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Performance and Insurrection in Recent Caribbean Drama: Ivette Ramirez's *Family Scenes* and David Edgecombe's *For Better For Worse*

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Ivette Ramirez's *Family Scenes* and David Edgecombe's *For Better For Worse* explore both the limiting discourse surrounding marriage and pre-marital sexual relations in Caribbean societies, and the means for liberation from that limiting discourse. Edgecombe's play focuses on the institution of marriage and the manner in which characters embrace the institution of marriage at the expense of individual fulfillment and self-expression. In his play, Edgecombe develops marriage as an elaborate conceit through which he displays many of the lingering deleterious effects of colonialism, and the institutionalized colonial discourse of power and authority that subjugate individual human expression. Ramirez's play also focuses on the discourse of marriage; however, *Family Scenes* emphasizes not so much the institution of marriage as the impetus individuals have for cultivating the discourse of marriage as the sign and substance of ideal familial relations. Like Edgecombe, she displays the limiting effects of that discourse on individuals. Ultimately, both plays perform an individual response to the discourse of marriage through which some of the characters embrace a more compassionate method of interaction with each other and with their environment. Moreover, each play consciously extends the implications of its performance to the play's spectators, and directly engages the audience in the characters' struggle and desire for self-expression.

Both plays perform a healing ritual in which the destructive components of identity find a curative answer in the deleterious attitudes surrounding marriage and in the conversion of those factors into more beneficial forms. To borrow a term from the clinical diagnosis of trauma, the plays "verbalize" both the positive and negative components of intimate human relations. According to Van der Kolk,

[a] critical element in the treatment of traumatized people is to help them find words for emotional states. Naming feelings gives patients a subjective sense of mastery and mental flexibility that facilitates comparison with other emotions and other situations. (427)

The act of verbalizing enables individuals to gain control over the forces that oftentimes overwhelm individual response. In terms of artistic production, theater can produce images that give form to this process. Indeed, performance as a curative element is part of a rich cultural tradition in Caribbean society that is as potent as colonialism but often ignored. Margarite Fernandez-Olmos notes that the "Spanish expression *la cultura cura* (culture heals) is understood, in the context of Caribbean culture, as an affirmation of the potential healing power of a variety of cultural practices—religion, art, music, literature, folklore, the vernacular language—that together constitute the ethos of the various peoples of the region" (xvii). Healing culture, as Michel Foucault argues, is a type of "subjugated language" (83), in that it has often been ignored or marginalized by the discourse of dominant culture. *For Better For Worse* and *Family Scenes* give voice to this formally marginalized dialogue, empowering both the individual and individual interaction with the environment.

David Edgecombe's *For Better For Worse* focuses on the impetus behind the image of marriage and images of authority. More specifically, the play "performs" certain cultural attitudes that invest an image of respectability with substantive morality. Scenes explore how individuals vest authority in the appearance of integrity and associate sexuality with shame. Further, the play associates stereotypical gender roles with both themes, associating femininity with sexual control and masculinity with power and economic status. The play also explores how religion and political power, together with class distinctions, work to establish marriage and decency at the expense of individual expression and emotional fulfillment. Ultimately, the play "performs" the superficiality of marriage as a social construct, and engages the audience in the play's efforts to undermine this social practice. In the process, the play offers human intimacy and love as alternatives to the void behind its performance of marriage.

Edgecombe's emphasis on the process by which society produces the image of marriage as representing true and substantive human relationships finds resonance with postcolonial studies. Certainly, Edward Said's exploration of a "Science of the Concrete" resonates with Edgecombe's work. Said saw in the "science of the concrete," actions or "objects or places or times to be assigned roles and given meanings that acquire objective validity only *after* the assignments are made" (53-4). Within Said's definition, colonial authority creates or appropriates events, like marriage, to service an ideal rather than have the event cultivate its own meanings and associations. Fergus observes that *For Better For Worse* "gives the author [Edgecombe] the opportunity to mock the notions of class and religion, which he attributes to the colonial mentality" (Fergus 145). While readers and audiences might view a play that focuses on the societal taboos associated with marriage and pre-marital sexual relations as dated, the 2002-2003 production of Edgecombe's work on the islands of St. Thomas and St. Croix sold out to enthusiastic audiences and enjoyed an extended run. Research, published as recently as the summer of 2000, indicates that in many Caribbean nations adherence to marital conventions grants individuals status, societal respectability, and even increased income potential (Coppin 7). *For Better For Worse*, then, can be read and performed as a highly relevant social commentary about the lingering effects of colonial ideals, and the struggle to overcome colonial discourse.

Edgecombe's work establishes an association between image and power at the onset. An early scene explores the relationship between authority and the appearance of integrity, and introduces sexuality as a mark of shame. Sandra discusses her father's whereabouts with her mother, Ann, who speculates that Sandra's boyfriend's father and Sandra's father are together:

ANN: Oh yes. He's probably out playing cards with Mr. Wellington. The Honorable James Llewellyn Wellington. I wonder if all these dreadful things people say about him could be true. . . . How he's always interfering with his secretaries and things like that. And how he's going around now with some little girl half his age.

