

Getting Out, Flying and Returning from the Dead: Girl Ghosts in Live Performance

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The prescient, subversive girl with abilities to traverse time and space is an icon of popular culture. Television, videos, books, and film are replete with images of girls who chase vampires, walk on walls, slash predators, fly, change shape, and walk through walls—and never exhaust the contents of their wardrobe. Are they real or shape-shifters? Are they absent or present? These empowered flickering, airborne girls continue their joyful whirling and twirling, flickering constantly across the screens, pages, and stages of contemporary culture. Yet it could be argued that the adolescent girl in North American society continues to be the least powerful, most thoroughly oppressed member of the family and the culture at large.¹

Why is there such a gap between the material reality of girl power and its representation? What forms of performance might contrast the “uncanny” courage and powers of resistance of adolescent girls with the hard reality in which they live?² While popular culture provides us with witches, vampires, and super-heroes in special effects productions, contemporary performance art, and theater have a unique opportunity to deploy the live body in the exploration of these issues. My paper focuses on three such performances: absent/present, disadvantaged (even victimized) ghost girls in plays by contemporary American playwrights Dael Orlandersmith, Naomi Wallace, and Ellen McLaughlin. Without the protean powers of Buffy or Sabrina, these central characters walk (and sometimes fly) through time and space—challenging capture, rape, loss, and death to explore the possibilities of survival and change in the hostile world that surrounds them.

Fictions of girls who fly

A working definition of “girl” involves social perceptions as well as biology. “Girl” and “girlhood” are not simply linked to corporeal attributes, but to culturally-determined markers of class, power, and sexual difference. Despite the fact that the term comes from a Middle English word describing a young child of either gender, it is traditionally defined in contemporary Western society as “female child” or “unmarried woman.”³ “Girlhood” could be described as an arbitrarily fixed time in a female’s life when subjecthood is imbued with concepts of sexual difference

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long *before* full socially-sanctioned use may be made of them. On the other hand, it is also commonly used as a derisory epithet for a female household laborer, food server, or adult long past the age of adolescence. Surrounded with associations of promise, innocence, pre-sexual readiness, smallness, and iconic power, the term “girl” is not so easily defined.

However, if we look at the term “girl” as a point of entry into the social construction of “woman” (in heteronormative terms of menarche, marriage, and motherhood), then the gap between the material reality of girls and the fictions surrounding them throws into relief the importance of stage representations that deliberately interrogate what it means to be a “woman-in-process.” These figures point out the cracks in the plaster: the constraints placed upon the bodies of girls, versus the illusions manufactured by a flourishing dream industry that has them flying out of the hands that try to grab and hold them down.

What is it about this body of the “woman in process” that captures the cultural imaginary? Is it the ability to change shape, imitate, reflect possibilities, and bear the marks of the rule of law in school, home, and the wider community? Why do grown men and women, as well as girls, so eagerly consume images of girlhood presented by *Xena the Warrior Princess* and *Princess Mononoke*? Does the explosion of girl-centered narratives denote a widening agency of girls themselves, or does it attest to a darker meditation on the nature of coercion in our society? If (as Merleau-Ponty posits in *The Phenomenology of Perception*) the body is not simply inserted into a pre-existing world, but actually engages with and shapes its own co-ordinates,⁴ then perhaps the fictive bodies of girls provide access to an exploration of power, and the systems by which we subvert or facilitate its circulation through our own bodies.

Claustrophobic reality/kick-ass fiction

In “Telling A Girl’s Life: Self-Authorization as a Form of Resistance,” Lyn Mikel Brown describes the period before and during menarche as a time of danger, coercion, and confusion.⁵ “For girls, adolescence is a time of particular vulnerability: a point where a girl is encouraged to give over or to disregard or devalue what she feels and thinks—what she knows about the world of relationships—if she is to enter the dominant views of conventional womanhood.”⁶ The entrance into sexual maturity (in terms of fertility, if not of practice) introduces a new system of social relationships, where bodily changes are linked to transformed attitudes on the part of parents, educators, and peers. This time of disorientation and undermined self-esteem is also one of increased perception and cognitive ability—“a time when a variety of perspectives can be held and co-ordinated.”⁷ Ironically, girls face greater bodily and social restrictions as their intellectual abilities increase. One could say that their consciousness heightens as the walls close in.⁸

