

Mud: The Imploding Subject

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ABSTRACT

Women increasingly take the center of Fornes' stages, neither as heroines nor villains, but as complex people controlling and controlled by their environments. Fornes offers the women in her audience the opportunity to place themselves within the spectrum of theatricality and life. And so, from somewhere within that spectrum, I set out here to read closely one of Fornes' major works, *Mud*. In *Mud*, I consider Mae's struggles for self-determination through language, and the theatrical world's—both her own and the spectator's—tenacious obstacles. Within this drama, violence is the inevitable outcome of Mae's movement toward selfhood because Mae can never be independent of the world she inhabits as long as she continues to meet the needs of the others in their limited world, and, for that matter, continues to ask those others to fulfill her needs.

Fornes images Mae's search for subjectivity in theatrical terms as the character seeking independence from the theatrical event, the character seeking responsibility for her own text. But Mae does not recognize the power of the theater. Naively, and with no sense of irony, she would like to escape the theater in order to be actor and playwright, independent agent and crafter of words. A kind of vanity, even selfishness, enables Mae to forget context even while she is so mired in mud; she believes that her liberation will work from the inside out, that knowledge will free her. Fornes emphasizes context in this play in order to make a broad political statement about the powerlessness of the individual against the power of the institutions the individual inhabits. Whether it is the character within the framework of the theatrical event, or the woman in her kitchen where two men go to great pains to control her, the outcome is the same. Without the ability to disrupt the context, Mae is confined to the roles she already plays.

The set of Maria Irene Fornes' *Mud* seems to funnel inward from the expansive blue background which represents the sky, to the red "earth promontory" of mud on which Mae's kitchen sits, to the white of "wood...the color and texture of bone that has dried in the sun" (15).¹ White will also prove to be the color of Lloyd's diseased

¹ Maria Irene Fornes, *Mud*, in *Maria Irene Fornes: Plays* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986). All further references in my text will be to this edition, and will be referred to by page number alone.

tongue, and we may suppose it is a white light that Mae dies into at the close of the play. In fact, in Act I, Scene i Mae imagines the perfect death as swathed in whiteness. Whiteness will be her reward for self-education: "I am going to die in a hospital," she tells Lloyd. "In white sheets.... Clean feet. Injections....I'm going to die clean. I'm going to school and I'm learning things" (19). Mae reserves blue for her fantasy of Lloyd's death: "You'll die like a pig in the mud," she insists. "Your skin will bloat.... Then, it will get blue like rotten meat and it will bloat even more" (19). In the context of the world of this play—a world finally colorful, in which the sky's blue will heighten the earth's red by comparison—Mae desires a pure and colorless death, condemning Lloyd to a colorful death for punishment.

As Mae articulates it, she would like her death to be an inward movement, mimicking the set's movement toward whiteness, dying into herself. And indeed, Mae's death in the play's final scene is an implosion, despite the explosive sounds of Lloyd's gun shots. Mae's search for her self, for subjectivity, has been an inward search characterized mostly by her efforts to use language to express her sense of self. Fornes suggests that what fails Mae is the direction of her search. Mae's developing use of language does not forge any connection with the world around her, nor recognize a fundamental purpose of language to communicate with one's community, to enable one to extend outward rather than confining one to prison of one's self. There is no self without the expression of that self to others, Fornes insists, or without receivers for that expression. In the last act of the play, Mae tries to move outward, but her efforts are futile both because that movement is not supported by the men she wants to move away from, and because she has laid no groundwork for such a move. Lloyd can easily bring Mae back into the world of the play with a simple act of violence.

Within this drama, violence is the inevitable outcome of Mae's movement toward selfhood because Mae can never be independent of the world she inhabits as long as she continues to meet the needs of the others in their limited world, and, for that matter, continues to ask those others to fulfill her needs. These characters are ruled by poverty and ignorance, and the play is essentially a theatricalization of the violence that poverty and ignorance can do to the spirit, mind and body.

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Fornes emphasizes context in this play in order to make a broad political statement about the powerlessness of the individual against the power of the institutions the individual inhabits. Whether it is the character within the framework of the theatrical event, or the woman in her kitchen where two men go to great pains to control her, the outcome is the same. Without the ability to disrupt the context, Mae is confined to the roles she already plays.

Mae's efforts to alter reality through language fail her from the start. The set belies the articulation of her aspirations; there will be no escaping the world of this play. The spectator/reader find the centripetal illusion of the set, the presence of all props within the stage space from the onset, and the literal, imagistic depiction of the play's central metaphor—mud. These have manifested a meaningful enclosure on the stage. **The drama uses mud as a significant presence in its own right, not just symbol but context.** The mud's comparable presence to the kitchen's presence (the promontory is "five feet high and covers the same periphery as the room" [15]) may evoke a visual balance (if not only a symbolic balance) between the world these characters inhabit, and the world that threatens them. As far as the eye can see—and that may be what matters most in the theater—the mud is a base for Mae's kitchen: context and subtext. Even if no action transpires within there, the spectator will see colors reflected, and remember to look there when Mae evokes mud as metaphor, which she does frequently. Though spectators cannot see into the mud as they can see into the kitchen, the mud will seem a threatening and potentially consuming shadow of the kitchen. Its weight as both image and metaphor will always be felt. The mud will always ground even Mae's loftiest poetry, as it pulls the blue sky down into the bulk of the stage. What the spectators see will always counter what the characters would like us to see, even the appearance of change within their relationships and personal lives.