SANDRA: And if he even has a young girl, what's wrong with that? It might do

him some good.

ANN: I don't believe it. I couldn't bring myself to believe such a thing about Mr. Wellington. *[Pause. She sits down in couch]* You think anything could go so for true?

SANDRA: Why don't you ask him when you see him again?

ANN: I can't do that! But Mr. Wellington is too much of a fine, upstanding man to be involved in that kind of thing, anyhow. And a good politician too. Just this morning they said on the radio that he's going to Guyana tomorrow. Just look at that. Going abroad to represent his island again, and at a big time conference on Federation besides. What a man. That son of his should be just a little more like him. (222-223)

Ann emphasizes Wellington's title and status and introduces him to the audience in terms of his rank. Subsequently, she initiates a discussion of Wellington's sexuality, dismissing any notion of impropriety, using the euphemism "that kind of thing." She has trouble describing sexuality in a precise way. Ann supports her dismissal of impropriety by citing Wellington's status as a politician and his ability to represent the island overseas. Ann's logic associates public appearance with internal propriety, confusing the character of an individual with his public persona. Ann's reasoning reveals not only the association of appearance with identity but also classifies sexuality as a marker of disgrace. She makes no mention of an emotional relationship between Wellington and a woman, and only points to the apparent age difference between Wellington and his rumored liaison. Interestingly, Ann harbors feelings for Wellington, which might explain her repression of sexual language and her purging of emotion from the supposed dalliance. However, the fact that she dismisses her concerns by pointing to Wellington's public persona and his political authority reveals her association of image with actual substance. The play goes onto raise further associations between the need to maintain a public image in order to demonstrate integrity of character.

In subsequent scenes, gender roles and their inherent obligations demand, in the eyes of some characters, certain external demonstrations in order to prove that individuals have value.

ANN: So when he pick up and leave you, what you're going to do then? Who is going to work for you?

SANDRA: I'm an educated woman, Mommy. I don't need a man to work for me.

ANN: But you don't have any hold over him. He could fool around with any other woman he wants to.

SANDRA: I don't see the marriage vows stopping any of these married men today from fooling around. And some of the women too. Besides, if he is going to be free to fool around, then so am I.

ANN: You mean to tell me this is all the ambition you have, Sandra. All the ambition you have. To go and live in sin with a man? (225)

For Ann, marriage is a means of economic stability for her daughter and a tool of sexual power over men. Ann expects that Sandra will invest her effort not in achieving a job that would give her certain freedoms and opportunities for self-expression, but in securing a husband and subsequently controlling his expression of sexual desire. Following Ann's logic, marriage is a power game in which the male partner establishes economic dominance over the woman, and the female partner establishes sexual territorial rights over the man. Ann introduces another element of propriety into her logical equation by referring to the church's sanction of her view, and by associating her daughter's intention to live with her boyfriend outside of marriage with "sin." Sandra points out the hypocrisy of her mother's views by observing that many men cheat despite marriage. Ann does not directly answer her daughter's point because, to Ann, it is not a question of whether men have sex with women other than their wives, rather, it is a matter of who owns the public sexual rights to the man, as sanctioned by the church. Ann, once again, endorses the public face of seeming propriety over substantive behavior.

James Wellington, in conversation with Sandra and his son, also endorses the value of a public image and links such an image not only to sexuality but also to class:

JAMES: Listen boy, you can't just walk into the home of a decent family like this, abuse their daughter and walk out as if nothing happened.

SANDRA: He hasn't abused me. I'm just as much responsible as he is. If not more so. (232)

Wellington uses the word "decent," suggesting that sexual adventurism might be appropriate for a family without social status. Later in the play, Derek reprimands his father for precisely such an attitude: "You see how you think? It's all well and good for some 'common country girl' to have a bastard child, which she cannot afford. But no such disgraceful behavior from the daughter of a decent and respectable to throw away the child?" (253) For Wellington, pregnancy without marriage, as opposed to sexuality, equals abuse when it occurs to a daughter of a "decent" family. Sandra dismisses Wellington's attitude and sanctions her individuality when she claims equal responsibility for the pregnancy. She does not see the pregnancy as diminishing her individuality, nor does she see her condition as a mark of shame. The fact that Wellington's attitude persists throughout the play suggests an inherent flaw in an older generation's attitude to sexuality. The "adults" in the play, for the most part, express confidence in the image of propriety. Sexual adventurism is permissible in the exploitation of the poorer or less distinguished classes, while respectability is the province of the upper classes. Behavior is secondary to image.

However, the younger generation does not entirely escape from notions of respectability that are vested in external appearance. Derek attempts to erase his actions by erasing the pregnancy.

DEREK: *[Getting up thoughtfully]* Maybe that's not a bad idea. *[Turning to Sandra]* Calling the doctor I mean. Why don't you get the doctor to give you some tablets or something and take care of it? Then you wouldn't have to tell anybody anything.

SANDRA: I've thought of that, Derek. But I can't.

