
The "Boy Wonder" and *The Naked Genius*:
Mike Todd, Gypsy Rose Lee, and the
Spectacle of Female Authorship

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From its origin as an autobiographical play about the construction of her "Striptease Intellectual" persona, Gypsy Rose Lee's The Naked Genius underwent transformation by producer Mike Todd into a three-ring circus burlesque extravaganza, with critics deriding the public spectacle of Lee's authorship. Yet original drafts of the play reveal Lee's authorial intentions—and her conception of burlesque performance as a mode of psychological striptease, in a play that is itself a complex palimpsest of fiction and memoir, confession and artifice.

Between 1941 and 1943, Gypsy Rose Lee revealed a new layer of her scintillating burlesque queen persona, different from her familiar striptease performances at Minsky's. This new, unexpected identity provoked and teased her audiences: that of author. With her autobiographical, backstage mystery novel *The G-String Murders* (1941), and her Broadway play *The Naked Genius* (1943)—an autobiographical play about her writing of *The G-String Murders*—Lee became a published novelist and a produced playwright, fifteen years before writing the memoir that inspired the 1959 musical *Gypsy*. Yet the reception of the two works varied dramatically. *The G-String Murders* was a highly publicized, critically acclaimed bestseller written in a prose so vernacularly vivid that it caused multiple reviewers to doubt Lee's authorship, often due to cultural assumptions that questioned

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the intellectual abilities of women working in burlesque. The *New York Daily News's* Burns Mantle, for instance, assumed there must have been a ghostwriter: that "Simon and Schuster wrote *G-String* and Gypsy checked it" (quoted in Shteir, *Gypsy* 124).

By contrast, Lee's *The Naked Genius* (produced by her lover, "Boy Wonder" impresario Mike Todd, and directed by George S. Kaufman) opened on 21 October 1943 at the Plymouth Theatre, to some of the most scathing Broadway reviews of its time. Here, no one made a mystery of Lee as the play's writer. A reviewer for *Time Magazine* scoffed, "Playwright Lee has snubbed her recollections, which might have been gay and racketsy, to indulge her imagination, which is chaotic, and display her wit, which is calamitous" ("Theater"). The *Wall Street Journal* chimed in, "Miss Lee's writing talents are not suited to the stage" (Cooke), while the critic for the *Boston Post* opined, "No one expected her to write a first-class drama. No one expected her to miss the bus by half a block" (quoted in Shteir, *Gypsy* 143). Still, on the strength of the thirty-four-year-old Todd's marketing shrewdness, the source of his reputation as a "Boy Genius" (Cohn 50), the production scored a commercial hit. Todd sold the play as the fulfillment of low expectations around Lee's ability to "write a first-class drama," promising patrons a play that was "guaranteed not to win the Pulitzer Prize" (Shteir, Afterword 232).

For all its box office success, *The Naked Genius* has gone down in Broadway history as a legendary fiasco, with critics deriding the public spectacle of Lee's authorship. Yet, as a work exploring Lee's dual identity as a burlesque performer and author, *The Naked Genius* merits re-consideration, despite the play's failure to reach full fruition.¹ In the various drafts of *The Naked Genius*, housed at the New York Public Library Billy Rose Collections, Lee subverts gendered and class-based assumptions about the stripper as author, while critiquing public scrutiny about the writing of her 1941 novel. In all of these drafts, Lee charts the great divide between her private life and public persona: the sharp conflict of her desire for cultural and artistic legitimacy, with her carefully constructed celebrity as "the Striptease Intellectual".

While Lee's drafts of *The Naked Genius* overlap substantially in their themes, they also reveal illuminating contrasts in tone, focus, and approach. Examined backward from the final Broadway version play-doctored by Kaufman, earlier drafts written solely by Lee under the title *The Ghost in the Woodpile* (1942) reveal intimate and intricate layers of self revelation. In *The Naked Genius*, Lee claims a place within New York's literary and publishing hierarchies, while contesting the masculine gendering of genius, as associated with Mike Todd's reputation as a "Boy Wonder."

By contrast, the *Ghost in the Woodpile* drafts expose Lee's original authorial intentions. The earlier drafts reveal her conception of burlesque performance as a mode of psychological striptease, in a play that is a complex palimpsest of fiction and memoir, confession and artifice, focusing as they did upon Lee's then-recent writing and publication of *The G-String Murders*.

Generating *The Naked Genius*

The controversial 1941 publication and critical reception of *The G-String Murders*, a crime novel about the backstage murders of two burlesque queens, strongly influenced Lee's writing of *The Naked Genius*. As Rachel Shteir notes, "From the beginning, journalists cast doubt on whether Gypsy had actually written the book or not" (Afterword 227). *Time Magazine* was one of the publications that positively affirmed the burlesque star's authorship, praising *The G-String Murders*: "Ecdysiast Lee's Minsky background, rich show-business vocabulary and stage-door gags make her book almost a social document. . . . Gypsy wrote every word of *The G-String Murders* herself, between shows. Nobody else could have" ("Books: For the Publicity"). The *New York Times*, on the other hand, attributed authorship to Lee. Yet their columnist snidely patronized both the star and burlesque audiences, through classist assumptions about the literacy of both:

Should Gypsy Rose Lee ever write another book—not that we advise it, mind you, for in her case the zipper is obviously mightier than the pen—but should she decide to continue her literary career, a glossary would be a great help to her readers. All spoofing aside, this book will probably amuse the patrons of the strip-tease shows—or such of them as are able to read. ("New Mystery Stories")

Anticipating Lee's line-blurring between fiction and memoir in *The Naked Genius*, Lee narrates *The G-String Murders* in first-person tense through a persona named "Gypsy Rose Lee."