Here, even if Mae's death is colorless for her, it is full of color for her audience, full of the blood red of her gunshot wounds. That red will probably be more bold than the mud's red, but will still draw the spectator's eye down, insuring a recognition that Mae has died in something like that mud, realizing her worst fear. But since Mae finds her own death beautiful and liberating, she may briefly raise mud from its inherently lowly status. It may be that even as the play opens, then, the mud's red is also beautiful; maybe the blue sky and white kitchen accentuate the red; maybe the simplicity of the set's colors (red, white and blue) is aesthetically satisfying. And if we associate the blue sky with Mae's description of Lloyd's body blue-ing in death, maybe the sky, despite its usual evocations, is ugly and limiting rather than limitless. **Context is all; and spectators' visions will have to vie with characters' visions as they are variously expressed throughout the play.** In fact, since "mud" serves as title,

metaphor, and physical context, the process of interpretation is significantly upset. Because Mae's linguistic achievements will work for her in the brief, shining movement of her death, the critic's task is to evaluate the worth of that theatrical and spiritual epiphany for Mae.

Certain critics would like to see in the play the emergence of a female subject (through Mae); I see the implosion of a female subject.² That the kitchen—traditionally the woman's space—is centered here has drawn feminist commentary,³ and Mae might well be considered the protagonist (if we use the phrase loosely). Mae will also draw the spectator's attention precisely because of her minority status and physical difference from the other two characters, as well as through Fornes' staging of her, even the predominance of her role as speaker. Most importantly, as the victim of the most severe violence in a play about violence, Mae is at the very least the central object here if not the central subject. But if the play ends with Mae's realization of her self—or some aspect of her self—it also ends simultaneously with her death, with the utter and complete loss of the self. To celebrate her achieving subjectivity is romantic at best.⁴ In the realm of the theater of human relationships, creating a self is inherently a precarious endeavor. Again, for Fornes context is paramount, and within a fixed context, creation will necessarily involve destruction. Mae, Lloyd, and Henry are rigidly characterized specifically in order to emphasize character as determined by theatrical rather than psychological or literary context. Character in this play is defined *through* the theater, through spectacle, through plot, against the set. This is not about a woman coming to

² Deborah R. Geis writes, "Mae acquires an identity and even a corporeality as she reifies herself through a text.... I would suggest that her point of 'entry into discourse' [Jill Dolan] is ...the act of reading from her textbook.... This linguistic recourse allows Mae the power of self-demonstration, the ability to articulate her bodied subjectivity" (300-301). Geis suggests that Jill Dolan sees Henry as Mae's "entry into discourse," but Dolan never goes so far as to suggest that Mae's movement is successful. Dolan writes, "Unable to learn to read, and now completely objectified by the man who was to grant her entry into discourse, Mae remains outside the register of language" (109). Deborah R. Geis, "Wordscapes of the Body: Performative Language as *Gestus* in Maria Irene Fornes's Plays," *Theatre Journal*, vol. 42 (October 1990): 291-307. Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1988).

³ "[T]hroughout the play, the audience is told that Mae's textbook is 'in the center' of the kitchen table (27, 29). To the extent that Mae refashions herself as a 'text,' the parallel centrality is evocative, for this moment of *Gestus* embodies Mae's liberation from the representational limits within which she has been confined" (Geis, 301).

Lurana Donnels O'Malley offers a distinctly cultural feminist reading of *Mud*: "In *Mud*, Mae is a typical woman/nurturer. She spends three scenes at the ironing board, a symbol of oppression.... But in Fornes's work such actions take on a ritualistic quality which is not completely unappealing.... Mae also snaps beans, and packs and unpacks boxes; she is surrounded by two nonbeings.... In such a world, the woman is the life force" (106). Lurana Donnels O'Malley, "Pressing Clothes/Snapping Beans/Reading Books: Maria Irene Fornes's Women's Work," in *Studies in American Drama, 1945-Present*, vol. 4 (1989): 103-117.

⁴ Fornes says, "These people are too poor to indulge in bizarre ego games. They have a reality to deal with, which is poverty.... The concepts of sex roles and role playing are a luxury, an indulgence that requires a degree of affluence" (13). Maria Irene Fornes, "Creative Danger," in *American Theatre*, vol. 11, no. 5 (September 1985): 13, 15.

consciousness, but about characters struggling to inhabit the stage. Though Fornes offers a story of sorts—one character joins the lives of two other characters, disrupting their relationship and eventually causing all relationships to undergo activity if not actual change—the play’s movement more accurately should be described formally: above all else, these characters are props for one another.

Mae’s physical presence dominates the tableaux of the first and last scenes of the play. In the first she stands, centered as the most powerful speaker; and in the last she lies horizontal, first in Lloyd’s arms, then on the kitchen table, dying, but still centered as the most powerful speaker. On the level of both the visual and the narrative then, the play realizes what appears to be Mae’s crucifixion. But unlike Christ’s, for example, Mae’s problems lie not only within the inadequacies of her audience; rather, Mae is never able to construct the kind of parables that could be meaningful to anyone other than herself. The only morals to any of her stories are entirely self-referential. On this level, Mae has little to no self-development because she fails to work with her audience, fails to seduce any evangelists.