DEREK: *[Walking around back of couch]* Oh, come on, Sandra, half the girls in town. (228)

For Derek, public knowledge of the pregnancy rather than the fact of the pregnancy is reason for shame. Thus, if Sandra were to have an abortion, there would be no shame according to his logic. He attempts to sway Sandra by asserting that "half the girls in town" have abortions to maintain an image of respectability. Derek's reasoning betrays a faith in the external. He does not acknowledge, at least in this scene, the implications of his behavior, nor does he embrace his relationship with Sandra. Rather, he seeks to avoid the stigma of pregnancy outside of marriage.

Pregnancy is also a mark of shame for Sandra's parents who value the image of an ideal family over honest family relationships. Specifically, Ann wants Derek and Sandra to marry to protect the family from the stigma of a pregnancy outside of marriage:

ANN: That might not mean nothing to you, but think of me and your father.

SANDRA: There's nothing disgraceful about being pregnant, Mommy.

ANN: You have the nerves to watch me in my face and talk about no disgrace! Well, something has to be done about it.

SANDRA: Please, Mommy, just leave . . .

ANN: The only thing that can save us now is for both of you to get married before the news gets around. *[To Derek]* I hope you know this means you will have to marry Sandra? (230)

Ann does not advocate marriage as a demonstration of love between Derek and Sandra; she values the ability of marriage to shield the family from scandal, telling Derek that he "will have to marry" in order to "save us now." Ann demonstrates no concern for her daughter's feelings either about her boyfriend or about her pregnancy, rather, she focuses on what the appearance of a pregnancy means for her status within society.

Both Sandra and Derek resist their parents' pressure to marry in order to avoid a scandal and also question their parents valuing marriage only for its external value. Sandra asks,

what protection does the law give to children in a family where the parents are just staying together 'for the sake of the children?' What protection do children have from seeing their mother cry over and over again, because their father is out running around with some of his . . . whores?" (234)

Sandra argues that because marriage puts pressure on couples to conform to an external image rather than develop substantive relationships, it actually has a deleterious effect on the family unit. Earlier in the play, Sandra points out that she “and Derek love each other, and that’s the only thing that’s going to keep us together. No repeating a couple of stupid vows and signing a piece of paper” (225). Sandra points out the shallow nature of marriage as a status symbol and embraces the sentiments that supposedly underlie the mask of marriage. Derek adds a practical perspective to Sandra’s arguments. He focuses on the marriage vows that start with the expectation that “every marriage” will be “perfect.”

They ask you to pledge to stick with each other for better for worse, to love, honor and respect each other forever. How could any honest, sensible person make such a promise not knowing what’s going to happen in five years, five months, five weeks? If two people should discover they’re not compatible any more, what should they do? Live in misery for the rest of their lives as the vows ask, or separate in peace and try again? The thing is just ridiculous.” (233)

Derek recognizes the vicissitudes of human emotion and suggests that marriage actually works against true affection and can damage an individual. Both Sandra and Derek reject their parents’ view of marriage as simply a means to maintain a public image.

Indeed, it is not surprising that Ann stifles emotion. The play reveals that she herself suppresses her feelings in order to preserve the appearance of propriety. She and James Wellington have an attraction for one another:

ANN: You don’t understand. Nobody understands.

[She turns away. He suddenly reaches out, grabs her and kisses her. For a brief moment, her hand reaches up as if she is going to embrace him, then she pulls away and jumps up]

Don’t do that. If the church should . . .

JAMES: *[Getting up right after her]* The church, the church, the church!

Everything is the church. We have to give vent to our feelings, Ann. *[He tries to embrace her]*

ANN: No. Wait! I’ve never done anything like this before.

JAMES: Of course you haven’t. *[Under his breath]* It’s always the first time.

Listen Ann, we are only human. The Lord will understand and forgive.

[He embraces her again. This time she allows herself to be embraced. Just as he is about to kiss her, she pulls away her head.] (246)

Wellington argues for an embrace of human emotion and against a continued repression of their attraction for one another. Ann resists, calling on the church’s authority to buttress her resistance. She argues, once again, the concept of sin. Earlier in the play, Andrew cuts through Ann’s mask of propriety, asking his wife if “going to church prevent[ed] you from becoming pregnant?”

(235). Religious devotion does not prevent Ann from engaging in private behavior that violates her religious values. However, Ann preserves those values by embracing marriage as an external mask of proper conduct; she tells her husband that, “as soon as we realized our mistake, we got married and cleared it up” (235). For Ann, the mistake does not involve premarital sexual relations but the fact of a pregnancy and public knowledge of premarital sexual relations. Immorality then involves the public violation of a standard and not private adherence to that standard.