Driven by the racy subject matter, the literary controversy, and Lee's own publicity stunts (including performing her "specialty" act inside the display window of Macy's²), *The G-String Murders* became the outstanding popular best-seller of 1941. The book played off Lee's image as an "erudite ecdysiast" (qtd. in Strom 89), cultivated by such famous burlesque routines as "A Stripteaser's Education." In the number, which she debuted in *The Ziegfeld Follies of 1936*, Lee demurely stripped while dropping sly allusions to Cézanne, *Lady Windemere's Fan*, and the "lovely letter I received from George Bernard Shaw" (Abbott 348–49). Selling over 30,000 copies in its first printing, and quickly re-published in five more, *The G-*

String Murders broke records for the most copies sold of a mystery novel, excepting Dashiell Hammett's *The Thin Man* ("Books and Authors"). A selection of witty epistolary excerpts between Lee and her editor, Lee Wright, further bolstered sales of *The G-String Murders*. Lee signed off as "The Girl with the Diamond Studded Navel," as well as "The Naked Genius," in her "Letters to My Editor," published at the back of the novel.

The "Letters" both played upon the controversy of Gypsy Rose Lee as novelist, and, with self-deprecating lightness, conveyed Lee's frustration with her contested authorship. In fact, the Lee accepted structural assistance from both veteran crime novelist Craig Rice (the pseudonym of Georgiana Craig), and her friend George Davis, the *Harper's Bazaar* editor with whom she famously shared a year's residence at the "February House" at 9 Middagh Street.³ As Lee's son Erik Lee Preminger has observed, his mother invented herself as an avid autodidact, as she had "no formal education" (Foreword 5) while trouping as a child performer in vaudeville:

How did she learn to write? She began by reading. Books were her escape from dirty dressing rooms and dismal theatrical hotels, her escape from feeling like a failure because her sister could sing and dance but she could do neither . . . She read any book she could buy or shoplift, which resulted in an eccentric range of topics and authors: *Decameron*, *The Blind Bow Boy*, *Painted Veils*, *Das Capital* [sic], and *Droll Stories*, to name a few (5).⁴

Despite the editorial guidance of Rice and Davis, Lee's biographers have persuasively argued for *The G-String Murders* as Lee's own distinct authorial creation. Rachel Shteir writes, "It was Gypsy alone who was, as she often said, 'making the book words'" (Afterword 220). Lee's sister, the actress June Havoc, similarly argued, "Gypsy, only Gypsy, could have written in the style she used. The language was uniquely her own. The story about someone writing for her was a healthy fable" (*Early Havoc* 184). Lee followed *The G-String Murders* with a 1942 murder mystery sequel, *Mother Finds a Body*.

At the same time that *The Naked Genius* tapped into Lee's experience writing and publishing *The G-String Murders*, the play also owed much of its genesis to Lee's romantic and professional relationship with the charismatic, self-made Todd. Born Avrom Goldbogen, in 1909, to a family of Polish Jewish immigrants, Todd had quickly ascended the show-business ranks from producing a risqué "Flame Dance" on the midway of the 1934 Chicago World's Fair to his 1939 Broadway production of *The Hot Mikado*. A jazz adaptation of Gilbert and Sullivan's comic opera, *The Hot Mikado* featured Bill "Bojangles" Robinson headlining an all-black cast, as well as spectacular effects that included "a waterfall of soap bubbles forty feet high and a volcano that actually erupted" (Cohn 92). In the 1940s and

'50s, Todd increasingly courted respectability in his 1945 Broadway production of *Hamlet*, starring Maurice Evans, and his film adaptation of *Around the World in 80 Days*, which won the 1957 Academy Award for Best Picture. Yet, at the time of his relationship with Lee, Todd was famous for his carnival-honed showmanship driven by flamboyant publicity stunts and affinity for lowbrow culture. Todd remarked in 1939, "The public wants broad theater, meat and potatoes at a low tap" (Cohn 98).