The violence integral to Act I, Scene i though not yet fully realized imagistically, requires very little for its eventual complete materialization. The first scene depicts violence verbally and emotionally, and need only theatricalization to confirm its power. That violence will turn physical is essentially a foregone conclusion; violence to the spirit (synonymous with the intellect for both Fornes and Mae) is a kind of physical violence. Throughout the drama, the futility of discourse is paralleled by the uselessness of physical violence; similarly, the violence of characters’ language is increasingly paralleled by violent physical behavior. The mutual development along these lines prevents any real development, mirroring the characters in a circular process. The only real change occurs at the drama’s end—or possibly, the moment after the last curtain. Mae’s death in and of itself is only an image that literalizes the death-in-life that has been her reality.

In the first scene, Mae stands while Lloyd sits, a posture the audience will see both physically and dramatically overturned. Mae uses language carefully. When Lloyd asks what Mae does at school, she tries to ascertain whether he really cares. When it becomes clear to her that he cares only for the blow to his ego, rather than the boon of her own, she gets angry. Lloyd begins the verbal abuse: “Don’t talk back to me,” he says, “I’ll kick your ass.” Mae responds, “Fuck you, Lloyd. I’m telling you about arithmetic and you talk to me like that?” Mae may be uneducated, and not all that eloquent at this point, but she can already use language to express herself succinctly.⁵ Mae wins the argument verbally, couched in terms of sex as commodity,

⁵ Alternatively, Bonnie Marranca suggests, “The violence committed in this play is the violence of the Cecilia H. C. Liu

by getting the last word: "I don't even want to fuck you," Lloyd says, to which Mae responds, "You can't, that's why. You can't get it up" (17). But Lloyd wins the argument visually. When it is clear that language will be an inadequate weapon for him, he shifts to the sure power of physicality. He attempts to soothe the pain of his insecurity by trying to dominate Mae sexually. He holds her hand on his crotch.

For Fornes, however, this does not make Mae the obvious victim. Her aspirations to education alone threaten violence to this scene; there is no place for her educated self in the space of this particular dramatic world. And though Lloyd ends up holding the gun, as it were (the scene ends with the ax in Lloyd's grasp), Fornes does not deny him her sympathy. When Mae threatens Lloyd with the life of solitude, even literal hunger, that would ensue from her abandonment of him, he admits that he "did it to Betsy" (20), a pig from the yard outside their home. He counters what he receives as Mae's violent threat with the image of some offstage violence (violence that is inherently threatening to Mae as well; i.e. she can be replaced too; or she can be treated like the pig, an animal). But Lloyd wants his audience to believe, with him, that the experience of having sex with Betsy was neither violent nor ugly. "It didn't hurt," he insists, and even adds, "She's nice. She lets me eat her food" (20). In a sense, Lloyd also acknowledges the power of language by trying to evoke, through language, an image whose lack of violence can counter the subtext of violence. As Mae does, he tries to use language as a lens through which the images of reality can be altered. Like Mae's fantasy about her clean death, Lloyd's fantasy tries to clean up his life (provocatively, Mae wonders, "Did you get clean before you did it? Worrying about Betsy's hygienic safety rather than Lloyd's). But for both characters, the imagistic context conspires against them; they cannot obliterate the violence already evoked. Mae cannot make clean, through language, what is dirty, what sits on a pile of mud, as Lloyd cannot make clean the image of his "doing it" to a pig.

The gaps between what Mae and Lloyd try to evoke through language and the actual stage events, underscore the authority of what the spectator **sees**. Between tableaux, the spectator watches the actors change the set. The theatrical self-consciousness of that maneuver reminds the spectators that the entire dramatic world of this play is contained in the space we see. Mae takes a prop (a brown paper bag from the mantelpiece) from the onstage set, then plays as if she got it offstage. As Lloyd's description of sex with Betsy gives the act qualities it could not have had (he anthropomorphizes the pig, and renders quiet and lovely what could not have been), Mae's between-scene gesture implies that we need not acknowledge anything beyond this stage space as relevant to the events herein. The stage's reality is

inarticulate" (30). Bonnie Marranca, "The Real Life of Maria Irene Fornes," *Performing Arts Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1, (1984): 29-34.

carefully constructed as utterly true even in its self-containment, and utterly irrelevant to offstage reality. It follows, however ironically, that Lloyd's mating with Betsy, as described by Lloyd, is the truth of that event as he needs to know it; the tableau he conjures verbally is the truth for him. Whatever else the spectator thinks he or she knows, at this stage in the drama the power of language cannot be minimized, even if its ultimate power is suspect, given the visual context of the play.

In fact, the ability to use language can be precisely what centers any particular character in this drama. While Mae carefully places herself center stage at the start of Act I, Scene ii, replacing the spectator's attention from Lloyd at the end of Act I, Scene i, ax in hand, she is eventually replaced by Henry. Not only is the spectator's physical focus shifted, but is his or her aural focus as well. Henry becomes the text's mouthpiece, the authority, as he reads from the pamphlet what Mae cannot read. Henry makes Lloyd's illness especially vivid:

[F]ebrile illness, back pains, perineal pain, irritative voiding, aching of the perineum, sexual pain, sexual impotency, painful ejaculation, and intermittent disureah, or bloody ejaculation. (22)

Or, Lloyd's illness would become more vivid if either the characters or the audience could make sense of what Henry reads.

