

PRICE, ALISSA J., M.A. *Playing with Fire: An Examination of the Other "Other."* (2010)  
Directed by Dr. Alexandra Schultheis. 21 pp.

Deepa Mehta's 1996 film *Fire* sparked controversy among right wing nationalist groups and secular audiences from the onset of its premiere in India; its popularization led to riots, the destruction of movie houses, and a ban on the film in theaters across the continent. Both film critics and cultural theorists have examined the content and context of the film as representations of a non-heteronormative desire between two female characters. Some critics, like Gayatri Gopinath and Jyoti Puri, have suggested that the film implicates transnational trajectories for queer identity, and, further, a potentially new Indian identity category that exists outside of the Western discourse of homosexuality. This essay further explicates how the Western scholarship on both identity in queer theory and national identity in postcolonial theory fail to comprehensively account for the non-identity forming same-sex desire evident between the two women in *Fire*.

PRICE, ALISSA J., M.A. Interview as Genre: Djuna Barnes' Rhetorical Voice. (2010)  
Directed by Dr. Nancy Myers. 20 pp.

Over the last thirty years, scholars have begun to recognize little-known writer/artist Djuna Barnes' major works, including her best-known Modernist novel *Nightwood* and her *New York Times* bestseller *Ryder*. However, little scholarship exists on Djuna Barnes' journalistic interviews, even though they offer insight to her rich dialogic rhetorical voice. This essay explicates interview texts by Barnes to examine how the use of genre blending and bending subverts the standard interview format and blurs the line between fact and fiction. By applying Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of primary and secondary speech genres, I demonstrate how the interview is a genre and how Barnes' manipulation of that genre challenges traditional discursive notions of stable generic forms. Moreover, I argue that the function of Barnes' blended writing style destabilizes established generic categories through her use of shared caricatures created throughout the interviews and literary her fiction.

PLAYING WITH *FIRE*: AN EXAMINATION OF THE OTHER 'OTHER'  
AND  
INTERVIEW AS GENRE: DJUNA BARNES' RHETORICAL VOICE

by

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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

This thesis analyzes two twentieth-century texts, one written and one visual, by female authors who endeavor to complicate social and textual categories. Deepa Mehta, a Canadian-born Indian filmmaker, addresses the complexity of desire and sexuality against the backdrop of national identity formation in India through her portrayal of the relationship between two female characters in her controversial film *Fire*. Djuna Barnes, an early twentieth-century artist/writer, challenges the boundaries of genre as she writes across multiple literary genres, effectively creating a space for the journalistic interview amongst them. Both women, however, use their artistic media to subvert the traditional, categorical boundaries that epitomize their cultural and professional discourses.

## PLAYING WITH FIRE: AN EXAMINATION OF THE OTHER 'OTHER'

The controversy surrounding Indian-born Canadian director Deepa Mehta's 1996 film, *Fire*, the second in a trilogy that landscapes the lives of Indian women in the twentieth century, suggests that the distinctions between the role(s) of women within Indian national and religious identities need closer examination. Mehta's film characterizes two women who do not succumb to culturally defined (national) identities as Indian wives; neither do the women identify as queer (as categorized by Western feminists). Instead, throughout the film, the women demonstrate their ability to negotiate new identities as an alternative to the repressive cultural cuffs of arranged marriages and wifely duties. The relationships these women have with their husbands as well as with each other push back against the boundaries that both queer theory and postcolonial theory inevitably create while theorizing culture and identity. As such, in *Fire*, the protagonists Sita and Radha negotiate a relationship that destabilizes the concepts of sexual identity and nation building. Their new identities ultimately work against audiences' understandings of both (Western) lesbianism and traditional Indian culture and highlight the limitations of queer theory and postcolonial theory as tied to national identity.

As *Fire* circulated through India's cinemas and American and European film festival circuits, its themes emerge with variable cultural meanings for Western *vis á vis* indigenous Indian discourses. For Western audiences, the film represents the "breakthrough story" of two fearless women who work against the heteronormative expectations that Indian culture imposed on its constituents. Under this rubric, the main characters Sita and Radha overcome this repression via a Western-style personal is political lesbian relationship. Accordingly, the first paragraph of Roger Ebert's three-star rating review in the *Chicago Sun Times* frames *Fire* as "[t]he first Indian film about lesbianism" and concludes that the film "seems to be a part of a new freedom in films from the subcontinent" (38) Ebert echoes the reading most other Euro-Americans have of the film, including, for example, the Canadian film reviewer who assessed the



portrayal of lesbian sexuality as “tame by Canadian standards” (Johnson 86). For Western audiences, Sita and Radha were at best brave and oppressed—and at worst, just not gay enough.

For Indian audiences, on the other hand, the film reflects the internal struggle for a national Indian identity. Within this context, portrayed through the vehicle of female sexuality, any identity performed outside heteronormative bounds is not acceptable. It is from the front lines of this struggle that the women of the right-wing Hindu party, the Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP], successfully led riots and protests to ban the film’s screening in Bombay and other major cities across India. The impetus for these protests can perhaps best be understood by examining the underpinnings of the modern expectations of Indian female identity that have not evolved far from those of the ancient Indian epics that, through their narratives, define and inform the cultural morals and expectations of Indian wives.

In two of the greatest ancient Hindu Epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, both Sita and Radha (the main characters of the film) are female goddesses whose identities were defined by their roles as wives. In her book *Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage*, Arti Dhand notes that “the invocation of the epics to support gender roles is hardly new—for centuries, if not millennia, male siblings have modeled their relationships on Rama and Lakshmana; girls have been socialized to “[b]e like Sita” (2).

In this way, Sita is one of the most popular heroines in Hindu mythology. She is known mostly as the wife of Rama, the hero in the Epic of *Ramayana*. Rama, portrayed as the ideal king in the *Ramayana*, wins Sita at her *svayamvara* (a suitor’s contest for a bride); here, their marriage represents an interplay between a virtuous and powerful king and a woman who symbolizes the forces of the earth. In the central part of the epic narrative, Rama is banished from the capital city, and Sita willingly follows her husband into the dangerous forest of exile to demonstrate her loyalty to him in the face of danger. While exiled, the villain Ravana abducts Sita, and Rama and his allies defeat Ravana and recapture Sita. Once Sita is recaptured, Rama accuses her of being disloyal (committing adultery) while under the capture of another man. Grieved by Rama’s false

accusations, Sita asks Lakshmana (her brother-in-law) to make a funeral pyre for her. Having displeased Rama and having been renounced by him publicly, she wishes to die (6.118). When the fire has been kindled, Sita prepares to enter it and addresses Agni, the god of fire, for protection. Because of her innocence and purity, Agni refuses to harm her and returns her to Rama unscathed (6.120). However, due to gossip and further public suspicion that Sita was unfaithful, Rama exiles her whilst she is pregnant with twins.

David Kinsley, in his book *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, remarks

Sita's self-effacing nature, her steadfast loyalty to her husband, and her chastity make her both the ideal Hindu wife and the ideal *pativrata*. In a sense Sita has no independent existence, no independent destiny. In all things she sees herself inextricably bound up with Rama. Apart from him, her life is meaningless . . .

In the Hindu tradition a woman is taught to understand herself primarily in relation to others. She is taught to emphasize in the development of her character what others expect of her . . . Sita's role as a devotee, like her role as intermediary, casts her in a subsidiary position vis-à-vis Rama. He is the supreme deity, the object of devotion; she is the ideal devotee. (77, 80)

Throughout the epic Sita is consistently depicted as the epitome of womanly purity and virtue (surviving a test of fire) and is seen as the prototypical wife: one who is chaste, faithful, and submissive. Sita is by far the most popular and beloved paradigm for wifely devotion, forbearance, and chastity throughout Hindu mythology, though rarely worshipped in her own right (79).

In *Fire*, Sita's sister-in-law Radha also represents a mythical Hindu goddess who is best known to represent the ideal devotee through her intense emotional feelings (81). However, contrary to the mythological symbol of faithfulness and devotion that Sita depicts in the epic of *Ramayana*, throughout Hindu mythology, it is Radha who is known for investing her whole being in an adulterous affair with the beautiful god Krsna (Kinsley 81). David Kinsley points out that "Radha's illicit relationship with Krsna breaks all social norms and casts her in a role of one who willfully steps outside the realm of *dharma* to pursue her love" (81). Donna Wulff characterizes Radha as a goddess from humble roots whose devotional significance is portrayed through early

sixteenth-century dramas and music as a character who inspires devotees by the strength of her feeling (111).

The characterizations of these female deities are both reflected and resisted within Mehta's characters Sita and Radha. Both characters represent aspects of what it means to be the ideal Indian wife and lover, and, accordingly, what it means to resist those ideals by forming a relationship outside of typical religious boundaries. A familiarity with the social and religious/mythical contexts of Indian female identity construction helps to explain why the reaction of Hindu audiences differs markedly from that of Western audiences.