The Naked Genius drew upon Todd's shrewd importation of burlesque to Broadway in the early 1940s. The play opened during a period in which Todd, responding to Fiorello LaGuardia's 1937 ban of burlesque, produced a streak of Minsky's-flavored Broadway plays and musicals including the Cole Porter musicals *Something for the Boys* (1943) and *Mexican Hayride* (1944), and Mae West's play *Catherine Was Great* (1944). Prior to *The Naked Genius*, the impresario had starred Lee in *The Streets of Paris* at the 1940 World's Fair, as well as his 1942 revue *Star and Garter*. It was during the run of *Star and Garter* that Lee wrote the play that would become *The Naked Genius*: early drafts were titled first *The Seven Year Cycle* (a nod to Lee's interest in astrology), and then *The Ghost in the Woodpile*.⁵ As Todd committed to produce his lover's first play, written by Lee over the course of eighteen months, he also enlisted George S. Kaufman to come on board as both director and an uncredited "play doctor": a collaboration mirrored by *The Naked Genius*'s themes of ghostwriting and authorial authenticity. With Todd convinced that Lee lacked the acting skills to star in her play, the producer cast movie star Joan Blondell (his new lover, having broken with Lee) as heroine Honey Bee Carroll. A Hollywood veteran with vaudeville roots, Blondell had portrayed a gallery of hard-boiled chorus girls, gold diggers, and burlesque queens at Warner Brothers in the 1930s.

The press avidly chronicled the debacle of *The Naked Genius*, as the play went into out-of-town tryouts. "The vicissitudes suffered by Miss Lee's first play during rehearsals, its cast changes, and script revisions, the tantrums, fits, quarrels, hysteria, and feuds during the tryouts are among the more fantastic recent events in that fantastic phase of private enterprise denoted by the words 'legitimate theatre,'" observed the *New York Times*'s Maurice Zolotow. The final plot of *The Naked Genius*, as it neared Broadway production, represented an incohesive mix of elements from the play's various drafts; characters included the brassy Honey Bee, her con-artist mother Pansy (called Evangie in some of the drafts), her refined wardrobe lady/diction coach Lottie, and her burlesque dancer friend Alibassi (shortened from Alabaster, because "she wears white body paint"), with the latter played by Minsky's star Georgia Sothorn. The play's characters also included Sam Hinkle, Honey Bee's blackmailing ghostwriter, who threatens to expose her as a literary fraud.

In spite of Lee's wishes to close the show, Todd insisted on riding out *The Naked Genius's* troubles. By the time *The Naked Genius* reached Pittsburgh, after badly received performances in Boston and Baltimore, both Lee and Kaufman implored Todd to close the show and cancel the Broadway run. Todd adamantly refused, having sold the rights to Twentieth Century Fox, who agreed to produce a film version of *The Naked Genius* only after a Broadway run (it was filmed in 1945 as *Doll Face*). According to Zolotow, Lee "avoided the Plymouth Theatre like a plague" and Kaufman, "unable to view what he was convinced was a dramatic horror, fled to his rustic retreat in Bucks County, PA."⁶ Transformed by Todd from Lee's self-reflective work into an unwieldy mix of navel-gazing confessional and knockabout farce, the play opened at the Plymouth Theatre as a three-ring spectacle complete with "a cast of forty-three, exclusive of seven dogs, one rooster, and a rhesus monkey whose name is Herman" (*The Naked Genius*). The latter led *The New Yorker* to jibe, "Only the monkey seemed to have much sense in the script" (qtd. in Frankel 127).

Todd responded to *Naked Genius's* brutal Broadway notices by exploiting the reviews themselves. Upholding his motto, "failure [is] success if you go big enough" (Cohn 57), Todd mocked the moniker of *The Naked Genius* right along with the press, boasting of the play and its author, "It's not Shakespeare, but it's laffs!" (Shteir, Afterword 232). He also informed the press that Lee, along with her Chihuahua Popsy, was "one of the greatest no-talent queens in show business" (Abbott 345). Courting populist favor rather than critical laurels, he also "ran adds placing the uncomplimentary reviews in tiny type with the words: 'DON'T STRAIN YOUR EYES. THEY DIDN'T LIKE IT ANYHOW'" (Frankel 127). Bolstered by its risqué title, Blondell's Hollywood fame, and Todd's shrewd publicity campaign, *The Naked Genius* played to sold-out audience for 36 performances, after which Todd—the Hollywood movie sale in his sights—mercifully closed the production.

"I'll Bare All": Authorship, Cultural Legitimacy, and Subverting "Boy Wonderment" in *The Naked Genius*

Contrary to Todd's denigration of the play and its writer, Lee asserts the legitimacy of her authorship in *The Naked Genius*, while undermining the gendered construction of "genius" as a predominately male domain. The play thoughtfully explores Lee's struggle for cultural legitimacy through the public role of authorship, and her conflicted identity as a sex symbol and celebrity. With the play, Lee responded both to charges that she didn't write her own fiction, and to the widespread perception that, as Shteir describes, "you could not possibly be an intellectual if you were a striptease woman" (Afterword 213). In a near-final draft of *The Naked Genius*, pre-

served at the NYPL, and reflecting Lee's collaboration with Kaufman, there is no ghostwriting Hinkle, and Honey Bee herself is the author of a memoir, entitled (suggesting *The G-String Murders*) *I'll Bare All*.

