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Response: Abstract The past two decades of contemporary British drama have been marked by an upsurge of interest in the exploration of the ethics, aesthetics and politics of authorship along with the relational dynamics among the author, the work and audience/reader. One of the latest and paradigmatic examples of this trend is Ella Hickson's The Writer (2018), a play informed by a queer feminist sensibility and distinguished by its aesthetics, its form, and its political critique of theatre as an institute underpinned by phallogocentric and heteronormative discourses. Accordingly, the essay will demonstrate how the queering of gender and genre are indelibly intertwined in the play. The Writer queers conventional theatrical form not only by deconstructing its "economy" and "forms" of hegemonic subjectivity, expression, and desire; but also by incorporating a surreal scene and various metatheatrical moments – to develop a more evental (or feminine) form characterised by formal transgression, abstraction, and excess. The Writer queers gender by pondering the dynamics of an evental love-sex relationship between the female writer (the protagonist) and her female lover along with a surreal experience of intimacy between the writer and mythical Semele. To effectively ponder the thematic and formal preoccupations of The Writer, this essay develops a nuanced conceptual framework whose premises include Irigaray's "the female imaginary", Deleuze's "becoming-other", Cixous's "écriture feminine", Lyotard's "the figural" and Derrida's "chora". Key Words: Ella Hickson's The Wrier, Ethics and Aesthetics of Becoming-Other, Queering Gender and Genre, Female Imaginary and Feminine Writing

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Crossing the Mirror into Maternal Waters: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Becoming-other in Ella Hickson's *The Writer* (2018**[Q1]**)**[Q2]**

Recto running head : ENGLISH STUDIES

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Introduction: The Return of the Dead (Female) Author to "Transform the Real"

The dramatist has evinced far more resistance to succumbing to and more resilience in surviving the "death sentence" apparently derived from the oft misconstrued poststructuralist tenet of "the death of the author" consonantly articulated by Michel Foucault[1] and Roland Barthes.[2] As is common knowledge by now, Foucault and Barthes's argument concerns the death of a "certain" author, to wit, the author posited, variously by the Romantic and Modernist traditions, as an autonomous figure and the metaphysical origin of the work, existing in a transcendent relation to the world of the work and its networks of truth and meaning. More broadly, however, even the death of this "certain author" has been argued to be less applicable to the realm/genre of theatre/drama primarily given the aesthetic dynamics prevalent in drama/theatre where the authorial text constitutes only one, however pivotal, element in the process of the production/performance and in which not only the director and the actors, but a whole host of other dramaturgical, scenographic, and technical components play a determining role in the hermeneutic process of reception.[3]

The figure of the author has been making a resounding return within this post-death context in contemporary Anglo-American drama to raise new questions. This return, however, is far from being driven by a relapse into a pre-poststructuralist conception of the author. As Silvija Jestrovic, in her recent and extended engagement with the subtleties of the figure of the author as it features in a number of contemporary British and European dramatic/theatrical productions, argues: "the author re-emerges at the other end as a performative figure"[4] or "as a fluid, slippery category, easy perhaps to kill off, but impossible to put to rest once and for all."[5] Her ensuing observation corroborates the abovementioned economy and aesthetics of the authorial figure in the context of drama/theatre: "the theatricality and performativity of the author did not first become apparent with the proclamation of the author's death but instead, would have been present from birth."[6] She further elaborates on the ontological intricacies of the authorial role in the processes of production and reception thus: "This performativity is what enables the intersection of text and embodiment, creating a space within which to understand 'the death of the author' as an interplay of presence and absence."[7] Add to this an author – in the case of Ella Hickson's *The Writer* (2018) – who appears as a character in his/her play thereby further complicating the ontological boundaries between fiction and reality and authorial presence and absence.

Ranging from a suicidal author/character who utters "I have no desire for death no suicide ever had watch me vanish watch me vanish watch me watch me"[8] to an author/character who challenges the audience/reader by averring his simultaneous absence–presence and appearance-disappearance thus: "Nobody was hurt. / Anyway. / I apologise. / Anyway. / I continue. / The writing is leaving the writer. / The death of the author. / Tim leaves the auditorium."[9] , the past two decades of contemporary Anglo-American drama have been marked by an upsurge of interest in the exploration of the ethics, aesthetics , and politics of authorship as well as the relational dynamics among the author, the work , and the audience/reader in an over-determined social-historical context. In "Exit the Author", Dan Rebellato argues that, for contemporary playwrights, "not just writing but authorship itself has become a key area of theatrical experimentation."[10] As he further elaborates: "authorship has become a ground for aesthetic and ethical questioning … as a way of profoundly investigating theatrical meaning and our capacity for fundamental political change."[11] The most emblematic examples in this trend are Brian Friel's *Performances* (2003), Tim Crouch's *The Author* (2009), David Ives's *Venus in Fur* (2010), Howard Barker's *Hurts Given and Received* (2010) and *Blok/Eko* (2011), and Paula Vogel's *Indecent* (2015). Among the notable common threads running through these plays are: art as event, the evental dynamics of creating and responding to (dramatic) art involving the questions of pain, desire and knowledge; the limits of responsibility in a globalised context; complicities between authority and authorship; spectacle-based and spectatorial facets of state power, spectators' intellectual and affective engagements, and, finally, a prevailing attention to the function of art as a platform where power and identity are negotiated. In addition, these plays exploit self-reflexivity as a metadramatic strategy to open to critical scrutiny the traditions and forms of dramatic art along with the epistemic and ethical predilections sedimented in them.

One of the latest and paradigmatic examples of this trend is Ella Hickson's *The Writer* (2018). What distinguishes Hickson's play from the foregoing is that her political critique of theatre as an institute is informed by a queer feminist sensibility

which emanates from its acute consciousness of the theatre's phallogocentric and heteronormative nature.[12] Territoriality, territorialisation and deterritorialization constitute the fulcrum around which Hickson's *The Writer* revolves, hence the salient role of *space* as the pivotal thematic and dramatic (kinaesthetic) element in the play. *The Writer* takes us through a concatenation of symbolically intertwined "spaces": theatre as a cultural institute, home as an eco-pathological space, spaces of desire, the mythical-fantasmatic space of intimacy with the "other" and encounter with evental forces, and, ultimately, the symbolic space of art as a vector traversed with potential war, revolution, desire, and either reproduction or transformation of the status quo at personal and social-political levels. One of the determining imbrications between these spaces is their being steeped in power relations in varying ways. At stake in *The Writer*'s exploration of the intricacies of power is, notably, its dual focus on the libidinal economy *and* political economy of art, desire, intimacy, and interpersonal relationships (including the ones between individuals of different gender identities and sexual orientation) in conjunction with the entanglements between them. Crucially, the force that steers the possibility of change in such entrenched territorial machines and configurations[13] is not merely a direct gender-political critique through critical commentary cast in a realist or naturalist mode. The possibility of change is rather propelled by the force of, what I would call, "becoming-other" – to wit, starting primarily from one's own subjectivity (at the levels of form, language and desire) as means and condition of possibility of~~and~~ taking up arms against a sea of oppressive disciplinary apparatuses~~ only secondarily~~. I am appropriating the term "becoming-other" from Gilles Deleuze who defines it as an evental process established via "diversity, multiplicity [and] the destruction of identity" (Deleuze, 1995, p. 44. Deleuze, G. (1995) *Negotiations 1972-1990*, trans. M. Joughin. New York: Columbia University Press.). According to Deleuze, all "becomings belong to geography, they are orientations, directions, entries and exits" (1987, p. 2. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). When considered specifically in relation to the categories of sex and gender, becoming-other designates a condition in which "there are as many sexes as there are terms in symbiosis, as many differences as elements contributing to a process of contagion. We know that many beings pass between a man and a woman; they come from different worlds, are borne on the wind, form rhizomes around roots; they cannot be understood in terms of production, only in terms of becoming" (Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 242.

An award-winning playwright, Hickson can be identified as part of that strand in contemporary generation of feminist playwrights – alongside d~~D~~ebbie t~~T~~ucker g~~G~~reen, Adura Onashile, Sophie Wu, Elinor Cook, Alice Birch, and Nina Segal – interested in representing the female experience and concerns on the stage in an experimental theatrical form. Hickson's plays also evince an acute historical consciousness with almost all her plays taking contemporary issues as their focal point. These include petro-politics, dementia, suicide, drugs, identity crisis, schizoid fragmentation, and the fate and nature of love and desire in contemporary culture. In addition, the issues of gender identity and politics along with the ethics of interpersonal relationships and intimacy form the recurrent preoccupations of her theatre. A fleeting survey of her plays demonstrates Hickson's feminist and socialist leanings and concerns as concomitant aesthetic-ethic stances. As such, she reveals strong affinities with Caryl Churchill (and her socialist feminism) whose influence Hickson has explicitly acknowledged in an interview where she has referred to Churchill as a "god[dess]."[14] Notably, Benjamin Poore, in a recent essay, has~~ acutely~~ demonstrated how the stylistic, discursive, and aesthetic features informing some of~~ Hickson's works~~ Hickson's work (particularly *Oil*) manifest affinities and resonances with those informing George Bernard Shaw's discussion plays and Caryl Churchill's avant-garde plays.[15] And finally, Alireza Fakhrkonandeh has extensively demonstrated that the formal and aesthetic features informing some of Hickson's more recent works (particularly *Oil*) evince striking affinities with Brecht's epic style, involving her use of epigraphs, historical-narrative breaks and gaps, and parabolic images in the form of non-linear narrative and interscenes.[16] As a sweeping thematic survey of her plays – including *Eight* (2008), *Boys* (2012), *Oil* (2016), and *Anna* (2019) – shows, Hickson's drama seeks to dramatise psychologically and affectively complex situations with an emphasis on the significance of the liminal, visceral, experiential, and immediate through a nuanced theatrical style and aesthetics. *The Writer* is a~~nother~~ prominent case in point where the main character, a female dramatist, seeks to overcome the phallogocentric constraints of the theatre as an institution and a discursive force while re-discovering her nature of desire and gender identity.

The Writer opened at the Almeida Theatre in 2018 in a production directed by Blanche McIntyre. The debut mostly received positive press response and critical acclaim. In 2020, the play was scheduled for its Australian premiere under Jessica Arthur's direction at the Roslyn Packer Theatre, Sidney which was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic.*The Writer* follows the eponymous, unnamed Writer – hence her symbolic status – and her unswerving endeavour to subvert the status quo of the theatre through the creation/production of a play that she hopes will influence "the world to change shape."[17] The play navigates its way through three different institutionalised and disciplined spaces – the theatre space, the domestic

space and the mythical space – each of which compels Writer to compromise her existential, aesthetic and psychological terms in conformity with its distinct gender economics and politics, which eventually come to inform her aesthetic expression. Central to the play's thematics is the nature of authorship or writing as a trope used throughout feminist~~-oriented~~ works as a symbol of expression, autonomy and non-procreative creativity (one which is not tethered to a patriarchal-phallic economy). The act of creative writing is depicted in the play as a space in which the pivotal issues besetting women come to a critical fore.