Given that Mehta names her filmic characters Sita and Radha gains her criticism from religious groups like the BJP who place Hindu religious tradition at the forefront of the (prescribed) representation of Indian national identity— exposing another binary struggle between a secular and a religious national identity. It is this very question of identity that is most disturbing to a group seeking to construct a non-secular national Indian identity via their protests against a film that portrays Hindu Indian women performing extra-normative sexual practices. Mehta expresses her dismay in the director's notes that accompany the DVD: "What I remember the most was the viciousness in the faces of the women who were tearing up the [film] posters in the theater and [sic] it felt like such desecration." In an interview, one of the protesters remarked that the film was an affront to Hinduism and "alien to Indian culture" (qtd.in Gopinath, 131).

At the same time, the BJP was adamant in pointing out that Mehta was diasporic, and therefore, unauthorized to portray Indian women displaying same-sex desire. BJP arguments for banning the film noted "if women's physical needs get fulfilled through lesbian acts, the institution of marriage will collapse, and the reproduction of human beings will stop" (qtd. in Gopinath, 157). In light of all of the protests, the lesson would eventually emerge that "what was offensive wasn't the women's relationship with each other, but it was the fear that *Fire* might shift the status quo of husbands, and women might just question their own insignificant role in marital relationships that lean heavily in favor of husbands" (Mehta).

These reactions to the film confirm how fragile and problematic is the proposition of constructing a national identity (either secular or religious) that has not yet labeled and categorized all of its citizens, especially its queers, into aspects of identity. Anne McClintock reminds us in her book *Imperial Leather* that “[a]ll nationalisms are gendered, all are invented, and all are dangerous . . . [and] all nations depend on powerful constructions of gender” (352-53); Benedict Anderson views nations as “imagined communities” in the sense that they are systems of cultural representations whereby people come to imagine a shared experience of identification with an extended community (6). As a result of this imagined shared experience, McClintock suggests that “[n]ationalism becomes radically constitutive of people’s identities through social contests that are frequently violent and often gendered” (353). The reactions to the film displayed by the BJP are both violent and gendered, and their motivations are fueled by the desire to create a religious national identity. In this context, the female characters Mehta portrays on the screen represent the antithesis of the community Hindu nationalists have imagined. At the same time, a culture that resists naming same-sex desire in Western terms does so seemingly at the cost of displaying a unified national identity that includes non-heteronormative relationships.

Thus, to both Indian and Western viewers looking in from outside the local discourse, Mehta’s heroines provide a negative answer to the inevitable, politically taboo query raised by the film: “Are they really gay?” Yet even under the current theoretical gaze, Radha and Sita do not quite fit. Within the realm of queer theory, for example, the relationship between the sisters-in-law cannot be neatly accounted for (as lesbian) according to familiar narratives of self-realization, desire, and identity which have been coded in even the most innovative Western or academic discourses of (homo)sexuality. Furthermore, postcolonial theories of a modern India forging its national identity struggle to capture the meanings produced by Sita and Radha’s private acts. In short, the identities in *Fire* are undecipherable to both popular and theoretical audiences.

In examining the tenets of queer theory, both Judith Butler and Michel Foucault offer contexts for examining the links between the political dimensions of queer theory in relationship to identity. While queer theory accounts for nearly every sexual act between two persons, it also

presupposes that an identity will arise from the iteration and reiteration of these acts. Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, exemplifies this position: “Foucault invokes a trope of prediscursive libidinal multiplicity that effectively presupposes a sexuality ‘before the law’ . . . while on the other hand insists that sexuality and power are coexistent” (97). Foucault himself traces the shift from sodomy as a crime of which anyone is potentially capable to an act that is the expression of innate identity (Hawley 4). Pure queer theory, based on Butler’s antifoundationalist work in opposition to fixed identities, asserts that identity “is performatively articulated as the effect of regulatory regimes—a constraint queer theory attempts to transgress, subvert, and disrupt” (qtd. in Hawley 3). An important qualification to this approach is offered by Paula Moya, who critiques Butler’s attempt to forge a feminist agenda that is built on experiences removed from their specific locations in the world. Moya instead cites Cherríe Moraga’s understanding of identities as relational and grounded in the “historically produced social facts which constitute social locations” as critical to understanding how the methods of theorizing identities have come about (127).

Both Moraga’s insight into social locations and Butler’s assertion of performative iterations support the central tenet of queer theory as a resistance to the normativity that demands the binary proposition hetero/homo. Mehta’s characters Sita and Radha further problematize this binary by not only not fitting into either (Western) category of hetero or homo, but also not fitting into any other analytic framework queer theory currently proposes (i.e. cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity, and corrective surgery) that can lead to identity (Jagose 3).

Sexual identity and its ambiguities—whether essential or constructed through performative iterations and social locations—are important to the postcolonial discourse because of the relationship between local identities and self-identifying new nations. The term *postcolonial*, as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin describe it, includes

[T]he study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the discursive operations of empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects, and most importantly perhaps, the differing responses to such incursions and their

contemporary colonial legacies, of both pre- and post-independence nations and communities (187).

Though the term *postcolonial* is at least as complex as the term *queer*, both have the potential to marginalize the local and pit the individual against a national power. In their work *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri assert that “[t]he nation becomes the only way to imagine community . . . [and] the multiplicity and singularity of the multitude are negated in the straightjacket of identity and homogeneity of the people” (106-7). In such nation-building cultures, sexual dissidence is thus a distraction (Hawley 10).

At the intersection of queer theory, which both resists and constitutes identity, and postcolonial theory, which exposes and problematizes the process of nation-building, there is an explanation of the *othering* of female sexual identity and the female, non-Western subject. While both theories attempt to explain a matrix of complexities that pertain to fixed sexual identities and culturally homogeneous views of nation, neither completely addresses the existence of the sexuality that is created between the women in Mehta’s film— which is a relationship formed in response to their own culture’s strict adherence to particular social codes, not to those of a colonizer. In the end, neither theory provides the language necessary to account for the locally-created, agentic, ambiguous sexual desire that exists between the two female characters in *Fire*.

To better understand Mehta’s heroines as the other “other” and how these women struggle to negotiate the space between hetero and homo, it is important to first look at the social constructs that relegate them to a space of alternative sexuality. In an examination of the relationship between Sita and Jatin, her arranged husband, we can uncover the spiritual and hierarchal cultural past of India— which serves as a reminder of how the pre-existence of past cultural identity constitutes a postcolonial nation’s modernity.

Sita, the younger, seemingly more modern Hindu wife of Jatin, expresses her idealistic views of love and marriage at the beginning of the *Fire* when she begs for the attention of her newly arranged husband. “Do you not like me?” she asks, as he clearly wants little to do with her. His reluctant and dutiful response is, “We have only been married for three days.” Their

conversation continues against the backdrop of the Taj Mahal, India's great monument to heterosexual love, which embodies the idealized type of love that Sita has been socialized to seek (as endorsed by the nationally-recognized tradition of the arranged marriage). Though she is young and idealistic, Sita seeks to do that which any modern Hindu wife should: "to be a good mother, wife, and daughter-in-law" (Puri x). Sita forges ahead undeterred—at first—in her quest for emotional fulfillment through a marriage with Jatin.

Sita's social location is in part constituted by "historically produced social facts" that Jyoti Puri describes as the modern middle-class expectations of Indian women (Moya 127). These facts include "a convent education, [and] the ability to converse in English as virtual prerequisites of marrying well" (127). Puri also points out that although dating, marriage, and parenthood are cast in modern terms as a partnership based on love, those expectations were juxtaposed with advice [to Indian women] to plan the first pregnancy two years after the wedding in order to "prevent the fading of the first flush of marriage" (Puri x).

Accordingly, Mehta's filmic character Sita begins her narrative in the traditional context of expectations of her role as Jatin's wife. She is willing to succumb to an arranged marriage, live in a joint family with her in-laws, and contribute to the family income by working in the family restaurant take-out business. Here, in her critique of *Fire*, Gayatri Gopinath agrees that "Mehta rather conveniently frames the dilemma of her heroines as one in which 'modernity,' with its promise of individual freedom and self-expression, pulls inevitably against 'tradition,' which demands that the women adhere to the roles prescribed for them as good Hindu wives and remain chaste, demure, and self-sacrificing" (141).

Yet Sita's submission to tradition is not enough to attract the notice of her husband, much less bring her the validation and voice she seeks from within the confines of her nation's modernity. As a result, she begins to rebel in the face of tradition early in the film. Just after Sita and Jatin are blessed into the family by Biji—the (literally) mute matriarch of the family—Sita's husband Jatin, Radha's husband Ashok, and the family's male servant hastily leave the room to take care of other business, leaving the three women of the family alone in the room as if their

presence was merely symbolic: as soon as the ceremony was over, the women became invisible once again.

Frustrated by the isolation from her new husband and her family, Sita, throughout the film, resists tradition in moments while her husband is away from home. Her first act of rebellion comes in a scene when she trades her saris for a pair of her husband's jeans and shirt and proceeds to dance around in front of the mirror while pretending to smoke a cigarette. During this scene she is startled back to the reality of traditional duty when her mute, elderly mother-in-law, Biji, rings a hand bell in the next room to notify her daughter-in-law that she is in need of assistance. When Sita appears in the next room to fulfill her attending duties, Biji rings the bell relentlessly in disapproval of Sita's attire until Sita finally leaves the room to change back into her saris. Biji, here and throughout the film, is a potent symbol of an impotent Old India—wizened, mute, helpless, carefully dressed and powdered each day, and carried around the room with a bell in her hand.