The themes of *The Naked Genius* pivot upon the reception of *I'll Bare All*, a book that weighs Honey's attachment to her burlesque roots against her desire for respectability and literary prestige. Honey Bee's two male love interests represent these contrasting value systems. Honey Bee finds herself pulled between Tracy Brannigan, a brash Irish-American press agent, and Charles Goodwin, the wealthy WASP publisher who not only plans to publish Honey Bee's novel, but offers her "security, money, position, a back drop. . . . There's quite a difference between being Mrs. Charles Goodwin and being Mrs. Tracy Brannigan," her mother Pansy advises her (2-1-16).⁷

The Naked Genius subordinates a romantic storyline to themes of personal and cultural identity. In the play, Lee portrays Tracy and Charles as aspects of Honey Bee's divided self, with Tracy representing the "striptease," and Charles the "intellectual." Lee romanticizes neither man. She depicts Charles as an effete, "stiff-necked Bostonian" (as described by Tracy [1-1-12]) and mama's boy who uses Honey Bee to prove his romantic prowess, and Tracy (as described by Charles) as a "first-class leech" (1-2-61) who exploits Honey Bee emotionally and financially, taking ten percent as her personal agent, and another ten percent as her press manager. Although Tracy represents to Honey Bee a more authentic, less "phony" past in burlesque, he also stifles her dreams of self-improvement.

Through the character of Tracy, drawn in part from Mike Todd, Lee critically engages with the rhetoric surrounding the spectacle of Lee's authorship. In one exchange between Honey Bee and Tracy, Gypsy Rose Lee less stakes her own claim to literary greatness than savages the preconception that a burlesque queen could never produce a work of enduring artistic value. Lee invokes, and challenges, a canon of white, male writers:

TRACY. You were getting good dough before you ever wrote a book. . . . I'm not underestimating it, mind ya . . . the book was a good gimmick. . . .

HONEY BEE. I wish you wouldn't use that work. It sounds so Burlesque. Besides, it wasn't written to be a gimmick. . . . I had something to say and I said it. Charles says the world's greatest literature was written for the same reason . . . Thoreau . . . Homer . . . Chaucer . . . they all had something to say and they said it.

TRACY. Homer and Honey Bee Carroll . . . that's a helluva parlay.

HONEY. That all depends on how you look at it. He was writing of life as how he saw it in his day. I write of life as I see it in my day. Of course . . . my life is different than HIS was . . .

TRACY. Yeah.

HONEY. But who knows . . . two thousand years from now I might be a classic (1-1-6).

By comparison, in his 1957 biography, *The Nine Line Lives of Michael Todd*, Art Cohn compared Todd in the same sentence to Erasmus and Cervantes's Don Quixote, calling the showman "a twentieth century Renaissance Man" (xii). With *The Naked Genius*, Lee debunks a powerful double standard.

In *The Naked Genius*, Lee also juxtaposes her own reception as a "scriptease" coming from the disreputable milieus of road-circuit vaudeville and burlesque with more respectable authors within the literary establishment. "You've been born and raised in a different kind of atmosphere than these people," Tracy advises Honey Bee against mingling with Manhattan's educated literati (1-1-9). The play contrasts Honey Bee's perceived frivolity against the stature and erudition of other female writers, including novelists Edna Ferber and Pearl S. Buck, and the English poet Dame Edith Sitwell. One humorous exchange shows Tracy lambasting Honey Bee's efforts at establishing a literary salon:

TRACY. Think you can tear yourself from your soirées to pick up a few bucks legitimately?

HONEY. A soirée is in the evening . . . my Thursday salon is at tea time.

TRACY. Salon, soirée . . . a lot of out of work bums eating you out of house and home. . . .

HONEY. I have the only literary salon in the city of New York. How can you talk that way about people you've never seen? You've never stepped a foot inside this door during one of my afternoon teas.

TRACY. I was here the day the dame in the shroud threw herself into a trance reading her own poetry.

HONEY. That dame happened to be Edith Sitwell.

Reflecting *The Naked Genius*, too, earlier drafts of *The Ghost in the Woodpile* demonstrate Lee's puncturing of the genteel tradition and claiming her own share of modernist stature. In the earlier *Ghost in the Woodpile* draft, the members of a Long Island Ladies' Community Fund spurn Honey

Bee's novel in favor of a winsome Book of the Month-style bestseller by actress-writer Cornelia Otis Skinner. One of the ladies, Constance, remarks, "Why, the only thing I ever thought about her was that the book she wrote was sort of vulgar. As a librarian, I couldn't very well recommend it to the children, could I? No more than I'd think of recommending Hemingway or Huxley." Fellow librarian Emily responds: "You're late with *Our Hearts Were Young and Gay*, and I do wish you'd bring it in. I have a list for it" (*Ghost*, first draft 2-3). Here, Lee aligns herself with the "obscene," anti-censorship modernism of Huxley and Hemingway, even while—in her jibes at Otis Skinner—succumbing to the unfortunate trap of pitting female authors against each other.