Given this nightmare scenario of body horror and social constraint, it is not surprising that fictions of evasion, flight, and protean super-powers abound, but this alone does not explain the popularity of recalcitrant girl fiction. For one thing, as Sherrie Inness points out in her study *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*, the most prominent “girl power” fictions tend to be created, produced, and consumed by men.⁹ The explosion of popular narratives using “kick-ass” girls could be interpreted as a reflection of heightened girl consciousness, but what power do girls have to impregnate their own concerns upon the social order, which is organized to contain women in general and young women in particular? Social commentators point out that many such fictions do not serve to sustain rebellious agendas, but actually starve and weaken them. In her study “From Girl to Woman to Grrrl: (Sub)Cultural Intervention and Political Activism in the Time of Post-Feminism,” Lisa Soccio notes that the “control of production, representation, and distribution of goods both material and ideological” is co-opted by the male purveyors of “girl” commodities in the marketplace.¹⁰ Gayle Wald’s article “Just A Girl?” Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Construction of Female Youth” sustains this argument and points out the racial sub-text inherent in the “strategic performances of ‘girlhood’” by such musicians as Madonna and Gwen Stefani.¹¹

Central to both these critiques is Foucault’s notion, set out in *Discipline and Punish*, that coercion is a self-sustaining system deeply embedded in modern political institutions, and that controlling the flow of ideology and the organization of knowledge works to persuade, co-opt, and reconfigures the “soft tissues of the brain” more effectively than any form of outright chastisement, physical punishments or incarceration.¹² This theory is developed further by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, which anatomizes resistance as a series of quotidian tricks, feints, gimmicks, and ploys that undermine the crushingly powerful but slow-moving megalith of social power.¹³ According to de Certeau, subversive tactics are constantly being appropriated by the prevailing order. Because they can be turned against themselves, they must be constantly re-invented, since the cycle of rebellion and co-option is a never-ending dynamic process.¹⁴

Through the prism of these works, rebellious “flying girl” fictions are revealed as tools of the twenty-first-century marketplace, a ploy to siphon off girlish resistance to compulsory heteronormativity by offering CDs, dolls, books, and films exalting (limited) rebellion, while continuing to prepare young females for social labor as underpaid workers, wives, and mothers.

With Britney Spears selling Pepsi-Cola and *Powerpuff Girls* linked to a line of lucrative merchandise from dolls to lunch boxes, it is difficult to imagine popular fictions of evasion that do not involve some form of selling out or complicity by “bad girls” themselves. But perhaps the subversive possibilities of the deployment of girls in the live arena have been overlooked.

“Volare:” the resistant girl in feminist performance

Since the 1970s, theorists such as Hélène Cixous have made use of the punning trope of flying/stealing (“voler”) to describe the “trickster tactics” of evasion in feminist literature and performance.¹⁵ But this ecstatic focus on flying, transcendence, and self-liberation from the bonds of a man-made order has often seemed insufficient to the task of negotiating the hostile terrain of everyday life. The iconic use of the unmarked, unmarkable golden girls in such warrior fictions as Wittig’s Amazonian novel *Les Guérillères* has certainly proved elusive, dissipating from lack of material substance.¹⁶

Is there a place for “flying” tropes in current feminist performance? Rejecting the death-or-submission plots of traditional dramaturgy as well as mystic liberatory fictions, scholars such as Dolan, Case, and Diamond have explored the question of visibility, performance, and the reinscription of violence on the performative body.¹⁷ Three contemporary practitioners reflect these theoretical concerns in works that feature the character of the “flying girl”—the resistant girl who crosses boundaries, but does not necessarily transcend them—in performances that neither ignore materiality nor dismiss the possibilities of subverting things as they are.