Eventually, Sita becomes aware of her husband's affair with his exotic "other" Chinese girlfriend, and this marks a turning point in her loyalties and duties as a Hindu wife. When Sita confronts Jatin about his affair, his response is to note that "it can be hell for a divorced woman in our society" and to ask Sita whether or not she wants a baby so that she will have something to keep her busy. The emphatic "no" that follows echoes into the remaining narrative of the film, which finds Sita emotionally and physically engaged with her elder sister-in-law.

Thus, within the scope of Indian tradition, Sita is a woman whose identity is constructed as both a voiceless object of desire and a necessary entity in regards to reproducing children for the family. Yet, unlike the mythological goddess after which Sita is named, Mehta's Sita refuses the traditional notions of motherhood, the first of many steps in her journey to transgress the categories of cultural identity available to her against the backdrop of modern India. Ultimately, however, within her current situation, Sita cannot negotiate her own desire within the local discourse. She is left to sort out her own desires outside of an emotionally unfulfilling relationship with her husband.



Dipesh Chakrabarty refers to this idea of the tradition-family-nation module in *Provincializing Europe* in commenting:

One does not have to subscribe to the ideology of clannish patriarchy, for instance, to acknowledge that the metaphor of the sanctified and patriarchal extended family was one of the most important elements in the cultural politics of Indian nationalism. In the struggle against British rule, it was frequently the use of this idiom—in songs, poetry, and other forms of nationalist mobilization—that allowed Indians to fabricate a sense of community and to retrieve for themselves a subject position from which to address the British. (39)

Later in his argument, Chakrabarty suggests that during the second half of the nineteenth century, Bengal literature on “domesticity” and women’s education portrays an embrace of nationalism wherein the “‘home’ emerged . . . as a space for reforms, where an educated and reformed mother was expected to prepare the Bengali Indian child to be the proper subject of nationalism” (224). All of the characters in the film present either a resistance to or a resignation to the ideological idiom of the “patriarchal extended family” that undergirds a sense of nationalism.

The traditional relationship in the film that exists between Ashok and Radha confronts these patriarchal precedents directly because the couple is not able to have children. Though it may not be a direct commentary, it is perceivable that Mehta alludes to a peripheral link between Radha’s infertility, murder by fire, and the tradition of the dowry exchange—a practice that links gender, nation, and fire. Linda Stone and Caroline James, in “Dowry, Bride-Burning, and Female Power in India,” examine the bride-burning problem in India by looking at recent changes that have occurred not only with respect to dowry transactions, but also with respect to one of the traditional sources of female power: fertility. Stone and James state that “[w]omen must be endowed with property in order to attract a husband of equal or higher rank, and their sexuality must be controlled in order to limit the possibility of conflicting claims of the estate in which a woman has rights” (308). The most common means of murder that takes place in response to a bride’s lack of dowry (and sometimes fertility) is soaking the bride in kerosene and setting her aflame, with the report to the police of a suicide or accident in the kitchen (310).

These authors suggest that what has changed in Indian society to bring about this form of violence against women is not only the socioeconomic terms of the dowry, but also “whether women in this modern context have lost sources of power, which previously gave them some leverage” (313). The source of power they reference is a woman’s fertility: “A woman’s fertility was the key to what can be considered a ‘great transition’ in her status and identity” (313). Stone and James argue that once this female fertility value diminishes, “a women’s position has indeed become insecure” (314).

Mehta, perhaps drawing similar conclusions, explicitly portrays Radha as infertile, and suggests that she has lost what little leverage and identity an Indian woman could acquire in her society. One night before they go to bed, Radha asks Ashok, her husband, “If I could have had children, would you still need me the way you need me?” Ashok replies with hesitation, but simply, “No, probably not.” Ashok needs Radha because he has taken a vow of chastity wherein he wards off “evil” desire by having Radha lay close beside him until his desire for her disappears. Ashok believes that by practicing chastity in the face of desire, he will achieve enlightenment and will come into his destiny. Once this ceremonial practice of Ashok overcoming his desire passes, he orders Radha to her own bed, where she has slept chaste and unfulfilled for the past fifteen years.

Here, Ashok aligns himself with the traditional Hindu understanding of the four stages of life, and his practice of chastity may reflect the last stage, with its focus on meditation of the absolute.<sup>1</sup> For Radha, this stage should be a return to the role of family matriarch and homemaker. Her commitment to this role explains Radha’s initial devotion to Ashok, for example, when he asks her to lay chaste as he fends off his own sexual desires in order to reach his spiritual height; however, in the process of elevating Ashok’s desire to practice self-control,

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<sup>1</sup> Shukavak Dasa in “A Hindu Primer” (2007) explains how a layer of the Hindu caste system includes the *Varnashrama Dharma* which divides the life of an individual into four stages: the student stage, the householder stage, the retirement stage, and the renunciation stage. This ancient social system was meant to assure spiritual and material prosperity for both society and the individual.

Radha's desires are eclipsed entirely. The modern middle-class arranged marriage without children leaves a woman like Radha with no obvious alternatives; she has no agentic space within which she can either satiate her desires or attain her own spiritual fulfillment. Whether the couples' infertility is the fault of Radha or Ashok, (the characters in the film assume that it is Radha who is infertile, although Mehta surrounds this issue with ambiguity rather than clarity), the situation is doubly damning for them both. While Ashok finds his spiritual fulfillment in a Hindu ritual focused on the denial of physical desire, Radha seeks her spiritual fulfillment outside of that same tradition through an engagement of physical desire.

Unlike the women, the men in the film are able to access pleasure and fantasy through "unofficially sanctioned sites that function as 'escape hatches' from the strictures of conjugal heterosexual domesticity" (Gopinath 153). Like Sita, Jatin must operate according to cultural expectations, but he has more choices as to how and where he may displace them. In "From Parody to Politics," Butler points out that "the culturally emired subject negotiates its own constructions, even when those constructions are the very predicates of its own identity" (175). Along these lines, Jatin's agency comes from his gender; with that agency he chooses to have a loving affair with his Chinese girlfriend, Julie, and owns a collection of porn videos that he sells under the table to clients young and old. In addition, we learn that Jatin's brother, Ashok, had given Jatin permission to marry Julie and that Julie refused on the grounds that once the 'hunt/kill' was over in a relationship, so was the desire.

In fulfilling desires, all of these men have an outlet unavailable to Sita and Radha. Even the rogue house servant, Mundu, fulfills his desire via his habit of masturbating to porn videos stolen from Jatin. Gopinath explains, "Thus, for the men, desire may be blocked within the officially sanctioned gender and class arrangements of the home, but it nevertheless emerges within these other locations" (153). These other locations include both the public (practicing religious devotion) and private spheres (having a mistress, watching pornography) of Indian culture. Because both women are denied satisfying their desires by their husbands and by their cultural traditions, they do create another choice for themselves. In choosing each other they not

only subvert the tradition-family-nation model, but also fulfill desire and become sovereign subjects of their own desires without clearly redefining their Indian identity.

Interestingly, however, Sita and Radha continue to perform rituals that suggest their submission to the idiom of the patriarchal family prior to their subversion of it. After their first kiss, Sita and Radha sit down together to begin a ritual fast to ensure their husbands' long lives. When Radha points out that Sita does not have to keep the fast if she does not want to, Sita responds:

You must be joking, my mother would kill me—and Biji, she would never stop ringing the bell. Isn't it amazing that we are so bound by customs and rituals? Somebody just has to press my button—this button marked tradition—and I start responding like a trained monkey. (Mehta)

This self-reflection is Sita's first explicit realization of how the rituals she currently performs are directly influenced by her surrounding culture. Though her behavior seems to surprise her, she willingly reiterates the traditional, ceremonial practices because she cannot envision a different performative act that potentially validates her identity as an Indian woman.

In the scene following Sita's self-realization, Jatin recognizes that Sita is fasting for his long life, and says, "You know I don't believe in all this rigmarole fasting-shasting business, so you don't have to suffer on my account." Sita replies, "I don't have a choice." She begins to recognize her lack of agency by saying later to Radha, "I'm so sick of all this devotion. We can find choices." Sita and Radha confide in one another to validate themselves as human beings and to fulfill desire—neither of which is offered by their husbands or their culture.

Given her cultural circumstances, Mehta's heroine has limited places to turn for her own personal freedom. Sita chooses, instead of a baby or divorce, both of which are very public responses to an unhappy marriage, to seek her freedom through the very socially-constructed sexuality that has put her in this predicament in the first place. Sita's sexuality is an act of protest, not an act (as Foucault and Butler would have it) of identity. By choosing to engage in an emotional and sexual relationship with her sister-in-law, Sita subverts the hetero/homo binary into an alternative sexuality that exists within the privacy of her home. She cannot be labeled with the

Western terminology of *lesbian* because, as she points out to Radha, there is “no Hindi word that exists” to describe their relationship.

