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Humorous, Satirical Dialogue Created by American Women Writers in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century and in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century

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HUMOROUS, SATIRICAL DIALOGUE CREATED BY AMERICAN
WOMEN WRITERS IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE NINETEENTH
CENTURY AND IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Title: Humorous, Satirical Dialogue Created by American Women Writers in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century and in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century

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This study considers American women's use of satirical humorous dialogue for subversive political discourse, highlighting gender disparity that occurred across socioeconomic strata and ethnicities in America during the second half of the nineteenth century and the second part of the twentieth century. While highlighting humorous satire as the mode that is used by the women considered in this study when confronting gender inequality, there is a comparison of similar contentions addressed by feminists in the second part of the nineteenth century and feminists in the second half of the twentieth century. Because each writing represents subversive social discourse in a specific social context, Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic imagination and Marxist feminism bring a theoretical perspective to the study. The feminist voices included in this study are those of Harriet Jacobs, E.D.E.N. Southworth, Marietta Holley, Julia Alvarez, Olive Hershey, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Sojourner Truth, Fanny Fern, Erma Bombeck, Estela Portillo Trambley, Alice Childress, Frances Harper, Emily Dickinson, Phoebe Cary, Judith Viorst, Sandra Cisneros, and Nikki Giovanni. That women are given minimal inclusion in American satire anthologies is the reason for the suggestion that a new anthology needs to be produced—one that represents, more equally, men's and women's satire.

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No written work is ever acceptable without a good editor, so I thank my editor, Carol Christopher. Her patience and kindness are greatly appreciated.

Thankfully, my two children, Brent and Amber, did not allow me to wavier from my goal: writing for women who do not have such an opportunity. I also thank my granddaughter Miranda because of her sense of humor and wit, which encouraged me to move forward with my work. She is the one I hope will someday read my work and continue in her grandmother's love for the acquisition of knowledge.

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CHAPTER ONE
A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE OF HOW LANGUAGE IS USED
TO SUBVERT AUTHORITATIVE DISCOURSE

According to conventional wisdom, American women writers in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century wrote in genres that dealt, appropriately and stereotypically, with sentimentality and domesticity. Also, overt, emotive poetry written by women, for women, was viewed as the accepted norm for women to pen and to read. Although many women authors of prose and poetry accommodated public expectations and publication constraints, numerous American women writers embedded subversive, humorous, satirical passages within the preferred sentimental genre. In fact, well-respected women authors and poets, especially in the last decades of the nineteenth century, wrote appropriately in sentimental genres, yet purposefully fractured the genre by creating satirically humorous dialogue for the subversive purpose of challenging patriarchal constricted gender roles.

However, because readers may not be aware of the political purpose of embedded satirical passages within sentimental and/or domestic writings, those passages may be noted only as humorous dialogues or episodes, with the intended serious political message being missed. Not only do women's rebellious humorous, satirical dialogues appear in writings deemed as sentimental or camouflaged as such; there are also works by women writers in which they dare to construct overt, witty dialogue that destabilizes conventional romantic ideas, writings such as *My Opinions*

and Betsey Bobbet's by Marietta Holley, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* by Julia Alvarez, "The Health Card" by Alice Childress, "Dorothy's Dower" by Phoebe Cary, and "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" by Emily Dickinson. Whether literary women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries chose to disrupt sentimental writing with furtive, humorous, satirical dialogue or whether some attacked romanticized ideas more unambiguously with their satire, the idea that they chose subversive humor not only for the humorous effect but also for political reasons, that is, to endorse socioeconomic advancement for marginalized American women, is a focus of this study.

The use of dissident, humorous, satirical dialogue within American women's writings aligns with the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's theory in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, in which he argues that, with dialogue, "languages do not exclude each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways," concluding that there is no absolute monologue but rather competing discourses about a subject (291). When languages intersect and an authoritative voice is challenged, the conceded premise that language is controlled completely by the male gender or a specific, hegemonic group becomes questionable. As Edward Said indicates in *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, there is a difference "between a flexible subject and a completed object" (193-94). A text, a "completed object," can be challenged, but the object itself can be considered non-malleable; whereas a subject that instigates a text can be interpreted from various perspectives, which can lead to the idea that language about a subject is not controlled by one specific sector of writers. Women who engender humorous, satirical dialogue within their works of literature prove that a subject, such as patriarchal ideas created by language, can be interpreted differently. An

authoritative group's psychological understanding of a subject, acknowledged through language, can be turned back on itself through women's humorous satire.

Appropriating Bakhtin's theory to the exegeses of the literature considered in this dissertation, I assert that language is not exclusively controlled by the male gender or members of the Anglo American culture. More specifically, humorously satirical dialogue employed by the women writers included in this literary study proves that language can be fluid and can be utilized to subvert authoritative language, while simultaneously signifying a need to alter the discriminatory social and economic practices scripted for most American women during the late nineteenth century and the latter part of the twentieth century.

Because the women's literature presented in this research attacks hegemonic patriarchal-capitalist ideas and practices, Marxist feminism, which promotes the concept that concrete social conditions determine consciousness, is included in my study. In "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism," Heidi Hartmann establishes that "many Marxists typically argue that feminism is at best less important than class conflict," demeaning the "predicament of women" within a patriarchal-capitalist society (97-98). Though there is a de-emphasis on women in Marxism, with an appropriate backlash from feminist criticism, a blending of Marxism and feminism is a must when analyzing women's socioeconomic subordination within the material world, as Hartmann argues:

Both marxist [sic] analysis, particularly its historical and materialist method, and feminist analysis, especially the identification of patriarchy as a social and historical structure, must be drawn upon if we are to

understand the development of western capitalist societies and the predicament of women within them. (97-98)

However, as Rosemary Hennessy states, “The notion of women as the oppressed group and men as the oppressors is problematic at least in part because not all women share a common oppression” (“Class” 58). Moreover, because Marxist feminism theorizes that racism is a product of a patriarchal, capitalistic society and because inequalities produced by patriarchy are not constructed for one specific group of American women, recognizing the differences among American women, that is, the different classes, ethnicities, socioeconomic particulars, and specific social contexts, is a significant element of this study. I have also made a conscious endeavor to include a representation of female voices of various ages because the ideology and practices of patriarchal capitalism impacts all ages.

Though the myriad of specific differences among women are infinite and impossible to address in one study, I deem it significant to choose the satirical humor of women who represent diverse identities, especially since respected scholars such as Nikki Giovanni and Gloria Anzaldúa have both noted that the voices of women of color have gone unrecognized by too many white scholars. The inclusion of minority women’s writings is not a gesture of tokenism, refuting the idea of tokenism asserted in *This Bridge Called My Back*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, but rather a true attempt to acknowledge the importance of diverse literary voices, especially the voices of non-middle-class women of color, because such voices are as significant to the time periods focused on in this study as are the Anglo voices of America. Inclusion of diverse voices provides a better understanding of the socioeconomic differences that

women of color and Anglo women were satirizing during the periods when the first feminist movement and the second feminist wave took place. Furthermore, because both of the women's movements were interested predominately in middle-class, white women's equality, and not of women of color, my emphasis on multi-cultural women's voices of America reinforces the Combahee River Collective argument that "[e]liminating racism in the white women's movement is by definition for white women to do" ("A Black Feminist Statement" 69). Thus the works of prose and poetry included in this dissertation have been carefully chosen because they provide a symbolic spectrum of American women's oppressive experiences.

Additionally, the works of literature in this study cannot be analyzed as texts without authors or as works disconnected from their social contexts because they have been written for social and economic subversive purposes. As Maggie Humm maintains in "Marxist-Feminist Criticism," "To speak of literature and life as two separate phenomena is, for Marxist-feminists, a meaningless distinction" (72). Likewise, as argued by Terry Eagleton in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, literature can be considered an element of a society's superstructure; however, such an association does not constitute literature as "the passive reflection of the economic base" (9).

Concurrently, satirical literary works, such as the ones discussed in this research, can play an active role in promoting change, as Matthew Hodgart establishes: "Satire at all levels must entertain as well as try to influence conduct" (*Satire* 20). Accordingly, from a Marxist-feminist perspective, women writers not only represent their social-historical context, consciously incorporating its ideologies into their texts, but feminist authors and poets who produce humorous satire wish to reconstruct the stifling

ideologies for women living in a specific social context. Their creative works also appropriate Humm's postulation that it is through work that "people construct and change their material and imaginative worlds" (72). Politically progressive women writers, as those who are considered in this study, do not possess a sense of false consciousness where they "absorb uncritically" the dominant class's ideals, as argued by Josephine Donovan in "Feminism and Marxism" (67). They instead speak with satirical humor their oppositional thoughts about such hegemonic ideas, which, according to Marx in *German Ideology*, controlling ideologies "are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships" (qtd. in Donovan 67). Moreover, the women reformulate those "ideal" expressions in their creative works, proving that society is a truly constructed product that can be changed. They use their satirical dialogue to expose the status quo as "ridiculous or wicked or repulsive," just as other satirists for centuries have done, as indicated in *The Power of Satire* by Robert C. Elliot (111). They strategically integrate humorous, satirical dialogue in their works by expressing the truth through the parody of patriarchal language, while concurrently destabilizing yet not directly attacking authoritative ideals and practices. Their crafted, humorous, satirical dialogue intersects with the voice of authority, representing a tenet of Bakhtin's theory: language is not exclusively the voice of a dominating class.

In fact, there is nothing exclusive, absolute, or unmodifiable about one's use of language. For Bakhtin, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, "All words uttered in everyday life, no less than half belong to someone else" (339). When individuals are involved in conversations, they sometimes paraphrase, summarize, or quote another, putting another's words into one's own verbal interpretation, making language half the original

speaker's and half that of the one who paraphrases, summarizes, or quotes the original (339-40). Or, as Julia Kristeva succinctly points out in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, "Dialogism is inherent in language itself" (67-68). Whether language is oral or written, dialogism occurs because of the oral or written linguistic sign's relation to other voices, either distant or concurrent. The social dynamics of an individual can influence one to have a unique interpretation of what is being said, which is evidenced by the women's voices brought forth in my critique of their humorous, satirical dialogue.

Regardless of gender, ethnicity, class, and social status, which can include illiteracy or literacy, people have oral discussions and/or written responses to what others talk about and write about; hence, language, specifically authoritative language, can be contested and adapted by any gender or ethnic group, with a possible consequence of empowerment through language. For Bakhtin, conversations or writings can produce judgments "full of transmissions and interpretations of other people's words" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 338). With discourse, written and oral, according to Bakhtin, one can put authoritative words into "a new situation in order to wrest new answers from it, new insights into its meanings" (346), demonstrated by the women writers highlighted in this dissertation. Continuing with Bakhtin's argument, authoritative diction, representing "political power, an institution, a person," is thought to be the internally persuasive voice that encourages citizens to abide by the ideology of authority (343). However, when thought begins to work independently and/or "struggle with other internally persuasive discourses," as evidenced by the humorous, satirical dialogue addressed in this study, the dominant language begins to cease being

“internally persuasive,” a parallel to the earlier reference to Said’s idea that the subject of any text can be addressed from different perspectives (*Beginnings: Intention and Method* 345). When one humorously satirizes the diction that manifests controlling ideologies and practices, those hegemonic ideas are viewed through a different lens, which, for some, can cause the privileged language to lose its persuasive power.

From a Marxist-feminist point of view and from Bakhtin’s theory, languages in literature represent the material world. More precisely, dialogues in literature can be considered the symbolic representation of true social utterances, a “verbal artistic representation” of authentic heteroglossia (*Dialogic Imagination* 332). Writers do not simply plagiarize people’s conversations but rather artistically create an image of language through what Bakhtin coined the hybridization of languages, which is “a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor” (358). Hybridization not only generates an image of authentic dialogue of the material world, but there can be a “collision between two different points of views [sic] on the world” in one utterance, which is what occurs when feminist writers parody an authoritative voice (360). When the women writers establish their humorous satirical dialogues, they employ the hybridization of languages, taking the accepted authoritative belief identified in a dialogue and subverting it by using a satirical tone, parodying the words that represent hegemonic ideals and/or actions. According to Hodgart, when satire is used, double language occurs like a mime reproducing his [her] victim’s gestures, which in turn, “reduces his [her] victim to a lower order of being” (121).

Analogous to Hodgart's idea, but not as harshly stated, is Bakhtin's theoretical perspective that when parody is utilized, the "intentions of the representing discourse are at odds with the intentions of the represented discourse," which leads to a subdued represented discourse while the languages intersect with one another (*Dialogic Imagination* 364). When one parodies another voice, the dominant language is objectified, reducing its potency, while the parodist's play on words becomes empowered (360). All the American women writers considered in this research use parody as a political agent to contest the socially constructed language of authority, and through their use of double language, they consciously create a verbal duel between their political views and the views they wish to subvert.

The women who dared to use satirical language knew that the language of one can be "an exposé to destroy" the language of another (*Dialogic Imagination* 364), proving that the supposed official language can actually be deemed as unofficial—a satirically humorous thought in itself. Although one might sense an undertone of negativity concerning the need for a dominant language to be subverted by parody, the implementation of parody can inadvertently produce a positive tone and outcome. As Joseph A. Dane claims in "Parody and Satire: A Theoretical Model," satire can, paradoxically, be understood as making "a positive statement despite its essential negativity" (147). To parody patriarchal diction for the purpose of improving the social and economic status of American women can be viewed as an affirmative, not a negative.

Complementing the idea that humorous satire can be conceived as a positive is the practice of carnivalization of authority. As explained by Bakhtin in *Problems of*

Dostoevsky's Poetics, during medieval European carnivals, all hierarchical barriers, along with “the laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary,” are suspended (122). Social inequalities are superseded with “*a new mode of interrelationship between individuals*” where people are free to express themselves and carnivalize the ruling class (123). In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin affirms that “during carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom” (7), allowing people to enter a realm of “community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (9). Carnival time allows a chance for “change and renewal” (10), a time for the serious official languages to be replaced with the “nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world,” building “a second world and a second life outside of officialdom” (6). Satirical, carnivalesque humor not only attacks hegemonic customs, but, as Hodgart argues, it can also “create a dream world in which the real world is fantastically inverted or travestied” (24).

Subversive freedom during carnival times can be transpositioned into written language by the women writers in this study, as in “A Church Mouse” by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, “Loose Woman” by Sandra Cisneros, and *Truck Dance* by Olive Hershey. Even though each writer’s work talks back to patriarchy for unique reasons since each represents specific social contexts in different centuries, the individual writings encourage laughter from readers because of the carnivalesque, satirical humor that repudiates the idea of an official language. Though American women’s satirical humor does not include some of the specific elements of medieval carnival language, e.g., abusive language and “images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 18), their humorous satire can still

be considered representative of Bakhtin's contention about the use of carnival because it defies and laughs at hegemonic ideals announced through official languages. However, the writings discussed in this dissertation do not wish to create a temporary "second life outside of officialdom," which was the norm for carnival during the medieval era; rather, they seek to fracture patriarchal laws and mores, allowing women to have a more permanent, prominent voice in their own democratic society. Their main objective is to replace the inequalities with more equitable opportunities, qualifying Bakhtin's explanation of the significance of carnivals during the medieval era. Parody and laughter within carnivalesque dialogism mock the dogma of authority and create a transference of power and a different view of conventional ideals, while concurrently providing triumph and revival (Bakhtin 11-12), supporting the earlier assertion that satirical humor might be perceived by some to have a negative tinge, yet simultaneously, produce positive effects.

Related to carnivalization is Menippean satire, or as Kristeva states, "Carnavalesque tradition was absorbed into Menippean discourse" (*Desire in Language* 79). Menippean satire, for Bakhtin, is a distinct type of humorous satire that allows the fantastical to serve as a "test and to expose ideas and ideologies" (*Dialogic Imagination* 26). In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin explains that the menippea is a "carnivalized genre" with comic elements that have "an extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention" (113-14). In the menippea, abnormality and the unusual are unrestrained (116). Bakhtin argues in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* that the unrepressed boundaries of experimental fantasy that are known to be part of a menippea can include "scandal scenes, eccentric behavior, inappropriate speeches" and

“violations of the generally accepted . . . established norms of behavior and etiquette, including manners of speech” (117). The creation of such bizarre satire can be considered the most daring for women writers because they go beyond perimeters deemed appropriate for women. For women writers to produce a carnivalization of the world in a fantastic tale, with female characters demonstrating questionable, scandalous, eccentric behavior and espousing unusual points of view, can be considered audaciously subversive writing, especially when compared to sentimental writings.

Select poetry that includes, but is not limited to, inappropriate language—

“inappropriate because of its cynical frankness”—and the inclusion of a diatribe can also be identified as Menippean satire (*Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 118-19). Whether or not the boldest of women writers, such as E.D.E.N. Southworth, from the nineteenth century, as well as Sandra Cisneros, Olive Hershey, and Estela Portillo Trambley, from the twentieth century, purposefully selected Menippean satire as a genre for certain writings does not diminish the claim that appropriating Menippean satire to the writings brings a different perspective to their writings: a perspective that highlights their literary courage to pen what other women may have been too timid to attempt. After all, writing assertively, a requirement when writing satirically, has not been considered the proper mode for ladies.

Although Bakhtin promotes the novel as the only genre that diffuses authoritative language, shorter prose writings can also support Bakhtin’s dialogical theory. As Bakhtin argues in *The Dialogic Imagination*, “A novel is a diversity of speech types artistically organized” (262), which disrupts the premise that there is one absolute, privileged language (264). In a novel, the artistically constructed images of

authentic, spoken languages can subversively compete with an authoritative voice. And even though there may be less dialogism within a short work in comparison to a novel, the more concise work can also be understood to represent social heteroglossia, which means certain terse prose can include images of authentic, disobedient, rebellious language. Therefore, it is fitting to apply Bakhtin's theory of dialogical imagination to the short stories, sketches, and newspaper columns, as well as the novels included in this investigation of women's satirical humor.

As long narratives and short prose can represent social discourse, so too can poetry. Poets do not write in vacuity, immune from voices of society. They write within a social context, as do writers of prose; therefore, their chosen poetic diction can only be understood to be influenced by social heteroglossia. Also, since poets are known to create fictional personas for their poetry, those personas do not necessarily represent a poet's personal language, as posited by Bakhtin when he states that a poet's select lexis is "a pure and direct expression of his [her] own intention," eliminating it from social heteroglossia (*Dialogic Imagination* 285). Poetic personas are neither pure nor direct representations of a poet; they, instead, reflect and respond to voices that a poet hears in her or his social environment. Bakhtin also surmises that although poetry may include "contradictions and insoluble conflicts," the poet adheres to "one unitary and indisputable discourse" (286). Based on Bakhtin's perspective concerning a singular voice in poetry, one can deduce that Bakhtin's contention about the exclusion of social voices from poetry is due to poetry's succinctness; for Bakhtin, there is no space for dialogical tension. However, there are poems that

fracture Bakhtin's argument because they include either explicit dialogic languages, as in Phoebe Cary's "Dorothy's Dower" and Emily Dickinson's "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" or implicit dialogue, as in Sandra Cisneros's "Loose Woman" and Frances Harper's "Learning to Read." Therefore, poems as well as novels can include artistically constructed representations of languages. Likewise, poetry and prose can equally decenter dominant voices that represent the patriarchal-capitalist structure of America.

An argument can be made that a reader, a product of social heteroglossia, does not have to have different voices explicitly written in a poem, a short story, a sketch, a newspaper column, or a novel in order to hear a mute voice being satirized and talked back to in a dissident style. In fact, when reading any of these genres, readers can experience a reticent conversation between a writer's written thoughts and a reader's cognitive response, creating a complex relationship for the writer, the work, and the reader, producing no authoritative single voice, but rather dialogical thoughts. As Kristeva in *Desire in Language* indicates, there are "three dimensions or coordinates of dialogue . . . [the] writing subject, addressee, and exterior texts" (66). In other words, linguistic signs within a text, especially satirical, humorous, dialogical signs, represent the writer having a dialogue with an authoritative language, and a dialogue with readers, while also speaking to texts that represent the current social context as well as sometimes having a conversation with anterior texts. While the characters in prose are having their own dialogue, they also converse with the writer and her readers and anterior texts. Therefore, authors of prose or poetry are only part "of a textual system," meaning the feminist writers treated in this study are assimilating and subverting,

through the hybridization of languages, other texts, a process known by Kristeva's coined word, "intertextuality" (15). Applying intertextuality to the prose and the poetry in this literary study, I argue that the women writers transpose authoritative language into their works, turning the dominant language back on itself in order to encourage the fetters of American gender roles to be undone.

Though there are literary articles and books commenting about American women's humor, there does not seem to be much criticism that solely focuses on American women writing humorous, satirical dialogue. For example, Kate Sanborn wrote one of the earliest essays about American women's humor in a 1906 issue of the *New England Magazine*. In Sanborn's article, "New England Women Humorists," she refutes the misconception that women do not have humor: "The New England woman more than keeps up with her brothers" when it comes to "puns, parodies and repartee" (159). In her argument, she catalogues a list of American women who use wit and humor for various purposes, but she does not bring to light women's satirically humorous dialogue that subverts patriarchy. Sanborn makes reference to noteworthy nineteenth-century feminist writers who are included in this study, such as Fanny Fern and Marietta Holley; however, she does not connect these writers to the idea that they are anti-sentimentalists who mock patriarchal language that prescribes gender roles.

Also, in Martha Bruere and Mary Beard's 1934 anthology, *Laughing Their Way: Women's Humor in America*, the editors hold that the decisive humor of the "professional humorist Marietta Holley" is equal to that of the well-known nineteenth-century male humorist Bill Nye (52). Carmel Snow, the editor of *Harper's Bazaar* from 1934 to 1958, has an insightful comment about the sale of her magazine being doubled

and tripled due to *Bazaar*'s serial printing of Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. In fact, Snow satirically comments in her biography that "[t]his was the first time men had ever read the *Bazaar*," showing that a woman's humor can be appreciated by both genders (qtd. in Loos xxiii). Yet neither the editors of the 1934 anthology of women's humor nor Snow mention how Holley or Loos create hilarious, meaningful, satirically humorous dialogue in order to challenge the accepted mores stipulated by patriarchal language. *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's* by Marietta Holley, various newspaper columns by Fanny Fern, and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* by Anita Loos include more than simple humor that laughs at the incongruent treatment of men and women: they satirize the privileges that men have in society when compared to women. These three authors use humorous satire as a means to provoke a social consciousness about women's lack of a respectable political voice.

In 1984, the first feminist criticism that focuses exclusively on American women's humor, "A Laughter of Their Own: Women's Humor in the United States" by Emily Toth, provides a historical overview of American women writers' humor, beginning with the first recognized American woman poet, Anne Bradstreet, and concluding with feminist humorist Rita Mae Brown's 1973 novel, *Rubyfruit Jungle*. The literary women referred to in Toth's article are identified as women humorists, female humorists, and feminist humorists who sometimes include satire within their writings. After reading Toth's essay, one could conclude that she sees satire as an element of humor, with humor the dominant term to be emphasized. Gloria Kaufman's introduction to the 1980 publication *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor and Satire* identifies feminist humor and feminist satire as distinctly different, with feminist

humor tending “to be a humor of hope,” while feminist satire is supposedly “didactic and often overtly so” (13-14). However, Kaufman joins feminist humor and feminist satire when she asserts that they have the same purpose: “[F]eminist satire, like feminist humor, is founded on hope and predicated on a stance of nonacceptance” (14). Since Kaufman separates the two writing modes as feminist humor and feminist satire, which is different from Toth’s claim that satire is a subordinate of women’s humor, the definitions of satire and humor found in *A Handbook to Literature* can be useful to clarify the difference between the two terms. Satire is defined as “a literary manner that blends a critical attitude with humor and wit for the purpose of improving human institutions or humanity” (447), while the definition of humor never mentions satire, but only that humor’s purpose is to evoke “some kind of laughter,” relying on “the ridiculous, the ludicrous, and the comical” (244). Hence, one could question Toth’s emphasis on humor, with satire as its subordinate, as well as question Kaufman’s idea that feminist humor is “a humor of hope” (13). Harry Levin’s statement in his article “The Wages of Satire” posits that “[w]hen comedy becomes more purposeful than playful, then it is satire” (3). Applying the *Handbook*’s definitions and Levin’s declaration encourages one to alter Toth’s idea by asserting that satire is more than a literary element of women’s humor. Kaufman’s thoughts about feminist humor seem to need alteration: since feminist humor includes a critical attitude and wit with the purpose of influencing positive changes for humanity, then it is actually humorous satire. Therefore, in my study I extend Toth’s and Kaufman’s discussions about humor and satire by positing that much of American literary women’s humor is actually humorous satire.

Another significant feminist critic, Nancy Walker, has produced numerous articles and books that provide profound insight into American women's disobedient, humorous writings. Her foundational text, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, identifies early female humorists, like Frances Whitcher, discusses the difference between America's preferred men's humor and unacknowledged women's humor, and gives examples of feminist humor. Her text classifies satire and humor as separate genres, whereas I focus on establishing the idea that much of what has been identified as American women's humor or satire is actually humorous satire instead of one or the other. In *A Very Serious Thing*, the chapter titled "The Humor of the 'Minority'" provides a limited number of examples from African American, Hispanic, and Jewish women's literary humor. However, the over-all purpose of the chapter seems to be to exploit the oppressed ethnic groups' humor and experiences as an analogy to white women's experiences as a subjugated minority. In my study, I provide a more balanced representation of African American, Anglo American, Latina, and Chicana women's works because literary America should not be thought of as only Anglo American.

In *Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women*, Walker discusses how American women writers transform cultural myths by revising them, subverting them, and challenging "the dominant discourse" through forms of irony, creating alternative fantasies to the traditional male metanarratives (44). She likewise exposes the idea that language proves to be adaptable to a certain perspective about a subject, with no one gender or group owning it (44), confirming Bakhtin's theory that language is full of competing discourses about a subject. My

discussion about language being fluid and not controlled by one group will add to Walker's understanding of how some women writers use language. Whereas Walker focuses on how irony and fantasy can revise cultural dominating myths, I focus on women's satirical, dialogical humor subverting and weakening the power of authoritative language.

Noteworthy unpublished dissertations written in the second half of the twentieth century by Linda Morris, Zita Zatzkin Dresner, and Lucia Cherciu bring valuable insight about women's humorous writings. Though "Women Vernacular Humorists in Nineteenth-Century America: Ann Stephens, Frances Witcher, and Marietta Holley" by Morris concentrates on the elements and purpose of the popular vernacular humor of the nineteenth century, and Dresner in her dissertation, "Twentieth Century American Women Humorists," includes writers like Erma Bombeck, who wrote humorous rebuttals to popular culture publications that claim women should be happy housewives, these two scholars do not deliberate about humorous, dialogical satire. Cherciu's dissertation, "Ludicrous 'Scribbling Women': The Politics of Laughter and Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers," appropriates Bakhtin's argument that carnivalization of established, accepted norms is used as a subversive, political weapon. However, while Cherciu probes the laughter of carnival, I explore the parody of authoritative language, an aspect of carnival. As Cherciu and I refer to Bakhtin's understanding of carnival from unique points of view, we also pay distinct homage to Marietta Holley, Fanny Fern, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, and E.D.E.N. Southworth. For example, Cherciu focuses on the foolish behavior of Betsey Bobbet in *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's* by Holley; I emphasize the humorous, satirical dialogue of Samantha

Allen and also the intertextuality that occurs between Holley's Samantha Allen and Seba Smith's Jack Downing. Cherciu highlights cross-dressing in Southworth's *The Hidden Hand*, while I concentrate on the humorous, satirical language that rebels against patriarchal capitalism and the intertextuality that occurs with a news report during Southworth's time, plus the intertextuality between *The Hidden Hand* and *The Wide, Wide World* by Susan Warner. Cherciu writes about cross-gendering in Fanny Fern's various writings, whereas I concentrate on Fern's biting humorous dialogues. And while Cherciu chose to discuss two of Freeman's short stories, "Juliza" and "One Good Time," both dealing with anomalous courtships, I point out the subversive, humorous satirical dialogue of Hetty, an elderly spinster, in Freeman's "A Church Mouse." Unlike Cherciu, who focuses only on nineteenth-century white, middle-class American women writers, I include nineteenth-century as well as twentieth-century American women writers with an inclusion of multi-cultural voices instead of only white American women.

Albeit the previously mentioned scholars examine women's humor and satire in different ways, they do not specifically concentrate on women writers' manipulation of humorous, satirical dialogue and its aim to fracture patriarchal language. Nor have any of the scholars applied Bakhtin's argument that there is no one authoritative language, but instead, there are languages that "intersect with each other in many different ways" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 291). And from Marxist feminism, the significance of concrete social conditions influencing one's consciousness and thus one's writing, that is, the importance of gender, race, class, and socioeconomics that has an impact on women's dissident dialogism is missing from the feminist scholars mentioned earlier in

this chapter. Therefore, my research contributes to the discussion about American women's subversive, humorous writings, as well as emphasize the importance of knowing that language is available to those who wish to advocate for social and economic improvement for the other Americans—women.

While there are significant, noteworthy, humorous, satirical feminist writings during the first half of the twentieth century, that is, works such as *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* by Anita Loos, *Herland* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, “The Garter” by Dorothy Parker, “The Delicatessen Husband” by Florence Guy Seabury, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, and María Luisa Garza's feminist newspaper columns, which appeared in *El Imparcial of Texas*,¹ I have circumvented these and others in order to emphasize, without being reductive, the emphatic point that despite the passage of one hundred years between the second half of the nineteenth century and the latter part of the twentieth century, a good number of American women writers during the last decades of the twentieth century still deliberated about the need to obtain greater social and economic parity with men. One would think that after a century of American women striving for equal status in a democratic society, there would not have been the need for women writers in the concluding decades of the twentieth century to address political disparities that are somewhat similar to those that had been the prominent concern of progressive women in the second half of the nineteenth century. Of course, the second part of the twentieth century is historically different from the nineteenth century. For example, because abolition of slavery occurred in the nineteenth century, an autobiography like Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* could not represent the material world of the twentieth century.

However, domestic black women workers, who were paid minimally, were still in the subservient role in white households, as indicated by Alice Childress's sketches in *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life*. Chicana writers in the last part of the nineteenth century were not included as mainstream literary voices, nor were they encouraged by Chicano writers in the second part of the twentieth century during the Chicano Renaissance to publish, yet they did. In Estela Portillo Trambley's 1975 short story "The Paris Gown," the message for twentieth-century readers is to remember the archaic, patriarchal practice of arranged marriages, which would often break the chosen woman's free spirit. And although Fanny Fern wrote in the nineteenth century, representing a different time, place, and culture, in her sketch "Owls Kill Hummingbirds," a woman's spirit is broken in a hegemonic marriage. Both Trambley and Fern wrote short prose that satirically defies the overarching structure of patriarchal dominance which was reinforced by men's control of economics. In the 1960s, Judith Viorst wrote "Where Is It Written?" which satirizes husbands' privileges as does Phoebe Cary in "Dorothy's Dower" in the 1860s. Although Jacobs, Childress, Trambley, Fern, Viorst, Cary, and others considered in my study represent a myriad of historical, material differences, for a Marxist feminist the writings echo a range of concrete realities of women being subjected to subordinate economic placement because of America's patriarchal capitalism. And even though there are vast differences in the writers' times and spaces, there is a sense of political interconnectiveness because of their subversive satirical satire that wishes to change the construct of patriarchal capitalism.