Ultimately, the play manages to reconcile the conflict between public appearance and internal sentiment in marriage. However, the performance of Derek and Sandra’s marriage actually undermines the institution of marriage as practiced by Sandra’s parents and by the society at large. Derek and Sandra agree to marry but acknowledge that marriage means nothing. For them, they will marry in order to keep their jobs; Derek’s father put considerable pressure on the couple to conform to societal expectations, including manipulating Sandra’s employer into dismissing her for displays of immorality. Sandra’s father lays out the argument. He tells his daughter: “It takes a lot of courage for a single woman to have a child in our society. And going to live common law with Derek isn’t going to make things any better” (260). He further acknowledges that, “the pressure against” his daughter “is becoming unbearable” (261). He engages his daughter directly. For the first time in the play, he urges his daughter to express her feelings. In addition, he empathizes with her. Emotion becomes an acceptable form of interaction. Andrew confronts Derek’s intellectual opposition to a hypocritical institution. Derek argues that he and Sandra “are dead set against the idea of marriage . . . We just can’t run off and get married now” (269). Andrew then points out that Derek’s opposition is not to marriage but rather to the appearance that he has yielded to public pressure. He asks Derek a series of questions about his opposition to marriage: “Why [are you opposed to marriage]? Afraid of losing face? Too proud to back down? Unable to change your position although common sense says you should? Man, that’s a silly attitude that cripples a lot of people” (269). Andrew points out Derek’s sanction of a public mask of resistance while disregarding Sandra’s emotional needs. He expresses sympathy for the principled position Derek and Sandra advocate but tells them:

The way I see it boy, you’re crippled before you even start. You don’t have any money, you don’t have a job, and now Sandra is about to lose her job. You’re endangering your future, Sandra’s future and the baby’s future. Is that what you want to do? *[Long pause]* Look at it this way. *[He rests his hand on Derek’s shoulder]* Why don’t you get married *[Derek shakes off his hand]* . . . for the moment. Just for the moment. That’ll take the heat off both of you for a while. (269-270)

Andrew argues that Derek and Sandra manipulate society’s hypocrisy by embracing what society values most, the external sanction of a public morality. However, because they acknowledge that it is hypocrisy, they control the hypocrisy rather than yield to it as Ann has; they expose the mask and embrace the substance of a meaningful relationship. Significantly, Andrew helps

Derek and Sandra come to this point by expressing his love for them. Wellington and Ann advocate only the appearance of proper familial relations. Andrew expresses genuine emotional regard for Sandra and for Derek. He accepts their love for one another and expresses his love for them.

The play concludes with a dance sequence that creates a community between actors and spectators:

Sandra puts on some hot calypso music. At the same time, Carol enters from the kitchen with a tray of hors d'oeuvres. James takes the tray from her, puts it on the centre table and they start to dance. Derek and Sandra dance. Molly and Joe dance. By and by, Andrew and Ann do a jig. They all continue to dance as the lights fade out. (281)

Earlier in the play, the actors, within character, acknowledge the house:

ANN: (*Pointing to the audience*) who are those?

JAMES: Those don't matter. They don't know who we are.

ANN: Are you sure?

JAMES: Of course I'm sure. Besides, they're minding their own business. (247)

The earlier exchange undermines the integrity of the "fourth wall." Even though the characters dismiss the interactivity between the house and the performance, by acknowledging the presence of spectators, the actors point out the artificial nature of the performance. The acknowledgment pulls the audience into the play by engaging them. The play's themes attempt to demonstrate the artificial nature of society's performance of marriage. By pointing out the artificial nature of a play, the characters invite the audience to confront the artificial structures that the play exposes. Moreover, the violation of the "fourth wall" occurs during the play's most shocking scene, one in which Ann and Wellington reveal their attraction for one another. That the artificial nature of the play reveals itself just when Wellington and Ann's hypocrisy become apparent further reinforces the transitory nature of all public performances. Within the scene, the actors attempt to push the audience away but actually pull them into the production. The final sequence further engages the audience through music and dance. "Hot calypso music" permeates the house. An audience cannot help but respond to the festive atmosphere it creates. But calypso is also a forum for public protest (Jones 259) that might also provoke resistance to societal standards among those participating in the final celebration, not of the forthcoming marriage, but of the triumph of a performance which points to the artificial nature of societal propriety. In the end, the characters most vocally opposed to the hypocrisy surrounding marriage do in fact get married. However, in doing so, they mimic the marital form, yielding not to the discourse of marriage but rather undermining its hegemony.

Ivette Ramirez's *Family Scenes* also examines marriage and its associations with authority, status, and gender. However, rather than functioning in part as a forum for lingering

colonial social constructs, Ramirez's play focuses instead on the family. She explores how marriage and the ethos of sexual and familial respectability can actually weaken the family as a support structure. *Family Scenes* undermines the discourse of family unity and respectability by performing the myths and props that sustain it. Paula, the eldest daughter, and her mother, Margarita spend their energy in the maintenance of a seemingly pleasant fiction, while Sophia challenges them to give voice to the truth about their past and the myths they create to make the past more consistent with an ethos of family life that values external markers of status and respectability. Ultimately, the women, unlike the men in the play, come to terms with reality, painfully divesting themselves of the lies that sustain their discourse of a proper familial image. The play deliberately engages the audiences first in the myths of marital respectability and then in the subversive act of discarding those myths.