Structured in five scenes, Hickson's play unveils the phallogocentric hegemony Writer is beset with as a normative-prescriptive force during the process of writing a play, before staging can even take place – where the play is supposed to become a vector for the female voice. Scene One constitutes a heated exchange between the young female Writer and the middle-aged male Director over the current state of theatre, immediately ensued by an audience Q&A session, illuminating to the reader/audience that the opening half of the scene had been a moment of metatheatricality providing an excerpt of Writer's play. During the Q&A, Hickson demonstrates the unbalanced gendered power dynamics within the theatre institute in the exchange between Writer and Director. Scene Two depicts Writer in a heterosexual relationship~~ which is~~ marked by a sexual as well as intellectual discontent on her part. Contrary to the preceding and following scenes, Scene Three is a non-naturalistic, surreal, one where Hickson crafts a sanctuary from phallogocentric/heteronormative norms and conventions by locating Writer in a feminine quasi-primal-tribal space where she engages in her first female-female sexual dynamics. Scene Four returns to the discussion between Writer and Director, this time regarding form, where the latter argues that the former's play needs to be finished, adhering to a specific (rather commercialised) style that he believes will appeal to audiences. Mirroring the second scene, Scene Five presents a sexual anti-climax in the relationship between Writer and her Girlfriend symbolised by a prosthetic "pegging penis."

With its main character describing the theatre establishment in contemporary Britain as "inherently patriarchal,"[18] *The Writer* can be considered as an at once retrospective and prospective dramatic-aesthetic manifesto and apologia. Retrospectively, as Hickson herself confirms, *The Writer* is, among other things, an attempt to expound the stringent institutional-discursive challenges and aesthetic travails *Oil* underwent at various stages of its creation, production/staging, and reception. *Oil* is Hickson's first smash hit that has received mixed critical response from drama/theatre scholars and reviewers. *Oil* also received a considerable amount of scathing criticism levelled primarily at the text – to wit, the perceived quality of the written script and its craftsmanship in various respects – rather than the production. Tacitly presuming *Oil* as a first tentative attempt at an epic-scale play by a writer of mainly juvenilia, some reviewers pushed their critiques to an extreme, giving Hickson advice~~s~~ for stylistic-formal refinement.[19]

Regardless of the fact that almost all the mainstream reviewers (reminiscent of the director and theatre manager in Hickson's *The Writer*) pertain to what can be described as the critical orthodoxy, their critical response can, more generally, be considered~~ as~~ symptomatic of the critical bias in the UK press against – particularly feminine – formal experimentation or theatrical adventurism.[20] By the same token, in their assessment of the rendition of form in Hickson's work, these critics fail on two fundamental counts. Primarily, they fail to recall the old lesson unanimously adopted by almost all dramatic and critical trends: that of the immanent relation between not only form and content, but also form and the social-historical and political-economic reality – the symbolic order – configuring and informing it. Second, the reviewers fall short of discerning the form as a result of the consciously experimental (episodic, non-naturalistic, magic-realist) aesthetics of the play, rather than being a failed attempt to reach the ideal of realistic form. As regards the first reason for their failure, although I~~we~~ have delved into various facets of form and its relation with the content and thematic preoccupations of *The Writer* extensively below, suffice it here to establish the justifiability of the disjunctive form in *Oil* and *The Writer* by referring to the argument propounded by Adorno: "The basic levels of experience that motivate art are related to those of the objective world from which they recoil. The unresolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form."[21] Second, the symptomatic response of the reviewers can be accounted for through a reference to the idea of "emergent unreadability"[22] proposed by Timothy Clark. More specifically, the aforementioned critics/reviewers fail to discern the "emergent" nature of Ella Hickson's work, both at the level of form and content, that is, its tackling a multi-scalar and historically ecologically urgent issues – oil as well as new forms of aesthetic, ethic and erotic experimentation. Clark propounds this emergent unreadability concept in his detailed analysis of a lyric poem by Gary Snyder.[23] Reminiscent of Derrida's characterisation of an evental literary/artistic work as one which subverts and transcends the existing aesthetic categories and critical vocabulary/language, Clark defines the concept of the "emergent" thus: "An 'emergent' event is one whose novelty meets no available, matching or adequate discourse in representation, discussion or judgement."[24] Here, Clark is predicating his definition on the philosophical explanation provided by Simon Prosser's elaboration on the term. The latter articulates it more technically thus: "when a physical system of sufficient complexity is in a suitable configuration new properties 'emerge' in a way that could not have been predicted from physical laws governing less complex or

differently configured systems."[25]

In his aforementioned essay, Poore applauds *Oil*'s Churchill-inspired "liquid dramaturgy" against mainstream reviewers that, in Poore's account, epitomise "the critical bias in the UK press … against formal experimentation."[26] Consequently, *The Writer* can be interpreted as a meta-dramatic reflection and inter-textual allusion to the reviews heaped on *Oil* as well as to the gender politics and hegemonic aesthetics that inform the critical establishment in the UK's mainstream platforms and art institutes. Prospectively, *The Writer* marks a juncture in Hickson's work, particularly as regards a turn towards an invariably gender-oriented social-cultural-political consciousness and a gender-inflected aesthetics. More strictly, in *The Writer* and works written afterwards (particularly *Anna*), there appears a critically self-conscious and conspicuous link between aesthetic and (gender) politics, gender and style, as well as aesthetic and ethics. Gender thus comes to constitute not merely a political or social facet of subjectivity, but to assume ~~an~~ ontological and existential dimensions as well. In *The Writer*, by the same token, the process of writing and creating new aesthetic forms demands an existential-ethical and psychosomatic process of becoming-other, self-transcendence and proximity with an immemorial and trans-historical matriarch/spirit (Semele).

The crux of *The Writer* is Writer's frustration in constructing and producing a play that she values and in the inexorable need to justify her choices – at thematic, narrative, aesthetic, and linguistic levels – in her attempt to parry Director's correction/censorship forays into her text by way of discursive argument. Through the conflict between Writer and Director, Hickson's narrative displays the subjective nature of aesthetic judgement, that is, how the normative values based on which a piece of art – or in this case, a play – may be considered "good" or well-structured. It also illuminates the economics and politics of mainstream playwriting, more specifically the combined influence of phallogocentric, heteronormative and capitalist values on the writing process. Hickson unabashedly engages with the struggle of a female artist against the commodification of her art and the re-forming of the female voice into a "normal" and commercially successful discourse. In doing so, she critiques the naturalist-realist dramatic form and self-consciously adapts the form of her play not only to the existential and psychological dynamics of the character but also to the aesthetic and ethical demands of a narrative in which Writer undergoes *becoming-other* at aesthetic, ethical, and existential levels. As such, the play turns away from the "dead" theatre towards a surrealist, or rather magic realist mode, or an abstract form that "affect[s] change."[27] Such an abstraction of form – which renders the play partially "an abstract machine"[28] suitable for its revolutionary purposes – is emblematically illustrated through Hickson's depictions of a utopian fantasy manifested in Scene Three. As Deleuze and Guattari state: "The diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality."[29]

Hickson's formal disruption of a well-made, realistic texture and narrative structure – by including a surreal scene in conjunction with the metatheatrical moments – runs parallel with a queer-feminist questioning of the phallogocentric/heteronormative gender politics pervading the theatrical space. In other words, the formal deconstruction of Scene Three is driven as much by a gendered ontological and existential dynamics as by a post-structuralist commitment to challenge the normative binarism underpinning the established tastes, forms, and conventions of playwriting. Hickson deconstructs traditional dramatic forms as a means of revealing how a queer-feminine psychodynamics demands an aesthetic form which transcends the hegemonic ideologies and epistemologies of the realistic/naturalistic structure and Aristotelian narrative form.

Hickson's *The Writer*, however, has not received any extended critical attention yet - which makes~~. Accordingly,~~ this essay ~~is~~ the first sustained critical exploration of this play. Accordingly, in what follows, this essay will undertake a fourfold task in its analysis of the central thematics, psychodynamics and aesthetics of Hickson's *The Writer*. First, I~~we~~ will explore the metatheatrical features and references in Scenes One and Four by considering the theatrical institute through a juxtaposition of Lacan's psychoanalytical accounts of the notion of phallus (as regards subjectivity, socio-symbolic order and eroticism) and Luce Irigaray's concept of "the female imaginary". In so doing, I~~we~~ will demonstrate how Writer (both the play and character) seeks to critique the phallogocentric bias pervading social institutions (including the theatre) at aesthetic, ethical and existential-psychological levels. Second, I~~we~~ will probe Scene Three in which form and gender are shown to be inextricably intertwined through a relevant cluster of concepts, including Deleuze's "becoming-other" (event), Lyotard's "the figural" and Kristeva's "semiotic chora". Thirdly, I~~we~~ will assess Hickson's subversion of the realistic principle of mimesis in Scene Three by deploying Irigaray's argument that a feminine language has the capacity to provide women with a power to subvert gender roles. And finally, I~~we~~ will investigate the questions of interpersonal ethics and relational dynamics in *The Writer* by delving into the implications of two antithetical modes of relationship in Scenes Two and Five: ~~(1)~~ one driven by an economy of intimacy and openness to the infinite otherness and différance of the other[30] and ~~(2)~~ the other driven by a "capitalist" (or phallic) economy of dialectical unity, comprehension, and recognition. This exploration will be predicated

on the concepts of proximity and intimacy variously elaborated by Levinas and Irigaray. This line of inquiry will ultimately reveal how the pivotal intertwinement between form, subjectivity, and desire constitutes the crux of Hickson's *The Writer* and how all three of them undergo an evental "queering" process throughout the play.

"Formed Through Instinct": The Phallogocentric and the Feminine Imaginary

A pivotal preoccupation of Hickson's *The Writer* is the tension arising from the intricate relationship between the theatre space – which, as Aston argues, is marked by a "history of male domination"[31] – and gender politics. This tension is immediately established in Scene One where the characters, simply named Young Woman and Older Man, have a confrontation over the state of contemporary theatre. When Young Woman first enters the "*bare stage, post-show*,"[32] she does so by emerging from the audience, rather than from off-stage, which immediately collapses the typical formal conventions of theatre, prefiguring the radical transformation of aesthetics and form to transpire later in the play. As she "*stands and walks on from the audience, takes the space, there's something sacred. She breathes. Lights come up. Slowly. It's hers, for a moment*."[33] Significantly, Hickson's description of the stage as "*something sacred*" suggests that there is a bond between the space of the theatre stage and the divine. This is a point explored by Pendzik who asserts that "the origins of all dramatic forms are connected to religion", not only through the practice of dramatising religious stories but also through "the spatial contiguity to temples and shrines"[34] in the design of the stages themselves. In a similar vein, Howard Barker, in *Death, the One and the Art of Theatre*, explicitly underscores the sacred nature of theatre and theatrical space: "the art of theatre is a sacred art … The actor entering the art of theatre must know it might cost him his life."[35] Indeed, as will be demonstrated below, the stage has the potential to become a space where a female writer can undergo existential ly transformative experience thereby pushing the normative values of the theatre and its modes of subjectivity to their limits.