Another group of American women who will not be included in this literary study is Asian American women. Even though there are Asian American women authors who produce fine, humorous literature, their writings do not focus on subverting American patriarchy. Two of Amy Tan's novels, *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, do include humor, but her themes and humor are about the disconnects between Asian immigrant mothers and Americanized daughters and not about the subversion of America's patriarchal society. While Gish Jen includes humor in her writings, such as "In the American Society" and *Mona in the Promised Land*, she does not focus on destabilizing patriarchy but rather focuses on the comical situations of a Chinese American's struggle with cultural assimilation.

Chapter Two, "American Women's Narratives Espouse Social and Economic Justice for Women," provides evidence that language is like a token that can be exchanged for the purpose of political advantage. The narratives selected for this chapter presents the needed examples to support Bakhtin's argument that there is no one absolute authoritative monologue but rather competing discourses about a subject. His stance that an authoritative language loses its power when challenged from a different lens is applied to the select novels. From my perspective, all narratives for this chapter are considered feminist texts with political themes; thus, Judi Roller's *The Politics of the Feminist Novel* reinforces my position. *Woman's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820-1870* by Nina Baym verifies the argument that generically labeling nineteenth-century women's fiction as sentimental can be an erroneous classification, especially for the nineteenth-century narratives that are discussed in this chapter: the autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by

Harriet Jacobs, and two novels, *The Hidden Hand or, Capitola the Madcap* by E.D.E.N. Southworth, and *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's* by Marietta Holley. Part of the discussion of nineteenth-century writings include the ideology of the proper sphere for women, supported by a Marxist-feminist perspective about the gender-division of labor as argued by Iris Young in "Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A Critique of the Dual Systems Theory." Also addressed is a black woman's identity and social context compared to white middle-class women's circumstances.

The twentieth-century novels assessed in chapter two are *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* by Julia Alvarez, and *Truck Dance* by Olive Hershey. Even though *Truck Dance* focuses on a woman who becomes a cross-country truck driver, infringing on the exclusive world of men truck drivers, and *The Hidden Hand or, Capitola the Madcap* highlights a young protagonist who goes on heroic adventures where she consistently outsmarts men, both novels can be considered Menippean works. Because the two narratives employ Menippean satire to promote the unfettering of women from finite gender expectations, they are compared, proving that Southworth's liberating philosophy of regendering—breaking through the constructs of gender roles—was still being emphasized in 1989 by Hershey. The analogous elements of Marietta Holley's criticism of the popular idea of women being clinging vines to strong men, and Julia Alvarez's mockery of women being obedient to Latino men are also identified, stressing the point that women in the late twentieth century addressed the patriarchy ideology that women are to be subservient to men as did women writers during the last half of the nineteenth century.

In Chapter Three, “American Women’s Dialogues in Short Works Defy Prescribed Female Roles,” there is a brief re-emphasis of my argument addressed in chapter one concerning the idea that the novel is the only genre that can represent social discourse and the hybridization of languages, as Bakhtin promotes in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. The concisely written short works chosen for this chapter are selections from Fanny Fern’s newspaper columns, the short story “A Church Mouse” by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, the poignant speech “And ar’n’t I a Woman?” by Sojourner Truth, selections from Erma Bombeck’s newspaper columns, the short story “The Paris Gown” by Estela Portillo Trambley, and two sketches by Alice Childress. These writings demonstrate Bakhtin’s argument about writers producing literature that artistically symbolizes social heteroglossia and its context, while concurrently stressing the humorous satirical language subverting contrived gender expectations for American women. Maggie Humm’s “Marxist-Feminist Criticism” is included to underscore the concept that literature can be a “social agent” for change (78). In her addresses at Akron, Ohio, Sojourner Truth represents black women and working-class women; thus, Angela Y. Davis’s clarification of the historical difference between Truth and middle-class white women in *Women, Race and Class* is part of this chapter. In *A Very Serious Thing*, Nancy Walker’s understanding of Erma Bombeck’s writings enhances my insight of Bombeck’s sketches; thus, Walker’s thoughts are part of the discussion about Bombeck. As the novels discussed in the second chapter have a common thread—improving social and economic situations for women—so too do the selected short pieces analyzed in chapter three. Following the evaluation of distinct passages of the

individual works, the thematic parallels between Fanny Fern's and Erma Bombeck's newspaper columns are assessed.

For Chapter Four, "The Disobedient Dialogues of American Women Poets," the analysis of the poetry illuminates how the poets from both centuries, by means of carnivalization, create a mockery of old patriarchal prescriptive ideas. Poetry from the second part of the nineteenth century include "Learning to Read" by Frances Harper, "Dorothy's Dower" by Phoebe Cary, and "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" by Emily Dickinson. Representing the last decades of the twentieth century are "Loose Woman" by Sandra Cisneros, "Where Is It Written?" by Judith Viorst, and "Woman" by Nikki Giovanni. In this chapter, I bring forth why the selected poetry does represent and symbolize American women's voices, contrasting Bakhtin's view about poetry being only one unitary discourse. The exegeses of the poems emphasize how the poets' satirical humor turns patriarchal language and its ideologies back on themselves. Nancy Walker's argument about feminist writers reconstructing traditional myths in *The Disobedient Writer: Women and Narrative Tradition* is included to support my assertion that Cisneros subverts archaic patriarchal myths to prove that a subject can be addressed from a different perspective. The selected poetry for this chapter is analyzed through a Marxist-feminist lens in order to continue the discussion found in the previous chapters concerning women employing humorous satire for political, socioeconomic purposes. Also, the nineteenth-century poem "Dorothy's Dower" in which family economics controlled by the husband is mocked and the twentieth-century poem "Where Is It Written?" whose persona satirically questions the socioeconomic

positions of husbands and wives are compared because both poems address the theme of inequality between a privileged husband and a non-privileged wife.

Chapter Five, the last chapter, entitled “Exclusiveness in American Anthologies: Not Humorous to American Women,” brings forth the argument that historically satire has been considered an exclusively male genre, with texts such as *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* by Robert C. Elliott representing this male perspective. I argue that American women who write humorous, satirical dialogism for political reasons are part of our literary history, yet much of their work continues to go unnoted because of conventional thinking about women writers and/or exclusion from satire anthologies. There are American satire anthologies that have a disproportionate representation of men satirists when compared to the sparing inclusion of women satirists. For example, *American Satire in Prose and Verse*, edited by Henry C. Carlisle and published in 1962, contains 105 entries by American men and only six by American women. Also, *American Satire: An Anthology of Writings from Colonial Times to the Present*, edited by Nicholas Bakalar and published in 1997, consists of twenty-seven entries by men and only four by women. After bringing forth evidence that there is a biased attitude that privileges men’s satire in American satire anthologies, I suggest that there need not be an anthology exclusively of American women’s satirical writings, but rather an anthology that includes an equal representation of men’s and women’s satirical humor, proving that literary women can be deemed as equally satirically humorous as literary men—not separate but inclusively equal. Though *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor & Satire* edited by Gloria Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely is a collection of American women’s humor and satire that was published in 1980, the book is not meant

to be an absolute scholarly publication but rather a feminist renunciation of the idea that feminists do not have a sense of humor. Therefore, I recommend that it is time for a multi-cultural American satire anthology that provides equal representation of satirical humor written by both genders because the recognition that American women, no matter what ethnicity, are as intellectually capable of humorous satire as men.

Notes

1. María Lusia Garza was one of the intellectuals who fled Mexico during its 1910 revolution. She settled in San Antonio, Texas where she discovered a strong Mexican literary community. In the 1920s, she wrote regularly for the newspaper *El Imparcial of Texas*. Her newspaper articles might remind one of Fanny Fern's newspaper sketches because both columnists prompt women to find self-fulfillment in their intellectual capabilities instead of being trapped in the domestic realm. Garza wrote in November 1920 in her feminist column about well-read women, "atravesar sola, el embravido de la vida" (qtd. in Lawhn 93), meaning an intellectual woman can flourish in life on her own. The reason she insisted on writing in her first language was twofold: she did not want her people to lose their language while in the United States, and she, as others, believed that they would return to Mexico after the end of the 1910 Mexican Revolution, which many did including Garza. She is known by her pseudonym Loreley, which is the same name for Anita Loos's protagonist in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, written in the same decade that Garza wrote for *El Imparcial of Texas*. For more information, see "María Lusia Garza: Novelist of El México de Afuera" by Juanita Luna Lawhn.

CHAPTER TWO
AMERICAN WOMEN'S NARRATIVES ESPOUSE SOCIAL AND
ECONOMIC JUSTICE FORWOMEN

The narratives that are the focus of this chapter signify American women's thoughts about the importance of gaining political control over their own lives. Although authors considered in this chapter are from different socioeconomic situations and ethnicities and have distinctive reasons for using humorous satire, their narratives have a common theme: change the American patriarchal-capitalist views and practices concerning women. For example, the women authors acknowledged in this chapter wittingly and cleverly rebelled against women's subordinate positions through their published writings, which were read, predominantly, by other women. The women's political, satirical, humorous, subversive writings considered in this chapter encouraged and continue to encourage readers to seek more opportunities for self-actualization, replacing their marginalized status. Thus one can argue that the literature discussed in this chapter—*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, *The Hidden Hand or, Capitola the Madcap* by E.D.E.N. Southworth, *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's* by Marietta Holley, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* by Julia Alvarez, and *Truck Dance* by Olive Hershey—offers women readers a sense of historical, political resistance against women's socioeconomic subordinate positions.

Although the terms *feminism* and *sexual politics* were coined during the second feminist wave during the last part of the twentieth century, the feminist

expressions are applicable to the nineteenth-century women authors included in my research because they, like feminists during the twentieth century, defied the narrow roles imposed on women by American patriarchal capitalism. The strong, independent female characters within each narrative, from both centuries, engage in political battles against individuals who personify the status quo. The characters substantiate Judi Roller's political understanding in *The Politics of the Feminist Novel*, in which she proclaims, "Struggles between individuals, especially between individual men and women, illuminate or suggest the power relationships existing between groups. Such grapplings for control between characters can be called political battles when the characters function as representatives of men and women in general" (5). Each writer presented in this chapter has constructed a strong, assertive female protagonist or compelling female characters who claim "individual self-determination" and the "right of individual choice" (Roller 53). The non-passive protagonists represent the voices of many American women who desired control of their own lives.

Instead of relying on polemical language, which can often create an offensive tone that may not have been appreciated by male publishers or female readers, the writers produced female characters who depend a great deal on defiant, humorous satirical dialogism. Because satirical humor is considered a milder way to criticize when compared to direct criticism, the humorous satirical subversion of patriarchal language embedded in the literature is considered a safe, acceptable political weapon, when promoting socioeconomic improvement for women and, ultimately, advocating the regendering of America. The

representative characters within each narrative exemplify what Charles Sanders asserts in *The Scope of Satire*, which is that satirical humor can be used to “wring laughter out of despair that has become resignation” (15). While creating laughter through satirically humorous dialogue is entertaining to an audience, it also “contains sharp and telling comments on the problems of the world,” as suggested by Matthew Hodgart in *Satire* (12). Thus in this chapter, the authors’ amusing, satirical diction can be considered to have a double purpose since it is to provoke laughter or approving smiles from readers while concurrently challenging an authoritative voice, producing the idea that language is not controlled by any one group. Or as Hodgart concisely reasons, “Satire humbles the mighty and brings men [and women] to equality” (30), which is quite evident in the writings chosen to be highlighted in this chapter. The writers in this section prove that language can be used to encourage the reconstruction of gender in America.

Women’s Subordinate Positions in the Nineteenth Century

Because much of women’s literature of the nineteenth century elicited an emotional response from readers—an emotional response can be laughter, a true political contrast to the supposedly rational patriarchal decision-making—the literature has erroneously been labeled sentimental, which, according to Nina Baym in *Woman’s Fiction*, is “a term of judgment rather than of description, and the judgment it conveys is of course adverse” (24). Branding all nineteenth-century women’s literature as female sentiment instead of acknowledging those writings that can be considered foundational feminist literature that critiques the

disadvantaged socioeconomic situations in which women found themselves defeats the feminist writers' primary purpose for writing: the betterment of American women. Another flawed thought contributing to the misnomer, sentimentalism, is that "the author's depiction of real life is heavily slanted toward the pretty and tender and hence is not a comment on reality but an evasion of it" (Baym 24). The three nineteenth-century narratives selected for this chapter—*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, *The Hidden Hand* or, *Capitola the Madcap* by E.D.E.N. Southworth, and *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's* by Marietta Holley—do not emphasize the "pretty and tender" but rather portray the reverse of such clichéd thinking; they are representative of many women's nineteenth-century lives, which for some were "full of poverty, coarseness, brutality, exploitation, treachery, pettiness, illness, exhaustion, degradation, and suffering" (Baym 24). The nineteenth-century selections for this chapter speak for women's various political discourses, while disrupting the generic classification of sentimentalism that has been attributed to them.

Though for thousands of years women have mostly, but not always, played a subordinate role to men in various socioeconomic structures. However, it is not until the nineteenth century with the development of capitalism that the gendered division of labor becomes more definite. As Rosemarie Putnam Tong states in *Feminist Thought*, with patriarchal capitalism "a wedge between the workplace and the home, sending men, as a primary workforce, out into the former and confining women, as a secondary workforce, to the latter" (134) substantiates gender inequality. Iris Young, in "Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A

Critique of the Dual Systems Theory,” points out that motherhood becomes the true vocation for nineteenth-century women, which prompted them to adhere to the domestic sphere (60). In the nineteenth century, if working-class women had to help support the family or if a woman had to support her children and herself, they were allowed only marginal, low paying work. With little means for financial independence or a public, political voice, most women in the nineteenth century were powerless over their own destinies because they had to labor at home with no monetary compensation and/or settle for minimal paying jobs. The concrete reality of patriarchal capitalism meant that only men had control of public and private finances, supported by the ideological superstructures, that is, religion, education, and the law, which is addressed in *The Hidden Hand or, Capitola the Madcap* by E.D.E.N. Southworth, and *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet’s* by Marietta Holley. However, for nineteenth-century black women, like Harriet Jacobs, patriarchal capitalism was doubly oppressive because of American racism. Black slaves were the backbone for white men’s capital gains; in fact, Jacobs’s autobiography tells of the buying and selling of African American slaves—human commodities that helped perpetuate nineteenth-century patriarchal capitalism. Black female slaves could not adhere to the ideology of true womanhood, nor could they depend on their husbands’ wages, especially since husbands and wives were sold separately or since wages were almost non-existent. Therefore, as argued by Hazel V. Carby, black women’s identity was based instead on positions subservient to white women and families with black women often being “surrogate mothers to white families rather than in relation to

their own families” (“White Woman Listen!” 113), which is presented in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs. In spite of the drastic differences between the social contexts of Southworth, Holley, and Jacobs, all three authors include subversive dialogism for the purpose of challenging women’s subordinate positions in America.

Harriet Jacobs

When Jacobs wrote her autobiography, she not only subversively responded to the concrete reality of slavery, but she also understood the need for her northern American women readers to view themselves as an important cohesive anti-slavery group who could influence emancipation for the slaves. Since Harriet Jacobs was a literary woman who had lived in the north for fifteen years before completing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, she was aware of sentimental motifs included in women’s literature written for her targeted northern, well read, middle-class audience. And because she originally had wanted to dictate her narrative to Harriet Beecher Stowe, she was obviously aware of Stowe’s bestselling, influential, abolitionist, sentimental story, as indicated by Jean Fagan Yellin in her introduction to the 1987 republication of Jacobs’s narrative (xviii-xix). Hence, one could argue that Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* does solicit sentiment from her northern, white readers, but it is interwoven in her non-sentimental plot for a political purpose only, to get northern women involved in “antislavery efforts” (Yellin xiv). Or, as Franny Nudelman maintains in her article “Harriet Jacobs and the

Sentimental Politics of Female Suffering,” Jacobs includes sentimental passages because she envisions a “basis for shared political endeavor,” one that can unify women of the north with slave women in order to rid America of the immoral institution—slavery (5). Hence, one could argue that she includes a sentimental tone not only to placate her northern readers but also to generate an emotional response for political purposes. She knew her audience. Periodically, however, she fractures her sentimental direct address to her white audience with a humorous, satirical tone, giving herself and the American female slaves she represents the political, subversive voice they deserve.

In the following excerpt from her narrative, Jacobs’s double language, sentimentalism overlaid with satirical humor, exemplifies Bakhtin’s argument that when authoritative language is contested from a new and different perspective, there will be “new insights into its meanings” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 346). In the passage, Jacobs mockingly laughs at the idea that female slaves could actually live up to the nineteenth-century ideal of true womanhood. Slave women were not given a chance to adhere to the mores codified for free women:

But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge me the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws. . . . (54)

Though her writing includes poignant diction, “happy women . . . purity . . . objects of your affection . . . poor desolate slave girl,” appeasing her audience with her sentimental rhetoric, the same emotional vocabulary can reveal a mildly sarcastic tone with a touch of humor. Sentimental language is intersected with Jacobs’s gentle, humorous, satirical tone, encouraging her audience to think differently of female slaves as she proceeds to tell of her decision to have an affair with Mr. Sands, a white Southern gentleman. By taking control of her own sexuality, she not only disrupts the system of slavery by having an affair that provides her freedom from her seducer, her white owner, but as Hazel V. Carby points out in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Jacobs develops “an alternative discourse of womanhood” (59), subverting the nineteenth-century ideology of true womanhood. Moreover, Jacobs’s use of double language or the hybridization of the two social languages supports Yellin’s argument that “Jacobs moves her book out of the world of conventional nineteenth-century polite discourse” (xiv). The hybridity of languages—the sentimental diction coupled with humorous, satirical overlay—creates meaningful irony that points out the incongruity between free white northern women and black female slaves. Jacobs creates a fresh political voice that is more daring and more authentic than Harriet Beecher Stowe’s sentimental style in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Juxtaposed with her direct commentary to her audience is the prevailing non-fiction story line, which is full of hybridization of languages and satirical, humorous dialogue. The dialogue between the Southern whites and Linda and her grandmother found in Chapter XII, “Fear of Insurrection,” exemplifies Jacobs’s

artistic wit. After the Nat Turner insurrection, poor white southerners were given an excuse to pillage and demoralize the blacks. A white Southern man who speaks non-standard English represents the crude attitude of some poor whites toward blacks. He asks a question about linens found in the grandmother's large trunk, "Where'd the damned niggers git all dis sheet an' table clarf?" (65). However, the white male character's dialogue is not to be read as simply a representation of how white, uneducated people spoke, but rather, Jacobs employs hybridization of languages with the dominant language being ridiculed, losing its potency, while Jacobs's mocking tone gains political power. She parodies the white's slurred, incorrect English, which reflects his social status and boorish understanding of life. Also, as Max Eastman establishes in *Enjoyment of Laughter*, "Bad grammar can be funny" (138), making Jacobs, her grandmother, and the northern women readers feel rightly superior to the crass Southern white man.

The Southern white's blundering English and wrongful accusation toward the grandmother are also parodied by the grandmother's response, spoken in correct English: "You may be sure we didn't pilfer 'em from *your* houses" (65). The grandmother's dialogue and Jacobs's italicized possessive pronoun, *your*, emphasizes the fact that the grandmother is using sarcastic sass, making obvious what Johnnie M. Stover recognizes about African American women's form of humorous, satirical dialogue being used to reshape and subvert the "language of the dominant society" ("Nineteenth-Century African American Women's Autobiography" 7). The dialogue and the italicized word is satirically humorous

because a black woman claims, through language, superiority over a white man who lacks ethical scruples, yet is supposed to have a higher social status.

As Jacobs continued to write the conversation of the lowly whites, Linda, and her grandmother, she makes a point that the whites do not know how to read, yet Linda does, which Linda uses to her advantage. Flippantly, Linda responds to one of the white's questions about who writes letters to her—"most of my letters are from white people" (66)—which, of course, satirically and humorously puts the illiterate man in a subordinate place when compared to Linda, the slave. The idea that whites write to her is an inconceivable thought for the white men to whom she is speaking, which is why her uninvited company discontinues the conversation between themselves and the black women. Through a clever, artistic manipulation of language, Jacobs strips the whites of their superficial social status by exposing their crude English, which is representative of their corrupt, unprincipled behavior, while simultaneously giving Linda and her grandmother superior status to the whites.

In Chapter VII, "The Lover," Jacobs employs her black woman's mother-tongue as well as hybridization of languages when creating Linda's confrontational conversation with licentious Dr. Flint, who becomes furious about Linda's announcement that she wants to marry a free black man. The scene begins when Linda enters Flint's study, and his glaring look at her seems to imply, "I have half a mind to kill you on the spot" (39). One can argue that Jacobs includes the adjective *half* to indicate Flint's crazed logic of wanting to kill a young black woman because she merely wants to marry a black man instead of allowing Flint

to seduce her. Through dialogue, Jacobs parodies a slave owner's demented thought while exposing Flint as a detestable buffoon.

As the scene continues and after a brief heated verbal exchange between the two, Flint, angry and jealous, gives her a "stunning blow" (39), to which she replies with an invective tone: "You have struck me for answering you honestly. How I despise you!" (39). Stunned by her quick, sassy tongue, he *eventually* asks her, "Do you know what you have said?" (39). Instead of Flint responding with a declarative, commanding utterance, he responds with a dumb-founded interrogative statement, proving that his authority over Linda has been fractured. Linda takes advantage of his weakness with a quick, satirically humorous comeback: "Yes, sir; but your treatment drove me to it" (39). Her witty, sarcastic reply mocks his authoritative voice and position, while concurrently giving a black female slave momentary equality with her owner, reinforcing Lucinda MacKethan's argument that slave women used mother wit as a means of empowerment over their owners ("Mother Wit" 143). Through language, an African American slave has decentered a slave owner, which can be interpreted as quite humorous to Linda, to Jacobs, and to anti-slavery readers.

Utilizing linguistic hybridization, Jacobs has Flint speak a dialogical self-parody, with Linda Brent mocking Flint's absurd dialogue. After Flint's initial shock when Brent boldly sasses him saying, "Yes, sir; but your treatment drove me to it," he finally responds to her with a rhetorical question: "Do you know that I have a right to do as I like with you,—that I can kill you, if I please?" (39). Reading Flint's question through the lens of hybridization, Flint through his own dialogue has created an evil caricature of himself, a symbol for other ruthless,

asinine slave holders. Linda again ridicules Flint's aggressive dialogue with her assertive, scornful answer: "You have tried to kill me, and I wish you had; but you have no right to do as you like with me" (39). She derides Flint's statement with parody, turning his own authoritative words back on themselves, which not only gives her equal dialogical command, but also diminishes, temporarily, the Southern slave-owner's authority. As Bakhtin points out in *The Dialogic Imagination*, when the powerful believe that their voice creates an internally persuasive voice for the oppressed, then the oppressor continues to have authority. However, when the authoritative voice is challenged by an independent thinker such as Linda Brent, then the dominant language is no longer internally persuasive for someone like Linda. Dr. Flint's voice has no persuasive power over Linda Brent, especially when she takes the opportunity to refute Flint's utterances with her satirically humorous brazenness.

With Linda's verbal wit, she meets Flint as an equal and not as a passive victim like the victims found in seduction novels. Because Flint's control over Linda is subdued by her satirically humorous backtalk, Jacobs has subversively disrupted the typical seduction scene between a white slave owner and a young black woman. As Yellin asserts, Linda is not "the pathetic seduced 'tragic mulatto' of white fiction" (xxxiv). She is instead verbally in control of the conversation, negating the stereotypical image of the manipulated mulatta. In "Meditations on History: The Slave Woman's Voice," Mary Helen Washington indicates that Jacobs "show[s] women as active agents rather than objects of pity, capable of interpreting their experiences and . . . able to turn their victimization

into triumph” (5). The conversation also contradicts the mythical sexual ideology that Carby in *Reconstructing Womanhood* argues, that is, that black female slaves had rampant sexual desires with white slave owners, being “merely prey[s]” to their overt sexual slave women (27). The confrontational dialogue between Flint and Linda demonstrates Roller’s argument that individual characters in a feminist text play out a political battle, which for Jacobs is the clash between slave-owners and female slaves. By exploiting humorous, satirical dialogue, Jacobs proves how some African American slaves used language to obtain self-worth and to save themselves from complete human degradation, while also disproving false ideologies. Jacobs’s double language with her mocking tone gives linguistic power to an African American woman—she, not the Southern white slave owner, owns the language.

Since Jacobs refers in the preface of her autobiography to “the condition of two millions of women at the South [sic], still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse” (1), the voices of the slaves, as well as those of the oppressors, in Jacobs’s narrative represent the different languages heard in the South. Though Jacobs’s autobiography is not a novel, it contains elements similar to those of a novel, meaning that it has numerous voices that represent authentic dialogues that Jacobs heard in her social context; thus her narrative reinforces Bakhtin’s theory that a novel represents social heteroglossia, where hegemonic expressions can be subverted.

E.D.E.N. Southworth

As Jacobs's autobiography disrupts the sentimental genre as well as talks back to oppressive patriarchal capitalism, E.D.E.N. Southworth does likewise in *The Hidden Hand or, Capitola the Madcap*. Like Jacobs, who had to seek employment when she escaped to the North, Southworth, after her husband had abandoned her, also had to work for economic self-sustainability. As established by Joanne Dobson in the introduction to the 1988 reprint of *The Hidden Hand*, Southworth discovered that the publication of her writings was a more profitable way to support her children and herself compared to a teacher's salary (xvii-xviii). Because she became such a popular author, Robert Bonner, the owner of the *New York Ledger*, offered her a contract that she could not refuse, so from 1856 to 1889, Southworth wrote exclusively for the popular newspaper, making Bonner a fortune since "the circulation of the *Ledger* is said to have doubled when she began to write for him" (Dobson xviii). Although Southworth was a favored writer for her time, she did not simply give her audience the traditional, sentimental, female rhetoric that is claimed to have been immensely acceptable for women writers to pen. She instead wrote, as Dobson suggests, "about the injustices perpetrated upon women in a society that allowed them little other than symbolic power" (xxi). She understood that the prescription for women's power, which was relegated to the domestic realm, was actually no political power at all, but rather appeasing dialogue from men to women, encouraging women to stay out of public, political decision-making. Southworth also knew that within each economic class, that is, upper-middle, middle, lower-middle, and working-class,

women were kept in a subordinate economic position of their own, or as Dobson argues in her introduction, Southworth “felt and recorded a deep personal sense of outrage at the oppressions and deprivations of her own life and the lives of the women she saw around her” (xiii). She personified the idea that politics is personal, with an emphasis on sexual politics, a consistent theme in her stories.

Not willing to accept the constraints for women or promote obedience as Susan Warner does in the best-seller *The Wide, Wide World*, Southworth addresses subjugation of women by offering her readers a vision of hope found in a fantasy world that subverts the status quo. Southworth exemplifies in her protagonist, Capitola the Madcap, what Nancy Walker argues in *Feminist Alternatives*: “Dissatisfaction with the self as constructed by others led women to imagine alternative selves, a conceptualization that extends into fantasy in the form of dreams, memory, and even madness” (8). In *The Hidden Hand*, Southworth not only creates an alternate world for her readers to explore, when juxtaposed with sentimental writings, but her impulsive or reckless protagonist-Madcap satirizes the controlled, tearful Ellen in *The Wide, Wide World*. Capitola, the independent, self-reliant, outspoken, adventurous, female protagonist chooses to not become the obedient middle-class, ideal Christian lady that Ellen Montgomery becomes in *The Wide, Wide World*; thus, Capitola proves to be the antithesis of Ellen Montgomery. Jane Tompkins in *Sensational Designs* argues that although Ellen may outwardly conform to social and Christian expectations for a woman, she inwardly “becomes master of her fate and subject to no one outside herself” (165). In contrast to Tompkins’s claim, I would argue that Ellen

never has an independent voice or control over her own destiny because she is subjected to elders' demands throughout the novel, which I believe Southworth found appalling because her novel talks back to such patriarchal thoughts found in *The Wide, Wide World*, and, as Dobson argues, Southworth "attacks with ridicule a gender ethos that implicitly suggests that women are at the disposal of the men who have authority over them" (xxviii).

Since one can assume that most of Southworth's readers would have been familiar with Warner's best-selling sentimental novel, they would have been able to identify the fantastical, unrestrained, eccentric behavior of Capitola the Madcap as humorous satire that was meant to challenge the submissive, ideal woman whom Ellen Montgomery represents. When Southworth carnivalizes the stipulation of dutiful woman, she likewise creates elements of Menippean satire: she creates extraordinary, fantastical situations for her protagonist to encounter, while criticizing the philosophical idea that women should be passive, meek adults who need to be taken care of by men and be obedient to them. Menippean satire, according to Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, is when the fantastic can take "on the character of an adventure story" with the purpose of testing "an *idea*, . . . a *truth*, and not the testing of a particular human character, whether an individual or a social type" (114-15). *The Hidden Hand* represents Bakhtin's explanation of Menippean satire because the fantastical narrative is an adventure story that uses a daring female to prove a truth: women do not have to be dependent on others, but rather can function as independent, bright, assertive people. Through her employment of Menippean satire, Southworth constructs a

multi-layered dialogue, meaning the characters in *The Hidden Hand* communicate with one another, while also conversing with readers and with anterior, sentimental texts like *The Wide, Wide World*. In other words, *The Hidden Hand* exemplifies Julia Kristeva's coined word—intertextuality.

The title *The Hidden Hand* symbolically represents the birthmark of a hand on one of Cap's hands, implying that Capitola has been marked as a woman with special qualities that need to be paid attention to by readers. As will be argued, intertextually, the title and the birthmark are representations of the novel's subversive allusions to the hand motif that is used in *The Wide, Wide World*. Cap uses her hands and her dialogical wit to save herself from villains, whereas Ellen always depends on others to rescue her from antagonists. In one episode, Cap outsmarts the scoundrel Black Donald with her sharp dialogue that decenters him, allowing her to send him through the trap door in her bedroom. In a different scene, Cap's hands and cleverness free Clara Day from the villainous Colonel Le Noir, followed by her satirical, humorous announcement to Le Noir about Clara's freedom: "It means that you have been outwitted by a girl" (316). Conversely, when Ellen has her first encounter with Mr. Sanders, she lapses into tears instead of showing bravado and using language to verbally defend herself as Cap would have done. Ellen, the sentimental hero, is fittingly rescued by a respected, elderly man of the community. While traveling on a boat to her aunt's home, she is emotionally distraught because she must leave her mother. Again an older gentleman saves her from despair and has her believe that she will be safe in the hands of the Christian savior if she believes in him (63). Independent Cap saves

herself and others in various episodes while Ellen is taught to be dependent on males and put her life in their hands, both tangibly and metaphorically.

Through Cap, Southworth encourages women to claim power over their own destinies, an alternative image when compared to Warner's Ellen. Cap's surprise encounter with Le Noir's lecherous son Craven subverts the episode in which Ellen unexpectedly meets the rogue Mr. Sanders. When on a return ride on her pony to Hurricane Hall, Cap is startled by Craven. The scene is not only controlled by Cap with humorous satire, but the dialogue between Cap and Craven satirizes Ellen's dialogue with Mr. Sanders. While speaking to Craven, Capitola claims, "I'm not witty nor amusing" (117). Yet the irony is that she is just that—witty and amusing to the readers because she outwits the villain throughout their encounter and conversation, and he doesn't realize it. In contrast, when Ellen rides home on her pony and meets Mr. Sanders on the road, she tells him, "but I want to get home very much—*please* let me go" (363). She continues to plead unsuccessfully, putting herself at the mercy of Mr. Sanders's abusive language and treatment, the opposite of Cap's bold discourse with Craven. Ellen's friend John comes to her rescue by throwing Sanders in a gulley by the side of the road, followed by John appropriately calming her: "He gently took one of her hands, the convulsive squeeze it gave him showed the state of nervous excitement she was in. It was very long before his utmost efforts could soothe her" (368). Thus Ellen is saved by a man's hands, whereas daring Cap saves herself through her own mental aptitude and her sharp dialogue, leaving Craven to realize that "he had been outwitted by a child!" (118), a female child.

