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# Hybrid, Subversive, and Skeptical Performances of Gender, Power, and Space in the Postcolonial Avant-Garde

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HYBRID, SUBVERSIVE, AND SKEPTICAL PERFORMANCES OF GENDER, POWER, AND  
SPACE IN THE POSTCOLONIAL AVANT-GARDE

by

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## Abstract

In her one-woman play, Iraqi-American playwright and actress Heather Raffo performs the testimonies of nine resilient Iraqi women, emphasizing their diverse experiences of the American occupation and life under the Baathist regime. Near the end of the play, one of the soliloquies breaks down into incoherence: an instance of poetic rupture. There is revolutionary potential latent in this avant-garde technique, and by applying it to her urgent and immediate postcolonial context Raffo simultaneously enacts and demands a response of justice to the injustices attested to throughout. Through the poetic rupture of Layal's textual/psychological breakdown, Raffo undermines the system that, by imposing norms and taboos, unjustly constructed and allotted power and privilege in the first place.

To understand how the breakdown at the end of *9 Parts of Desire* serves as a call to justice requires a journey through the connections between postcolonial, postmodern, gender, and spatial theories. Judith Butler, Susan Friedman, Chandra Mohanty, and Riverbend help elucidate the element of performed identity/feminism, and Simon Gikandi, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva reveal the revolutionary power latent in avant-garde texts. Butler argues that identity is always performed; Friedman, that we are all hybrid beings; Mohanty, that we must advocate for transnational feminism thoughtfully and critically; and Riverbend, that Iraqi feminism predates the American occupation. Gikandi highlights ways in which postcolonial texts adapt modernist avant-garde techniques; Derrida lays out the deconstructionist framework of *différance* from which Kristeva draws; and Kristeva unpacks the political rupture constituted by poetic deviations like Raffo's. Raffo does not allow her audience to sit with the stereotypes, taboos, and norms that have been consciously established to enforce an oppressive agenda against Iraqi women, but rather breaks down the system in which they are stable.

## Hybrid, Subversive, and Skeptical Performances of Gender, Power, and Space in the Postcolonial Avant-Garde

### **Introduction: Norms, Taboos, and Stereotypes, and the Potential to Subvert Them**

Language can be a tool through which we construct our shared experiences of reality, for better or for worse. To have such a tool gives us a dangerous power: through it we create categories, and based on those categories we assert norms, taboos, and stereotypes<sup>i</sup> which enforce and reinforce hierarchical power structures. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues that this process is not accidental or innocent, but highly motivated. It is, as he summarizes it in a film interview with Professor Sut Jhally of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, “the end result of a process that reflects certain interests.” And because of this process, we now view Middle Easterners through “a lens that distorts their actual reality to make them appear different and threatening.” But language can also be a tool through which we subvert oppressive social constructions. We create categories, norms, taboos, and stereotypes through words -- so we can revolt against those creations by undermining the language game within which they play out. In short, there is power in a text that ruptures accepted, oppressive systems, and *9 Parts of Desire* is one such text.

In her play, *9 Parts of Desire*, Iraqi-American actress and playwright Heather Raffo denies stereotypes and the power structures they reinforce through her hybrid, skeptical, and subversive performances of gender, power, and space. Playfully engaging her own hybridity, Raffo asserts the diversity of Iraqi women and revolts against the assumptions built into their “category.” Throughout the play, the characters (all Iraqi women) perform their own stories according to their own rules, acknowledging only skeptically the fates and scripts too often

believed to be inevitable for them. But despite their resilience, certain gendered injustices still occur, and some are unique to the space in which Raffo's characters live. These remaining injustices Raffo subverts poetically, when one of the final soliloquies breaks down into incoherence. Through the poetic rupture of this textual/psychological breakdown, Raffo undermines the system that, by imposing norms and taboos, unjustly constructed and allotted power and privilege in the first place.

To understand how the breakdown at the end of *9 Parts of Desire* serves as a call to justice requires a journey through the connections between postcolonial, postmodern, gender, and spatial theories. There is revolutionary power latent in poetic rupture, and by applying this avant-garde technique to her postcolonial context, Raffo simultaneously enacts and demands a response of justice to the injustices attested to throughout. Theorists Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler both consider poetic deviance like Raffo's to be revolutionary and healing. Their lenses help us consider this breakdown, but their theoretical fit is imperfect, and literary critic Simon Gikandi helps us to identify why. Gikandi argues that the correlation between painful experience and experimental or deviant speech we find in *9 Parts of Desire* is common to both the Modernists and Post-Colonialists, so Raffo's project is part of a larger tradition – what I call the Postcolonial Avant-Garde. The differences Gikandi delineates between Modernist and Postcolonial strands of Avant-Gardism render projects like Raffo's play not merely experimental, like the projects Kristeva addresses, but urgent: requiring us to respond. The breakdown through which *9 Parts of Desire* comes to its close is subversive and powerful in its own right but it does not leave room for complacency; its end is not yet fully reached. There is regarding the oppressions listed a sense of responsibility; there is in the final breakdown a call to justice.

### **Part One: *9 Parts of Desire*, a Summary**

Raffo performs the experiences of her nine characters in an experimental and subversive way: by playing all nine roles herself. Raffo, an American with Iraqi roots, spun the play out of stories she collected while visiting her family in Baghdad in 1993. The women Raffo interviewed lived under Saddam Hussein's regime, and the nine characters she portrays have experienced and understood the recent wars and the American occupation in different ways. They enact their individual testimonies in the form of soliloquies, which are separate and coherent and for the most part do not overlap until the very end. When their voices do finally come together in two of the three final soliloquies, however, they break down into incoherence. The play ends with the fracture and confusion of a bombing, reflected in fractured and confused language. Raffo employs this correlation between painful experience and experimental or deviant speech as a form of resistance that also expresses inexpressible pain.

The nine characters in the play are the Mullaya, Layal, Amal, Huda, the Doctor, the Iraqi Girl, Umm Ghada, The American, and Nanna. The play opens with the dawn call to prayer, and then the Mullaya enters singing a traditional Iraqi song. The Mullaya is a spiritual leader who – poetically, beautifully – “leads call and response with women mourning at funerals” (9). She wears her abaya – a black cloth – traditionally (covering her hair), laments the changes in the land that once was Eden, and feeds old shoes/soles/souls to the river that runs across the stage. The actress then transforms into Layal by draping the abaya off her shoulders, giggling, and talking about her decision to stay in Iraq as curator of the Saddam Art Center even when most other artists have left. She admits that she has “loved many” (16) and discusses her subversive visual art projects: painting other women's faces onto her own naked body to tell their stories without exposing them, and “revealing something” even in her portraits of Saddam (15).

Next we meet Amal, a Bedouin who has been hurt – by the infidelity of her first husband and by the jealousy of her second husband’s other wife, and then by her third fiancé, who changed his mind about her once they saw each other in person. Amal is a well-traveled mother with a full heart, who describes her chance to tell someone her story as “the most free moment of [her] life” (22). After Amal comes Huda, a political exile who shares her reasons for hating Saddam enough to support the war, despite her “doubts about American policy” (22). Then the actress vomits and becomes the Doctor, who informs us about the radiation seeping through Iraq and the “high levels of genetic damage” and cancer that come with it (24). She tells us that Iraqi communities are hurting because their men are returning from the wars deformed, and expresses the conflict felt by educated and medically trained Iraqis like herself: she could have gone anywhere, but she will stay, even if it feels to her as hopeless as it does. The actress then skips rope with her abaya and becomes the Iraqi Girl, who says she hates Saddam because her father and brothers were taken away and because her mother is afraid to leave the house. She cannot go to school because her mother does not like the American soldiers being there, smiling at the girls, and to keep her home her mother simply tells her she is stupid.

After the Iraqi Girl we meet Umm Ghada, who lives in the ruins of the Amiriyya bomb shelter, bearing witness to the 1991 bombing. A U.S. airplane, she tells us, took her children among its 403 victims. Umm Ghada pauses to acknowledge the midday call to prayer and asks us to sign the witness book, and then we are back to Layal. Layal tells us her house “was hit, from Bush’s war” (33) and insists that she prefers protection to freedom if freedom means being alone (34). She talks freely about her first affair, about how her husband shot her when he found out, and about how she continues to love many, passionately. She huddles in front of a TV and becomes the American, who has been watching the war from her New York studio apartment,

looking for family faces, crying, praying, and repeating to herself the names of her Iraqi family.

Then we return to Huda, who rants about the freedoms Iraqis had before the war and about the backlashes against these freedoms resulting from the occupation. She rebukes America for supporting Saddam all his life, laments that she no longer recognizes her country, denounces revolution and advocates instead for deep-rooted, gradual, careful development (40-1).

The last character left to meet is Nanna, who hears the third call to prayer and then greets us by trying to sell old family things. She bears witness to the degrading, racist comments made by marines during recent lootings, to the 23 revolutions through which she has lived, and to the burning of National Archives and Koranic Libraries: in short, to the destruction of shared Iraqi history (45). When we return to the American, she is wrestling with herself, trying to get out of her apartment – but even outside, she carries the pain of the war, of her family, with her. She is sick to her stomach even on “a beautiful warm day” because she cannot escape the dehumanizing images she’s seen on TV, because even though “there’s a tank in [her] *ammu’s*<sup>ii</sup> front yard,” New York carries on. The actress transitions back into Layal, who asks us not to judge her her choices: to paint herself naked, to accept protection from Saddam’s regime, and, possibly, to agree to create a mosaic for them. Layal accepts that she will die but she insists the regime will never kill her – and it is difficult to tell whether she is sad or sincere about the freedom she finds in their arrangement. “I have been raped and raped and raped and raped” she says, “and I want more / they see me, they recognize me for what I am” (49). Then Huda returns, to tell about the nightmare of being a political prisoner and to prove through her story that Iraqis want liberation.

Then: “*A bombing raid, everything is shaking. Layal is screaming into the phone*” (51).

Layal is talking to a member of the regime, someone to whom she turns for love and protection, asking him to do something – both about the bombing and about her commitment to create a



mosaic for Saddam. He does nothing. Then a voice-over provides a few lines from the American's uncle, calling from Baghdad, and from the American's words we learn that he is calling after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attack, to apologize, and to make sure she's okay. The Uncle's voice is heard again, and then Layal is talking on the phone, presumably to the American, calling her "*habiti*, my daughter"<sup>iii</sup> and asking her not to come to Iraq that summer: to stay home, or to stay at her aunt's house in London (55). The Uncle calls again, and the American calls back, "screaming into the phone, / our last call before the bombs started" (56). Her aunt replies, "Go to church and pray," and then, "I love you / *habiti habiti*" – followed by the names of all their relatives, on and on, until they cut the phone off.