The possibility of turning the theatrical space into an evental or sacred space, however, is hindered by vicissitudes from the outset, instantiated by the moment when Young Woman is interrupted by Older Man who, materialising "*[f]rom the back of the auditorium … like he owns the space*," tells her that "she shouldn't be on stage" [36] and asks her what she thought about the play: "did you enjoy the show?"[37] When he invites her back onstage, back into the sacred space – though this time on *his* terms, not hers – she launches into a series of scathing monologues. Irigaray's contention that "women's submission by and to a culture that oppresses them, uses them, makes of them a medium of exchange, with very little profit to them"[38] can shed light on the issue at stake here. Young Woman criticises the play's representation of women which depicts them in "tight skirt[s] leaning arse-front over a desk for twenty minutes, for no fucking reason."[39] This, she argues, is "[b]ecause it's all part of the same way of seeing … it's 'sexy' women and 'smart' men … it's old guys saying some fascinating fucking things about time and history." [40] The intense discussion of the gendered politics of theatrical space and aesthetics continues with Young Woman contending that women are "being made to present"[41] and judged on their on-stage appearances whereas male actors are extolled for their acting. Pointing out the objectification and commodification of the female body in the theatrical space, she remarks that the audience questions "how fuckable is she?," [42] reducing the female presence on stage to a passive object of erotic appeal. She proceeds to foreground the ontological and social implications of such an ostensibly innocuous convention by exclaiming how she, as a woman, is meant to relate to this:

> We're sick, you know that? We're sick to the back fucking teeth of hearing from old men, with flaky skin, at weddings, patting the back of your hand gently as they explain what they consider to be the truths of the world, like I share the same truths, like his truth and my truth are anywhere near the fucking same when it's you that gets to make the world and me that's got to live in it.[43]

She suggests that instead of this, which appeases the "couple of hundred middle-class folk", "we should be screaming, we should be speaking in tongues, in a fit, in a fucking – rage, naked, raging, arms open, screaming at the sky."[44] In response to this, Older Man suggests that she write a play: "I think you should write something for this theatre. I think what you have to say is interesting and we should put it on stage." [45] But she harbours cynicism towards the reception and social-cultural efficacy of such an endeavour: "people would laugh and give zero fucks and carry on doing exactly what they were doing before."[46] Older Man disagrees and states that her anger is "zeitgeisty,"[47] and will prove popular (and profitable).

In alerting Young Woman~~Writer~~ (Writer) to how the motif of female anger is "zeitgeisty," Director (Older Man) is unwittingly revealing how even the affective–cognitive states (and aesthetic forms featuring them) that are originally intended to be revolutionary are always already assimilated by the capitalist system and utilised as reproducible commodities ~~used~~ to boost sales and reproduce the means and relations of production. More importantly, Director's point cautions Young Woman~~Writer~~ against an unconscious assimilation of what she is trying to counter in her feminist endeavours: affective states, and ethical attitudes (driven by blind anger and violence) that antagonise the Other (be it the male or even the hegemonic norms) thereby ending up not only reproducing the opposed norms by embodying them, but

thereby dissolving the "differénce" between the normative and its alternatives. But working within the parameters of the capitalist and phallogocentric system, as Writer will come to find out, does little to liberate women. As Crispin remarks, "in order to gain entry [into this system], [women] will have to exhibit the characteristics of the patriarchs who built it,"[48] which would simply endorse a reproduction of the masculine imaginary.

Soon, the debate between Young Woman and Older Man is revealed to be a moment of metatheatricality representing a scene from Writer's play. It is significant that Hickson chooses to begin her play with a meta-theatrical encounter where an "impassioned" criticism of the theatrical institute and its failure to help "the world to change shape"[49] occupies the centre stage. Writer perceives the theatre space to be inherently phallogocentric.[50] Her dispute with Director about form, as it relates to gender, readily evokes the dichotomy between logocentrism and excess. As Grosz writes, "'woman' represents a resistance, a locus of excess within certain logocentric/phallocentric texts, functioning as a point upon which the text turns upon itself." [51] Hickson's play consistently turns upon itself, with scenes revealing that the preceding scene was part of the play-within-a-play. This meta-theatrical aesthetics – as modus operandi of the play – enables Writer to comment on the space in which her play is supposed to be embedded in a bid to deconstruct the phallogocentric and heteronormative structures underpinning both contemporary social institutions and conventional dramatic forms. It is indeed through experimenting with form and excess that Writer seeks to compose an alternative for the expression/representation of the feminine and the queer.

In Scene Four, Hickson presents a discussion between Writer and Director concerning the form of Writer's play which Director strives to acclimate to a naturalist style with a proper ending (hence spatial boundaries) that he believes will appeal to audiences. Finding his authority and aesthetic rationality threatened by Writer's attempts to break "form", Director seeks to edit Writer's play on the grounds that it feels unfinished and it "desperately needs rigour and logic."[52] In accentuating that the piece does not conform to the "formal logic" of theatre, Director is implicitly invoking the Aristotelian logic and realist-naturalist discourses on time, space, language, and character where primacy is accorded to clarity and consistency as ultimate evaluative principles. However, perceiving this as a violation, Writer defies Director's intervention and probes for herself the possibility of presenting a queer femininity on the stage. How she achieves this will be explained in the ensuing section's scrutiny of Scene Three.

One useful way of considering the debate between Writer and Director is through Luce Irigaray's theorisation of sexual difference where she draws attention to the erasure of the feminine through a phallic economy that designates those with a phallus as "one" and those without as "none." [53] Elsewhere, Irigaray states that "all existing theory, all thought, all language ... [is] monopolized by men and men alone."[54] This renders women unaccounted for and deprives them of a language of their own to express themselves, particularly regarding their sexual desire, which "has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters." [55] To counter this, she suggests that an attempt be made "to (re)discover a possible space for the feminine imaginary"[56] which, as Whitford explains, is "marked by the morphology of the female body, and characterised by plurality, non-linearity, [and a] fluid identity."[57] Unlike the male imaginary, which is preoccupied with the singularity of the phallus, the female imaginary is characterised by the multiplicity of the feminine. This is articulated through the imagery of lips, given that, "morphologically, [woman] has two mouths and two pairs of lips."[58] This metaphor accounts for both woman's linguistic and sexual expression.[59]

In the play, the feminine language of Writer's work along with the reasons underlying its choice elude Director who labels it "a mess" and "self-indulgent."[60] Writer argues that "its structure was formed through instinct. It might not have been logically [structured]."[61] This conversation adumbrates the coercion within (male) director – (female) writer relationships, wherein the "formal" editing is intended to "re-produce" a (hetero-)-normative, intelligible, and commercially successful artwork even if it would not ultimately be reflective of the evental experience of its female writer. By including this conversation, Hickson opens up for re-visioning the gendered hegemonic constraints embedded in the theatrical institute. Writer asks Director "does it scare you that the future might speak a language that you can't understand?,"[62] challenging his inherent sense of security in the theatre as a (hetero-)normative institution. By asking this question, Writer intimates the possibility of dismantling androcentric stage productions as well as of a more inclusive theatrical environment. Hickson achieves this potential by simply having her play presented on stage, allowing her new feminine language to be performed for an audience. She demonstrates that once the audiences are liberated from capitalist and phallogocentric epistemic structures and languages, the feminine experiences become audible. To Irigaray, a phallic economy lacks the semiotic and symbolic means of expressing *the feminine* due to its logics of identity, clarity, and unity/uniformity. [63] Hence, it is only by creating a new "figural" language that feminine experiences of "infinite becoming" can be adequately presented.[64] However, whilst the recognition of Irigaray's ontological concept of sexual difference can be potentially liberating, her feminist theory of language reaches a limit in her insistence on "miming/mimicry" as an effective conduit through which

women can subvert phallogocentrism and express themselves.[65] As we will see below, it is by pursuing a formal-linguistic path beyond feminine miming/mimicry that Hickson's Writer reaches a true deconstruction of the phallogocentric discourse/form through its evental-figural form for the depiction of the sacred experience of communal being, carnal-spiritual proximity, and "becoming-other".

Queering the Gender, Queering the Genre: Writer's Becoming-Other in the Chora

Scene Three contrasts the rest of the play, disrupting the linear structure of the other four scenes. Here, Hickson strives to stage the queer feminine experience, which she claims cannot exist in heteronormative phallocentric contexts, so she creates a space where the female body exists outside of its relationship with the phallus. In this new space, she focuses on feminine experience of singularity, becoming-other, and proximity with the Other by steering clear of all heteronormative structures and heterosexual relational dynamics. In Scene Three, the scene moves from what seems to be a health clinic to a spiritually naturistic space where Writer encounters the Theban princess Semele, a maternal figure recognised as the "other mother."[66] Semele is the one to guide Writer to the feminine space where she can gain an evental insight into her own bodily jouissance and explore her sexual identity. Hickson introduces Semele with "a mane of grey hair and a cowboy's stride."[67] Aged and with a cocky masculine walk, Semele exists in the liminal space between an older female and a strong heroic cowboy figure. She embodies Hickson's subversion of gender dynamics as she presents power in an unlikely figure who embodies the two ends of gender spectrum simultaneously. This Gaia figure leads Writer to a lake, where she must undertake a spiritual baptism by way of immersion and swimming to an island.[68] This existential rebirth through water is consonant with the fluidity of Hickson's form and signifies an evental resubjectivation outside the domain of the phallic economy and heteronormative gender politics, promising freedom and autonomy for Writer. The stage directions in this act attest to the aforementioned dynamics: "*What follows should be an attempt at staging female experience, the director should be aware of avoiding the inherently patriarchal nature of theatre*."[69] Hickson directly guides her prospective director into a staging not informed with voyeuristic dynamics and the politics of phallic gaze where agency and autonomy are attributed to the female body formerly fantasised as a passive object/commodity: "*Female characters should do – they are not having things done to them. Bodies are for action, not titillation or decoration. There should be no looking. The protagonist should own the. Space*."[70] As such, Hickson directly interpellates her audience into a position where they need to abandon their hegemonic gender politics of perception and relationality and adopt a non-heteronormative ethics of witnessing the feminine experience.