Through opposite lenses, Warner has Ellen continue to be dependent until the end, whereas Cap, who marries, never loses her independent wit. In Warner's concluding chapter, John comes to visit Ellen in England. She is elated, but at one point, she cannot control her convulsive emotions, so John, as he did in the past, calms her by holding one of her hands: "[H]e quietly possessed himself of one of her hands, and when in her excitement the hand struggled to get away again, it was not permitted. . . . Better than words, the calm firm grasp of his hand quieted her" (516). She in return takes his hand in hers, "But that was not permitted to last either, for his hand quickly imprisoned hers again" (516). For a feminist, the verb imprisoned must be subverted, which Southworth does through intertextuality. Southworth's narrator tells readers that Cap will never be a controlled female: "And I know for a positive fact, that our Cap sometimes gives her 'dear, darling, sweet Herbert,' the benefit of the sharp edge of her tongue, which of course he deserves" (485). Humorous, satirical wit concludes *The Hidden Hand*, the subversive antithesis to the sentimental language of *The Wide, Wide World*. Cap will never lose her spunky, independent personality, a contrast to the sentimental behavior of Ellen Montgomery.

With humorous, satirical dialogue, Southworth entertains her public while also rebelling against anterior texts like *The Wide, Wide World*, as well as subverting the accepted ideology that women are sentimental beings who need to be controlled by the hands of men. Southworth's fantastical narrative fulfills a tenet of Menippean satire: address "ultimate questions" (Bakhtin 115). The

nineteenth-century women's question concerning the need for gender equality has been answered with an affirmative response from Southworth.

While employing her humorous satire to upset sentimentalism, Southworth also talks back to a newspaper report that she had read. According to Dobson, Southworth in 1857 read an obituary in a New York newspaper about a "nine-year-old girl dressed in boy's clothing, and selling newspapers," who was arrested because she had cross-dressed; the girl, "homeless and friendless . . . was sent to some asylum in Westchester County" (qtd. in Dobson xxvii). Determined to expose and ridicule the unfair law of employment for males only, while concurrently providing agency for destitute females, Southworth creates a self-assured protagonist who divulges the hypocrisy of the gendered law. Representing Kristeva's idea of intertextuality, Southworth constructs a dialogue between what actually happened and an alternative way of action. Consequently, Southworth's fictional female character substantiates Nancy Walker's argument in *Feminist Alternatives*, in which she claims that reality is insufficient for women's identity, so a "socially created identity becomes replaced . . . [by] an alternative identity that views the socially created self ironically" (75). When the discovery of Capitola being disguised as a boy is revealed and discussed, in Chapters V-VII, the befuddled male court clerk and recorder continuously transpose the gendered common nouns, boy and girl, revealing their confusion and the duplicity of gender identification when addressing Capitola. Their humorous, satirical dialogue emphasizes Southworth's point that gendered roles need to be re-evaluated: "Boy—*girl* I should say—what tempted you to put yourself into male attire?"

(41). The unfair practice of only the male gender being allowed to work outside the domestic sphere is being ridiculed, especially when analyzing orphans' legitimate needs to support themselves. Southworth's fictional construct of reality implies the following admonition: if a girl can do work reserved for a boy, allow her to do so. Through Cap, Southworth mocks the finite rules for gendered jobs.

At one point, Cap responds to the men of law by explaining, "I thought to myself *if I were only a boy*, I might carry packages, and shovel in coal, and do lots of jobs by day. . . . I felt bitter against fate for not making me a boy! . . . And then, all of a sudden, a bright thought struck me: *and I made up my mind to be a boy!*"

(46). Southworth, with her clever manipulation of dialogue, scoffs at what Dobson calls "the limiting nature of codified gender roles" (xxvii). Moreover, Southworth's protagonist exemplifies a Marxist-feminist argument concerning the denial of self-sustainability for women: Cap, a thirteen-year-old girl, declaring employment laws gender-biased to a court full of men can only be read as subversive humor, satirizing the capitalist-patriarchal laws, the ideological superstructure of capitalism that literally kept women economically oppressed and dependent on men. Fantastical, satirical Capitola and her adventures as a boy not only characterize a purpose of Menippean satire, which is that fantasy can be used to seek truth, but she also represents Walker's thought: "The use of fantasy in women's fiction is a way of exploring and challenging assumptions about women's lives" (*Feminist Alternatives* 55).

One can only interpret Southworth's claim—"Reader! I do not defend, far less approve, poor Cap! I only tell her story and describe her as I have seen her,

leaving her to your charitable interpretation”—as humorous satire (121). Relying on verbal irony, Southworth very much approves of Cap and her audacious behavior and language; after all, she created her likeable character Cap, whose purpose is to bring forth the need to regender America.

Marietta Holley

There is a myth in America: women are not humorous, only men are. In *Humor and Laughter, An Anthropological Approach*, one of Mahadev L. Apte's basic premises concerning women's humor is that women cannot fully develop their talent for creating humor as men can because patriarchy promotes men's humor and not women's (69), an argument that favors the principle that men own the language, and more specifically, humor belongs exclusively to men. However, not only does E.D.E.N. Southworth's satirical humor in *The Hidden Hand* refute Apte's assertion that women cannot develop their humor as well as men, Marietta Holley's satirically humorous narrative, *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's*, also does so. Both writers prove that women can and do develop literary humor quite proficiently, in spite of patriarchal prohibition. Since their narratives were as popular as Mark Twain's witty tales, one can argue that language can be used quite effectively by either gender for political purposes. According to Kate H. Winter in her biography of Marietta Holley, "She [Holley] was called the Female Mark Twain in the popular press" (1). The gender-biased title given to Holley can be interpreted as Holley's writings are to be considered secondary to Twain's. Since both Holley and Twain are known to have produced best-selling

narratives, the more accurate way to acknowledge them as equals in their literary wit and humor is to announce that two of the most prolific, political satirists in the nineteenth century were Holley and Twain, instead of allowing history to continuously recognize Twain as the eminent one. Thus, to contest and reformulate Apte's assertion that women cannot fully develop their literary humor in a patriarchal society, one could argue that humorists like Twain are acknowledged more readily from an *historical* perspective, which does not equate to women not developing their humor profoundly.

Just as significant as women's humorous satire being noted as equal to men's, Holley, like Southworth, markedly destabilizes sentimentalism with her creative wit and humor. Holley's protagonist, Samantha Allen, early in the narrative, identifies herself as a rational, common-sense, hard-working farmer's wife who abhors sentimentality: "No! sentiment aint my style . . ." (24). Though Samantha is devoted to her husband of fifteen years, her loyalty is not based on sentimentality, as she explains in an agitated, yet humorous way to naïve, sentimental Betsey: "I am expected to do all the smilin' and cooin' there is done, though you know . . . I haint no time for it" (65). Samantha Allen is not the representative voice for sentimentality, but rather the voice for hundreds of agricultural women who labored equally as hard as their husbandry husbands, yet the women weren't allowed a political voice. Samantha rationally argues for women's suffrage, while concurrently carnivalizing those who are against the needed political progress for women.

As an advocate for women's rights, Holley, in her narrative, tackles two false ideologies that hindered women's socioeconomic progress: antagonistic ideas toward women's suffrage disclosed through the language of men, represented by Samantha's husband, Josiah; and the genteel values to which some women, like Betsey Bobbet, were determined to adhere. Every traditionally authoritative statement that Josiah makes concerning women's rights is satirically ridiculed by Samantha. For example, Josiah states, "I mean that women hain't no business votin'; they had better let the laws alone, and tend to their housework. The law loves wimmin and protects 'em" (87). Samantha humorously retorts, "If the law loves wimmin so well, why don't he give her as much wages as men get for doin' the same work! Why don't he give her half as much, Josiah Allen?" (87). Within the pages wherein Samantha continues to denounce her husband's chauvinist comments about the law, she uses the word *sect* as a malapropism for sex: "Now I love to see folks reason if they have got any—and I won't stand no importations cast on to my sect" (87). The double language of the female sex being identified as a *sect* is satirically humorous and meaningful for Holley's female readers because for Holley and the voices she represents, *sect* means that when women are compared to men, women have no political leverage for their own lives. They have been subjugated to a secondary position in society because of men's decision to exclude them from public politics. Through Samantha and Josiah's verbal battles, Holley acknowledges what nineteenth-century American women knew: men were the privileged sex. With her characters' verbal exchanges, Holley has created representative voices of social heteroglossia, which

is consistent with Eileen Gillooly's premise about women's humor bringing "attention to the multiple, often conflicting, interpretive possibilities of language and, in so doing, undermin[ing] the authority of the official story that language is employed to tell" ("Women and Humor" 477). Holley demonstrates that language is not controlled by one group only, but can be used by others for political gain.

The political gain for which Holley writes is for women to be able to diffuse the socioeconomic, political stronghold men had in America. Holley pragmatically recognized what Marxist feminists, like Heidi Hartmann, argue a century later: "We can usefully define patriarchy as a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women" ("The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism" 101). And Linda Morris in "Women Vernacular Humorists in Nineteenth-Century America" indicates, "Holley wished to puncture the male ego so women would not accept male dominance and control as a 'natural' social phenomenon" (197). Morris's critique of Holley's writing is exemplified by Holley's character Samantha when she reminds her husband that it is considered appropriate for her and other women to handle the hop pole and the cistern pole but not proper for them to go to the polls to vote (*My Opinions* 92-93). Holley's clever use of the word pole, coupled with the irony of the situation in which women can conduct hard labor but not drop "a little slip of clean paper into a small seven by nine box, once a year" at a local voting poll (92), suggests the absurdity of American men's logic.

Emphasizing her argument that women are treated as subordinates to men and are kept from political involvement in men's politics, Holley uses malapropism for another humorous situation in her book. According to Linda Morris, Holley's application of malapropism, when she uses *spear* for the word *sphere*, is to be interpreted as "an integral part of her social criticism" (8). For instance, Holley has Samantha visit the presidential candidate Horace Greeley in order to argue for women's rights. After Samantha catalogues for Greeley the substantial roles that biblical women play in the story of Jesus, Greeley's response is, "Wedlock was woman's true spear. In the noble position of wife and mother, there lay her greatest happiness, and her only true spear" (390). Holley creates the fictional dialogue between Samantha and Greeley to demonstrate that male politicians are afraid of the power of women. Greeley, who represents the voice of male heteroglossia, reveals what Holley believed to be true: men wanted women to stay in their proper place—in the domestic space. For Holley and for a Marxist-feminist, women required to provide non-wage labor at home are placed in a socioeconomic, politically powerless position. According to Margaret Benston in "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation,"

In a society in which money determines value, women are a group who work outside the money economy. Their work is not worth money, is therefore valueless, is therefore no real work. And women themselves, who do this valueless work, can hardly be expected to be worth as much as men, who work for money. (19)

Though Holley wrote years before Benston did, the satirical humorous dialogue between Holley's characters supports, in a humorous subversive style, Benston's statement. Moreover, when Holley has her male character say *spear* in place of *sphere*, putting this language in the mouth of a male character produces true satirically humorous double-edged irony since it is men who demanded that women belong only in the home, which in turn influenced women to use the domestic sphere as a social weapon. Holley carnivalizes male's hegemonic dialogue about a woman's place in society through her representation of Horace Greeley. Through Greeley's dialogue, Holley turns patriarchal language back on itself. Thus, a male character's diction paradoxically subverts the patriarchal norm for women, while also representing a Marxist-feminist argument as stated by Benston.

For Samantha Allen's foil, Betsey Bobbet, Holley uses the technique of exaggeration because, as Leonard Feinberg points out in *Introduction to Satire*, "By distorting accepted values, exaggeration makes them seem ludicrous" (105). Betsey, with her false teeth, her fake curls, her bad complexion, her large nose, and her bad sentimental poetry is the caricature of genteel women. Nancy Walker, in *A Very Serious Thing*, appropriately identifies Betsey as "the sentimental clinging-vine type," which Holley, according to Walker, uses as a warning to "women who might behave similarly" (63). Three pages after Samantha Allen declared that she is not sentimental (quoted earlier in this chapter), Holley uses humorous critical diction to identify her foil, Betsey: "[T]he sentimentalist, you couldn't squeeze a laugh out of her with a cheese press" (27). Bobbet's only

concern is “the right to get married” (27), which she pursues diligently, scoffed at repeatedly by Samantha. Although, at the end of the narrative, Betsey Bobbet does capture seventy-year-old Simon Slimpsey for her husband, the incongruity of the situation is that poor Simon Slimpsey finds himself in Bobbet’s black web—her women’s sphere/spear—as revealed by Betsey, who declares, “He shall not escape me!” (413). The sentimental ideal that Betsey once held—“I have always felt that it was woman’s highest speah, her only mission to soothe, to cling, to smile, to coo” (62)—is replaced with a realistic representation of marriage with Betsey experiencing hard work and hard times in an unromantic marriage that she herself insisted on. For Walker in “Wit, Sentimentality, and the Image of Women,” Betsey’s victory is a hollow one because she becomes a ludicrous, pathetic character (80). With the character Betsey Bobbet, Holley recontextualizes sentimentality.

Like Southworth creating intertextuality with an anterior text, Holley does so with preceding satirical, political writings by Seba Smith, the creator of the popular character Jack Downing, an unsophisticated country lad who travels to the city in order to investigate the world of politicians. In *Native American Humor*, Walter Blair states that Smith’s Downing letters include “laughable turns of Yankee speech and illiterate spelling, portraits of politicians which had the amusing quality of well-executed caricatures” (47), all of which Holley implements in her narrative. In fact, because of the enormous popularity of the Down East Humor that Smith and other writers used during the nineteenth century, Holley, according to Winter, continues the style but with a different

regional dialect for *My Opinions* (42). However, Holley fractures the humorous, satirical political writings of men by not writing solely about men, for men, but rather she produces similar political humor for women, from a feminist perspective. In her novel, her character Samantha Allen boldly intrudes into men's political space by promoting women's rights. Blair tells that the Portland, Maine, newspaper publications of Seba Smith's writings, from 1834-1863, humorously critiqued political business of the Maine legislators and national politicians (40). In one letter, Downing has a friendly chat with President Jackson (44), which Holley emulates when she has Samantha visit Horace Greeley. Holley takes Smith's anecdote and subverts the tale by having a woman step out of the domestic realm and converse with a national politician. She announces to her readers that women, as well as men, can venture into the public arena and dialogue about political issues.

Holley also subverts Smith's writing when she has Samantha write to her husband when she is in New York, instead of a male writing about the political scene to a female relative, as mythical Jack Downing writes to his Aunt Keziah. One can speculate that Holley is not only destabilizing traditional gender roles, with Samantha traveling for a political purpose while her husband stays at home, but she seems to be playing with the spelling of *Keziah*, when she uses *Josiah* Allen's wife, the woman who does not stay at home as Aunt *Keziah* does. Additionally, since most nineteenth-century Americans knew biblical stories, Holley takes the biblical character King Josiah, who influenced favorable reforms for the Jewish people, and has her character, Josiah's wife, speak in favor of

socioeconomic reforms for women. It can be deduced that there is a literary, subversive intertextual dialogue occurring between Seba Smith and Holley, as well as between the Old Testament authors and Holley. Consequently, Holley in her novel proves that language is not controlled by male writers, but rather language can be used by a woman author who wishes to unfetter women from their less than equal socioeconomic positions.

Holley brings women's issues to the forefront. And as Walter Blair states in *Horse Sense in American Humor*, "I think there can be no doubt that Samantha did more for the cause than many hard workers ever accomplished by serious speeches and arguments" (238-39). Because Holley created a rural, hard working married woman as her spokesperson for women's rights instead of a more liberated feminist like Victoria Woodhull, Kate Winter argues that "her conservatism and pragmatism based on a sense of justice and expediency won audiences that would otherwise be antagonistic to her feminist ideals" (51). One can infer that Holley's popular, non-sentimental, subversive humorous narrative resonated with her immediate audience, who were perhaps, predominantly, hard-working Americans who had no time for sentimentalism but did want some common-sense direction with the woman's question.

Even though Holley's novel *My Opinion and Betsey Bobbet's* was extremely popular, she was mostly interested in using her novel for satirical, subversive purposes rather than its intriguing story. Her humorous, satirical commentary through her characters' dialogues aligns with Feinberg's insight, "Plot is rarely the most important component of a satire. The satirist's real

purpose is to comment rather than narrate, criticize rather than recite” (226).
Feinberg also believes that satirists are not interested in individuality but rather humanity, which Holley exemplifies (232). Holley’s satirical political humor aligns itself with Walker’s assertion that women write satirically to mock the myth that women are not intellectual (*A Very Serious Thing* 87). One must be able to analyze, with logic, the incongruities of a culture in order to challenge them with assertive language, which Holley did quite well with her feminist wit.

Satirical writers like Jacobs, Southworth, and Holley wrote to promote change. Therefore, they would most likely disagree with Feinberg’s assertion that satirical pieces are fun to read with the understanding that the writer and reader “have no real intention of ever doing anything about it [the topic being satirized]” (*Introduction to Satire* 7). Literary humorous satire is entertaining, but it also can speak to readers about change and influence those readers to act.

Women’s Socioeconomic Issues in the Twentieth Century

Although women had obtained the right to vote in the twentieth century and the emancipation of slaves had occurred, such cultural shifts did not provide as much change for minorities as some had hoped, meaning patriarchal capitalism still reigned with many women still living as marginal citizens. So regardless of the one hundred years between the second half of the nineteenth century and the second half of the twentieth century, numerous American women writers in the latter part of the twentieth century continued to contest socioeconomic, political issues as Jacobs, Southworth, and Holley did in the nineteenth century. Even

though twentieth-century feminist writers subvert patriarchy from different perspectives, such as Alvarez, who satirizes twentieth-century Latino machismo in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, and Hershey, who mocks modern-day truck drivers in *Truck Dance*, they both draw attention to women's subordinate social positions. And in spite of specific social context differences between the nineteenth- and the twentieth-century writers, there are some parallel situations about the expectation for women to be dependent on men that are humorously satirically addressed by Alvarez and Holley. Like Southworth, who uses humorous satire to challenge constricting gender roles, that is, the expectation for women to be docile beings as well as criticizing the limited opportunity for women to be economically self-reliant, Hershey in the twentieth century humorously subverts the idea that women are to adhere to gender codified socioeconomic roles and positions.

Julia Alvarez

For too long in America, Latina and Chicana literary voices were not encouraged to be heard. Maria Herrera-Sobek, in her introduction to *Beyond Stereotypes: The Critical Analysis of Chicana Literature*, argues that the impediment to Chicana publications was mainly “the male control of Chicano literary critics, professors and publishers. The male control of Chicano publication enterprises is a most important element in the analysis of Chicana literary production” (11). After the Chicano Renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s, as Silvo Sirias explains in *Julia Alvarez: A Critical Companion*, the publication of Latina

and Chicana prose began to flourish in the 1980s, proving that they too could own the language for political, subversive purposes (13). Feminist Latina and Chicana writers had something to say about women's prescribed roles, which is evident in Alvarez's narrative about the García girls' experiences in New York as well as in the Dominican Republic. In *Latino Literature in America*, Bridget Kevane comments about Latina writers like Alvarez. She argues that Latina writers include the immigrants' struggles between the new and old ideals, represented by female characters defying the traditional, stipulated, domestic role for Latinas (11). Though the García girls deal with the cultural conflicts between their new, more liberal mainland home, New York, and the old, established, traditional expectations of the Dominican Republic, Kevane suggests, it is "the formidable culture of Latino patriarchy and machismo" that the girls intensely rebel against (11). They rebel with success, not only against patriarchy on the island, but also on the mainland.

One of the rebellious episodes that the García girls become involved in proves to be one of the most satirically humorous scenes in the novel. Because the parents of the García girls did not want their daughters to lose their sense of true Dominican culture, they were sent back to the island every summer to stay with relatives, that is, until the youngest, Sofía/Fifi, disrupts the tradition. While the girls are spending a summer on the island, their mother, Laura, discovers Fifi's bag of hidden marijuana in the girls' New York bedroom. Fifi's punishment is to choose between two options, both unfavorable to her: to return to New York and live with her parents while her sisters continue to go to a boarding school, or to

stay on the island for a year. Fifi chooses the latter. When Laura and her three daughters visit Fifi at Christmas, Fifi has transformed herself from her independent, no make-up persona, to a gussied-up “Spanish-American princess” (Alvarez 118). She has become the twentieth-century, Spanish American version of Betsey Bobbet, meaning she and Betsey both focus on their looks and the idea that marriage is the best avenue for women. As Betsey keeps her false hair and false teeth in place, Fifi insists that her hair stay in perfect form, as she tells her sisters, who are shocked at her new look and new attitude, “Don’t muss my hair” (118). Of course, Fifi’s own dialogue about her new obsession with beauty is to be read as humorous satire in the same way as Holley’s dialogical description about Bobbet’s looks in *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet’s*.

Unlike Betsey Bobbet, who must endure an unhappy marriage to Slimpsey, Fifi is saved from a marriage to tyrannical Manuel by her three feminist sisters, Carla, Sandra, and Yolanda. Just as Betsey had been convinced about true womanhood in the nineteenth century, Fifi, before she is rescued by her sisters, is “brainwashed” by the Dominican Republic’s ideology about machismo and subservient women (126). Like Betsey, Fifi, as Sirias notes, allows herself to succumb to patriarchal prescriptions for a woman’s proper place, as “wife, mother, and mistress of the house, nothing more” (50). Fifi is compliantly determined to make her fiancé, Manuel, happy, as indicated by one of her statements about not using contraception: “‘He thinks it might cause impotence,’ Fifi says, smiling sweetly, cherishing his cute male ignorance” (123). Fifi’s attitude is parallel to Betsey’s naïve, romantic attitude about love, found in her

poem “Owed to Love,” where she writes that a woman should “live for love—and live to cling” (Holley 66). Both Alvarez and Holley use their character’s language to create for their readers a humorous satirical understanding of such foolish, unrealistic, submissive ideas.

After the three García sisters question Manuel about women’s rights in the Republic, ending with Manuel’s final response to one of their questions, “But men wear the pants,” they decide that “the revolution is on” (122); in other words, they must save their sister, Fifi, from macho Manuel. For Sirias, the sisters’ success against Manuel represents the ability of Latina women to achieve triumph “in their fight against patriarchy, machismo, and conservatism” (51). “Revolution” is meant to be understood as an ironic pun for Alvarez, for her characters, and for her readers because the García sisters had to leave their home as a result of Dominican men’s revolution, yet because of the revolution, the girls no longer want to adhere to the machismo tradition of the Island. As Kevane argues, they instead rebel against the old ways and follow “the ideas, customs, and traditions of their new world” (12). Like characters identified earlier in this chapter, the sisters have turned patriarchal language back on itself, using a word such as “revolution” for their own feminist freedom, an unexpected, satirical twist on the original Dominican political revolution, as well as an ironic twist to Marx’s idea of revolution. The García sisters’ revolution is a Marxist-feminist revolution against what Michele Barrett identifies as a woman’s identity being “tied to a household” and “dependence of women on a male wage (or capital)” (“Capitalism and Women’s Liberation” 126-27). Alvarez, as Jacobs, Southworth, and Holley

do, substantiates Roller's theory that female and male characters have conflicts within feminist narratives that represent the sexual politics in the backdrop for which the novel speaks. Her characters' voices represent the voices that Alvarez has heard on the mainland of America and on the Dominican Republic island, voices that represent patriarchal capitalism and those that represent Marxist feminism.

The conclusion is a victory for the feminists, Carla, Sandra, and Yolanda. The three arrange a plan so that Fifi and Manuel are not chaperoned by them and a male cousin, which is unacceptable on the island, as established by Mundín, the male cousin who says, "Girls are not to be left unchaperoned with their *novios*" (Alvarez 128). When the girls' mother discovers Fifi has been unaccompanied by her sisters, she declares that Fifi will return to the states; consequently, Fifi is furious. However, the conclusion of the sisters is that "she'll get over it" (132). The "Spanish American Princess" is saved from herself by her feminist sisters, which is an outcome different from that for Betsey Bobbet. In spite of unlike social contexts and the different time periods which Holley and Alvarez represent, the premise of a feminist writer and her feminist characters warning women about illusory ideas about marriage through the use of humorous, satirical dialogism found in Alvarez's and Holley's novels is comparable.

In an ironic twist, the same youngest García girl, Sophía, who was rescued from her escapade with Manuel, resists her traditional father's fury and concern about her "dragging [his] good name through the dirt" because she has allowed herself to be deflowered (30). As Sirias argues, "Carlos, the father, also subscribes

to machismo. It is ingrained in him” (45). Carlos believes that a woman must remain a virgin until marriage, a code that benefits men “almost exclusively” (Sirias 47-48). However, as father and daughter exchange verbal accusations, Sophía exemplifies a Latina feminist attitude when she tells him, “You have no right, no right at all, to go through my stuff or read my mail!” (Alvarez 30). His other three daughters come to Sophía’s aid: “Come on, Papi, simmer down now. Take it easy. Let’s talk. We’re a family, after all” (30). Humorously, through dialogue Carlos’s own daughters override his authority, which for Sirias “constitutes a victory for Latinas, and by extension, for all women” (45). The idea that the Latino father has the ultimate say about the women in his house has been subverted by his daughters, as Sirias observes, “[T]hey speak for an entire population that historically has been without voice” (44-45). Assertive daughters can also mean that they will not subject themselves to be dominated by other men, either in the home or in the work force, changing their lower material status in the gendered hierarchy in patriarchal capitalism. Alvarez has given her Latina characters a sense of independence and control over their own lives, as Jacobs does with Linda Brent, the slave who talks back to her owner, as Southworth does with Cap, who lives successfully outside of domesticity, and as Holley’s Samantha is a foil to sentimental, clinging Betsey Bobbet. The nineteenth-century female characters would not allow themselves to be controlled by a male just as Sophía would not allow a male to control her destiny. Albeit, one would think that after a hundred years, twentieth-century American women writers would not have

had to address the need for a female character to play out a subversive role, and yet it seems to be necessary since patriarchy still had a stronghold.

Olive Hershey

Truck Dance by Olive Hershey is not as well-known as the other narratives discussed in this chapter, but perhaps it should be. The twentieth-century novel is as daring and subversive as the nineteenth-century narrative *The Hidden Hand*, with echoes of Cap in Wilma, the protagonist of *Truck Dance*. As Cap challenges the discrepancy between gender roles, so does Wilma. Wilma challenges an old patriarchal rule concerning men-only-membership for a Texas gun club. Bantering dialogue occurs between a member of the club and Wilma, with Wilma's humorous, defiant remarks undermining the traditional ways of the club:

“If you hadn't given me this job, I'da never learned in the first place,” Wilma said. “If I win this darned thing, are you gonna make me a member?”

“Shoot, Wilma,” the old man said, “you know good and well the club charter doesn't let us take in ladies.”

“What makes you think I'm a lady, Admiral?” she said.

(59)

Hershey's feminist character, Wilma, challenges patriarchal language with her sarcastic dialogical questions. Her last interrogative is meant to influence a re-evaluation of the reductive idea that all women are ladies, meaning women are too

delicate and too frail to be part of a men's gun club, a fallacy that is comparable to the nineteenth-century argument found in Holley's narrative: voting polls were too dangerous for women. Also, by defying the term "ladies," Wilma spoils the long traditional thinking about the exclusion of women by socially codified regulations that favor men. Her outspoken awareness of double standards is comparable to Cap's humorous comments about unequal gender standards, when in the court room in *The Hidden Hand*. Wilma's humorously satirical ridicule exemplifies Robert Elliott's statement, "Ridicule is, as far as one can tell, ubiquitous, used by every people as a means of influencing behavior" (69), proving that women can use ridiculing dialogue as well as men, substantiating my claim that language can be utilized by either gender for political purposes.

Continuing the focus on the dialogue between the admiral and Wilma, Hershey points out through her characters' dialogue that, ironically, Wilma is allowed to compete in the shooting contest as an equal to men yet not allowed to be a member of the venerated men's gun club. The admiral, who represents the twentieth-century male's voice of gender sanction, serves as a parody of patriarchal language and practice, especially since he uses the term "ladies" as a linguistic way of denying membership to women. He models the premise that men are the deviant ones in society since they practice gender segregation. Women who want gender parity are not the intolerant ones; instead, it is the male gender. In the *Power of Satire*, Robert Elliott claims that ridicule can be "a potent deterrent to deviant behavior" (69), which is clearly exemplified in Hershey's

jeering at patriarchal language and practices through her constructed dialogue between Wilma and the admiral.

Hershey's motif of needed gender equality continues when Wilma expresses her desire for self-sufficiency: "I want to learn to do something as well as a man. Take care of myself" (64). Wilma's wish reiterates young Capitola's willingness to do the work reserved for boys. Even though the teenage Cap acquires a middle-class status and Wilma, middle-aged, is from the working class, they both use language to help obtain independence. Although Southworth and Hershey's writings represent different centuries, their female protagonists symbolically signify the same need espoused by nineteenth- and twentieth-century American women: socioeconomic parity with men.

As Southworth included elements of Menippean satire to challenge the ideology that women and domesticity are a bond that should not be broken, so too does Hershey. Hershey, as Southworth did, has her unconventional, daring protagonist use humorous satirical language coupled with bizarre adventures in order to support a feminist truth: women can survive socially and economically in a world that privileges men. After Wilma discovers that her husband, "still boyish at fifty" (4), has taken her savings as well as his so that he could start a catfish farm in East Texas, after her husband has told her that their drug-addicted son is "nothing but a big kid with runaway hormones, sugar" (14), and after she has learned of her husband's affair with the local librarian, she decides that she can quit her gendered, truck-stop waitress job and fulfill her dream of wanting to do something as well as a man, which is to become a truck driver. Though Wilma

could not break through the men-only-code for the male gun club, she does fracture the truck driving males' world when she becomes a truck driver.

Instead of riding a pony, as Cap does to go on adventures, Wilma drives an eighteen wheeler to participate in the world beyond domesticity. Like Cap, Wilma encounters ruffians and is able to outwit them, while she herself learns how to survive and thrive. Gary, whom she met when she was a waitress, becomes her sponsor on the road. When in Louisiana, Gary and Wilma are introduced to a Ku Klux Klan group celebrating Fat Tuesday. Menippean satire is exploited when the bizarre, eccentric, crude behavior of the Klan and their macho treatment of Wilma are subverted with her humorous, satirical, rhetorical question, "What is a bunch of grown men doing in this foolishness, anyhow?" (108). For readers, there is really no answer needed to her question since it is obvious that her question is humorously critical of the group, but Hershey cleverly has one of the male participants respond, "The child's the father of the man" (108). The man's response, the famous line from Wordsworth's poem "My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold," has been decontextualized from its original Romantic context. For Hershey and her readers, the line has been recontextualized as a humorously satirical statement that can be interpreted as indicating that the Ku Klux Klan members remain childish. As the other feminist writers discussed in this chapter have done, Hershey has turned a male character's language into a parody of itself as well as mocking the men dressed in white Ku Klux Klan robes. Wordsworth's line that has been revered by many as an exceptional poetic line has now been carnivalized by one of Hershey's unsophisticated male character's

dialogue, producing a self-disparaging attitude toward the Ku Klux Klan.