Layal cuts in, again insisting that she will not leave Iraq. She declares that she will do the mosaic, but she will do it for herself: it will be a portrait of President Bush, on the floor, so that people will get to walk across his face. She then begins destroying her art studio, smashing pottery for the mosaic but all the while growing more and more frenzied, until she begins to beat her face and chest. Thus begins the breakdown, of which I include the full text because it is the central concern of this paper:

"And 200 more  
 waiting in line  
 risking everything to take my place  
 without my legs  
 buried in the backyard  
 they're making their own map of  
 me anyway – sure after every  
 bomb  
 first bomb drilling bomb  
 all I want is to feel it – love  
 we were just a boy and a girl  
 bodies were fused together –  
 second bomb come inside exactly same spot  
 here – he made them prostitutes  
 eight houses from here

don't come home  
 I am not the Layal he loved  
 third bomb – boil the people  
 I don't want freedom  
 Mullaya why are you here?  
 so old you cannot see it  
*yaboo yaboo*  
 I'm fine I'm fine I'm (*The fourth call to prayer is heard off in the distance.*)  
*la ilaha illa allah*  
*la ilaha illa allah*  
*la ilaha illa allah*  
 I'm dead." (60)

After Layal dies, the Mullaya picks up where she left off, quoting the other characters in a random way. But where Layal's words were explosive, the Mullaya's words are calm.

Halfway through she steps into the river and immerses herself in the water. Then the stage darkens and the final call to prayer resounds. For the final scene, we return to Nanna, who is still trying to sell us old things on the street. Only now she includes among her items Layal's painting *Savagery* – in which she, Nanna, has been painted to blend into a tree. Nanna calls Layal a martyr and tells us that the rest of her paintings burned in the museum. This painting is all that remains – but she has “to sell it / [she has] to eat” (64) – so the play ends on her eerily unsatisfying question, “Two dollar?”

## **Part Two: Self and Other**

Layal's breakdown ends the play with an ontological challenge. If nine women can share one body, and if two of those nine women can speak through an assemblage of lines previously spoken by the others, then what constitutes the self and why do people differentiate that self from the “other” that is actually part of its constitution? This question is especially important in the contemporary context of Middle Eastern and Western conflict. “While the Iraqi has been held up

as the ‘other’ for American society,” argues Kimberly Segall, “the language and embodiment of this play suggests that there is no distinct self and other, by intersecting these women in a single body with syncretic ties” (70). By confusing the categories of the individual and her community, Iraqi and American, Arabic and English, theater and dialogue, here and there, us and them, Raffo breaks down the barriers that differentiate them and “splits the dichotomy of self and other into pieces” (Segall 66). Raffo problematizes the schism Americans have constructed between the Western “self” and the Iraqi, Islamic “other,” and that challenge forces the audience to claim as its own – and therefore, to respond to – the injustices attested to throughout. But although the women perform testimonies of injustices, they do so skeptically – in a way that demands instead of worn narratives like exoticism and victimization a shift towards the recognition of both agency and humanity – or, in short, towards justice. Through its skeptical performances of gender, power, and space, *9 Parts of Desire* shatters stereotypes and the narratives built upon them and offers instead a series of hybrid, avant-garde testimonies that both demand justice and contain in their very structures their own revolutions.

Raffo navigates and speaks into the labyrinth of the postcolonial, modern, and postmodern with a map and language that together reject dichotomies and the tunnel vision of stereotypes and single stories in favor of diversity, hybridity, and multiplicity. The women in *9 Parts of Desire* perform their own diverse and hybrid identities and feminisms. Their hybridity as individuals and diversity as representatives of Iraqi women help readers and audiences to consider and advocate for transnational feminism thoughtfully and critically, without ignoring the strides Iraqi feminism made before the backlash that followed the American occupation. And the multiplicity underlying the two final incoherent overlap speeches (Layal’s and the Mullaya’s) render those soliloquies avant-garde – that is, artistically transgressive of normal

representational systems (systems that represent concepts through signs).<sup>iv</sup> Through this multiplicity, the women enact their own subversive revolutions.

### **Part Three: Subverting Stereotypes and Categorization through Skeptical Performances**

Many of the gendered injustices that Raffo brings to light stem from attempts to delimit the stories and roles of women, for with delimited roles come the punishments society inflicts on women whose behavior does not comply. Yet while gendered violence is a real and pressing issue, it is not the only story Iraqi women have to tell. Western mass media perpetuates stereotypes of Muslim women as either victims or dream-girls. As Said puts it, they are seen as either virginal, helpless, and oppressed, or as the harem whores of exotic sexual fantasies. When Western media present the struggles of Iraqi women without acknowledging their diversity and the diversity of their stories, they commit a delimiting injustice akin to – though not on par with – the injustices they seek to expose. Raffo’s project addresses both of these issues. Her play testifies to injustices that should not be ignored but does not deny her resilient characters agency; she offers multiple stories without suggesting that any one of them is the only story out there. “Unlike mass media,” argues Segall, “Raffo’s play stages multiple memories of violence, set amidst transnational connections” and “establishes the diverse perspectives of Iraqi women” (67). Raffo destroys all of the boxes through which people, whether in the name of tradition or liberation, have sought to define “the Iraqi woman” and replaces that narrative with a set of stories inspired by real and diverse Iraqi *women* who perform their own identities and feminisms according to their own terms.

In denying generalization, Raffo also rejects the idea of archetypes: specifically, that there is some ultimate archetype of Iraqi woman-ness or of global woman-ness or even of

feminism from which her characters ought to draw their truths. Judith Butler promotes a similar anti-essentialism project in her essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.” Like Raffo, Butler argues that no prior or ideal female identity or essence actually exists. Gender – specifically for Raffo, Iraqi female identity – is something performed by repeating “internally discontinuous” acts, and it does not exist prior to those acts (Butler 901). Butler argues that it is crucial to pay attention to the ways in which subjects perform gender and the ways in which structures try to influence that – and to respond with applause whenever it is performed subversively. Raffo’s subversive performances should therefore be applauded since they show that no prior, defined gender identity is set in stone. *9 Parts of Desire* challenges its readership/audience to encourage the subversive gender performances they witness and to protest people and systems that try to force their own limiting agendas onto those performances.

The reason Raffo can perform her play without the whole thing turning into a confusing mess of indeterminate voices is that her presentation is anti-essentialist. Because it must be evident when Raffo has switched between characters (because the voices must be different enough not to be confused), the play rejects the idea of a single identity for all Iraqi women. In the first two scenes of the play, the close of the Mullaya’s contemplative lines, “a great dark sea / of desire / and I will feed it / my worn sole” (11), does not blur with Layal’s giggling introduction, “Leave Iraq? / Well, I could move I suppose –” because the characters are too distinct and full to be confused. The Mullaya – who leads funeral songs – performs her identity in a way that is “mythic, celebratory and inviting” (9). Her heartbreaking mourning signals the presence of a persona clearly unique from the “sexy and elegant...resilient and fragile” daredevil artist Layal (12). Similarly, Layal – elegant and flirtatiously mocking – is so distinct from earnest, imploring Amal (who “asks many questions” and “really thinks there is an answer out

there for her” [16]) that it is obvious when one has left the stage and the other has taken it, and no underlying essence of what it means to be a woman is present to complicate that. Because the acts relate to each other so arbitrarily – because nine absolutely distinct women tell their individual stories, rather than one seamless story of woman-ness – the identity-scripts the characters perform do not reinforce gendered expectations, but allow them to rewrite their identities as women on their own terms.

The characters in *9 Parts of Desire* perform their identities as Iraqi women skeptically and subversively. Too often, according to Butler, individuals merely repeat acts according to stylistic guidelines laid down by earlier performances, but *9 Parts of Desire* breaks that cycle of naïve appropriation. This non-appropriating breach, though evident throughout the play, is especially magnified in Layal’s breakdown and the Mullaya’s healing continuation of that breakdown. “The different sort of repeating,” or “the breaking or subversive repetition of...style” (Butler 901) that happens in these scenes not only calls attention to the possibility of breaking scripted cycles but deems our recognition of that possibility something imperative.

Layal – the artist’s – final breakdown is an instance of stylized and subversive repetition. Though the characters’ testimonies were subversive to begin with, Layal could have repeated their words in a way that would have begun to secure their experiences as normal. Instead, her frenzied repetition denies the idea that their individual truths must in any way continue to be the essential truth for all women. Recalling the events of the days after a bombing, the “peaceful and dispassionate” Umm Ghada recalls searching for her daughter among “charred bodies, / bodies they were fused together,” but when Layal repeats her line, she blends it ambiguously with two of her own. Her new phrase, “All I want is to feel it – love / we were just a boy and a girl / bodies were fused together – ” though not perfectly redemptive, literally repeats Umm Ghada’s

“script” while rejecting the idea that her reality must be inevitable. Umm Ghada’s testimony already questioned the necessity of her experiences in her own life, and the repetition in Layal’s speech reinforces only that questioning of the necessity of pain, rather than the story in which the pain in question is necessary. Layal does not repeat the story, but allots the question a new context – her own.

Because the other characters did not convincingly perform submission to a “natural order” or women’s fate that would inevitably-eventually render them prostitutes or abandoned wives, chopped up bodies or vaporized silhouettes, Layal was not led to repeat their convinced submission. She repeats their skeptical performances and so, according to Raffo’s production notes, takes on their “struggle for self-identity and liberation,” until she “willfully explodes under [their] weight” (65). Layal repeats the skeptical performances of the other women and so performs a twist on stylistic repetition. Stylistic repetition – the naive appropriation of acts from earlier performances – usually serves to reinforce the normalcy of an idea, but Layal’s subversion breaks that cycle and denounces the normalcy of – for example – death by bombing as a fate for all Iraqis, or prostitution as a fate for all Iraqi women.

Those examples only hint at the myriad of injustices to which Raffo attests. In the play, several characters describe oppressive circumstances over which they could not possibly have any control. These are what Butler calls the hegemonic social conditions within which actors must perform. Hegemonic conditions don’t dictate acts entirely – Raffo’s characters respond with different levels of resilience – but they do allow for the possibility of certain acts and the impossibility of others. Butler supposes what the angry, imploring, and wounded voices of even these strongest of women attest to: there are certain pressures that no amount of personal resilience can render irrelevant. Huda, for example, is obviously strong, but she has also suffered

deep pain. A whiskey-drinker and ex-heavy-smoker, Huda is a well-traveled political activist and intellect who has “walked for peace” in places like Vietnam and Chile and was even exiled from her own country (23). Her descriptions are at once both solemn and wry; she is someone of great strength who has participated in past revolutions and knows her own power, yet she admits to feeling angry, sad, and stuck. She has a history of political nerve, but she laments almost<sup>v</sup> hopelessly Saddam’s abuses of power. Huda’s testimony reveals that oppressions like the sexist, circular “logic” of bad people with too much power can impose themselves whether one is resilient enough to try to resist them or not. She explains that Saddam “beheaded 70 women for being prostitutes, / but he made them prostitutes” (Raffo 22). He kidnapped them, made them into sex slaves, tired of them, and beheaded them for committing a crime he forced them to commit. A fate like prostitution may not be inevitable, but it is not always possible to denounce the reality of those people who would use force to make it normal.