More importantly, Sita’s sexual acts do not, fixed or unfixed, performed or unfulfilled, translate into any type of identity. It is here that the crossroads of postcolonial and queer theory, while helping open the door to a view of the film from a non-Western viewpoint, fail to help define this alternative sexuality, created between Sita and Radha as an act of resistance. Gopinath begins to articulate this failure by pointing out that

*Fire* both adheres to and challenges a developmental narrative of gay and lesbian identity, which underlies dominant Euro-American discourses on non-Western sexualities. Within the dominant discursive production of India as anterior to the West, lesbian or gay identity is explicitly articulated as the marker of full-fledged modernity. (141-42)

Gopinath’s description is a beginning, however, and not an end. If Sita and Radha’s relationship is not identified within a Western queer discourse, then a new discourse must emerge to encompass their identities.

As the film progresses, Radha and Sita continue to find fulfillment in each other in both homosocial and homosexual ways. The relationship between these two women unleashes the potential for self-assertion in a hierarchical Indian society, wherein the traditional relationship between the older and younger sister-in law is one of affection and respect. Sita and Radha display this affection in several ways as they become more emboldened in their desire for one another. In other words, Sita and Radha subvert what could be viewed as normal homosocial behavior for Indian family culture, such as Sita rubbing Radha’s feet at the family picnic and later rubbing oil into each other’s hair. These scenes are charged with homoerotic desire and reinforce the subversion of accepted traditional sister-in-law behaviors in Indian culture. In another scene, they subvert the kitchen (a traditionally oppressive room), into a space within the home where they are able love each other. While cooking, Radha explains that men eat black pepper on their wedding night “for better performance.” Sita asks, “What about brides?” Radha responds that

they eat green cardamom "for fragrance" and pops one in Sita's mouth. Sita moves close to her and asks if it is working.

These subversive acts move both women toward a sense of agency and resistance, as exemplified by scenes that deliberately push the boundaries of the traditional roles as wives of submission. Sita, for example, decides that she will not let Jatin's affair with his Chinese girlfriend bother her and stops asking him when (or if) he will return home at night. In another scene, Jatin and Sita have an argument, and Jatin slaps Sita. Sita immediately slaps him back. Radha's behavior also grows less submissive. She denies Ashok's request to lie beside him so that he can test himself; she consciously decides not to come when he calls her, and later tells him that he should feed Biji (his mother) instead of her. When Ashok inquires about this behavior, Radha's response is that "Sita said the concept of duty is overrated." As these women find a space to embrace desire, they also create a space of resistance to cultural and traditional submissive norms.

We also see here how the relationship between Sita and Radha never moves along the traditional narrative trajectory of the Euro-American tale of lesbianism—the axis along which, in Gopinath's terms, a relationship moves from an "asexual 'romantic friendship' between bourgeois women in privatized, domestic, gender-segregated spaces, to a modern autonomous, 'lesbian' identity, sexuality and community" (155). Instead, the film refuses to subscribe to the notion that the manifestation of same-sex desire must lead to visibility and identity. This relationship does, however, lead to a space where agency can occur. In her critical account of *Fire*, Gopinath does not, however, follow this desire to its inevitable conclusion—which is the emergence of a completely new micro-discourse of sexuality, creating the space in which Sita and Radha live.

At the end of the film, Radha stays behind to tell Ashok that she is leaving, that she desires to live, and that without desire she is dead. Ashok dismisses her by telling her they can seek help from Swamigi, the spiritual guru, in order to destroy the desire that destroys. Radha's insistence on leaving—because she desires to be with Sita—angers Ashok and he pushes her away from him. Radha's sari catches on fire as she falls into the stove. In her act of protest and

independence, she is tested by fire just as the Goddess Sita was tested in the epic. In both mirroring and twisting the ancient epic, Mehta has Radha's husband—instead of helping her—stand back to watch her burn. The fact that Radha survives the trial by fire suggests that she is indeed pure and proves her chastity as Ashok's wife. In both the epic and the film, the women survive the test of fire (purity) yet still find themselves exiled to a space that is undefined and somewhat unknown to them.

In Butler's *Gender Trouble*, she raises the question of what constitutes the notions of identity and asserts:

Inasmuch as 'identity' is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of 'the person' is called into question by the cultural emergence of those 'incoherent' or 'discontinuous' gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined. (17)

The relationship between Sita and Radha is not one within which they question the construction of their gender or its institution in their society (they consistently perform the stereotypical role of Indian women, right down to fasting for the health of their husbands). It is, however, because of the gender role each woman represents—the role of submissive and subservient wife in Indian culture—that they find themselves fulfilling their desires in what is perhaps a culturally unintelligible way. When Sita holds Radha's head between her hands and explains that there is no word in Hindi for the way that they feel about each other, there is a sense that this realization frees both women to continue to pursue their definition-less relationship. Because Sita and Radha engage in a same-sex desire without necessarily self-identifying as lesbian, it is important for queer theory to ask how these exchanges between the two women help rearticulate and redefine Indian identity, which may subvert (whether consciously or not) normative regimes of heterosexuality. In *Fire*, the women perform the "proper" gender role, but by choosing to participate in a same-sex relationship they undermine the notion of the nation by disengaging from the act of procreating for the nation.

Respectively, queer and, indirectly, postcolonial theories ask for interpretations of subjects from non-heteronormative and non-Western viewpoints. However, the social constructions of identity and agency implied by theorists such as Edward Said fail to encompass the trouble a non-Western identity represents, as enacted by Sita and Radha in *Fire*. While I argue that as the “other,” Sita and Radha become the creators of their own sites of resistance in response to the idiom of the patriarchal Indian extended family, it is arguable also that they become the other Other that Said depicts in his introduction to *Orientalism*. Said explains how the Orient is one of Europe’s “most recurring images of the Other” and suggests a representation of the Other as a construction of the West (1). This construction of Said’s Other is a direct result of the Western gaze onto the exotic. Thus, the view of an Indian woman as exotic would be one way to read both Sita and Radha. Interestingly, however, though the identity category of lesbian is a Western construction, Western audiences view Sita and Radha as lacking exotic appeal. We are able to see this ironic inversion in the following criticism of the film:

Deepa Mehta’s feminist message about the damage caused by these male rules will appear self-evident to North American audiences. The relationship between Sita and Radha is at the center of the story, but Mehta doesn’t do enough to portray the dynamic of the affair and explore the complexity of their love story. (Johnson)

In other words, the relationship between the women is not dressed in enough Western self-realization/coming-out-narrative clothing to be defined as a Western construct. Therefore, it lacks the exotic appeal necessary to qualify as part of the Western gaze that Said describes. Mehta’s narrative silence—in the face of the implied Western lesbian story—also seems to subvert the notion that there is a potential transnational identity, since the West has not successfully culturally appropriated Indian sexualities via its labels of gay and lesbian nor via the public sphere of pride parades.

To further demonstrate how the gaze onto the Other “Other” works in the film, Mehta has placed Biji, the mute and paralyzed matriarch, as the primary onlooker. Biji is in constant observation of the two women—from the time she sees Sita dressed in men’s clothes to the



scene where Sita and Radha dress up and dance with one another. Though mute, Biji rings her small bell in disapproval of Sita and Radha's behavior. It soon becomes clear that Biji despises them for their actions when she viciously spits in Radha's face and silently watches Radha attempt to save herself from her burning sari. While Biji is always there and always watching the women, the men gaze as well. Both Ashok and Mundu watch the women having sex through the crack in Radha's bedroom door. This leads Ashok to burst in on the women in disbelief and protest. Despite the invasion of almost all of Sita and Radha's domestic space by the rest of the family, the women rely on the roof terrace—a space never encroached upon by the men or Biji—to exercise their own gaze. It is on the terrace that the two women further explore their desire and continue to move beyond the confines of traditional Indian womanhood.

If both Sita and Radha have created a space but have not assumed a new identity, they present a scenario that gay rights activist and scholar Dennis Altman notes as “a test of the globalization thesis: new identities may well develop but their development is not predictable through Western experience” (34). Altman also suggests, “It is certainly possible that many people in developing countries, whatever their exposure to Western media imagery and consumer affluence, will not adopt Western sexual identities” (29). Like Altman, Mehta argues against the notion of a Western prescribed transnational sexual identity by situating both heroines within and outside of tradition at once. Altman furthers his arguments in his article “Global Gaze/Global Gays” reminding us that American queer theory remains as relentlessly Atlantic-centric in its view of the world as the mainstream culture it critiques. John Hawley, in *Postcolonial and Queer Theories: Intersections and Essays* suggests that Altman “finds equally intriguing the non-Western world's apparent lack of interest in queer theory, and the continued usage of the terminology ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ by emerging political movements in the Third World” (200). Like Altman, Mehta is perhaps suggesting that a further investigation of the essentialist Westernized view of gender and sexuality is necessary.