Wordsworth's authoritative place in poetic history and the Klan's once hegemonic status in the South have been undermined by Hershey, reinforcing Bakhtin's idea that a once accepted thought can be carnivalized, producing an alternative way of understanding.

As the Louisiana scene continues, so does the implementation of Menippean satire. The humor and satire continue when Gary, in a drug-overdosed state, tries unsuccessfully to molest Wilma. As Wilma physically outmaneuvers him, it is his dialogue that Hershey uses to mock the male ego: "‘Tease,’ he said. ‘Slut.’ . . . ‘Who do you think you are? Miss Texas?’" (112). Pompous Gary, the representative of certain twentieth-century men, not only incriminates himself with worn-out misogynistic clichés, but a feminist writer, along with her readers, would find the language unsubstantial, especially as the episode ends with Wilma outwitting him. The scene parallels the incident where Black Donald believes he will be able to take advantage of Cap in her bedroom; however, he, like Gary, is outfoxed by a woman. Through outrageous satirical situations, an element of Menippean satire, the female protagonists from two different eras evidence a feminist position: women can sabotage men's pretentious authority.

Wilma becomes more independent when she buys her own semi-truck. While she finds the freedom and adventure that she was looking for, she also helps the Catholic Charity by smuggling downtrodden illegal Mexican immigrants, which eventually causes her to lose her truck. With no truck, she

returns home to Vernon, whose catfish farm actually has turned into a success: “‘I’m countin’ on you’ she said, ‘payin’ back the money you stole’” (311). She is confident enough to return to one of her original nemeses to acquire what is rightly hers. However, unlike *The Hidden Hand*, with the audience knowing that Cap will marry a man of standards equal to hers, a typical nineteenth-century ending even for a feminist text, readers do not know if Vernon and Wilma’s marriage will stay intact. Readers are unsure if Vernon will travel with Wilma, for her last question and the last line in the novel is, “‘Want to take a run to Alaska when the permafrost melts?’” (312). Whether Vernon accompanies Wilma to Alaska is unclear; however, what is apparent is that Wilma owns the last words of the novel, and she does not plan to return to the patriarchal, controlled environment she once had experienced when living with Vernon, her two sons, and their trapped animals in her kitchen—of course the trapped animals in her kitchen are symbolic of her being trapped in domesticity. She is a forty-four-year-old married woman who has an awakening to the need for self-fulfillment and for space of her own.

Thus the character Wilma moves beyond true womanhood, which espouses that women are to always put others first, especially the male gender, an ideal that Marxist-feminists argue against. In “Marxist and Socialist Feminism,” Rosemarie P. Tong maintains, “Marxist feminists aim to create a world in which women can experience themselves as whole persons, as integrated rather than fragmented beings, as people who can be happy even when they are unable to ‘make’ their families and friends happy” (100), which is what Wilma establishes

in Hershey's novel. In order for women to gain a political, socioeconomic presence in America, Barrett contends that "a redivision of the labour and responsibilities of childcare" must occur (127). Hershey's protagonist illustrates Barrett's argument because Wilma leaves her teenaged son, for whom Vernon will be responsible, while she claims her own space when becoming a career truck driver, splintering the male-dominated world of truck driving.

After understanding the similar personalities and needs of Cap and Wilma, one wonders if *Truck Dance* is strangely a long awaited sequel to *The Hidden Hand*. Keeping in mind the different space and time, one can wonder: what if Wilma represents the married Cap?

It may be fun to speculate about whether Wilma could be the twentieth-century version of a married Cap, but what is not humorous is that American women authors like Hershey write about socioeconomic disparities between genders, as did Southworth a hundred years earlier. Though Wilma drives an eight wheeler truck and Cap rides her pony to escape domesticity and though Wilma defuses Gary's sexual advances as Cap outsmarts Black Donald, both Hershey and Southworth utilize humorous satire to address sexual politics and the need for the regendering of America.

Concluding Thoughts

The narratives selected for this chapter represent the idea that American writings offer a wealth of multicultural voices that wish to challenge the privileging of men in the structure of patriarchal capitalism. The writings also

indicate that patriarchal capitalism is a structure that can hegemonically adapt itself to different social contexts, with too many women being subjected to a lower status than men. However, such subjugation is challenged with the women authors' keen satirical humorous dialogues, proving that women can claim equality, not only in the material world which the women's characters represent, but also their satirical writings equal those of men, an idea that is subversive in itself.

Moreover, if American women desire to obtain more equality, then putting aside racial and ethnic divides as well as socioeconomic differences would be beneficial. In *This Bridge Called My Back*, a collection of essays that talked backed to the exclusive white women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s, Rosario Morales in "We're All in the Same Boat" catalogues the various ways hate and prejudice fracture America. She not only wants Americans to correct such destructive ideas and practices, she also wants people, mainly white women, to move beyond classifications—"[C]lass and color and sex do not define people do not define politics" (92-93)—because such fracturing can impede needed political rights for all. Or, as Tong argues, Americans need "to cultivate mutual toleration, respect, and knowledge of each other's cultures and to make sure we all possess the skills and rights necessary to compete in the economic market and the political arena" (215). The narratives that are included in this chapter are to be understood as interconnected, thus reinforcing Tong's argument.

CHAPTER THREE
AMERICAN WOMEN'S DIALOGUES IN SHORT WORKS
DEFY PRESCRIBED FEMALE ROLES

For Bakhtin, only characters in long narratives symbolically represent the voices of reality, but so too can characters of more succinct prose. Short works can be considered just as significant an art form that represents heteroglossia as novels because they also can challenge the status quo “through different languages and speech types” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination* 263). Novelists are influenced by the voices of their social contexts, but producers of short prose pieces are likewise influenced by the languages used in “open spaces of public squares, streets, cities, and villages” (259), with the outcome not limited to polyphonic voices of characters, but in the case of the feminist writers and orator discussed in this chapter, the writings also include cacophonous dialogue derived from humorous satire. Like the novels examined in the preceding chapter, the short stories, sketches, and proclamation selected for this chapter include dialogue that is not only artistically representative of the social context but also symbolic of the linguistic duels and discussions concerning feminists and *other*. Denying Bakhtin’s idea that there are imposed linguistic limits that eliminate dialogical imagination from short works, the subversive female voices found in these terse works contribute to Bakhtin’s argument that artistically constructed languages that denote heteroglossia produce linguistic centrifugal waves: that is, the women’s discourses decenter patriarchal language.

Each of the texts examined in this chapter, “A Church Mouse” by Mary Wilkins Freeman, “And ar’n’t I a woman?” by Sojourner Truth, “Aunt Hetty on Matrimony” and “Owls Kill Hummingbirds” by Fanny Fern, “The Seven-Inch Plague” and “I Want to be More Than Just Another Pretty Face . . .” by Erma Bombeck, “The Paris Gown” by Estela Portillo Trambley, and “The Pocketbook Game” and “The Health Card” by Alice Childress, can be characterized as belonging to a seriocomic genre since each uses humorous, satirical, disobedient language to address social issues significant for women. The writings destabilize an accepted authoritative language; they each demonstrate Robert Burton’s definition of a seriocomic work, which is stated in his dissertation: “Seriocomic forms present a challenge, open or covert, to literary and intellectual orthodoxy, a challenge that is reflected not only in their philosophic content but also in their structure and language” (qtd. in Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 107). Satirical humor can operate as a corrective for serious issues.

A form of humor that satirizes the status quo is carnivalesque language, a rhetorical element of the seriocomic genre. The feminists addressed in this chapter use such language since, with carnivalistic diction, the “one-sided rhetorical seriousness” with its singular meaning and “its dogmatism” is weakened (107). With carnivalesque language, the women give “their sentences the license of carnival, a license to overturn, to mimic, and to ‘deconstruct’” an authoritative voice, as denoted by Judy Little in “Humoring the Sentence: Women’s Dialogic Comedy” (155). Also, Bakhtin indicates that by carnivalizing dogma, there is a transferring of power, and a different view, a fresh view, is provided (*Problems of*

Dostoevsky's Poetics 107), which is precisely what the women who are the focus of this chapter wish to accomplish.

With the dialogue in each selection in this section of my study, the hierarchical structure of authority and non-authority figures is suspended. The traditional performance of carnival, where “people who in life are separated by [an] impenetrable hierarchical barrier enter into free familiar contact on the carnival square” (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 123), applies to the written dialogue concentrated on in this chapter. The subversive, carnivalesque, satirical dialogues prove that “impenetrable hierarchical barrier[s]” can be breached, reversing or at least challenging the American political power structure. The brief writings analyzed in this segment of my research demonstrate that marginalized people can redefine “the world with their language” (Little 167). By means of a double-voiced discourse, or as Bakhtin termed such discourse, the hybridity of languages, women’s dialogical, satirical humor can overturn conventional ideology that is produced through language. By way of carnivalesque language, the norms of patriarchy are mocked and proclaimed authoritative language is subdued, while the de-valued voices of the marginalized are uplifted to an equal standing.

As was referenced in chapter one, Julia Kristeva argues that Menippean satire encompasses carnivalized satire (*Desire in Language* 79). However, not all carnivalesque writing can be labeled as menippea, for a Menippean work includes a fantastical, somewhat bizarre situation, or it leans toward “the scandalous and eccentric in language” (Kristeva 83). Though the works in this chapter do carnivalize authoritative language, only one can be considered a true menippea: “The Paris Gown” by Estela

Portillo Trambley. While the feminist protagonist in the “The Paris Gown” does not “ascend into heaven, descend into the nether world, wander through unknown and fantastic lands” as early Menippean characters did (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 114), she does perform an outrageous, fantastical act that allows her to explore Paris, which was an unfamiliar terrain for her; in addition, she tests “a philosophical idea, a discourse, a truth” (114), a requirement for a menippea. Thus “The Paris Gown” establishes itself as a Menippean satire.

From a Marxist-feminist perspective, women who write not only represent their material social-historical context, consciously including its ideologies into their texts, but those who produce carnivalesque dialogue wish to terminate the stifling narrow roles for women. The women’s discourses discussed in this chapter can be considered, from a Marxist-feminist stance, according to Humm, as “revolutionary,” meaning rebellious, no matter what socioeconomic situation the writer or her characters may represent (75). Even though the American women addressed in this chapter are from different socioeconomic strata, from various ethnicities, and from two different eras, one can argue that their works are politically linked because of their rebellious, humorous satirical dialogism aimed at oppressive patriarchy.

In spite of the different, specific social constraints identified in the women’s works, the selected short pieces of prose for this chapter signify the desire for women to empower themselves through language. This section’s literature and the one oration when placed in the frame of patriarchy can be recognized as representations defiant of hegemonic ideals and practices; they

qualify what Maggie Humm in “Marxist-Feminist Criticism” notes, which is that literature can be a “social agent” for the transformation of political power (78). Wishing to reformulate society, the women’s discourses instigate a form of power for themselves and their female audiences. Through the manipulation of language, whether written or oral, women can move from the feeling of isolation that produces a sense of separation from others to a sense of gender consciousness, encouraging them to break through economic and social barriers.

Subversive Women of the Nineteenth Century

Mary Wilkins Freeman

The renowned nineteenth-century writer Mary Wilkins Freeman wrote in order to support herself and “an indigent aunt,” that is, before she married. Thus, as Perry D. Westbrook, in his revised edition of *Mary Wilkins Freeman*, argues, for practical economic reasons, Wilkins had to please her editors and write “in a manner that custom considered appropriate for a woman writing mainly for women,” which Freeman thought limited her scope (89). Hence her short stories embrace the expected sentimentality, but she also embedded carnivalesque humor, which allowed her to break from *appropriateness*.

Although Freeman can be classified as a local colorist, such identification seems to be too narrow, especially when compared to Mary Reichardt’s understanding of the importance of Freeman’s works: “Freeman’s primary strength as a writer is the universal aspects of her themes, particularly as they apply to women’s lives” (34). Also, in “The Subversion of Genre in the Short

Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman,” Kate Gardner concludes, “The assertion of self against overwhelming odds gives us the heroism of distinctly unheroic types, and the rebellion of a female character against patriarchal structures gives us a distinctly feminist literature ” (449). Hence Freeman’s short stories include women of various ages as strong-spirited, independent women who are able to survive on their own in spite of the mores and laws of patriarchy. Her writings cannot be thought to be limited in scope, but rather her short narratives can be considered seminal feminist pieces.

And even though Freeman does not focus on women’s suffrage as some feminists of her era did, she can be considered as an equally progressive thinker as other feminists. Leah Blatt Glasser argues in her book *In a Closet Hidden: The Life and Works of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman* that because Freeman has her female characters struggling for individual rights in small American towns, not allowing them “to step outside the system that oppresses them or to attempt to bring about widescale social change,” she is not “an outspoken and committed feminist,” especially when compared to the feminist advocate Charlotte Perkins Gilman (214-15). Contrasting Glasser’s view, I would argue that Freeman’s female characters who denounce the prescribed roles for common women in small New England villages should be considered pragmatic, symbolic representatives of the voices of the unheard small-town American women. Are not their situations and voices just as important as urbanite ones? Freeman’s women are not *petty* females in insignificant gender conflicts, but rather they highlight the reasons that American women own the right to be acknowledged as equals to men. Gardner

concisely states what Freeman creates for her female characters: “She grants power to the seemingly powerless” (468), an essential goal for the feminist movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In “A Church Mouse,” Hetty, the spinster protagonist, may not vocalize about women’s suffrage, but she does argue for equal economic opportunities, a substantial Marxist-feminist objective. Hetty challenges not only a male antagonist, but also the entire male-dominated community—that is, until the other women of the village come together as one subversive political voice or, as Westbrook states, “as a community of gender” in order to support Hetty (141). Therefore, Freeman may create feminist literature different from Gilman’s, but the difference does not make Freeman less of a feminist nor her characters non-agents of feminism.

Freeman begins “A Church Mouse” with a confrontational dialogue between Hetty and the influential deacon of the village, Caleb, who stays true to patriarchal thought when he tells Hetty, “I never heard of a woman’s bein’ saxton [sexton]” (407). Known in the village for her frankness and unabashed voice, Hetty, the poorest of the village, contests “the rich and influential” Caleb with her humorous wit:

I dun’know what difference that makes; I don’t see why they shouldn’t have women saxtons as well as men saxtons, for my part, nor nobody else neither. . . . Men git in a good many places where they don’t belong, an’ where they set as awkward as a cow on a hen-roost, jest because they push in ahead of women. I ain’t blamin’ ’em; I s’pose if I could push in I should, jest the same way.

But there ain't no reason that I can see, nor nobody else neither,
why a woman shouldn't be sexton. (407)

Hetty's subversive, sarcastic reply to Caleb not only carnivalizes men's sole claim that the position of a sexton belongs to the male gender, but she also mocks men's assertiveness that sometimes puts them in "awkward" positions. Challenging the tradition of superiors, a true carnival practice, Hetty has turned upside down Caleb's understanding of the way life *should* be when she questions why the sexton position should be reserved for a man. Fracturing what Glasser posits about Freeman not being a "committed feminist," Hetty's determination to gain a position reserved for males is not an inconsequential resistance to a gender-structured community, but rather a move that contests a conundrum that continued throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

As the story continues, small town heteroglossia is symbolically represented with the bantering between Caleb and Hetty. Every "couldn't" that comes from Caleb, Hetty refutes with true grit. When Caleb tries to weakly argue that Hetty "couldn't tend the fires," Hetty responds with, "Couldn't tend the fires—when I've cut an' carried all the wood I've burned for forty year! Couldn't keep the fires a-goin in them two little wood-stoves!" (408). Hetty's carnivalesque reply makes Caleb seem ineffectual. All of her life Hetty has been the caretaker of various women and families in the village, which means that she was the wood cutter and was the keeper of stoves and fireplaces. When Caleb alleges that Hetty "couldn't tend the fires" in the church, Hetty's reply is meant to have a humorous, satirical tone, with strong sarcasm when she ends her dialogue with "two little

wood-stoves!” Her sassiness creates a sense of equilibrium between a pillar of the community and an insignificant, impoverished, single, elderly female member of the community, supporting Bakhtin’s argument that with carnival, the social hierarchy is transformed to a sense of non-restrictive positioning in a society.

Freeman through her characters continues to present the practice of double standards when Caleb tells Hetty that the village could not pay her, a woman, as much as a male sexton, and with less pay she would not have enough to pay for a place to live. Never being married, Hetty has not been trained to abide by the dominant gender; hence, she disregards Deacon Caleb’s argument and announces to him that “*I’m going to live in the meetin’-house*” (409). Freeman’s italicized diction brings emphasis to a woman’s assertiveness and the ironic humor that a woman who has lost her standing in her community because of her age, her economic position, and her unmarried status has used language to take control of her own financial future. Through carnivalesque language, Hetty has disrupted the rigid social codes of patriarchy.

Moreover, since the amount of pay that Hetty acquires is stated ambiguously as “a small weekly sum” (418), one does not know, in spite of Caleb’s claim that a woman could not receive pay equal to that of a man, if she actually receives less or the same as the previous sexton. Whatever the “small weekly sum” is, readers can infer that Hetty’s situation is an improvement over that of the previous male sexton since he received twenty dollars a year and had to pay for his room and board elsewhere, while Hetty has free room and board, a small wage, and charitable food items from villagers. While Hetty repeatedly

carnivalizes the patriarchal practices of a small New England village, she, likewise, symbolizes the need to unfetter the dictate of gender role positions for men and women.

After moving into the church's gallery, feisty Hetty must continue to battle with the selectmen of the town who think of reasons why Hetty should not be quartered in the town's meeting house. The conflict between Hetty and the townsmen comes to its final duel with Hetty locking herself in her new home, once more claiming victory over male community leaders. Furthermore, while secured in the church, waiting for the townsmen to concede defeat again, she hears Caleb's wife's voice. Playing on one woman's compassion for another woman, Hetty wisely changes her defiant language toward Caleb to a more emotional tone: "Won't you let me stay? I ain't complainin', but I've always had a dreadful time; seems as if now I might take a little comfort the last of it, if I could stay here" (424). Hetty's sentimental appeal influences Mrs. Gale, Caleb's wife, and an accompanying village woman to announce that Hetty should continue to live in the church.

One could argue that Freeman has Hetty lapse briefly into sentimental language in order to appease the conventional requirement that stories for women's magazines, like *Harper's Bazaar*, in which many of Freeman's short works were published, should include sentiment and gentility for women readers. However, seemingly, Freeman has shrewdly reserved sentimental dialogue as a means for Hetty to gain camaraderie with women of the village. Her sentimental dialogue is used for a feminist cause, as Mary Reichardt conveys: "Freeman often

makes use of sentimental material in order to twist its content and displace its import. . . . A cursory reading of a story may therefore mislead one into regarding it as pure sentiment” (34). The sentimental pleading of Hetty has influenced the women of the village to form a relationship that will insist on a new opportunity for a woman: to work in a position that had always been reserved for a man. The women’s voices have subverted the constructs of patriarchal-capitalism.

Supporting Hetty through dialogue, the unnamed village woman asks Mrs. Gale, “Why couldn’t she have that little room side of the pulpit, where the minister hangs his hat?” followed by Mrs. Gale’s response: “Course she could” (425). This exchange has to be read as subversive, satirical humor. Not only will Hetty continue to live independently in the meeting house while working as the sexton, she will also occupy a chamber reserved for the minister’s use.

Demonstrating the essence of carnival, the women’s dialogue claims authority over one of the most powerful patriarchal voices of the era: the minister. With the support of two other women, Hetty fractures the patriarchal-controlled Christian church. Likewise, exemplifying a Marxist-feminist argument that women are not as valued as men in a capitalistic society because they, as Benston points out, are “outside the money economy” (19), Freeman has taken Hetty out of the domestic sphere where she lived in an inferior, subservient role to families and moved her into the public arena where the spinster can be thought to have a more valued status in her community since she is not only receiving a wage like men, but she has also acquired an economic position that was once reserved only for men.

Hetty's emotional dialogue is not the last dialogue of the story, but rather the defiant dialogue of the village women is the final voices that are heard. As Westbrook indicates, they "break out of their socially sanctioned roles" (55). In the conclusion, women's heteroglossia is symbolically heard through the female characters' voices that support one another, bringing a sense of gender solidarity in a public space for the women of the community. Instead of the women submitting to what Westbrook describes as an "inferior political and economic status forced upon them by society at large" (141), they subversively create their own political voice: a political voice for working American women to emulate.

Sojourner Truth

As Harriet A. Jacobs in her autobiography tells how female slaves used their sharp, satirical humor in order to undermine slave owners' control over them, Sojourner Truth likewise uses satirical wit to talk back to white men's ideals and practices. As established in *Sojourner Truth as Orator: Wit, Story, and Song*, by Suzanne Pullon Fitch and Roseann M. Madziuk, Truth relied on satirical language to endorse the women's movement and the liberation of enslaved black Americans: "Her use of humor—quick wit, sarcasm, and the retort—was a key element in Truth's ability to conquer her opponents" (5). Though, as Fitch and Madziuk acknowledge, some may find it "difficult to imagine how she [Truth] brought humor into such serious problems as slavery" (5), she knew, as Jacobs and the other women considered in this study did, that criticism through humor is the safest way for subordinates to get their point of view accepted. Similarly, Max

Eastman, in *Enjoyment of Laughter*, maintains that humorous satire can attack in a more playful way without creating as much harsh resentment when compared to polemic diction (242). Fittingly, Fitch and Madziuk state, “Truth had a ‘tongue of fire,’ but the fire most often was humor, thus softening the attack to the point that even her enemies had to laugh” (46). Though not literate, Truth, nevertheless, knew how to manipulate language to promote socioeconomic improvement for those who had been excluded from decision-making policies.

Ironically, a year before Harriet Jacobs obtained her freedom in 1852, the former New York slave Sojourner Truth gave the speech for which she is most remembered at the Woman’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, in 1851. Though Jacobs knew the power of the pen, Truth did not; therefore, she never wrote her orations, presenting the problem of authentic wording. There are different interpretive publications of her Akron speech, a fact which presents a dilemma when one wants to identify her humorous satire. The *Anti-Slavery Bugle* transcript, written by Marius Robinson, was published shortly after her speech; however, it does not capture Truth’s humorous satire because the wording is too white-washed with middle-class rhetoric. The transcript does not represent Truth’s preferred vernacular style that she used “to amuse her audiences and bring down her opponents” (Fitch and Madziuk 38). Robinson’s written recording of Truth’s speech does not support the report in the *Liberator*, on June 13, 1851: “Sojourner Truth spoke in her own peculiar style. . . . The power and wit of this remarkable woman convulsed the audience with laughter” (141). In *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol*, Nell Irvin Painter explains that the young, inexperienced

Marius Robinson “presented Truth’s words in standard English” and “without the use of dialect or other rhetorical techniques to emphasize her blackness” or her powerful humor (128, 126). Consequently, Robinson’s transcript does not capture Truth’s genuine verbal style.

Twelve years after Truth’s Akron speech, Frances Dana Gage, the woman who presided over the 1851 Akron convention, produced her first report of Truth’s speech. Gage’s 1863 publication includes some black dialect, but there is even more in her second printed version of the speech found in the *History of Woman Suffrage*, published in 1882. Since “she [Truth] did not like those who quoted her speeches in heavy southern black dialect” (Fitch and Madziuk 37), I will use Gage’s first transcript printed in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* on May 2, 1863.

While it has been established that Truth’s Akron speech entertained her audience with her “peculiar style,” which includes witty humor and black vernacular language in Gage’s 1863 publication, some of the transcribed vernacular speech can also be considered a derivative of the popular common sense, colloquial language of the time that was used by humorous satirists, such as Seba Smith, Ann Stephens, Frances M. Whitcher, Henry Wheeler Shaw/Josh Billings, and Charles F. Browne/Artemus Ward. Truth, a one-woman entrepreneur who sold her biography and her photos while traveling a speech circuit to promote political freedom for women and blacks, could have crisscrossed with other lecturers who were known as popular humorists, like Shaw, who, “like most of the thriving humorists of the day . . . became established

as a lecturer” (Blair, *Horse Sense* 220). Thus, one could postulate that she would have been familiar with the popular colloquial, horse-sense style of humor of her time, which she could have incorporated in her own speeches. She was, after all, part of the social fabric where she heard the varied voices of many.

With the popularity of the vernacular diction that represented homespun, non-standard English, a black woman using such language could be considered more shockingly subversive than if she had used standard English, a ploy that Truth might have attempted for a more profound effect. Furthermore, in *A Life for Liberty: Anti-Slavery and Other Letters of Sallie Holley*, Holley wrote that she and her friends “were vastly entertained, especially by Sojourner’s discomfiture and rout of a young preacher who had the temerity to come up against her” (57). Aptly, Gage’s recreation of Truth’s speech captures the spirit of Truth and her humor when compared to the *Anti-Slavery Bugle*’s publication.

Though Gage’s inclusion of the interrogative, “And ar’n’t I a woman?” has been noted as perhaps not a Truth original, one could conclude that the phrase might have been approved by her, especially since she “made no attempt to correct the error” of the following claim that Gage included in her publication of the Akron speech: “I have born thirteen children, and seen ‘em mos’ all sold off to slavery” (Fitch and Madziuk 9). In reality, Truth had five children with one being illegally sold as a slave, for whom Truth was able to obtain his rightful freedom through the New York courts. Or perhaps “And ar’n’t I a woman?” is an unadulterated statement by Truth; and Gage, being a feminist, would have remembered such a feminist declaration, unlike the male journalist Marius Robinson. Accordingly, I choose to interpret Gage’s first transcript

because of the inclusion of humorous satire, which reinforces the belief that Sojourner Truth enjoyed humor and wit. Gage's transcript that symbolizes Truth's fiery rhetoric also aligns with Harriet Jacobs's and Alice Childress's black women's sharp, witty retorts to their oppressors.

In her speech, Truth employs two types of humor in order to challenge the status quo. According to Fitch and Mandziuk, Truth relies on superiority humor, which frequently exploits sarcasm that focuses on degradation and defects of the other, and incongruity humor, which greatly depends on wit and satire when highlighting the strange absurdities in a society (32-33). By employing both styles of humor, Truth is able to entertain her audience, to promote change while creating a sense of unity among American women. Unity of women and change for the *other* are two themes of Truth's Akron's speech, as indicated in her opening statement: "I tink dat'twixt de niggers of de South and de women at de Norf, all a-talking 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon." The use of superior humor in Truth's initial statement indicates that because of women's determination and numbers, they are a political force to be noticed, which is going to cause socioeconomic problems for white men. The humorous sarcasm of her introductory sentence also creates a sense that the women's platform for change is superior to the established rules of patriarchy, with an insinuation that the authority of white males is going to be revised.

Truth contests a male heckler's statement about women as helpless beings through incongruity humor, when she parodies his words, "woman needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to have de best place

eberywhar,” and juxtaposes them with her reality, “Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or give me any best place.” With her satirical incongruous humor, followed with her quick, black woman’s sassy rhetorical question, “And ar’n’t I a woman?” she refutes the male harasser’s original idea about women being frail. Truth exposes the absurdity of the illusion of true womanhood when compared to concrete reality for many women, supporting Leonard Feinberg’s argument that “humor arises when one suddenly perceives an incongruity between the concept and the object” (*Introduction to Satire* 101). She disclaims the man’s reductive idea that all American women are the same, reinforcing Bakhtin’s idea that a society is made of various social voices, with assorted ways of understanding the constructs of the social order. Her carnivalization of the heckler’s original words produces the hybridization of languages with her satirical tone outstripping the man’s arrogant one.

Her subversive ploy continues with, “I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me,” whether the male be a black worker or a white farmer. The pronoun “I” is not meant to be a single voice, but rather one that represents other black women and white working-class women who worked equally as hard as some laboring black and white males (Fitch and Mandziuk 5), yet those same women did not have the political vote as men did. As Angela Y. Davis highlights in *Women, Race and Class*, Truth’s presence and acknowledgement of working women reminded white middle-class women that “black women were no less women than they”; they deserved the same rights as white American women (64). With the use of the pronoun “I,” Truth affirms that

she, as an agent for American working women, has the right to speak as a subject instead of being the object of oppression. By exploiting the pronoun “I,” Truth gives women the position of authority. Truth’s statement also includes incongruity because she inverts male’s logic, or more precisely, male’s flawed logic, as established in Holley’s *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet’s*: “voting would harm women’s delicate sensibilities” (76). Truth’s statement about hard-working women proves the absurdity of the unsubstantiated contention that voting would be detrimental for women.

As Truth continues her speech, she again carnivalizes an outspoken male agitator in the audience who actually uses a post hoc fallacy when he states that “woman can’t have as much rights as man, ‘cause Christ wa’n’n’t a woman.” Truth subverts the prejudicial claim, with her provocative response: “*Whar did your Christ come from?* From God and a woman! Man had not’ing to do with him.” Truth, like Jacobs, is quick to use a keen, satirical retort to opponents, “demolishing them by twisting their ideas to fit her own causes” (Fitch and Mandziuk 31). She transposes men’s language for her own purpose. Likewise, in her response to the male protestor, she answers her own question, superseding the man’s unsound logic, proving his words to be self-disparaging. Through her satirically humorous, mother-wit statements to her heckler, she again supplants the male ego by utilizing superior humor. For Fitch and Mandziuk, “Truth made it very plain that men had no place in one of the most significant Christian creations, and thus there was no justification for them to believe themselves superior to women” (36). She not only undermines the man’s attempt to claim

biblical authority, but she, as Painter indicates, also implicitly brings attention to the noticeably nil role that white men played “in the present antislavery and women’s rights agitation” (128). For Truth, the white man’s role in three significant, historical changes—the birth of Christ, the call for emancipation of American slaves, and the endorsement of gender equality—has been nonexistent.

Speaking in a public forum, Truth also exemplifies incongruity humor by taking the patriarchal, religious conventional idea that males should be the only gender that has a public voice and contrasting it with what might be considered an inappropriate public comment declared by a woman about men having nothing to do with the conception of Christ. Her statement reinforces a main element of incongruity in humor identified by D. H. Monro in *Argument of Laughter*: “Since there must be some appropriateness concealed in the inappropriate, the incongruous calls attention to the neglected elements in the situation” (65). Thus while some may have identified Truth’s defiant religious statement as questionable, it becomes acceptable to others because she brings forth a feminist perspective that challenges conventional thought. Her humorous, satirical reply proves that there is another way to address the subject of Christ and to interpret slavery and the woman question, supporting Said’s claim, presented in my chapter one, that a subject can be analyzed from different perspectives.

The conclusion of Truth’s speech can be understood to be said in a most sly, humorous tone. She begins with purposeful uncertainty, “that *if de fust* woman God ever made was strong enough to turn de world upside down” (emphasis added), followed with a comparison to the women gathered at Akron

who “ought to be able to turn it back, and git it right side up again.” Applying intertextuality, Painter points out that Truth subversively dialogues with the male myth that holds a woman responsible for the fall of humanity (127). Yet, simultaneously, she is confident that northern American women can reconstitute their gender-biased society, a distorted society that had been created by white men.