The Doctor, the Iraqi Girl, and Nanna attest to similarly oppressive circumstances. The Doctor, who “trained in England” and “could have gone anywhere” is a breast cancer survivor and the caretaker and provider for her handicapped husband. She is exhausted and nauseous but still at work; she is extremely competent but operating in terrible conditions. She is tough, convicted, and intelligent, and yet even she laments certain oppressions as inescapable. She curses the oppression imposed on pregnant women and their children by radiation seeping through everything: “Damn it! I lost her. The baby should be dead, not her. God she had enough, she had three girls at home, but she insisted, hoping for a boy” (Raffo 24). The Doctor grieves for eight-year-olds with breast cancer, babies born with genetic damage, and children playing with the uranium-tipped bullets they find, and feels stuck because the radiation has changed the very soil. “Who can clean it? Ever?” she dejectedly pleads. Radiation renders



pregnancy a “death sentence” – and the Doctor herself is pregnant (25). The Iraqi Girl, whose speech is a mix of keen perception and the frustration of not understanding everything, is smart (the best English speaker in her family), able to operate a pistol, and aware of both the losses within her family and the general shifts of the war. But she is also intrigued by her collection of (uranium-tipped?) bullets, misdirected-ly angry at her mother for their circumstances, and childishly infatuated with the American boy-band NSYNC and the soldiers who resemble its members. Among her insights, she notices that her mom never leaves the house except to go to the market with the protection of her uncle and her covered hair because “she is afraid of getting stolen by gangs” (27). And Nanna, an old, traditionally-covered woman “who has seen it all” (41) recalls an art project in school – a family tree for which she drew a picture of her mother in her favorite dress. Her teacher denounced the picture as disrespectful before Allah, since Nanna had drawn “her hair and her body showing” (44). Nanna remembers looking around to see how the other children were drawing their mothers, and saw that they weren’t, “because of the name-line” – so she erased her mother (44). The tradition of the name-line and the religious imposition of modesty act as “erasure[s] on women’s histories” (Segall 72). The power of terror dynamics restrict women to the house. The preference for male heirs subjects women to the death sentence of pregnancy in a radioactive climate. And common discourse around honor and virginity renders women susceptible not only to blame but also corporal punishment for violations committed against them.

All of these oppressive social conditions claim too great a say in the shaping of Iraqi women’s experiences, and Raffo demands to see them transformed. Because acts are not just individual, but “a shared experience and ‘collective action,’” Butler sees hope for that transformation. “The act that embodied agents are” she writes, “inasmuch as they dramatically

and actively embody and...wear certain cultural significations, is clearly not one's act alone" (906). If women collectively wear the same cultural significations in subversive ways, their "category" breaks down – and Raffo's characters do precisely that.

The women in *9 Parts of Desire* contribute to the breaking down of the "category" of woman by literally wearing the same cultural signification in diverse, subversive ways. The opening stage note in *9 Parts of Desire* is about the main prop: the abaya. An abaya is "a traditional Iraqi black robe-like garment," and the actress uses it throughout the play "to move from character to character" (9). Segall notes that the way the characters use the abaya "defines religious affinities and postwar doubt." It links them, and serves as both "a site of personal identity" and "a form of public protest" (72-3). Nanna wears the abaya traditionally; Amal, who is Bedouin, uses it to distinguish her particular subculture; Layal wears it "loosely hanging off her shoulder like a dressing gown or a painting smock" (12); the Doctor and the Iraqi Girl use it as a prop; and Umm Ghada "throws [it] down forcefully" to make a black hole (30). No stage directions tell us how the Mullaya, the American, and Huda should wear it, but even within the six specific directions there is enough diversity to challenge and so transform a cultural signification so often used – whether by personal choice or patriarchal enforcement – to monitor women's sexuality in one way or the other.

Such subversion will not necessarily end all oppression, but if there is only a problematized idea of women rather than a clear-cut category, expectations for that non-category ought to dissipate. If the category breaks down, it is harder to impose value-claims about what a woman is onto the myriad of people who no longer fit into its box. If individual subjects are no longer part of a category of people that cannot keep their own name, or that must be modest and pure, or that must produce a male child that will be more valued than they are, it is harder to

force that category's expectations upon them. If an individual subject is forced into prostitution, it is still a terrible offense that should not be abstracted into nothingness, but if society cannot then say to that person, you belong to this category and your value is tied to your ability to maintain the expectations that precede this category, then at least they cannot be ousted as a consequence of logic. That is not to say no one will come up with another way to justify their punishment, but at least the idea that you are a woman, so you ought to have maintained the values of woman-ness, no longer applies.

#### **Part Four: The Personal is Political – Performing Diverse Feminisms and Hybrid Identities**

*9 Parts of Desire* relies on and embodies the expansion of the personal to accommodate the public and the political because its individual testimonies to attest to something larger.

Raffo's ontological challenge is so effective because it takes what Butler calls "the feminist impulse" – the "recognition that my pain or my silence...is...not mine alone, and that it delimits me in a shared cultural situation" (904) – and applies it on an individual level. The personal testimonies of the characters expand to include the political structures that affect Iraqi women more broadly, and the single body of the actress expands to include all nine testimonies. One body accommodates nine voices that each in turn accommodate entire political realities: so everything is everyone's responsibility.

Many of the political realities Raffo addresses are founded in memories; that is, the women carry with them the heaviness of traumas past. Umm Ghada, a proud, now childless mother, lives in the site of the bombing that killed her family and hundreds others, bearing witness to the event. On February 13, 1991 The U.S. destroyed the Amiriyya bomb shelter with a "special two-bomb design for breaking only a bomb shelter" (32). Though the U.S. claimed

they thought the shelter was a “communication center for military” (32), 403 citizens died.

Huda, a nationalist and exile, constructs her identity on what Segall calls “memory zones”—instances of history that stand out in her memory and highlight patterns of oppression. These memory zones link the British invasion of the Ottoman Empire in the 1920s with the Second Gulf War and call out the “decimation of highly populated areas, like Fallujah and Najaf” that were battlegrounds in both (Segall 63). The Iraqi Girl recalls the events that lead up to her father’s kidnapping. She pieces together glimpses of the adult world like watching her mother cry, “Saddam stole my sons” at the television (28) and hearing the men who came to collect her father repeat something she had told her class he had said. She reads in her father’s notebook, “I should have taught her how to lie” (29) and learns to fear Saddam, but then watches Saddam mocked and belittled on television and deems herself stupid for fearing him all her life (30). Yet how could she not, when he didn’t hesitate to take away her brothers and even her father – whom she thought was so strong – for a comment about the stars? Yet even these citations of oppression are a form of resistance. Skeptical of easy histories, the characters do not turn to cheap cliches or black and white generalizations but instead perform their own diverse and complex memories.

These oppressive realities share some common, even gendered, threads, but feminist solidarity language can often seem to suggest that women share some single universal/essential experience – and at first glance, Raffo’s solidarity project of granting nine scripted voices one performing body might seem like gender essentialism. Many feminists have fought to make the category of “woman” visible, but Butler believes that category is problematic in its own right. It is unhelpful to fight against sexism with a discourse that relies on the essentialist myth of the shared oppression of all women. She argues for a reexamination of the ways in which

representations less diverse than Raffo's contribute to and reproduce the "gender identities which sustain discrete and binary categories" from which "conditions of oppression" stem (904). In order to write about women, and particularly about women facing oppression, we need projects that are inherently diverse.

Raffo's project works because of its diversity. Raffo does write that the transformation of a single actress "from one Iraqi woman to another" reminds us of "the universality of all women," but she pairs that phrase with a counterpart that vouches for its non-essentialist intent: the transformation also serves to remind us of "the complexities of nationality" (66). Because each woman still owns the salient aspects of her identity, Raffo's presentation of diversity within such a small niche – Iraqi women affected by the Gulf War, the American occupation, and Saddam's regime – challenges the category of "woman." Each woman feels suffocated in some way by the cultural expectations and taboos set up around the category of woman, but though they experience suffocation, they are also resilient and perform their own intentionally subversive acts. Loyal, for example, scoffs at her role as mother and wife but says she is good at being naked (16), and Amal leaves her husbands when they treat her poorly (16-22). Raffo rejects both the pre-defined idea of woman-ness as a delimiting gender category and the tired narratives attached to its definition, and turns instead to diverse, individual, skeptical performances of gender by diverse, resilient women.

Like gender, feminism must also be performed individually by each individual that claims it, and each character in *9 Parts of Desire* performs it her own way. Loyal trespasses most preconceived notions the Western world associates with feminism, yet it would be difficult to make a case that she is anything but a feminist. Feminism, for one thing, has long been considered a "phantom form": any attempt to define it rules out who is included in it, even

though by nature it is a doctrine of inclusivity and equality. Even a woman who turns to the Baathist party and exchanges sexual favors for protection can be a feminist – and any such attempt to summarize Layal does her an injustice. Layal works with the Baathist party, but she does so for control: to liberate other women by painting their stories onto her body. Her whole feminist project is to trespass lines and expectations. Of all the characters, Layal has the most political power, yet she secures this by sleeping with members of the Ba'athist party. She is empowered and strong, yet turns to men for protection; she works for Saddam yet sneaks subversive paintings into his gallery, and she shifts even further as the play progresses.

The other characters also perform their own feminisms, and the fact that they can each do so in such a variety of ways lends the play (and the single actress) what Susan Friedman calls a hybrid identity: it (she) is composed of a multiplicity of performances, stories, and options. And even the individual characters that the hybrid actress performs are hybrid beings themselves. In her final speech, Layal's identity "becomes" hybrid, but each voice within the multiplicity she takes on is already hybrid itself. The Mullaya plays a traditional spiritual leadership role in a land that has (d)evolved from the Eden it once was. Her song is at once both healing and sad, and she bookends Raffo's postmodern experimental play in tradition. Amal seems simple and traditional, but she has been everywhere and loved many and deeply. She is Bedouin, and she has stretched the meaning of nomadism to encompass the Atlantic as well as the desert; several places are integral to who she now is. Huda is funny but angry, not wholeheartedly pro-America but definitely anti-Saddam. The Doctor is educated, worried about money, married to an injured man probably weaker than herself, and losing patients every day to defective pregnancies/radioactivity – and although she does not say how or why or whether she chose to be

or tried not to be, she is pregnant. They are all hybrid individuals, made up of apparently contradictory components, inherently.

Even Raffo is hybrid. In a series of interviews about the play, Raffo discusses what it was like to be an interviewer to the Iraqi women whose stories constitute the play. Raffo likens her original process of interviewing to song writing and then expresses the “sense of fracture and self-division” she felt as an Iraqi-American before that the same trip helped her “conquer it” (Renner 62). Raffo’s roots reach Iraq and connect her with women there. During the Gulf War, Raffo grappled with what Simi Horwitz calls “a sense of [herself] as ‘the other,’” and during her trip she attempted to write her friends’ stories into song. In writing their songs as her own, she took on, in Magda Romanska’s words, the “painful attempt to bridge the gap between her two identities.” And each of Raffo’s characters takes on this attempt as well. But each character performs her own hybridity differently, engaging different levels of playfulness and loss in different moments.

When someone is hybrid, there’s loss that happens, and in certain moments some of the characters feel, know, and enact this loss quite strikingly. The American clings to her rosary as she watches CNN and tries and fails to reach her Iraqi relatives over the phone. Though not in immediate danger herself, she suffers the loss of not knowing how her family is doing or whether they’re safe, and she feels she must contain her sadness because “you just can’t / watch it / on TV” (37). She worries and imagines the worst every time she hears a report, and she feels some sense of isolation from her family both because she cannot be there with them and because she could never “go home again / and sit / in [her] *amma*’s kitchen / and say / I’m sorry / I’m sorry” (47). Her home country is bombing and exploiting her motherland, and she feels this tension in the core of her being. Nanna also attests to loss, but on a communal scale. She tells us she saw

Iraqis burning texts from the National Archives and Koranic Library: specifically, and not by accident, texts that somehow represent or record the shared history between “Sunni, Shi’a, Kurd, / Christian even, Jew” (43). Of course, Nanna’s testimony is not true of Iraq’s hybrid identity in every way, but merely witnesses an instance in which that hybridity is felt and expressed as loss.

