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Power and Perfection in Karen Finley's The Constant State of Desire: Creating a New Discourse

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of English
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In partial fulfillment
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by
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ABSTRACT

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by

Melissa D. Greenwood

Karen Finley's The Constant State of Desire merits attention because it acknowledges modern language's inability to represent the suffering of victims and creates awareness of our personal involvement in constructing gendered identities. Finley expresses her abhorrence of the desire for power and perfection by asserting that power is secured in American culture through physical and economic domination. In addition, the pursuit of perfection is engrained in one's psyche through media images and habituated behaviors. Finley does not offer a new language through which to communicate suffering, but she draws the reader's attention to the inadequacies of psychological and cultural rhetoric, thus engaging in an important step of language creation. Finley's art makes use of dominant and nondominant languages combined with body language to illustrate that neither are adequate for representing marginalized bodies of postmodern culture.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Violating prescribed limits and boundaries of language and body, Karen Finley “looks head on at unresolved hostilities, humiliations, and traumas” of American culture. In A Different Kind of Intimacy, Finley says she focuses on the psychic problems of postmodern America and uses her art as a type of Rorschach test. Her inexorable ability to reveal the unmentionables of society leads, as she says, to a state of catharsis whose aftermath allows healing (Finley 79). In other words, she uses a combination of verbal and body discourses to channel the suffering of angst-ridden personas; thus, she gives them visibility and possible psychological release. And while Finley may not be a performer accepted by mass culture, she is a performer whose acts originate as reactions to mass culture. She explains, also in A Different Kind of Intimacy, that the “exhilaration” of making her art was never about “making money, or even being discovered—it was about creating a scene, an identity” (Finley 16). While many viewers/readers dismiss her texts/performances as ranting simplicities, I am continually intrigued by her ability to challenge notions of language and representation. Even if one has not seen her perform, the act of reading her text defies the traditional relationship of author and reader by bringing out the same feeling of a non-narrativized construction that one might experience at her performance. A non-narrative is a narrative that does follow the traditional outline of fiction writing, which begins with a problem, rises until a point of climax, and finally achieves resolution. One might better understand her type of writing by comparing it with stream of consciousness made famous by Virginia Woolf in Mrs. Dalloway. Her personas say whatever comes into their minds without censorship, but unlike Mrs.

Dalloway, there is no central storyline holding Finley's personas together. But there is a theme, the theme of desire. Reading Finley's performances is often difficult because of the continuous litanies of vulgarities and the sexually graphic depictions of rape, child molestation, and mental illness. However, I am drawn to the possibility of subtextual meaning in her seemingly up-front and honest vignettes. I believe as Maria Pramaggoire does that "Finley's cultural critique negotiates the borders between flesh and body, gender and the power of representation" (271).

Close examination of The Constant State of Desire reveals a modern cultural critique of language and its relationship to power. Finley occupies different voices and creates a disordered collection of nameless, faceless, almost transparent personas that represent a multiplicity of abused personas. The title itself explains much about the performance. To be in a constant state of desire is to never attain what one desires. Therefore, the personas are ones in a state of want that is never fulfilled. Desire is elicited from a "lack" of having what is desired. As a result, for "desire" to maintain its lexical meaning, it must be unattainable. As Lynda Hart states about The Constant State of Desire, the desire in the performance is always deferred; "it is a constant pursuit of a lost object. Thus desire is always imbricated in loss" (128).

The notion of desire being comprised of "lack" is the same philosophy behind Freud's definition of the female body, which is "lacking" because of the absence of a penis. According to Freudian psychology the feminine is such because it is "lacking" a penis, a masculine symbol of power. Thus, according to Freud's theory, the feminine image is in a constant state of desire because it is lacking the power symbol. One might say, from a Freudian perspective, that the constant state of desire is the constant state of the feminine image, an image perpetually "wanting" yet never achieving because to achieve "wholeness" would undermine the

psychological meaning of the female gender. Therefore, Finley critiques the Freudian definition of the female body as a body of “lack.”

It is impossible to define a coherent and universal approach to feminist theory. The lack of coherence and universality are essentially clichéd topics of gender analysis articles because the act of defining and naming a theory subjects the theory to the patriarchal constructions and understandings of reason as one finds in the principles of the Enlightenment—a purely male-centered philosophy. Currently, feminists approach theory from an interdisciplinary perspective, often blending traditional feminist theory with psychoanalytic, postmodern, and Marxist theories. An informative discussion of psychological and feminist theory is available in Nancy Chodorow’s “Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory” in which she presents the thesis that psychological theory and feminist theory are compatible because psychological theory deals explicitly with the gendered and emotional selves, two of the most important considerations for feminist theorists (182). Two feminist theorists use postmodern theory to enhance feminist theory. Jane Flax’s article “Postmodern and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory” basically posits that the deconstructive nature of feminist theory, breaking down the relationship between biology and gender, directly relates to Derrida’s theory of deconstructing binary oppositions. She explains, [...] despite an understandable attraction to the (apparently) logical, orderly world of the Enlightenment, feminist theory more properly belongs in the terrain of postmodern philosophy (173). Also, Elizabeth Wright explains the connection of postmodern and feminist theory in “Thoroughly Postmodernist Feminist Criticism.” Her theory is that feminist theory is similar to postmodern theory because it is interested in “the shifting of boundaries, the undoing of binary oppositions” (179). Finally, a discussion about the relationship between Marxist theory and feminist theory is available in Nancy

Hartsock's "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism." Some theorists, such as Carol Gilligan who writes in "In a Different Voice" that the voices of women illustrate an "ethic of care, the tie between relationship and responsibility" (151), have made the observation that the difficulty in forming a feminist theory is that of biology vs. gender. In other words, women are subordinate because they are biologically constructed as empathetic humans and stress a collective, interrelated world relationship, while men are individualistic and less familiar with their emotions. On the other hand, some theorists argue that the female image in modern society is created by history and changes according to societal norms prescribed through media and language. Most people are familiar with Simone de Beauvoir's statement that "woman is made." I agree with Beauvoir's assumption and apply it to women's roles in Western civilization. Thus the premise of my argument relies on genders being determined by social structures and not biology. Of course there are biological differences between women and men, obviously, but it is not the absence or presence of a penis or vagina that determines the subordination of women; subordination is a hierarchical relationship based in the fundamental social structures of our culture that are accepted as natural. Likewise, the roles that men inhabit in our modern culture are determined socially. Emphasis on social determinants of gender roles has been a topic much explored in past decades. Gender theory and analysis is a relatively new approach to interpreting literature.

Gender theory explores the development of gender roles in a given culture. Specifically, gender theory allows room to explore the social conventions that create public images of women and men. In American culture, media is a structuring tool that determines a great number of gender roles and furthers an ideology of consumerism. When I use the word "media" I mean to

include all forms of written and visual media produced for mass communication. Media has always played an important role in constructing gender, but economic changes have also determined gender roles. Consider the shifting roles of American women from the American Industrial Revolution until the 1970s. During the late eighteenth century with the invention of the first steam engine, American economics underwent an enormous shift in the labor structure. The Encyclopedia of Social History explains that the preindustrialized family was “the site of production, vocational training, and welfare.” Following industrialization, outside institutions provided the services that were once the sole responsibility of the family. In addition, women and men’s roles shifted as men left the home to work in public factories, thus creating the private and public spheres (Hareven 262). In order to maintain the male/female binary as a “natural” construction, media perpetuated countless images of “happy” housewives and promised personal fulfillment through consumerism. According to a discussion of consumerism in The Encyclopedia of Social History, women perceived their domestic place in the nineteenth-century family as a ‘natural’ position; wives were responsible for the “management of the household economy.” As a result, advertisers targeted women and families as consumptive entities; “marketing messages often reinforced traditional gender roles and the ideal of comfort and convenience within the private sphere of the family” (Breckman 172).

Part of what Karen Finley does in her performances is expose the myths created by history and media that have secured women into domesticated, secondary positions. She does not necessarily place the blame for sexual inequality on patriarchal society but exposes how social structures and conventions have contributed to masculine and feminine ways of thinking and interacting. One cannot simply approach her texts with gender theory, though. In order to

completely work one's way through her texts, one must employ a combination of gender, postmodern, and psychological theories. The dominant theoretical approach used for each chapter is discussed in the chapter's introduction. In addition, during the discussion of the texts, I will use the term persona, as opposed to character, to represent the speaking voices in Finley's performance because persona better represents my theory that Finley assumes the social facades or public images of marginalized character; she is not representing herself on stage. Technically, character is suitable, but in traditional drama one actor often represents one character who is highly developed, but Finley may inhabit twenty personas in a performance that represent many less-developed social facades.