The dramatic world of *Mud* is not extending out into the space beyond the stage—not even to the clinic from which the pamphlet presumably came, since we know it came from the set—but into the invisible verbal space within the stage, even within the characters themselves. Ominously, language seems to occupy its own space, separate from the world the spectator can see, and yet portentously the key to making sense of that world. The spectator, though not the characters, is being taught to be especially distrustful of language. Act I, Scene ii ends with more verbal deception, to which both the characters and audience are subject. From the careful, terrible delineation of the symptoms of Lloyd's disease, the image shifts to Mae's offering dinner to Henry. Lingering is the image of Lloyd's sickly white tongue, or even the image Mae has evoked of Lloyd digging his own grave: "You better dig your grave while you can, Lloyd," Mae says. "I told him to find a spot and dig it. It takes a strong person to dig that deep. I can't do it. I wouldn't, even if I could" (23), Mae says, shifting from the adage to the image. But with Mae's offer of dinner to Henry, she brings the spectator's attention back to the stage, reminding us of the context for anything verbally evoked. Verbal images matter only in the context of the theatrical event we witness.

Mae's most important insight into the nature of the theater lies in her apparent understanding of the theater as forum for the representation of the image and text *in process*. She recognizes, then, the space in which she might alter her self and her

story. In Act I, Scene iii Mae seduces Henry in a scene with metatheatrical reverberations (let alone political reverberations; Mae plays a typically “masculine” role). **Mae attempts to actively alter context through text.** She manipulates the manuscript like a playwright: to her assertion that she wants Henry to live with her, he responds, “To live here?”; to her assertion “I want your mind,” he responds, “My mind?” Moreover, she manages to manipulate the text by converting their general conversation about the value of objects (their lack of inherent value, their need for context), to the value of the individual: “[S]ome people make you feel that you have something inside you...What I’m saying, Henry, is that I want you” (24). Simultaneously, she moves more and more closely toward him, completing the movement with two kisses. Mae has both put words in another’s mouth—the playwright’s role—and staged the physical progress of their relationship—the director’s role. But forebodingly, Mae lacks a comprehension of the minds of her characters; she is essentially directing with her eyes closed, with both an inadequate sense of the nature of their present in this theatrical world, or the possibilities for the future.

Though Mae may not be entirely aware of context, Fornes assures her audience’s focus there by keeping the art foregrounded. At the end of each scene, “*a freeze is indicated. These freezes will last eight seconds which will create the effect of a still photograph*” (16). On the one hand, each scene reaches a visual climax, forcing the spectator to concentrate on the image that most endures from the scene’s progress, the image that essentially outlasts the text, giving that image primacy over the text.⁶ But the stills also draw attention to their own artificiality. The scene’s process is rudely interrupted by the revelation of the art behind it. The variety of both the text and the image are undermined. Both are put into quotation marks, referring the spectator to the subtext of the accumulation of both text and image, i.e. to the **inclusive** theatrical text.⁷

Mae’s commitment to the power of language is emphasized in the next few

⁶ Toby Zinman writes, “[T]he play becomes a photograph album, ironically using the art form most easily associated with realism to break the stage realism” (217); and Bonnie Marranca writes that the stills “leave room for the audience to enter for contemplative moments. The authorial voice does not demand power over the theatrical experience.... There is room for subjectivity, as a corrective to evasive objectification” (“Real Life,” 32). Toby Zinman, “Hen in a Foxhouse,” in *Around the Absurd*, ed. Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan P, 1990) 203-220.

⁷ Bonnie Marranca writes, “*Mud*’s scenes seem, radically, to be a comment on what does not occur in performance, as if all the action had happened off stage.... [Fornes] turns realism upside down by attacking its materialism and in its place emphasizing the interior lives of her characters, not their exterior selves. Each scene is a strong pictorial unit. Sometimes a scene is only an image, or a few lines of dialogue. This realism is quotational, theatre in close-up, freeze frame. Theatre made by a miniaturist” (“Real Life,” 31). Though I do not think Fornes’s method illuminates the “interior lives of her characters,” I do think it helps to de-emphasize appearances.

scenes; but while she is attentive to its strengths in terms of what it can do for her, she neglects to make the leap toward what it can do for others, or for her relationships with others. In one scene, Mae's speech and Lloyd's reactive pantomime illustrate the consequences of both Mae's literal and literary actions. Mae is distinguished as powerful *through* language. She narrates their immediate future:

Henry is going to stay here with us.... Henry's going to sleep in the bedroom.... You can sleep here.—Get papers from the shed and lay them on the floor. (25)

Mae shapes the future as she speaks. Lloyd, on the other hand, is powerless in the context of this particular scene, specifically because of his lack of language. The text reads, "*He is distraught. He sits on the chair on the left and cries. He puts his head on the table and freezes*" (25).