Truth’s public, political address represents the spirit of ancient carnival because she supported the serious concerns of non-authorities, in her case nineteenth-century women and blacks. She exemplifies characteristics of early carnival, as established by Bakhtin: “[T]he behavior, gesture, and discourse of a person are freed from the authority of all hierarchical positions,” and “the public square was the symbol of communal performance” (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 123, 128). Reassigning Bakhtin’s specifics about the purpose of carnival to the Akron women’s convention, Truth’s strong, subversive speech, rich with parody, given in a public forum that specifically wanted to fracture patriarchal-capitalistic hierarchy, qualifies for the mocking humor of carnivalesque language. However, because of the colloquial diction she chose to use for a purposeful, humorous effect, there should be no association of Truth, speaking in a public medium, with a grotesque carnival side show, for that is not what Bakhtin’s understanding of carnival is. In addition to her speech demonstrating carnival, it also represents the seriocomic genre since she relies on elements of satirical humor to address serious social concerns while promoting a new mode of relations, replacing the old.

Fanny Fern

Sara Payson Willis Parton was and is known more readily by her pseudonym, Fanny Fern, which according to Joyce W. Warren in “Sara Payson Willis Parton” was chosen by Parton to satirize “the kind of alliterative, flowery name used by genteel lady writers” (233). Also reported by Warren in her introduction to *Ruth Hall and Other Writings*, Fern, the American star journalist of the second half of the nineteenth century, wrote in a non-sentimental style about various social issues of her era, such as “poverty, crime, prostitution, venereal disease, prison reform,” and women’s rights, her most common subject (xxxii, xxxiii). Because she did write with wit and sarcasm, nineteenth-century critics considered her style unladylike, according to Nancy Walker in *A Very Serious Thing* (50). Fern was annoyed by such conventional thinkers and their commentaries, as indicated in her satirical question that appeared in the *New York Ledger* in 1870: “A woman can’t be vital and energetic, without being thought masculine?” (qtd. in Warren xxxvii). However, her style was applauded by Hawthorne in his famous 1855 critique of women writers: “Can you tell me anything about this Fanny Fern? If you meet her, I wish you would let her know how much I admire her” (qtd. in Warren xxxv).

Despite conservative criticism, apparently, many besides Hawthorne appreciated her style and what she had to say about the patriarchal-capitalist oppressive prejudices of her day since her popular newspaper columns that depended on unladylike, sharp, humorous satire and unadorned language influenced immensely the increased sales for the Boston *Olive Branch*, the *True*

Flag, and the *New York Ledger*. Fern's writings not only prove that language can be used for political purposes by a subversive female journalist, but her published sketches can be noted as valued commodities since they increased the profits of the newspapers in which her columns appeared. Ironically, Fern uses language to produce a commodity that has a monetary exchange value while simultaneously using it to deconstruct and to bring social consciousness to the commodification of most women in the nineteenth century. Her linguistic commodities talk back to America's male controlled society. Many of her publications, as the two presented in this chapter, also bring forth the common political thread that kept nineteenth-century women in their subservient place—the material constructs that privileged men. However, by supporting herself economically with her writings, Fern proves that women can go beyond their confined roles scripted for them, an idea that she advocates in her publications.

Even though her short prose does not have numerous fictional characters, as do novels, which for Bakhtin is *the* genre that represents heteroglossia, her articles do represent women's progressive voices while concurrently subverting voices of authority. Or as Warren maintains in her introduction to *Ruth Hall*, "She writes from within her culture, giving an accurate and realistic portrayal of people and events. . . . She also brings to her assessment a critical eye, a sense of humor, and a fearlessness that provide us with unusual insights into the thought and customs of her time" (xxxvii). Hence, in spite of the brevity of her sketches and columns, Fanny Fern's public writings prove to be part of the social discourse that is an element of the material world of her period.

Concerning the subject of women, Fern wrote about what she observed in her social context, “the sexual double standard” (Warren xxxiii). And though she “was not an active member of the women’s rights movement” (Warren xxxi), she believed that women should be considered equal to men and not subservient to them. Instead of meeting with forthright women at conventions, she chose to write succinct, easily readable columns and sketches that would reach a larger audience instead of only the women who met at the suffrage conventions who already believed in the necessity for improved lives for women. Fern dialogued, through her humorous satire, with those who might have been skeptical of not only the need for women’s voting rights but also the need for socioeconomic improvement for women.

One of the dominating themes in Fern’s sketches is the contrast between the sentimental idea of marriage and the harsh reality of it. In “Aunt Hetty on Matrimony,” Fern disrupts, in a public venue, the true-womanhood syndrome of the nineteenth century. Hetty, the wise female sage, who talks directly to young women, does not promote a Cinderella story, but rather makes use of wit and humor to denounce the romantic, sentimental ideas about marriage. She warns want-to-be brides that “matrimony is humbug” (220). After Hetty identifies the honeymoon as a brief experience, she tells about the reality of marriage: “[Y]ou may wear your wedding-dress at the wash tub, and your night-cap to meeting, and your husband wouldn’t know it” (220). As Warren in her introduction states, Fern attacks men’s “grandiose airs and pompous self-complacency” (xxxii), evidenced when Hetty exposes the pretentiousness of a husband’s ego when she explains

that a husband will not have time to complete an errand for his wife because he will claim to be “so *pressed with business*” (220). Because of Fern’s use of italics, she has humorously carnivalized the pompous diction of a male.

According to Judy Little, “[I]n order to carnivalize the voice of authority and power, the rebel voice must use that authoritative voice, must parody or mimic it” (“Humoring the Sentence” 157), which is what Fern does when she takes a man’s typical excuse for why he cannot honor a wife’s request and parodies it.

Furthermore, the persona of Aunt Hetty doubly criticizes the patriarchal term “business” as a true euphemism for a husband who actually means that he will take “an ice-cream with some ladies at a confectioner’s, while you are at home new-lining his old coat-sleeves” (220). Thus Fern adeptly juxtaposes two contradictory scenes: a husband who makes no time for a wife’s errand, with a wife who accommodates the material needs of a husband.

The sketch also cleverly contrasts the husband/businessman’s willingness to chat with ladies at an ice cream parlor to his unwillingness to converse with his family, for when he comes home he has time only to box his son’s ears, put his daughter into a corner, and make himself comfortable, where he quietly

sits down in the easiest chair in the warmest corner, puts his feet up over the grate, shutting out all the fire, while the baby’s little pug nose grows blue with the cold; reads the newspaper all to himself, solaces his inner man with a hot cup of tea, and, just as you are laboring under the hallucination that he will ask you to take a mouthful of fresh air with him, he puts on his dressing-gown

and slippers, and begins to reckon up the family expenses! after which he lies down on the sofa, and you keep time with your needle, while he sleeps till nine o'clock. (220-21)

Ironically, the publication of Fern's descriptive parody of the non-communicative husband who oppresses family discourse became part of public conversations. Fern's perceptive Aunt Hetty argues against the conventional idea that a woman must find her prince in order to be a respectable woman. She forewarns idealistic women of the alternate inferior position they will achieve instead of a respectable one, as she explains the economic dependency of wives: "Next morning, ask him to leave you a 'little money,'—he looks at you as if to be sure that you are in your right mind," coupled with, "It's the hardest way on earth of getting a living—you never know when your work is done" (221). Hetty's insight underscores the argument in "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism," in which Heidi Hartmann reasons that in a patriarchal-capitalist society, men are able to control their wives' "access to resources and their sexuality, [which] in turn, allows men to control women's labor power, both for the purpose of serving men in many personal and sexual ways and for the purpose of rearing children" (101). Poignantly, Fern's argument reinforces what Marxist-feminists would argue a century later: the sexual division of labor, which is both materially based and psychologically based, undermines equality. Wives and mothers work as hard as men, yet because the women work as non-waged laborers, their work is identified as use-value and not profit-value, making wives

financially dependent on husbands, leading them to have to ask for money, as if they were children.

Fern, who witnessed childlike dependency of wives, spoke for those who could not speak against the grain. She wrote disapprovingly about wives' economic dependence on men since the husbands earned the family wages in the labor market while the women worked for no wages, perpetuating the separate spheres for women and men. As Warren keenly posits, "Her [Fern's] view of marriage was realistic and critical. She undercut the idealized portrait of happy submissive wives and satirized pompous selfish husbands" (xxxiii). Moreover, through a public, literary forum, Fern's defiant writings are part of the social discourse that promoted structural change of patriarchal capitalism. And although Fern's writings relate to the twentieth-century Marxist-feminist theorist Heidi Hartmann, Fern's argumentative sketches preceded Hartmann's writings, proving that after one hundred years, women continued to use language to argue for socioeconomic power for women.

As Fern ridicules the old myth of finding one's prince and living happily ever after in "Aunt Hetty on Matrimony," in "Owls Kill Hummingbirds" she attacks another myth: women can discover self-worth through marriage. In this short sketch, written for the *True Flag* in 1852, Fern makes use of a foreboding persona who highlights the depletion of the wife's feeling of self-worth when a husband views his wife's sense of merriment as being of little importance. The narrator of the sketch talks as if she is speaking directly to a female reader, making a reader feel more personally connected to the anecdote: "You come

skipping into the parlor, with your heart as light as a feather, and your brain full of merry fancies. There he sits! Stupid—solemn—and forbidding” (242). As in “Aunt Hetty on Matrimony,” the husband in this sketch has no desire to communicate with his wife; she has become a commodity to him, or as Donovan posits, in a patriarchal-capitalistic society, a wife is “a tool for male purposes” since the husband has the stronger material base in the nuclear family unit (“Feminism and Marxism” 74). Fern carnivalizes the husband’s behavior, not in a jovial tone, but rather with a demeaning, satirical one. The woman next tries to show affection, which her husband disregards, followed by her attempt to engage in conversation over a clever paragraph: “There’s a witty paragraph; your first impulse is to read it aloud to him. No use!” (242). Fern concludes with her unsentimental attitude: “No—no—make no such shipwreck of yourself. Marry a man who is not too ascetic to enjoy a good, merry laugh. *Owls kill humming-birds!*” (243). The cautionary sketch relies on the second person pronoun, “you,” in order to warn readers, directly, that a wife will eventually have no voice of her own, only a shadow of her husband’s personality and his ideas of what is worthy to focus upon.

The metaphorical title and its content establishes the idea that the arrogant husband, who characterizes what Fern has seen in reality, as indicated by Warren and cited earlier in this chapter, will disregard his wife’s jovial personality so that his hateful attitude toward her will break her spirit and deplete her sense of self-worth. The narrator points out the degradation of the dependent wife while simultaneously revealing the husband’s self-indulgent tyranny.

Because Fern was an exceedingly popular writer who published in a public space for the masses to read, her humorous sketches could have encouraged public and private conversations about women having no autonomy. After all, “humor does not dismiss a subject,” as Regina Barreca argues in *Women’s Humor*, “but, rather, often opens that subject up for discussion, especially when the subject is one that is not considered ‘fit’ for public discussion” (10). Additionally, by dialoguing with her readers, Fern puts forth the disparities in marriage; she wanted women to break the stifling chains of romanticized myths. She was an advocate for women to be able to obtain independence, self-actualization, and a career. Fern, “throughout her journalistic career . . . advocated equal pay and more opportunities for women”; she believed that “women must look out for themselves . . . and refuse to allow themselves to be victimized by the misuse of masculine authority” (Warren xxxiii), as revealed in the sketches interpreted in this chapter. And as posited by Walker and Dressner in “Women’s Humor,” Fern used humor to deliver her serious message about the need for “education and independence for women” while also “attributing much of the unhappiness in marriage to imbalances of power” (180). Fern understood what Kate Millet identified in the twentieth century: sexual politics is “power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another” (*Sexual Politics* 23). Through her dialogues with her readers, she argued for what Marxist-feminists would want in the twentieth century: shatter the glass jar that patriarchal capitalism has used to encapsulate women.

Bold Literary Women of the Twentieth Century

Erma Bombeck

As Fern wrote against the inequality and constraints for women in the institution of marriage, so did Erma Bombeck in the twentieth century. In Zita Zarkin Dresner's dissertation, "Twentieth Century American Women Humorists," Dresner claims that Bombeck's humor was directed against the "social and cultural institutions and values that have manipulated women to dissipate their energies in unproductive ways, obsess about trivialities, and judge themselves as inadequate and unfulfilled" (235). As Fern recognized the struggle that women had when trying to find self-worth in the domestic realm, Bombeck, a century later, correspondingly understood that patriarchal capitalism kept women locked away in domesticity, in the suburbs, and away from any potential for meaningful work. Since most women, in Fern's era as well as Bombeck's, were encouraged to stay out of the public realm, such structure influenced domestic women to rely on men for their happiness and for their lives to have meaning, as demonstrated in Fern's and Bombeck's writings. With such a hegemonic social structure, Marxist-feminists contend that women are noted as "socially defined and recognized as inferior to men" (Hartmann 101), an idea that Bombeck and Fern bring forth in their publications. What's more, Fern's and Bombeck's writings that are examined in this study substantiate a Marxist-feminist perspective that identifies American women as the pillars of America's patriarchal capitalism since they work as unpaid workers at home, perpetuating the male wage as well as the traditional patriarchal family.

Though the two columnists have similar trepidations about women's position in America, they differ in their styles of writing. For example, Fern frequently uses personas who speak to readers directly, whereas Bombeck consistently makes use of the autobiographical persona, which is not to be understood to represent only her experiences, but also the experiences that she observed around her, as argued by Dresner (242). More specifically, Dresner contends that "Bombeck seems to be writing, despite the autobiographical *persona*, less about the particular characteristics of her family than about the general personality traits and habits that define the women and families that she sees around her" (244). She is the public agent who speaks for the common American woman, as did Fern. Monique Wittig's concept about subject and object in *The Straight Mind* indicates that when the first-person pronoun becomes the narrator, then it is the narrator who becomes the subject instead of an object (80), which fittingly applies to Bombeck's manipulation of the autobiographical pronoun because the pronoun "I" produces the opportunity for a housewife to be "an absolute subject" (80). For Bombeck, a female voice, not a male's, controls the situation.

Fern's columns were more readily understood to be satirical pieces, but unfortunately, because of the personal tone of Bombeck's sketches, her satire is somewhat camouflaged, leading many readers to understand her column as purely humor instead of humorous satire. Many of her fans do not realize that she was promoting change instead of acceptance.¹ Some readers simply think that the popular writings were meant to bring a sense of camaraderie for women, allowing

them to laugh at themselves as housewives. As Bombeck herself stated at one point, “A lot of people think I write humor. . . . As an observer of the human condition all I do is question it. I rarely find it funny” (qtd. in Barreca 5).

Although humor can bring a sense of connectedness, satire argues for change, which is what Bombeck’s sketches promote when she laughingly ridicules the entrapment of housewives. As Dresner argues, Bombeck wished “to instigate change rather than reconciliation, to attack the structures and institutions that victimized them [housewives] rather than their inadequacies in coping within these frameworks” (215-16). Through satirical humor, Bombeck talks back to the language that convinced women they belong in the home.

Parallel to Fern’s two sketches addressed in this chapter is Erma Bombeck’s “The Seven-Inch Plague,” a lampoon of middle-class America. In Bombeck’s anecdote, television, instead of a newspaper, is the reason for the husband’s non-communication with the family, and the husband’s complete lack of interest in his wife’s attempt at conversation as in Fern’s sketches. However, the message from Fern and Bombeck is that since women are understood to be of use-value in patriarchal capitalism, men can ignore their wives at whim. And because women in Fern’s sketches had no true opportunity to work outside the domestic sphere since that was their rightful place in society, and because women in Bombeck’s sketches were to be good suburban housewives, domestic women in both centuries relied on husbands for mature conversations and identities as adults, which does not happen with husbands who indulge in their own self-interests. Using exaggeration, an element for effective satire, the narrator—the

wife—wants to declare her husband dead since “he became a sports addict who was in a catatonic state twelve months out of every year” (69). But her lawyer makes her aware that “just because a man sits in front of a TV set with eyes fixed and no pulse is not enough. He said I would have to keep a log of my husband’s behavior over a year’s period of time” (70). Thus, the wife keeps a log for an entire year to prove that her husband is metaphorically dead toward his wife and family.

Continuing with humorous exaggeration, the wife narrates what she has recorded, beginning with August when the children get to visit their father during a beer commercial: “He offered them a pretzel at the same time watching a beer can dancing with a hot dog” (70). In September, while the husband continuously watches a blank TV screen, the wife consolingly states, “‘Just relax. It could be only this channel experiencing temporary. . . .’ The husband’s response, ‘Lady, you are going to be temporary if you don’t get out of this room and let me watch my game in peace’” (70). In October, the wife kisses her husband on his cheek while he stares at the TV screen, with his response, “‘How did that fly get in here?’” (71). By means of double language, she constructs a likeness to the dialogue that occurred in middle-class American homes. She also produces what Hodgart understands to be effective satire: “[A] ludicrous distortion in which the compulsive gestures and tics of the victim are exaggerated: a newly created character is built out of them and superimposed on the original likeness” (121-22). Her parody of the dominant language yields a caricature of the husband. For

Bombeck, the self-engrossed husband is the object of derision, while revealing the degradation of a wife, analogous to Fern's two writings.

At the end of the sketch, the wife breaks the ties of the hegemonic-patriarchal marriage. In July, the last month for the log, the wife announces that she plans to leave the husband: "I am leaving you," I said calmly. "I can't stand it any more—the loneliness, the boredom, the roller derbies, the golf tournaments, the snacks. I'm young. I have all my own teeth. I want to see a movie besides the Frazier-Ali fight. I want to dance and drink champagne from a slipper. Do you understand?" (74.) The husband's reply is only, "Shh," he said, "there's a commercial coming up. The one where the beer can dances with the hot dog" (74). The incongruity of the husband's concluding reply to the wife's final question, "Do you understand?" mocks what the husband wished to value: a beer can dancing with a hot dog. The parody of the dominant language is objectified, reducing its potency, while the woman's voice becomes empowered. Bombeck's satirical style supports what Leonard Feinberg asserts in *Introduction to Satire*, in which he maintains that satire deals with "experience rather than contemplation" because satirists write what they see "rather than what society says they should see" (58). As Walker documents in *A Very Serious Thing*, Bombeck tells her housewife readers that "a group other than themselves has made the rules by which they must live," a realization that the female narrator rebels against (13). Bombeck targeted what she knew, that is, she wrote against the propaganda that middle-class suburban life was the life to obtain. Her sketches prove otherwise.

The pronoun “I” gives the fictional wife the agency of language, signifying that a woman can gain a sense of self-worth. She claims her freedom from an oppressive situation, which is a different ending when compared to Fern’s anecdotes. However, thinking metaphorically, Fern might have sadly laughed that her concluding declarations in “Aunt Hetty on Matrimony” could fittingly be the conclusion for Bombeck’s “The Seven-Inch Plague”: “I wish one half the world warn’t fools, and the other half idiots, I do. Oh, dear!” After a century has passed between Fern’s writings and Bombeck’s, it is a sad realization that Fern’s conclusion could be applicable to Bombeck’s sketch.

Bombeck’s “I Want to be More Than Just Another Pretty Face . . .” carnivalizes how women live in one sphere and men in another, which corresponds to Fern’s two columns critiqued in this chapter. In Bombeck’s sketch, the first-person persona, who stands in front of a mirror seeing a woman with brush rollers in her hair, declares to herself, “I want to be more than just another pretty face. I want to make some difference in this world” (37). The statement is humorously ironic because of the juxtaposition of brush rollers in the wife’s hair as she declares herself to be an object of beauty, while simultaneously wishing to escape such a narrow, meaningless existence. However, wanting to be more than another attractive, stay-at-home woman is not to be understood as a self-deprecating statement, but rather as an attack on the deluge of media that, as Dresner argues, targets suburban women to be attractive, content women who are to find self-worth in marriage and being a mother, while being consumers of the products that will help them gain that self-worth (242). Dresner’s insight

corresponds to Walker's understanding of Bombeck's writing about twentieth-century housewifery: "It is not the housewives who are failures, but a social system—including media—that makes women solely responsible for the functioning of the household and sets impossibly high standards for their performance" (*A Very Serious Thing* 6). Through humorous dialogue, Bombeck brings attention to such capitalist paralysis for women; her narrator would like to escape the limitations of the woman's sphere and be part of the world reserved for men where significant decisions are made for both genders of society. Yet how can she when her society expects her to abide by the gender constructs of the late twentieth century?

Bombeck, as Fern did a century earlier, wants structural change for American society, meaning she found woman's societal position as demoralizing as Fern did in the nineteenth century. As Walker points out, "Erma Bombeck's distraught housewives may seem to have little to do with the broad social movements and issues of public policy . . . but in fact they reveal a great deal about American social organization . . . [and] strict gender-role definition" (*A Very Serious Thing* 182), with which I concur. On the other hand, Dresner claims that "if Bombeck's work does not encourage women to change their lives, it at least makes them aware of the possibility that housewifery as an end in itself is as meaningless and as barren as the American commercialism that extols it" (262). However, I believe that Bombeck wants women to be aware that they are a target of frivolous commercials, which for too many women create a shallow addiction to consumerism, a lifestyle that Bombeck ridicules as she has her housewife stand

in front of the mirror wanting to be more than the “angel of the house.”

Therefore, because Bombeck wanted to de-compartmentalize the gender roles, she would not have been content with housewives only realizing that housewifery is mostly “meaningless and barren,” as argued by Dresner. She understood the significance of women needing to go beyond domesticity; she wanted women to break through codified gender roles for their own self-actualization.

In Fern’s “Owls Kill Hummingbirds,” the wife alludes to the womanly sphere as quite dull when she is eager for adult conversation with her husband about a witty paragraph. Fern’s acknowledgement of boredom within the confines of domesticity is similar to the wife in Bombeck’s “I Want to be More Than Just Another Pretty Face . . .” since the housewife writes a query letter to a college in regard to a new course entitled “Boredom of Housewifery” (40). Bombeck’s satirical piece continues with the emphasis on women’s exclusion from adult discussions about “the big stuff like strikes, racial differences, and wars” (42). While at a dinner party, the wife asks her husband why he never talks about “the big stuff” with her and/or the other women at the party, ““Why don’t you ever talk with us about those things?””(42). His answer is, ““Remember the last time at a party I mentioned Taylor was in Vietnam?’ (I nodded.) ‘And you asked if Burton was there with her?’ (I nodded.) ‘That’s why’” (42). The husband in Bombeck’s writing answers the wife, acknowledging that she deserves an answer, even though the answer is disparaging. His answer mocks the different spheres that husbands and wives participate in. Through satirical humorous dialogue, Bombeck is pointing out the incongruity between the man’s public

sphere and the woman's domestic sphere. The husband in "Owls Kill Hummingbirds" simply disregards his wife's attempt at conversation and their child's endeavor to be part of his life because "He's too *dignified!*" (242). Perhaps one could argue that slight progress has been made since the husband in Bombeck's sketch answers his wife, unlike the one in Fern's, who remains silent.

Based on Fern's and Bombeck's writings included in this research, the cliché, much has changed, but much remains the same, seems to be valid. Though both highly respected writers wrote in different centuries, they each argue that domesticity for some women is a bland, non-intellectual, non-stimulating environment. Moreover, for women, the "lack of social, political, and economic equality has been a subject of women's humor for well over a hundred years" claims Nancy Walker in her introduction to *What's So Funny? Humor in American Culture* (63). Her assertion is exemplified by the popular columns of Fanny Fern and Erma Bombeck. If Fern could have peered into Bombeck's era, she might have been shocked to know that a leading female columnist was essentially arguing for political, socioeconomic power for American women as she had done one hundred years earlier.

Estela Portillo Trambley

Unlike the previous Anglo American writers addressed in this chapter, twentieth-century Chicana writers faced double resistance to the publication of their works because of their gender and their ethnicity. Yet, in spite of the prejudice against Chicana writers during the Chicano movement in the second

part of the twentieth century, valiant writers like Estela Portillo Trambley wrote even if they were considered “on the margins of the Chicano movement,” as indicated in “Re(Riting) the Chicana Postcolonial: From Traitor to 21st Century Interpreter,” by Naomi H. Quiñonez (136). In fact, Trambley can be considered one of the formative Chicana feminists during the 1970s, editing one of the first collections of Chicana literature in the anthology *Chicanas en la Literatura y el Arte: El Grito*, meaning the celebration of Chicana literature and art. She was also honored as the first Chicana woman, and ironically, the last recipient of the prestigious Premio Quinto Sol award (sponsored by a California publishing company, Quinto Sol) in 1975 for her collection *Rain of Scorpions and Other Writings*, in which “The Paris Gown” appears.

Parallel to the Chicano movement was the Second Wave of Feminism, which spurred many Chicana writers to write from a feminist perspective: “Chicanas produced poetry and prose as part of a larger feminist discourse. . . . The politicization of Chicanas created a critical mass of writers who desired and needed to express their ideas and viewpoints” (Quiñonez 137). They, as other assertive feminist writers did during this transformational time, produced aesthetic literature with a humorous, satirical political voice in order to abort socioeconomic, sexual oppression of women. However, as Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano argues, Chicana authors not only write stories about themselves, challenging “the dominant male concepts of cultural ownership and literary authority,” but they also “reject the dominant culture’s definition of what a Chicana is” (“Chicana Literature from a Chicana Feminist Perspective” 215).

Thus, as the other writers considered in this chapter wrote against the constraints of patriarchy, so does feminist Trambley; yet, she writes from a distinct, ethnic social context when compared to the white women's works discussed in this chapter.

Trambley, as Bombeck does, exercises first person narration in order to place the woman in the subject position; however, unlike Bombeck who focuses on white suburban life, Trambley creates a feminist character who wittingly rebels against the hegemonic control of Mexican-American patriarchy. Cordelia Candelaria, in her essay "Engendering Re/Solutions: The (Feminist) Legacy of Estela Portillo Trambley," explains that Trambley, being one of the feminist writers during a time of social and political upheaval, wrote a "counterdiscourse" to patriarchal male practices. Candelaria accurately describes Trambley's protagonists as women who "resist, deflect, defy, denounce, distort, and, perhaps especially, explode the received patterns of gender rigidities forced upon women and men from the moment of the first natal cry" (198). Though Clotilde, the feminist protagonist in "The Paris Gown," exemplifies Candelaria's depiction of Trambley's main characters, I will enhance Candelaria's description by identifying Clotilde's satirically humorous dialogue as well as Trambley's satirically subversive use of intertextuality.

Trambley, in "The Paris Gown," links the past to the present, reminding her readers why a feminist point of view is significant. Candelaria claims that Trambley writes from a "retrospective reflection as a strategy for prospective thinking" that "demands a backward glance in order to see forward" (195). Such

thoughts are evidenced explicitly in the short story when the narrator states that the narrative of the past, being told by Clotilde, the grandmother, to her granddaughter, is “part of now” (7). The point is that many women dared to bring freedom for themselves, their sisters, and future generations; thus, women of the present must know women’s historical situations so that the present does not regress back to the conservatism of the past. Connecting the past to the present, Trambley relies on intertextuality when she chooses the name Clotilde. As noted by Eliud Martinez in “Portillo’s Short Stories,” Trambley chose Clotilde as the name for her feminist character as a subversive move because in the fourth century there was a Clotilde who was granted sainthood because of her devotion to the Catholic Church and to the building of a church in Paris (81). Trambley’s Clotilde, who resides in Paris, opposes the patriarchal Catholic formula for sainthood: “Clotilde Romero de Traske, art dealer at the Rue Auber, was a legend back home. The stories about her numerous marriages, her travels, her artistic ventures, and the famous names that frequented her salon were many” (1). Free-spirited Clotilde defies the criteria that one must meet in order to become a Catholic saint. The intertextual dialogue between the factual knowledge of Saint Clotilde and Trambley’s description of her fictional Clotilde can be considered a feminist satirical ploy to subvert the superstructure of the predominant, male-oriented religion of Mexican-Americans. Through intertextuality, Trambley establishes the idea that women need to break free from patriarchal tradition.

After introducing Clotilde as a feminist character, the plot of Trambley’s resistant literature represents Menippean satire. Succeeding the initial dialogue

between the grandmother's feminist voice of experience and the granddaughter as a budding feminist, the grandmother tells of her audacious act that allowed her to escape from the Mexican tradition of arranged marriages, which was used to bind wealthy families together at the expense of the bride. The anecdote tells how the grandmother, when younger, outwits her father's decision that she should marry "a neighboring widower old enough to be my father" because it was a "good business venture" (6). Clotilde narrates how she, being a dutiful, aristocratic daughter, pretended to plan for the announcement of the wedding by devoting months to the design of her Paris gown. True to the traditional short story ironic ending, Clotilde walks down the stairs without the gown on: "I came down the stairs . . . *stark naked*" as her mother fainted and the future groom "threw his champagne glass and it smashed on the floor, then he turned and left without ceremony" (8). She had gone "completely against the grain of gentlewomen" (7). The bizarre, unrestrained action of Clotilde is not only subversive and humorous, but an element of Menippean satire because as Bakhtin claims, a Menippean scene is eccentric and scandalous, freeing "human behavior from the norms and motivations that predetermine it" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 117). Likewise, according to Bakhtin, one of the most significant characteristics of an effective menippea is when a character is motivated to conduct an abrasive, fantastical act in order to provoke a philosophical truth (114), which for Trambley is to prove, through Clotilde, that women can gain freedom from the shackles of Mexican tradition: "The violence of man against woman is a traditional blindness whose wall can be broken" ("The Paris Gown" 3). Trambley's Menippean

satirical plot suggests that women can be bold players in life, creating their own destinies, as symbolized by Clotilde.

Thus “The Paris Gown” proves to be a multi-layered, subversive story. On one level it is a feminist story that rebels against Mexican patriarchal conditions. It is also a feminist-generational tale because an older feminist tells a younger female about the daring act of a woman. On a different plane, the story dialogues intertextually with history, contesting not the “angel of the house” trope, but rather, the dedicated, patriarchal angel of religion—the female saint. Although Trambley employs O’Henry’s short story schematic plot, I believe that she reformulates the accepted traditional gender performances of the foundational, renowned short story structure of O’Henry’s, upsetting the usual codification of gender with a Menippean satirical event to prove her theory that patriarchal rules need to be challenged. Moreover, the story disrupts the socioeconomic stagnation for women that Marxist-feminists oppose: Clotilde is free from domesticity and free from her use-value position in a patriarchal society.

Alice Childress

Alice Childress is a non-middle-class black writer who wrote about what she eminently knew: the have-nots of American society. In “A Candle in a Gale Wind,” Childress campaigns for the “have-nots in a *have* society, those seldom singled out by mass media, except as source material for derogatory humor and/or condescending clinical, social analysis” (112). Her sketches, which were originally published as a column in the respected *Baltimore Afro-American*

newspaper and later gathered as a collection in *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic's Life*, bring forth from the shadows of society, the voices of underprivileged blacks. Her publications give domestic workers a respectable position in public space. Likewise, the dialogues in her sketches represent the racial conflict found in America's social heteroglossia.

Childress's main character throughout her short works is Mildred, a domestic worker for white families in New York. Mildred, like Linda Brent in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, uses witty dialogue to override a white's authoritative language, which according to Walker is a long tradition for black servants "who outwit and see more clearly than their masters, a tradition that turns upon class differences as well as upon racial differences" (*A Very Serious Thing* 108). In other words, she is not the stereotypical, Anglo-constructed "handkerchief-headed black woman, or one bowing or scraping" to her white employers, as indicated by Trudier Harris in her introduction to Childress's *Like One of the Family* (xv). Accordingly, as Harriet Jacobs in her autobiography proves not to be the female victim found in the popular seduction novels written by white authors of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Childress replaces the caricature of a black domestic as a banal, dutiful, mammy servant with sassy Mildred, who is actually, according to Harris, based on Childress's real-life Aunt Lorraine (xxxii). Hence, Mildred, who symbolically represents domestic workers like Aunt Lorraine, maintains her dignity and self-respect through the use of carnivalesque language, as Linda Brent does.