In the feminine space of Scene Three, the women who have created a new tribe feel unity and a sense of belonging that they were unable to find in the patriarchal society they have come from. This new community, in which the feminine imaginary is allowed to exist in its full-fledged and unrestrained form, provides appropriate representation for the women it shelters. The dynamics of the naturistic space in which Hickson situates her Writer can be illuminated if we approach it through what Irigaray characterises as

> [t]hat "elsewhere" of feminine pleasure [which] can be found only at the price of crossing back through the mirror that subtends all speculation. … A playful crossing, and an unsettling one, which would allow woman to rediscover the place of her "self-affection."[71]

Once Writer "crosses" the lake and reaches the "other" side, she finds that the spatial boundaries are "conceived entirely by the architecture of [their] wanting,"[72] allowing for a unity-in-différance and evental "proximity" with both the nature and each other. Hickson also breaks the dramatic form in this scene whose diegetic (narrative) mode contrasts with the mimetic (dialogue) mode of the other scenes in the play, a generic change corresponding to the gender change towards queerness. Her avoidance of a conventional dramatic structure corresponds to her physical exclusion of Director and his hegemonic gaze from Scene Three. Crucially, the play reveals the subtlety of the phallogocentric discourse and its heteronormative dynamics by accentuating the prevailing role of "hegemony" in fashioning Writer's work, rather than featuring a Director who crudely imposes his views as authoritative. And it is on the basis of such a hegemonic common sense that Director later refers condescendingly to Scene Three as the "tribal shit in the middle of [the play]."[73]

Writer's subversion of both gender dynamics and naturalistic dramatic form in Scene Three can best be accounted for in terms of the Deleuzian concept of "becoming-other" which, as will be argued here, constitutes the crux of Hickson's play. Deleuze argues that

> [t]o become is not to attain a form (identification, imitation, Mimesis) but to find the zone of proximity, indiscernibility, or indifferentiation where one can no longer be distinguished from a woman, an animal, or a molecule – neither imprecise nor general, but unforeseen and non-preexistent, singularized out of a population rather than determined in a form.[74]

In the female tribe of Scene Three, Writer gains her singularity by experiencing proximity and intimacy in a feminine plurality. In this "zone of proximity", Writer feels herself part of something greater, she feels that she belongs: "Others come. From out the forest. A tribe. Wide-eyed and seeking, we who have felt too long lost – here, tonight. Once alone, now found. The joy, at last, in belonging is … "[75] Once Writer swims across the lake, she recognises the carnal-spiritual "proximity" between herself and her mate. It is through her own body that she knows how to please her mate sexually, to "delightfully negotiate … sameness on"[76] her mate's body. Hickson presents the audience with the *becoming* of Writer through the act of sex, a moment of intimacy and mutual self-disclosure, which puts her and her mate in a state of "only being."[77] Writer further describes the effects of this evental experience on her "being" in terms of the multiplicity of identities she feels to embody: "We are both mothers and both children and somehow it isn't odd, both daughters, both brothers, both friends, both lovers."[78] This strikingly resonates with Deleuze's argument that becoming-other is characterised by "diversity, multiplicity [and] the destruction of identity."[79] In their multiplicity, the women in the tribe become a species that assumes the~~a~~ position of the "people-to-come"~~at the forefront of humankind~~.

Such a prehistoric temporality preceding Western modernity, capitalist (phallic) economy or institutionalised (linear-teleological) time~~patriarchy~~ coupled with the mythical feminine space are pivotal to the process of becoming-other. Deleuze characterises "becoming" as distinct from history (understood as a phallogocentric construct with a linear-chronological dynamics): "Becoming isn't part of history; history amounts only [*sic*] the set of preconditions, however recent, that one leaves behind in order to 'become', that is, to create something new."[80] In order to create event or revolution in the phallogocentric norms and narratives of culture, theatre and history, Writer needs to tackle them at the level of aesthetics (form) and relational ethics. That is, if phallogocentric account of history is linear-progressive and teleological, conforming to a cause–effect ontology and dynamics (where Logos/Phallus/Spirit is the cause and Womb/Ground/Female is the effect or the recipient of the cause) and if the art/form that adopts a mimetic approach to such a history is reproductive and representational, then~~ the~~ Writer subverts such a metaphysics by opting for the non-representational, non-linear, and non-heteronormative. The emergence of such an abstract form through a figural and form-bending writing in the middle of an otherwise-realistic play betokens a constitutive moment in the process of Writer's *becoming-other*. As Deleuze remarks:

> [w]riting is inseparable from becoming: in writing, one becomes-woman, becomes-animal or vegetable, becomes-molecule to the point of becoming-imperceptible. … Becoming does not move in the other direction, and one does not become Man, insofar as man presents himself as a dominant form of expression that claims to impose itself on all matter, whereas woman, animal, or molecule always has a component of flight that escapes its own formalization.[81]

Accordingly, Writer's disruption of the logical linearity of time coupled with her use of the non-subliminal deterritorialised space in Scene Three is a move as much towards a compositional form that would surpass historicism and realism as towards a feminine existence.

As attested by Writer's subordination of "looking" to a sense of con-tactility and proximal intimacy between the self and the other in the feminine space of Scene Three, sense of vision, both as a sensory perception and a metaphor for an "objective-objectifying" means of the re-cognition of the other, is not only primarily associated with a certain gender (masculinity) and disciplinary power: phallogocentrism and its institutional arms. Vision is, by the same token, also decried – particularly in the forms of ocularcentrism and voyeurism – as a means of phallic pleasure, seizure, fixation, and objectification. Irigaray defines ocularcentrism as the privileging or "the predominance of the visual" in Western culture which falls short of characterising female pleasure:

> Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking, and her entry into the dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation. While her body finds itself thus eroticized, and called to a double movement of exhibition and of chaste retreat in order to stimulate the drives of the "subject," her sexual organ represents the horror of nothing to see.[82]

In line with this elaboration, Hickson's protagonist looks askance at the "gaze" and valorises the sense of tactility and proximity in erotic, affective, and aesthetic respects. At the beginning of the play, she draws attention to the phallic gaze pervading theatre and its realist-naturalist, commercialised aesthetics and objectifying the female body on the stage:

> When you watched it on stage, she just looked humiliated. She was owning it the best she could, she committed like hell but a couple of hundred people staring at your tits, you can't be master of that. It's looking that does it.[83]

Similarly, in Scene Two, ocularcentrism and phallogocentrism are shown to be concomitant through Boyfriend's fetishisation of Writer's coat – in the visual mode of perception – when he asks her to keep it on during their sexual

intercourse: "It makes you look like a grown-up. I feel like I'm fucking a grown-up."[84] In an attempt to subvert the phallic gaze embodied by Director in the theatre space and Boyfriend in the domestic space, Writer constructs a mythical feminine space in Scene Three where looking is subordinate to touching. The stage directions are vividly telling: '*Bodies are for action, not titillation or decoration. There should be no looking. The protagonist should own the space*.'[85] Strikingly, in contrast with the sex in Scene Two, Writer describes sex in the private feminine space of Scene Three with an abundance of tactile imagery:

> She and I – my swimming mate. Dig our fingers into damp mud. … With very little ceremony and even less fuss, we fuck. She knows what she's up to more than I do but whilst new, I'm not a novice. It turns out, of course, that you do know what you're doing. You've done it to yourself a thousand times … But when we sleep. she and I, occasionally her head is on my chest and my arm is slung around her. Later, my bigness, is curled into the small of her back, the backs of her knees, my arms seeking harbour in the "couldn't-give-a-fuck-ness" of her being very much asleep.[86]

In *The Writer*, we can thus argue, the *phallic/phallogocentric gaze* is depicted in a way that can be described as an "assertoric gaze" whereas the feminine (non-phallic) gaze features as an "aletheic gaze" verging on being intimate and haptic, rather than impersonal and objective. Levin characterises "assertoric gaze" as "the propositional looking" – which he associates with "the correspondence theory of truth, with truth as correctness," thus explaining how such an approach "essentially tends to see from only one perspective, one and only one position."[87] On this basis, Levin identifies the "assertoric gaze" as "tend[ing] to be narrow, dogmatic, intolerant, rigid, fixed, inflexible, unmoved"; attributes that render it "essentially exclusionary."[88] Deriving his premise from Heidegger's postulation of truth as "aletheia", Levin associates the "aletheic gaze" with "the hermeneutic theory of truth, with truth as 'unconcealment'" thus characterising it with the "tendency to see from a multiplicity of perspectives: with an awareness of contextuality, of field and horizon, of situational complexity, and with a corresponding openness to the possibility of different positions."[89] The "alethetic gaze," in contrast to the assertoric, is defined as "pluralistic, democratic: it tends to be inclusive, but in a way that does not deny or suppress the differences". Significantly, he then adds, "the gaze that is moved aletheically is a gaze that cares."[90]

Accordingly, contrary to the distance evoked by the "assertoric gaze" (associated in the play with the males: Director~~the director~~, Boyfriend~~the boyfriend~~, but also with Writer herself particularly in the scene with her girlfriend), the touch denotes proximity and connection between the self and the other. As Irigaray argues, "touch binds and unbinds two others in a flesh that is still and always untouched by mastery."[91] The touch, in this respect, implies as much the collapse of hierarchies as an intimate relationship. In the play, Writer describes the sex with her partner as a moment of equality and mutual self-disclosure: "For the first time in my life I feel like I'm in bed with an ally. … Not the semi-devastation that follows sex with men, the land-grab, the Blitzkrieg, the small strange impulse to cry. With her it was an aggregation."[92] What ruins this blissful moment is the arrival of "a tourist … with binoculars held to his eyes"[93] who seems to have been peeping at the tribe from a nearby hill, hence a voyeuristic, reifying, and assertoric gaze. Writer expresses her feeling of discomfort in the presence of this man:

> I am being watched but I don't know where from. I can feel it. The experience is acute. … I am, once again, resoundingly mortal. Looked at. Patted down. This strange cage so much more visible for having spent some deific time without it.[94]

It turns out that the man is Director reading the latest draft of Writer's play as the following scene brings the two together for a conversation on the unconventional form and language of the foregoing scene.

What renders the form of Scene Three so poetic and unconventional, apart from its prose style, is its juxtaposition of picture (visual-figural language) with~~and~~ text (discursive and written language). Although the textual and the visual are expressive at different semantic, affective, and semiotic levels, Hickson uses them in conjunction on the same page to make them resonate with each other. Whilst the prose structure of the scene disrupts the conventional topographical configuration of dramatic works (dialogue sequence), the various images scattered between passages function to bridge the semantic gap as discursive language alone is not adequate for representing the complex evental psychodynamics of Writer's experience in Scene Three. This can best be accounted for in terms of Kristeva's distinction between the two modalities of language, the semiotic and the symbolic.[95] Kristeva designates these two modalities to be "inseparable within the signifying process" whose dialectical relationship is "constitutive of the subject."[96] She proceeds to place particular focus on the exclusivity of the semiotic (the layer of semiosis) without which the symbolic cannot be interpreted. The semiotic is a pre-symbolic modality which enables "the functioning of signifying practices such as art, poetry, and myth that are irreducible to the 'language' object."[97] Besides common modes of articulation that fall within the remit of "the symbolic register of meaning and reference", "there are nonverbal signifying systems that are constructed exclusively on the basis of the semiotic"[98] such

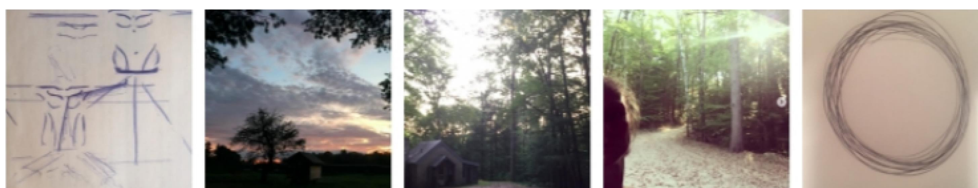
as music, pictures, and photographs. The unconventional multimodal nature of Scene Three of *The Writer* can thus be interpreted as Hickson's attempt at complementing the symbolic with the semiotic to do justice to the affective–cognitive dynamics of the process of evental becoming-other and proximity with the Other at stake in the scene.

