificity through engaging in an act of touching. The speech in which Betty describes this experience is worth quoting at some length:

I thought if Clive wasn't looking at me there wasn't a person there. And one night in bed in my flat I was so frightened I started touching myself. I thought my hand might go through space. I touched my face, it was there, my arm, my breast, and my hand went down where I thought it shouldn't, and I thought well there is somebody there. It felt very sweet . . . and I felt myself gathering together more and more . . . and there was this vast feeling growing in me and all round me . . . and no one could stop me and I was there and coming and coming. Afterwards I thought I'd betrayed Clive . . . But I felt triumphant because I was a separate person from [him]. (316)

Betty's speech preserves the same movement from negation to affirmation that we find in Irigaray's description of the female Imaginary. Initially, the desire to touch, to establish what I would call a tactile economy, arises in direct response to, and critique of, the specular economy that will only allow women to appear as objects at the cost of disappearing as subjects; that will only "satisfy" Betty's "unquenchable longing to *be* there" by allowing her to appear as the object of Clive's gaze, "a man's creation as you see." Against the scopic regime with its valorization of "definite form," Betty establishes a relationship with the body that dissociates subjectivity from a position (with all the sense of definable boundaries that the spatial metaphor implies), reconstituting it as dispersal across multiple positions. The body itself traverses these positions, moving from "it was

there" to "there is *somebody* there" to "I was there." In this movement from "it" to "I," the body remains indistinguishable from, yet irreducible to, the "self" labelled Betty. Indeed, the "I" that Betty names herself eschews even the fictive coherence of the ego emerging from the Lacanian mirror stage. She can say "I was there" only through the agency of the *jouissance* "beyond the phallus" that disallows the formation of a circumscribed "there" in which the "I" could congeal into a settled subject. For Churchill, the embodied female subject is a "subject-in-process,"<sup>27</sup> acceding to subjectivity through her own dialectic of appearance and disappearance, the ceaseless dialectic of "gathering together" and orgasmic dissolution.

Subject/object, self/other, active/passive, caresser/caressed—all oppositional categories become undone through the logic of the touch. In this tactile economy, as Irigaray writes, "woman derives pleasure from what is *so near that she cannot have it, nor have herself* . . . This puts into question all prevailing economies."<sup>28</sup> Despite my account of Betty's speech, however, I think we must ask if it does succeed in questioning the dominant representational economies. I have been concerned with this speech as an utterance, a narrative Betty relates concerning her sexual awakening. Within the theatre, however, narrative does not exist independently of the dramatic representation of the act of narrating, and at this moment of the play narrative and the act of narrating conflict with each other. Specifically, we *hear* Betty describe a logic of the touch in which the female body resists objectification as "a definite form." At the same time, however, we *see* this speech being spoken by "a definite form," by a figure uniting the bodies of character and actress into a corporeal whole.

We can concisely state the problem Churchill confronts by remembering Margaret Whitford's observation that what is at stake for Irigaray is not simply the assertion of a female imaginary, but the elaboration of a signifying system in which that imaginary can achieve symbolization. As I have suggested, with its emphasis on suturing the ontological rift between performer and character and encouraging the audience to perceive character as a physical and existential unity, the ideology of representation characterizing much of Western theatre precludes the kind of authentic symbolization within which Irigaray seeks to inscribe the imaginary. To achieve this symbolization within the theatre, Churchill would have to develop an alternative model of corporeal representation—the kind of model, as I will now argue, she offers in the final moment of the play.

*Cloud Nine* concludes with an image at once utterly simple in its presentation, yet remarkably complex in its implications. Shortly after Betty's speech, the play ends with a representation of the *jouissance* she describes, a representation that becomes the "referent" of her speech. Betty stands alone on stage. Then, "*Betty* from Act One comes. *Betty* and *Betty* embrace" (320). Elin

Diamond critiques this conclusion, accusing Churchill of opting for "transcendence . . . comic closure and narrative teleology rather than decentered play."<sup>29</sup> The charge of imposing closure, if true, would seriously undermine Churchill's project, for Diamond implies that the playwright purchases a definite *aesthetic* and *generic* form for her work by suggesting (if not actually showing) the absorption of Betty's multiplicity into a new unity.

Viewed from an Irigarayan perspective, however, closure and unity are disallowed by the image of the two Bettys, which, like the "two lips," are not divisible into one. Rather than suggesting an androgynous union, the embrace of actor and actress images the "ceaseless exchange of herself with the other"<sup>30</sup> that Irigaray codes as internal to the female body. It is precisely because this exchange is "ceaseless" that the other can *preserve* its otherness, rather than being absorbed and cancelled, within the self. Within the female imaginary, and the logic of the touch it valorizes, such otherness never becomes the basis for the elaboration of the binary and binding categories of self and other. Just as for Irigaray "herself" and "the other" are constantly shifting their positions, so Churchill's description of the touch—"Betty and Betty embrace"—refuses to distinguish subject and object, self and other; pleasure is neither given nor received, but endlessly circulates between the two figures who are "neither one nor two."

Not only does the embrace allow Churchill to grant authentic symbolization to the female body, releasing it from the confining categories of the masculine imaginary, it also allows her to symbolize the multiple forms of pleasure that body can enjoy. I have discussed this embrace as a representation of the auto-eroticism through which Betty derives pleasure from her own otherness, but such a claim reduces the phenomenological complexity of the image Churchill stages. While it is undeniably true that we register the embrace as occurring between the two characters (a term we must always use rather loosely in connection with Churchill's theatre) we have come to identify as Betty, we also see this as an embrace between two *women*; that is, an embrace between two figures whose clothing (and any other external signifiers a director may choose) identifies them as women. Finally, of course, because there is no attempt to trick the audience into perceiving the male actor from the first act as a "real" woman, we see the touch as an embrace between a woman and a man.