Like Edgecombe's play, some critics and audiences might find Ramirez's play dated. The play stages the dynamic between an older world view and contemporary American cultural standards, privileging neither but rather using that dynamic to discover the sometimes buried potential within each cultural system. Therefore, rather than perform the situation many Puerto Ricans face living simultaneously within and outside American culture as a negative circumstance, Ramirez stages positive aspects of the cultural situation. As John Antush explains, Puerto Ricans' "marginality sometimes involves the overlap of two cultures when the post-immigrant writer has grown up . . . with an easy mobility between communities" (x). Although the word "marginality," taken out of context, might suggest to some a subtle cultural slur, Antush uses it to describe the process by which many Puerto Rican artists and writers convert cultural prejudice and its stereotypes into dynamic artistic forms and expressions. Antush goes on to discuss how many immigrant communities adhere to myths imported from their parent culture to help sustain their families and their personal and cultural identities within a new and oftentimes alien society. "America" comes to be seen "as a challenging arena for Puerto Rican values and assumptions in the rough and tumble of the mainland social cauldron" (Antush x). Research indicates that a similar dynamic exists on the island of Puerto Rico. Cultural markers such as marriage, valued within "traditional" Puerto Rican culture, become a means for distinguishing some Puerto Ricans from the perception of the "backward Other label imposed by the colonial order" (Safa 7) on many Caribbean societies. Therefore, Ramirez's play, although set in New York, speaks to an experience that would be familiar to many of the island's residents and its emigrants.

The play begins by framing the characters within the setting, which reinforces the characters' isolation within a fantasy world where image replaces substance. As the curtain opens, "*Paula, dressed casually but fashionably, is in the bedroom admiring a wedding dress which hangs on a closet door. A light flickers from the living room television as Margarita watches it*" (230). Shortly, thereafter, Paula emerges from her "*bedroom with a bride's magazine in her hand*" (230). Her dreamy interaction with the dress and her possession of the bride magazine associate the image of the bride with Paula, who is identified not through dialogue but

through the props and the setting. Dialogue would reveal something of her character and thought processes. The audience then only gets the product of Paula's thoughts and not their substance, associating Paula simply with the image. Likewise, Margarita focuses on images from a television, suggesting that her character lives in a world of images and not in reality. A dialogue between Margarita and her younger daughter, Sophia, further reinforces Margarita's isolation within the image, and also points to the possible origin of Paula's obsession. Speaking of Paula, Margarita tells Sophia that "She's a good girl, she works hard and she should marry and settle down and have a family" (232). Sophia later asks, "Why Mom? Why is it so important that she get married to Benny? Or is it that you don't care who she marries as long as she gets married?" (236). Sophia's questions ask her mother for the substantive reasoning behind her desire for Paula's marriage. The questions themselves, left unanswered, indicate that there is no substantive reasoning behind Margarita's position. They reveal that Margarita, like Paula, remains isolated within an image of happiness and propriety.

Sophia, conversely, longs for internal, substantive development. She, at the start of the play, "comes up the steps of the brownstone to the door, fumbles for the house keys in her bag, drops it, tries the door and, finding it open, goes in" (230). Significantly, Sophia is the only character moving in the opening tableau. The other characters remain fixed by images. Sophia, on the other hand, searches for the "key." Symbolically, she has the ability to unlock the prison of images that contain her mother and sister. That the door is unlocked suggests that the gateway to true perception requires no specific code but rather a simple acceptance of the real. Sophia searches for the key but also probes the obvious, revealing an inquisitive mind that sees past the seeming and discovers the real. Sophia's dialogue reinforces her perception. She directly confronts Paula's preoccupation with marriage: "How come you're still looking at those? Didn't you tell Mami you were wearing her dress?" (230). Sophia wonders why Paula still fantasizes about a dress if the dress is already selected. Sophia questions her sister's preoccupation with the world of bridal images that has no practical benefit. Sophia also comically undermines Paula's romantic notions. Paula tells Sophia that Benny is "my boyfriend" (231). Sophia tells Paula, "Big deal. I personally wouldn't go telling that to people I knew" (231). Sophia questions the value of her sister's romantic relationships and further questions Paula's desire for Eduardo to give her away at the ceremony. Paula "just want[s]" her "wedding to be proper. He is my father and he should give me away" (238). Paula wants a "proper" wedding, which, from Paula's point of view requires a father to give the bride away, even if, as Sophia points out, "He's nothing to us, when we needed him where was he? When we were on welfare? . . . he doesn't care about either of us or Mom" (238). Sophia moves past the image of propriety and asks Paula to confront the reality of Eduardo's neglect. Sophia's character moves the action of the play forward through confrontation. She, through dialogue, defines her character as one who desires substance over symbol. She also tries, through direct confrontation and comic engagement, to force both her sister and her mother to escape their worlds of illusion.