Childress, in “The Pocketbook Game,” creates a black domestic worker who mockingly echoes her prejudiced employer’s words, exemplifying contemporary carnivalization of a socioeconomic, superior white woman. As Walker asserts, Mildred, constructed by a black writer and not by a white writer, proves “to be morally superior to the white families for whom she works, and she uses wit and irony as the methods” (108). Whites stereotypically believe that black domestic workers are going to take advantage or steal from their white employers, which Childress satirically mimics in her opening paragraph in “The Pocketbook Game” when she has Mildred talking to her faithful friend, Marge: “I tell you, it really keeps your mind sharp tryin’ to watch for what folks will put over on you” (26). The dialogue is an example of intertextuality because Mildred is imitating white’s thoughts, while revealing, with satirical humor, the truth about whites trying to take advantage of their workers. By carnivalizing the authoritative language of whites, Childress reverses the binary of whites/blacks to blacks/whites: through language she has turned racial hierarchy upside down. As the sketch continues, Mildred tells Marge about the white woman’s obsession of “her pocketbook habit”:

Marge, she’s got a big old pocketbook with two long straps on it . . . and whenever I’d go there, she’d be propped up in a chair with her handbag double wrapped tight around her wrist, and from room to room she’d roam with that purse hugged to her bosom. . . . Yes, girl! This happens every time! No, there’s *nobody*

there but me and her. . . . Marge, I couldn't say nothin' to her! It's her purse, ain't it? She can hold onto it if she wants to!" (26)

Mildred's anecdote can be read only as satirically humorous, indicating the disconnect between American women because of race and socioeconomic disparity. In "Feminism: A Transformational Politic," bell hooks points out that unfortunately "women can and do participate in politics of domination, as perpetrators as well as victims" (465). And too many times, privileged white women practice racism and class exploitation, which, for hooks, is "merely the off-spring of the parent system: patriarchy" (465). The consequence of such practice is naturally reverse racism and bitterness toward white women. One can argue that by reading humorous sketches like Childress's, social barriers can be recognized and destroyed. For whites who dare to read Childress's sketches, they can laugh at the ridiculous behavior of some whites, which could instigate positive action for improved socioeconomics for black women. By using humorous satire as social commentary, Childress speaks to her audience about the needs of black women. Thus, from a Marxist-feminist perspective, instead of allowing race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic distinctions to create a sense of superiority and inferiority, American women could reconsider the idea of gender solidarity as a political means for more equal opportunities for more women.

Because of Childress's witty humor applied to the word "pocketbook," the sketch concludes with a serious, yet humorous, satirical message. Mildred is to run an errand for her employer, yet she quickly returns to her employer's home with the following explanation: "I was almost downstairs when I remembered . . .

I left *my pocketbook!*” (27). This is true carnivalization of an authoritative diction and parody at its best. After Mildred had grabbed her purse and completed her errand, and at the end of the work day, the conversation between the white woman and the black domestic completes the carnival sketch with the domestic worker’s dialogue overshadowing the white’s: ““Mildred, I hope that you don’t think I distrust you because . . .’ I cut her off real quick. . . . ‘That’s all right, Mrs. E . . . , I understand. ‘Cause if I paid anybody as little as you pay me, I’d hold my pocketbook too!’” (27). The doubleness of the word “pocketbook” symbolizes the prejudicial fear of white employers, negligible pay to blacks, and the need of the blacks, through language, to defend themselves as creditable people who deserve to own a respectable place in America.

In “The Health Card,” Mildred, who has been newly employed by a white family, is asked, “Do you have a health card, Mildred?” (43). Mildred replies dishonestly with the claim that she owns a card, but it is at home, so she will bring it to work tomorrow. Next, the white female, with superficial politeness, tells Mildred, ““I don’t mean any offense, but one must be careful, mustn’t one?”” (43). With a witty quip, Mildred responds, ““Sure,’ I said, ‘indeed one must, and I am glad you are so understandin’, ‘cause I was just worryin’ and studyin’ on how I was goin’ to ask you for yours, and of course you’ll let me see one from your husband and one for each of the three children’” (43). After further dialogue and a discussion with her husband, the white woman announces, ““Mildred, you don’t have to bring a health card. I am sure it will be all right’” (43). Of course, according to Mildred, the white family does not have to show their health cards

since “you folks look real clean, too. . . .” (43). The two repeatedly smile at one another, with an implication that the white woman’s smile denotes that she has been embarrassingly outdone by the black domestic female. Through keen wit, the employer’s seeming authority has been usurped by her employee. The white authoritative language has been turned back on itself.

The piece ends with Mildred telling Marge, ““Oh, stop laughin’ so loud, Marge, everybody on this bus is starin’”” (43), cuing Childress’s initial black readers, who may have been reading the column while riding home from work on a bus, to laugh at a working-class black woman’s success in superseding a white’s prejudicial dialogue. The sketches in which Mildred appears can be thought of, Harris suggests, as the “lady in shining armor charging off to attack insensitive racist infidels” (xvii). Childress’s short skit affirms what Gina Wisner claims, “Writing is a political act of breaking silence” (*Black Women’s Writing* 3). For common black workers, Mildred had become their political voice, a voice they could relate to and appreciate. As Harris understands, Mildred was the domestic workers’ voice: “The many black domestic workers who subscribed to that paper [the *Baltimore Afro-American*] and who found themselves in situations equally or more restricting than Mildred’s could applaud her victories; the conversations thereby transcended their individuality and responded to a collective consciousness” (xxv-xxvi). Through her contemporary carnivalization of authority, Childress breaks through what Bakhtin describes as the barriers of “self-enclosed systems of thought” (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 134). The white employers’ supposedly exclusive language has become an inclusive

linguistic system through Childress's humorous satire. Because of carnival dialogue, as Bakhtin recognizes, the "all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life" have been suspended and replaced with a different mode of relations (123). Childress's carnivalesque language and the voices of racial tension, which represent America's heteroglossia, support the idea that language is a fluid source that can be used for political purposes.

Like Fern and Bombeck, who received an overwhelming number of letters from readers, Childress did also: "Childress says that in reaction to her column, 'floods of beautiful mail came in from domestics (male and female) telling me of their own experiences'" (Harris xxvi). Because of the magnitude of fan letters that Childress received, she had to have been as popular with her readers as Fern and Bombeck were with theirs. As Fern's and Bombeck's readers could identify with their colloquial, satirical, humorous newspaper columns, so did Childress's readers relate to Mildred's subversive, sassy humor. According to Harris, "They [the readers] gave their approval to Mildred's exploits and escapades and then told their own stories of protest" in their letters to Childress (xxvi). By exploiting satirical, humorous dialogue, all three writers gave an uncommon voice to the suppressed voices of common citizens, which, it is clear based on the written responses that the writers received, was appreciated.

Concluding Thoughts

There is a need to honor and listen to the diversity of women's voices and to recognize their struggles against authoritative language. In *Black Women's*

Writing, Wisner makes a needed point that white feminists need to be careful of making any “blunders of any covert racism” (5). Hopefully, I am not guilty of such unintentional lapses because I mean to recognize the similar qualities of the humorous satirical voices and the marginal status of all American women represented by the different races, ethnicities, socioeconomic situations, and range of ages. Instead of being fractured along ethnic, racial, or socioeconomic lines, the assertive American women’s carnivalesque, dialogical language, though distinct, can also symbolize the commonality that might move women to unite as a cohesive group, so the ungendering of America can continue more effectively, as well as bring forth the need for more socioeconomic parity for women.

Notes

1. While researching and writing this dissertation, I would sometimes be asked what writers were included in my “writing project.” When I mentioned Erma Bombeck as one of the writers, the overwhelming response from women was that they loved her humor. Many would make a comment that Bombeck’s life was just like theirs, which means that many readers believed Bombeck’s writings were truly autobiographical, which is not necessarily true. Not one woman commented about Bombeck’s satirical wit or how she made them rethink the prescriptive position of a full-time housewife.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DISOBEDIENT DIALOGUES OF AMERICAN WOMEN POETS

As literary prose can be symbolic of the social matrix of authentic dialogues, so can poetry. Through poetic language, poets respond, reflect, promote, and/or challenge a society's ideas and practices that have been created with language, producing intertextuality between social discourse and a poet's text. On a macro level, poetry dialogues with many discourses of the public realm, while on a micro level, on a more personal level, a dialogue occurs between a poet, the poem, and a reader, a concept based on Aristotle's rhetoric triangle. Adding to the rhetoric triangle, readers in the dynamics of a group converse among themselves about their interpretations and responses to a poet and his or her poetry. On multiple levels in various venues, poetry can be very much part of a society's range of discourse; in fact, poetry is in the midst of heteroglossia.

Likewise, poetry can include "dialogic imagination," which Bakhtin reserves for only the novel. For example, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin claims that "the language of the poet is *his* language, he is utterly immersed in it, inseparable from it, he makes use of each form, each word, each expression . . . of his own intention" (285). This statement can be interpreted to mean that a poet is somehow disconnected from the voices in his or her social context. Paradoxically, Bakhtin's position about the language of poets can be extended to the language of novelists because they are as engrossed in, dedicated to, and meticulous about the diction in their genre, as poets are when writing poetry. However, Bakhtin

privileges prose writers as part of social discourse while excluding poets from any social framework. Contrary to Bakhtin's view that poetic diction is equivalent to a poet's singular view of the world is the argument that a poet creates various personas that do not necessarily speak the language of the poet, but rather can represent a poet's context of discourses. Poets can be as involved with, as immersed in, and as influenced by social discourse as a novelist. Hence, a persona of a poem functions similarly to a narrator of a novel, with the understanding that both types of literary speakers can be agents of a society's voices. Identifying the similar particularities of poets and novelists brings forth the argument that prose and poetic writers are skilled wordsmiths who choose their diction carefully, which does not mean that they are separated from social heteroglossia, but rather that both types of writers can create "dialogic imagination," an artistic representation of voices heard in a poet's or author's social environment.

The poems featured in this chapter disprove Bakhtin's claim that "poetic style is by convention suspended from any mutual interaction with alien discourse, any allusion to alien discourse" (*Dialogic Imagination* 285). For example, poems, such as "Learning to Read" by Fances Harper, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" by Emily Dickinson, "Dorothy's Dower" by Phoebe Cary, and "Loose Woman" by Sandra Cisneros contain interactive discourse with patriarchy, whereas "Where Is It Written?" by Judith Viorst and "Woman" by Nikki Giovanni contradict Bakhtin's theory and include "allusion to alien discourse" (*Dialogic Imagination* 285). The identified poems negate Bakhtin's contention that "the possibility of another vocabulary, another semantics, other

syntactic forms and so forth, to the possibility of linguistic points of view, is equally foreign to poetic style” (285). Although Bakhtin’s stance disallows poetry to be part of heteroglossia, the world of languages is not denied in the poetry selected for this chapter; moreover, within each poem, there is a mingling with an alien language because the authoritative diction of America’s patriarchal capitalism is being talked back to.

Rather than critiquing poetry based on style and tropes, as Bakhtin seems to do, the genre can be absorbed into his theory of “dialogic imagination.” Bakhtin maintains that the criticism of novels can no longer focus only on the style of writing or the tropes like “characterization of language, such as ‘expressiveness,’ ‘imagery,’ ‘force,’ clarity’ and so on . . .” (264). However, his non-stylistic analysis of the novel is applicable to poetry, especially satirical poetry. Though Bakhtin acknowledges that satirical poetry can be comprised of a representation of limited heteroglossia, he maintains that it is limited not because of the succinctness of poetry writing, but rather because the dialogue is the object of a poet’s distinct perspective and not the depiction of social discourse (287). The poetry addressed in this chapter denotes the opposite of what Bakhtin argues since the poems represent the backdrop of what many American women were discussing during the second half of the nineteenth century and the latter decades of the twentieth century. Furthermore, he argues that the language of a satirical poem “often becomes authoritarian, dogmatic and conservative, sealing itself off from such influences of extraliterary social dialect” (287). The poems discussed in this study contradict Bakhtin’s argument about satirical poems since the verses

express progressive, liberal thoughts that challenge the authoritative dogma of patriarchal capitalism. Because the women poets identified in this section carnivalize authoritative language and practices, their “dialogic imagination” includes what Lionel Trilling coined “adverse imagination” (*Opposing Self* 1), as well as a liberating imagination, since they advocate for a better socioeconomic situation for women. Through poetic, dialogical language the women poets deconstruct authoritative rhetoric in order to influence the reconstruction of concrete reality.

Harper, Dickinson, Cary, and Cisneros use the autobiographical persona, allowing the female voice agency. The first person point of view does not mean that the poet is necessarily writing about herself but rather moving woman out of the object position and placing her as the subject, the one in control. Additionally, the purpose of the pronoun “I” is to create woman as the subject who speaks to other subjects, the audience. Thus, when a female reader reads a poem that uses the first person pronoun, she can supplant her own voice and experiences in the poem, providing her with a more personal connection to the poem in comparison to reading a poem written in the third person. Or, as Nancy Walker suggests in *The Disobedient Writer*, by using the first person voice, poets and readers can both claim the language for themselves, writing themselves into existence (121). Feminist poets, such as the ones referred to in this paragraph, privilege women’s own space, their own subjectivity, transferring the subordinate position of woman from object to subject.

Whether employing the first person pronoun, as the previously identified poets do, or the third person perspective that Viorst and Giovanni implement, each poet creates an alternative way of perceiving women's positions in America, encouraging them to think beyond the patriarchal norm that has been scripted for them. Each poem considered in this chapter brings a unique perspective concerning women's need for improved socioeconomic positions. The common subversive, humorous, satirical, political, underlying message of the poems, as a collective force, encourages women to take control of their own destinies, no matter what ethnic group or economic stratum they may be in.

Women's Rebellious Poetics of the Nineteenth Century

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

In the nineteenth century, many women believed that change needed to occur because most women had no political voice. Since women were discouraged from speaking in public spaces though some did, as evidenced by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, they relied heavily on writing because it allowed them a venue in which they could own the language. Women, especially those who were unable to travel or listen to women speaking in public, gained a sense of satisfaction that the cry for equality was being addressed in published writings. One such published political writer is Frances Harper. She saw herself as an important advocate for the emancipation of slaves, for the suffrage movement, for temperance, and for education for all women, as Frances Smith Foster posits in her introduction to *A Brighter Coming Day: A Frances Ellen Watkins Harper*

Reader (4). Also, as Patricia Hill indicates in ““Let Me Make the Songs,”” Harper envisioned herself as “the black shepherd who [could] provide leadership for her flock of sheep (the black masses)” (60). In fact, according to Hill, “During her postwar Southern tour, Harper took the opportunity to assist many Southern black women who had been the objects of abuse in slavery and had been in a state of subjugation and ignorance since emancipation” (63). Because of Harper’s experiences and observations when touring the postwar South, she wrote the Aunt Chloe poems, such as “Learning to Read,” in order to promote literacy and independence through education (Foster 137; Hill 64). And as Hill points out, “[T]here are feminist overtones in her women’s poetry”; consequently, Hill identifies Harper as “the first black feminist poet” (64). Harper, the first black American feminist poet, utilizes satirical humor to entertain and to dialogue about the need for improved socioeconomic standards for black women.

In the narrative poem “Learning to Read,” Harper’s spokesperson is Aunt Chloe, who, Foster suggests, is not the “young, talented, cultivated middle-class heroine of the sentimental novel, nor is she the weeping, shivering slave girl,” but rather a mature, ex-slave woman, “a no-nonsense woman of moral strength and great common sense” who symbolically represents the many black women who, in reality, had to endure slavery most of their lives (137). Thus Harper rejects and supplants the stereotypical, popular heroine of sentimental writings and the weak, victimized female slave of seduction novels with common-sense Chloe who uses a satirically humorous tone when speaking her lucid, colloquial, subversive, mother tongue language. Not only does Harper’s Chloe undermine the wronged

female slave of a seduction novel, but the fact that Harper was never a slave, yet she creates a former slave woman as the spokeswoman of “Learning to Read” refutes Bakhtin’s position that poetry does not represent social discourse. Harper challenges the seduction novel motif and speaks for former black slaves who had no public voice.

Illiterate and literate individuals alike had and have the opportunity to appreciate Harper’s satirical dialogue about the demise of slavery. Because Harper often took her poetry to her people, reading aloud to a predominately illiterate audience, “Learning to Read,” is written, Hill suggests, as if the persona is speaking directly to her audience (60). However, for anyone who detests the practices of slavery, the carnivalesque tone and message, which begin with the first stanza, can be appreciated:

Very soon the Yankee teachers
Came down and set up school;
But, oh! How the Rebs did hate it, --
It was agin’ their rule. (1-4)

The stanza erases the South’s racist law by not only parodying the “rule” that slaves were not allowed to be educated, but doubly mocking it in the last line with a black colloquial dialect. In this stanza, staying true to an effective satirical voice, Frances Harper, like Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, uses sass to ridicule the hegemonic voice of slave owners.

In stanza eight of the poem, Chloe shifts from her anecdotes about slaves learning to read in spite of their owners to a more personal situation, identifying her determination to read regardless of pessimistic voices:

Folks just shook their heads,
And said there is no use trying,
Oh! Chloe you're too late;
But as I was rising sixty,
I had no time to wait." (32-36)

Chloe provides hope for former slaves and represents the voices of many older female slaves who were finally given their freedom to pursue their own dreams of literacy. Harper has her persona move from the object of a master and places her as the subject who can orchestrate her own destiny, signified when she refutes the disapproving voices who believe that she is too old to learn: Chloe, through Harper's "dialogic imagination," characterizes the discourse of freed blacks who dialogued about their overdue opportunity to pursue literacy.

With the end of slavery, the marginalized could get glasses to help them read, as Chloe points out: "So I got a pair of glasses, /And straight to work I went / And never stopped till I could read" (37-39). The dialogue presents a tone of salient excitement while symbolizing the demise of a patriarchal-capitalistic society that used humans to produce capital gains.

In the concluding stanza, the female persona declares her freedom and her new place in society, an example for freed black women to consider:

Then I got a little cabin
A place to call my own --
And I felt as independent
As the queen upon her throne. (41-44)

In her last stanza, Harper gives her audience, especially black women, a sense of sovereignty and self-worth. Former black female slaves, who read the poem with its first-person point of view, could easily transpose themselves in the speaker's position as subject and claim the same rights narrated in the poem. A woman's need to have a place of her own in order to gain knowledge and literate skills is addressed by the black writer Frances Harper long before Virginia Woolf wrote "A Room of One's Own."

Harper's clean poetic style and the use of the ballad stanza enhance her colloquial, optimistic dialogue. Her artistic construction gives the ballad a sense of joyful excitement while also cultivating the subversive, carnivalesque dialogue that speaks for and to former slaves, as well as talking back with satirical humor to the once powerful system of slavery. Chloe, the elderly slave spokeswoman, celebrates her freedom with a book in her hand in a place she can call her own, contradicting racist ideology as pointed out by Davis: "Black people were allegedly incapable of intellectual advancement" (*Women, Race and Class* 101). Harper's poem "Learning to Read" destabilizes the erroneous theory that blacks were biologically inferior and incapable of learning how to read.

Emily Dickinson

Although the upper-middle-class enigma Emily Dickinson writes from a different socioeconomic stratum when compared to Frances Harper, Dickinson employs a satirical “dialogic imagination” to some of her laconic poems, such as “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” as Harper does to “Learning to Read.” However, because her family had economic means that protected her from having to write for a living, she escaped the demands of editors who too often want writers to change or adapt their unique styles for a specific publication and a certain audience. As Richard B. Sewall points out in *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, she could not abide by “Higginson’s attempts to get her to write according to his prescriptions. . . . With a conception of poetry so different from his, she could not possibly write as he would wish” (559). Though it seems that Dickinson did not want professional editors to make any final modifications of her poetry, she did, according to Sewall, allow her sister-in-law Susan Dickinson to sometimes provide editorial comments about her poetry, with Emily making any final changes to her poems (201). Also, Dickinson was aware of the common practice of writers’ personal lives becoming public domain, a common practice since periodicals of her time gave accounts of writers’ personal lives, as well as a view of their homes, as Willis J. Buckingham explains in “Emily Dickinson and the Reading Life” (239-40). Therefore, her self-published poems that were sent to a select few were untainted by the manipulation of others, and she was also able to maintain a private poet’s undisclosed life. Or as Karen Dandurand so succinctly states, “One reason she chose not to publish was to protect herself from the

attention and curiosity that publication involved” (“Dickinson and the Public” 255). Although some scholars, like Buckingham and Dandurand, understand Dickinson’s need for privacy, there are copious commentaries by others who believe it strange for her to have isolated herself from much of society.

But a writer limiting herself to a chosen environment and preferring exclusion from the larger sector of society, as Dickinson eventually did, is not truly abnormal, especially when compared to other writers. For example, in order to write, Sandra Cisneros chooses not to live with her family because she needs more private space than Dickinson did. According to Cisneros, spending time with family requires “an inordinate amount of time in front of a television screen. So at the end of a day I feel bloated and sick, as if I’ve eaten a box of jelly donuts or something” (Satz, “Returning to One’s House” n. pag.). Dickinson, on the other hand, stayed close to family but ended the social visits that genteel women were to participate in, as Sarah Ann Wider avows: “The visiting alone was so time-consuming as to be prohibitive in itself. . . . [S]he gradually eased out of the countless rounds of social calls” (“Emily Dickinson” 115). Also as established by Dandurand, “Dickinson was aware of public interest in her work, both through requests she received for poems to publish and through expressions of curiosity about herself that reached her” (268); thus one can argue that she did not want to deal with the public curiosity that Louisa May Alcott had to guard against. Moreover, Dandurand suggests that Dickinson may have read “in the *Springfield Republican* of 5 May 1869” Alcott’s written disdain for people who wanted to intrude into her private life (271); hence, Dickinson wanting to live a reclusive

life so she could write seems like a sensible decision. One can surmise that it is not uncommon for some writers to find social demands intrusive to the needed time for mental dedication to write. However, demarcating the need for an exclusive writing environment does not exclude one from social discourse. Dickinson conversed with her family and occasionally with visitors if she so pleased. She also read and wrote letters extensively and selectively and read current publications as well as a wealth of earlier literature. Thus her poetry is part of verbal and written discourses.

One of the most recognized, subversive, satirically witty poems of American literature, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" seems like such a simple poem to deconstruct because of its minimalist style. Yet when one recognizes the poem's polyvocality, the two stanza poem creates various insights and interpretations.

Consider for example, Suzanne Juhasz, Cristanne Miller, and Martha Nell Smith's *Comic Power in Emily Dickinson* where they recognize the satirical humor in "I'm Nobody! Who are you?". The three scholars establish the point that the poem mocks "the pretensions of the public world by imagining public figures as loud bullfrogs" (15). In the second stanza of the poem, the image of a public orator, analogous to an unattractive, baritone creature, announcing one's self-importance to an audience that "has the character of a swamp, something one sinks in, not something with an opinion to be respected," is quite amusing (Juhasz, Miller, and Smith 15). Applying the interpretation of the poem's second verse by Juhasz, Miller, and Smith, the satirical, humorous tone cannot be missed

when a public figure is caricatured as a “Frog” who speaks “To an admiring Bog!” (lines 6; 8). Additionally, the poem’s end rhyme of “Frog” and “Bog” makes the caricature of a public dignitary doubly humorous. Thus when one recognizes Dickinson’s satirical tone, the lines read as social criticism about public persons and gullible audiences.

The other part of the poem’s subversive message relies on the idea that the status of a non-public person, a “Nobody,” is preferred, especially when compared to the satirical description of a “Somebody.” For Juhasz in “The Big Tease,” Chapter Two of *Comic Power in Emily Dickinson*, the persona “pokes fun” at and provides another way of viewing the privileged men who are considered culturally important (27). Dickinson’s poem reconstructs, satirically, what is considered socially significant by overshadowing a pontificating “Somebody” with the voice of a “Nobody.” The dialogue of the nobodies in the poem, whether implied or overt, represents the socially marginalized citizens, especially silenced women who were not encouraged or allowed to speak their names in public. For Nancy Walker in “Emily Dickinson and the Self: Humor as Identity,” the conventions that Dickinson was supposed to take seriously are mocked instead when she declares “her rejection of and her superiority to them” (59). With humor, the poem views patriarchal values through a different lens, with the unofficial social discourse disproving and superseding the official public speakers who marketed themselves and their ideologies.

Extending the argument that Dickinson is critical about the patriarchal-capitalistic constructed binary of nobodies and somebodies is the intertextual play

between Dickinson's poem and three letters she wrote to Catherine Scott Turner Anthon. The first letter to Anthon, #203, written in 1859, acknowledges a group of Amherst women with whom Dickinson and Anthon associated. In the letter, Dickinson identifies Anthon as an accepted member of the group, followed with the charge, "All we are strangers—dear—The world is not acquainted with us, because we are not acquainted with her" (349). One can speculate that the Amherst women with whom Dickinson socialized knew that they were nobodies in the public arena because women were not to participate, publicly, in political discourse or political decisions. In the confined domestic sphere, they possibly could have chatted and ridiculed the isolation that they felt, as well as the socioeconomic limitations they had to endure, which is addressed in letter #203 and later established in Dickinson's satirical, humorous poem. The ladies' attitudes about their social position can be identified in Dickinson's first stanza, in which the speaker, "Nobody," greets another unknown. In the same stanza, the persona uses a telegraphic, exclamatory, sarcastically teasing declaration about patriarchal structure: "Don't tell! they'd banish us—you know!" (4).¹ The line seems to be doubly satirical: since women, like the Amherst group, are already excluded from public, political space because of their gender, the thought of dual banishment because they dared to speak of their subordinate position in public is meant to be purposely nonsensical. Therefore, for Dickinson, her poem could symbolize what she and the other Amherst women discussed: their unwarranted scripted roles in nineteenth-century America's patriarchal-capitalistic society.

Letters #209 and #222 include the word “Frogs.” In both letters the common noun is capitalized and accentuated with single quotation marks, which could mean that it is a coded term representing male, public speakers for Dickinson, Anthon, and the other women with whom Dickinson was then socializing. In 1859, in letter #209, Dickinson includes a humorous statement: “It is too late for ‘Frogs,’ or which pleases me better, dear—not quite early enough!” (356). In 1860, in letter #222, Dickinson writes in a remorseful tone about missing people of past visits, followed with a humorous remark about frogs: “The murmuring leaves fill up the chinks thro’ which the winter red shone, when Kate was here, and Frank was here—and ‘Frogs’ sincerer than our own splash in their Maker’s pools . . .” (365). The image of a male orator having the characteristics of a frog could have been thought quite humorous among the women with whom Dickinson spent time; consequently, “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” can be a poetic commentary that reflects Dickinson’s social group’s view about the genderization of America, diffusing Bakhtin’s limited view about poets and their poetry being disconnected from heteroglossia.

Since the three letters were written between 1859 and 1860 and the year of the poem has been conjectured as 1861, the intertextuality seems to be appropriately fitting, especially since Agnieszka Salska notes, “[Dickinson] lived in a culture that persistently encouraged the fusion of literary and personal experience beyond the need and, really, the possibility of separating the two” (“Dickinson’s Letters” 166). The acknowledgement of the commonality of content between the poets’ personal letters and her terse poem that relate to the

thoughts of Amherst women seems to be a sensible argument: intertextuality transpired among Dickinson's writings and social rhetoric. Connecting the letters to the poem links Dickinson's external world to the poem's space in which she "challenge[s] dominance and hegemony" (Juhasz 27). Equally significant concerning the poem relating to Dickinson's external world is the Marxist-feminist argument that literature and reality cannot be seen as separate entities, and for Dickinson, such a connection brings an emphasis on women's segregated, demure social position.

Likewise, the intertextuality of the letters and the poem can also relate to politicians like her father. According to Jane Donahue Eberwein in "Dickinson's Local, Global, and Cosmic Perspectives," Dickinson's father "tied his personal hopes to community advancement in his resolute quest for power and wealth" (36). He believed and insisted on clearly defined gender roles, which allowed his son to pursue "public success" while his daughters were to adhere to "domestic submission" (31). The "Somebody" in her poem could represent her father, whom she is mocking and talking back to, with the two nobodies symbolizing her sister and herself. Though like her sister, Dickinson adhered to her father's wishes and stayed within the domestic sphere, her written poetic thoughts seem to parody such a position, illustrating Nancy Walker's argument in *The Disobedient Writer* in which she writes that "a woman who writes is practicing a form of disobedience to the established order" (172). Dickinson uses her poetry to mock her father's patriarchal-capitalistic social order where men were allowed to work for profit, which empowered them, while women were supposed to be dedicated

to labor-intensive household chores that were valued as useful and necessary for the continuance of the status quo. Through literary humor, Dickinson demonstrates thought that is independent from patriarchal ideas and equally important. Her poem provides evidence that she has an empathic connection with others who were superficially perceived as not noteworthy. Thus, Dickinson's laconic eight line poem refutes Bakhtin's idea that the novel is the only genre that represents heteroglossia. The speaker of the poem does not necessarily represent Dickinson's singular voice, but rather voices she had heard.

Adding to the social, linguistic intertextuality of the poem, one can argue that there is another type of dialogue occurring in the poem since Dickinson takes a section of the Massachusetts environment and assimilates it into her poem.

Although Dickinson did not reside near Massachusetts's eastern cranberry farms, she was more than likely aware of her state's cranberry bogs, where frogs reside and where Cape Verde emigrants were employed in the nineteenth century. For Eberwein,

[I]t would be a mistake to assume that Dickinson's experience was limited to her hometown or that Amherst itself was culturally isolated. As a college community, it drew a constant influx of students from other rural New England towns, of faculty elsewhere, and of alumni returning from exotic places. (34)

Also according to Eberwein, friends would bring Dickinson news from elsewhere (34). Hence she could have known about eastern cranberry farms from others. Because Dickinson was a prolific reader and a Massachusetts educated person,

there is a strong probability that she knew about cranberry farms and the immigrants who worked in the bogs in eastern Massachusetts. Consequently, her last line, “To an admiring Bog!” could be playing with the idea that the public speakers who pass through Massachusetts are admired only by the non-English-speaking, bog-working Cape Verdeans, which is quite satirically humorous. Or, as Domnhall Mitchell claims, in “Emily Dickinson and Class,” Dickinson is mocking the many illiterate Irish immigrants in Massachusetts who were labeled “bog-trotters” (197). Also, according to Mitchell, adjacent to the Amherst Common, where political meetings often occurred, there was a large frog pond (198), which, because of the juxtaposition of the two, produces a hilarious image of male public speakers at the Amherst Common sounding and looking like frogs. Again, Dickinson produces double humor because she implies that while male orators are listened to only by migrant workers and immigrants, the speakers’ voices may not be distinguishable from the simultaneous background noise produced by frogs, especially since the bog workers or bog-trotters may not be able to understand completely what is being said or croaked.