Alternatively, a new discourse emerges through the story of the women in *Fire* that attempts to encompass the ambiguities of sexual desire in terms of a social outlet from male and

culturally-constructed oppression. To expand on the question Gayatri Spivak asks, Can the gay and lesbian subaltern speak? we may respond: not unless a new discourse arises as an alternative to the notions of binaries and make room for a non-normative, socially constructed, sexual desire that does not tidily constitute an identity. Along these lines, Mehta has challenged her viewers to imagine that space where sexual acts do preclude an identity, but instead, a site of resistance to a particular identity. Within this examination of culturally-constructed desire—correlated with female acts of sexual identity assertion on either side of the picket line—two general, viable questions arise: (1) does *Fire* indeed articulate a novel, non-Western discourse of female sexuality? and (2) can our understanding of India as a postcolonial nation scaffold this construction of a new queer Indian discourse?

Spivak's acknowledgement that "our work [as postcolonial theorists] cannot succeed if we always have a scapegoat" is an honest critique of postcolonial reason and one that seems highlighted in the story of *Fire*, where the scapegoat is an indigenous patriarchal history. The characters' constructed space of escape from that hierarchy leads to no specific reiteration of identity for the subjects involved (309). In defining identities as either fixed or fluid, theory inevitably creates hegemony between itself and that which it is theorizing. The solution is not as easy as rejecting outright the theoretical tenets of postcolonial and queer theories, but instead it must acknowledge an extra-theoretical space for asserting idiosyncratic personhood, with its wants and desires, in the context of resistance. What we can learn from both queer and postcolonial theory, however, is that not one single theory can begin to encompass the vast, and complicated, constructions of self that exist. In the case of identifying as queer, if one does identify as such, one becomes a subject that creates a need for an agent. In the example Mehta puts forth in *Fire*, the viewer is enabled to "see without seeing" that there are choices outside of the hegemonic theories, outside of Western academic discourses of identity and agency, and within resistance itself.

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## INTERVIEW AS GENRE: DJUNA BARNES' RHETORICAL VOICE

Just as many American Modernists, Djuna Barnes wrote in multiple literary genres—short story, novel, drama, and poetry—as well as in journalistic ones. While it might be argued that her work in journalism provided the income for her literary pursuits, her approach to those journalistic texts reveals a curiosity of experience that bridges the factual with the fictive and the observational with the performative. What makes Barnes' experimental writing unusual and difficult for scholars to categorize is that she often blurred both content and technique across literary and journalistic genres: in particular, her journalistic interviews subvert the conventional limitations of generic form, invoking the emblematic structures of fictional texts. In this essay, I invoke Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of genre as a premise from which to propose that in the work of Djuna Barnes, the interview is itself both a genre and a tool used to destabilize generic categories to further resist classification within a traditional literary discourse. As a genre, an interview presupposes an audience's expectation of formal questions posed and then answered. In Barnes' interviews, she asks no formal questions and disrupts the traditional power balance between the interviewed and the interviewee. Instead of reinforcing the literary category of "interview" (as exemplified by a question and answer format), Barnes incorporates a dialogue between the interviewer and interviewed, creating a narrator/character dynamic traditionally characteristic of fiction.

Often, professional interviews, no matter the medium of presentation, suggest a face-to-face oral interaction between the interviewer and interviewee. While the audience expectations are that the interviewer has prepared objective questions to elicit information, the interviewee is assumed to be speaking spontaneously. The twentieth-century philosopher and semiotician Mikhail Bahktin refers to these interview protocols and audience expectations as characteristics of a genre. In "The Problem of Speech Genres," Bahktin defines genres as "relatively stable types of . . . utterances" (62) within which words and sentences attain typical expressions, relations,

meanings, and boundaries (87), and within which exist “typical conception[s]” of the reader (95) and typical forms of writing (99). Within any type of genre, such as a letter or a face-to-face meeting, formal protocols begin, develop and close/end these genres. Thus, those interacting with a genre have specifically prescribed expectations concerning those protocols and boundaries—particularly in the case of written genres. Since the features in a genre are “relatively stable,” different genres are recognizable by their particular features, protocols, and boundaries. Thus, a dialogical relationship between generic forms can be established that allow for the perceived boundaries between generic categories to be blurred.<sup>2</sup> Bakhtin further classifies “utterances” as existing within the confines of either primary speech genres (mediated speech communion) or secondary speech genres (novels, dramas) (62). Although Barnes’ interviews first occurred in what Bakhtin describes as a primary (simple) speech genre—as a spoken interaction between interviewer and interviewee—the penning intended for reading audiences generates a secondary (complex) speech genre. Here, Barnes as interviewer accomplishes a dialogical relationship between primary and secondary speech genres, the factual and the fictional. She becomes a narrative character in the celebratory interviews she writes, while simultaneously creating fictitious characters out of those same interviews.

One of the critical theoretical problems addressed here is how to approach the eccentric and eclectic journalistic interviews of Djuna Barnes. In other words, how can we address and understand the genre conventions of these once-spoken-then-written interviews? How does the speech “transaction” between the speaker and listener play a role in creating the narrative

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<sup>2</sup> At the heart of Bakhtin’s dialogic view of genres is the distinction he makes between a sentence and an utterance. He defines a *sentence* as a “unit of language” that is bounded grammatically and exists in isolation, outside of a sphere of communication (“Speech Genres,” 74). A sentence is, further, a grammatical unit that does not evoke a responsive reaction (74). An *utterance* (by contrast) is “a unit of speech communication” (73) that is inherently responsive and that is bounded by a change in speaking subjects: “its beginning is preceded by the utterances of others (or, although it may be silent, others’ active responsive understanding, or, finally, a responsive action based on this understanding” (71). The key point for Bakhtin is that utterances are dialogically related to other utterances— and because genres are typified utterances, they are likewise dialogically related to other genres.

rhetorical voice Barnes adopts in her interviews? Bakhtin underlines these questions in recognizing

The fact is that when the listener perceives and understands the meaning (the language meaning) of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude toward it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution, and so on. And the listener adopts this responsive attitude for the entire duration of the process of listening and understanding, from the very beginning—sometimes literally from the speaker's first word. Any understanding of live speech, live utterance, is inherently responsive, although the degree of this activity varies extremely. Any understanding is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker. (100)

Barnes' use of narrative dialogue as an alternative to a traditional question and answer format reinforces the idea that the listener becomes the speaker, as Bakhtin suggests, and furthers the argument that although initially spoken (i.e. a primary speech genre), when the interview transfers to a written format (a secondary speech genre) its transformation features literary devices and embedded authorial messages as a result of the transformation from listener to speaker. Barnes' interviews clearly reflect this transition from listener to speaker as her narrative rhetorical (responsive) voice interweaves the voices of those she interviews. This transition, in turn, destabilizes readers' preconceptions of the interview genre.

Barnes' work is difficult to categorize because it challenges the specific forms of both primary and secondary speech genres, as evidenced by the production of her interviews and fiction. She is at once the one who questions and the one who listens—and who eventually becomes the speaker for her audience. She not only becomes a character in her interviews, but also incorporates real-life knowledge of those interviews and interview subjects into her fiction. An examination of her celebrity interviews reveals Barnes' rhetorical voice among a mass media audience that is unprecedented for her time (the early nineteenth-century). Further, in her blurring of genre forms, Barnes emancipates herself from both personal and literary categorization—a process which mimics the destabilization of traditional textual categories. Consequently, this move effectively alienates her from future audiences by subduing her rhetorical voice into a whisper (alongside the Modern influence of James Joyce and T.S. Elliot). What is at stake, given

her literary genre blurring style, is not only Barnes' place in the anthologized literary canon of Modern writers, but the notion that when generic formats become blurred, they potentially lose the rhetorical impact on readers who equate a lack of traditional generic structure with a lack of meaning.

To date, the complexity of Barnes' writing across genres and her blurring of genres has been largely overlooked by her critics. Critical interest in Barnes began in the 1970's with the publication of James B. Scott's *Djuna Barnes* (1976) and Louis Kannenstine's *The Art of Djuna Barnes: Duality and Damnation* (1977), both of which focus on her four major works, including her novels *Ryder* (1928), *Ladies Almanack* (1928), *Nightwood* (1936) and the play *The Antiphon* (1958). Both *Ryder* (ostensibly characterized as a family chronicle) and *Ladies Almanack* (a bold body of texts produced by and about the lesbian society that flourished in Paris between the turn of the century and World War II) put the term *novel* to the test due to their incorporation of nearly every literary mode and tradition since the Holy Scriptures. Both make way for *Nightwood*, a Modernist novel with a preface by T.S. Eliot. *The Antiphon* represents Djuna's only verse play and echoes the theme of martyrdom of womankind at the hands of men. A biography of Barnes by Andrew Field appeared after Djuna's death in 1983, offering new material on her life but little critical discussion of her works. May Lynn Broe's *Silence and Power* (1991), a collection of edited essays on Barnes' work, and Phillip Herring's *Djuna*, an extensive biographical overture whose last chapter is titled "Madame Vitriol: The Century's Most Famous Unknown," also stimulated subsequent scholarly interest as they continued to focus on her novel *Nightwood* and the intimate details of Djuna's private life.