In other instances, the characters react to their hybridity with resistance, and even protest. Growing up under the American occupation as well as in a globalized world, the Iraqi Girl soaks up Western culture and admits, “Today I thought / maybe I should get stolens / so I could leave my country” (27). Again, this is not her whole identity, but an example of an instance in which she resists her hybridity. And elsewhere in the play, we are reminded that there is always the option to ignore one’s hybridity, for instance by exclusively performing one’s expected social role. The Doctor’s patient – or the more influential characters in her life – denies the complexities of her identity by privileging and so performing at the cost of all else her role as a potential bearer of a son. But while hybridity can instill a sense of loss or anger, or it can simply be ignored, it can also be expressed as navigation, negotiation, and reconciliation. We are all inherently a multiplicity of cultures, and each character also celebrates that in some way.

Cultures have always been blended, and people have always been hybrid – so by taking the other women’s stories upon themselves, Layal and Raffo simply take that to the next level. As a hybridity project, *9 Parts of Desire* challenges the idea of the American self and the Iraqi other and replaces that problematized narrative with an alternate narrative of syncretic ties.

This alternative narrative matters because of the popular and harmful misconceptions of Iraqi women that too often seep into social justice and feminist solidarity discourse. In her essay, “Under Western Eyes,” Chandra Talpade Mohanty famously cautions against the potential within Western Feminist discourse to reduce real, “third-world” women to the abstract Other –



the Third-World Woman. She also responds to the tendency within intellectual feminist discourse to universalize despite important cultural differences. In “‘Under Western Eyes’: Revisited,” however, she steps back a bit in order to promote a feminism without borders. We must advocate for transnational feminism, but we must do so thoughtfully and critically. Applied to Iraq, this thoughtful critical approach means recognizing the strides Iraqi women made before the West began to get involved, as well as the problems that began to arise once we did. The blogger Riverbend, for example, writes about the backlash against feminism after the American occupation. Iraqi feminism predates the American occupation, and Riverbend believes that Western feminism failed Iraqi women. Riverbend experienced the backlash in her own life when she lost her job as a computer programmer, so her blog lends a personal, gendered, Sunni feminist voice to the events she reports and thus gives us “a new sense of the protest movements” (Segall 79). Segall describes Iraq as “one of the most progressive countries for middle-class and upper-class women, and one of the most educated countries in the Middle East” before the Second Gulf War (85).

This description, like Riverbend’s claim – that she (Riverbend) “received equal pay, wore whatever she wanted, and was well-respected” *before* the American occupation and was met “with an unfamiliar ‘hostility’” after (Segall 85) – is echoed in Huda’s lament about the young girls who still live in Iraq. “I said let the young ones living there have a chance with the policies / but they are too afraid to speak up / they are shell-shocked, all these girls” she tells her listener. She notes, like Riverbend, the regression that stemmed from the desire to differentiate Iraqi culture from anything considered American, including female empowerment. Sexual liberation, perceived as Western, was met with a pendulum swing. “After the Gulf War, they go backwards,” says Huda, “they abandon their education and now, / now they are wearing the

veils.” It was not always this way, and there are still those old enough to remember that. As Huda puts it, “Their grandmothers are more liberated than them” (39). Especially through her performance of Huda, whose political, feminist strides are the sort that Western feminism disrespects and in some ways undoes by failing to acknowledge, Raffo speaks to this problematic disconnect. But she does more than merely testify to a phenomenon that needs changing; she also enacts that change. Raffo writes into the structures of these women’s speeches their own subversive revolutions.

### **Part Five: The Postcolonial Avant-Garde**

Avant-garde texts are subversive in that they overthrow normal language patterns, and transnational or postcolonial frameworks contextualize subversive textual revolutions within specific political circumstances – so Raffo performs her transnationalism through avant-garde soliloquies because there is power in that experimental space. According to Simon Gikandi, this move is part of a larger trend. Gikandi traces the stylistic parallels between postcolonialism and modernism, highlighting the ways in which postcolonial texts adapt modernist avant-garde techniques to respond to postcolonial pressures. Gikandi believes that these parallels stem from a shared link between freedom – from tradition, from feeling silenced as “the other” – and experimentation. Although Gikandi concedes that modernism is usually associated with cultural elitism and is “now remembered...as the art of exclusiveness” (421), he believes this association is flawed. Gikandi argues that modernism engages “with the culture of the other,” and he challenges postcolonial critics who deem it inherently Eurocentric. “Without modernism,” he claims, “postcolonial literature as we know it would perhaps not exist” (421). His argument is largely historical – he notes the absence of English literature coming out of colonized areas

before modernism's introduction there – and he concludes by redefining modernism as a “transnational phenomena” (422).

Gikandi's transnational modernism lends itself to three different narratives, and *9 Parts of Desire* bridges the gap between modernism and postcolonialism according to all three explanations. The first of Gikandi's narratives challenges modernism's “set” boundaries the way Huda's history and Amal and the American's families challenge set notions of national space. Modernism, considered in light of this unrestricted formulation of space, is a term that can cover more time and space than traditionally seen in the West. Its key thread or criteria is its aesthetic “of the international avant-garde,” rather than its assumed-aesthetic of “high European culture” (422). According to the second narrative, postcolonial authors translate the methods of European modernists “to respond to the pressures of late colonialism” (423) and so are just as much modernist authors as are their European counterparts. And according to the third narrative, modernism is not in every respect the apolitical and racist movement it is often construed to be. “Modernism,” argues Gikandi, “having freed the European subject from the tutelage of tradition, also opened the space in which the other could become a self-reflective subject” (423). *9 Parts of Desire* is both avant-garde and a translation of modernist techniques to respond to postcolonial pressures, and because Raffo is an Iraqi-American herself, it is also an embrace of the self-reflective “other” that is inherently indebted to the dissolution of tradition.

All of this must be nuanced, however, for although the testimonies out of which Raffo constructed her play could be counted as postcolonial texts themselves, Raffo's context is ultimately postmodern. My claim is not that Raffo is a modernist writer – only that modernist and postcolonial writing techniques have more overlap than we typically think to assume of them, and that Raffo's success seems to stem out of that overlapping space. The high artistry of

props like the water into which the Mullaya steps until “*she becomes fully immersed*” (62), and the reimagining of syntactical structures in order to favor the conveyance of concept over efficient communication situate Raffo within the avant-garde. The Mullaya’s entreaty, “Hear my voice / upside down / broken English” (62), while not grammatically correct, enacts what it describes. Concept takes priority over syntax, and in this sense at least, the play is experimental.

With her situation as avant-garde comes a broader scope of theories regarding the success of her technique, one among many being the generally accepted claim that modernist formal deviance reflects the breakdown of certainties and purpose in the Western world after World War I. Modernists turned away from sonnets and rhymed couplets whose orderly structures they could no longer relate to in favor of the free verse, and abandoned the certain, moral lines that often wrap up a poem or book in favor of ambiguity and open-ended questions. In doing so, they not only represented more accurately their own broken realities, but also rebelled against the axioms they were learning to distrust. Their method pointed out truths, and contained within itself its own rebellion. A translation of that method to respond to late colonial pressures is not difficult to imagine. World War I becomes the Gulf Wars, the U.S. occupation, and Saddam’s Baathist regime, and the move from fixed to free verse becomes the move from predictable English sentence structures and story patterns to the broken English and Arabic montage of speakers and scenes we see at the end of the play.

Modernist and postcolonial texts contain within themselves their own experimental, liberation revolutions, but postcolonial writers often push their experiments into physical realms that modernist writers omit. Postcolonial contexts of oppression, enslavement, chaos, and pessimism stretch beyond the writer’s individual psyche or “imagined” (not unreal, but unimmediate: distant, cognitive, unthreatening) battlefields and into the collective, immediate,

inescapable day-to-day physical/political realities of their often war-torn or mid-war communities. Postcolonial authors confront preoccupations already present in modernist texts “with the presence and pressures” of other factors, because those factors are immediately before them (422).

Raffo joins in on this confrontation, addressing a series of postcolonial pressures by translating a series of modernist techniques. Among these techniques, Raffo probes the limits of collective rather than individual consciousness to accommodate for collective rather than individual trauma and collapses not just space but transnational space. She also breaks the fourth wall to remind the audience of both her role and their roles in these stories and renders present in a single day all of Iraqi history and all the history of each woman. The methods she uses to collapse time and transition between characters (the call to prayer, the exchange of the abaya) locate her characters culturally and historically, as does the heteroglossic interplay between Arabic and English.

Like other avant-garde writers, Raffo probes the limits of consciousness, but in her postcolonial translation the focus is not individual but collective. Layal’s mental breakdown is reflected in a poetic and dramatic breakdown: a fragmentation of words and a splitting of the character. The scattered assemblage of images torn from other parts of the play, pieced together in grammatically shattered phrases like Layal’s “third bomb – boil the people / I don’t want freedom / Mullaya why are you here?”(60) and the Mullaya’s “sing to my mother / I am home again / oblivion even” (62), renders the language shared between the women something as fractured as Layal’s psyche. In her production note, Raffo explains her intention. “Although the solo actress plays nine separate characters, through her the audience sees what could also be conflicting aspects of a single psyche” (65). And near the end of the play, even before they come

together as Layal, the different characters, once so separate and distinct, start to “cut each other off mid-sentence” (65). They seem to share in the chaos and violence of some common fright – some common collective trauma.

The plural character – Layal comprising the nine – responds to a tenth absent character: the Uncle, cast on behalf of an entire family, who speaks, but never appears. The Uncle is the only member who speaks in the voiceover, but he calls on behalf of a “we.” When the American responds to the missed call, she lists off all the names of the family to whom she directs her “I love you’s” – the multiple voices present behind the uncle’s call (58). Again it seems Raffo desires to weave into her play as much existence as possible. Her actress is a body containing many bodies, responding to a voice containing many voices – in a space containing many spaces.

Because the audience feels that both the speaker and listener are present, the phone call serves to collapse international space. Jahan Ramazani, whom Gikandi lists among members of the first-narrative camp, reflects on the way “postcolonial poets name, rename, and even de-name...signature sites...and relocate the imagination to ‘a free- floating noumen’” – which Ramazani defines as “a space that is neither global nor local but somewhere in between” (422).

Raffo renders permeable physical, spatial boundaries and so suggests the simultaneous sameness and difference of those spaces. Layal’s sister lives in London, Amal has traveled and her children go to school in London, Huda is in exile in London and has moved five times, the Doctor trained in England, the American watches the war on TV in New York, and her uncle calls her from Baghdad. *9 Parts of Desire* blurs the dichotomy of the two locations of “the West” and Iraq, Paradise (“this land between two rivers” [10]) and rubble (“this grave of Iraqi people” [32]) in the site that is each character’s plural self. The transnational, wandering, bilingual characters fall everywhere spatially and relationally and so blur the boundaries there.

By locating *9 Parts of Desire* in a transnational space, Raffo fills her short play with multiplicity and diversity: and then she locates all of that within herself.

Raffo adapts the avant-garde technique of breaking the fourth wall by literally placing herself in the play. Her physical presence either overrides or underlies the bodies of the women she takes on: she is both them and someone acknowledged to be an actress: i.e., not them.