The psycho-dynamics and poetics of this figural conjunction informing Scene Three can also be characterised in terms of Lyotardian figural mode/language. In *Discourse, Figure*, Lyotard defines the figural space as one that

> shuns sight and thought, … indicates itself laterally, fleetingly, within discourses and perceptions, as what disturbs them. It is desire's own space, what is at stake in the struggle that painters and poets tirelessly wage against the return of the Ego and text.[99]

The figural saves the sensory from the monotonous textuality of discourse and opens up a new space where artistic desire can flourish independently of the logical confines of discursive language. Lyotard explains: "the articulation of discourse with the figural is in every way attached to the fate of desire, even in artworks."[100] It should come as no surprise, then, that Hickson's protagonist complements her feminine form, which is characterised by desire and excess, with effective figurality by means of photographs of nature and hand-drawn sketches of physical boundaries entailing a feminine space (Figure 1). **[Q4]**

Figure 1. (Hickson, *The Writer*, 61–4; original images courtesy of Ella Hickson).



Pictures 1 to 5 together have been referred to as Figure 1. (Hickson, The Writer, 61–4; original images courtesy of Ella Hickson).

As is clearly discernible, the mode of visuality of the above pictures is quite different, some being quasi-referential, some schematic, some figural and some symbolic. In addition, the relation between them is far from referential and representational; instead, the mode and dynamics of the relation between them seem to have been intentionally kept opaque. The semiotic and figural features of the textual-visual in Scene Three seem to be "passed through, sometimes thwarted by, a pulsionnal drive, a search for intensity, a desire for power." [101] In this scene, to deploy Lyotard's terms, "signs are … no longer taken in their representative dimension. They do not even represent, they allow actions. They function like transformers that consume natural and social energies in order to produce affects of great intensity." [102] The images of nature seem to depict the mythic cultural space where Writer's long-pursued possibility of probing the nature of gender, desire, subjectivity, and relationality is realised. As discussed earlier, this moment of becoming for Writer is the most crucial eventful occasion in the play marked by inter-corporeal proximity, self-transcendence, and exposure to the other. The complex relational and evental dynamics of the scene render the affective-psychological intensities unrepresentable by means of a solely discursive language. Thus, the figural, which is the mode of writing/presenting the event,[103] is employed by Writer.

The meaning of the hand-drawn sketches is even more opaque. The image of the imperfect circle seems to indicate the spatial boundaries of the feminine experience in Scene Three. Writer says: "we draw a large chalk circle on the forest floor and stand inside it." [104] This manifold chalk circle can therefore be interpreted as an illustration of the "chora" which is defined by Kristeva as "a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated." [105] The chora stands for the totality of drives, as a space in which the propositional logic of language (realist account of language) and the axiomatic conception of space (Archimedean and Aristotelian: realism) are countered by the logic of drives (pulsions). She further argues that "one can situate the chora and, if necessary, lend it a topology, but one can never give it axiomatic form." [106] In line with this description, it is possible to consider Writer's "choratic" aesthetics – characterised by excess, instinct, transgression, dissolution of authorial identity – in a mode of collective unity-within-différance with other women/nature.

The act of drawing "choratic" circles features as an act of arch-writing or spacing (of the evental time) in the play. The function of such an act is in keeping with that of the "chora" which, according to Derrida, is "the spacing that is the condition of everything to take place, for everything to be inscribed."[107] This spacing engenders and preserves the "différance" that constitutes identity/singularity: "[t]his third kind, or genus, is neither the eternal eidos not its sensible copy,

but the place in which all those types are inscribed – chora."[108] These rather irregular and partially open circles (see the above pictures) – when drawn by the women around themselves and in-between – serve as the place of the event and the secret. As Derrida avers: "Everything secret is played out here [chora]."[109] This choratic space between the women is presented as at once salute and adieu, the place of possible hope and community where singularity of the individual is not sacrificed. For Derrida, the chora is "the distance of infinite alterity as singularity."[110] In the play, the womb-like space evoked by the fluid, amorphous, maternal circle represents the semiotic ushering out the symbolic, which is evidenced by Writer's statement: "A structure. A system. A scheme. For a new world: the whole earth changes its face."[111]

The two human-like images, on the other hand, are likely to represent Semele and Writer who are depicted in the play in a mother-daughter relationship: "They say her name's Semele. ... Out into the world to collect her daughters. ... We travel a thousand miles and Semele leaves me lake-side."[112] In the image, there is an emphasis on the figural-choratic facets of the body including the womb, breasts and belly, all entailing inter-corporeal proximity and intimacy. Another conspicuous feature of the image of the bodies is their fluid and blurred contours. Here, it seems that the anatomical is giving way to morphology. In the feminine space of Scene Three, Writer's re-subjectivation is carried out through this mythical maternal figure, Semele, who lends herself to the rebirth of her many daughters, each named Dionysus. The fact that Hickson's protagonist chooses the myth of the self-deconstructing God of Theatre for her subversion of traditional theatrical form and gender roles has a twofold function. First, as Lyotard argues,

> the mythical tale is eminently figural in that its form impacts not only religious discourse itself, but all the activities that are identified in the culture in question: it is the spoken trappings of a matricial figure, open to numerous other trappings (danced, woven, erected, painted).[113]

Through her revisionary re-writing of the Dionysian myth, Writer challenges the symbolic order of language that dictates the dominance of the phallus as the universal signifier. Lyotard's elaboration proceeds: "the function of the mythical tale is to allay the difference it narrates, to establish this difference in a system, that is, to transform difference into opposition."[114] Thus, Writer's mythopoetic account coupled with the mythic images in Scene Three contribute to her formal disruption of conventional naturalist theatre. Second, by re-writing the Dionysian myth, Writer becomes one of the god(desse)s of theatre who attempts to create an alternative space where the excessive, the instinctive, and the feminine can be effectively (re)presented. By declaring herself a goddess worthy of the theatre as a "sacred" space, Writer also seems to respond to Irigaray's apprehension that "the only diabolic thing about women is their lack of a God and the fact that, deprived of a God, they are forced to comply with models that do not match them."[115] Not only does Writer provide women with a god, but she makes each woman her own god, in the feminine plurality. Through the plurality of the goddesses, Hickson continues to tilt towards the feminine multiplicity to avoid phallocentrism.

When Semele leads Writer to the lake in Scene Three, Writer plunges into a lake symbolising a re-entrance into the womb, the maternal chora. Hickson's symbolic womb is a naturistic space and is entered by choice. This should not be perceived as a retrogressive movement or collapse into a psychotic state of primary narcissism but rather as a revolutionary move to a pre-symbolic, pre-phallic space where the structures for signifier/signification/language and drives/desire can be reorganised. The audience witnesses Writer's body physically mould itself in material-affective consistency with its surroundings as she rises above the water with "longer limbs" and is impressively tall, becoming "six feet or more."[116] Writer's morphological evolution – in inter-corporeal proximity with the Other and natural environment – attests to her existential and psychological becoming-other involving a change to her psychic-mnemonic traces, corporeal schemas, and affective–cognitive structures. This is a deconstructionist ~~(feminist)~~ or revisionary writing (in a feminist register) of the myth of gendered re-subjectivation through a mythical maternal or sisterly figure~~)~~ **[Q5]** illustrated by the evolutionary image of Writer emerging from the lake like a "prehistoric beast."[117] This scene can also be construed to allude to the creation of the first woman. Later in the scene, Writer mentions wasted prayers to God about changing her body when all she wants is thick skin so that she can "stamp on snakeheads."[118] Here, Hickson makes a reference to God's promise to Eve in Genesis 3:15, where Eve is told that she will give birth to the Messiah who will crush the head of the serpent.[119] However, Writer's rebirth manifests her desire to attain the power and ability to conquer the serpent herself, to be her own messiah. By submerging Writer into the chora and allowing for a rebirth, Hickson presents the audience with a woman that does not need a male god but rather a woman who becomes herself through carnal--spiritual intimacy with a feminine god.

The mythical space of Scene Three where Hickson offers a radical exploration of form and gender is not only a queer-feminist deconstruction of the phallogocentrically structured spaces we have been exposed to up to that point. It is also a transgressive treatment of hegemonic/heteronormative time. In line with its spatial symbolism variously discussed above, Scene Three can be read as a critical response to the ways in which the phallogocentric heteronormativity shapes and

disciplines relationships to social time. Kristeva considers the ontological and affective–cognitive essence of femininity independently of the universal temporality: "As for time, female subjectivity seems to offer it a specific concept of measurement that essentially retains repetition and eternity out of the many modalities that appear throughout the history of civilization."[120] In other words, the feminine time envisioned here is cyclical and monumental in contrast with the so-called logical structure of masculine time that entails linearity, progression , and finiteness determined by death. Kristeva's elaboration proceeds:

> On the one hand, this measure preserves cycles, gestation and the eternal return of biological rhythm that is similar to the rhythm of nature. Its predictability can be shocking, but its simultaneity with what is experienced as extra-subjective and cosmic time is a source of resplendent visions and unnamable jouissance. On the other hand, it preserves a solid temporality that is faultless and impenetrable, one that has so little to do with linear time that the very term "temporality" seems inappropriate.[121]

Here, Kristeva associates masculinity with linear time and femininity with mythic, cyclical time. To her, femininity signifies a return to "an archaic (mythic) memory as well as to the cyclical or monumental temporality of marginal movements."[122] Along the same line, Hickson situates Writer in a prehistoric temporality in Scene Three where the sequential logic of time is ruptured. The mythic-natural-cyclical time involved in the scene is a pre-modern, queer temporality which precedes and subversively persists in the reproductive capitalism, phallic economy of time , and the teleological history of modern man's question for the post-myth rationality of the Absolute Spirit.