The following two sections of the Introduction establish Karen Finley as an artist and performance art as an important part of modern American drama. "Beneath the Garden" shows the major influences upon her work and "Subversive Space" gives a brief summary of performance art, the female performance artist, and Karen Finley's performances. Chapter Two, "Power: No Language At All" posits that the language of modern psychology, specifically the influences of Sigmund Freud, are incapable of prescribing a "talking" cure for feminine illness. Sandra Harding and Elizabeth Wright's essays are important because they introduce the idea of psychology as a discipline that needs analysis. Specifically, they suggest that critical analysts may find "fictions" in psychology, and I argue that Finley exposes the fiction that "voice" is a tool of liberation for the female patient. "Strangling Baby Birds" and "Common Sense" deal explicitly with female patients. "Two Stories" and "Refrigerator" expose the empty rhetoric of condolence that basically renders victims' languages useless. And finally, "Father in All of Us" explores the uselessness of language when it is contrary to the dominant language; the nondominant language

is “revised” by the dominant. Overall, Chapter Two shows how dominant figures use language to maintain power relations, but dominance is also secured through sexual dominance.

Chapter Three, “Power: Eroticized Dominance and Biological Subversion,” is founded on Freud’s definition of the female body as a body of “lack.” This basic cultural definition of “female” creates the male/female binary that reinforces patriarchal power. The first part of the chapter looks at the acceptance of eroticized dominance as a desirable construct. The basic premise of the second part of the chapter is taken from Catharine A. MacKinnon’s essay on rape and explores physical and figurative images of rape in Finley’s performance. “Strangling Baby Birds” illustrates what happens when one loses domination/power. “Two Stories,” “Refrigerator,” and “My First Sexual Experience” shows domination through physical rape, and “Enter Entrepreneur” and “Abuse” explores figurative rape. Chapter Three attempts to prove that power is maintained through dominance, but also explores the marginalization of genders when the body is abnormal or gender is not performed according to dominant ideological constructions. In the chapter, I compare Finley’s performance art to carnival and use Mary Russo’s essay “Female Grotesques” to explain how bodies in The Constant State of Desire are marginalized because they are aging, pregnant, or irregular. Judith Butler’s essay “Performance Acts and Gender Constitution” supports the argument for marginalization when the gendered-body is not performed correctly.

Chapter Four explains how cultural ideologies of the perfect feminine and masculine images are perpetuated and accepted in American culture. This chapter differs from the first two, because it is more of a gender-based study. The basic argument is built upon Foucault’s “docile body.” Carroll Smith Rosenberg, Sandra Lee Bartkey, and Susan Bordo help explain Foucault’s

theory. “Strangling Baby Birds” and “Common Sense” communicate Finley’s denial of the perfect mother/woman, and “Two Stories” and “Common Sense” convey her reaction to the perfect son and father. The basic idea of Chapter Four is that the ideology of perfection creates both feminine and masculine desires that are never fulfilled. Finally, the Conclusion discusses two contrasting responses to Finley’s performances and offers more explanation concerning the disconnectedness of Finley’s performance style.

Throughout the discussion of The Constant State of Desire the reader should keep in mind that the two main desires are for power and perfection. Power is achieved through verbal and physical domination, and the ideology of perfection is constructed in such a way as to appear as a “natural” goal of the feminine and masculine. Finley exposes the inability of the dominant language to express the female body, but she does not support body discourse. Body discourse is increasingly the language of the postmodern female because media images of the female body have replaced textual descriptions of the female body. In other words, language descriptions are increasingly being replaced with visual depictions of the female body; Finley supports neither of these representation and draws attention to the dangers of acceptance of dominant images of the female body. Acceptance of gendered roles is often accepted subconsciously as a response to images in the media; a female diets, exercises, and dresses herself according to the dominant body representation. Finley’s “scene,” as she might call it, is mediated between verbal and body languages; she suggests that neither is sufficient in American culture nor truly representative of the undercurrents of society.

Beneath the Garden

The image of a garden evokes a sense of aesthetic beauty, but what one often does not consider is the intricate root system that sustains the garden—a root system buried in mud and moisture—a root system that does not smell as pleasant as the flowers above the ground. It is this dirt and foul smell lying beneath the visual representations of American culture that Finley is interested in exposing, the intricate and complicated root systems that underlie American culture. The title of this section originates in a quote by Karen Finley's mother in which she states that Finley tries "to show what's going on underneath the garden" (Gussow xiv).

If a reader has encountered Finley, it was probably through the media coverage of the famed court case, *Finley et al. vs. the NEA*. After applying for a solo artist's grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1990 and being recommended for approval, Finley was denied funding along with three other applicants. The decision was based on influence from the Bush administration and a proposal from Jesse Helms to amend the grant-reviewing process. Their concern was with the pornographic images in the artists' work. The struggle between art and politics began to surface publicly when Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano displayed their photographs. Mapplethorpe's "The Perfect Moment" depicted homosexual images and Andres Serrano's photo entitled "Piss Christ" displayed a crucifix immersed in urine. The government's concern arose in reaction to these images that challenge the dominant white, male, Christian ideology of America.

Finley's art was targeted because of her use of food and her body on stage. A specific performance during her "waiting period" with the NEA branded her as "the chocolate smeared lady." A portion of *We Keep Our Victims Ready* deals with a news story about the discovery of

the body of young girl covered in feces. Finley was compelled to voice the suffering of this victim and during the performance, to illustrate feces; she smeared chocolate over her body. When the images from this play were leaked to the media, the political right was infuriated that Finley had been approved and recommended by the review board. Articles about Finley surfaced in newspapers and magazines, and Rush Limbaugh regularly talked about her on his show. The four applicants denied funding banded together in a lawsuit and became known as the NEA Four. In 1993 the NEA Four won their case and performance art had had its moment in the mass media spotlight. Prior to the art form's involvement with politics, performance art had basically existed as an alternative art form with a small but dedicated audience.

Before the NEA case Finley had been performing her controversial art and was well known in the art communities of Chicago, New York City, San Francisco, London, and Germany. Before Finley was a successful performance artist, she was a painter. As a child, she took drawing classes and later, as a teenager, she read Artforum and Village Voice where she found early inspiration.

During 1964, at age eight Finley attended weekly life-drawing classes at the Chicago Art Institute, and as she wandered the halls of the institute after her class, “[she] longed for female mentors, and interestingly, she thought she found them in Jean Dubuffet and Joan Miro who [she] believed were female (Finley, Different Kind 184). During early adolescence, Finley was affected by the media images of assassinations, the Civil Rights movement, and the Vietnam War. She was most specifically affected by the televised beatings of the Chicago Democratic Convention, which Finley says she and her friends watched on television at a slumber party (99-100). As a teenager, she read *Artforum* and *Village Voice* and learned about the performances of Chris Burden, Vito

Acconci, Yoko Ono, and Charlotte Mormon. Her early influences naturally led her to study art as an adult.

Finley received an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute. As a student she had an intimate relationship with Brian Routh of The Kipper Kids who were famous for what Finley describes as “perverse vaudevillian art” (2). Also in San Francisco, she was influenced by the 1977 music insurgence of Punk. In addition, she was introduced to the art of Judy Chicago and her famous piece The Dinner Party, in which various famous women’s vaginas were represented by place settings on a dinner table. Finley says in A Different Kind of Intimacy:

You might think that being a budding feminist artist with no female mentors or teachers, I would eagerly embrace The Dinner Party. But I didn’t. I reacted against it. The problem, I felt, was that there would never be a show for famous men with their dicks interpreted as plates. (184)

If one applies this quote to Finley’s own work, one might see that her art is not simply about patriarchal oppression of the female gender, and thus celebration of female sexuality, but instead, an expression of oppression experienced by men and women. While working toward a successful career as a performance artist, Finley worked as a hostess, a cocktail waitress at the first topless club in America, and eventually co-curator of “Obsession” nights at the New York hotspot, Area. Also, she was a bartender at Danceteria where she eventually became a regular performer of monologues for the cabaret called “No Entientes (“you don’t understand”) at which the likes of Madonna, Beastie Boys, Ann Magnuson, and John Sex all performed when getting started. She co-hosted Bad Music Videos and recorded The Uproar Tapes. Her performances

have been seen all over the world; she has performed in Germany at The Theater of the World biannual international festival, in a vacated JC Penny building in Chicago, and many of the hottest downtown performance spaces in New York City. All of her performances, in some sense, have a genesis in her life and the lives of her parents.