Raffo's language is realistic and directed to some absent interviewer or friend – perhaps the audience. Because of that possibility, the audience not only has to sit with the ontological questions her presence spurs – they also have to respond. When, at the end of the play, Nanna tries to sell Layal's painting, her question is not only directed at the absent/invisible interviewer all the characters have been talking to all along, but also spills out into the quiet space before the applause in which the play is both over and yet not quite closed. The audience sits with her insistence, “You must buy, buy / ... / I have to sell it / I have to eat” and her question, “Two dollar? / Two dollar?” in the stillness that barely separates the play from the rest of life (64).

Even when the play is performed by an actress other than Raffo, her presence is still irremovable from the play. She is possibly the interviewer, and certainly someone affected by and in tune with some of the traumas and responses the women describe. Raffo's characters desperately hold on to names and stories – according to Pamela Renner, “any shred of individuality” that they can – and Raffo is one of them, a stranger and ambassador, a torn personality that takes on others by following her roots to their ancient river and rendering the stories she finds there song.

The Tigris River – the ancient river around which the play revolves – draws together all of history into the present and dissolves the present in the rhythm of all of history. The river runs “straight and fast” (10), and its movement between characters and through Iraq exists as a motif of connection and continuity. The river itself is a landmark of Mesopotamia, the birthplace of

civilization, and through it the past is rendered present. “Let me tell you,” shares the Mullaya, “I have walked across it / Qurna, Eridu, Ur / The Garden of Eden was here” (10). The history of humankind flows through Raffo’s stage, and through its waters float the Mullaya’s shoes and Layal’s brushes. “Huda’s books and newspapers line the river; they become Nana’s looted books and newspapers” (66) – the river unites everything, and no prop stands alone. Shared tangibly, as a prop – something used and felt, rather than just cognized – the river in *9 Parts of Desire* suggests something physical: perhaps a shared history of social injustice, a collective trauma, a common and current oppression, as felt and life-defining as the bomb-raid that forces Layal’s phone-call to escalate into a scream (50) and that the American cannot escape even though she can only watch it on T.V.

Beyond the way in which *9 Parts of Desire* fits into its wider histories, Raffo also collapses the time specific to her own narrative through lines within the Mullaya’s mourning chant, and also through the call to prayer. *9 Parts of Desire* opens with the dawn call to prayer, and Raffo’s introductory notes inform readers unfamiliar with the Islamic context that “*in Muslim countries the call to prayer is heard five times a day: at dawn, at midday, in the afternoon, at sunset, and finally when the sky becomes dark and daytime is over.*” Raffo then adds, “*The call to prayer is heard five times in the course of this play.*” The dawn call sounds, and the Mullaya walks in singing a traditional Iraqi song, “Che Mali Wali” (I have no Protector), and then opens the play with the lines, “Early in the morning / early in the morning / I come to throw dead shoes into the river” (9). Near the end of the play, the Mullaya will return, ending her chant – the “healing and effortless” half of the fractured language spiel (60) – with the lines, “late in the evening / late in the evening / I come to collect worn souls from the river” (62). She carries on for a few more lines, and then, “*We hear the fifth and final call to prayer. Darkness, it*



*is the end of the day's cycle*" – though Nanna will go on talking even in the darkness. *9 Parts of Desire* keeps its day undivided, single – and the rest of its structure supports that decision. As a text, it is a fast read – short in page length, lovely but not dense in description, and rapid in speech. It contains as much intensity as possible in a single day, undivided, as its actress contains as many women as possible in a single body.

The interludes in *9 Parts of Desire* are not only artistic and experimental, but also locate Raffo's characters culturally. The interludes are the quickest costume changes: one black abaya, or robe, is worn (or carried, or dropped) nine different ways to signify changes in character, and the calls to prayer are melodious, but enough in the background to be only briefly observed.

Umm Ghada, for example, pauses to acknowledge the midday call to prayer before continuing on her way to show her spectator the hole the United States bombed into the roof of a bomb shelter. The call to prayer, the metronome that measures the play, announces midday, and as the sun sinks, the lines that follow highlight frustration with Western imperialism and consider the future in terms of both hope and hopelessness. The language of their interludes – the use of the abaya and the resounding call to prayer – locates Raffo's characters culturally and historically.

The interludes call the women back into the context of their nation, and so also into a recollection of their nation's collective trauma.

Romanska notes a "profound sadness" about Raffo's women – "the sense of having been broken down...of time frozen in the moment of one's trauma" (211). Romanska then defines trauma as "a violent rupture in the social and psychological order that...alters an individual's concept of self and world" (214). Such a rupture is difficult to convey without risking giving on the one hand the impression that the women who have undergone this trauma are hopeless victims and on the other the impression that the trauma itself was less detrimental than it actually

was. Raffo presents successfully and sensitively navigates that tension by immediately juxtaposing Layal's howling fracture of the psyches that have been synthesized in hers and the Mullaya's soothing synthesis of what has been broken. Conscious of the need to strike a balance in which she neither belittles her characters by glossing over their resilience nor belittles their resilience by minimizing the forces they are up against, Raffo oscillates between the desires to synthesize that which has been fractured or made other, and to fracture the synthesized.

One theoretical term that helps describe how Raffo achieves both synthesis and fracture is "heteroglossia," a term for multi-voicedness first coined by Mikhail Bakhtin. When we hear a voice transform from one Iraqi woman's voice to another, we are better reminded of the complexities of individual story and the universality of the power of the voice – and the same is true of the transformation of languages. Layal's speech, while in English throughout, ends in Arabic: "*la ilaha illa allah*": there is no God but God. Raffo's glossary of Arabic terms tells us that the phrase is "the first half of the Muslim profession of faith," and is "also uttered upon witnessing or hearing of a sad or calamitous event." By witnessing such events in English throughout and ending in this not only Arabic but specifically Islamic refrain, Raffo's characters invite even their English-speaking audience to stand with them in their response to these tragedies despite the constructed obstacles.

The use of Arabic also collapses space. Segall points out that the Arabic interjections break the English – so what is left is the broken English of the outsider. Broken English is a travelling English, one that is both here and there – one that, again, collapses space. Memories, stories, and philosophies flesh themselves out in the single stage in which they are performed – and through this simultaneity of space, as through her simultaneity of language, Raffo transfers and transports. Space is something active and relevant: brimming with multiplicity, rather than

stagnating in the fate of the cliché. Perhaps Raffo is able to write this multiplicity into the country – or is, at least, aided in doing so – in part because of/by the “double-consciousness” Françoise Lionnet attributes to “the postcolonial, bilingual, and bicultural writer” because of the fact that she “lives and writes across the margins of different traditions and cultural universes” (26-7). The fact that *9 Parts of Desire* is a bilingual text contributes to its ability to enrich the English language via language games. For bilingual writers, argues postcolonial critic Saikat Majumdar, English is a “curious hybridity of experience and expression.” Raffo, as a bilingual writer, writes in what “the liminality of [that] position between alienness and familiarity” English holds in the hybrid writer’s life: her language “never quite [commits] itself to either [pole]” (6-30). Raffo blurs boundaries and draws attention to the multiplicity of life pulsing beneath every surface.

Gikandi links heteroglossia to what he deems “the doubleness of the postcolonial literary project” (419), citing as an example a poem by the Malawian poet David Rubadiri. Gikandi defines that doubleness as the need “to mark a space of local identity in the language of the other and to reroute the signifiers of colonialism” (419). Rubadiri’s poem – like Raffo’s play – is in English throughout, and only switches to Swahili for one line when the colonizer enters.

Gikandi interprets this strategy – the representation of the colonial event as an “alien invasion...nevertheless controlled through linguistic gestures” – as a “play of alienation and identification” through which “postcolonial difference [can] be inscribed” (420). Raffo’s switches between Arabic and English could be considered another instance of this same strategy. The moment before Layal announces her death, she prays in Arabic – “*la iaha illa allah*” (60) – and after Layal’s death, Mullaya cries “*Baba oh Baba*” – Father oh Father (61). These moments – of “alienation and identification” – allow for the inscription of “postcolonial difference.” At

the climax of her breakdown, Layal declares *I am not you, you are not a victim with me*. By performing difference, by linguistically enabling its inscription through heteroglossia, Raffo claims particularity and identity for the justice she demands. Her Western audience is no longer included, but implicated.

### **Part Six: Unity, Justice, and the Ontological Challenge of Différance**

Raffo's performance of difference also relates to Jaques Derrida's concept of *différance*, the idea that the present is the flickering between the past and the future, neither of which are realities capable of being present themselves. The trace "constitutes what is called the present by this very relation...to what it absolutely is not" (Derrida 287), and in *9 Parts of Desire*, the self is constituted, at least in part, by what it is not – that is, by its perceived "other." An interval must divide the present from what it is not and "divide the present in itself." The present is "irreducibly nonsimple" and the "primordial" is "non-primordial." A binary understanding of self and other cannot account for the separation and unity, sameness and difference, or presence and absence that his essay shows are always necessarily already there.

The identities of all nine of Raffo's characters will converge in Layal's breakdown before her death, and the live possibility of the same type of death already hollows each of them out beforehand. Even Layal's death, when it appears at the stage of presence, is hollowed out by the mark of Mullaya's presence: Layal asks Mullaya why she is there, though only one can appear on stage at a time, and once Layal is dead Mullaya, apparently present throughout, picks up her words and continues her fragmented speech in a healing tone. And when Mullaya's healing speech appears at the stage of presence, it in turn is hollowed out by the mark of Nanna's capitalistic looting ventures. Layal's art is subsumed into Mullaya's ritual, and then sold on

Nanna's street corner. Nanna can make a greater profit off of it because the artist is dead, so Layal's death and the mourning song that follows it are hollowed out by the fact that they will eventually be able to contribute to the change in monetary value that Nanna will use to her advantage.

More obvious in the performance is the way in which each instance of presence retains the mark of a past element. Most directly, Mullaya and Layal literally repeat words from past monologues, and following their speeches, Nanna's presence retains their trace. Her greedy words alone might seem unaffected by the Mullaya's mourning song, but her body is soaked from the water ritual that accompanied it. And earlier in the play, everything about Umm Ghada's soliloquy defines her personal experience of the present and her understanding about the future according to its relation to the past. Umm Ghada defines herself by her *kunya* – a name that typically “refers to a parent in relation to their first-born son.” Raffo's Arabic Glossary tells us it is “not common practice to take the name of a daughter” (70), but Umm Ghada does so anyway. She names her daughter Ghada, which means tomorrow, and so names herself “Mother of Tomorrow.” Umm Ghada haunts the Amiriyya bomb shelter, shows her witness the traces of the people who died there – “smoked figures”; “charred hand prints and footprints / from people who lay in the top bunks”; “a silhouette of a woman / vaporized from the heat”; and walls “stuck with hairs and skin” (31) – and says her daughter Ghada was among them. “All my family is here / so I am Umm Ghada, Mother of Tomorrow. / My full name is dead with them” (32). Her present self is defined by her future self – her daughter, Tomorrow – which in turn is defined by the past: the bombing that buried her. Umm Ghada lives at the site of her Tomorrow and its past-tense death, and commits her Mother-of-Tomorrow life to witnessing that past.