The Naked Genius can be read as both an indignant and self-critical response to the reception of *The G-String Murders*. Honey Bee laments to Tracy, "Every time I try to get out of Burlesque, try to do something different, it turns out to be a gimmick. Look at what the critics said about my book . . . they don't write those things about other authors, rhyming novel with navel" (1-1-9). Yet if the tone of *The Naked Genius* skews sometimes toward the righteously defensive, Lee also satirizes her own penchant for self-publicizing, navel-gazing, and playing up her café society grandeur: "Okay, Miss Hoity Toity," a fellow stripper sniffs at Honey Bee (1-2-60). Through Honey Bee, Lee also implicates her own proclivities, of blurring reality and fiction, and trespassing over the privacy of friends, associates, and employees for her high-profile authorship. Those offended by Honey Bee's actions include Pansy's business partner Myrtle (1-2-57), and Honey Bee's "assistant secretary" and sometime-confidante Angela. In one scene in *The Naked Genius*, Angela objects to Honey Bee including her, without her blessing, as a character in *I'll Bare All*:

ANGELA: You know, Miss Carroll, I [sic] been thinking about this book. . . . How you wrote about meeting me for the first time. . . .

HONEY BEE: We've come a long way since then, haven't we, Angela. . . .

ANGELA: You said I was delivering laundry for my mother.

HONEY BEE: That's right . . . you were. . . .

ANGELA: Yes . . . but you know I'm not sure I like reading it in a book.

HONEY BEE: There's nothing to be ashamed about in delivering laundry . . . it's good honest work.

ANGELA: No, but having it in a book is . . . well . . . it's an invasion of my privacy.

HONEY BEE: Privacy? We're in show business . . . we don't have any privacy. (1-1-25)

That Lee wrote Angela as a working-class woman of color, as played originally by African American actress Pauline Myers, only intensifies the exploitative implications of Honey Bee's racial and economic privilege as a white, celebrity burlesque queen.

While navigating the cultural and ethical complexities of Lee's authorial identities, *The Naked Genius* concludes with Honey Bee returning to her burlesque roots. Honey Bee's mother Pansy, who breeds guinea pigs and "fences" stolen goods from Saks Fifth Avenue, ultimately scuttles Honey's engagement to Charles. A flamboyant caricature of Lee's own mother Rose, Pansy stages the wedding as three-ring media circus on Honey's country estate "Naked Acres."⁸ She sells (and scalps) tickets, casts a photogenic actor as the judge, invites *Life Magazine* paparazzi, and—with Todd-like bravado—markets the wedding as a vaudeville bill of "Girls Girls Girls, Laffs Laffs Laffs" (*The Naked Genius* 2-1-10). After Honey Bee and Pansy outrage Charles's Bostonian mother, her fiancé cancels the wedding. Honey Bee, relieved, goes back to Tracy, and to her career in burlesque: "You'd better okay Philadelphia . . . you can take 'em out of Burlesque, but you can't take Burlesque out of them" (2-2-46). Through the character of Honey Bee, *The Naked Genius* asserts the legitimacy of Lee's own claims to authorship. At the same time, the play identifies burlesque performance as an essential—if not defining—source of Lee's self-invention as "the Striptease Intellectual."

Identity, Authenticity, and Lee's "Self-Portrait" in *The Ghost in the Woodpile*

In the Broadway version play-doctored by Kaufman, *The Naked Genius* explored the spectacle of Lee's critical reception as an author, and her navigation between burlesque roots and cultural respectability. By contrast, earlier drafts of the play, written solely by Lee, examine not only the burlesque queen's authorial role, but the complex nature of her artistic identity. *The Ghost in the Woodpile*, a title that encompassed at least two earlier drafts of *The Naked Genius*, demonstrates deeper critical self-reflexivity than *The Naked Genius*, even as Lee's solo-authored version of the play lacks the structural clarity of her work with Kaufman. Once again, the play pivots on issues of identity and authenticity. In Lee's most honestly engaged work, the author pursues her vexed relationship with veracity. Here, Lee positions herself as the unreliable narrator of her own identity, which is both a truthful expression and a highly crafted fiction. With wit and nuance, Lee considers her own public performance of authorship as,

described by Karen Abbott, a "strutting, bawdy erudite conundrum—belonging to everyone but known by none."

While reflecting upon her role as an author, Lee also wrote her *Ghost in the Woodpile* in conversation with her ventures as a visual artist. In January of 1943, Lee contributed a collage to Peggy Guggenheim's historic "Exhibition of 31 Women" show at the collector's Art of This Century gallery. The *New York Times* previewed the show, and noted Guggenheim's inclusion of "work selected to show extraordinary imagination. Gypsy Rose Lee, after successfully invading the literary field, will participate in the exhibition with 'Self-Portrait'" ("Art Notes"). Displaying "Self-Portrait" alongside works by (mostly) female Surrealists, including Frida Kahlo, Leonora Carrington, Kay Sage, and Dorothea Tanning (Strom 62), Lee visually echoed the themes of her play: a subconsciously channeled portrait of the artist as flim-flam woman. Art critic Edward Alden Jewell described Lee's "Self Portrait" in a way that evokes the "shadow boxes" of Lee's friend Joseph Cornell:

it is . . . a paste-up, or "collage," contrived in a deep shadow-box frame. Miss Lee's face makes several appearances, once surmounting a form manifestly not her own, dressed in a Victorian bathing suit. Again, she has pasted a nice dog's head where one would expect to find her own (the form this time is unmistakably authentic, teasing along toward the strip) and the foreground is marvelously enriched with a three-dimensional mosaic of seashells.⁹