Economies of Phallic and Non-Phallic Intimacy

Having considered Hickson's *formal event* as it relates to gender and generic dynamics, it is now crucial to throw into relief the unobtrusive contrast between the two modes of relationship – each with a distinct gender ethics and economics – in the play: one based on intimacy and one driven by phallus (and its fantasies) which includes phallic (whether homo or hetero) relations. Hickson's second and fifth scenes parallel each other, providing an interpersonal dynamic that stands in stark contrast to the form-bending feminism of Scene Three. Scene Two presents Writer in a heterosexual relationship where Boyfriend projects his desires onto her~~Writer~~ and prioritises their satisfaction over that of her~~Writer's~~ desires. Their fraught relationship characterised by a phallic economy and an unbalanced power dynamic culminates in a sexual intercourse in which Boyfriend objectifies and depersonalises Writer who "doesn't make much noise, he does – he comes – she doesn't."[123] Later, in Scene Three, Writer comments on this relationship as follows: "with men, I was always playing small to try and make sense of them having to mount you. But you're also having to be mother so you can manage the insecurity of their dick being in open air."[124] Scene Five, on the other hand, presents Writer in a homosexual relationship where she projects her desires onto Girlfriend and prioritises their satisfaction over fulfilling Girlfriend's desires. Their relationship, similarly, culminates in a sexual intercourse in which Writer dominates her partner by means of a pegging penis:

> [Writer] arranges herself [and] puts it in, … there's no connection, the concentration is all logistical and focused on the groin area … she's really going for it – there's something aggressive about it – she's in the zone, it's all her, the GIRLFRIEND has all but evaporated. The WRITER comes. The GIRLFRIEND does not.[125]

This illustrates a reproduction of the economic and ethical logics and dynamics of the interpersonal relationship in Scene Two – though in a different key.

Through these sexual acts, Hickson demonstrates that the phallocentric logic transcends gender identity and asserts itself as much within a homosexual female relationship as within a heterosexual one. In Scene Two, Hickson's protagonist goes to take her coat off, but is told to keep it on by Boyfriend who states: "I feel like I'm fucking a grown-up."[126] Once the sexual act has finished, Writer keeps her coat on because she is cold, yet Boyfriend tells her "it's weird to wear a coat inside."[127] For Boyfriend, once the sexual fantasy has been fulfilled, the coat (and Writer within it) ceases to be the object of desire. Then, Writer's decision to keep her coat on becomes an index of feminine agency. This dynamics is especially significant, as we gather that Writer has on occasion covered Boyfriend's rent.[128] The financial imbalance between the partners affects the power dynamics in their relationship, making Boyfriend feel emasculated and propelling him to seek control over Writer elsewhere, as displayed in their sexual intercourse. Rae remarks that "men … privilege a relationship where the phallus is affirmed and the relationship is structured as desire for what the Other does not have: the phallus."[129] Boyfriend desires Writer for the affirmation of his phallus and it is around this power dynamics that their relationship revolves.

Similarly, even though Writer's orgasm in Scene Five stems from clitoral stimulation in reality, the audience witnesses the orgasm as phallic for the sake of the fantasy, prosthesis, and adoption of heteronormative norms. This parallels the sexual

performance of Boyfriend in Scene Two, by only providing Writer with the gratification of an orgasm. Hickson evokes the same sense of failure in Writer's sexual (anti-)climax with her statement: "I feel like I've done something terrible."[130] Writer's reaction stems from her realisation that she has blindly reproduced the phallic economy of sexual intercourse where the source and goal of desire (and orgasm) remain exclusively bound to the phallus at the sacrifice of feminine psychosomatic structure and libidinal dynamics. Once penetrated by the penis, Girlfriend starts to submissively adapt herself and regresses into a "*kid-like*"[131] state. Writer, on the other hand, is evidently aware that an act of subordination through debasement has occurred and she is described as having "*a sort of guilty feeling*."[132] Having used the prosthetic penis, she realises the inherently unbalanced power dynamics in penetrative sex and ends up feeling horrified.

As evidenced by the above encounters, the problem with Writer's sexual relationships does not stem from a gender preference, but rather from the economics and ethics of her fantasy (and its concomitant mode of relationship). She requires that which her younger self already intimated, "to dismantle capitalism and overturn the patriarchy."[133] This sentiment constitutes the micro-politics of her projected desires which she finds in Scene Three. Consonant with Irigaray's argument that a return to "intimacy" and erotic pleasure will provide more scope for feminine experiences, Hickson displays sex in the private feminine space of Scene Three to reclaim "the female body as a site of pleasure for women."[134] Significantly, sex in this space does not leave Writer feeling bereft. On the contrary, she feels "more whole."[135] However, in Scenes Two and Five, the sex (both heterosexual and homosexual) leaves Writer feeling bereft and distressed. It is only in the "heteronomous" space, in the mode of the evental proximity[136] and manifested in the play in a feminine register, that sex is truly *evental* and fulfilling for Writer. The evental nature of the heteronomous relationship informing Scene Three resides not only in its freedom from an economy of identity and identification (dialectical synthesis and unification). It also arises from its instigation of a process of "differen/ciation" which both takes~~returns~~ the female subject (Writer) to a~~her~~ (virtual) stratum of her self -in-process and makes her transcend her egoistic limits through its relational intimacy with Semele and multiple Other females – a process of repetition of and with difference inscribed in the eternal return of the same event (process of becoming-other). As Deleuze explains: "Whereas differentiation determines the virtual content of the Idea as problem, differenciation expresses the actualization of this virtual and the constitution of solutions."[137]

Nevertheless, upon closer inspection, the relation between Writer and Semele, and more generally the clan of women in Scene Three, seems to be streaked with traces of a narcissistic economy and psychodynamics. This becomes more evident when we scrutinise Writer's own description of the dynamics of the relationship: "We are both mothers and both children and somehow it isn't odd, both daughters, both brothers, both friends, both lovers."[138] This passage apparently betokens an element or degree of mirroring (between individuals) to the point of identification or merging into one whole. One the other hand, however, the aforementioned dynamics of the relationship can be construed to involve an evental "multiplication" or "becoming-multiple" – rather than a totalising assimilation/identification – particularly attested by the fact that the multiplication of gender identities defies privileging the female/feminine. Overall, it is not quite clear whether this is a tacit critique of the economy and gender dynamics informing heteronormative relationships (particularly informing the Oedipal-familial relationships) or only those informed by a patriarchal structure. Hickson uses this difference to dramatize a deconstruction of~~comment on~~ the identitarian~~patriarchal~~ desires that shape psychosomatic structures~~sex~~ of the subject in a phallogocentric~~masculine~~ space, with or without a male presence, as in Scenes Two and Five.

One rewarding way to elucidate the contrast between the two forms of relationship in the play is through Levinas's definitions of proximity and intimacy and Irigaray's feminist~~ critical~~ adaptation of it, both of which share significant affinities. Levinas defines proximity as

> not a state, a repose, but, a restlessness, null site, outside of the place of rest … No site then, is ever sufficiently a proximity, like an embrace … Never close enough, proximity does not congeal into a structure … and reverts into a simple relation. Proximity, as the "closer and closer," becomes the subject.[139]

He visualises proximity as the subject's openness or exteriority to an ethical relationship with the other, characterised by an immediate intercorporeality giving rise to responsibility. It is quite crucial to note here that Levinas explains proximity in relation to femininity. He describes the feminine as a realm of selflessness for "one who does not conquer."[140] In the feminine aspect of human existence, Levinas argues, one does not inhabit or transcend the other, but cohabits with the other.[141] Thus, for Levinas, the feminine is inherently ethical and intimate.

In a similar vein, Irigaray describes intimacy as the defining value of the feminine space. An intimate relationship, for her, corresponds

> to the shared outpouring, to the loss of boundaries which takes place for both lovers when they cross the boundary of the skin into the mucous membranes of the body, leaving the circle which

> encloses my solitude to meet in a shared space, a shared breath, abandoning the relatively dry and precise outlines of each body's solid exterior to enter a fluid universe where the perception of being two persons…becomes indistinct.[142]

The loss of boundaries Irigaray refers to here is a state of being that is closely related to Levinas's concept "proximity". Elsewhere, Irigaray uses the term "nearness" to address a similar state in which all economies of selfhood and alterity lose their meaning: "Nearness so pronounced that it makes all discrimination of identity, and thus all forms of property, impossible.".[143] True intimacy takes place in such a space where the skins become "porous" and interpenetrate: "The internal and external horizon of my skin interpenetrating with yours wears away their edges, their limits, their solidity. Creating another space – outside any framework. An opening of openness."[144] Considering these assertions in the context of sexuality, an intimate/proximal sexual intercourse transpires as not an act of domination of one by the other, but an act of mutual self-disclosure.

The contrast between the respective psychodynamics, ethics, and economy informing the two modes of interpersonal relationships in *The Writer* can be effectively elaborated in the light of Levinas's and Irigaray's definitions of intimacy (or proximity). In Scene Three, Writer and her partner are equal from the beginning, and their relationship appears to be not transactional but consensual. Being "both" in their relationship instead of being each other's girlfriend signifies a sense of subjective autonomy and unity rather than a sense of being an object in someone's fantasmatic economy of desire. The heteronormative structure that is tied to social status and wealth is removed in Scene Three of the play, and the women are only connected as already self-overcome subjects that do not seek the approval of but complement one another. Writer states: "Post-coitally, with her, I feel more whole."[145] As is evident in this expression, Writer's first homosexual relationship seems to be one based on intimacy.

Writer's relationships in Scenes Two and Five, on the other hand, are driven by phallic fantasies and economy. In her relationship with Boyfriend in Scene Two, the sexual intercourse is a one-sided act in which he asserts his masculinity on her. The semiotic and spatial language of positions conveyed by the stage directions is telling:

> BOYFRIEND *leads her back onto/over the sofa and pushes her back until she's lying down on it [and] disappears from view…the way the sofa is arranged we can't see the sex – we can only see the person "on top" – whoever is beneath is obscured by the sofa back*.[146]

The fact that Writer disappears from view during this moment of sexual intimacy and is silent throughout is resonant with Irigaray's argument that during (hetero-)sexual intercourse "women are in a position of exclusion",[147] whereby their pleasure is not considered important, they are simply "an *envelope*, a *container*,"[148] "a receptacle that passively receives his *product*".[149] However, it is not just in heterosexual relationships that this occurs. Although Holmlund argues that, according to Irigaray, "the lesbian and lesbian relationships provide … an alternative to the hegemonic phallocentric model",[150] this ideal is not the case in the relationship between Writer and Girlfriend in Scene Five where a reproduction of the same phallic economy occurs. There, Writer takes on an active role and initiates sex with Girlfriend: *"[WRITER] picks her up – she's small – she wraps her legs around* … [and] *lies her back on the couch. … the sex is obscured from the audience – behind the sofa – we can hear it, but barely – but we can't see anything*".[151] At first, the couple seems harmoniously fluid and indistinct, with Writer attempting to give Girlfriend oral sex through her pants: *"WRITER noses and pushes, with hands and face – into the GIRLFRIEND's crotch*.. [GIRLFRIEND] *puts her hand on the WRITER's head. Pulls the WRITER up to face height and kisses her*".[152] Their experience of sex or moment of sexual intercourse – expressed in a non-phallic mode (the oral) – proves a tentative carnal-spiritual intimacy. This erotics of intimacy stems from the fact that they seem to understand each other's bodies and also from their shared knowledge of the rhythms and erogenous sensitivities of the "so-called" feminine "morphology".