Derrida also rejects the idea of an origin story, and a similar project could be read into the beginning of Raffo's play. "This is the land between two rivers," says Mullaya about Iraq, before she notes the changes that have happened to its climate. "Where is the other river / more circular and slow?" she asks. "Where is anything they said would be here?" (Raffo 10). She laments that Iraq's "marsh lands are different / they've been diverted, damned and dried" (Raffo 11). The play takes place, for the most part, in the geographic location of so many origin stories, but the Mullaya laments that only the slightest trace of those storied lands remains – only one river of the paradise she says they were "promised" (Raffo 10). Promised implies both past and future, and that she is able to use it to describe the present is telling. She seems to believe that, if there ever were something unifying or primordial about her land, that factor has long since been damned and dried: its organic unity was promised, but never delivered. What links the nine characters is not a shared origin, which according to Derrida would only provide false comfort and a false teleology. What links them is not something prior – not the now-desert Eden of a false perception about Iraq – and Raffo's switch between characters does not rely on that initial unity which has already been proclaimed fictive. Rather, Raffo's switch between characters *is* what links them: the movement is the sameness which is difference.

Derrida's *différance* matters because it, like the implications of Raffo's experimental casting, challenges the very notion of alterity. His project is an ethical one. He deconstructs and so challenges metaphysical assumptions about the subject and its origins not in order to replace it, but because the process of reexamination is good in itself. A common critique of deconstruction is that it fails to actually go anywhere but only tears everything down and leaves. *9 Parts of Desire*, however, is proof that the act of deconstruction is enough. If a series of individual characters can only be said to be present because a trace of the characters they are not

constitutes them – if a character like Layal can only be recognized as present because something (a prop, a body, a phrase) of another character is now being used in a new way – and if it is only this shift (the change in the way that prop, body, or phrase is used) and not some shared origin that links these characters, then the thing that links them is also the thing that divides them, and oppression cannot be justified on the premise of either sameness or difference. Raffo challenges both the argument, “you are all the same, therefore you should adhere to the expectations of stereotypes and categorized roles” and the mentality, “you are different than me: you are not me: your problems do not concern me.”

When something false – for Butler, essentialist claims about gender; for Derrida, metaphysical assumptions about the subject and its origins – is accepted as an unquestioned truth and its construction is willfully forgotten, the result is often something harmful. When we deconstruct what is not benign – or when we present a harmful situation in such an experimental and subversive way that it probes others to deconstruct it – we shed light on injustices that have gained a normalized and forgotten status. *9 Parts of Desire* may not end with any specific action for its audience to march forward with, but its performance is itself an ethical act. It shares problems it does not have and does not pretend to have the solutions to, and it tells the audience that because there is no self-other binary, these problems are equally theirs. If a discourse of unity and synthesis can challenge that of division and binaries, and if the whole audience can take on the women’s struggle and resilience together, then what is happening in the theater or between the reader and the author is good in and of itself.

## **Part Seven: Revolution and Poetic Rupture**

Literary theorist Julia Kristeva draws from Derrida's poststructuralism and deconstruction the idea that, in the words of Kristeva scholar Elizabeth Grosz "power relations are immanent in intellectual and textual practices" because some terms are repressed, others privileged<sup>vi</sup> (Grosz 41). But Derrida's subject – and Kristeva's enunciative or "speaking subject" – can resist both language's structuring power and the power dynamic built into it via one or both of two textual strategies. The subject, in our case, Layal, can either force a text "to approximate its own unconscious" or inhabit a text "in order to push it to the limits of...intelligibility" (Grosz 41).

According to the production notes at the end of the play, these two strategies appear to be central to Raffo's project. All nine women inhabit Layal's final speech; and their voices make it nearly unintelligible. Layal plays with linguistic structure. She assembles "fragments of lines we have heard throughout the play," constructing her own language out of "the other characters' language" (65), and that nearly unintelligible new language forces the speech "to approximate its own unconscious" (Grosz 41). Layal, always strong as the embodiment of Iraq's women, "willfully explodes under the weight of the many women she has taken on. Her psyche fractures," she dies, and the apparent nonsense of the lines that precede her death – "And 200 more / waiting in line / risking everything to take my place / without my legs / buried in the backyard" – explode the text open, and approximate the fracture of Layal's overwhelmed psyche. And as Kristeva argues, there is power in that act of rupture.

Alongside Derrida's deconstructionism, Kristeva's claims are also founded in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory. Psychoanalysis works as a metaphor for language games, and a psychoanalytic interpretation of human consciousness parallels what happens to the language used to describe it. Lacan argues that "the subject is split." She is "located in both a conscious



and an unconscious agency” and so must face her own inability to know herself (Grosz 198). This subverts her ability to communicate truth, because she finds her identity “from being positioned in language as an ‘I.’” Raffo’s play complicates this system: the “I” of the actress is plural because she performs multiple characters, the “I” of each character is plural because Layal takes on all their consciences at once, and the concept of “I” altogether is plural, because we are hybrid beings. The audience, confronted with this ontological challenge, is forced to process the imposition of empathy this invitation into the semiotic entails.

From Lacan, Kristeva draws the idea that language is a structuring device, but the subject can also resist it. Kristeva nuances Lacan’s term subject to “speaking subject,” locates “the speaking subject and the poetic text” socio-historically and politically, and analyzes the ways in which poetic texts put subjectivity into question (Grosz 41-2). Like Butler, Kristeva and Lacan believe that there is no prior human (or, much less, Iraqi female) essence; that, through the construction of norms, taboos, and stereotypes, language can coerce people into behaving a certain way; and that people are capable of resisting such coercion. But theorists like Butler cannot account for *why* Raffo’s nine women are inherently able to resist – only *that* they can, and *how* they do so – so psychoanalysis, once amended by Kristeva, carries out the conversation.<sup>vii</sup>

Briefly: Kristeva contrasts a feminine, anarchic, non-signifying layer of language – “the semiotic” – with the masculine, categorical, signifying “symbolic.” The “threshold” between the two she deems the “thetic” (Grosz 42-9). The semiotic might be seen as life-as-is; and the symbolic as our linguistic attempt to unify all those conflicting tensions inherent to life. The symbolic is the language within which we usually communicate, but it depends on forced categories: like stereotypes of Iraqi women as virginal victims or exotic concubines. The speaking subject, Layal, is stable within the symbolic, but the “‘cost’ is the repression of the

semiotic” – that is, feminine silence (Grosz 49). Only the avant-garde text resists the symbolic’s imposed coherence; it is “a politically transgressive discourse that challenges the limits of representation” and shatters “the norms and conventions governing signification” (Grosz 51).

Layal’s identity is only stable so long as the semiotic does not transgress its boundaries. When it does, however – when the semiotic is provided expression in Layal’s speech – the result is a “breakdown of identity (psychosis), meaning and coherence (poetry), and sexual identity (perversion, fetishism)” (Grosz 48). When “symbolic components...exceed the boundaries and limits imposed in them,” they bring their “previous stability” to “a point of revolutionary rupture” (Grosz 49). In a process akin to Hegel’s dialectic, the confrontation between the symbolic and semiotic enables revolutionary change. Layal maintains stability until her components – the women she has taken on – exceed their boundaries and spill out into her sexual, subjective, and linguistic identities. Her words then break down into poetry, her singular identity breaks down into what Raffo calls a “split psyche,” and her sexual identity breaks down from its false unity into its inherent but repressed multiplicity.

### **Part Eight: The Psychological, the Poetic, and the Political**

The poetic deviations in the final speeches anticipate political ruptures, so inherent in Layal’s breakdown, there is a revolution. Layal’s subjective breakdown, in which her singular identity is broken into a split psyche, allows for this first collapse of the barrier between self and other. This subjective breakdown manifests itself as the collapse between multiple polarities, including American selfhood and the perception of the Iraqi as other.

Raffo describes her play as “a psychic civil war,” and says that her main character, Layal, embodies a larger political argument: “what liberation means for each woman and for Iraq.”

Raffo responds to her own torn community by embodying it, despite its tear, in her own physical self (65). In this, her role is akin to Layal's, who "begins the play embodying the stories of many Iraqi women as she works" by painting their faces – faces of raped women, suffering women – onto her own naked body. "I paint my body / but her body, herself inside me," she tells her audience. "So it is not me alone / it is all of us / but I am the body that takes the experience" (13) The body that takes the experience – whether it belongs to the actress or her character – lends her psyche to the (gendered) violence and injustice of her political circumstance, whether her psyche can handle it or not – and expresses her eventual psychological breakdown as poetic rupture. Layal's ruptured psyche expressed as a breakdown into fractured language anticipates a larger social rupture – one that collapses barriers between self and other, dissipates stereotypes about women and women's sexuality, and carries in its creative resistance a revolution of justice and that revolution's rallying cry.

Poetic and psychological breakdowns anticipate political breakdowns, and even if we consider the text without its context, it is inherently political in that it is avant-garde. Its "effects are political" because its "literariness consists in its *estrangement* from conventions" (Grosz 54); but though Kristeva would stop there in her analysis of modernity's avant-garde, our analysis of the postcolonial avant-garde takes us farther. By filling her speech with the other women's voices and her psyche with other women's trauma, Layal violates even the simplest definition of self and other – and because of the specific topics voiced and the specific traumas felt, Layal renders that violation political. The string of repeated lines Layal re-voices at the end is not a random amalgam of senseless or unrelated thoughts: it is a mosaic of fragments from testimonies about the Gulf War and the period of trauma surrounding it.

All nine voices and stories are present and remembered in Layal and the Mullaya's words, and even the isolated lines they echo stand not only for themselves but also for their characters' larger stories. "And 200 more / waiting in line / risking everything to take my place" recalls most directly Huda's specific statement about the Iraqi people/police force and the desire they've always had for liberation (51). But it also carries with it the broader sense of anger and frustration Huda walks with always as an overlooked Iraqi (versus Western-for-Iraqis) activist. In her first monologue, Huda tells us that she has her "doubts about American policy" but that she prefers its "chaos to permanent repression and cruelty / because Saddam was the worst enemy" (22). The tension of such conflicted politics, the memories of prison – lying naked like sardines on the floor (50) – and of the flight into exile, and the crude humor with which she copes with America butting into things so late in the game as if she and others had not fought and sacrificed everything for liberty themselves, all are present underneath Layal's nuanced version of her lines.

Layal changes the lines the same way she changes the women in her paintings: she chooses to be the body that takes the experience. "I am not the Amal he loved" (20) becomes "I am not the Layal he loved" (60), and "I'm fine I'm fine I'm" is no more true for Layal than it was for the pregnant Doctor. The Doctor's lament about her husband – and about all Iraqi men who have suffered as soldiers, and about all Iraqi women who must as consequence provide for too many and suffer the sickening thought of their husbands remaining deformed forever – shifts when Layal takes it on. "My husband he sits at home without his legs" (25), becomes in Layal's voice, "Without my legs" (60). Here, significantly, Layal even extends her body to take on the bodies of male soldiers: her reach is spreading, her empathy widening.

### **Part Nine: Multiplicity**

The second social rupture Layal's psychological breakdown predicts is one that dissipates stereotypes about women and women's sexuality. "God created sexual desire in ten parts," claims caliph Ali ibn Abu Taleb, whom Raffo cites in the opening pages before the script begins "then he gave nine parts to women and one to men." In some ways, Raffo subverts this quotation. The women she introduces own their own sexuality, but they are not over-sexed or solely defined by their sexuality. And if the proverb implies that because of that unequal distribution, morality deems necessary the imposition of extra repressive measures, Raffo's rebellious use of the abaya and heartbreaking testimonies of violence cut that notion short. In other ways, however, this quotation is subversive in its own right. It denies the stereotype that Iraqi women are sexless or virginal, and Raffo draws from it the idea of assigning nine roles – nine diverse testimonies of sexual desire, expressed by nine diverse women with agency – to one actress.