Nevertheless, Barnes has remained a problematic presence for scholars. From the time she began as a cub reporter with the Brooklyn *Daily Eagle* in 1912 until her contract ran out with *Theatre Guild* magazine in 1931, Barnes published thirty-nine poems, more than eighteen one-act plays, and more than 110 newspaper and magazine essays for *Vanity Fair*, *Charm*, *McCall's*, the *New Yorker*, and *New York's World, Press, and Morning Telegraph* (Broe 9). This early journalism is often viewed by her critics as the "seedbed for her greatest novel, *Nightwood*" and



not so much on its own merits (Levine 27). Deborah Parson's Introduction to her book *Djuna*

*Barnes*, notes

Barnes's focus on perversion and abnormality often led early reviewers to regard her work as imitative of the decadence of the 1890's. By contrast the support and respect she received from Ford Madox Ford and T.S. Eliot have placed her firmly within the dominant formalist account of literary 'high' modernism. (4)

Neither critical perspective—Barnes as journalist or Barnes as a modernist—satisfactorily characterizes Barnes' work however, and both subordinate the combination of her mystical imagery and rich satire that makes her writing so compelling.

Barnes' writings also reflect the complex and heterogeneous social, historical and aesthetic contexts of Modernism, and gain criticism for both adhering to and transforming the tenants of Modernism. For a brief period, Barnes was to become one of the foremost writers of modern literary Paris; the critic Edwin Muir described her work as "the only prose by a living writer which can be compared with that of Joyce" (150). However, as Donna Gerstenberger notes in her article "Modern (Post) Modern: Djuna Barnes among the Others," Barnes' work can also be read as sufficiently unclassifiable as to challenge the practice of periodization entirely:

Barnes clearly shares time an space with those we call our British American modernist writers, a definition that has been increasingly generalized with the circulation of descriptive notions of postmodernism . . . Barnes does not share a clear adherence to some central tenets of modernism, even given modernism's shifting critical constructions . . . [and] it seems that the work [Barnes] left is mostly unmarked by the outlines of periods and movements and provides a good case for healthy skepticism about the whole project of codifying. (33)

Likewise Barnes' contemporaries described her work as obscure and tended to both draw from her work and be dismissive of it at once. Biographer Andrew Field notes a prominent case in point of this dismissal by Faulkner, who actually cites Barnes, unfavorably, in *The Town and Intruder in the Dust*, even though his own prose style "manifestly owes her more than a little" (20). Barnes' most notable critics responded variably to her novel *Nightwood*, Alfred Kazin indifferently reviewed *Nightwood* in *The New York Times* calling one of Barnes' passages "bad poetry and certainly reckless prose . . . [b]ut Miss Barnes does build a full-blooded characterization on the

basis of many others like it, and is her achievement” (98) while Clifton Fadiman championed the novel in *The New Yorker* (Field 20). The greatest enthusiast for *Nightwood* was Dylan Thomas, who wrote “It isn’t a la-de-dah prose poem, because it’s about what some very real human people feel, think, and do. It’s *Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes, and one of the three great prose books written by a woman” (qtd. in Field 21). Though these types of critiques of *Nightwood* should be sufficient proof of the place of Barnes in modern literature, she has always stood far off to the side of Joyce, Proust, and Kafka with her strange and unique themes and her manipulation of language.

Unlike *Nightwood*, Barnes’ early stunt journalism was enjoyed by a wide audience and brought her enough financial success to sustain what she considered her more serious works of fiction. By 1917 Barnes was earning five thousand dollars a year as a free-lance writer and received commissions from the *New Yorker* and *McCall’s*. Rebecca Loncraine’s article “Voix-de-Ville: Djuna Barnes’s Stunt Journalism, Harry Houdini and the Birth of Cinema,” reminds us that the nineteenth-century journalist is sometimes considered an example of that urban wonderer and wanderer, the *flâneur*. This term, writes Loncraine, “encompasses two contradictory versions of the journalist: the public-minded investigator, and the money-grubbing, selfish sensationalist. Both ideas assume that the journalist can choose the kinds of stories to cover” (157). Loncraine continues

Barnes’s stunt journalism suggests that the woman reporter is largely excluded from both of these versions of the popular journalist . . . In stunt articles the journalist becomes the protagonist of a story, and the majority of stunt stories were written by women . . . Stunt stories provided women with the opportunity to write articles outside the women’s pages. Barnes entered the employment of the *New York World* within this context of a tradition of women stunt reporters. (158).

Barnes’ stunt stories for Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* included articles such as “My Sisters and I at a New York Prizefight” (which features Barnes’ visit to a boxing match, as one woman among a throng of new female boxing fans), “How it Feels to be Forcibly Fed,” (where she undergoes the brutality of force-feeding in the light of the force-feeding of hunger-striking

imprisoned British suffragettes), and “My Adventures Being Rescued” (a recount of her experiences as a “dummy” body for a school of firefighters (Loncraine 156). Nancy Levine also suggests that if much of Barnes’ early newspaper work is indeed “subjective journalism rather than straight reportage, it was mainly because there was a demand for that work, at which she, above others, excelled” (32). However, between 1916 and 1918 Barnes’ flow of articles diminished considerably, and her career as a reporter was over when she refused to divulge to her editor the facts about a rape case she had investigated (33). Barnes’ early journalism and interviews exemplify a personal and artistic as well as professional integrity that foreground her future fictions and set the page for genre bending.

Though Barnes’ major works are noted for their poetic language and symbolic tone, her interviews serve as the best example of Barnes’ resistance to one particular literary format over another. Mary Broe agrees that for Barnes, “the interview format was flawed” and that the “asymmetrical power distribution emphasized all that was predatory and distortive” (10). As with the play and short story genres, Barnes set about subverting the interview format and exposing the interviewer’s power as she shaped the whole exchange into a highly evaluative art. For the most part, Barnes’ story lines follow the journalistic outline of *who, what, when, how, and where*. Her characters are flat caricatures and stereotypes imbued with the psychological and sociological notions of her day. There is, however, within the interviews, an inevitability that her characters are forced to act—and Barnes seems particularly interested in a character’s action; though, paradoxically, her commentary and interjections about those characters are often deterministic. Along these lines, Douglas Messerli, in his introduction to Barnes’ *Smoke and other Early Stories* comments:

Barnes’ persistent intrusions and her oracular statements can be understood as drawing character away from the particular as an attempt to generalize the specific. And, ultimately, such a conjunction of techniques directs her tales toward a revelation of moral values. (19)

Though Messerli is commenting on the narrative style of Barnes’ short stories, I argue that Barnes similarly creates a space of “revelation” outside the formal interview format which allows

her subjects to have distinct voices. In Barnes' interviews, these voices are not overpowered by that of the interviewer— and, further, reveal a “reality” about the interviewee that the reading audience never expects. Moreover, much like the characters in her short stories, novels and plays, Barnes' interviewees are the main characters, and she is the subtle narrator— thus blurring the line between the real person and the imagined character. This blurring of boundaries qualifies Barnes' work to serve as an object of inquiry into the limitations of genre, which over the past thirty years has come to be understood in a myriad of ways.

Bakhtin's speech genre theory allows for an understanding of how the multi-generic works of Djuna Barnes can be both understood and wholly overlooked as literary works which both resist the limitations of genre while participating in multiple generic categories at once.<sup>3</sup> This process of bending generic constraints functions most vividly in Barnes' interviews. The following excerpt from Barnes' interview with Mary Harris (“Mother”) Jones written in 1915 provides a prototypical example of how Barnes incorporates herself as a narrative character in dialogue with Harris:

*I asked her what had started her in this work that she had taken as her life task. It was an unfortunate remark. She arose abruptly to her feet, she swept her arms wide in a passionate gesture. It was the universal gesture of the powerful person, it proclaimed disgust and contempt.*

"And you ask me that?" she said. "That is the question that forty million other fools before you have asked. How does thunder or lightning have its start? How does the world start— it has its birth in the struggle. I was born of the struggle and the torment and the pain. A child of the wheel, a brat of the cogs, a woman of the dust. For even iron has its dust, and when a

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<sup>3</sup> Besides Bahktin, Derrida provides a complementary theoretical backdrop against which we can interpret Barnes' dynamic embrace of the inevitability of generic categorization. In the “Law of Genre,” Derrida acknowledges, “as soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind” (221). Derrida suggests, “every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging” (230). For Derrida, “participation” is a key word and thus genres are not *a priori* categories that classify, clarify, or even structure texts, but rather are continuously reconstituted through textual performance (Threadgold 115). Though Derrida's account furthers the argument for multi-generic texts, it differs from Bahktin's because it does not account for the role of primary utterances which lead into secondary texts.

laborer sweats his sweat of blood and weeps his tears of blood a remedy is thrust upon the world. I am remedy.

"And so how can you ask, and how can I tell when I began to care? You ask because very probably none of you know— you haven't seen our lives as we live them out there in Colorado. We can tell you and you can listen but no tragedy was ever comprehended that went from the mouth to the ear. It has to pass from the eye to the soul."

*She had grasped the back of the chair with her hand and now she let go with a violence that sent her forward.*

"Listen," she said. "You are a young woman, you have never seen the beginning or the ending of creation. I've borne sons; I've seen death. I've just come from the inside of the world. I've been on the under side of the watch. I've been breast-to-breast with the ticks, and I know."