The play's male characters also exist within the realm of image or of immediate satisfaction. Margarita's boyfriend, Samuel, remains passive and urges passivity: "It's all going to work out, you'll see" (241). It is true that he will later urge an acceptance of reality rather than the maintenance of an image. However, his character, at best, sends a mixed message to Margarita. Rather than challenge her outright, he tells her what makes her feel better about the status quo. Eduardo, the father figure of Paula's imagination, tells her that he would "still be proud to walk" her "down the aisle" (254). Eduardo's declaration comes as the women confront the reality of their situation. Eduardo still exists within the illusion of the play's opening scenes. He yields to the comfortable image even in the face of substantive developments in understanding in his fellow characters. Benny, the most clearly defined of all the men in the play, is a more active figure than the other men. However, his character's actions actually give only the illusion of substance and ultimately reinforce a static relationship and also Paula's reliance on a static self-conception. Benny and Paula discuss pre-marital sexual relations:

BENNY: Honey, it's the same old story. I'm a man not a kid, or a machine you can turn on and off. I've got hormones.

PAULA: You better keep them under control.

BENNY: (*Taking her hand and kissing it.*) When are you going to stop being such a proper lady?

PAULA: When I have the wedding ring on my finger and it's official. (234)

Paula performs the stereotype of the "virgin" for the equally stereotypical "licentious" Benny. They engage in a type of dance, in which Benny pushes for physical contact but Paula resists. The dance introduces dynamism into their relationship. The more Benny pushes and the more Paula responds with reticence, the more Paula reinforces the image of herself as the pure "bride to be." Later, Paula reveals earlier sexual experiences that lead to an abortion. Perhaps in an effort to avoid the reality of her past, Paula maintains an image of herself as she would like to be and to have been. Benny helps her maintain that image by putting constant pressure on her to violate it. The dance gives the illusion of a relationship that is in a constant, albeit a dramatic, tension. The tension creates excitement which becomes a type of "fix" on which the characters feed and subsequently read as a relationship. Their relationship becomes the dynamic of image maintenance rather than a growing and substantive relationship. The male characters, then, cling to image rather than accept the truth behind their illusions.

As the plot develops, the women, in contrast to the men, come to terms with the illusions that have ruled their lives. Margarita and Paula reveal that they are not quite ready to come to terms with the truth but they do begin to confront at least the difficulties associated with the image that they have worked so hard to maintain. In a conversation with Samuel, Margarita expresses concern that Eduardo will actually attend Paula's wedding: "I'm so worried that he'll come. I really hope he doesn't" (241). The burden of maintaining an image of respectability in the face of reality begins to wear Margarita's resolve to maintain the image. She then articulates a fear of the truth: "What if he tells them that we were never married and that Paula's not his

daughter?" (241). Her fears find expression in terms of a question, as if Margarita herself doubts their veracity after leaving them unspoken for so long a period of time; the interrogative betrays doubt. Margarita's self-loathing judgments about herself come in the form of a statement: "Oh, sure, let me tell them that I hardly knew Paula's father and that Eduardo never married me because he never thought me good enough" (241). The origins of Margarita's image of respectability can be discovered in this first scene. She frames the declaration of reality in the form of a question but articulates her self-judgment in the form of a statement. The latter construction suggests the stereotypical reaction of societal respectability that Margarita has internalized. However, the real circumstances of her past frame themselves within a structure that suggests doubt. Margarita begins to articulate her burden and the image of herself imposed on her by the judgments of society. She has not yet fully accepted the distinction between perception and reality. However, she has begun the process.

Paula too begins a process of coming to terms with the truth. For Paula, Sophia once again acts as catalyst. Sophia tell her sister in a straightforward way that she "can't face reality," and that she "think[s she has] a trophy between [her] legs, that a guy has to jump through hoops just right in order to win the prize" (245). In addition, Sophia exposes Paula's motive for appearing pure: "You think because you're marrying Benny that's going to make you respectable" (245). Sophia speaks Paula's lie and her motive for maintaining the lie. Paula's sense of shame compels her to project a pure image, an illusion of sexual abstinence. Sophia focuses on the central issue of Paula's delusion: that Paula considers her sexuality not as a natural part of herself but rather as a "prize," something that exists outside of her. Paula's projection of the illusion of sexual purity creates a type of neurosis in which Paula divides her consciousness and purges her sexuality from part of an integrated identity. Paula, predictably, responds with anger, telling her sister to "Get out of here, get out" (245). Paula's anger betrays a desire not to face the truth. However, it also betrays an inability to contain her frustration and anxiety at the truth as it is presented to her. She can no longer exist in an imagined world of pre-marital propriety. Rather, she must come to terms not only with her illusions but her motive for producing the illusions. Paula responds with anger precisely because Sophia has made the repressed manifest. The anger demonstrates Paula's struggle but reveals that Paula is no longer secure in her delusions. Importantly, she is not yet ready to accept the truth, but she is in an important transitional period between delusion and reality.