According to Shteir, Lee's "Self Portrait" also included a "newspaper photo of her face above Walter Winchell's name, suggest[ing] that her mind and her dreams could only meet under the sign of publicity" (Shteir, *Gypsy* 136). June Havoc similarly discussed the paradox of her sister's public persona: "The only escape Gypsy had was behind closed doors. The audience who caught my sister in private retreat was very, very small. She was a creation of her own publicity to the world, but in private, she was her very own person" (*More Havoc* 224).

The fine arts and the "signs of publicity" structure the dramatic contrasts of *The Ghost in the Woodpile*, which uses most of the characters and situations of *The Naked Genius*. The opening stage directions of *The Ghost in the Woodpile* introduce the conflicted self of Gypsy Rose Lee, with one side of the stage "covered in paintings, moderns and Primitives," as well as a "Majolica bust of a woman on a pedestal." On the other side of the stage, a window card, in an "ornate gold-leaf frame" reads:

THE GAIETY THEATRE
BURLESQUE AS YOU LIKE IT
THE MERRY WHIRL

GYPSY ROSE LEE (Our Personality Girl)

GIRLS! GIRLS! GIRLS!

LAFFS! LAFFS! LAFFS!

WRESTLING THURSDAY NIGHTS (*Ghost*, second draft 1-1)

In the contrast of cultural hierarchies, between modern art and burlesque's "merry whirl," Lee's stage directions also suggest her likely awareness of Clement Greenberg's influential essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." First published in *The Partisan Review* in 1939, and influenced by the Frankfurt School of cultural criticism, the essay identified popular art, or kitsch, as "the epitome as all that is spurious in the life of our times," while referring to "popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc." (9-10). *The Ghost in the Woodpile* dramatizes Lee's sense of burlesque as a stigmatized performance form. At the same time, the play asserts Lee's self-aware bridging, and blurring, of the "Great Divide" separating "high art and mass culture" (Huysens viii) in her roles as burlesque star, visual artist, and author.

Whereas *The Naked Genius* concerned the conflicting identities of Honey Bee Carroll, the earlier *Ghost in the Woodpile*'s anti-heroine is named Gypsy Rose Lee, further blurring the lines between dramatic fiction, fantasy, and autobiography. *The Ghost in the Woodpile* examines the nature and function of autobiography, which Lee depicts as both essential to, and estranged from, her creative identity. Written by a woman who asserted her authorship of *The G-String Murders*, *The Ghost in the Woodpile*'s plot might seem puzzling: Lee reveals Sam Hinkle, and not Gypsy, as the true author of Gypsy's memoir *I'll Bare All*. Alluded to in both drafts, he appears in the earlier *Ghost in the Woodpile* as Gypsy's blackmailer: threatening to expose "the broad (as a) fraud" (*Ghost*, first draft 2-10). Yet through the "ghost" of the rough, uncultured Hinkle, Lee both questions the notion of an "authentic" self, and dramatizes the condition defining the terms of her high-profile writing career: the sense that she could not write honestly about herself in autobiographical form, but about a constructed persona; that the only truthful "self-portrait" has to be ghostwritten, when the subject lives in a pose. In one scene, Tracy reveals to Gypsy why he commissioned Hinkle:

That's why I had to get a guy like Hinkle to write it. Getting a ghost writer for you is a little different from getting a ghost writer for most people. You've been around a while. You've talked to newspaper people. You've been interviewed and quoted for more than six years. I had to get a very special writer to ghost for you. I had to get a writer with a good memory. I knew if you knew he was taking down everything you said, you'd go into one of your interview poses. I

didn't want that side of you in the book. I wanted the you that I know. The kid shoved into show business by her mother before she knows what's happened to her, kicking around second-rate vaudeville theaters, never going to school, never knowing which fork to use, living in cheap hotels, traveling in day coaches . . . that's what I wanted, Gyp. Not your house in the country, how many cans of fruit you put up last year, or your opinion of Karl Marx, or how well-read you are with the books to prove it. I wanted it to be a book just like you'd write if you got around to it. That's why it had to be written by a man who is uneducated, corny. . . . (*Ghost*, second draft 1-75)

In *The Ghost in the Woodpile*, then, Gypsy Rose Lee portrays herself, even more so than Hinkle, as the ghost of the title. The phantoms in the play are those of identity, representing both Gypsy's fear of the inauthentic, and the ghosts of her former self: the vulgar "second-rate vaudevillian" summoned by Hinkle's monologue. As Shteir observes of Lee, "she was essentially honest about her motive for stripping, which was to hurl herself away from the constraints of her family and her past, and into the American dream" (*Striptease* 339).