Growing up in a suburb of Chicago, Finley was one of six children. Her mother and father had histories of mental illness, and her father committed suicide when Finley was twenty-one. She says of his death in A Different Kind of Intimacy:

My father's death gave me passion, an emotional indicator toward which to push the content of my work. It compelled me to take the unanswered grief, the terrible sadness that I lived with, and throw it at the world. It was the event that catapulted me into my heroic complex, my vision of myself as a kind of Joan of Arc. Because no one was able to protect me, I would protect others, be a do-gooder, and lay the moral compass for others to live up to. (61)

In addition to her father, her mother was also a source of inspiration. As one can see in Finley's performances she does not limit herself to white, middle class women as persona-subject but often delves into the nature of different types of victims in American culture such as the eroticized female and child. Mary Finley was a combination of American Indian and Hungarian Gypsy and, according to Finley, "lived with a shame of her skin, her darkness, and of being eroticized because of her "exotic" looks" (68). Finley often gives voice to the suffering child in her performances and says that it is her mother's pain of growing up in a life of poverty that she cries out in her art, "the pain of the child who is not taken care of and so becomes the caretaker (69).

The juxtaposition between the images of the suburban family and the “real” family exists in the subtext of Finley’s art; it is the act of seeing beyond the aesthetic representation that represents Finley’s search for what happens under the surface. As Jessica Weiss says in To Have and to Hold: “Behind the picket fences of ranch house suburbia, alcoholism and psychiatric problems made the individuals inside miserable” (5). Obviously, Finley’s ability to see beyond surfaces began when she became aware of the hidden life of her seemingly normal suburban existence. She is interested in the historical influences and the genetic connections that affect modern individuals; she cannot separate the historical situation from the current situation; she is always struggling with the myths that often become a part of our historical consciousness; she is “interested in exposing devices and artifice” (Finley, Different Kind 61). For example, the myth that the 1950s was a time of prosperity and a return to family values collides with the actuality of existence as seen in Finley’s description of her father: “He experimented with homosexual sex, drugs, and every other new experience that crossed his path” (58). The myth of the fifties’ father is the driving force behind a sense of nostalgia for a time gone by, and the reality behind the myth is shocking. Likewise, the 1950s images of the housewife and mother are icons in the minds of modern Americans; however, Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique helped expose the truth behind the picket fence. Interestingly, though, the image resurfaces when the modern experience seems to be in chaos. For example, a more modern approach to gay rights has led to a conservative backlash in much the same way that the modern woman’s movement suffered a terrible backlash in the 70s and 80s; Susan Faludi’s Backlash argues a similar theory. As marginalized people become major players in American society, media reproduces images of the happy, heterosexual home. Consider the still-prominent female-subject of household product

commercials. The chaotic nature of Finley's life and specifically the death of her father led her to make "the decision to turn [her] disadvantages to [her] advantage. [She] made use of the fact that [she] was a woman, of [her] 'hysteria,'" and [her] body" (12).

Blending the personal, political, and sexual, Karen Finley is an enigmatic artist who draws upon the victimization of women and men in American culture. In her memoir, she compares herself to Joan of Arc a number of times. Perhaps she sees her performances that give voice to victims who have no voice as being just as serious as defending one's beliefs. In addition, her political involvement in the 1990s was a type of burning at the stake; her artistic expression, which uses violent language and obscene images became the representative of late-twentieth century fear of religious and moral disgrace.

To read a performance by Finley is to be shocked by the language and images, which she shares with the audience. She certainly draws from her life to create her art, but she also draws from American culture. I first encountered Finley as an undergraduate student in a twentieth-century American drama class. My interest in her writing arose from the fact that she seems to have the power to say what no one else is willing to utter, unspoken truths. And certainly, she is controversial, but more certainly she is an important writer and performer in modern American culture.

Subversive Space

Performance art was preceded by the avant-garde movement of the early twentieth century, which challenged traditional art forms and attempted to challenge cultural conventions through public appearances (Champagne 2). Using public appearances to stage art later became known as conceptual or body art. In the late 60s and early 70s Vito Acconci and Dennis Oppenheim experimented with their bodies as art and often, similar to Finley, portrayed sexuality

and sexual acts as a means of subversion. The performances of the seventies were performed in real-time, thus unable to be duplicated and were “process orientated, challenging the commercial-object status of the art work”(Champagne 2-3). Conceptual and body art reacted against the “museum culture,” which was seen as a bourgeois construction that made art available only to upper class Americans. Performances in the seventies were often group performances that still had a hint of formality and stylistic control, but the performers of the eighties began moving from group work to solo projects and away from the formal to a combination of the autobiographical and social.

The 80s and 90s were the decades in which performance art truly began to gain attention. Performances of the 80s often took place in museums or small clubs. The performers of the 80s had “powerful, direct and original voices that cut to the heart of things; some of them [were] funny and most [were] angry” (Champagne 4). Laurie Anderson’s performance art, which began in the 70s, continued to grow during the 80s and 90s. Performers such as Lydia Lunch, Dancenoise, and Karen Finley rejected the dominant image of feminine delicacy and adopted a hard-edged performance style; during the 80s, they formed a kind of “rude-girl network” in which “they allowed themselves to be monsters” (Carr 256). New themes were addressed in performances during the eighties—issues of race, gender, and identity. The subject matter and the performer’s singleness naturally put visual focus on the body (Finley, “Conversations” 480).

Overall, performance art is a form of subversive art in reaction to the dissent in the art world, not the theatrical world (Champagne 2). One of the concerns with performance art and literary analysis is the degree to which performances permit analysis; fortunately, many performance artists record a type of script prior to performing. Finley is one artist who does write

a script but does not use it during her performances. The theatrical space of performance art and the unscripted nature of the language relates to what Hélène Cixous calls l'écriture féminine, a particular kind of female writing characterized by fluidity. In a sense, the use of the voice without the domination of grammar and page allows a type of voice/text to be created in which the female performer subverts the oppression of dominant theories about the construction of fictions.

Through the assumption of different genders and classes, performance artists create images that offer alternatives to or critiques of the “traditional images and roles they [...] inherited”

(Champagne 2). In performance art the female artist creates a unique special experience that is counter to the dominant culture, a non-entertainment.

To read a text written by Finley is to be jolted; “she doesn’t entertain” (Carr 3). Both her language and physical presences onstage induces fear because she presents “an unsocialized woman” (Carr 1). Her graphic sexual depictions and streams of vulgar language “signal a threatening femininity, a banshee” (Carr 5). The threatening nature of the text is one induced through language of uncontrolled rage, but Finley’s strength is in her ability to express the “trigger” of one’s rage (Carr 9). Her ability to communicate deeply buried and unvoiced emotions universalizes her performances. As Lynda Goldstein has written, she articulates “feminist anger at social injustices and violence perpetrated against women by the dominant culture” (102). Certainly, a reader is shocked by her descriptions of child molestation, rape, or domination, but she “charges through the gross forbidden subtext of everyday life [...]” (Carr 97) with the purpose of coming to terms with “a world both horrifying and unacceptable” (Jerome 141).

Many of Finley's critics say that her sexually explicit performances undercut a feminist message, but C. Carr notes in "Unspeakable Practices" that Finley's art works to express "the damage and longing in everyone that triggers both desire and rage" and not pornographic sexuality (Carr 153). Carr explains that Finley's strength is in her ability "to tell the awfulest truth" about abuse, desire, and rage by exposing the "victimizer's monstrous impulses" and validating the feelings the "victim [can] barely talk about" (Carr 153). The abusers and victims in Finley's performances are fragmented postmodern personas.

She does not offer up a resolved character but "presents a persona that is shattered, a self unable to put a face on things" (Carr 3). Her characters are shape-changers without boundaries as "they flow into each other over the course of a monologue [...]" (Carr 9). In a critical analysis of Finley's performance style Judith Jerome sums up the essence of the changing persona by saying: "Finley is willing to put many faces 'on things'—to display the multiple, fragmented identities we all contain" (136).

Not only does Finley shift personas between victim and abuser, she forces her audience/reader to shift positions. As one reads her performance text, one finds his/her voice becoming that of a child molester, an abused wife, or a forsaken son. Lynda Goldstein says that through gender shifting Finley "destabilizes" the audience/reader's "stable, gendered identities," which are privileged in modern culture (102-3). The lack of narrative structure, abusive language, and persona shifts neither allows the reader/audience to dissociate themselves nor lose themselves by inducing a suspension of disbelief, which often allows an audience member to enter into the fictitious world of a novel, movie, or play. She is keenly in tune with her purpose and craft and often discusses her views on performance art and her individual techniques.

She says that she does not rehearse her performances or plan out the order of the scenes but does write a script beforehand (Robinson 486). She also does not censor herself; she says, “the world of my performances is this inner world—inside me, inside anyone” (486). She brings her sense, rage, and emotions into her performances (486-7). The use of the personal in art has always been debated, and Finley says, “the goal is to make it seem universal” (487).