Eventually, the female characters do come to terms with the truth that lies behind and, in most cases, motivates their illusions. The confrontation with reality lays the framework for a new means of coming to terms with the world and their place in the world. Instead of systems of self-deception and avoidance, the characters embrace the precarious nature of truth with none of the guarantees of illusion. Paula begins the process by expressing frustration with the illusions. Speaking to Sophia, Paula explains that she's "tired of all the secrets, of all the lies" (252). Margarita then confesses the truth not only about her marriage but also about the props she purchased to support her illusionary world. She tells her children that she bought the wedding

dress, the dress on which Paula's imagination focused, at "a thrift shop. I saw it hanging in the window. It made me feel like I really had worn it" (253). Margarita constructs not only the spoken myth of a wedding and a respectable family, but also reinforces her delusion by purchasing the relics of the event. The illusion then becomes reality not in and of itself but through false props that suggest marriage. The symbolism is clear. The more impressive the illusion the more stable is its mythology. Paula confesses that she indeed "wanted to live up to" her mother's "image of goodness, even when I knew it was a lie" (253). Paula constructs her illusion around and upon her mother's false mythology. Sophia sums up the lessons of living under an illusion by stating simply that "lies hurt more than the truth" (254). The women come to terms with the reality of their illusions and the reality of their lives. There is no easy resolution. Paula does not even cancel the wedding. Rather, she "postpone(s)" it (254), telling Benny that, "it's time to face reality" (254). The fact that she neither cancels nor goes ahead with the planned marriage suggests that the truth becomes a sophisticated and complicated alternative to the clarity the illusions offered. The characters do not give the audience any definitive answers, nor do they offer a clear resolution; they offer the ambiguity of truth.

The ambiguity is nowhere more apparent than in Paula's confession about her abortion. Paula's actions both explain her desire to project an image of purity but also complicate a reading of the play because, in conceiving a child in high school, she mirrors her mother's act. However, whereas her mother went forward with the pregnancy and began her series of illusions of marital propriety surrounding her choice, Paula's choice catalyzed her myths of virginal sexual propriety. The choices surrounding the abortion then do not necessarily determine a better future. Rather, the play suggests that any choice that favors illusion aborts psychic integrity and wholeness.

MARGARITA: What is this about?

PAULA: It was this boy I dated, you remember him, very clean cut and polite. He got me pregnant and Sophia helped me get an abortion.

MARGARITA: You couldn't have!

SOPHIA: Why did you tell her?

PAULA: I thought you wanted the truth. (*To her mother.*) Oh, I sure did have an abortion. I wasn't going to make your mistake. I wasn't going to have a kid without being married. So, I had an abortion. How do you like that, Mami? I'm very respectable, just like you. I'm respectable on the outside, but on the inside ...

MARGARITA: Don't say that.

PAULA: I'm all right. It doesn't mean I don't love you.

SOPHIA: You didn't have to tell her.

PAULA: No, I didn't. But, I'm glad I did, I'm tired of carrying this load all alone.
(254)

As Paula purges herself of the lie and the illusions she built around the lie, she also realizes a distinction between the external self and the internal self. Initially, she passes judgment based on

received standards and condemns not her illusions but the actions themselves. The condemnation might suggest, if the scene had ended there, that Paula cannot grow beyond the same forces that served as impetus for her self-myth of purity. However, because the scene continues and continues with expressions of love and support between the women, reality proves more potent than the force of illusion and the judgments that created the illusion. Because Paula does not receive the scorn and negative judgment she might have expected, based on her internalized judgments, as a consequence of her confession she may begin to associate loving expressions with a purging of lies and illusions. In short, her confession pulls her closer to her mother and sister. She receives the love and sanction she seeks but never receives as a consequence of her myths of purity and respectability. She expresses relief because she is no longer “alone.” Characters then, the play suggests, can begin to develop beyond an illusory world by embracing the support of family and society.

Such a resolution is complicated and ambiguous. As the curtain falls, “*Margarita lays her head on the kitchen table and cries out*” (255). She is alone. However, unlike the opening tableau, the final scene reveals a subtle strength in Margarita’s character. She no longer distracts herself by fixating on the television’s false images. She experiences grief. She is by herself, but she is so by choice. She tells Eduardo that she “can’t help” (255) him because she has “enough of my own damage to repair” (255). She chooses to resist the urge to satisfy others’ needs and begins to focus on her own needs. That the characters only come to terms with their illusions suggest to some critics that the play lacks a coherent plan of progress; John Antush sees the play as a vision of seeming hope but, in actuality, a vision of “dissonance”:

The simple gesture of self-revelation is a step in the right direction, but it is not powerful enough to neutralize the lies and disrelations of a lifetime. So the reassuring aspect of the ending is partially subverted, and the incompletions and isolations exposed by the dramatic action of the play create an awareness that the dissonances are more important than the deceptive harmonies. (Antush 22)

Certainly, the play’s ending invites spectators to read into it the “deceptive harmonies” it reveals. However, the deception of the characters’ illusions find clearer expression in the play and, indeed, in its ending. The ending requires that spectators reflect on and experience a portion of the emotional dissatisfaction felt by the characters. The play began with emotionally satisfactory images, with easy images of marriage and of family life, and these prove to be illusions. The play’s ending carries no such easy reassurance or certainty. By failing to offer an emotionally satisfying resolution, Ramirez points to the lack of satisfaction in illusion. She compels the audience to search for a resolution to the play within themselves. By highlighting the artificiality of images and the dissatisfactory nature of illusion, Ramirez actually helps her play resonate with the reality of each of the spectators since each must complete the performance.