The Living: *The Gimmick* and its recipe for survival

Dael Orlandersmith’s *The Gimmick* is a semi-autobiographical work about Alexis, a Harlem teenager who is taunted, beaten, and victimized by her family and friends. Performed as a solo work, *The Gimmick* presents a girl who has “flown” the carceral space of victimization, evoking her through writings, letters, and conversation recalled by her adult self. In the New York premiere of this piece, Orlandersmith herself played the role of narrator, using her own large and stabilizing presence to protect the abjected body of the central character.¹⁸ *The Gimmick*, then, is a live event in which the soloist (conflating the roles of adult/child/performer/writer) enacts the tentative attempts of young girl to reveal her writings, both to the audience in the “house” and to the fictional construct of a young boy who shares her dreams of escape. “I read about a girl/a fat girl who lives in a dirty house/then wakes up thin in a clean house/and Jimmy says, ‘that girl, that’s you, right.’”¹⁹ As Elin Diamond points out in *Unmaking Mimesis*, techniques of occlusion and evasion of the “scopic” economy provide the feminist practitioner with ways of frustrating the objectification (sexual and otherwise) of the female being represented.²⁰ In the case of a girl (the more than usually vulnerable female subject), this technique of “standing in front of” the victimized body is an interesting performative tactic. Refusing to let the audience “see” the battered girl except through her adult self, Orlandersmith is able to present Alexis in full range of emotions, from deep despair to a growing awareness of her own burgeoning powers. She voices Alexis’s adolescent fantasies of a literary life in Paris, interspersed with

her acute teen-age insights on the rule of law in the projects, where trickster tactics of “ass/cash/money/The total Gimmick” prevail.

Gimmick realizing your home is a ghetto . . . looking at the cracks in the wall.²¹ Enlarging these cracks, Orlandersmith evokes the moment when Alexis understands that the Gimmick can turn back and “eat” the self. Jimmy has been discovered by a downtown gallery, which puts on an exhibition of his works. Orlandersmith embodies an uncertain Alexis at the opening, decked out in an uncomfortable expensive blouse: large, but invisible to the downtown crowd; naked but ignored in a painting on the wall—a girl who has been erased from the picture.

Subsequent descriptions of Jimmy’s desertion and Alexis’s spiral into self-mutilation and despair are only extensions of the moment where the naked body, the occluded body, the adult body, and the teenage body are united in single *geste* of self-revelation and awareness. The redemptive coda of *The Gimmick*, where the narrator describes Alexis’s escape to Paris, does not hide the fact that the performance is an ongoing conversation with the audience about the process of co-option. The character of Alexis is able to travel across three decades and the Atlantic to evoke the memories of her youthful disillusionment. By the end, she is nothing more than a faintly triumphant ghost. But the narrator who embodies her is left standing in the center of hostile territory, continuing the negotiation—her ample body, her Blackness and her adult presence serving as material evidence of a refusal to be erased.

The dying: *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* and leaping into the abyss

The problems of presenting the vulnerable body of the resistant girl in live performance are all more evident when the performer herself is a girl. Naomi Wallace, an American playwright resident in Britain, is well-known for her recurrent use of iconic girl figures (and girl actors) in historical and contemporary plays.²² Her performative use of girls is linked to an explicit agenda that connects capitalism, violence, and the body, in a polity that she perceives to be virulently “anti-youth.”²³ *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*, set in Wallace’s native Kentucky, shares themes and characters with other work, such as *One Flea Spare* and *Slaughter City*: a ghost girl, a sense of dislocation, a sharp generational divide, and a fascination with the gap between the hard surfaces of life and the soft but powerful forces of the body. In this play, a seventeen-year-old tomboy named Pace challenges a fifteen-year-old “mama’s boy” to join her in playing chicken with the 7:10 train that speeds past their town every day. This dare is an attempt to escape the no-exit life of Pope Lick, where an older generation has been wrung dry by a capitalist infrastructure that has no more use for them.