Her subject matter is generally one of universality and often concerns tragic people with tragic lives. She says that she is concerned about these types of people, “people who have suffered a tragedy and carry it on their shoulders to their graves” (487). It seems that her role as performer is that of medium for the suffering people around her.

Finley does not focus on just one suffering gender. In general, she is “interested in...bad things happening to good people” (487). She oscillates between female and male personas, but she does, as she has said, “try to show females in power, and to show different ways in which women have been abused.” (487). Finley addresses the universal question of the myths that form gendered selves: “In my performances, I also try to dispel myths. I feel I have a responsibility to denounce the myths about women and psychology created by Freud and other like him” (487). Finally, she says in an interview with Robert Schechner:

The reason why the feminine or the maternal way has been oppressed is because the male energy is so scared of it. And so the only way males can deal with it is to knock it down, to not allow it to come up. In The Constant State of Desire I wanted to show vignettes of capitalist, consumer society where people go far out, stretch the boundaries—but still they

never can be satisfied. So they take things into themselves, and this is what incest or abuse are about. (154)

In other words, the inability to feel satisfied may lead to abuse or incest because these two areas are taboo and uncharted, thus the satisfactory level undetermined and fulfillment possible. The continuous wanting of postmodern bodies is a want that will never be fulfilled, so on the road to achievement, people are abused and victimized as a way of expressing “the desperate want for something, the hole in all of us that nothing ever fills” (Carr 9). One possible fulfillment is language, but in Chapter Two, one will see that Finley denies language’s ability to facilitate healing.

CHAPTER 2

POWER: NO LANGUAGE AT ALL

Tension between psychological theory and feminist theory is one that has garnered much attention. Finley may speculate, as Sandra Harding does in “Is there a Feminist Method,” that women are only recently beginning to consider the “bizarre mental and behavioral characteristics of psychiatrists,” even though “psychiatrists have endlessly studied what they regard as women's peculiar mental and behavioral characteristics” (164). Furthermore, Sandra Kemp notes in the Introduction to Feminisms: An Oxford Reader that women’s suffering is often noted in psychological literature to “...signify a problem in women's development” (146). In “Thoroughly Postmodern Feminist Criticism,” Elizabeth Wright explains that Shoshana Felman’s important advance in the 1970s points to the unconscious of psychoanalysis. Specifically, Felman argues that literature exposes “slippages of meaning,” which would reveal that there was fiction in [psychological] theory” (179). The “fiction” that Finley reveals is that “voice” is a tool of liberation. For many years literary critics have used Freud’s psychoanalytic theories to interpret literary texts, but recently they have begun analyzing Freud’s theories as a type of literary text in order to uncover the meaning behind the psychoanalyst. Karen Finley addresses the myths of psychoanalysis in The Constant State of Desire through direct references to Sigmund Freud and vignettes illustrating Freud’s main theories of psychology. In addition, she discusses how one is marginalized because he/she speaks a nondominant language.

Typically, Americans have been led to believe by psychologists that obtaining “voice” is an important step towards assuming individuality. An explicit promise of modern psychology is that

through “voicing” one’s problems one’s suffering will diminish. According to Pamela Thrushwell’s interpretation of Freud’s Studies on Hysteria, “uncovering a reason behind an illness will instigate a cure.” Thus, “psychoanalytic theory, in this sense, puts a great deal of emphasis on the act of interpreting and understanding a symptom” (30). Many feminist scholars privilege “voice” over “silence.” However, the connection of “voice” and liberation is a misconception. Language’s inability to operate as a tool of autonomy for the female gender in American culture is one of the main facets of The Constant State of Desire. Maria Pramaggoire suggests that Finley forces psychoanalysis to reflect upon its inability to “narrativize” the hysterical female body or provide a language “to speak for the flesh” (274). Interestingly, Finley, as a solo performance artist, uses her body as a canvas in combination with her shocking language to create a “new” language, a forceful language that confronts cultural taboos. Finley’s performance shows how “voice” does not alleviate suffering.

Finley creates personas that exhibit psychology’s inadequacy when applied to female suffering. The female patient’s illness often originates from her self-perception of her body. She may realize that as an aging mother, her body is no longer considered attractive, and the only language through which she can express her suffering is that of dream imagery or fantasy, which is misinterpreted through dominant language. Modern psychology primarily uses “talk” therapy in a doctor/patient relationship, an extension of Freud’s Interpretation of Dreams in which “meanings of dreams are only retrievable through examining the way in which the patient retells the dream.” By “retelling” the dream, thus putting the dream into language, “the patient and analyst together can construct a better understanding of the dream” (Thrushwell 36). In addition to hypnosis, Freud used free association a method of psychoanalysis that insists that a patient

“says” everything that comes into their heads (Thrushwell 38). The basic construction of the doctor/patient relationship indicates an unspoken domination. The doctor is the dominant character whose knowledge is privileged over the patient, and the patient is the nondominant character analyzed through the dominant language of the doctor. Picture for a moment a patient in a counseling session. While the patient “talks,” the doctor writes and interprets the patient’s illness according to the doctor’s language, the dominant language. For example, in a case study published by Freud, he interprets a female’s dream about a jewel case as a vaginal symbol because of the case’s connection to the shell of Venus (qtd. in Thrushwell: 37). Therefore, the patient’s nondominant language is reinterpreted accordingly; the doctor revises the patient’s nondominant language. In other words, the patient has no language at all through which to communicate suffering because his/her language is “rewritten” in the doctor’s dominant language, which is unable to speak for the suffering female body. The basis of modern psychology is that healing is achieved through communication between a patient and doctor, and Finley, as Maria Pramaggiore states, “indicts the Freudian regime for its inability to provide a talking cure for what it itself defines as the disease of femininity” (275). “Strangling Baby Birds” and “Common Sense” deal explicitly with the doctor/patient relationship.

After the persona in “Strangling Baby Birds” tells the doctor about her three dreams, he dismisses all but the third, which he deems “very important” (3). The doctor interprets the third dream as “very important” because of the presence of voice:

As she hangs out the window her husband walks below, but her
husband hadn’t memorized her shadow and she didn’t know how to

wear perfume. She just wasn't that kind of girl. So she cried out
for help. Help. Help. Helllp. Heeellp! (3)

In the past she had just dreamt of “tortures, rapes and beating where no sounds would come out all” (3). The reader may instantly want to assert that the presence of voice is a positive symbol and the lack of voice is a negative symbol. Therefore, the persona must be improving if she has gained voice. But, the persona goes on to say that the doctors were wrong (3). Although feminist discourse has celebrated “voice” as the key to overturning oppressive patriarchal power, Finley denies the effectiveness of language/voice. As Pramaggiore says, “She addresses the complicity of language in oppression, showing that, despite some feminist claims to the contrary, finding one’s voice is not always a liberatory act” (273). One may ask, do the woman’s feelings of rape and torture decrease because she yelled, “Help!”? I posit that her language does not facilitate healing or strengthening of her position; rather, the doctor who decides what is and is not important judges her language. Pramaggiore notes Finley’s denial of voice as a cure for suffering. She says that when the woman finds her voice, only to have it stolen and given to a crying child “reinscribes the mothering function” because it is “trapped within a circle of women, mothers, and children...”(275).

The fact that the language occurs in her third dream, is stolen by the wind, and equated with the “cries” of a child indicates that the persona cannot find a language through which to escape her position, thus “infantilizing the dreaming woman” (Pramaggiore 275-6). The female persona is equated with an infant who cannot communicate a message. There seems to be no language through which the persona can communicate her anger and her oppression because the doctor dismisses her silent suffering in her previous dreams as unimportant, thus “revising” the

patient's language according to his own; the doctor's cannot understand her language because he does not understand her body. The doctors "revise" her language, but they also "revise" and "resculpted" her body according to their psychological and medical theories:

But she knew that these doctors were wrong. For these were the same doctors who anesthetized her during the birth of her children. These were the same doctors who called her animal as she nursed. These were the same doctors who gave her episiotomies. No more sexual feelings for her during and after childbirth. (3)

The doctors figuratively pick away at her brain with their psychological rhetoric and literally carve out her body during childbirth. Psychological rhetoric is not the only language that oppresses Finley's personas. The inability for a female persona to use language as a victim is also important.