The next scene suggests that Mae's vigor comes not only from her use of language in speech, but in her more general use of language as poet, reader, writer, actor, and critic. First she directs Henry to offer grace for their meal, then she practices a kind of reader-response: "I feel grace in my heart," she says. "I feel fresh inside as if a breeze had just gone through my heart." She makes use of the art, **empowering** herself through the medium of her sensual response. But unapologetically, she seeks little in the way of interpretation or intellectual understanding. Mae continues, "I don't retain the words.... I don't remember the things I learn too well.... But I rejoice with the knowledge that I get" (26). **Knowledge, for Mae, is essence rather than substance.** As is so often true for Fornes' heroines, *meaning* is never something you just hold in your hand, but what you do with it once it is there.⁸ Mae asks Henry to repeat grace (to underscore the rhyme, as it were) and responds emotionally again, even more intensely with tears and perfect empathy. "I am a hungry soul," she answers to Henry's "For [God] satisfies the longing soul, and fills the hungry soul with goodness." "I am a longing soul," Mae adds, "It satisfies me to hear words that speak so lovingly to my soul" (27). Mae forces the text to speak directly to her; by reiteration, she even makes it her own text. And finally, she assures herself the last word in this scene with a comment that borders on non sequitur, giving her even more control over the direction of discourse. Somewhat abruptly, she concludes, "Don't be afraid to eat from our dishes, Henry. They are clean" (27). On the one hand, the spectators are thrust back to the visual image, essentially instructed to stop listening to text and to remember to consider the image before them. In this case,

⁸ Fornes told Scott Cummings that "[t]here is not deceit in romance.... When the glass of beer looks like the most beautiful amber, there's no deception, because it *is* actually. Everything is beautiful.... To respond to the beauty that's around you, there's no deception in that. That's why I like lyricism" (Cummings, 55). That's why Mae likes lyricism too.

the redirecting of attention will be ominous in retrospect; what the spectators **see** is three people at a table; what they **hear** is Mae's inability to make the leap from an awareness that language enables her to express herself, to using language to communicate with others. But the spectators are also returned to the very real physical context of the scene, which helps to ground Mae's spirituality. She compels not only Henry and Lloyd's respect and attention, but the respect and attention of her more general spectator.

The next scene provides a literal text to support Mae's self-characterization. Text is specifically foregrounded as Mae reads from her book while Lloyd listens silently. Mae's "inspired" reading describes the purely sensory "starfish" functional ("they keep water clean"), sensitive ("A starfish's eye cannot see. But they can tell if it is night or day"), and mysterious ("no one really knows" how long they live). The spectator should already know that Mae will empathize with what she reads here—she might do so even if the description of the starfish were not so apt simply because it is her own voice reading aloud—but the text that Mae reads is especially meaningful as an indication of Mae's sense of herself as both worthy of textual description, and even of herself as the conjurer of such an image. Mae briefly perceives of herself as a text, and even though she is not the author of this particular text, she perceives herself as authoritative, as capable of poetic articulation.

But then with a single and succinct gesture, the visual tableau replaces the text. Stage directions read: "*Lloyd slaps the book off the table. Mae slaps Lloyd. They freeze*" (27). The final and enduring image of this scene, then, is not only of **Mae's desperate desire for the authority of the artist, for access to both knowledge and feeling**, but of the conflict between herself and Lloyd that her desire provokes. **The text and image work together to describe the insecurity, poverty (of material, of spirit), and ignorance that thwart any progress in this drama.** But above all else, the truth emerges that the text **cannot** advance as long as the image has this much potency.

Even those images that the audience is exposed to **between** scenes have the power to effect readings of both text and image. Responsibility for props between scenes is delegated differently than during scenes; Lloyd also handles the book, for example. And the characters' maneuvers between scenes are not strictly functional, i.e. both Mae and Lloyd move the book between Act I, Scene vi and Scene vii. The spectator's response to Lloyd must be effected by his at least dual role. Henry's opening line in I. vii instructs the spectator to be attentive to the impact of Lloyd's resulting elusiveness. He asks Mae, "What is Lloyd to you?" which is what the image has also just asked of the spectator (even of Mae, for that matter). The tableau insists that character is subject to context, to the context of the enacted drama, as well as to

the ineffable context of those more elaborate images and emotions which are not, cannot be, staged.

Mae suggests that her relationship with Lloyd has been altered specifically because of the new context her relationship with Henry provides. She describes her alliance with Lloyd to Henry as “animals who grow up together and mate,” but she says that has changed since Henry has moved in: “I could not be his mate again, not while you are here. I am not an animal. I care about things, Henry, I do” (28). She claims that both her relationship with Lloyd and her self-definition have been redefined within the new format of these broader relationships.

But on another level, what Mae urges through her words is inconsistent with the image she provides, both linguistically and visually. The honesty and careful description of her relationship with Lloyd—her use of detail particularly—finally seem to celebrate that relationship. She rehearses their history together, their childhood, her father’s bringing Lloyd home, and then her father’s death which left her and Lloyd a family of sorts in their own right. “I don’t know what we are,” she insists, “We are related but I don’t know what to call it.” Language, she claims, fails her, though she has so successfully evoked the quality of her relationship with Lloyd. “Lloyd is good, Henry,” she adds. And more importantly: “And this is his home” (28). Context is apparently not as much altered as she would like to believe.