*Silence came into the room upon this last word and I did not speak. I found suddenly that no word in my world was the right word to say—knew that neither a "tch-tch" of the tongue nor an "Isn't that dreadful?" of the mouth would mean anything.*

*I just looked at her and she looked back at me, and about her mouth there had settled that subtle something that is a contemplation that has left the mind for the lips. Her mouth is no longer a mouth; it is a sermon.<sup>4</sup>*

Within this excerpt, Barnes creates a caricature of Mother Jones through her use of language and imagery and narrates rather than interrogates her interviewee. Instead of writing within the clear distinctions of a formulaic 'question and answer' format, Barnes inserts her voice and transforms a primary ('vernacular') speech genre into a secondary ('literary') speech genre which, in Barnes' writing of it, becomes transformative. In Bakhtin's distinction of primary and secondary speech genres, he points out that during the process of formation of these secondary (or complex) speech genres— novels, drama, primarily written— the primary (simple) speech genres which take form in unmediated speech communication are absorbed, digested and stabilized into writing. As such, "these primary genres are altered and assume a special character when they enter complex ones" and lose their immediate relation to actual reality and to the real utterances of others (62). Accordingly, Barnes takes the words of Mother Jones and sets them in relief using vivid imagery and biblical metaphors, absorbing, if not her words, the essence of them.

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<sup>4</sup> This excerpt is reprinted in Brandel and McDaniel ("Interviews and Illustrations by and with Barnes: Selections from an Interview with Mary Harris ("Mother") Jones, 7 February 1915").

Barnes' interviews blur two distinct lines. The first line-blurring occurs between a primary speech genre, which Bakhtin loosely defines as "rejoinders in everyday dialogue" and "unmediated speech communion" (i.e. conversation) and that of a secondary speech genre, which he refers to as "organized cultural communication that is artistic, scientific, sociopolitical, and so on" (i.e. novels, short stories) (62). Because the form of a journalistic interview is written, it is classified by Bakhtin's definition as a secondary speech genre— since it passes from the conversational to the written. Additionally, the interview has a generally organized structure with formal, sometimes pre-planned questions and somewhat predictable aims (e.g. to expose the "reality" of its interviewee.) In Barnes' interviews, however, there are no outlined questions, and the interview moves along a trajectory which is more like that of narrative dialogue than that of the more traditional, dyadic question-and-answer exchange. In Barnes' celebrity interviews, she chooses to expose her subjects using a disjointed conversational style that disrupts the traditional question-and-answer format of an interview, thus blurring the limits of primary and secondary speech genres while destabilizing her audience's expectations— and disrupting genre itself as a static form<sup>5</sup>.

The second line Barnes blurs is that between two (parallel) secondary speech genres, the interview and fiction. As Bakhtin notes that using features from one genre within another is both disruptive and transformative:

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<sup>5</sup> Critical approaches to this "static form" involve the relation of the text to both historical trends and readers' expectations. First, neoclassical approaches to genre seek to outline a static transhistorical system of archetypes in order to describe literary texts and their relations and to use these "transhistorical categories (such as epic, lyric, and dramatic) to classify and clarify literary texts." Structuralist approaches, by contrast, are more concerned with how socio-historically localized genres "shape specific literary actions, identifications, and representations" (Bawarshi and Reiff 18). Thus, in a Structuralist approach, how we make sense of a particular discourse and the event it represents points to the significance of genre in structuring literary events; this approach acknowledges the power of genre to shape textual interpretation and production. In Barnes it is clear that the interviews cannot be placed into "transhistorical" categories— nor do they resemble a recognizable form that could "shape" an understanding of the text.

In the majority of cases, these are various types of conversational-dialogical genres . . . [w]here there is style there is genre. The transfer of style from one genre to another not only alters the way a style sounds, under conditions of a genre unnatural to it, but violates or renews the given genre. (66)

Fiction, like the interview, is a highly organized and complex discursive form which presupposes specific audience expectations in terms of its characters and form. Not only do Barnes' celebrity interviews not follow the expected trajectories of neither fictional nor of non-fictional (interview) form, the interview participants also reoccur as characters in her fiction. This blurring of secondary genres disrupts the broader audience of Barnes' works and suggests further that neither of the secondary speech genres— interview nor fiction— reflects any reality except that which the author has constructed. In these early pieces, Barnes is "flexing muscles she will use when she creates the characters of *Nightwood*" as well as the characters who will appear in her short stories (Levine 29).

The practical necessities of Barnes' everyday existence— as well as her literary inspirations— shaped Barnes' writing life. Djuna Barnes began her newspaperman (her term) career in 1913. At the beginning of her career, Barnes was known to do nearly anything for a story—including staging sensationalistic events for public consumption, such as undergoing force tube feeding and writing interviews with celebrities. Scattered among the big names she interviewed—Diamond Jim Brady the financier, Lillian Russell the precursor to Marilyn Monroe, Billy Sunday the baseball player-turned-evangelist, David Belasco the playwright, Florence Ziegfeld of Ziegfeld follies, and James Joyce—were also these oddities: an Italian actress billed as the "Wild Aguglia," who kept monkeys in her dressing room and an "Indian" snake charmer named "Roshanara." The celebrity interviews of Barnes's early journalistic career both foreground the problem of the woman who observes (the interviewer) and the writer/journalist who blurs the line between simple speech genres and complex speech genres. This disruption, which recasts the (silent) producer of its text (the author) into a speaking character, bridges the thematic gap between Barnes' journalism and her works of fiction.

As such, Barnes' interview subjects bear a striking resemblance to several of her fictional characters, which, in turn brings to the forefront the question of genre blurring. In an interview with the retired Lillian Russell, Barnes prefaces the interview with a vivid physical description of Russell as she enters the room in which Barnes is waiting:

Six bounteous ruffles gird her at the knees, white duchess laces enhance the splendor of her throat, the odor of Eastern incense lies heavy on everything . . . I could just make her out in the dim room, sitting over there in the corner upon a wide chair like a throne, just make-out the high-piled drift of gold that is her hair, the still beautiful eyes, only half-claimed from youth, the smiling mouth that has expressed all that can live within a black satin gown. (*Interviews* 49-50)

Barnes' introductory narrative commentary belies her authorial intention to expose and challenge what the public constructs as celebrity— and with one sentence confronts readers with the realities and limitations of what they have constructed as celebrity, “all that can live within a black satin gown” (50). Throughout the interview, Barnes asks Russell questions about her political opinions, her French poodle, her modern dress, and her recipes until finally Russell thanks Barnes:

What for? Barnes inquires.  
For not having asked me a single question about the way I preserve my good looks. Everyone always asks that first. For a few minutes you have let me forget my face, and I want to forget it. I get very tired of it—very, very tired of it. I hate a mirror sometimes. What after all is there great in being beautiful? To be a great woman, a great person, one must have suffered, even as our women in Panama have suffered, as our women have suffered in great crisis. What have I done that I should be famous—nothing but powdered a bit gently the cheeks that God gave me and smoothed the hair that I was born with, laughed and proven a faultless set of teeth. Any grinning idol, well painted, can do as well, but the real women, the big women, are those who toil and never write of it, those who labor and never cry of it, those who forfeit all and never seek reward. (Barnes, *Interviews* 55-56)

In Russell's response, the audience is confronted with an alternative view of the famous, beautiful actress/icon and perhaps called to question its own public perceptions of her. What's more, Russell's response is elicited based on a question that was not asked, in contrast to the ones that were. This moment (“For not having asked”) is a vivid example of Barnes blurring the lines between the traditional, more complex secondary speech genre and that of the simple, more



conversational speech genre. Barnes does not ask formal questions—instead she allows Russell to respond as if they were merely in dialogue with only one another. Barnes' insertion of her narrative voice reminds readers of her status (and accomplishes a sardonic rhetorical move) as she concludes the interview with imagery describing Russell as a “wise-mouthed sun god” rolling “sightless eyes toward the peacock feathers,” further suggesting the irony of the persona Russell has tried to create throughout the interview (Barnes, *Smoke* 56).