Joanne's story of "Two Stories" exposes the inability of language to serve as a mediating force between victim and abuser. After Joanne's husband raped her in front of her children and pets, her family and friends said, "you're so lucky he didn't kill you and your children [...] that it didn't happen in your house [...] that your children weren't harmed" (12). The response of family and friends is empty rhetoric; the language does not relieve Joanne's suffering. So, Joanne stays with her husband and merely fantasizes a violent revenge in which she sleeps with a gun under her pillow (11) to shoot him with before he has an orgasm. She uses the gun to dominate her husband because her language is not enough; she had no language except the language of fantasy through which to express her suffering. Maria Pramaggiore says, "she [Finley] seizes upon ideological assumptions—about sexuality, about psychoanalysis, about the body and language—and shatters them with schizoid fantasies..." (270). And fantasy by definition is not real; a fantasy

is basically the same as a desire, only existing because of the attainable nature of the want. The binary sanity/insanity is interwoven throughout The Constant State of Desire, and fantasy seems a suggestion by Finley of one way American culture regulates sanity. Finley has said she focuses on “sanity and insanity.” (487), and sanity, for her, is “the ability to let yourself go—to release yourself—and then to pull yourself back in again” (487). Persona fantasies are in basically every vignette of The Constant State of Desire. Fantasy is one way that marginalized personas react against the empty rhetoric of condolence. “Common Sense” further illustrates the theory of empty rhetoric. In a matter-of-fact tone, the last section of “Common Sense” sums up the uselessness of language to express suffering:

We all discussed our psychological disorders. Gary had overdosed, fell into a coma and imagined tigers and angels dancing on his neck. Rachel feared she had cancer until she really did create it with her mind. Rita washed her hands all night long till her hands were chapped raw and bleeding and her flesh just washed down the drain. Jeffery heard voices. One told him to marry Charles Manson, another told him to impregnate childless women, and the third told him to become Jodie Foster’s bicycle seat. (16)

Finley’s dark humor is apparent in this excerpt as she catalogs psychological illness in much the same way that Freud might have pronounced the causes of neuroses. The summary nature of this section is interesting in that it implies, in the same way that psychology does, a narrative way of looking at illness. After reading this section, one notices that even though the patients are receiving counseling, they are not improving.

Probably one of the most explicit and disturbing examples of language's inability to relieve suffering is "Refrigerator," a subsection of "The Father in All of Us." The performance describes the abuse of a young girl by her father. When he molested her as a child, he told her that he was teaching her what it was to "be a woman, to be loved" (20), and when the child cried herself to sleep because she could not scream out (21), she was told to "Ssh, now. Ssh, ssh, child. Ssh. Hush, child, go to sleep" (21). The child is not given language and thus resorts to fantasy like Joanne; she puts Band-Aids between the legs of all of her stuffed animals (21), symbolizing her effort to take care of herself, but the symbol goes unrecognized by her mother who blames her for playing with her food, thus ruining dinner (21). Her mother's inability to see the abuse results from the child's language being different from the dominant language. When a person's language is contrary to the dominant language, he/she is marginalized and suffering is invisible.

The subsection from which the vignette "The Father in All of Us" gets its name, "Father in All of Us," expresses how nondominant/contrary language marginalizes a homosexual son. The son is homosexual, has AIDS, and has been renounced by his father. Even after the son's death, the father does not announce it in a "truthful" language:

When I died, you didn't announce my death. Oh, no. You just called it accidental, cause unknown, cause uncertain. How could you have announced my death when you never announced my life? Not even a proper burial. Not even a mourning for those who loved me. Oh Father, Father. Your fucking reputation! Call him the provider, the punisher, the money man. (22)

The father's language is a language of "prestige" (21) and symbolizes the male language present in the feminine and the masculine, the language of building up and tearing down of culture:

It's the father in all of us that gave us the Berlin Wall, that saves the whales, makes treaties, makes decisions and reasons, makes bridges and tunnels, cures and diseases, ways and means, politics and social disorders. It's the father, it's the father in all of us. (22-3)

It is interesting to note that the verbs used to describe the actions of the "father in all of us" indicate power. "Gave," "save," "make," "cures," "diseases," "ways," "means," "politics," and "disorders" situates the "father in all of us" at the top of the power hierarchy controlling most important facets of modern culture. What is left for those outside of the power hierarchy?

The language of dominant ideology is one that cannot represent those figures who are outside the mainstream, the aging mother, the raped wife, the molested child, the homosexual son. The personas not existing within the media's perpetuation of youthful beauty and heterosexual love have no language at all through which to voice suffering. One must be a part of the economics of the culture to have the dominant voice, must be interested in controlling the environment, the people, and even the animals. Even when nondominant figures attempt to create a voice that is representative of their situations, dominant figures "revise" their nondominant language. For example the homosexual son in "Father in All of Us" describes his homosexuality as love of another man and his father describes homosexuals as "faggots, queens, queers, fairies, people with lisps;" in other words, the stereotypical rhetoric of homosexuality maintains dominant rhetoric; power is preserved.

CHAPTER 3

POWER: EROTICIZED DOMINANCE AND BIOLOGICAL SUBVERSION

Dominance exists in many forms and often the dominator and dominated desire the hierarchical structure of power. For clarity of my discussion I equate “erotic” with “desirable;” therefore, “eroticized dominance,” means a dominance that is desired. For instance, women are taught that attractiveness directly relates to surface presentation. The surface presentation need be sleek, slender, and well styled, and many women attempt to achieve their culture’s idea of the perfect surface presentation by exercising, dieting, or surgery; these types of women desire dominance over their bodies, their surface presentations. Many women accept marriage vows dictating the husband as the dominant partner and the wife as the submissive partner; in this instance, the female desires domination. The female may desire domination, but the powerful party also desires dominance; in a marriage, this is typically the husband, but the wife, if she succumbs to cultural ideologies may “desire” being dominated as a “natural” way of being. This chapter explores the dynamics behind male and female desire for domination and the literal and figurative ways that domination is used as a tool to secure power. A dominant persona fearing that he/she has lost control may resort to domination tactics such as physical and figurative rapes. Catharine A. MacKinnon illustrates in “Rape: On Coercion and Consent” that two groups of women are vulnerable to eroticized dominance: “Virtuous women, like young girls, are unconsenting, virginal, rapable. Unvirtuous women, like wives and prostitutes, are consenting, whores, unrapable” (46). Basically, MacKinnon is repeating the whore-Madonna paradigm in Western culture. MacKinnon further explains that the heightening rates of childhood abuse may

reflect an eroticized fantasy of young girls as “forbidden” (46), thus desirable. My idea of eroticized dominance originated after reading MacKinnon’s essay in which she asserts that rape is a powerful patriarchal tool that keeps control over a woman’s sexuality. She says, “almost half of all women...are raped or victims of attempted rape at least once in their lives. Almost forty percent are victims of sexual abuse in childhood. Women are more likely to be raped than to rape and are most often raped by men they know” (47). Physical rape is self-explanatory, but figurative rape may be financial control or psychological control.

Concerning desired domination, consider articles from popular women’s magazines such as Redbook, Cosmopolitan, and Seventeen. The covers generally advertise a “10 ways to...” article from which a woman learns how to make herself more attractive to her husband or “spice up” her love life. For instance, a female may desire the body images portrayed in magazines or on television, and her desire for “perfection” may lead her to form a regime of diet and exercise, a disciplined body. Overtly sexual message about women’s bodies builds a cultural ideology that to be feminine is to be sexual and nondominant.

The eroticized image of young girls and a male’s sexual attraction to this type of persona is discussed in “Strangling Baby Bird.” The section concerning a female persona and her father illustrates the ideology of eroticized dominance. When the female persona turns forty and is a mother, her father finally tells her that he loves her (5). After telling her that he loves her, he hangs himself in the bathroom after masturbating to the children’s section of the Sear’s catalog. I believe what Finley is exposing here is that the father no longer felt dominant over his sexualized daughter because she was desexualized by motherhood and age; there was no longer space for him to dominate this “grown woman,” an “unrapable” woman in MacKinnon’s words (46); she is

“unrapable” not just in a physical sense, but in a psychological sense because she no longer fits into his fantasy of domination. Finley exposes different forms of “rape” in her performance; she addresses figurative and physical rape. Physical rape occurs in “Two Stories,” “My First Sexual Experience,” and “Refrigerator,” and figurative rape occurs in “Enter Entrepreneur” and “Abuse.”