Presumably, on some level Mae is conscious of the context’s tenacity. She turns to Henry and contradicts her assertion that she is “not an animal.” “I don’t want to live like a dog,” she insists, disclosing her fear that she lives precisely that way. And Mae is down on her knees, just like a dog, begging Henry neither to leave nor to be too disgusted with her and Lloyd. This image of Mae contrasts so severely with the image of the powerful woman Mae has tried, often successfully, to evoke. Ironically, despite her intentions, in this scene Mae has strengthened the spectator’s perception of the positive aspects of her relationship with Lloyd—something like respect and care—while undermining her own assertions about the strengths of her relationship with Henry. By comparison, the latter relationship is far too abstract, too intellectual. That relationship is the one that eludes words, and is best described by image.

Scenes viii and ix end Act I with images that illustrate not the shortcomings of Mae and Lloyd’s relationship, but the gaps in Mae and Henry’s. In Act I, Scene viii Henry gives Mae the gift of lipstick and a mirror which essentially leave her speechless: “Lipstick.... A mirror.... Oh, Henry” (29), Mae utters. The text has nothing to add to the scene’s absurdity; Mae has no intelligible response. What does she need with lipstick?⁹ And in order to assure that the spectator will be aware of this

⁹ Bonnie Marranca offers an alternative reading: “[W]hen Henry buys Mae lipstick and a mirror in which to see herself, the moment is not for her a cosmetic action but a recognition of self in the act of knowing, an objectification, a critique of the self” (“Real Life,” 31).

absurdity, the final scene of Act I shows Mae actively back to her textbook; in fact, the lipstick scene is framed by Mae's reading and writing in its juxtaposing scenes.

Finally, the inner text of the first act's final scene—the text within the text—severs Mae from the drama's movement. **The absurd objectification of Mae** that Henry's gift begins, is perpetuated when Henry and Lloyd become the central actors. Mae is reduced to setting, to the stage for Henry and Lloyd's struggle, imaged in the shell of a hermit crab. Mae reads from her textbook the description of a hermit crab's territorial demands: "Often he tries several shells before he finds the one that fits. Sometimes he wants the shell of another hermit crab and then there is a fight" (29). None of these characters are able to work this observation into a parable, but each certainly recognizes its aptness though it leaves them speechless. All three exchange looks, and the scene ends with the men eyeing each other, with Mae, figuratively at least, now outside of both the text and the image.

As Act I ends with all eyes on the men, Act II begins as the men's drama, prophesying Mae's further demise. Act II, Scene x involves only Henry and Lloyd, cast in the somewhat conventional roles of father and son, or authority and subject, roles that seem to materialize inevitably from the context. Lloyd is reduced to a stuttering child desperately seeking help: "They gave me *this*," Lloyd says, to which Henry responds, "That's the prescription for your medicine," and Lloyd again—apparently retarded—"They said I should buy *this*" (30). While Henry may have originally seemed virtuous, by way of what Mae wanted him to be, and Lloyd wicked, the reversal process is underway. Lloyd is becoming an increasingly sympathetic character, particularly in contrast to Henry, who is didactic and cruel even while Lloyd is so obviously fragile. Act II begins then by focusing on Lloyd as this drama's most obvious victim, rather than Mae. When Mae is re-involved in the drama, she is efficient and productive, in strong contrast to both men. But ironically, for all her activity, Mae controls the drama less at this point than she has at any other. Though she plays a variety of roles considerably more complicated than those of Lloyd and Henry, each of those roles is in service to the men. She doctors Lloyd by physically helping him to swallow his pills down his throat. And she acts as arbitrator in Lloyd and Henry's argument over Lloyd's theft of Henry's money for his medicine. Mae speaks to both of the men, for both of them, further displacing the conflict onto them and away from herself. She is both indirectly the commodity they are bargaining for, and the one doing the bargaining, essentially erasing herself. Forced into the various roles designed to accommodate the men—nurse, care-taker, voice of emotion, voice of reason—the play's emphasis shifts **from Mae as agent to Mae as medium**. She is no longer the artist; Mae provides the stage on which the men can enact *their* drama.

As these characters would have it, plot progress is ultimately responsible for the

roles they play. In Act II, Scene xii Lloyd has his strength back, obviously inspired by Henry's loss of strength (due to an offstage fall). Lloyd and Henry's relationship has become symbolic, as these two crabs vie for the same shell, bargaining with the same money whose right to possession dubious at best—it might even be Mae's money. Mae becomes defeatist, giving over the drama to Lloyd. As Mae reasons it, Lloyd might as well kill Henry since "He can't talk straight anymore" (34). All of her power, as she saw it, or her potential for power was in the possibility of intellectual discourse with Henry. Now that the struggle has been narrowed down to a physical struggle between the men, she assumes she no longer has a place in their drama.

But Mae is still more of an agent than she acknowledges. She still has the authority to insist that she and Lloyd will take care of Henry in his infirmity. By way of that insistence, Mae exercises her continued control over Lloyd; in fact, the spectator sees much more of Lloyd's physical caretaking of Henry than of Mae's. Act II, Scene xiii finds Lloyd feeding Henry, now literally. Typically Fornesian, however, Mae's agency cannot be independent of either Lloyd or Henry's agency. Who has the most power on this stage is highly ambiguous at this point. As long as Lloyd and Mae will respond to Henry's needs, he becomes increasingly powerful even while appearing at least physically powerless. Insofar as a character's boundaries are determined by the other characters—i.e. the extent to which character is defined against other characters—Mae and Lloyd's responsiveness to Henry undermines their autonomy. Though the characters may see their actions as determined by plot, Fornes suggests that they are more elaborately determined by the other characters.