Churchill thus stages an economy of female pleasure in which auto-eroticism, homo-eroticism and hetero-eroticism all coexist without competing for hierarchical pride of place. Indeed, the reinscription of heterosexuality within the tactile economy of the female imaginary marks a decisive difference between Churchill and Irigaray. The latter implies an ineluctable opposition between women's auto-erotic *jouissance* and a heterosexuality she describes as a "violent break-in"

to which the female body must submit. Churchill's work, on the other hand, suggests that, because it is mediated by representational and signifying economies, heterosexuality can change its status as a "real" practice through changing the representations that govern its performance. If the female imaginary supplants phallogocentric representation, then heterosexuality need no longer be symbolized or *lived* as an opposition between the male, granted the status of Absolute Subject because endowed with "the noble phallic organ," and the female, reduced to a "non-sex."<sup>31</sup> By dramatizing an embrace that is *simultaneously* auto-, homo-, and hetero-erotic, Churchill proposes the possibility of an heterosexual practice governed by the logic of the touch; governed by fluidity, multiplicity and reciprocity.

On the "cloud nine" that Churchill imagines—a realm of sexual possibility where the domination of the gaze yields to the self-effacement of the touch—women will finally satisfy their "unquenchable longing to *be* there" through a *jouissance* that offers them contact with the other's constitutive alterity: the otherness within the female body, the otherness of *other* female bodies, the otherness of male bodies. The importance of *Cloud Nine* for the development of a contemporary feminist performance practice lies in Churchill's ability to represent the possibility for such *jouissance*, her ability to utilize the stage for granting "its own specific symbolization" to the female imaginary and its logic of the touch. Julia Kristeva has remarked that "feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say 'that's not it' and 'that's still not it.'"<sup>32</sup> While *Cloud Nine* quite obviously says "that's not it" to phallogocentric structures of representation, it manages to move beyond simple (or even complex) negation to affirm a representational sphere in which women can appear.

Such affirmation distinguishes Churchill from feminist playwrights like Marguerite Duras, Maria Irene Fornes or Marsha Norman. Despite the vast stylistic and thematic differences between the work of these three women (and it is because of such differences that I choose them as examples), they share a sense of women's inescapable immurement within the categories of a phallogocentric economy possessing absolute hegemony over the representation of gender. Churchill, on the other hand, remains committed to the search for new representational forms, new strategies for encoding the body, new ways to organize the sex/gender relations in which we live. This last point is particularly important; by foregrounding Churchill's emphasis on questions of representation, I do not want to give the impression that she retreats from the real cultural conditions to which feminism addresses itself into a rarefied realm of aestheticism. Rather, she understands that our negotiation of the lived experience (if I may use such a term) of sexuality and gender is mediated, if not governed, by

representational and signifying economies. *Cloud Nine* remains perhaps the strongest evidence of Churchill's attempt to elaborate such an economy—the representational sphere without which neither a feminist theatrical practice nor a feminist political practice will prove capable of giving women the history they haven't had, making them the women that phallogentrism says they can't be.

## Notes

1. Caryl Churchill, *Cloud Nine*, in *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1985) 308. All subsequent references in the text are to this edition.
2. Herbert Blau, *To All Appearances: Ideology and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 169.
3. Margaret Whitford, "Luce Irigaray and the Female Imaginary: Speaking as a Woman," *Radical Philosophy* 43 (Summer): 1986, 4; emphasis added.
4. Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism,'" in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 15.
5. Blau 11.
6. Josette Feral, "Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified," *Modern Drama* 25(1): 1982, 177.
7. Elin Diamond, "(In)visible Bodies in Churchill's Theatre," in Lynda Hart, ed., *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre* (Ann Arbor: The U of Michigan P, 1989) 261.
8. Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, Ben Brewster, tr. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971) 173-74, 176.
9. Jorge Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1979) 58.
10. Althusser 174.
11. I speak of "risk" here in the same sense that Stephen Heath uses the word when suggesting that "the risk of essence may have to be taken" ("Difference," *Screen* 19(3): 1978, 99). As this essay continues, I hope it will become clear—if it is not already—that I am not endorsing a concept of authenticity that recuperates the bourgeois notion of the self as a pre- or extra-discursive entity enjoying total autonomy.
12. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Gillian Gill, tr. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985) 26-27.
13. Jacques Lacan, "A Love Letter," in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne*, Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds., Jacqueline Rose, tr. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company 1982) 150.
14. Lacan, "God and the Jouissance of The Woman," in *Ibid*, 144.
15. Lacan, "A Love Letter" 159.
16. Churchill, *Vinegar Tom*, in *Plays: One* 175.
17. Luce Irigaray, "Women, the Sacred and Money," *Paragraph* 8 (1986): 12.
18. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke, trs. (Ithaca: Cornell UP) 28, 212.
19. 26, 23.
20. Luce Irigaray, "Women's Exile," *Ideology and Consciousness* 1 (1977): 64.
21. 64.

22. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Robyn C. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1991) 436.
23. Diamond 276.
24. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, A. M. S. Smith, tr. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973) 165-66, 121.
25. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* 26.
26. 24.
27. I borrow this term (and adapt it to a slightly different context) from Julia Kristeva. See her *Desire in Language* (New York: Columbia UP, 1980).
28. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 31.
29. Elin Diamond, "Refusing the Romanticism of Identity: Narrative Interventions in Churchill, Benmusa, Duras," in Sue-Ellen Case, ed., *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990) 98.
30. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* 31.
31. 24, 23.
32. Julia Kristeva, "Woman Can Never Be Defined," in Elaine Marks and Isabella de Courtivron, eds., *New French Feminisms* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981) 137.