As mentioned earlier, lips (both facial and vaginal) are what Irigaray designates as the feminine medium and signifier (as opposed to Lacan's depiction of the phallus as the ~~masculine~~ signifier of completeness). In Scene Five of the play, the lips appear to be instruments of feminine intimacy, and the stage directions describe this moment as "*the best* [sex] *we've seen*".[153] However, the intimacy of the intercourse is consumed (read "shattered") with the introduction of the prosthetic penis with which Writer starts dominating Girlfriend. This is also consonant with Irigaray's description of phallic penetration as "the brutal separation of the two lips by a violating penis."[154] Whilst Irigaray maintains that lesbians offer the potential for a new reconfiguration and understanding of female sexuality, she also points out that "the instincts that lead the homosexual woman to choose an object for her satisfaction are … 'male' instincts".[155] That is, the psychic structure of these women (at the level of the unconscious – revealed in their fantasies and their mode and economy of desire), even those with non-heteronormative inclinations, reveals the structural embeddedness of the phallus as the signifier of wholeness, jouissance, and meaning. This is reflected in the dynamics of their sexual intercourse – both literally and symbolically –

where using the prosthesis seems the only means of reaching ultimate jouissance. Thus, when "*it's handed over*"[156] in the play, it is not just the object itself that is being swapped out, but the power that comes with it.

The references to Picasso at the end of Hickson's *The Writer* are significant in understanding the protagonist's reproduction of the phallic fantasies and economy. After Writer's domination of Girlfriend by means of the pegging penis, the latter relates a story she heard at the pub concerning Picasso and his famous painting *Guernica* (1937): "these two women that he was fucking at the same time were having a fight at the bottom of the ladder, they were wrestling, they drew blood. And he just keeps painting, the whole time."~~-~~[157] As expounded above, mimesis as an aesthetic imperative and social-political doctrine – representing the necessity of "identification/imitation" with the phallogocentric symbolic order as the guarantor of identity, truth, and meaning – has been casting a corrosive shadow on Writer and her attempts at rupturing with it through revolutionary (or evental) form throughout. Mimesis assumes new dimensions towards the end when Girlfriend recounts the above~~an~~ evocative anecdote involving Picasso and his rival lovers where mimesis appears as a principle of desire, recognition, and resistance. Mimesis as a principle of desire – as elaborated by René Girard and later adopted by Lacan: I desire only what the other desires – is epitomised by the triangular tangle of desire where two rival women battle for Picasso's desire and possession.

In this story, Picasso, as the quintessential phallogocentric figure, stands aloof from the space and infinite demands of the desire embodied by the two women and, maintaining his God-like autonomy, is rather immersed in his symbolically significant praxis (of aesthetic creation) – the sphere of history and war from which the two female lovers seem to be excluded. Picasso is here utilised as a metaphor for the phallus - to be apprehended in the Lacanian sense of a symbolic signifier and not a genital organ owned by the males. This phallic position emanates both from Picasso's position as a historical reality – that is, the position he occupies in the socio-symbolic discourse and art history (as a symbol of genius, creative power, self-possession and ideal/narcissistic sovereignty) – and from the way he is fantasised by Writer as a ubiquitous, spectral figure haunting (the likes of) Writer – as a male idol/ideal to be imitated and desired. However, the reference to Picasso at the end of the play gains further dimensions and reverberations when one considers the symbolic content of his painting. *Guernica* is a highly allegorical anti-war painting, depicting the destruction in the eponymous city in Spain wrought by the Nazi aerial bombings in the spring of 1937. In Greenfeld's words, the painting's "power is almost overwhelming, its condemnation of darkness and wanton destruction goes far beyond the bounds of the tragedy of one Spanish town: it is an angry outcry against all war and human suffering".[158] The painting owes its popularity and power to the effective use of symbols – including a bull, a horse, a flower, a broken sword and a light bulb among various others – to reflect "the ugliness of war"[159]; although the individual meanings of each symbol are still widely debated. Given its intensely political and anti-war nature, it is quite ironic that *Guernica* in composition is depicted in Hickson's *The Writer* to provoke the two lovers of Picasso into "dr[a]w[ing] blood" and "ripping flesh off each other"[160] in a hopeless competition to be the preferred object of his desire. It is even more ironic that the politically conscious Picasso remains indifferent to the politics of desire playing out below, painting his masterpiece. It is in this juncture that the similarities between the ethical and aesthetic stances of Picasso and Writer surface. As the epitome of artistic success and recognition, Picasso practices his art by detaching himself from the realm of desire into the symbolic realm of his art. Writer, on the other hand, wishes to challenge the patriarchal aesthetics and economies of the theatre institute throughout the play. Her commitment to this cause is expressed in her earlier statement in the play: "I want awe. I feel like I need blood".[161] However, having dominated Girlfriend at the end of the play for fulfilling her own desires, Writer comes to the realisation that she has become the exact opposite of what she has been projecting herself to be, that she has inadvertently reproduced and embodied phallogocentric norms and values by playing into the phallic economy and gender politics underpinning inter-personal relationships and the theatre institute. Hickson's remark at an audience Q&A session lends credence to this inference: "I really hope [*The Writer*] activates your wanting in the world, but I'm really sorry about how quickly anxious and defeated that will make you feel".[162] Therefore, the conclusion of the play is a symbolic moment that shatters Writer's sense of reality and demonstrates her recognition of how she has become all which she has previously been opposed to. The fact that she "stares – horrified, haunted"[163] at an image of *Guernica* on the stage stems as much from her dread at what she has become in the end as from the images of war and death in Picasso's painting.

Writer's ruminations on the subtleties of mimesis as a phallogocentric principle (including her own attempts at conforming to it) and the insidious ways in which it informs various dimensions of the subject's life where even attempts at subverting it through partial conformity with them (through mimicry) prove ineffective and already assimilated can be best probed in terms of Butler's critique of Irigaray's notion of mimesis/mimicry and the latter's endorsement of it as a strategy "to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it".[164] Irigaray articulates mimesis as women's deliberate reproduction/embodiment of and seeming submission to phallogocentric values and norms to challenge and subvert them from within:

> To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself – inasmuch as she is on the side of the "perceptible," of "matter" – to "ideas," in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover up of a possible operation of the feminine in language.[165]

Butler finds Irigaray's proposition of mimesis as a strategy of subversion rather problematic on the grounds that miming the masculine discourse amounts to the postulation/presupposition of masculinity as the origin and reiteration of masculine values: "Her [Irigaray's] miming has the effect of repeating the origin only to displace that origin *as* an origin".[166] In addition, Butler disaffirms Irigaray's positioning of the (feminine) body outside the masculine discourse as an extra-linguistic "matter that exceeds the matter"[167] which can serve as a medium to express/articulate the female imaginary. Instead, for Butler,

> [t]he body posited as prior to the sign, is always *posited* or *signified as prior*. … If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all.[168]

In this respect, mimesis as a strategy is bound to remain within and repeat the phallogocentric discourse/practice as the body is already situated within and constructed/materialised by that discourse/practice. Elsewhere, Butler argues: "I think all mimesis has ambivalence in it. But I wonder whether mimesis isn't precisely that kind of thing that is so fundamental that it actually defeats any strategy that might be built upon it?"[169] In Hickson's play, Writer's struggle against the phallogocentric and heteronormative discourse of the theatre institution can be interpreted as a strategy of mimesis with an eye to the Picasso reference at the end.

Picasso is ultimately an ambiguous figure within the context of the play. On the one hand, he is a symbolic figure representing the phallogocentric discourse in all its transcendental and metaphysical aloofness, hence the object of desire not only for the two women fighting for him but also for Writer who desires[170] the socio-symbolic and transcendental-metaphysical positions he occupies as an artist. On the other, as an at once avant-garde (non-realist) and socially politically engaged artist, he appeals to Writer as the epitome of artistic responsibility and freedom from established aesthetic norms and conventions. Intending to gain such a footing and established place in theatre as Picasso has in panting, Writer ends up embodying and re-enacting the very phallogocentric values she was opposed to as a young and idealist author. In other words, in order to overcome the impediments to her success and production of her play, she complies with or mimes the principle of mimesis (realism/naturalism) as demanded by Director all along. In Irigaray's terms, this move is supposed to resolve the problem of femininity within phallogocentrism and endow Writer with freedom and autonomy as a female artist within a capitalist and phallogocentric theatre establishment. However, Writer's reaction to the Picasso story and the image of *Guernica* at the end attests to the futility of this stance as it has led to nothing but the reproduction of the metaphysics and economics of the system and its relations of production.

Conclusion

In *The Writer*, Hickson subverts mimetic (including realist-naturalistic) theatrical forms not only to illustrate how her female character's experience of "reality" – at existential, psychological and affective levels – undergoes an upheaval (or "de-realisation") due to her evental experience of non-heteronormative love and desire; but also to represent her (female Writer's) revolutionary aesthetics and vision. This interpretation is corroborated by Hickson's emphasis on the political functions and ontic-ontological significance of theatrical form:

> I want people to find new forms that relate to their specific emotional experience of the world. I think that's your job as a writer. I don't understand the thing of having an idea about a thing and fitting it into a form that you have inherited from somebody else. I think form is your job as much as content. And I think form is where you are political because if you want to say a thing about the world, then say it in a shape that lets us know what you want the world to look like.[171]

Considering the theatre as the vector of phallocentric ideals, Hickson argues for a more female-inclusive theatrical space and experience. Not only is the content of Hickson's play progressive, but Hickson's play queers conventional forms to employ a more feminine form characterised by formal disruption, abstraction, and excess. Hickson's protagonist deconstructs the typical form of naturalist theatre to create a new space in which female experiences can abound. However,

Hickson retains some naturalism, as she does not end her play with Scene Three. Writer enters a relational dynamics in which she embodies masculinity through sex, fundamentally disturbing her sense of self and tarnishing the queer relationship of intimacy she is in.

In her review titled "Anger, Ambivalence and Ella Hickson's*The Writer* (2018)", Greenstreet argues that the play "refuses to adjudicate between the Writer's and the Director's views of art and of the world; neither point of view wins out at the end of the play." [172] However, as the play draws to its mise-en-abyme conclusion, it reveals a threefold compromise on Writer's part: aesthetic, ethical, and libidinal (the latter two designate the ethics and politics of her desire). Although Scenes Two and Five mirror each other in terms of the interpersonal ethics and relational dynamics between Writer and her lovers (with roles reversed), what distinguishes the latter is its setting: "It's the West End version of the apartment from Part Two. It's high-end, smart, glitzy – the commercialism sings out through the reserved luxury of it, the seamlessness."[173] Writer's move to this luxurious West End apartment betokens not only her rise to wealth, but also her assimilation of and within the mainstream theatre (its formal strictures and commercial/capitalist values) given the culturally symbolic status of the district (the West End) which is also known as Theatreland. In other words, she seems to have succumbed to the satiety and "safety of the money" rather than the "courage of transgression" (and its concomitant exclusion from the mainstream and centre stage). Strikingly, this scene supervenes on Director's threatening of Writer at the end of Scene Four: "Get it finished. Get it finished or it doesn't go on."[174] Therefore, it can be inferred that Writer has betrayed her "revolutionary" aesthetic ambitions but also her vision of feminine intimacy and community along with her evental experience of desire with women for the sake of commercial success and recognition. Similarly, Writer's reproduction of the phallic economy in her relationship with Girlfriend can be interpreted as an ethical compromise when considered in the light of her discussion with Director in Scene Four. There, Writer explicitly avers how evental desire (as expressed in her queer feminine experience in Scene Three) has affected her emotionally and psychologically: "It was a peace and contentment that I've never – that – since I lost … it has crucified me." [175] Director, on the other hand, dismisses the evental nature of Writer's experience as mere frivolity and escapism: "you're a coward, you fly off to feminist manifestos and dancing in the fucking woods because you're scared of what you might actually want to say if you followed it through." [176] Accordingly, Writer's adoption of phallogocentric principles – at the levels of aesthetic form and expression of desire – can be construed as an evidence to her betrayal and abandonment of her radical feminist visions. Hickson's words attest to such a counter-revolutionary compromise: "I guess what the Writer does is halfway there but a little bit lazy potentially still as it constantly says look and look again and look again and look again but it doesn't go." [177] Thus, Hickson's inclusion of the last scene – whilst being an attempt to eschew the fatal compromise Writer made by ending the play with a scene involving two female lovers rather than one featuring Writer and Director – functions to reveal the persistence of the phallic economy within the female realm in conjunction with the persistence of the gendered (heteronormative) structures of the theatrical institute. As such, it reveals how far away the established theatre (and the commodified and heteronormative society it exists within) is from the queer-feminist utopia of Scene Three.