In this piece, Wallace provides an unusual opportunity for an adolescent actor to represent an endangered girl whose heightened sense of her own sexual power and agency are matched with a grim assessment of her chances in an overdetermined

universe. The gestures and tactics of this central character embody de Certeau's principles of evasion: swift, hidden, and continual movement; daring, trickery, and cunning. Pace's quicksilver dashes around the stage signal a total commitment to flight—a fascination with locomotion, with travel, with escape, and with the desperation that fuels the leap of faith into nearly certain death. Most critiques of this piece center on a scene of sexual intercourse where Pace brings Dalton to orgasm without touching him, transforming his body through active collusion in an act of imaginary engagement. But Wallace's achievement does not simply reside in her ability to stage sexuality without victimizing the bodies of her young actors. In a complicated but deft manoeuvre, Wallace has Pace lead the audience through the moment of her own death. She then re-introduces the "already-victimised" girl in the second act as a persistent and witty ghost, presiding over the lives of her imprisoned friend and his depleted parents. (For an extended exploration of absence and female embodiment in this play, see Gwendolyn Hale's paper on "The Ghost Girl in Naomi Wallace's *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek*" in this supplement).

In Wallace's work, the live body on stage performs a supernatural figure, able to walk through time and space, traversing prison walls, and emerging from the shadows. This uncanny ability of the "flying girl" to see ahead, speak her mind, mimic her elders, subvert their pronouncements, and undermine their speculations marks a dangerous persistence. In essence, this figure performs the most subversive "trick" of all—turning the lack of material power into a persuasive force that compels spectators to question (and even undermine) the very social network they have helped to constitute.

The Dead—Tongue of a Bird and the smiling Kali

In Ellen McLaughlin's *Tongue of a Bird*, three generations of women, living and dead, are trapped in a form of imprisonment from which they make repeated gestures of escape.²⁴ Zofia, the dying matriarch, keeps hearing birds knock against her house. Evie, her late daughter, re-enacts her suicide in a series of night-time visitations. Maxine, her granddaughter, is a pilot who has undertaken an all-but-doomed mission to save the kidnapped daughter of Dessa, a distraught single mother who is overwhelmed by guilt and impotence in the face of disaster. In a performance space marked out as a cockpit, Maxine makes repeated sorties over mountain terrain in the driving snow, fantasizing about the missing girl—her likes, her dislikes, and her nascent sexual feelings. Suddenly, the bloodied Charlotte appears in the cockpit:

CHARLOTTE. You found me. Ta da.

The child draws a bloody finger down Maxine's face.

CHARLOTTE. Sometimes the quiet girls go completely mute.

Isn't it provoking? Neither seen nor heard. Poof. They just

vanish. No one can see them, even when they stand right in front of you. Like your mother.²⁵

The Kali-like figure of the girl taunts Maxine about her “Rockwell” notions of childhood (“You wish, Honey!”) and mocks the woman’s stubborn determination to find her. When Maxine goes home to sleep, the mangled child follows and lies down beside her. The haunting continues as Maxine’s mother, dressed up as Amelia Earhart, descends from the rafters and hangs above the bed. Maxine returns to the space of flight and suddenly “dives” into darkness as Charlotte crosses the stage, howling. This apocalyptic moment is followed by a report that the body has been recovered—an event the spectators never witness. Instead, they watch Maxine return to bed where she is re-visited by her ghostly mother, who forces her to remember the childhood discovery of her lifeless body. Maxine pulls Evie down from the ceiling, peels off the “Amelia” costume to reveal the ordinary house dress underneath, and rocks her. Charlotte, now unbloodied, returns to the stage and stands by the dying grandmother’s chair. Evie’s body disappears, and Maxine “opens her arms in a gesture of release.”²⁶

In *Tongue of Bird*, what at first appears as a variation on the “volare” movement of ecstatic feminist evasion becomes a negotiation between Cartesian reality—the co-ordinates of a mountain landscape—and the dangerous interior world of dreams, tricks, and evasions. In this instance, the “flying girl” represents the ultimate refusal: she will not be rescued. It is ironic, but fitting, that while the body of the abducted girl is “captured” offstage, the resistant girl (in the form of a live performative body) persistently drifts back into sight. This “flickering” of live bodies in performance is an operation as sophisticated as any animé feature (such as *Grave of the Fireflies*) that deploys a ghost girl in cheerful flights across the borders of life and death, forcing spectators to confront the bodily coercion imposed by the society in which they live.²⁷