However, Mitchell’s suggestion that Dickinson had a condescending attitude toward hard working Irish immigrants seems doubtful. As Martha Nell Smith points out in “Susan and Emily Dickinson: Their Lives, in Letters,” the Irish immigrants who worked with Dickinson at the Amherst home were considered “extensions of the family” (55); thus line 8—“To an admiring Bog!”—is meant to reinforce her mockery of the self-proclaimed important male speakers and is not to be interpreted as a degrading comment about working-class

immigrants. Also an example of her compassion for the less fortunate is identified by Dandurand:

In rare instances she allowed her poems to be published on behalf of charities—three poems in about 1880 . . . because she could not refuse to ‘aid unfortunate Children,’ and three poems in the *Drum Beat* in 1864, because she could not refuse to ‘help the sick and wounded soldiers.’ (269)

Hence, she may have seen the immigrants, both the Irish and the Cape Verdeans, as a gullible audience for public orators to easily influence, but disliking such groups seems inconsistent with her empathy for those who have no social or economic political power.

Moving beyond Dickinson’s dialogue with Massachusetts voices, her recognition of nobodies seems to have been an international motif in the late nineteenth century. For example, Dickens, whom Dickinson read, honors in all his novels the insignificant, marginalized people of England, while criticizing the wealthy. The most obvious symbolic representation is his female protagonist Dorrit in *Little Dorrit*. Consequently, because Dickinson gives a nobody the subject position while the highly visible, renowned “Somebody” is placed in the object position, her poem speaks to Dickens and his socially marginal characters. And like Dickens, she includes satirical humor to make her point. The Scottish bard Charles Mackay carries the same theme in his poem “Little Nobody,” published in the *Springfield Republican* on January 23, 1858. As Sewell points out in *The Life of Emily Dickinson*, Dickinson read daily the Springfield

Republican (363); thus, her poem, “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” could have been a textual response to Mackay’s poem. Furthermore, as Sewall notes, “Emily Dickinson enjoyed establishing a kind of dialogue with the things she read, picking up hints and snatches here and there and, as it were, answering them or expanding upon them” (*The Life of Emily Dickinson* 549). Dickinson continues Dickens’s and Mackay’s theme of privileging the unassuming subordinates of a society in her short, dialogical poem. Although Dickinson may have supported Dickens’s and Mackay’s mutual theme, one can infer that she could have disliked Mackay’s traditionally constructed, sentimental poem, with its heroic couplets and its two identically stylized stanzas since her non-sentimental, humorous, satirical verse, with its non-traditional poetic structure, seems to talk back to Mackay’s mundane poem. In her poem, she improves on two of Mackay’s lines: “I’m but little Nobody—Nobody am I” and “Who would be a Somebody?—Nobody am I” (12; 24). Unlike MacKay’s mournful lines, her vibrant lines, “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” and “How dreary—to be—Somebody!” (1; 5), speak with vitality. As Sewall indicates, her compact poem is “superior to Mackay’s swollen monologue. . . . The last stanza, at any rate, lives as nothing in the Mackay poem” (675). On one level, her poem demonstrates complimentary intertextuality since she promotes the same theme as Dickens and Mackay, but on another level, her poem denounces Mackay’s traditional form. And ironically, it is the male who puts forth sentimental diction, while the female poet writes satirically.

The childlike persona that Dickinson chooses for “I’m Nobody! Who are You?” intensifies the humorous incongruity between the binary of insignificant persons and the self-proclaimed, prominent somebodies. With the innocent, charming “Nobody” contrasted with the officious “Somebody,” the humorous, satirical message cannot be missed. Dickinson exemplifies the insight of John Russell and Ashley Brown: a “satirist means business and knows how to go about it, no matter what disguises he [she] may choose” (*A Critical Anthology* xix). The persona sounds amusingly playful and innocent, yet, as Juhasz suggests, when the poem is interpreted as a subversive satire, it “reveal[s] experience,” attacking the constructs of patriarchy (34). For Juhasz, Dickinson produces a poem that “sounds like one thing and reveal[s] something else” (34). She knows how to tease while delivering the idea that patriarchal values are to be questioned. Her concise poem also exemplifies what Leonard Feinberg argues in *Introduction to Satire*: the most effective satiric material is produced in “short units” because it does not tire readers’ minds (85). Hence, Dickinson’s eight-line poem gives meaning to Feinberg’s line of reasoning.

Since Dickinson was a prolific reader of various genres, the personas of her poetry could have been influenced by different works. For instance, the dialogue in the poem “I’m Nobody! Who are You?” could have been influenced by the reading of Shakespeare’s plays, an idea proposed by Gary Lee Stonum in “Dickinson’s Literary Background”: “Dickinson’s admiration for Shakespeare suggests the appeal of role playing and hence a fondness for representing characters other than her own” (54). Furthermore, because Dickinson read a good

number of women writers, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, and Emily Brontë, Stonum argues that characters from respected women authors influenced her to create different personas for her poetry rather than “expressing the self” (59). Thus the first person “I” in “I’m Nobody! Who are You?” does not necessarily represent Dickinson herself, but rather voices from her social milieu, which includes her literary context. The poem demonstrates an intertextuality of style, with Dickinson applying to her poem what she appreciates about others’ writings. As playwrights and novelists take the multi-voices heard in a social framework, Dickinson likewise creates artistically constructed dialogue based on the utterances she heard in the literature she chose to read.

When the poem became available to the general public, readers could be verbal participants with the poem. Because of the use of the first person perspective, a reader can insert himself or herself as the speaker of the poem. Or as Buckingham suggests, a reader can exchange “the writer’s voice with his or her own” (244). By including the pronouns “you” and “your,” Dickinson teases readers to play an active role in the poem. She also invites her readers to question the binary limitations of a “nobody” or a “somebody.” And as the persona of the poem laughs satirically at such conventional practices, engaged readers must too. The dialoguing that can occur between the poem and a reader or a group of readers is another example of why the poem can be considered part of a social discourse.

Her humorously satirical poem proves to be a non-simplistic poem that represents polyvocality, with a myriad of meanings. As Paul Crumbley argues,

quoting one of his own essays in “Dickinson’s Dialogic Voice,” Dickinson’s style reveals “a mix of personal and social discourses not containable within a unified voice” (qtd. in Crumbley 105). Dickinson’s terse poem disproves Bakhtin’s argument that poets produce monologic verses that signify the poets’ single voice. Instead, Dickinson speaks for and to the marginalized, while carnivalizing the official language of patriarchy. She chooses cryptic metaphorical language that would have been understood by a specific group of Amherst women, who would have understood why she reverses the binary of objectified nobodies and the publicly recognized somebodies like her father who made sure that the dual gender rules were adhered to in his household. Within her literary context, her poem dialogues with international authors as well as talks back to one who wrote traditionally constructed poetry. Her animated persona invites readers to be participants in “dialogic imagination.” With such complexity, which includes intertextuality and the representation of multiple dialogues that interact with different social and literary contexts, the poem can only be understood to be part of more than one linguistic register.

Phoebe Cary

Unlike Emily Dickinson, who was expected to rely on her father for economic sustainability, Phoebe Cary and her sister Alice had to leave their home in order to support themselves. They moved from rural life in Ohio to city life in New York City, where they were able to survive financially from their published works, or as their biographer Mary Clemmer states in *A Memorial of Alice and*

Phoebe Cary, they supported themselves on their “literary labor” (13). Despite Dickinson’s and Phoebe Cary’s social class difference, they share a sense of humor and wit, which is quite apparent in their poetry. Like Dickinson, who often satirized the dictates of society in her poetry, Cary, in a more public way, published her poems that denounce woman’s place in society, especially concerning the imbalanced gender prescriptions for husband and wife. She saw how men had the advantages in a marriage, a situation that she parodies in “Dorothy’s Dower.”

In “Dorothy’s Dower,” Cary takes readers through three stages of a marriage, which I have labeled the enchanted phase, the apathetic period, and the bitter finale. Her poem goes beyond the motif in many sentimental writings of her time: the Cinderella fairy tale ending that implies a couple will live happily ever after. Cary identifies the marriage between John and Dorothy as the typical patriarchal-capitalistic arrangement, in which, according to Josephine Donovan in “Feminism and Marxism,” the husband has the political control because he considers himself the head of the household since his worth is based on income received in the exchange-value market. On the other hand, the wife is supposed to adhere to the characteristics of true womanhood since she is to be demure and responsible for the home labor, which is based on use-value, for which she receives no wages (72-73). In the poem, when the enchanted phase is over, the marriage becomes a commodity battle about how the dower should be spent. And although the dower belongs to Dorothy, her husband John controls the conversation and the finances while Dorothy remains self-effacing throughout

most of the poem, symbolizing male dominance practiced in reality. However, through parody and the hybridization of languages, the codified roles that John and Dorothy represent are satirically questioned by Cary.

In the enchanted phase, Part I of the poem, John is identified: “the fellow was enchanted!” (8). What is his is hers, John states, “for all my worldly goods are yours” (7), with Dorothy’s dower belonging only to her. According to enchanted John, Dorothy can spend her dower on whatever she pleases: “Throw it away, do what you please, / Spend it on sugar-candy!” (10-11). For John, the more she spends of his income, the happier he is, as he indicates by his declaration to Dorothy: “the better you will please me” (16). Cary produces a male persona who is captivated, not by the femme fatale, like Eve in the Garden of Eden or the beautiful damsel in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” by John Keats, but rather enthralled by the patriarchal ideal that he will be the sole supporter of a wife who has “sweet, dependent ways” (13). Cary, with humor and wit, invalidates the femme fatale theme, which has been predominately penned by men, and creates a male fatale, with the husband being the culprit who causes disenchantment because he brings his family economic troubles.

In Part II, the apathetic period, the shift of John’s attitude about Dorothy’s inheritance cannot be missed, for he no longer believes that Dorothy should spend the money on “sugar-candy” as indicated in Part I. John, in Part II, asks Dorothy if she has spent her dower. Her response is an implied, “no,” since John states, “No; well that’s sensible for you; / This fix is most unpleasant” (21-22). He instead, perhaps because of his inept ability or unwillingness to provide for his

family adequately, needs her to spend it on needed items for the family: “But money’s tight, so just take yours / And use it for the present” (23-24). Cary’s use of ironic humor demonstrates Gillooly’s argument in “Women and Humor”: “Whereas irony acts as a principle of antithesis, humor operates as a principle of subversion” (477). Through a husband’s dialogue, Cary not only exposes the irony of the husband’s changed viewpoint about the dower, but with humor, she has also carnivalized and challenged his ironic shift about Dorothy’s money.

As Part II continues, Cary is consistent with the ironic parody between the husband’s diction in the enchanted phase of matrimony compared to his dialogue in the second phase of marriage. After John tells Dorothy to use her money for “the present,” John next announces to Dorothy that she needs to loan him cash from her dower so that he can enjoy himself away from home, leaving her alone with the continuous responsibility of the children in the domestic sphere:

Now I must go—to—meet a man!

By George! I’ll have to borrow!

Lend me a twenty—that’s all right!

I’ll pay you back to-morrow.” (25-28)

Money is still the object of discussion, but the husband begins to depend on the wife, which proves to be an ironic contradiction to his earlier declaration in Part I: “I like your sweet, dependent ways” (13). The dashes in “Now I must go—to—meet a man!” indicate that John hesitates in his speech. He is trying to think of what to say to Dorothy, for the dashes imply that he is going to do something else rather than simply meet a man. The dash used in line 27, “Lend me a twenty—

that's all right!" means that Dorothy has given John either less or more than a twenty. The amount of cash John receives is overshadowed with the ludicrous idea that penniless John will pay his wife back the very next day. For Feinberg, satirists create characters "whose behavior exposes their pretenses" (*Introduction to Satire* 31), a technique appropriated by Cary when she produces a caricature of a nineteenth-century, negative prototype of a husband. Cary's Part II also reverses and challenges the unrealistic view of marriage found in the sentimental poetry that was popular during her time. Moreover, John's financial reliance on his wife's dower provokes a question about the allegiance to the accepted patriarchal-capitalistic ideology that a properly constructed nuclear family is financially supported by the man. The patriarchal-capitalistic creed has been disrupted by Cary.

In Part III, the final part of the poem, which I label the bitter finale, Cary constructs another ironic, satirically humorous twist as well as a parody of John's changed behavior and dictional shift when speaking to Dorothy. In Part I, he identifies his wife as "My sweetest Dorothy" (1), but in Part III, he addresses her as "Madame" (29), indicating that the enchanted fellow has become emotionally distant from his wife. As he "rudely" pushes her as he speaks to her in passing (30), the topic of conversation is again about finances, with John complaining that Dorothy and *her* children (emphasis added) are causing him financial hardship: "You and your children are enough / To break John Jacob Astor" (35-36). There is no more enchantment but rather disenchantment revealed when John yells at Dorothy, "Where's what you had yourself when I / Was fool enough to court

you?” (37-38). Cary acknowledges John’s voice of authority through the hybridity of language, which according to Bakhtin can include “an intentional hybrid” with one language being illuminated “by another linguistic consciousness” (*Dialogic Imagination* 359). When parody is part of the illumination of the represented language, such as John’s representation of authentic, authoritative dialogue, such language is objectified and challenged through the hybrid construction (*Dialogic Imagination* 363-64). Adding to Bakhtin’s stance, the husband’s dialogue is understood to be supplanted by the feminist poet parodying the male’s acrimonious diction, making him a sardonic buffoon. Furthermore, Cary’s dialogic imagination of John speaking to Dorothy represents the authentic language of husbands—an alien language that is different than the poet’s language. Such an inclusion of an alien voice challenges Bakhtin’s claim that poetry cannot include alien discourse (*Dialogic Imagination* 285).

Next in Part III, John questions what has happened to his wife’s inheritance, only to receive a calm, rational response from Dorothy, “It’s lent and gone, not very far; / Pray don’t be apprehensive” (41-42). John emotionally retorts, “*Lent!* I’ve had use enough for it: / My family is expensive” (43-44). Dorothy’s composed response underscores John’s anxious tone. The nineteenth-century belief that men are the rational, unemotional creatures and women the reverse is being toppled; Cary reconstructs the conventional ideas of gender characteristics. Also, the dialogue between John and Dorothy can only be interpreted as satirically humorous, for Dorothy is parodying John’s word “Lend” from Part II. Cary’s play on the words “Lend” and “Lent” creates the humorous,

satirical tone that Cary wishes to bring forth concerning money being given to John for his own selfish indulgences. Cary stimulates ridicule of male privilege, not through polemic rhetoric, but rather through the clever use of the rhetorical device—parody, an element of the hybridization of languages. John’s final remark, “I didn’t, as a woman would, / Spend it on sugar-candy!” (45-46), is an ironic self-parody of the declaration he made in the enchantment stage about his wife’s dower, “Throw it away, do what you please, / Spend it on sugar-candy!” (7-8). The male’s own dialogue produces a self-caricature. However, his final words are not the conclusive ones of the poem, for it is Dorothy’s verbal comeback that brings the discord between husband and wife to its conclusion: “No, John, I think the most of it / Went for cigars and brandy!” (47-48). The poem’s dialogue that depicts and criticizes male hegemony has been carnivalized by John’s own diction as well as Dorothy’s. Cary has the woman utter the last statement, finalizing the non-sentimental, non-Cinderella storybook view of marriage.

Rather than writing a critical prose piece about the problems with a patriarchal-constructed marriage, which might not have been published during her time because of her gender, Cary relies on her comic, dialogic imagination, along with her humorous satire, in order to make her point. Cary’s theme of male self-serving practices parallels with Fern’s sketches, which are addressed in chapter three of this study. Moreover, through the symbolic middle-class couple’s dialogue, Cary accents the Marxist-feminist tenet that women and men in a specific economic stratum experience the material world differently.

Concurrently, “Dorothy’s Dower” rejects nineteenth-century sentimental novels and poems that supported the myth that women will marry, find true bliss, and be taken care of as if they are children because men are rational and women are too emotional and weak to financially support themselves. Dorothy and John are the antipodes to sentimental myth-making. Cary’s poem offered her nineteenth-century women readers an opportunity to dialogue about the patriarchal-capitalistic, socioeconomic structure that oppressed them. Cary’s dialogic poem disrupts the rationale for a patriarchal-capitalistic family structure. Her poetry aligns itself with social discourse, for she challenges the authentic, authoritative language on the macro level, while dialoguing through her poetry with others on a more personal, micro level. Cary, like Harper and Dickinson, disproves Bakhtin’s thought about a poet’s inability to be part of heteroglossia.

Phoebe Cary had a different view of marriage from that of her sister Alice Cary. And though the two sisters wrote from completely different perspectives about the topic of matrimony, Mary Clemmer points out in *A Memorial of Alice and Phoebe Cary* that the sisters respected one another’s writings and supported each other’s works (45). Moreover, when one compares Phoebe’s “Dorothy’s Dower” to Alice’s “Epithalamium,” Phoebe Cary’s carnivalesque language in “Dorothy’s Dower” becomes more noticeably subversive. In “Epithalamium,” Alice Cary writes of marriage as a holy union:

But when we see the meeting
Of the lives that are to run
Henceforward to the beating

Of two hearts that are as one,
When we hear the holy taking
Of the vows that cannot break,
Then it seems as if the making
Of the world was for their sake. (17-24)

The standard romantic, sentimental view that occurs in Alice Cary's "Epithalamium" is sharply contrasted in Phoebe's "Dorothy's Dower." Phoebe Cary's "Dorothy's Dower" translates Alice's attitude about marriage in "Epithalamium" as an artificial construct. As Lucia Cherciu indicates in "Parody as Dialogue," Phoebe was known for defying, through parody, her sister's conventional attitude about marriage (338). For Phoebe there was nothing natural about writing poetry, even when writing sentimental verses as she sometimes did. She understood that writing takes time, dedication, and mental labor, excluding the myth that women are natural poetic writers of sentimentality. Phoebe Cary, as Cherciu argues, disproved the ideology that "nineteenth-century women's poetry [is] . . . a natural expression of truth, an overflow of feelings, an unadulterated picture of heart" (333). And for Mary Clemmer, Cary had "this tenacious grip on reality" that allowed her to distance herself from sentimental poetry, making her "a very queen of parodists" (158). Cary, the queen of parody, redefines women's language.

Women Poets Write for Equality in the Twentieth Century

Judith Viorst

Moving into the twentieth century, specifically the 1960s, “Where Is It Written?” by Judith Viorst campaigns against the privileges of husbands, as Phoebe Cary protested in “Dorothy’s Dower.” Instead of the man’s voice being mocked, as it is in Cary’s poem, Viorst chooses to have a female persona parody the difference between the self-important rank allowed husbands and the self-effacing role specified for wives. The refrain of the poem is identical to the title of the poem, with both serving as a satirically humorous, rhetorical question about American mores identified in the poem. While the poem’s speaker verbalizes her discontent about gender inequalities to an audience, considered the micro-level of society, she also challenges the macro-level constructs of American patriarchal capitalism. She challenges the dogma that there is a natural order for men and women, with men being the privileged sector, while women are typed as secondary.

In “Dorothy’s Dower” and “Where Is It Written?” wives’ frugal practices are compared to husbands’ disproportionate spending, and wives’ domestic sphere is contrasted with husbands’ public social engagements. Dorothy does not spend her inheritance on herself but instead gives money to her husband for his privileged pleasures. In Viorst’s poem, wives eat “Campbell’s black bean soup” while the “husbands get twenty-five dollar lunches” (4; 2). In Cary’s poem, while there is probable deception because of the hesitation in John’s dialogue when telling Dorothy why he needs to borrow money from her, “Now I must go—to—

meet a man!” (25), in Viorst’s poem there is no camouflaging with whom husbands meet: “[H]usbands get to meet beautiful lady lawyers and beautiful lady / professors of Ancient History and beautiful sculptresses and / heiresses and poetesses” (7-9). In Viorst’s poem, the willingness of husbands to converse with professional career women or women of prominence seems to be inconsistent in a patriarchal-capitalistic society where males want to control the behavior of women. Paradoxically, capitalists do hire women for lesser pay in comparison to men’s wages because of the drive for higher profits. However, as Hartmann points out in “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism,” “The vast majority of men want their women at home to personally service them. A smaller number of men, who are capitalists, might want most women (not their own) to work in the wage labor market” (104). The husbands in the poems enjoy public conversations, perhaps flirtatious dialogue with other women, while their alienated wives stay in the domestic sector having conversations with children. In both poems, husbands find it more interesting to be away from home and family, a practice that Cary and Viorst satirize.

The poems equally indicate that the home and children are the responsibility of wives, not of husbands. John announces to Dorothy, “You and your children are enough / To break John Jacob Astor” (35), with the implication that Dorothy and her children are a burden to him. The husband has no time or energy for his nuclear family, which a century later is a similar scenario that Viorst identifies in her poem: “[H]usbands get a nap and the Super Bowl on Sundays while / Wives get to help color in the coloring book” (12-13). Because

both poems highlight the practice that men see themselves as privileged in comparison to their wives, one can note that in America, there are codified, long-lasting gender roles for husbands and wives to play out, roles that feminist poets, like Cary and Viorst, verbally attack.

In “Dorothy’s Dower,” the idea that a male’s ego is to be protected and privileged by the wife is more implicit when compared to “Where Is It Written?” in which the female persona explicitly asks, “Where is it written / That husbands get ego gratification, emotional support. . . . Wives get to give it to them?” (14-17). Though both poems have been written in different times and spaces, the same message—savor the male’s self-worth—has been subverted through carnivalesque language and a carnival tone. As ancient carnivals mocked and uncrowned kings metaphorically, Cary and Viorst do likewise to the ruling husbands of America’s patriarchal capitalism. Concurrently, while the decrowning occurs, there is a shift of emphasis, a creative power that produces what Bakhtin calls a different way of understanding the world (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 124), demonstrated in “Dorothy’s Dower” and “Where Is It Written?”

The concluding lines for both poems recast politics as usual. In Cary’s poem, in the final lines when Dorothy tells John that he has spent much of her dower on his cigars and brandy, the dialogue is meant to truncate male dominance. In Viorst’s poem, the final lines, “Where is it written / That she always has to feel / Guilty?” (22-24) encourages readers to evaluate the psychological syndrome of shame that wives are supposed to feel when they

decide to pursue their own careers, while allowing husbands to participate in child rearing. Likewise, the continuous practice of men earning the family wage, which, for Hartmann, gives them the psychological means to “exercise their control in receiving personal service work from women, in not having to do housework or rear children” (103-04), is challenged in “Where Is It Written?” The female persona of Viorst’s poem invites change when she states that the husband can be responsible for some of the mundane yet necessary chores that keep family life running smoothly, while the wife pursues her own goals “like brain surgery or transcendental meditation” (21), a statement that supports Michèle Barrett’s claim that there needs to be “a redivision of labor and responsibilities of childcare,” as well as family and household duties (“Capitalism and Women’s Liberation” 127). Viorst’s phrase about surgery and meditation is meant to be a double-purpose phrase: women do need to claim space for their own goals and interests, while simultaneously declaring that women need to take time to meditate and to perform “surgery”—reconstruct the political practice that men are the privileged gender.

By comparing the poems of Cary and Viorst, one can argue that for a century American women had been stuck on a never ending merry-go-round of gender disparity, which means that patriarchal capitalism has had a stronghold in America. The poems support Hartmann’s argument that patriarchal capitalism sustains itself through the ability to be flexible yet steadfast in the control of women (107-108). A political angst of Cary and Viorst is that woman, the subordinate gender, has limited political leverage when alienated in the domestic

zone, and if their socioeconomic situation is not changed, the construct of patriarchal capitalism will continue as is.

Although Cary's "Dorothy's Dower" and Viorst's "Where Is It Written?" were written approximately one hundred years apart, the intertextual dialogue presented between the two poems in this chapter, the dialogue between the unofficial carnivalesque language and the official patriarchal language in each poem, and the assumed responsive conversations among women readers about these poems prove that these two poems were and are part of social discourse.

Sandra Cisneros

Continuing the feminist, literary practice of using carnivalesque language as Cary and Viorst do, is the twentieth-century Latina writer, Sandra Cisneros. As Cary's and Viorst's poetry satirizes social realities, so too does Cisneros's poem "Loose Woman." And like Cary and Viorst, Cisneros also encourages what Walker identifies in *The Disobedient Writer*, "the possibility of cultural transformation" (6). Though Cary and Viorst write more for an Anglo middle-class audience, Cisneros claims space for Latinas and Chicanas. However, the space she wants to claim and her provocative poetry has not always been appreciated by some. Her audacious, feminist attitude, especially in the collection of poems published in *Loose Woman*, received several negative Texas reviews. In Martha Satz's personal interview with Cisneros, the poet applies her humorous wit when responding to the unenthusiastic Texas reviews: "I think the fact that I wandered into Texas with my awards rattling in my pocket threatened a lot of

male poets—‘How dare I?’” (“Returning to One’s House” n. pag.). Perhaps she received adverse reviews because a poem like “Loose Woman” not only carnivalizes patriarchal language but also deconstructs it in such a way that it is the strong voice of the feminist persona who owns the language. Though Cisneros does not revise a traditional fairy tale as writers identified in *The Disobedient Writer* do, she reconstructs authentic, male diction, with the feminist voice subordinating the male voice; hence, Cisneros can be identified as a disobedient writer. However, her disobedient, carnivalesque poetry does not support Judy Little in “Humoring the Sentence: Women’s Dialogic Comedy” in which Little argues that women writers have had to get along with patriarchal language “to be nice to it, and give in to it enough so that [they] could make it give in to [them] at least some of the time. In doing this, women have also humored the sentence in another way—they have carnivalized it” (155). Though Cisneros carnivalizes patriarchal language, she does not humor it, but rather directly subverts it, proving that language is not only controlled by men, but by women as well. Women, like Cisneros do not borrow men’s language but rather claim language as their own. And in “Loose Woman,” the persona’s transformation of language goes against cultural expectations or what Walker identifies as a “cultural mythology that tells her what to be” (125). The voice of “Loose Woman” influences one to believe that Cisneros is one of the more assertive, bold poetic voices during the second part of the twentieth century.

Cisneros, unlike Emily Dickinson, published her satirical poetry for the public at large. She is perhaps provided the opportunity to publish her rebellious,

feminist poetry without adhering to as much stylistic requirements by editors as Emily Dickinson's poetry might have been subjected to if she had allowed more of her poetry to be published for the general public. Dickinson's admirers will never know how she might have responded to Cisneros's poetry, but they get a glimpse of the respect Cisneros has for Dickinson when she tells Satz, "I think Emily Dickinson was absolutely lucid to write so freely without thinking of the public or what the neighbors would say" ("Returning to One's House" n. pag.). Cisneros's thoughts about Dickinson writing as she pleased seem to become concrete in "Loose Woman."

In the first stanzas of "Loose Woman," Cisneros's feminist persona takes pejorative linguistic labels that men have used for women and subverts those signs, changing them so they have positive connotations instead of negative ones. In the initial stanza, the spokeswoman takes men's denigrating diction about women and transforms it as a tool of empowerment for women: "They say I'm a beast. / And feast on it. When all along / I thought that's what a woman was" (1-3). The sign "beast" that has been used to signify women as monstrously difficult becomes a linguistic sword that provides women victory over verbal degradation. The forthright speaker, in the second stanza, seizes upon patriarchal official labels, such as "bitch" and "witch" and carnivalizes them when she states, "I've claimed / the same and never winced" (5-6). While the feminist persona creates satirical humor by mocking the infamous signs, she also overpowers such signs by turning them back on themselves. By claiming the signs, she has negated the negativity, proving that there is nothing natural or fixed when dealing with

language. The two stanzas aptly correspond to Bakhtin's thoughts that people's words can be interpreted differently from the original denotative meaning, bringing about fundamental changes to the initial meaning (*The Dialogic Imagination* 339-40). Cisneros's poem satirically dialogues with patriarchy, while recontextualizing the language for women.

"Loose Woman" typifies what Tey Diana Rebolledo in "Walking the Line" understands about Chicana humor. Rebolledo explains that Chicana humor deals with "linguistic humor, code switching, making humorous play on words, meanings, and their proper use and misuse" (102). Rebolledo's delineation is demonstrated in the first line of the third verse of "Loose Woman": "They say I'm a *macha*, hell on wheels" (7). Cisneros plays with the genderization of the Spanish language by changing macho to "macha." Through carnivalization, the official, male noun "macho" is being subversively reformulated with the unofficial, female noun "macha." The humorous play on words encourages a sense of equal bravado for the two genders, destroying the accepted idea that assertive, aggressive behavior is reserved only for men. The "linguistic humor" also demonstrates what Bakhtin points out about the practice of carnival: it disrupts the "all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 123). Changing "macho" to "macha" implies that there is no need for a socio-hierarchical relationship between the genders. Or as Yarbrow-Bejarano suggests, Chicanas "reject the dominant culture's definition of what a Chicana is" ("Chicana Literature" 215), which Cisneros exemplifies when she expands the concept of what a woman can be.

In this same stanza, Cisneros, unlike the other feminist writers considered in this study, acknowledges her lesbian sisters. The feminist spokeswoman states, “. . . boogey-woman lesbian. / Not necessarily, / but I like the compliment” (10-12). Changing the legendary childhood mythical “boogey-man” to “boogey-woman lesbian” exhibits Cisneros’s satirical wit. Her “humorous play on words and their meanings” influences readers twofold: to recall how the “boogey-man” was truly nothing to fear, and to transfer that understanding to lesbian women, who are likewise not truly ominous individuals. The conventional idea that lesbian women are unacceptable and scary to many is ridiculed with an amusing, satirical tone. The sense of humor used when paying homage to lesbians is a corrective for homophobic prejudice.

As the poem continues so does the use of the first person pronoun, giving feminist ownership of the language and allowing those women who wish to identify with the speaker of the poem the opportunity to claim the words. Instead of following patriarchal laws, the speaker defiantly brags that she breaks them: “I break laws, / upset the natural order, / anguish the Pope and make fathers cry” (37-39). The satirical humor found in these lines challenges and talks back to conservative thinking about “natural order.” Moreover, the female persona speaks to the patriarchal Catholic Church when she uses the metonymy “the Pope”; she overturns basic principles established by the male-centered church since she is an independent, loose woman. The common noun “fathers” is meant to be a pun, for the feminist spokesperson challenges the fathers of the Catholic organization as well as fathers of feminist daughters. Because she wishes to overturn religious

and secular patriarchy, she, the voice of other Chicana feminists, is “*la desesperada*, most-wanted public enemy” (41). Cisneros takes the sign “desperado,” a noun reserved for wild, dangerous men, and claims it for women, not only by changing the last letter gender indicator but also by italicizing the linguistic alteration, highlighting the humorous subversion of patriarchy. Her language demonstrates what Yarbrow-Bejarano argues: “In writing, they [Chicanas] refuse the objectification imposed on gender roles” (“Chicana Literature” 215). Cisneros’s word play with gendered vocabulary supports Bakhtin’s argument about Menippean satire in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* because she violates “the generally accepted . . . established norms of behavior and etiquette, including manners of speech” (117). Her decision to create the sense of gender equality by manipulating language can be deemed “eccentric . . . [and] inappropriate” (117), two elements of Menippean satire.

When analyzing “Loose Woman,” the argument needs to be made that if women dare to “break laws, / upset the natural order” (37-38), cultural transformation can occur. For example, if the control of male infrastructure of superstructure institutions, such as the Catholic Church and the institution of the patriarchal family, is fractured by daring women like Cisneros, then women’s subordinate positions would also be altered. Likewise, if the Spanish language that reserves assertive terminology for males is reconstructed to include female constructed terms, and the derogatory English expressions toward women, i.e., bitch and witch, are claimed as empowering signs instead of demeaning ones, then it follows that alternate word choices and different applicable connotations to

words can influence both genders to perceive women as equally assertive within a positive frame.