In Kristeva's psychoanalytic metaphor, Raffo's language is female sexuality – nine parts of human sexual desire – rendered word: multiple, ambiguous, fluid, and excessive. "In cracking the socio-symbolic order," asserts Kristeva, in "splitting it open, changing vocabulary, syntax, the word itself and releasing from beneath them the drives borne by vocalic or kinetic differences, jouissance works its way into the social" (*Revolution* 79-80). And because "musicalization pluralizes meanings" (*Revolution* 80), we see this penetrating potential of language best through poetry – the songs Raffo pulled from the testimonies. Raffo's songs establish rhythm, which, in the words of Jane Marcus, "facilitates a...revolution by privileging what is in excess of representation and meaning (the enigmatic, the feminine)" (81). By privileging poetry over meaning, Raffo lends expression to the semiotic; and in doing so she

confronts the norms upon which the symbolic depends. Raffo's avant-garde language destabilizes conceptions of certainty, expressing instead "libidinal, rhythmical, impulses which threaten the symbolic with what it must repress" (Grosz 55).

Raffo's deviant language – for example, her use of both English and Arabic – is both a subversion of the oppressive and a reconciliation of dichotomies. Because Raffo intertwines English and Arabic fluidly, her heteroglossia blurs the boundaries of language. And yet it also establishes those boundaries: at the interjection of Arabic, much of Raffo's Western audience is left with sound devoid – for them – of meaning. In other words, they are left with the libidinal, rhythmical impulses of the semiotic – the inherent multiplicity of the poetic chaos upon which the symbolic imposes coherence via its highly motivated, constructed rules. Layal's speech culminates in Arabic – "*yaboo yaboo*" – then, "I'm fine I'm fine I'm," then the fourth call to prayer, and then more Arabic: the thrice enunciated prayer, "*la ilaha illa allah*" (60). The Arabic phrases have meanings, but those meanings are inaccessible to much of Raffo's Western audience. Similarly, "I'm fine" has a meaning, but it is something false; after a pause, Layal announces, "I'm dead" (60).

The expression of the repressed requires a rupture of the layer repressing it – so violence and desire are intimately linked in both language and plot. "Language" argues Kristeva "is at the service of the death drive" (*Revolution* 70), and in the case of Layal's breakdown, both plot and language hinge on tensions of death and desire, sacrifice and *jouissance* (pleasure expressed in multiplicity<sup>viii</sup>). The nine-in-one character feels the suffocation of systems she cannot deny even in her defiance, and so winds up dead. Yet despite her end as Layal, she is resurrected as the Mullaya. She escapes the fate of these systems – even of death – because the Mullaya engages her project and continues her breath. The Mullaya carries on Layal's language of assembly

according instead to her own calm rhythm; she “carefully picks up these broken pieces of language and builds a greater and celebratory whole from them” (65).

The scattered assemblage of images torn from other parts of the play, pieced together in grammatically shattered phrases are at once both shorn fragments and a shared breath. They announce Layal’s death and yet unite so many women’s bodies/voices/experiences/songs in one; they are cracked and broken and yet pulse with so much life. In an earlier monologue, Layal confronts her liberal, Western, feminist visitor, conceding that yes, she – the friend – might love women like Layal, but, she continues,

“you hate us too  
because you cannot breathe  
because women here, we are not free –  
you are not free, you love too much.  
It’s the same, all, anywhere you live  
if you love like an Iraqi woman  
if you love like you cannot breathe.” (Raffo 36)

Layal links the idea of breath with that of intimacy. Luce Irigaray writes similarly of breath, concluding that its link to human sexual desire is part of why we understand desire so poorly. If desire is ultimately tied “to the soul, to the breath” (*Between East and West* 82), then attempts at solely corporeal embrace will never eradicate that hunger (84). “Most women they must be so hungry” muses Layal, “because they love with such a sacrifice” (35). Iraqi women cannot breathe – not because they are oppressed, but because they love deeply: because central to their identity is the hunger of desire.

Layal especially describes her identity in terms of desire. Stories of corrupted desire – the tragedies to which her paintings attest – live inside her (14), she is “crazy” and “hungry” for love, and she will “risk everything for it” (34). Her language bursts with jousissance and multiplicity. Its musicality blurs boundaries, transgresses norms, and ultimately ruptures the

symbolic with the intrusion of the semiotic. The function of poetry, according to Kristeva, is “to introduce through the symbolic that which works on, moves through, and threatens it” (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 81), and in these women’s songs, the orderly and static are worked on and through until rendered fluid and phantom – strange enough that we cannot help but confront the injustices once hidden therein.

### **Conclusion: How Does the Breakdown Serve as a Call to Justice?**

Judith Butler, Susan Friedman, Chandra Mohanty, and Riverbend help elucidate the element of performed identity/feminism, and Simon Gikandi, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva reveal the revolutionary power latent in avant-garde texts. Butler argues that identity (gender identity, the spectrum of identities that constitute the feminist movement) is always performed; Friedman, that we are all hybrid beings; Mohanty, that though we must advocate for transnational feminism, we must do so thoughtfully and critically; and Riverbend, that Iraqi feminism predates the American occupation. Gikandi highlights ways in which postcolonial texts adapt modernist avant-garde techniques; Derrida lays out the deconstructionist framework of *différance* from which Kristeva draws; and all of these theories culminate in Kristeva’s, which unpacks the political rupture constituted by poetic deviations like Raffo’s.

Throughout the play, Raffo’s skeptical performances of gender subvert and shatter damaging stereotypes like the ones highlighted by Edward Said. Similarly, her skeptical performances of power subvert the widespread Western narratives of gifted feminism and gifted liberation which Riverbend critiques in favor of memories like Huda’s. And her skeptical performances of space bridge the gap between the postcolonial and the avant-garde. What Raffo



subverts through these performances, she replaces with a model of individual hybridity and collective diversity.

The nine-characters-in-one-actress nature of the play and its culmination as the nine-voices-in-one-character speech challenge what it means to be not only “other” but even individual at all. The play as a whole challenges our most deep-rooted and even relatively apolitical ontological assumptions (this is one person, this is another), and the especially concentrated power of Layal’s speech pushes that challenge into the political and applicable realm. Raffo does not allow her audience to sit with the stereotypes, taboos, and norms that have been consciously established to enforce an oppressive agenda, but rather breaks down the system in which they are stable. This is where Kristeva comes in. The stereotypes and stories Raffo seeks to transgress are stable within the symbolic, so to fully uproot them she must rupture the symbolic and grant expression to the semiotic. She achieves this in Layal’s final breakdown.

Layal’s speech breaks down from narrative into poetry, her psychological state breaks down from stable individuality into unstable heterogeneity, and the lens through which we view her – once composed of accepted categories and expectations – shatters so that we must approach her as she is, so that we must approach every diverse and inherently hybrid Iraqi woman as she individually is. Layal’s sexual identity breaks free from the constraints of the now-ruptured system to express its inherent multiplicity, her prayer breaks free from the now-exploded expectations of English to express her inherent multi-voicedness, and the category of Iraqi Women is shattered into its infinitely diverse components. And from these “broken pieces of language” the Mullaya then “builds a greater and celebratory whole” that accounts for “the resilience, ambitions, warmth, humor, integrity and the ancient history of the Iraqi women” in Raffo’s play (Raffo 65-7).

Iraqi women face many cruel injustices which continue to make it into Western media, so Raffo's project will always be relevant. It would be naïve to assume that a shift in language could solve everything, but it does carry some important weight. Of some recent, gendered violence committed by ISIS specifically in Iraq, for instance, UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict Zainab Bangura stated that "the resilience and ability of these women to build back their lives would help 'strip victory away' from the militants." Their resilience, continues Bangura, quoted by Ishaan Tharoor in *The Washington Post*, could be its own "kind of vengeance" because it is "precisely what [the Islamic State] does not want." A shift in our discourse – away from stereotypes and towards a recognition of resilience and diversity – could reinforce the fact of Iraqi women's agency, which has time and time again been the very thing oppressors have sought to take from them. Without conflating ISIS and Saddam's regime or the American occupation, it is important to note that neither are a-historical events, but rather sub-points of a larger trajectory. As Segall puts it, "Women's bodies are often caught in the crossfire of historical violence from dictatorship to occupation to civil war and its recent manifestation in ISIS – yet throughout we see women's resistance."<sup>ix</sup> The delimiting language of stereotypes still skews the way Western media present current events, but there has always been and will always be evidence of Iraqi women's resistance and agency. And by destabilizing the language system within which Western media operate, Raffo demands that such resistance be acknowledged. She destabilizes that system through Layal's poetic breakdown, which predicts a social rupture and carries in its creative resistance a revolution of justice and its rallying cry.

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## Appendix

### **On Faith and Learning:**

I grew up as a pastor's kid in a Presbyterian church, and while I still appreciate much of the theology professed by the PC(USA) denomination, many of my beliefs no longer align with those in which I was raised. My understanding of human depravity and the brokenness of the "fallen world," in particular, is no longer in keeping with what I learned in Sunday school. I think all creatures, including humans, are innately beautiful, not depraved, and I often lean towards disassociation with Christianity as a whole because it is so important to me that my paradigm not be one obsessed with human failure. What I cannot deny, however, is that living beings around the world are *suffering*, and that that is not something I want to attempt to beautify. That is brokenness, if I may reclaim the word: not that we are inclined towards evil, but that we suffer injustice, and that suffering is not *right*. The world as a whole is "fallen" because someone is suffering, and we are all connected.

Because of that, I cannot understand faith except in the context of justice. I claim as my heroes compassionate hearts like Heather Raffo because even if they express more doubt than a suburban pastor, their holy anger isn't over petty morality judgments – it's about people dying who don't have to. My project circulates around brokenness in that sense of the word because that is what I care about and that is where I see literary scholarship fitting into the discussion of faith and learning. There is something beautiful in poetry and in humanity and in life, but there is also something broken – not evil, but suffering – and I started this project in order to explore the way in which writing can serve not only as testimony to suffering, but also as an act of justice. That is why I am so in love with Raffo and Kristeva. Kristeva's idea that poetry can

actively transgress systems that reinforce suffering gives me hope, and Raffo's play is a beautiful instantiation of that kind of literary justice.

I was partially interested in researching this subject because it is in poetry and acts of social justice (which I consider Raffo's play to be) that I find assurance for my faith when I have it. I understand God the way I understand poetry and avant-garde artistry – meaning that I find something echoic of God's paradoxical nature (God's nature as I understand it) in the energy that bursts through the meaningless and the strange. When something is formed just so, and can be understood and appreciated in the context of its success, that's nice – but when something absolutely should not hold the power and potential that it somehow still does, that (in my mind) is a hint that something Else might possibly live in the space of its disconnect. I am fascinated by the energy and purpose with which apparent meaninglessness can be charged, and I am specifically looking at Raffo's play because the end of it hit me like a punch to the gut despite the fact that, on the surface, it appears to be little more than a breakdown into meaningless rambling. There is something there, within that rambling, but that quality does not immediately make sense in any typical intellectual category – and we would be missing out if we dismissed it too quickly solely because of its evasiveness there. And the same is true, for me, of God. When things make too much sense, I start to doubt, but when there is some element that you just have to sit with because it strikes in a way that can't immediately be categorized, that feels somehow, to some degree, indicative of divinity. And that isn't anti-intellectual – that's poetry.