Conclusion: Flying Girls and Dangerous Persistence

What is the most subversive thing about resistant girls who fly? It is not their dress, language or manner—or even their performance of transgressive sexual behavior. Nor is it in their ability to survive after death or walk through walls—for what is theatre if not a venue for live performers who represent the bodies of the disappeared? No, if these flying girls match their cinematic and literary counterparts in power, it is in their ability to focus attention on the least powerful players in the current social order. Forsaking the commodity dreams of kick-ass super-heroes, practitioners like Orlandersmith, Wallace, and McLaughlin have retained the *frisson* of supernatural power in live performances, which enact the most subversive *geste* of all—their dangerous persistence; their refusal to leave the stage. What “flying” dramas might we witness when notions of sentimental “girlhood” and utopic

feminist visions are completely subsumed by performances shaped by resistant girls themselves?

Notes

1. For studies on the material status of girls in the United States, England, and Canada, see Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*. (New York: Random, 1998); Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture: From "Jackie" to "Just Seventeen"* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1991); and the works of Carol Gilligan, Michelle Fine, Mary Celeste Kearney, and Barbara Ehrenreich.

2. I am indebted to Katherine Mezur and the range of feminist scholars participating in the "Girls, Girls, Girls" panel at the ASTR 2002 conference for helping to frame these questions and deepen the critique surrounding performance and girlhood.

3. See the definitions of "girl" and "girlhood" in Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. "Girl" <<http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>> and Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary <<http://www1.oup.co.uk/elt/oald>>.

4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2000) 414.

5. Lynn Mikel Brown, "Telling A Girl's Life: Self-Authorization as a Form of Resistance," *Women, Girls and Psychotherapy: Reframing Resistance*, eds. Carol Gilligan, Annie G. Rogers, and Deborah L. Tolman (New York: Harrington Park, 1991) 71-86.

6. 83.

7. 83.

8. 81. See also, Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1993) 176.

9. Sherrie A. Inness, *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1999) 74, 80, 142.

10. Lisa Soccio, "From Girl to Woman to Grrrl: (Sub)Cultural Intervention and Political Activism in the Time of Post-Feminism," *Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Studies* 2 (1999) <http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/issue2/soccio>.

11. Gayle Wald, "'Just A Girl?'" Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Construction of Female Youth," *Signs* 23.1 (1998): 585-610; here 586.

12. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1991) 103-104.

13. Michel Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1984).

14. 39-42.

15. See Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 1997) 347-62. Elin Diamond cites this flight metaphor in her analysis of Caryl Churchill's *A Mouthful of Birds* in *Unmaking Mimesis* (London: Routledge, 1997) 97-98; and Sarah Projansky weaves it through her critique on the life and untimely death of the girl flyer Jessie Dubroff in "Girls Who Act Like Women Who Fly: Jessica Dubroff as Cultural Troublemaker" *SIGNS*. 23.1 (1998) 771-808.

16. Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, trans. David Le Vay (London: Owen, 1971).

17. See Sue-Ellen Case, "Feminism and Performance: A Post-Disciplinary Couple," *Theatre Research International* 26.2 (2001): 145-52; and Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1991) as well as Diamond's sustained exploration of visibility and evasion in *Unmaking Mimesis*.

18. Dael Orlandersmith, *The Gimmick* [playscript], *American Theatre* 16.7 (1999): 31-42.

19. 34.

20. Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis* 20.

21. Orlandersmith, *Gimmick* 35.

22. Naomi Wallace, *In the Heart of America and Other Plays: One Flea Spare, In the Heart of America, The War Boys, Slaughter City, Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2001).

23. James Palmarini, "Power and Poetry: Playwright Naomi Wallace." *Dramatics* 69.2 (1998): 28.

24. Ellen McLaughlin, *Tongue of a Bird*. Playscript. *American Theatre*. 16.3 (1999): 27-43.

25. Act 1, Scene 8.

26. Act 2, Scene 26.

27. For more on the phenomenon of animé and its link to adolescence, popular culture, and female embodiment, see Susan J Napier's engaging study *Animé from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), particularly her chapter "No More Words: *Barefoot Gen*, *Grave of the Fireflies* and 'Victim's History'" 161-173.