As she would in the later *Naked Genius*, Lee fictionalized aspects of her relationship with Mike Todd in the *Ghost in the Woodpile* drafts, while critiquing the impresario's marketing strategies. Named Stu Tracy in these drafts (and renamed Tracy Brannigan in *The Naked Genius*), he attempts to control the career of Honey Bee/Gypsy in both versions. At one point in *Ghost in the Woodpile*, Tracy echoes verbatim the press with which Todd belittled Gypsy Rose Lee. Having sold the rights to *I'll Bare All* to Twentieth Century Fox, he says on the phone to a Hollywood agent (in the earlier Hinkle draft), "No, Dave, I don't want Gypsy to make any more pictures. They damned near ruined her in the one she did. Let's face it. Gyp's strictly a no-talent dame" (*Ghost*, first draft 1-31). At the end of *The Ghost in the Woodpile*, Gypsy—after confessing Hinkle wrote *I'll Bare All*—returns to her roots in burlesque. Yet the play can be viewed less as a condemnation of burlesque as an institution, then of the larger patriarchal structures connecting the realms of show business, represented by Tracy, and publishing, represented by Charles Goodwin.

Tracy's managerial and emotional control of the fictional Gypsy in *The Ghost in the Woodpile* echoes the experience of the author with the subsequent production of *The Naked Genius*. In one letter, written in Pittsburgh, Lee bitterly rebukes Mike Todd (and, to a lesser extent, George S. Kaufman) for silencing her input on rehearsals and out-of-town tryouts. In the letter to Todd, Lee responds to the former's accusations that she attacked his production of *The Naked Genius* to a Pittsburgh newspaper interviewer.

Disputing Todd's well-publicized image as "The Boy Wonder," she also asserts that the responsibility for the production's failure did not lie solely with her script:

As I say, I have not seen those papers. . . . I didn't blame you or George. I said I didn't like the play. I lamented the jokes that get the laughs. Not because of how they were said, or who said them, who directed them, or who produced the facilities for them to have been said. I blamed the script. You know, in my heart I feel otherwise, but I can't tell that to people. As a producer, you have spent fifty thousand dollars. You have given the play a superb cast, director, costumes and sets. I blame you for not allowing me to be at rehearsals. For not allowing me a word as to the changes. For constantly belittling my efforts, in regards to the script, cast, sets and costumes. For those things I will not say to the press and have not. . . . You say you're glad to break up the Boy Genius myth. I'm only sorry you are pleased about breaking it with a play that I bled over for so many months. Yes, years. You say you can razzle dazzle it. I hope so. I have every faith that you can. You did so before, I believe you can do it again. Can you blame me for wishing that the play could stand on its own without a razzle dazzle? You have said over and over, "Give me time, I know what I'm doing." The nights the sailors saw it in Boston I said we were wrong. I said it even with the changes in New York. I said it in Baltimore. Each time, you told me to wait. I've waited. That's all. (Letter)

Lee's various drafts of *The Naked Genius* dramatize, on some levels, the battles of will that Lee waged with Mike Todd. Yet *The Ghost in the Woodpile* presents Lee seizing control of her own means of self-representation, choosing what to reveal and what to expose. In *The Ghost in the Woodpile*, Lee shows Gypsy commissioning Alonzo, a Spanish sculptor who has been working on a clay bust of Gypsy for the past two years. However, he has not even come close to finishing the bust: "What the hell, I like having you around," Gypsy tells him in the second draft of *Ghost*: "I'll probably be lonesome without you" (1-103). Although a male sculptor creates the image of Gypsy Rose Lee, it's the artist herself who controls the final outcome of the sculpture, and the unfinished—or unending—nature of the work may illustrate Lee's intuitive understanding of her own naked genius, in all its self-reinventing potential.

Likewise, the various drafts of *The Naked Genius* never reached final fruition. Yet these drafts, speaking powerfully to Lee's conception of both burlesque performance and authorship as psychological striptease, assert Lee's sense of an authorial role as essential to the many aspects of her private and public identity. Her work as a novelist and playwright expanded and enlarged Lee's image as America's preeminent stripper as much as it

allowed her to explore new facets of creative expression and forms of self-exploration. The model of authorship, as much as that of striptease, provided a potent framework for the many revisions of Lee's aspirational self-crafting.

Finally, *The Naked Genius* drafts reveal that Lee viewed the act of authorship, in the context of her burlesque background, as a culturally subversive form of feminist agency. With her writing, Lee redefined ideas and myths of who might play the role of author—and genius—in an American society marked by imposing stratifications of class, education, and gender. At the same time, these drafts speak to still-lingering double standards that surrounded the perception of women on the burlesque stage: to show, not to tell; to be seen, but not to narrate. Lee told the *National Police Gazette* in 1957, "People think that just because you're a stripper you don't have much else except a body. They don't credit you for your intelligence. Maybe that's why I write" (qtd. in Strom 145). Displaying the powerful spectacle of her intellect in both *The G-String Murders* and *The Naked Genius*, Lee would use these autobiographical fictions to further hone her literary talents into the truthful fabrications of *Gypsy: A Memoir*. Forming the basis of Jule Styne's, Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim's classic 1959 Broadway musical *Gypsy: A Musical Fable*, this memoir might claim *The Naked Genius* as a powerful, if unseen, authorial layer. □

Notes

¹Although it hasn't received a major full production since 1943, *The Naked Genius* was produced in June 2010 by the Mint Theater Company as a staged benefit reading, starring Kristen Johnston as Honey Bee Carroll.