I grew up in a Christian family. Between my dad's sermons, the youth group messages, and the general lack of rhythm that kept our congregation from a more enthusiastic form of worship (like, you know, *clapping*), my church experience was a self-identified “intellectual” one. My youth pastor, Tato, once told me that he gears his ministries around an intellectual

understanding of the Bible not because that's superior in any way, but because he's seen so many students turn away from God the second they no longer feel God's presence bringing them to tears or shouts of joy. Conceptually, I should appreciate this, and there are so many ways I could see a (relatively) open-minded logician like my dad – or the child he raised – thriving in the world of academia. It was his graciously-expressed differentiation from the conservative norm on subjects like the creation account as metaphor and women's pastoral rights that first encouraged me to think about my faith with greater skepticism – but there was still something about that take on intellectualism that felt defensive, even compliant.

I think the issue, or at least insofar as it resonated with me, was that our church never really embraced academia, but rather debate. We were hounded on the importance of being able to “defend” our faith and interpret the Bible “correctly.” It was a beautiful thing in that I had the chance to read the works of incredible theologians that my current theology-major friends are only just jumping into, but we weren't reading them in search of truth, but in search of proof for the truth we already thought we knew. Since starting at SPU, however, I have changed my mind about so much of that truth – which is fine, except that, as someone who was once able to win any theological debate and who knew all the proofs behind her position, it can be hard to explain the ways in which my current faith-and-doubt-state is still intellectually engaged, rather than some sort of mere pendulum swing into stupefied awe (or stupidity, as the old-me might have deemed it). For instance, I now accept that there are things in this world that are sad while remaining convinced of human beauty, which means that I must live with a large degree of ambiguity: something that is oftentimes misinterpreted. I recently tried to explain what I believe in a job interview for a position at a church and had it paraphrased back to me as “seeking God relationally, rather than theologically, and acting, rather than thinking.” I didn't like that. My

faith is not just a vague feeling, but an intellectual commitment to beliefs – one of which just happens to be the necessity of living with ambiguity.

I also believe in beauty, selflessness, poetry, social justice, empathy, love, and story. I love the “more-than” of the Romantic Sublime and think about faith in terms of a Coleridge-style *ecstasis* – a stepping outside of oneself to appreciate beauty. I believe in highly valuing the “other,” am convinced of our human interdependence, and feel a strong imperative to fight for social justice. And though I don’t know where others are coming from, I feel they’re inherently beautiful and know they’re incredibly valued – so I value the role of story. To tell one’s story – and to read someone else’s – is so powerful because it replaces assumptions with revelations, empathy, and eventually – hopefully – justice. By engaging literature, we can better understand – and therefore better serve – those we might otherwise judge, so literary scholarship is a tool for living out one’s commitment to justice (or, if that commitment stems from this, one’s faith).

Another reason I love literature has to do with the way we interact with it, and anyone who understands that engagement can start to see where I stand in my dilemma of awe, ambiguity, and intellectualism. In high school, the bulk of my peers considered a certain accusation – that English teachers read more into a novel than the author ever did – among the wittiest of memes. Even in high school, I disagreed. Authors don’t necessarily blueprint every chain of symbols or every implication of metaphor or name or simple word beforehand, but at the same time, they are, at least subconsciously, aware that those connections and connotations exist. There is profound truth in metaphor, so even if it’s something that an author didn’t necessarily sculpt out perfectly for a moral’s sake, that connection exists in the world (and thus in the story) because there is a truth in it. In *Wisdom & Metaphor*, poet Jan Zwicky writes that that connection is “a way of expressing insights whose form prevents expression” within the



rules of our current language game. The only way we can express certain more-than truths within our language (the basic structure of which is non-metaphorical) is to lean on the “implied ‘is not’ in a metaphor” so that we can glimpse through it to the “is” of that connection. Those connections *exist*, but even as we write them out, we concede that they are not “what is.” To say Raffo’s image of a painting bartered off for next to nothing *is* the plight of a prostitute or the oppression of a country or a cry for justice is also to say that it is *not actually* that – but that doesn’t mean the connection isn’t supposed to be (or simply isn’t) there.

And so we engage with a text that is that incredibly loaded and yet that incredibly empty (reliant on so many empty spaces of implied is-not’s) the same way that I engage with God. Every word in a poem and every grouping of words and every detail of meter and grammar and rhyme are loaded with a thousand and one connotations and voices and scenes, and yet never serve as simple/perfect allegory to any one of these. So although we cannot say that A obviously means B and etc., we can say there is a connection between those two things for a reason. And although there are a thousand and one other connections floating in the back of our brain once we read a word, we don’t consciously give attention to each of those things, but rather allow them to exist as the more-than quality of that word – a sort of soup that connects it to everything else. We engage with the text before us, and although vaguely aware of that more-than soup, any attempt to really catalogue its components would oversimplify them, since they exist *as a soup*, swirling around in dialogue with all the other implications. Attention to the more prominent of the connections informs and illuminates, but as a whole what is more important is the text before us.<sup>x</sup>

It is not anti-intellectual to accept this dynamic in literature, and it shouldn’t have to be so in faith, either. We don’t oversimplify the world by refusing to understand things except in

relation to themselves, but we also accept that the whirl of the ideas and energies connected to our experiences is one we can't break down into easy allegory, either. More-than knowing, whether in regards to literature or faith, isn't a way to back out of academic discussion but is instead a reality of perspective to keep in mind while we examine tiny, focused parts of spirit and metaphor. We can touch on them and in so doing illuminate something about what we have, but all the while we must remember that ultimately those connections veer into the realm of the infinite; they are so much more than what our language can express.

In their essay, "Instinctive Response as a Tool for the Scholar" – the fourth essay from their book *Scholarship & Christian Faith: Enlarging the Conversation* – Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen apply this type of knowing to art criticism, arguing the need to rethink the scholarly tendency to devalue the emotional response. They believe that a synthesis of the instinctive with the considered provides results more resonant, freed from the didactic (Jacobsen 147). The scholar is not to embrace more-than knowing as "an alternative to intellectual engagement," but in order to land on "a richer understanding" (Jacobsen 137). My understanding of faith and scholarship is an artistic understanding: one based on poetry and integration. In an essay entitled *Scholarship Reconsidered*, Ernest Boyer relates this concept as the blurring of boundaries.

Boundaries blur for me in (and also between) both faith and poetry because those connections are inherently *there* whether I recognize them or not, and what is beautiful is that I have the opportunity to respond and analyze the implications of those connections without having to deny them in any sort of expected, left-brained, categorical sense.

But this response can still sometimes feel too abstract when I remember that real people are still physically suffering. I would love for my life to really help people – for it to resemble someone like Paul Farmer's in terms of selflessness and service – but I know that academia

could only help me get there. I still sometimes struggle to see exactly how, but I know that there must be some promise for the poor in literary scholarship. Even Paul Farmer is effective not only because he acts, but because he can think and connect and respond. Anthropological metaphor informs the logic behind what he does and keeps him open to the counterintuitive realities that constantly slap him in the face (sustainable technology can mask a lack of generosity, a commitment to a greater number of people can deter nurses capable of more from pouring into the individuals in front of them) and I guess I believe that the cultivation of empathy and open paradigms that literary scholarship is so adept at could similarly carry over to more tangible aid realms as well.

Even while I know I need to help in more immediate ways, I strongly believe that literature and literary scholarship can contribute to the cause of justice. There is something uniquely humanizing in a life immersed in the more-than of the human connection found in metaphor, or in a career committed to poetic understanding, and that matters, and can do something to help. Or, at the very least, it can do something (through testimony, through avant-garde rupture) to help people to understand each other in the best of lights – to recognize the beauty and pain of the other, and perhaps even the systems and norms that contribute to their oppression – and that new lens can make all the difference.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Norms – traits and actions perceived as socially acceptable – assert and reassert the power of those they privilege. Taboos – traits and actions perceived as socially unacceptable – punish those who do not fit the norms. And stereotypes – the association of certain peoples with certain traits and actions, acceptable or not – dehumanize individuals and deny the diversity of groups. By linking together diverse people based on "similarities" that are not observed, but assumed or even inflicted, stereotypes provide a false foundation upon which we continue to construct oppressive systems of norms and taboos that privilege the stereotyper at the expense of the stereotyped.

<sup>ii</sup> Raffo's glossary tells us that *ammu* means, "uncle" in Arabic.

<sup>iii</sup> *Habiti* means "My darling, I love you."

<sup>iv</sup> Elizabeth Grosz defines "avant-garde" as "the transgressive and code-breaking symbolic and representational systems (within [various] arts)." Some like Kristeva require of the category a historical context (post World War II), but the term may also refer "more generally to experimental, innovative, subversive, representational practices...which refuse the historically relative norms or conventional forms of representation" and "embark on various experiments and procedures to break down these conventions" (xiv)

<sup>v</sup> Though not behind U.S. policy "100 percent," Huda prefers the chaos of the war to the "permanent repression and cruelty" of Saddam Hussein's regime. I describe her as feeling "almost" hopeless because in accepting America's war and its chaos she does not express the same confidence she has shown in the past. Things are so bad, she will accept any solution, even one that far from ideal.

<sup>vi</sup> Terms and structures we generally conceive of as normal actually exist (at all times) in a co-dependent relationship with their abnormal counterparts, so if we subvert language to focus on those counterparts, we draw attention to that co-dependence. In Derrida's terms, the normative and the non-normative bring each other into existence, and the deconstruction of the expected pattern brings to our attention that mutuality and so forces us to acknowledge that two things swim beneath a surface we might otherwise assume to be singular (Derrida cited in Grosz xv).

<sup>vii</sup> Kristeva uses psychoanalytic theory to explain both language systems and the people using them. Though in some ways she critiques Freud, she also pulls heavily from even his more misogynistic claims. Much of psychoanalysis is generally considered outdated; so while I consider Kristeva's semiotic/unconscious versus symbolic/conscious dialectic to be an excellent metaphor for ruptures in language systems, I do not agree that the same system affects the authors. Thus, while Kristeva exclusively considers avant-garde texts written by men, whose stable position within the symbolic (which women never have) allows them to subvert it, I do not hesitate to consider Raffo equally capable. Perhaps it is a matter of context – Kristeva is writing in the 60's; Raffo in the 90's – but whether psychoanalysts would argue that women have more stability as subjects now or not, my point is that I do not consider women to (ever have) be(en) literally constrained to psychoanalytic choices. Female authors do not have to either accept castration or gain stability through male identification, even if something similar could be said to be happening on a textual level; so Raffo can subvert the symbolic in the same way that men can.

<sup>viii</sup> Or, still loosely: orgasmic pleasure that transgresses Freud's pleasure principle – which addresses the tendency to seek through discharge "the lowest possible level of tension" (Sheridan, in Lacan, 1977a, x, cited in Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, xix).

<sup>ix</sup> Segall, Kimberly. Personal Interview. 27 May 2015.

<sup>x</sup> Since writing my statement of faith sophomore year, I have learned that that soup is basically the differential relations between signs in Saussure's representational system. But metaphors are nice, so there you go.