However, whilst numerous feminist thinkers, critics and dramatists have been striving hard to overcome the value-laden, gendered binary opposition between instinct and intellect – allegedly established by the phallogocentric discourse – whereby they are respectively ascribed to women and men, Hickson's Writer seems to embrace that association. This is evidenced by her affirmation of "instinct" as a self-conscious stylistic attribute and aesthetic principle. It is thus worth emphasising that Writer's mode of feminism and gendered aesthetics can be characterised as a stance that is liable to perpetuate the very phallogocentric structural binaries – at the levels of aesthetic, desire, and gender – she intends to overcome. By the same token, expressions such as the inherent masculinity of the theatrical space or "the inherently patriarchal nature of theatre" Hickson uses in the stage directions (as at the beginning of Scene Three) seem uncalled-for considering the historical and national context of contemporary British culture and drama where women have ample creative leeway and institutional power.

In addition, Writer's association of a certain aesthetic sensibility and normative formal preference – realism/naturalism, that is – with a specific gender (masculinity: the Male Director) and age (by accentuating the old age of the male director – hence smacking of ageism) seems rather problematic. As the history of British and European theatre evidently attests, numerous male dramatists have been at the forefront of anti-naturalist and avant-garde aesthetics, ranging from Ibsen and Strindberg to Pinter, Artaud, Brecht, Beckett, and, above all, Barker. One other problematic aspect of Writer's militant gender-political stance is that in Scene Four she resents Director's suggestions for her to be more conventional by arguing that "it's wordy, it's Stoppard, it's Pinter, it's power struggle, it's patriarchy – that's what it is, it's how it's learnt and how it's meant to be, it's elitist. It's of an entirely different politic to what' [she's] trying to do."[178] She seems to condemn both the realist aesthetic sensibility (represented by the director) and the avant-garde (represented by Pinter and Stoppard). In this, she seems to be blankly dismissive of the artistic works and aesthetic forms/values merely on the grounds that they have

been produced by men. Such a denigration of both the Realist and Anti-Realist (avant-garde) trends in drama created by men is an evidence to her radical and militant feminism which not only believes in a radical ontological difference between the two genders and hence their creative dynamics/production; it is also merely driven by negativity rather than a mode of affirmative negation which would involve a nuanced and différance-based relation between the two creative works of the two genders as both parts of a spectrum (an approach endorsed by Nietzsche, Derrida, Kristeva, and Butler). Finally, as epitomised by the symbolic moment when Writer wears a prosthetic penis, by ruminating on the aesthetic, ontological, and ethical implications of such pregnant moments, *The Writer* could be argued to illustrate how authoritarian and militant matriarchy and patriarchy are two sides of the same coin as long as both remain bound to a phallic economy of unity and uniformity where the otherness of the other, be it heteronormatively defined or otherwise, is elided.

Footnotes

1 Foucault, "What is an Author?" 143; Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 386.

2 Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 142.

3 see Page, "Introduction," 1–7.

4 Jestrovic, *Performances of Authorial Presence*, 7.

5 Ibid., 13.

6 Ibid., 39.

7 Ibid.

8 Kane, *4.48 Psychosis*, 244–5.

9 Crouch, *The Author*, 27.

10 Rebellato, "Exit the Author," 11.

11 Ibid., 12.

12 For the complications of deploying "queer" for characterising the aesthetic/generic and gender dynamics of *The Writer*, see Stephen Greer's elucidating reflections in *The Writer*'s Programme Note. (Greer, "Ella Hickson's *The Writer*".)

13 See Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 34; Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 59.

14 Hickson, "Ella Hickson and Blanche McIntyre," 11:47-11:54; see also Poore, "You Can't Be Here," 27.

15 Poore, "You Can't Be Here," 22–37.

16 Fakhrkonandeh, "Oil Cultures, World Drama," 12–5; Fakhrkonandeh, "As an Illuminator," 117–21.

17 Hickson, *The Writer*, 19.

18 Ibid., 57.

19 see Evans, "Ziggurat of Bilge"; Treneman, "Theatre: Oil at Almeida"; Marmion, "Ella Hickson's New Play."

20 As Ken Urban acutely argues: "While historically British theatre tended to be insular and shied away from more experimental forms, European figures such as Antonin Artaud and Heiner Müller began to exert a significant influence on the English stage." (Urban, "An Ethics of Catastrophe," 40).

21 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 6.

22 Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, 62.

23 Ibid., 47–66.

24 Ibid., 47.

25 Ibid.

26 Poore, "You Can't Be Here," 31.

27 Hickson, *The Writer*, 31.

28 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 90–1.

29 Ibid., 142.

30 See Derrida, "Différance," 3–27.

31 Aston, *An Introduction*, 3.

32 Hickson, *The Writer*, 11.

33 Ibid.

34 Pendzik, “The Theatre Stage,” 27.

35 Barker, “*Death, the One*,” 27.

36 Hickson, *The Writer*, 11.

37 Ibid.

38 Irigaray, *This Sex*, 32.

39 Hickson, *The Writer*, 14.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., 27.

43 Ibid., 14–5.

44 Ibid., 19, 15.

45 Ibid., 18.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 21.

48 Crispin, *Why I'm not a Feminist*, 16–20.

49 Hickson, *The Writer*, 20.

50 Phallogocentrism is Derrida's neologism coined for critiquing Lacan's designation of the phallus as the universal signifier. (See Derrida, “Interview: Choreographies,” 69; Feder and Zakin, “Flirting with the Truth,” 47.).

51 Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, 33.

52 Hickson, *The Writer*, 40.

53 Irigaray, *Speculum*, 14.

54 Irigaray, *This Sex*, 165.

55 Ibid., 23.

56 Ibid., 164.

57 Whitford, “Luce Irigaray,” 4.

58 Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 11.

59 see Aston, *An Introduction*, 47.

60 Hickson, *The Writer*, 32–3.

61 Ibid., 32.

62 Ibid., 70.

63 Irigaray, *This Sex*, 74.

64 Ibid., 29.

65 see Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 68.

66 Hickson, *The Writer*, 58.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., 59–60.

69 Ibid., 57.

70 Ibid.

71 Irigaray, *This Sex*, 77.

72 Hickson, *The Writer*, 64.

73 Ibid., 67.

74 Deleuze, “Literature and Life,” 1.

75 Hickson, *The Writer*, 61.

76 Ibid., 63.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid., 64.
79 Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 44.
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81 Deleuze, "Literature and Life," 1.
82 Irigaray, *This Sex*, 25–6.
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85 Ibid., 57.
86 Ibid., 63–4.
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88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, 186.
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93 Ibid., 65.
94 Ibid.
95 see Kristeva, "Revolution in Poetic Language," 34.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., 32.
98 Ibid., 26–34.
99 Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 129.
100 Ibid., 164.
101 Lyotard in Williams, *Lyotard & the Political*, 62.
102 Ibid.
103 see Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 17.
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105 Kristeva, "Revolution in Poetic Language," 35.
106 Ibid.
107 Derrida, *Chora L Works*, 10.
108 Ibid.
109 Derrida, *On the Name*, 56.
110 Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 60.
111 Hickson, *The Writer*, 64.
112 Ibid., 58.
113 Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 163.
114 Ibid.
115 Irigaray, *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 64.
116 Hickson, *The Writer*, 60.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid., 61.
119 *The Holy Bible*, 3.15.
120 Kristeva, *New Maladies*, 205.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid., 208.

123 Hickson, *The Writer*, 39.

124 Ibid., 63.

125 Ibid., 85.

126 Ibid., 39.

127 Ibid. 40.

128 Ibid., 44.

129 Rae, "Questioning the Phallus," 19.

130 Hickson, *The Writer*, 87.

131 Ibid., 86.

132 Ibid., 85.

133 Ibid., 23.

134 Aston, *An Introduction*, 65.

135 Hickson, *The Writer*, 64.

136 see Libertson, *Proximity*, 79–80; Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea," 58; Bataille, "Definition of Heterology," 36.

137 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 209.

138 Hickson, *The Writer*, 64.

139 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 82.

140 Levinas, "Judaism and the Feminine Element," 32.

141 see Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 155; Vasseleu, *Textures of Light*, 102.

142 Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, 180.

143 Irigaray, *This Sex*, 31.

144 Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, 59.

145 Hickson, *The Writer*, 64.

146 Ibid., 39.

147 Irigaray, *This Sex*, 88.

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149 Irigaray, *This Sex*, 18.

150 Holmlund, "The Lesbian, the Mother," 297.

151 Hickson, *The Writer*, 78.

152 Ibid., 81–2.

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154 Irigaray, *This Sex*, 24.

155 Irigaray, *Speculum*, 99.

156 Hickson, *The Writer*, 85.

157 Ibid., 88.

158 Greenfeld, *Pablo Picasso*, 137.

159 Ibid., 139.

160 Hickson, *The Writer*, 88.

161 Ibid., 52.

162 Hickson, "Ella Hickson and Blanche McIntyre," 41:00–41:08.

163 Hickson, *The Writer*, 88.

164 Irigaray, *This Sex*, 76.

165 Ibid., 76.

166 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 45.

167 Ibid., 47.

168 Ibid., 30.

169 Butler, "Future of Sexual Difference," 39.

170 For a detailed account of the indelible ties between mimesis and desire, see Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 180.

171 Hickson, "Ella Hickson and Blanche McIntyre," 45:28–45:58.

172 Greenstreet, "Anger, Ambivalence," 349.

173 Hickson, *The Writer*, 75.

174 Ibid., 74.

175 Ibid., 71.

176 Ibid.

177 Hickson, "Ella Hickson and Blanche McIntyre," 46:01–46:10.

178 Hickson, *The Writer*, 67.

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