Joanne is the subject of the first story in “Two Stories.” Because her husband raped her in the past, she sleeps with a gun (11). She has resorted to violence because she does not want to continue accepting her husband’s sexual abuse or in her words: “[I’ll] take his cash but [I] won’t take his shit” (11). She is specifically drawing a parallel between “shit” and the type of marital relationship they have. Eroticized dominance is accepted if confirmed by the masses. In Joanne’s case even when her husband forced her to perform sexual acts in front of their children, the neighbors and her family did not support her need to escape the abuse:

When she was forced to perform fellatio at gunpoint in front of her own children and pets. And afterwards all her loved ones, family and neighbors could say was, “You’re so lucky he didn’t kill you and your children. You’re so lucky that it didn’t happen in the house. You’re so lucky you children weren’t harmed.” (12)

The belief that women who are raped by someone they know are less traumatized is a misunderstanding addressed by MacKinnon in “Rape” (47). She says, “women often feel as or more traumatized from being raped by someone known or trusted, someone with whom at least an illusion of mutuality has been shared [...]” (47). However, the gray area of marital rape often leaves the wife as a helpless victim. In Joanne’s case, she creates a fantasy in which she shoots her husband before he has an orgasm to ensure that she does not get abused. The husband’s

desire to dominate his wife sexually is what I mean by eroticized dominance; it is an idea that is highly arousing to him, the dominator, and virtually inescapable for Joanne, the dominated. The dominated personas of Finley's performance are sometimes children. "Refrigerator" is the second part of "The Father in All of Us" and further illustrates eroticized dominance. The performance essentially describes the abuse of a young girl by her father. When he molested her as a child, he told her that he was teaching her what it was to "be a woman, to be loved" (20), to be dominated. As an adult, she has "no no no feelings at all" (20), which is often the complaint of a battered wife, a dominated woman. The raped mother of "My First Sexual Experience" appears to have no feelings at all as she simply allows her son to "mount her in the ass" (19). After he completes the rape, she merely comments on the similarity between his father's and her son's sperm: "Boy, you got lazy ass cum. Just like your father" (19).

"My First Sexual Experience" is a critique of Freud's theory of the Oedipus Complex and explores the theory's representation of man's sexual domination over women, specifically mothers. Maria Pramaggiore makes an interesting point in that the overtly incestuous nature of this section is simply Finley's use of exaggeration as a subversive method. Basically the Oedipus complex is the polite way to say "motherfucker," according to Pramaggiore. She says Finley takes a "catch-all" word and uses imagery to illustrate language's relationship to the body; the images of a son "fucking" a "mother" does not allow the reader to separate the body's relationship from the language (281) or the implied dominance of the son over the mother:

My first sexual experience was at the time of my birth, passing
through the vaginal canal. That red pulsing tunnel, that alley of
love. It's the smell of my mama. I'm nothing but a human penis.

At the time of my birth I had an erection. I'm fucking my own
mama at birth. It's the smell, it's the sight of my own mama that
keeps me going. (17)

As an adult the man surrounds himself with symbols of masculinity such as a red car but is always looking for “hot mamas with hot titties in hot Laundromats dressed in gingham” (17). The male persona is driven by his fantasy of the mother as a signifier of his power; he is dominant over her even during birth. When the persona describes having sex with his mother, one may see that this performance is symbolically about the abuse and domination of the mother/mother image and the sexualizing of the mother by Freudian psychology. It is an exaggerated depiction of what Freud theorized was the son's impulse towards his mother. But physical rape is not the only way to dominate; figurative rape is also a tactic.

In “Enter Entrepreneur” the female persona is reacting to the entrepreneurial currents of American culture (7). She explicitly says to the entrepreneur:

I'm not gonna let you gang rape me any more, Mr. Yuppie, Mr.
Businessman, Mr. Entrepreneur. I'm not going to let you take my
streets that I built with my soul, my creativity, my spirit. (7)

“Rape” is figurative in this sense, but the persona basically feels that the entrepreneur's “take over” of her streets, soul, creativity, and spirit (7) is a version of rape—albeit a figurative rape. Much like the husband's desire to dominate his wife, the entrepreneur experiences pleasure from dominating the production of goods. But, not all female personas resist this figurative rape because they know that resistance leads to marginalization.

“Abuse” presents a male persona who uses powerful monetary images such as “sapphires, emerald, opals, gold, silver, and platinum to figuratively “fuck” or “rape” a female persona. And all she says after his figurative rape is “it’s better to feel abuse than to feel nothing at all” (23). The idea of accepting abuse is the same as accepting domination as an alternative to being marginalized in one’s culture. But, what if a persona does not choose to be dominated or does not represent a desirable subject for domination?

As much as performance art is unique and subversive, it does draw upon other performance styles that emphasize rebellion. There are biological subversions that make escape from patriarchal domination possible. However, the biological manifestations are ones that separate personas from ever attaining feminine perfection. Because of performance art’s expression of the “grotesque body” and its rebellious nature, it is similar to carnival.

Mary Russo’s article “Female Grotesques” suggests that the emphasis of performance art on the body is a “reenactment of the carnivalesque portrayals of the grotesque body”—the pregnant, aging, or irregular body” (320). Russo further illustrates in her article some basic premises of carnival and its connection to female performance. A basic summary of her theory is that carnival was traditionally a form of “rebellion and reorganization” orchestrated behind masks that subverted the dominant class by illustrating counter production and reorganization. Further, she states that the carnivalesque centralizes on the grotesque body, which is an “open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change,” rather than a culturally created feminine image which is often “monumental, static, closed, and sleek” (325). Particularly relevant to Finley’s presentations of personas is Russo’s argument that behind masks or personas a performer can rebel against dominant ideologies and perhaps provide visibility to marginalized

“grotesques” in a culture. Maria Pramaggoire says, “The disgust that surrounds femininity and femaleness is located in the grotesque body’s rhythms, ingestions, and expulsions [...]” (273). With its shifts of personas (or masks) and its destabilized boundaries, The Constant State of Desire creates a carnivalesque atmosphere. Furthermore, her consistent subject of the body as a body of “becoming, process, and change” focuses her work in the female grotesque, malformed, expulsing, and changing.

Women who have malformations of the body or whose bodies are “expulsing” or “becoming” are protected from sexual objectification, but live with the knowledge that they can never be the ideal. It is an un-desirable subversion determined by an abnormality in biological construction. Karen Finley chastises psychological theory for defining the feminine as a body of lack—one lacking a penis and “the inadequacy of Freudian psychoanalysis to construct a feminine or female self except as lack [...] or as monstrous ‘abject’ [...]”(Pramaggoire 274). The basic biological difference between man and woman situates the female body in a nondominant position. In order to secure an ideology that the female body is nondominant, sexualized feminine images are perpetuated without censorship in American media. For example, a persona in The Constant State of Desire does not have a vagina and it is her “lack” of the vagina that saves her from being raped:

Let me tell you about power. Being gang raped by a group of youths at the age of fifteen in the subway until they discovered my secret, that I was born without a vagina. They didn’t want to fuck me in my other holes, so they just threw me onto the train track in their embarrassment [...]. (16)

The persona's "lack" of a vagina is what saves her from being in the words of her mother, "violated in this way" (16) and prevents what Catherine A. MacKinnon describes as one's sexuality being "a thing to be stolen, sold, bought, bartered, or exchanged by others (43). The girl goes on to say she could not be a "mother and a whore" and there was no way for her to be the third, and final option for women, a saint, because God was a man (16). Finley has said that if a woman is not a mother or a whore in American culture, she is considered unproductive (Finley, "Karen Finley: A Constant" 154) and being unproductive is threatening to America's mass production ideology.

In another performance, I'm an Assman, a female persona is almost raped by a man on the subway, but when he discovers that she is menstruating, he flees in horror. Emily Martin discusses man's fear of menstruation in "Medical Metaphors of Women's Bodies: Menstruation and Menopause" as a fear expressed through the metaphor of an Industrial society. She says that just as men of an Industrial society are afraid of their machines "breaking down," they are afraid of the supposed emotional "breakdown" that accompanies women during menstruation (29). Similar to the "lack" of "production" that will accompany a factory breakdown, when women menstruate they are "not reproducing, not continuing the species, not preparing to stay at home with the baby, not providing a safe, warm womb to nurture man's sperm" (Martin 30).

In conclusion, the female body as a body of "lack" is the basis of power relations, and rape, actual and figurative, is a tool used to reinforce the man "on top" philosophy. But, it should be noted that the victim sometimes desires dominance because it seems natural. As Thruswell explains, "psychoanalytic ideas were also used to suggest that women were naturally passive and masochistic" (125). Unfortunately, dominance is most likely not going to be subverted unless a

persona is of the grotesque body, and if one inhabits the grotesque body, one cannot inhabit the ideology of perfection.