²Lee wrote in one of the "Letters to My Editor," "As for my cooperating on promotion of *The G-String Murders*—if and when—I'll do my specialty in Macy's window to sell a book. If you would prefer it dignified, make it Wanamaker's window. There has been so much publicity about it already that I'm a little embarrassed (the book, I mean—not the specialty)" (*The G-String Murders* 238).

³Sherrill Tippins's *February House* offers a rich and detailed account of Lee's residence at 9 Middagh Street (her "literary incubator") along with George Davis, writers and artists such as W. H. Auden and Benjamin Britten, her work on *The G-String Murders*, and her close friendship with Carson McCullers, who Lee "delighted with her stories of playing the back half of a cow in vaudeville, of touring with Ziegfeld's *Follies* with a menagerie of cats, turtles, guinea pigs, and a goldfish that she'd won at Coney Island" (106). Ironically, Lee had frequented Davis's Seven Arts Bookstore in Detroit while on the road with the Orpheum Circuit; Davis had recommended Shakespeare's sonnets to the book-hungry teenager (Preminger 6).

⁴These are works by, respectively, Giovanni Boccaccio, Carl Van Vechten, James Huneker, Karl Marx, and Honoré de Balzac.

⁵It is difficult to arrive at a definite order of the various drafts of *The Naked Genius*, due to the scripts being dated by year, but not month. However, I've speculated upon a probable chronology based upon close textual study of scripts in the Gypsy Rose Lee Papers at the New York Library of Performing Arts's Billy Rose Collection. The director's script of *The Naked Genius*, reflecting the changes made by George S. Kaufman, is dated to 1943. Two earlier scripts of *The Ghost in the Woodpile* are estimated by the NYPL to have been written in 1942, as is a script of the earliest version, *The Seven Year Cycle*. One of the *Ghost in the Woodpile* scripts (including the character of Sam Hinkle) closely resembles the earliest draft, *The Seven Year Cycle*; for this reason, I have referenced it as the first draft of the *Ghost in the Woodpile* script. Speculating on a probable later date of composition, I have also referenced a second draft of *The Ghost in the Woodpile*, which more closely resembles *The Naked Genius*.

⁶Maurice Zolotow memorably describes George S. Kaufman's reactions as the play rehearsed: "Kaufman sat in the front row and watched the rehearsals and he did not say much. All the actors say he kept grinning happily. It soon developed that Mr. Kaufman's grin was not a grin—it was a nervous muscular reaction which appeared on his face whenever he experienced a profound revulsion at the dialogue or some member of the cast."

⁷Pagination in the manuscript follows the convention act—scene—page.

⁸The autobiographically-based character of Lee's mother (named Pansy in *The Naked Genius*, and Evangie in drafts of *The Ghost in the Woodpile*) also appears in Lee's 1942 murder mystery novel, *Mother Finds a Body*. Lee's withering, yet jaggedly affectionate, portrait of Pansy is among the highlights of *The Naked Genius*. It also presages the Rose, and "Rose's Turn," of *Gypsy*.

HONEY BEE (to Pansy): But darling . . . the book is about me.

MOTHER: And where would you be if it wasn't for me? (1–1–15).

⁹Rachel Shteir writes that, "According to John Cage, Joseph Cornell 'idolized Gypsy, whom he met after she bought one of his works'" (*Gypsy* 137).

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Embodying Intersections: The Performance Poetry of Staceyann Chin and Lenelle Moïse

Kristyl D. Tift

In this article, Kristal D. Tift analyzes the Black Lesbian Feminist Performance (BLFP) poetry of Staceyann Chin and Lenelle Moïse. With queer of color, lesbian-feminist, and performance theories as frameworks, she analyzes and theorizes Chin's "Cross-Fire" and Moïse's "Madivinez" for evidence of the intricacies of homemaking, or what José Esteban Muñoz termed worldmaking, for them as transnational black lesbian artists. Chin and Moïse not only present the pleasures of black lesbian womanhood in these solo performances, but they also propose interventions to the discomfort that arises when black lesbians craft and embody such intersectional identities in public.

Introduction

Staceyann Chin (b. 1972) and Lenelle Moïse (b. 1980) are Afro-Caribbean American lesbian feminist performance artists whose bodies and autobiographical narratives are central to their work.¹ Widely known as poets, Chin and Moïse are also playwrights who utilize a solo performance model in which their racialized and gendered bodies are front and center.² Still, much of the scholarship about their work is centered around the rich language of their poems—Chin's Jamaican patois and Moïse's Haitian Kreyol are unmistakable signifiers of the Caribbean. Less attention, however, has been given to their bodies in performance.³ Chin's "Cross-Fire"

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