In the latter part of the poem, Cisneros shifts to a more carefree tone, with a minimalist, linear poetic form that encourages one to read with clarity the humorous satire that daringly speaks to patriarchy. Cisneros playfully repeats the word “loose,” having her feminist persona declare that she is “foot-loose, / . . . woman-on-the-loose / loose woman” (53-57). The repetition of the word “loose” emphasizes independence and freedom from the control of the other, a first-rate choice for women. With the first person perspective, the feminist spokeswoman of the poem, as well as each individual female reader can claim to be the agent of her own world.

Throughout the poem, Cisneros proves that language can be owned by either gender. Her poem validates Sara Mills’s argument in “Language”: “Language [is] an arena whereby power may be appropriated, rather than societal roles being clearly mapped out for participants with language reflecting those roles” (142). By talking back to patriarchy with “verbal dexterity,” with a sense of confidence, with “linguistic directness” (142), Cisneros’s poem becomes part of social discourse and expresses Mills’s phrase, “interactional power” (142). With poetic language, Cisneros challenges the institutions of patriarchy, debunks the traditional idea that women are the weaker sex, and disrupts the illusion that it is a man’s world. In “Loose Woman,” Cisneros establishes how linguistic signs can be manipulated and used by women for their own empowerment.

Nikki Giovanni

Cisneros may be considered, in terms of linguistics, the most confrontational poet in this chapter, but perhaps the most marginalized woman poet is the black, lesbian, feminist Nikki Giovanni. She has all the inhibiting labels that might stop one from becoming an established poet in America, yet she had the audacity to have her poetry heard. Beginning in the 1960s, Giovanni launched her poetry career with black militant verses, yet as established in “Nikki Giovanni” by Jennifer Walters, although Giovanni was part of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, she was “overshadowed by the more dominating and influential male poets” (213). Albeit, her “reputation as a serious poet was hurt by the sexism of the Black Arts Movement and the racism of the literary establishment, she remained intolerant of both, and in doing so she paved the way for younger Black women poets” (Walters 213). In the 1970s, as Giovanni continued to write poetry, she moved from being a black militant poet to one who became more introspective, which is evident in her publication *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day*, in which “Woman” was first published. She proudly writes from the position of a black woman who believes that poetry reflects what one experiences or what one hears, supporting the Marxist-feminist tenet that literature and reality are interconnected. Her understanding that poets, like her, represent the unofficial language that needs to be heard correlates appositionally with Bakhtin’s theory that literature artistically reflects heteroglossia. She also comprehends what Gina Wisker in *Black Women’s Writing* states, “Writing is a political act of breaking

silence . . .” (3). Writing can bring value, respect, and recognition to marginalized voices; it can bring them a sense of political empowerment.

Because of her belief that poetry does relate and speak for concrete reality, her cultural materialistic understanding of writing disrupts Harold Bloom’s long-standing theory that the aesthetic value of poetry is what needs to be emphasized in college literature classes. In “Harold Bloom’s Charge that Multiculturalism in American Poetry is a Mask for Mediocrity,” Bloom’s statement that indicates a resistance to a multicultural focus when teaching American poetry is presented: “Our modish multiculturalism is a lie, a mask for mediocrity” (qtd. in Giovanni 111). Giovanni emphatically disagrees, charging that Bloom’s perspective is outdated and seems to come from a lack of “cultural understanding” (111). Giovanni believes that Bloom’s attitude about teaching aesthetics comes from a prejudicial base when she sarcastically claims that Bloom believes that “only white men can determine the good, the true, the beautiful. . . . He is wrong. All the racists are wrong” (111). Furthermore, Bloom’s argument that American poetry is losing its aesthetic sensibility is challenged, intertextually, when Paula Giddings in her introduction to *Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day* refers to Giovanni’s conviction about poetry. For Giovanni, poems are not flawless gems that need “to be mulled over and polished until they show no resemblance to the earth from which they came. Rather they are thought of as souvenirs extracted from the site of some precious moment” (qtd. in Giddings 13). Intertextually supporting Giovanni’s position while opposing Bloom’s stance is a summary by Scott Wilson of Stephen Greenblatt’s theoretical thoughts established in Greenblatt’s

various publications: “Words and texts are not passive, transparent representation of things and events, but are material things in themselves that are active in the world to which they are tied by their specific historical mode of existence” (*Cultural Materialism: Theory and Practice* 57). Or, as Terry Eagleton suggests in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, “[E]very writer is individually placed in society, responding to a general history from his [her] own particular standpoint, making sense of it in his [her] own concrete terms” (8). Though Giovanni’s advocacy for the politically oppressed to be heard and respected goes against Bloom’s contention for the aesthetic approach to literature, her cultural materialistic principle that correlates with Eagleton’s Marxist theory about literature and the Marxist-feminist tenet that links literature to a social context parallels with the other women’s voices in this chapter.

With “Woman” by Giovanni, the aesthetics and politics of the poem may be pleasing to women, but perhaps not so much for men; hence, the differences could lead to a discussion of gender conflicts. Giovanni’s reliance on her witty sense of humor in “Woman” expresses the familiar theme addressed in the other poems considered in this chapter: if women are to achieve self-fulfillment, they will have to be disobedient to the usual social expectations set for them—an idea many men would not relish. Her message also echoes a verbal sparring that occurred between James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni in 1971, in which Giovanni attempts to get Baldwin to understand about changing gender expectations. At one point of their conversation, Giovanni tells Baldwin what she believes black men think: “In order for me to be a man, you walk ten paces behind me” (*A Dialogue:*

James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni 47). Giovanni follows her statement by adding, “[I]f that’s what the black man needs, I’ll never get far enough behind him for him to be a man. I’ll never walk that slowly” (47). Her comments to Baldwin are reflected in each stanza in “Woman,” with “she” wanting to be an individual with the support of “he”; however, the support from “he” never comes, as indicated in stanza three:

she spun herself into a web
and looking for a place to rest
turned to him
but he stood straight
declining to be her corner (9-13)

The third verse, like the entire poem, metaphorically identifies women’s desire to be in the subject position, displacing Baldwin’s defensive patriarchal comments about black men’s rightful, gendered status. Moreover, Giovanni as a black feminist speaks for the needed socioeconomic change for black women, as well as for other American women since she uses the universal pronouns “she” and “he.” And though the second feminist wave was predominately constituted by Anglo, middle-class, educated women who seemed to have disregarded black women, Giovanni does the opposite with her poem. Her poem reveals empathy for all women, not just a select few.

After the poet uses metaphorical references, as noted in stanza three, the enigmatic “she” finally realizes that “he” would continue to refuse her support.

Thus in the last stanza, “she” concludes that women can be content, autonomous beings without a man’s encouragement:

she decided to become
a woman
and though he still refused
to be a man
she decided it was all
right (18-23)

The poem’s final lines bring a tone of sarcastic humor that creates a sense of camaraderie among women who wish to find their rightful places in society in spite of men’s reluctance to provide emotional assistance. The poem’s non-ethnic, universal diction encourages American women who were interested in gaining more socioeconomic equity with men during the 1970s to feel a sense of identity with each other, a sense of solidarity.

The poem “Woman” fittingly symbolizes, through intertextuality, the thread that runs through all of the poems discussed in this chapter, which is women’s rights to have improved socioeconomic lives as well as a more equal status with men. The poem relates to “Learning to Read” because in Harper’s poem the persona, Chloe, is free to fulfill her life-long desire to read, freed from being owned by a slave owner, who is intertextually identified by Giovanni when she states in her poem, “he wouldn’t let her grow” (17). “Woman” connects to “Dorothy’s Dower” by Cary since Dorothy finds little support from her financially inept, self-serving husband. For Dickinson’s “I’m Nobody! Who are

you?” the persona, who can be a female spokesperson, wishes not to be a “Somebody” in society, but rather simply a person who is worthy of being listened to, yet is subjugated by patriarchy to the place of a “nobody” in society, which intertextually relates to the second stanza of Giovanni’s poem:

she wanted to be a robin singing
through the leaves
but he refused to be
her tree (5-8)

Judith Viorst’s persona in “Where Is It Written?” wishing to move beyond mundane domesticity without feeling guilty, especially if she lacks support from the husband, relates to Giovanni’s message that men are unwilling to allow women to move beyond their sequestered, stifling role assigned by patriarchy. And “Loose Woman” by Cisneros shares the message of “Woman” since both poems dare to speak about a woman who can live an autonomous, self-determined life.

Concluding Thoughts

Each poet through her poetry claims agency for women in a specific historical time and space, yet collectively they relate to the macro-economic and political structure of American patriarchal capitalism. The women poets have a lucid understanding about the framing of women in separate, subordinate, socioeconomic positions from men. With a keen understanding of the patriarchal, limited socioeconomic expectations for women, each feminist poet creates a

disobedient dialogue that satirizes, with humor, the false consciousness that male politics have created for women, meaning that women will find happiness and self-fulfillment in the formulated space allocated for women. Though the women poets may have been in a “powerless position” (Mills 142), they used language as a means to restructure gendered politics. They dared to write critically about what they saw, what they heard, and what they believed needed to be changed for the betterment of American women. They believed in the power of language.

Notes

1. There is an accepted alternate wording for “banish” (4), which is “advertise.” See

The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition, edited by R.W. Franklin, 279.

Also, because of the alternate wording, there can be a different interpretation of the

line, see *Comic Power in Emily Dickinson*, 15.

CHAPTER FIVE
EXCLUSIVENESS IN AMERICAN ANTHOLOGIES:
NOT HUMOROUS TO AMERICAN WOMEN

Progressive thinking women—feminists—during the second part of the nineteenth century and the second half of the twentieth century knew that one of the few accepted venues a woman could manipulate for the purpose of political change for the marginalized was the publication of prose and poetry. Women authors of prose and poetry who wrote to alter sexual politics and who knew that other women would be reading their published writings wisely employed language that was theirs to use in order to push for equal political power that should also be theirs. More specifically, political, satirical, humorous dialogism was often the weapon of choice because it allowed women to approach change in a non-threatening manner, the opposite of hegemonic ways of authority. In *The Power of Satire*, Robert C. Elliott explains that throughout history satirists have acknowledged themselves as “public servant[s] fighting the good fight against vice and folly” (265), an argument that is not only applicable to male satirists as Elliott claims, but is equally applicable to women who either create explicit satirical writings, such as Bombeck, Cary, Childress, Cisneros, Dickinson, Harper, Holley, Fern, Truth, and Viorst, or who embed satirical dialogue in their writings, like Alvarez, Freeman, Giovanni, Hershey, Jacobs, Southworth, and Trambley. They used satirical dialogue to affirm what hundreds of other American women desired, more control of their own destinies and more liberation from their secondary, socioeconomic positions, as well as to influence

conservative, traditional women to reconsider the roles that they were willing to adhere to because of male-driven dogma. The writers wrote for those who could not or dared not write. They wrote against the immoral psychological and economic degradation that fed the practice of women's subordinate placement no matter the specific socioeconomic point of the spectrum women found themselves in.

However, the writings considered in this research are only part of the historical textual history of women satirists. Women in vastly different times and contexts have been part of the satirical frame, such as Iambe in *The Hymn to Demeter*,¹ Sappho, Marie de France, Isabella Whitney, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen, Anne Bradstreet, Caroline Kirkland, and Frances Whitcher. And as indicated in chapter one, there are well-known, twentieth-century, American women authors responsible for satirical humor who were omitted in my research because of my premise that one hundred years after the first feminist movement, feminists in the second half of the twentieth century concentrated as intensely on gender inequality as the feminist of the late nineteenth century did. Considering the fact that historically there have always been women who have used satire for subversive reasons, one would think that such women would be as recognized as men who are known for their satirical humor. Yet this seems not to be the case. In *The Power of Satire*, a seminal book about the history of satire, Elliott briefly mentions that there were female satirists in ancient times who were treated severely or executed because of their satiric verses. Elliott also includes a statement from S.D. Goitein: "The biting satires of the woman judge, some of

which were later included in the so-called Song of Deborah (Judges 5) were a most effective means of activating the languid tribes” (qtd. in Elliott 17). And finally, Elliott includes the name of one female satirist, “Richis,” an Irish woman (32). The rest of his research highlights the usual, renowned satirists, such as Archilochus, “the first individual satirist of record” (7), which of course brings up the question: which gender was responsible for records? Well-known satirists like Aristophanes, Horace, Juvenal, Shakespeare, Pope, Swift, and Campbell are also acknowledged by Elliott. Likewise, Leonard Feinberg in *Introduction to Satire* catalogues male satirists: Chaucer, Cervantes, Marvell, Byron, Twain, Lewis, Shaw, Huxley, and Mencken. He recognizes only two female satirists: Jane Austen and Katherine Porter. In *Satire* by Matthew Hodgart, the usual list of European and American male satirists, as identified by Feinberg, is again the preferred group to mention, with female satirists excluded. Concentrating on ethnic voices, one of the more current publications about Chicano satire, *Chicano Satire: A Study in Literary Culture* by Guillermo E. Hernández, highlights three male satirists, Luis Valdez, José Montoya, and Rolando Hinojosa. Although Chicano satire is worthy of attention, I could not locate any texts exclusively about Chicana satire, or a Chicano/a satire anthology.

Conversely, *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* by Darryl Dickson-Carr does mention African American women’s satirical voices, like Nikki Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Terry McMillan. He also acknowledges the significant anthology, *Honey Hush!: An Anthology of African American Women’s Humor*. In Dickson-Carr’s analysis of African American

satirical novels, he includes two by women: *Moses, Man of the Mountain* by Zora Neale Hurston and *Jazz* by Toni Morrison. In his introduction, Dickson-Carr asks a significant question: “Why aren’t more satirical novels written by African American women?” (11), which could be reconstructed, “Why isn’t the African American women’s satirical voice embedded in novels given more recognition?” However, in comparison to other scholars who have written about satirical writings, Dickson-Carr in his concluding chapter on his final page makes a profound, insightful statement about the future of African American women’s satire:

[W]hen the satirical novel asserts its place in twenty-first-century African American literary traditions, women will be at the forefront of the new movement. With luck, this will yield the benefit of forcing the old political directions of African American communities—and African American satire itself—to take fresh, new turns into more inclusive examinations of those same communities and their individual members. (207)

Dickson-Carr has disrupted the perpetual myth that other published scholars have helped create—satire is a male’s genre or style of writing. He recognizes the importance of the needed inclusion of the African American women’s satirical voice when focusing on African American satirical writings, specifically satirical novels. His assertion can be transposed to other future literary American women’s satirically humorous writings becoming as equally recognizable as men’s penned satirical humor.

But one can argue that in order for future women to write satirically or to appreciate the place and purpose of women's satirical, political humor in America's literary history, they must be introduced to a nice array of such works. One would think that American satire anthologies would be an excellent source for one to discover a range of women's satirical humorous wit, yet perplexingly, there is a limited number of women's satirical pieces included. For example, Henry C. Carlisle, the editor of the 1962 *American Satire in Prose and Verse*, indicates in his preface:

I must admit a prejudice for the sort of American satire that means business, that says something about the kind of people we are, and whose purpose is not merely gentle spoofing. In the end, I must rely on the hope that the presence of such masters as Benjamin Franklin . . . Mark Twain . . . H. L. Mencken . . . Will Rogers, and James Thurber will distract the reader from finding too many sins of omission and debatable choices. (xvii)

For women who are interested in American satirical humor, the omission of women satirists who can also be considered "masters" is problematic. The preference given to Anglo American male satire seems to be based on a biased perspective, especially when there is a comparable amount of fine satire pieces by women in comparison to men's satire.

Carlisle chose to include 104 satirical pieces written by Anglo American men, one excerpt from *The Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, and only six entries

by twentieth-century Anglo American women. Of the six satirical writings by women, three are by Dorothy Parker. The other two women included in the anthology are Mary McCarthy and Lillian Ross. The obvious absence of women satirists who wrote before the twentieth century is an oversight that needs to be confronted. For his “Portraits” collection, Carlisle selects an excerpt from *Home as Found*, published in 1838 by James Fenimore Cooper, but not a snippet from Caroline Kirkland’s *A New Home—Who’ll Follow? Glimpses of Western Life*, published in 1839. Though both Cooper and Kirkland satirize the narrow focus of many Americans—the desire for wealth and the aspiration for an improved class status—only Cooper is included in Carlisle’s narrow understanding of American satirical humor. Washington Irving’s satirically humorous character sketch of Aunt Charity Cockloft, a stereotypical female busy-body, is meant to forewarn women to stay in the domestic sphere and not worry or be interested in other people’s affairs or situations. However, the omission of Frances M. Whitcher, who is considered the first recognized American female satirist, is puzzling. In *Widow Bedott Papers*, Whitcher’s protagonist Widow Bedott babbles incessantly and manipulates a seating arrangement at a community meeting so that she can speak to her potential husband. Finding a husband was the task for economic survival for women in the nineteenth century, of which Whitcher is satirically critical. In her novel, Whitcher humorously denounces the hollow, narrow lives of women. Because of the rigid gender role that women were to adhere to, Whitcher, unlike Irving, satirizes the limited choices available for women; her humor attacks the constructs of her society, which Irving does not do with his character Aunt

Charity Cockloft. He instead burlesques women. Nancy Walker argues in *A Very Serious Thing* that Whitcher, who originated the idea that women's humor is a "very serious thing," wanted women to be able to move beyond "the narrowness and shallowness of their lives" (21). Walker understands that Whitcher does not blame women but rather "a social system that makes women economically dependent on men" (21). Disappointingly, because readers have been inundated with female stereotypes like Irving's, many miss the point of Whitcher's satirical wit. The purpose of her literary wit is quite different from Irving's, yet as significant, a point perhaps missed by Carlisle.

In Carlisle's political category, Seba Smith's and Mark Twain's nineteenth-century political satires about the politicians of the day are included but not an excerpt from Marietta Holley's *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's*. Knowing that satirical humor in published writings identifies what are deemed to be important topics of discussion in America's history, for example, the fight for women's suffrage, an important culture shift for America, has been ignored by Carlisle. Also, how very odd that Carlisle chooses as one of his entries "How the Bog-trotter is Nearly Elected to the Legislature" from *Modern Chivalry*, published in 1792 by Hugh Henry Brackenridge, yet neglects the poem, "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" by Emily Dickinson. As argued in my chapter four, Dickinson's final line in the poem, "To an Admiring Bog!" may be an allusion to bog-trotters, a label given to Irish immigrants. However, unlike Brackenridge, who sees bog-trotters as people unqualified for public office, Dickinson includes

an allusion to bog-trotters as gullible people who unwisely admire self-promoting politicians.

In the religion section of Carlisle's anthology, instead of excluding women's humorous satirical sensibilities, he could have included from *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's* the ironic satire of a minister who preaches that a woman is to be the clinging vine while the man is the tree. The preacher tells Samantha, the feminist protagonist, "It is flyin' in the face of the Bible for a woman not to marry" (135). Yet when asked by Samantha if he would allow Betsey Bobbet to be his clinging vine, he exits the scene without another word about men being the superior gender and women the weaker, dependent one. Carlisle could have also selected to publish "The Bible is an antique Volume—," a subversive religious poem by Emily Dickinson, in which the Bible is "Written by faded Men" (2), or the poem "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—" in which verbal irony is applied to the declaration, "God preaches, a noted Clergyman— / And the sermon is never long" (9-10). Dickinson's view of religion is as sarcastically truthful as Ambrose Bierce's 1899 "Four Fables," which are included in Carlisle's satire anthology.

For Carlisle's subtopic "The Black and the White," nineteenth-century Anglo American men's writings about the emancipation of blacks dominate this section, which seems incongruent since the title indicates a parallel representation of blacks and whites. To continue the equilibrium of the title, Carlisle might have included nineteenth-century popular African Americans, such as Sojourner Truth's satirical speech "And ar'n't I a woman?" or subversive poetry like

“Learning to Read” by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, or a satirically humorous excerpt from Harriet Jacobs’s autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Since twentieth-century author Ralph Ellison is the only black writer of the five authors considered for this section, why not include humorous sketches from *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic’s Life* by Alice Childress, who signifies that blacks will not be invisible! The inclusion of two twentieth-century black writers, one male and one female, would be an improvement over including only one African American literary voice in “The Black and the White.”

In “Higher Education” Carlisle has chosen seven writers to represent this theme. There are four early American male satirists, no nineteenth-century women authors, two excerpts from twentieth-century men’s prose, and one excerpt from the twentieth-century writer Mary McCarthy. Since McCarthy is included in this section, there could have been at least one woman writer from the nineteenth century who focuses on education. As McCarthy satirizes progressive education in “Jocelyn College” from *The Groves of Academe*, in the nineteenth century in *Country Living and Country Thinking*, Mary Abigail Dodge, known by her pseudonym Gail Hamilton, wittily criticizes women who want to focus on beauty and fashion instead of an education. She also argues against women’s entrapment in “moral heroism, silent influence, might of love, and all that cut-and-dried woman’s sphereism” (82) and makes a case for the significance of educated women: “If the mind of a woman is dwarfed, and her faculties weakened by disuse, she will be an inefficient wife, because she is an inefficient woman” (118). Moreover, the early American writers in this section aim their satire at

students, and the twentieth-century satirists critique higher education institutions, indicating that there is a shift of attitude and social discourse beginning in the twentieth century. Instead of women's voices being excluded, their satirical dialogue about the topic of higher education and the noticeable change of contention about the subject needs to be recognized as part of the social discourse.

When one thinks of a courtship followed by a marriage, both genders and their viewpoints usually come to mind, yet for the section "Courtship and Marriage," Carlisle offers only four men's writings about a dual-gendered topic. Phoebe Cary's poem "Dorothy's Dower" is as humorous and witty as Donald Ogden Stewart's poem "Wedding Etiquette," yet Cary's poem is absent. Fanny Fern and Erma Bombeck needed to be part of the section about heterogeneous relationships because they are two of the most popular, well-known, respected humorous satirical writers who devoted many of their newspaper sketches to difficult marital situations. Both of these women columnists are as significant to the history of American satire as the male writers Washington Irving, Eugene Field, Donald Ogden Stewart, and H.L. Mencken, who were chosen to represent the American satirical voice about the staple of social relationships. Based on Carlisle's selections, there is a biased view of what is considered satirically humorous concerning courtship and marriage and what writings should characterize Americans' attitude about such topics.

The last theme for Carlisle's satire anthology is "Progress and Civilization." Most of the satirical writings that appear in this section question the benefits of technological progress and its effect on society, as symbolically stated

in the essay “Whoa!” by Robert Benchley: Paul Revere rode through the modern cities of America and “saw the Stars and Stripes fluttering in the artificial breeze of an electric fan operated behind the scenes” (431). Others, like Sinclair Lewis, ridicule the competitive drive needed to succeed to be able to consume in patriarchal capitalism. An excerpt from Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* would have been a nice choice for this last section because it critiques America’s patriarchal-capitalist society through a completely different lens. Because of the 1962 publication of the anthology, late twentieth-century writers like Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros, Nikki Giovanni, and Estela Portillo Trambley could not have been part of this section; however, a future American satire collection could include them as well as other ethnic voices that represent America’s satirical slant on life.

As Carlisle concentrates on American male satirists, so does Nicholas Bakalar, editor of the 1997 publication *American Satire: An Anthology of Writings from Colonial Times to the Present*. Instead of organizing satirical writings thematically as Carlisle does, Bakalar arranges his collection chronologically. Bakalar selected thirty-one satirists for his anthology: twenty-seven men and four women; that is, the works of Fanny Fern, Edith Wharton, Dorothy Parker, and Molly Ivins are included in the anthology. Though Bakalar’s book provides an assortment of genres penned by women and men, he might have included a more equitable representation of satire by both genders. Instead of including only an excerpt from *The Biglow Papers* as the nineteenth-century representation of the once popular vernacular voice that was often used for

satirically humorous purposes, Bakalar could have chosen a passage from *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's* to demonstrate a woman's application of vernacular humor. The essay "Rondo on an Ancient Theme" by the early twentieth-century satirist H. L. Mencken is one of the entries for the anthology. Since Mencken's essay satirizes women's freedom to talk about the once taboo topic—sex—a few paragraphs from Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, which deals with the same subject, would be worth including, giving readers different gendered perspectives from the same time period. Alice Childress's character Mildred and her sassy dialogue that humorously outwits her white employers in *Like One of the Family* would be a perfect contrast to the biting satire in Langston Hughes's "Ballad of the Landlord," in which the black tenant persona talks back to the white landlord, with the result being the victimization of the black renter. The different satirical styles, voices, and messages of Childress and Hughes seem to be a point worth highlighting.

Incongruously, though Bakalar does include a small number of humorous satirical writings by women, in his preface he gives accolades only to those male satirists who were read by Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and President McKinley. In other words, Bakalar seems to be interested in male readers and what they read and not what women read. Also in the anthology's introduction, Stephen Koch writes, "[T]he satiric mode from before the founding of the republic until the end of the twentieth century . . . has been used at every phase of American history to make the country and its culture what they are" (xiii-xiv). There is a disconnect between Koch's statement and the collection of American satire in Bakalar's

anthology because of the privileging of Anglo American men's satire and the sparse selection of other satirical voices. When reading his anthology, one could be led to believe that Anglo American men are the voice of American satire, which would be an erroneous conclusion. Bakalar, like Carlisle, provides little space for women's satirical humor and no space for multi-cultural voices that were finally becoming part of mainstream literature in the last decades of the twentieth century. Including works from early twentieth-century black male authors, such as Langston Hughes's poem in Bakalar's anthology and an excerpt from Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* in Carlisle's anthology, do not qualify an American anthology as an accurate representation of American satirical voices. And as stated earlier in this chapter, if budding women satirical writers, no matter what ethnicity, are not exposed to the array of women's satirical, political works, they would not only be excluded from a more truthful understanding of American history, but they would have no idea that women were and are actually part of the American satirical frame.

Bakalar's knowledge about the schism between satire of the past and modern day readers is mostly true, except for much of the satire written by women. In his preface, Bakalar states that "the older a satire is, the more obscure the allusions, and the less understandable to modern readers" (xii). However, many of Fern's and Bombeck's satirically humorous writings about relationships between men and women are still appreciated by many and are as relevant to today's society as they were in the past. In Phoebe Cary's "Dorothy's Dower," the three stages of a marriage and marital friction because of economics is still as

applicable to contemporary marriages as it was in Cary's time. And "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" by Emily Dickinson continues to be meaningfully humorous satire because the poem offers a voice to common citizens who believe themselves to be sometimes insignificants while understanding the every so often superficiality of a "Somebody." Thus some literary satire written in the past can be meaningful for that specific time and social context as well as for future readers, which is why the satirical pieces mentioned in this paragraph would have been appropriate selections for an American satire anthology.

Bakalar in his preface does acknowledge that some works have eternal meaning. He recognizes Mark Twain's "War Prayer" as a timeless poem (xii). Although Twain's "War Prayer" and Dorothy Parker's "Comment" are both included in the anthology and both address universal subjects, Bakalar acknowledges only "War Prayer" as the poem that is ageless. Likewise, since Bakalar does submit the idea that there is timeless poetry, there are also other American writings, such as satirical anti-slavery pieces, that should be part of and continue to be part of an American satirical anthology. Thus Frances Harper's "Learning to Read" and/or passages from Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* could have been included as part of Bakalar's America's satirical frame. Satirical anti-slavery writing should be considered to be as eternal in meaning as Twain's satirical anti-war poem.

The Encyclopedia of American Humorists, published in 1988, stays true to Anglo male biases. Out of the 135 entries, eighteen are women. Editor Steven H. Gale in his preface does establish the criterion for the selection of writers: "One of

my first decisions was to include only those writers who are known primarily as humorists” (xiii). He continues his stance with the statement, “Many major American authors . . . utilize humor in their work but are not recognized for this aspect of their canon above all others—William Faulkner and Edgar Allan Poe come to mind” (xiii). Along with Faulkner and Poe, Gale could have recognized a woman writer, such as the eminent Emily Dickinson who, like Faulkner and Poe, is not known primarily for her humor, yet regrettably a woman writer, like Dickinson, is not paired with Faulkner and Poe. However, Gale does include a limited, but nice repertoire of American women literary humorists, such as Erma Bombeck, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Jean Kerr, Anita Loos, Fran Lebowitz, and Frances M. Whitcher. However, I suggest that the women included in Gale’s encyclopedia are more than simply humorists because they write to critique society with their humor. The number of women selected for *The Encyclopedia of American Humorists* in comparison to Carlisle’s and Bakalar’s satire anthologies seems to suggest that literary women who utilize humor are reductively thought of as only humorists and not as satirical humorists, a meaningful difference since the women writers identified in this paragraph write satirical humor not only for entertainment but more importantly to challenge the gendered social construct of America.

Gale does not embrace the multi-culturalism of America. He does include Canadian humorists but neglects the minority voices of America; thus, the title is misleading because America means multi-ethnicities, especially by the late twentieth century. Consequently, Alice Childress, Nikki Giovanni, and Estela

Portillo Trambley, who are known for their satirical humor, could have been included in Gale's collection because by the time of his publication these women writers were established literary figures in America.

American satirical anthologies that emphasize the Anglo male voice prove to be negligent of the rich variety of other American voices when compared to other types of anthologies. For example, contemporary literature anthologies, such as the 2006 edition of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, has a nice representation of multi-cultural voices as well as a near equal representation of women's and men's writings. In fact *The Heath Anthology* includes most of the women writers considered in this research. Though the 1980 publication *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor & Satire* edited by Gloria Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely is a collection of American women's humor and satire, the book is not meant to be an absolute scholarly publication but rather a feminist confutation to the idea that feminists do not have a sense of humor. There are collections of African American humorous writings, such as the 2002 publication *African American Humor: The Best Black Comedy from Slavery to Today*, with a strong emphasis on black men's humor, and the 1998 anthology, *Honey, Hush! An Anthology of African American Women's Humor*. There are also numerous published collections of Chicano/a writings, such as a 1993 anthology of Chicana writers, *Infinite Divisions: An Anthology of Chicana Literature*, which does include humorous, satirical writings. The continuation of publications that concentrate on single ethnicities or the marginalized is understandable, yet there seems to be a need for a new American satire anthology that is more inclusive of

others and more representative of the diversity of American heteroglossia when compared to Carlisle's and Bakalar's books.

With more inclusion of others, especially women's humorous satire, readers would have a more panoramic understanding of how satire has been part of the political language of America. The more readers who are exposed to women's subversive, political writings, the more attention they might give to the agency of women, especially when the language serves as a tool for the betterment of a subjugated group. Women's satirically humorous writings, as the ones considered in this research, can be used as prototypes for future writers who wish to exploit language for political reasons. If readers, especially women, are not taught how to read women's humorous satire, then they will not know how such satirical dialogism served and can continue to serve progressive, feminist writers. Moreover, readers need to recognize the fact that women as well as men can and do write satire.

Notes

1. In *Hymn to Demeter*, Homer tells of Iambe, a serving woman, who uses satire to make Demeter laugh in spite of Demeter's search for her kidnapped daughter. Since writing is part of social discourse, Iambe represents how women used satire when they organized their cultic women's groups during religious festivals. As suggested by Laurie O'Higgins "[W]omen's cultic joking affected and indeed inspired the ancient genre that we know as iambic" (*Women and Humor in Classical Greece* 2). For Elliot, Archilochus is "generally credited with having 'invented' iambic verse" (*The Power of Satire* 7). It has not been proven that Archilochus or other Greek satirists were directly influenced by Greek women's use of satirical language, but O'Higgins seems to hint at such a suggestion.

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