CHAPTER 4

PERFECTION: THE FEMININE AND MASCULINE

The first speaker in The Constant State of Desire describes the female persona in “Strangling Baby Birds” as dependent upon dominant representations of the feminine for a clear understanding of her place in American culture. The speaker says of the female persona: “if she wasn’t passive, well, she just didn’t feel desirable. And if she wasn’t desirable she just didn’t feel female. And if she wasn’t female, well the whole world cave in” (3). Rosi Braidotti writes in “Mothers, Monster, and Machines” that femininity of the 1950s and 60s was constructed of adjectives like “childlike, nonassertive, and helpless.” Furthermore, she explains, women were supposed to be “content in a world of bedroom, kitchen, sex, babies, and home” (95). Popular media in a given generation creates a dominant image of the mother, father, and family. When discussing the ideology of perfection, one cannot argue simply discuss women because both genders are led to believe that they should strive for perfection.

Carroll Smith Rosenberg sees the body as a “medium of culture” (90) and argues that American culture has created the “docile body,” which is a term that Foucault used in The History of Sexuality. Sandra Lee Bartky’s essay “Foucault, Femininity, and the Moderation of Patriarchal Power,” is helpful in understanding Foucault’s theory. Bartky explains the “docile body” as being dependent upon three factors, those intended to determine the shape and configuration of the body, such as diet and exercise, those intended to produce homogenized gestures, postures, and movements, and those aimed at creating an “ornamental” surface body (132). Bartky uses the metaphor of the army as an institution that creates homogenized images of the body just as the

classroom with its desks and unspoken rules of “being” creates the student’s body (130). Bartky says that American society is a “disciplinary society” (131) in which forces such as school and work bells are determinants of the body’s actions and configurations (131). Susan Bordo’s essay “The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity” explains the “docile body” as “bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, ‘improvement’” (91); and, therefore, according to Bordo, femininity is not defined by biology, but created through accepted “habituated” actions. Thus, femininity and masculinity are based on “surface presentation[s] of the self” (94), presentations, I argue, of perfection. Surface presentation has always been a factor in determining cultural representations of femininity, for instance, the Chinese tradition of foot binding, adornment of jewelry, and body piercing of tribal communities. But, the constancy of the postmodern body’s interaction with images of perfection in the media has created a culture seeking perfection. American culture is one in which men and women are bombarded with images of desirable masculinity, and one in which male and female bodies are subjected to seemingly innocent behavioral rituals.

Visual culture has influenced a change from verbal descriptions of femininity that may be found in medical texts of the nineteenth century to visual representations that have created “bodily discourse” by telling women how to dress, express, and behave (Bartky 94). It is perhaps easier to understand this theory if one considers the verbal descriptions of women in nineteenth-century novels; these descriptions were the dominant ways of dictating style for women and men. The twenty-first century is a time in which most magazine photographs have been “retouched” or enhanced by digital media, thus creating a perfected image, which is not even attainable for the featured model. Often the control is in the dominant capitalistic powers that determine the mass

production of materials in American society, but, as Bordo points out, those powers consist of a central mechanism that is generating, facilitating, and ordering the perfected images and the consumer views this generating force as a positive symbol (92). The central mechanism, then, is often accepted as a “natural” way of living and ordering culture. If one accepts the Foucaultian notion that gender is created by external forces in our culture and our own participation in the gendering of our bodies, one may accept Bartky’s conclusion that the absence of a responsible entity, a “formal institutional structure” that determines the configurations of the body, “creates the impression that the production of femininity is either entirely voluntarily or natural” (143). In other words, men and women accept cultural representations of gender and internalize gender hierarchy because there is no one entity responsible for the perpetuation of gender representation; it is a combination of parents, teachers, media, and beauty experts (148) that contribute to a “natural” idea and internalization of what it means to be masculine and feminine. Mostly, media portrays perfect images of desirability, and art, specifically performance art, subverts the dominant ideas of what constitutes entertainment.

The Constant State of Desire gives voice to the unmentionables of American culture, taboo subjects such as childbirth, mental illness, homosexuality, marital rape, child molestation, and sexual fantasies. Through “social sanction” of specific taboos, gender identity becomes as Judith Butler says in “Performance Acts and Gender Constitution” a “stylized repetition of acts [...] a performative accomplishment” which attempts not to perform cultural taboos, thereby performing cultural constructions of gender (402). Butler argues that the repetition of non-tabooed acts creates gender identities because one learns how not to perform gender representations outside of the mainstream. She goes on to say that gender constructions are

viewed as “natural configurations” (407) that place men and women in a binary opposition. Further, she says that the cultural acceptance of the binary opposition as “natural” “recreates the cyclical ideology of heterosexual marriage and reproduction” (408). Butler revises Simone de Beavouir’s idea that “woman is made” to include man. Therefore, one might say that Butler believes gender is made. She says in her essay that the body is “a historical situation” (404). Her assertion is very much an extension of Bartky’s interpretation of Foucault’s idea of the “docile body” in which the body is created by external forces that act as disciplinary functions to create particular gendered movements, gestures, etc, which we accept as necessary, actually participating the disciplining of our own bodies. As Butler notes, when a gender is not performed according to the cultural ideology, one is marginalized (412). For instance, an aging woman does not fulfill the current American focus on youthful beauty. In addition, a homosexual male is in opposition to the basic binary gender construction and is thus denied validation or a clear depiction of his place in society. Even a mother is subject to marginalization because she is disconnected from youthful sexuality by cultural emphasis on her role as a caregiver. It is the American ideology of desire that is the cause of this marginalization because it is a desire for perfection and power, two attributes that these marginalized people cannot attain. Butler notes, if one doubts the cultural construction of gender, consider society’s reaction to persons who do not perform their gender correctly—the fact of marginalization is testament that “on some level there is a social knowledge that the truth [...] of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated” (412). When the “socially compelled” gender is not performed correctly the male or female is subjected to marginalization.

The personas in The Constant State of Desire are marginalized because they do not perform their genders correctly.

In the first dream of “Strangling Baby Birds,” the persona:

...dreams of strangling baby birds. Bluebirds, wrens and robins.

And with her thumbs she pushes back on their small feathered necks, pushes back against their beaks till they snap like breaking twigs. (2)

From the beginning of the performance the reader is confronted with an image that defies his/her notion of femininity. The image of the a woman strangling baby birds is significant because it contradicts the common association of woman and bird, which is a metaphorical relationship that automatically triggers associations of entrapment, delicacy, or frailty. The persona’s desire to kill the birds is an extended desire to reject the traditional relationship of woman to frail, small, delicate creatures. The fact that the birds are babies implies a connection with children. Female anger towards the helpless baby bird is an inversion of the cultural representation that women are nurturing, selfless beings.

The second dream is of the persona in a cage singing loudly and off-key. In this dream she inhabits the image of the mother bird. Her family members stand outside of the cage judging and telling her that she sings terribly. The cage, like the archetypal image of the house, becomes a symbol of the mother’s oppression. Tension exists between the negative and positive in the image of the female being “locked” in a cage and yet singing expressively. There is significance in the fact that she is “locked” in the cage. Someone outside the cage had to “lock” her up, and in the dream the only people outside the cage are her husband and children. The dream illustrates the

mother as subject; she is not an individual entity but rather an image or cultural representation created through the ideas of her culture. The constant state of desire could be said to be that of the mother who desires the ability to dream or that of the family who constantly desires their archetypal image of the mother figure.

The third dream begins with the mother falling from a fifth-story window and catching herself on the ledge of a windowsill. Her attempt at survival involves bloody and dangerous imagery. The windowsill is “icy, frozen, and cold” and made of stone (3). Her cut fingers bleed as she holds on, but she says that she had always had “ugly fingers;” therefore, the wounds are unimportant. Her husband walks below her and for a moment she believes that she is freed, but he does not notice her because he “hadn’t memorized her shadow and she didn’t know how to wear perfume” (3). She realizes her inability to be “feminine” as prescribed by modern ideology disconnects her from her husband. In other words, she becomes aware of her invisibility. She begins to yell for help, but even the wind has a “mean spirit” (3) and carries the woman’s voice half way around the world into the crib of a crying child so that the child’s mother might hear the cries (3). The third dream furthers the idea of the mother as subject by equating the mother with a powerless, voiceless child. The mother is voiceless because she exists outside of “normative femininity,” a term used by Sandra Bartkey that indicates the image of the feminine becoming “more and more to be centered on a woman’s body—not its duties and obligations or even its capacity to bear children, but its sexuality [...] (149). The persona’s “lack” of sexuality is directly connected to her role as a mother. The persona continues to chastise the doctors who “anesthetized her during the birth of her children and called her animal as she nursed. Childbirth causes her to have “no more sexual feeling” (3) and also “shatter [s] the image of painless,

bloodless maternity, the icon of the self-abnegating Madonna” (Pramaggiore 276). The anger expressed in the dreams is a result of the persona’s knowledge that she is not performing the roles of wife and mother according to cultural rules.