Sophia’s characterization carries forward this technique. Although on the surface, Sophia suggests a Latina stereotype, she actually reveals a counter-stereotypical character. The character

descriptions in the play's script describe her as "rebellious and hot-tempered" (229). She also enjoys sex with her boyfriend. However, Sophia's dialogue negates the stereotype. The apparent dichotomy between image and substance compels an audience first to be taken into the world of the image of the fiery, sexual Latina, only to find that image frustrated and overcome by the considerable intellectual power of Sophia; the name itself suggests wisdom. The play performs the image of the Latin woman and also the substance of a reasoning and intelligent individual under the surface stereotype. The audience then must force itself both to confront its shorthand characterization of Sophia and also come to terms with her true nature. The audience must face the same process faced by Paula and Margarita. Just as Sophia forces her mother and sister to confront reality rather than image, Sophia invites the audience to do the same through a similar process.

Ivette Ramirez's performance of the virulence but also the fragility of myths associated with sexuality, marriage and family finds a resonance in studies of the dynamics of performance. Just as *Family Scenes* stages the lies that service an ethos of marriage and family, Elin Diamond notes that, "that discourse and its products (gender, identity, politics) are caught up in fantasies, identifications, and frictional modes of passing as truths" (iii). It is a process akin to "materiality," as discussed by Judith Butler:

'Materiality' designates a certain effect of power or, rather, *is* power in its formative or constituting effects. Insofar as power operates successfully by constituting an object domain, a field of intelligibility, as a taken-for-granted ontology, its material effects are taken as material data or primary givens. These material positives appear *outside* discourse and power, as its incontestable referents, its transcendental signifieds. But this appearance is precisely the moment in which the power/discourse regime is most fully dissimulated and most insidiously effective. When this material effect is taken as an epistemological point of departure, a *sine qua non* of some political argumentation, this is a move of empiricist foundationalism that, in accepting this constituted effect as a primary given, successfully buries and masks the genealogy of power relations by which it is constituted. (34-35)

Family Scenes stages the "materiality" of marriage and familial discourse and, in the process, undermines that discourse. The play performs "liberation" from the limits of the material hegemony by constructing a "hermeneutics of affirmation."

The best response to ideological imagination is not pure negation but a hermeneutic imagination capable of critical discrimination. This critical hermeneutic would be able to operate 'within' the social imaginary, while refusing any absolute standpoint of knowledge . . . Once the work of suspicion has taken place, once the archeological unveiling of the concealed meaning behind the apparent meaning has removed the masks of falsehood, there remains another

task. This supplementary practice of interpretation is what Ricoeur terms a 'hermeneutics of affirmation.' Such a hermeneutics seeks to discriminate between falsifying and emancipating modes of symbolization. Having smashed the idols of false consciousness, it labors to identify genuine symbols of liberation. (Kearney 74)

Margarita, Paula, and Sophia have set aside the "ideological imaginings" associated with marriage. Moreover, they have begun the difficult process of "identify[ing] genuine symbols of liberation."

For Ramirez, as for Edgecombe, theater becomes a way of exploring the revision of old forms by mixing them with the new and the consequent undermining of the old forms by revision and adaptation. Significantly, such a process is not always pleasant. As Derek Walcott observes, in a preface to one of his collections of plays, the "future of West Indian militancy lies in art" (18). Indeed, militancy may, in fact, be the appropriate response to the institutionalized repression of colonial discourse. The liberating alternative to the limiting discourse of dominant society is a "subjugated knowledge," which is "concerned with a *historical knowledge of struggles*. In the specialized areas of erudition as in the disqualified, popular knowledge there lay the memory of hostile encounters which even up to this day have been confined to the margins of knowledge" (Foucault 83). Kuan-Hsing Chen, writing of "postmodernism and cultural studies," notes a dynamic similar to the display of limiting discourse and the performance of an alternate discourse in that both,

emphasize *relative* continuity and rupture; both positions are against historical necessity and for historical contingency. Both oppose the linearity and unity of an evolutionary historicism. Both stress the plurality of origins and that of trajectories of movements. Both attempt to do 'ascending analysis' to write popular history, that is, to bring the repressed voices of history back into the historical agenda. And, most importantly, both see 'history' as the (discursively articulated) records or archives of war between the dominant and the dominated. (311)

The result of Ivette Ramirez's and David Edgecombe's plays is not a negative performance of conflict, although conflict is a vital component of the production. In the end, the plays embrace an ethos of "humanism," as defined by Wilson Harris in his essay "Comedy and Modern Allegory" (127). For Harris, humanism involves a genuine and profound engagement with the individual human person taken as she or he is, with no claim or deference to a superior cultural system of discourse of any kind.

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