Again, Mae claims to believe that her recourse is what she can either give or withhold through speech: "Kill him if you want. –He can't talk straight anymore" (34). Mae blames Henry's muteness for her modified desires. But one wonders what Mae ever got from Henry. While she has alluded to intelligent conversation between them, the spectator has no evidence; we have heard Mae's intelligence, but the only evidence of Henry's is his ability to read, or possibly Mae's faith in him. As far as the spectator is concerned, nothing has changed about Mae's relationship with Henry, except her perceptions. Mae's desire for Henry—specifically for his supposed intelligence—has had a command over her all along that has enabled her to avoid the true vacuousness of their relationship, even her vacuous self, and to see instead what she has wanted to see. Mae's self-definition could not have been more enmeshed in her desire for another, or more specifically, in her efforts to make another into what she herself wanted to be. When she knows for certain that her desire will not be satisfied she can no longer sustain the illusion of an intelligent and valuable relationship between she and Henry.

Essentially, the entire conflict dramatized in *Mud* has been an illusion. Events

have been predetermined by the inadequate power of language and the inevitable power of context. All that has left undetermined was whether any character would change sufficiently to alter the chain of events—or, whether characters would make room for such changes in each other. The metamorphoses that Lloyd and Henry *seem* to go through do not alter the context, because of their symbiosis: one of them is always a burden for Mae, and always will be. The interconnectedness of the lives of these characters, the extent to which they do not exist outside of each other—cannot exist, theatrically speaking—allows no space for such change in characterization. Their theatrical space is too small and constricted. Mae will never get either enough power or pleasure from her capacities because those capacities will never be happily met by Lloyd and Henry. If language has a resilience or beauty in this play, even if we consider it the language of the illiterate and inarticulate, the tragedy here is that even that cannot save these characters, bound as they are to the theater they inhabit. Toby Zinman labels *Mud* absurdist theater in part because “linguistically, it demonstrates simultaneously both the inadequacy and the dazzling beauty of words” (218). What is most bleak, then, is how little that beauty counts. When Lloyd tries to teach himself to read—an act that might satisfy Mae enormously—she knows, instead, the irrelevance of that gesture. For Mae, Lloyd’s trying to learn to read is the same kind of ridiculing mimicry of her as Henry’s aping and laughing at Lloyd’s efforts at pronunciation. The gesture only reveals to Mae the context they are mired in; both of their efforts are a joke.

That Mae lacks empathy for Lloyd is not entirely her fault. In this particular dramatic world, so void of both empathy and sympathy for Mae, she especially cannot take pleasure in Lloyd’s efforts at self-education. He had ridiculed those efforts of hers, and moreover, indirectly would deny Mae what would have been her own, what might have distinguished her. But Mae is responsible here for thwarting change in both their plot and their theatrical context. She is suppressing Lloyd’s character development, and hence, suppressing her own. Not unlike Julia in *Fefu and Her Friends*, Mae has bowed to context, and figured her own death-in-life.

The increasingly violent subtext—the violence that has been partially realized in Lloyd’s illness, Henry’s crippling, and Mae’s objectification—continues to beg its theatrical equivalent as did the conflict between Julia and Fefu in *Fefu and Her Friends*. Act II, Scene xv, a literally climactic scene (Henry masturbates to orgasm), is pivotal to the mounting violence. In a plea for Mae’s love, Henry masturbates in front of her, to her as it were, and in context, making a particularly selfish kind of love. Henry endeavors to compel a response from Mae, but he clearly does not know where to aim. He blames Mae for their deteriorating relationship: “You think a cripple has no feelings” (37), he protests, typically underestimating Mae’s intelligence. In fact,

she knows fully well that he has no feelings, in the phrase's cliched sense, i.e. he has no feelings for others, including herself. Henry does provoke a response from Mae, but presumably the inverse of what he had anticipated. When he has an orgasm, Mae also collapses (onto a chair), but there is nothing sympathetic about her response. Rather, she appears to be responding to the inherent violence of his selfish gesture (when he might have made a sexual gesture that actually reached out to Mae, a gesture *for* her), the violence that his selfish desire does to her.

But Mae is also guilty of a dangerous kind of masturbation. Her seduction of Henry was entirely self-serving; she had nothing to offer him. In this sense, Henry's masturbating, like Lloyd's before him, dramatizes certain truths about *all* of their conditions. Mae has tried to use language and poetry for her pleasure alone. Hence, that language fails Mae is inevitable, given the extent to which she uses it only self-reflexively, the extent to which she does not make enough effort to use it for communication with others. For all the characters, the danger lies in the divestment of meaning in words. At the close of Act II, Scene xvi, both men shout, "I love you" to Mae which could not be a greater waste of words.

What is finally so menacing about Mae, Lloyd and Henry's mutual inarticulateness is the power that gives to the drama, to the theatrical image. Without adequate language, they cannot reshape either the images of their surrounding world, or their own images. Mud, though present all along, re-asserts itself toward the end of the play, as a place in which Mae is especially swamped. Between Act II, Scene xv and Scene xvi Lloyd enacts a particular kindness: he helps Henry back up onto a chair and closes his fly. That circumscribes Mae's violence of Act II, Scene xvi. When she finds her money in Henry's pocket, she threatens to choke him with his tie, and concludes "You're a pig, Henry" (38). Though Mae suggests the mud is Henry's, what is most striking here is that Mae has been unable to escape the mud despite her apparently profound efforts.