The persona of “Strangling Baby Birds” is another example of gender marginalization when she says that her husband does not recognize her because she “didn’t know how to wear perfume” (3). She has not accepted the discipline wearing perfume, thus is ignored by her husband. The mother persona of this section blames her sickness on her inability to perform her feminine role: “the real problem was in the way she projected her femininity” (3). In other words, the real problem was the way she performed her femininity. She goes on to say that if she does not perform her femininity correctly the whole world will cave in (3) as it does when her father does not perform his role correctly.

The final division of “Strangling Baby Birds” furthers the image of the mother as an undesirable being. The persona’s father tells her after forty years and after she has become a mother that he loves her. After he tells her he loves her, he commits suicide. The persona professes that the reason he commits suicide is because he no longer found her attractive (5). Maria T. Pramaggiore interprets this act significantly different than I do by saying that the basic relationship of the father and daughter is one of incestuous rape. She interprets the text as implying that the “abortion” on the conscience of the female persona is an abortion of the father’s baby. Her conclusion is that the daughter’s denial of the father’s penis and baby is what fuels his suicide (277-278). While there may be some validity to her assertions, on a symbolic level and in succession of the preceding sections in the performance, the desexualized mother image appears to contribute to the death of the father; and thus, Finley’s revised version of earlier lines in the

performance assume significance. Specifically, after the father's death, the female persona says, "when that man died, volcanoes erupted, cyclones appeared, coyotes came out of their caves [...]" (5) In other worlds, the world symbolically caves in just as it would have if the mother did not perform her role properly (3); both personas suffer because they do not represent the perfect mother, daughter, or father.

The persona in "Common Sense" struggles with her desire to be the "perfect mother" and with her realization that by accepting the prescribed role she is supporting dangerous myths. She says, in media-determined language, that she will sacrifice anything for her children, "to the point of becoming a boring and phobic person" (14). When questioned if her self-sacrifice is the cause of her headaches she replies, "Illness is my only form of nurturing" (15). She says that she takes Valium to cope with her role as the perpetuator of the myths that have been tradition for centuries (that of the perfection) and asks how she can dispel the myths to her daughters and sons (15). She not only realizes that her acceptance of cultural roles will affect her daughter, but also furthers the constraints places upon her son. Concerning masculine perfections, she says:

Let me tell you about obsession. Grown men force-feeding young boys to produce the perfect shit. The perfect taste, the perfect smell, the perfect color, the perfect length, the perfect size shit. Let it drop and suck it back up. Let it drop and suck it back up. (16)

One might apply the image of perfection to football, soccer, education, or the military.

The second voice in "Two Stories" is that of a son who is fighting in Vietnam and struggling with his inability to mold himself as the perfect man. Before he is sent to war, he

reaches out for his father's approval, his father was an alcoholic and did not respond. The son was sent to war "to clean the blood off a dead man's gun [...]" (12). The dead man's gun parallels the death of his father, but the details are significant because the story works to show how the perpetuated myth of the masculine creates death. The son says that "every man, woman, child [he] killed was [his] father's face [...]" (12). He had hoped he would die before his father so that his father would feel guilty, but his father died first. His connection with the image of fatherhood he received from home and from war disable him from being a different type of man, he is "a drunken slob" just like his father (12). And, the only feelings he feels are "no, no feelings at all" (12); he merely performs the gender he has learned.

The attempt to perform the perfect feminine or masculine image is an attempt that has been celebrated by media, and perfection often is equated with monetary success; thus, rags-to-riches stories are an American legacy and serve the purpose of reinforcing the American focus on monetary gain in spite of moral losses. In addition, the majority of people never obtain their ideas of perfection, but they continue to strive for what seems natural; they never realize their constant state of desire is determined by outside mechanisms structuring the "docile body" through a combination of outside forces.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Finley's performances have received much praise and criticism. A viewer/reader of her performance is often passionately intrigued with her content and method or repulsed by the seemingly pornographic nature of her body on stage.

Dean Wilcox says, "Finley's work is both frustrating and enlightening" (Wilcox 31), and he is "drawn into the performance via the bodily exhibitionism that permeates so much of her work, only to be pushed away by the tone and subject matter of her narration" (31). He finds her work "challenging" because it works to deconstruct "the traditional roles of female performer and male spectator" (31). Wilcox's experience with Finley is unique in that he is a male spectator who is accustomed to viewing the female subject in an objectified manner that is often accepted as natural. And Wilcox is challenged by the way in which "Finley problematizes the moment of erotic pleasure by forcing the spectator to witness not only the aftermath of that objectification but the physical energy expended in the creation of this position" (33). In other words, the spectator cannot simply look upon Finley's body and feel desire because Finley's language is that of exposing the suffering behind sexual domination. Wilcox, as audience member, feels that "as she takes on the persona of the aggressor, she verbally dominat[es] [him]" and he must "sit passively watching her perform, a complete reversal of the traditional female-object male-subject position occurs" (33). Wilcox sees promise in Finley's performances because they form "a volatile social threshold that works to eradicate the domination of the female body by the patriarchal system" (35), but other critics see no promise in Finley's performances.

Kevin Kelly wrote a review of a We Keep Our Victims Ready in The Boston Globe, and like many of Finley's conservative critics that have "read her deconstruction of women's doubly-bound eroticism only as a lewd teasing of their sexual desires, not as a stripping of the cultural baggage that women's sexuality must carry" (Goldstein 100); Kelly is teased and not pleased.

He calls her an exploiter of "everything at her fingertips, including her body, which she ridicules in an attempt at reverse sexism that would be funny were it not so blatantly self-serving" (59). Kelly uses descriptions of Finley's body to point out her blatant sexuality. He describes her entrance onto the stage like she is entering a brothel; she enters in a "deeply cut, flouncy black dress" (59-62). He implies that she considers herself an intellectual elite when he chastises her for acknowledging the audience's knowledge of an obscure artist. He even compares Finley's humor to that of Joan Rivers (62). Kelly relies on a sarcastic tone to influence his readers who may be "turned off" by feminist rhetoric: "Were Finley less fanatic and more of a craftsman (oops! Craftsperson), she might be able to shape her distortions so they didn't pop up at us like so many sour greeting cards" (62). His closing remark is a basic summary of his feelings about Finley's performance art: "She says critics don't credit her content. What content?" (62).

Granted, Finley's performances defy traditional constructions of "content." One may walk away from her text without the ability to verbalize what he/she has just experienced. The performance does not introduce the reader to a situation with various complications, take the reader/viewer up the side of the narrative mountain until reaching the climactic moment, and then back down the other side to a point of resolution. Finley situates her narratives in the "climactic" moment and does not offer resolution. Her personas are almost transparent in their presentations, nameless, faceless. Anthony Kubiak says in "Splitting the Difference: Performance and Its Double

in American Culture” that using this deconstructed self in theater is a way of redefining the subject and giving the persona power, against “patriarchal horror,” the horror of rape, suicide, and child molestation. He offers a further explanation for her use of de-centered personas. He argues that the psychological traumas experienced by the personas would naturally cause confusion about identity. A self-awareness of psychological and physical differences may contribute to one’s sense of being “outside” the norm, thus being invisible; Finley attempts to give visibility to marginalized selves.

Her approach seems dependent upon her ability to continuously “shock” her audience. The Constant State of Desire was published in a collection of Finley’s performances titled Shock Treatment, which is taken from a quote in the vignette “Entertaining the Average Assman.” When a doctor asks the female if she has ever had shock treatment, the female replies, “Doctor, life is a shock treatment” (46). One cannot dismiss the title’s obvious psychological reference. Shock therapy was at one time a popular treatment for mental disorder in which the patient was subjected to an artificial induction of coma or convulsions through the use of drugs or electric current. The title of the collection not only illustrates her central subject of psychology but also her method of performance.

Performance art creates a subversive space in which the body exists without the boundaries of the narrative page. It is generally impromptu and does not prescribe to the ideologies of rehearsed theater and the perpetuation of the “perfect” performance. Finley’s narrative medium is an extension of her entire message in The Constant State of Desire. The disconnected structure of her performances illustrates her resistance to achieve the “perfect” performance; the gender shifts indicate her “un-desire” to perform the roles prescribed by culture.

Performance art is decentralized as an obvious resistance to centralized narratives and centralized constructions of gender, thus Finley also gives voice to those who are decentralized/marginalized. The Constant State of Desire and Karen Finley's works in general are significant because they unearth and expose the integral, hidden mechanisms that build the misleading aesthetic representation of American culture; she exposes the repulsiveness lurking beneath the surface, the invisible.

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