The character of Lillian Russell that Barnes constructs in this interview also informs one of Barnes' characters who emerges with similar physical attributes and attitudes about her beauty in the short story “The Terrible Peacock.” In this piece the reader first encounters the Peacock, a glamorous mystery woman, when a news reporter by the name of Garvey is assigned to find out more about this “Somebody” (*Smoke* 25). Upon first seeing her in the streets of Brooklyn, Barnes narrates Garvey's view and describes the woman as having hair that

[e]ven in the darkness . . . gleamed a full eight inches above her forehead, piled higher than any hair Garvey had ever seen. The moon shone through it like butter through mosquito netting. Her neck was long and white, her lips were redder than her hair, and her green eyes, with the close-fitting, silken dress, that undulated like troubled, weed-filled water as she moved, completed the whole daring creation. The powers that be had gone in for poster effects when they made the Peacock. (27)

This description echoes Barnes' characterization of Russell. Further along in the short story, we learn more about the character, the “Terrible Peacock:” she is someone who uses her sexual appeal to lure men to a tearoom that would otherwise be losing business without the Peacock “drumming up patronage” (*Smoke* 34). The Peacock narrative easily parallels Russell's personal story—one that, ironically, was not divulged in the interview— wherein Russell was successfully performing in England but was wooed back to the United States by a \$20,000 salary to appear at New York City's Casino, which was otherwise suffering for a lack of performers (48). Both the language and situational context that are used to describe both women, The Terrible Peacock and Lillian Russell, suggest the blurring of one complex speech genre into another. Further, at the end of the Russell interview, the reference that Barnes makes to the peacock's tail

feathers—one of the most ostentatiously adored creatures on earth who uses its brilliant iridescent plumage to entice a mate—is an additional, deliberate characterization of (both) women as creatures who attract their men with nothing more than awe-inspiring beauty. Here, the caricatured interviewee (Russell) transforms into literary character (“The Terrible Peacock”) without regard from which particular “sphere of communication” either one came (Bakhtin 60).

Another example of this blending of communication spheres comes from Barnes’ interview with the famous baseball player-turned-evangelist Billy Sunday. Throughout the interview with Barnes, Sunday sidesteps questions and uses the rhetorical device of analogy to assert his views in the discussion that Barnes engages. When Barnes inquires of Sunday, “What has the war [World War I] done to religion?” Sunday responds

Through ammunition one attains immunity; through battle one locates the knees. The eyes do not necessarily need to be acquainted with the Bible; the knees must be acquainted with the floor. The jackknife is most dangerous when half-open; the man is a direct contradiction, a man is harmless only when crouching. (*Interviews* 110)

This monologue response marks the style of answer Sunday gives for most of the interview—he speaks with a preacher’s cadence that relies on copious imagery and Biblical allusions. However, toward the end of the interview, Barnes is privy to the preparations Sunday makes before addressing a large crowd of God’s lambs. As such, she notes the stark contrast between the Billy Sunday in front of an audience of one and the Billy Sunday in front of an audience of thousands. Barnes comments that at this moment of transition she “had forgotten that he had only met [her] eyes once during the entire morning” and that at the call of his preaching duty he “wakes suddenly into a man so entirely different” (*Interviews* 118).

As with most of the interviews Barnes wrote, it is difficult to discern how much of the analogies printed in the interview with Sunday were actually Sunday’s own productions and how much of his response was the cadenced language of Barnes’ own Methodist background. The monologues of Dr. Mathew O’Conner, one of the main characters in Barnes’ novel *Nightwood*, reflect Sunday’s verbal dexterity. The balanced repetition of the preacher’s language (“through

ammunition . . . through battle”) is echoed in the doctor’s speech to Nora, the heroine of the *Nightwood*, who is mourning the death of her love: “we all go down in battle, but we all go home . . . my war brought me many things; let yours bring you as much. Life is not to be told, call it as loud as you like, it will not tell itself” (129). Earlier in this scene, Nora asks Dr. O’Connor “What am I to do?” to which he replies, “[m]ake birds’ nests with your teeth; that would be better” (127). This exchange makes little sense out of context, yet even explaining the context would not likely aid a reader’s interpretation—except to reveal that the name of the character that Nora is referring to is Robin. This attack by analogy is a rhetorical strategy of both Sunday, however constructed, and Barnes’ *Nightwood* character.

Dr. O’Conner’s role throughout the novel is also similar to that of the preacher man: he leads the wandering souls, like Nora, the heroine of the novel and supposedly a representation of Barnes through the world of the bohemian. Again, we see Barnes blur the lines between primary and secondary speech genres in her exhibition of language and her characterization of O’Conner as reticent to that of the preacher man, Billy Sunday. Dr. O’Conner’s relationship to the characters in the novel is not all that different than the relationship between that of the inquirer and the one who makes the inquiry. Dr. O’Conner’s character, much like that of Sunday’s, and Barnes’ own characterization of herself, relies on an inquiring audience. Barnes uses an “interview” with a real person to extract what is meant to be the “reality” of him—via the verbal conversationalist style of interview. Barnes pulls from this constructed reality the very same “reality” she means to reflect in her novel character, Dr. O’Conner. Fact and fiction make friendly bedfellows once again in the house of Barnes, with no regard for the traditional categorical assumptions of genre.

Barnes clearly relies on her interviews to fill the pages of her fiction with extraordinary characters that are, in their portrayal, a bit off-balance. This practice is not so much different from other authors who draw from realistic situations to craft fictional characters; however, Barnes’ practice is unique—she uses the rhetorical move of genre-blurring to destabilize the expectations of her interview readers from their notions of celebrity, and, in turn, creates fictional characters

from this destabilized secondary speech genre. Her interviews are crafted neither as interviews with formalized questions and answers, nor as other complex secondary speech genres (such as novel or short story). Furthermore, because they are written, they surpass the primary simple speech genres of conversation that Bakhtin outlines. Readers are left to reinterpret what category—fact or fiction—the interviews fall into, just as they are left to reinterpret their categorical perceptions of celebrities.

Because Barnes' works require a high level of reader engagement in order to determine the category she may be working in, it is arguable that this high investment is also one of the reasons Barnes is not canonized in any literary anthologies nor communication studies texts. Readers (and anthology editors) expect and promote categories and clear lines between their genres so as to group them properly for public consumption.<sup>6</sup> Though Barnes makes these categorical distinctions difficult for her audiences to code, her articles and interviews deserve to be read not only for their historical and biographical interest, but also for the insights a reader gains into the subversive genre techniques of novels such as *Nightwood* and Barnes' other short stories. It is within the same historical contexts that T.S. Elliot and others supported Barnes' art—an art that encompassed the broader cultural malaise of modernity and created grotesque characters symbolic of all outcasts from an intolerable society. One of Barnes' biographers, Phillip Herring, attempts to explain how one might interpret Barnes' style:

In the early 1920s, James Joyce gave Barnes advice that he gave to other aspiring writers: in writing, the extraordinary event was the subject of journalism, while the commonplace was for literature. But from the first, Barnes was attracted to the extraordinary, regardless of

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<sup>6</sup> Both Reader Response and Cultural Studies approaches to genre follow Derrida in presenting a complex relationship between texts and genre. Reader Response approaches recognize genre as a performance of the reader (literary critic) upon a text wherein the same text can be subject to different genre explanations without compromising its integrity. Such an approach acknowledges genre's constitutive power as a tool involved in literary consumption instead of literary production (Bawarshi and Reiff 23). With this in mind, because Barnes carefully welds her words into no obvious generic form it is arguable that she was more interested in the production of art rather than the public consumption of it.

genre. She ignored Joyce's advice, then, in her literary work, forged his technique to a different shape. (77)

This blurring of genre might also explain, at least in part, why Djuna's journalism was successful and her fiction was less so. Her novel *Nightwood*, for example, considered to be her masterpiece, was rejected six times for publication before T.S. Eliot convinced Faber and Faber of London to print it. Once published, it received mixed critical reception because of its representation of a world void of morality. To a certain extent, Barnes invented all of the people about whom she wrote, and seemed to trust her audience to rely on its powers of discrimination to interpret the blurred lines of fact and fiction. This is an art lost on a category-driven literature and, further, complicates the function of genre altogether (i.e. for both publishers and readers).<sup>7</sup>

Barnes' exhibition of this blurred line also reflects her own personal resistance to generic categorization—a resistance that perhaps cost her the very category of literary celebrity (yet another category that she would not have mourned). In *The Rise of Corporate Publishing and its Effects on Authorship in Early Twentieth-Century America*, Kim Becnel writes

Much to her sorrow, Barnes was forced to participate in the transformation of her personal material into public artifacts, a process which she resisted and resented. She was in such a desperate financial situation in 1972 that she decided to sell some of her papers to McKeldin Library at the University of Maryland. The sale was a traumatic experience for Barnes, who felt that it was one significant step toward forfeiting control of her identity . . . Barnes had to sell those papers because she needed the money, and this is a circumstance many highbrow authors found themselves in. Although they may not have been transformed into celebrities with their images used to mass market books to the public, they did, in some sense, lose control over their work and their identities when their unpublished works and papers found their way to public institutions. Since highbrow authors often did not make a great deal of money on their books, but did gain solid artistic reputations, they often found themselves needing to trade some of that cultural capital for money (44).

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<sup>7</sup> It is within the scope of the Cultural Studies approach to genre that begins to give researchers a framework from which they can examine the institutions, both literary and social, that regulate habits of reading via publishing companies, marketing agencies, and schools. These institutions constitute what John Frow has called “reading regimes” (140). According to Frow, “it is through our learning of the structure of reading regimes that we acquire the background knowledges, and the knowledge of rules of use and relevance, that allow us to respond appropriately to different generic contexts” (140). These rules of “use and relevance” help shape how readers identify, select, and value literary texts, thus linking genres to social institutions (Bawarshi and Reiff 25).

Djuna's life mirrored her work. Just as she resisted publishing houses in favor of private patrons, her writing resisted the boundaries of literary genre in favor of art.

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