While the unspoken pact between the men to take care of each other seems to make Mae the villain, even to invest her with the greatest powers of agency, the shift of focus back onto Mae at a point where the violence demands its most theatrical realization, simultaneously locates her as the most likely victim. The penultimate scene of the drama is strikingly unfinished, both verbally and imagistically. The obvious inadequacies—even falseness—of the men's demonstrations of love reverberate and require correction, and the mounting violence demands an ultimate victim. The last scene begins with Mae on the brink of escape, though that theatrical possibility is undermined by the dramatic truth of her bondage. Mae is still trying to talk her way out: "I work too hard and the two of you keep sucking my blood. I'm going to look for a better place to be. Just a place where the two of you are not sucking my

blood” (39). She carefully articulates and underscores with repetition her awareness that she has no self in the context of this particular stage event, has no self in the presence of these two other dramatically demanding characters.

The violence that will finally annihilate Mae takes place offstage—it does not matter; she is already lost. The men narrate Lloyd’s murder of Mae with Henry’s “plaintive” and “incoherent” sounds, and both of their repeated shouting of her name. Her name is, in face, briefly the only intelligible text, and that text says very little. It seems to give Lloyd a target, something to aim at, more than anything else. Offstage, Lloyd shoots Mae twice, even though the silence following the first shot suggests a successful hit. When Lloyd carried Mae back onto the stage, “drenched in blood and unconscious,” we are treated to more irrelevant commentary. Lloyd concludes, “She’s not leaving, Henry” (40).

Lloyd’s announcement may be no more superfluous than his theatrical gesture of shooting Mae. The loop was already closed; as far as Mae was concerned, they had already spiritually killed her. The insipid and incipient violence—already evident in Act I, Scene i—would require a dramatically and theatrically different context *not* to be realized. Mae’s final speech resounds triumphantly, but reveals something closer to the truth. “Like a starfish,” Mae says, “I live in the dark and my eyes see only a faint light. It is faint and yet it consumes me. I long for it. I thirst for it. I would die for it. Lloyd, I am dying” (40). Mae’s self-perception has been realized, according to her. She has become the spiritually graced single entity she hungered to be. But she has achieved a solitariness that echoes what was never communicative about her, what never reached honestly for connection. Mae’s coming into language, into the power of art, at her death is so brief and the subtext so resonant, that I see no redemption of the self in this tragedy of human intercourse. Mae’s death confirms for both Mae and her audience the destructiveness of her life. While Lloyd’s ultimate violence confirms the violence she knows the men have done to her all along, emotionally and intellectually, it also confirms her own self-afflicted violence. Again, Mae’s death only appears to be an explosion; rather it is her own implosion.

But it is the play’s general context that is finally at fault here, rather than Mae’s constructed text. Her text was continually controlled by the theater, by the conditions that always have to play against other characters, and against the set.¹⁰ In *Mud*, Mae is transformed into something virtually other than human in order to reveal the extent to which her own self-definition is dependent on context. “Mud” is Mae’s emotion, her entire narrative, realized in stage space. The theater, for Fornes, is a place in which the artist can literalize context, foregrounding the visible world’s impact

¹⁰ Fornes’ point here may be gender-specific. Mae’s role is largely determined by her female status, in the context of her responsibilities toward men, in the “female” realm of the kitchen.

on the individual, and the visible world as the contrived product of individuals. The theatrical frame in *Mud* is so self-conscious, so crafted, that the spectator will be unable to forget the theater even while occupied with the narrative. The formal attributes of theater—the set, the scene breaks, the props—are exhibited in order to reveal that aspect of the human life that is theatrical. The institutional contexts that we construct, as we construct sets in the theater, will determine us as much as we determine them. The relationships between Mae, Lloyd, and Henry are subject to their world of poverty and ignorance, and herein lies *Mud's* most political assertion. If we do not use language to de-construct our institutions, then we will be bound to them. If we were to use language in honest response to our institutions, toward dismantling them, toward fighting them when they are oppressive, we could change the situation we are living in. But as long as we play roles within the institutions we inhabit—as lovers, friends, students, teachers—without understanding our power to remake those institutions, without understanding our power as artists, there is no escaping their oppressive violence. Character is finally role-playing and stage-pacing. If Mae cannot destroy her own mud, her character will always be fixed. And as character is defined against any other character on the stage, there is no self without the other; Lloyd and Henry, too desperate and ignorant to perceive themselves as capable of change, react with fear to this realization at the close of the play, and are hence ironically stirred to murder Mae in an effort to save themselves.

While *Mud* reminds us of the devastating effect of violence that we cannot necessarily see, namely, violence to the human spirit, it is also a call to arms to prevent the materialization of that violence. As the characters, between scenes, explicitly share responsibility for the set, the spectator too is assigned responsibility for this theatrical text. If the spectator becomes seduced by plot, letting narrative assert itself, then one's participation parallels Mae's, and the text will continue to write itself. The spectator, like Mae, is also threatened with being consumed by his or her environment. In *Mud*, Fornes suggests that the spectator needs to recognize the need to interrupt the image-in-process, in this case the larger theatrical text of poverty and ignorance.

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