

Doing the Dirty Work: Gendered Versions of Working Class Women in Sarah Daniels' *The Gut Girls* and Israel Horovitz's *North Shore Fish*

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"Who does the cooking? Me! Who does the washing up? Me! Who does the shopping? Me! And who does the death-defying financial acrobatics so we can get through the end of the month? Me me me! And I'm working full time at the factory, remember. Your dirty socks . . . who washes them, eh? How many times have you washed my socks?"¹

complains the young working mother to her sleeping husband as she reconstructs the argument of the previous evening in her frantic search for her house key before she leaves for work. This domestic exploitation parallels the exploitation she suffers at work where the bosses, the "multinationals" she labels them, keep the profits for themselves and shrug at the decrease in real income saying, "Nothing I can do about it. It's just the way things go."² This double-sided oppression in the home and the workplace so stridently proclaimed by Franca Rame's central character in *Waking Up* clearly establishes the author's ideological position as the spectator is encouraged to view the situation through the young mother's eyes and empathize with her predicament. The audience feels her anger at her husband and her frustration with her boss, both "sleeping" through her pain, and recognizes her as victimized by the system.

Two other contemporary plays, Israel Horovitz's *North Shore Fish* (1986) and Sarah Daniels' *The Gut Girls* (1988), also explore the exploitation of women in the workplace and the home. Like Rame, these dramatists present the women sympathetically and appear to place the blame for their oppression on the "system." Because the plays are so alike, it is easy to respond to them with identical reactions, but this fallacy lulls us into misguided anger and ultimately into an acceptance of the status quo. In spite of their "family resemblance," the ways in which the female characters are presented to the audience, the authorial stance, and the cultural ideologies which inform each play diverge widely, and

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it is only by contrasting the assumed ideologies that we can discover the subtle and subversive differences.

The similarities between the plays are astonishing: both dramatists are sympathetic to the exploitation of the working women they portray, and both foreground the daily activities of these women at home and at work. Each play opens in a food production plant—a Gloucester, Massachusetts, frozen fish processing company in the 1980's in *North Shore Fish*, a slaughter house in Deptford, England, at the turn of the century in *The Gut Girls*—two places of employment dominated by female workers overseen by the male foreman. For the women on the fish packaging line (Flo, Josie, Maureen, Marlena, Ruthie, and her mother Arlyne) and for the gut girls (Maggie, Ellen, Polly, Kate, and Annie), their jobs, often in the family for generations, are more than a livelihood; they represent the women's identity, so the closure of the plants toward the end of each play not only makes their jobs obsolete, but also forces them to alter their self-images. Parallels in the characters are also striking: individualized women bonded by the job in both plays; a lascivious boss (Sal in *North Shore Fish*, Harry in *The Gut Girls*); an emasculated assistant weaker in body and spirit than the women, but paid more (Porker in *North Shore Fish*, Jim in *Gut Girls*); and an empowered woman who, for economic or social reasons, has allied herself with the dominant male culture. The inspector Catherine Shimma in *North Shore Fish* refuses to pass the inferior product at the plant; the philanthropist Lady Helena in *The Gut Girls* sets up a social club to teach the girls decency, humility, and Christian virtues. These "male-identified" characters, to use Sue-Ellen Case's term, invade the community of working women and contribute to their forced change.

Though, at first glance, these two plays appear to offer parallel visions, in fact, the gendered authorial voices originate from profoundly different ideologies and result in subtle, but crucially different views of female oppression. These opposing ideological positions (which I will introduce here and to which I will return at the end of the paper) are more easily understood by drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of novelistic heteroglossia, "the living mix of varied and opposing voices"³ in dialogue with each other, renewing and clarifying each other. Bakhtin writes that a work seems monoglossic (or single-voiced) when an author "comes forward with his own unitary and fully affirming language"⁴ that privileges one point of view. It is crucial to recognize however, Bakhtin cautions, that it is the author's choice to make meaning appear unified, and that choice represents a profound ideological position located in the dominant authorial and authoritarian voice. This unified vision is what exists in Horowitz's play—a vision that consciously excludes other voices, other viewpoints for the sake of coherence and clear meaning. Undeniably sympathetic to the women on whom

he bases his play, Horovitz nevertheless portrays the female characters as objects for viewing: they may have distinct personalities, but not one has a voice of her own that can be differentiated from the dominant cultural voice, as we shall see later in the paper. While Horovitz deplores the exploitation of the women in the workplace, he does not offer much hope for improvement, so the subtextual message is that given the immutability of the situation, the only possibility of happiness and fulfillment, even if only momentary, is in the little things a home offers—a vacation, a loving husband, an affair, a baby. Other political views are outside the world of the play since all the characters think and speak from the same worldview. Even though the women in *North Shore Fish* narrate experiences of domestic unhappiness, even violence, they all cling to the myth of domestic fulfillment as love relationships blossom and a baby is born during the play. The women thus appear naive or worse which allows the spectator to feel superior and uninvolved. Horovitz, therefore, has reinforced the status quo as a unitary and unchanging system and has lured us into collusion.

His technique contrasts with that of Daniels who begins to decenter the ideological world, to inject heteroglossia into the world of the play by presenting characters with wildly different social visions: the variety of voices of the gut girls from the romantic Kate to the activist Ellen; the voice of Lady Helena, a good woman with altruistic motives, but blind to the value of the social world and supportive community of the gut girls, or the stereotypical male voice of Lard Tartaden or Arthur, one kinder perhaps, but both firmly placed in a patriarchal vision of the world. Bakhtin writes that "the decentralizing of the verbal-ideological world . . . begins by presuming fundamentally differentiated social groups, which exist in an intense and vital interaction with other social groups"⁵—a situation dramatized by Daniels. She places these different social languages, which represent according to Bakhtin "the social and ideological voices of [their] era,"⁶ in dialogue with each other. Victorian aristocratic notions (altruistic, imperialist, and materialist) confront trade unionist rhetoric; patriarchal values confront alternate class and gender systems, and the coexistence of the contradictions destroys monoglossia and the unitary system it represents. Lady Helena, while representing a point of view opposing that of Daniels, is not a monster determined to break the gut girls, and her sympathetic portrayal intensifies the conflicts both author and audience feel about the enforced conformity she imposes on the gut girls. In her speech, we hear what Bakhtin labels "double-voiced discourse . . . in such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions"⁷ almost in conversation with each other. Thus the diversity of voices, rather than accepting the limits of a system as given, strains at those constructed constraints and pushes definitions, ideas, images of systems

beyond their "completed aspect"⁸ and encourages spectators/readers to provide a more complete and forward-looking vision. Bakhtin poetically explains:

Languages of heteroglossia, like mirrors that face each other, each reflecting in its own way a piece, a tiny corner of the world, force us to guess at and grasp for a world *behind* [italics mine] their mutually reflecting aspects that is broader, more multi-leveled, containing more and varied horizons than would be available to a single language or a single mirror.⁹

Daniels offers the possibility of such a world in which women demand to be heard and assert themselves as subjects, and she challenges the dominant cultural system to change its ways, to allow alternate voices and lifestyles to exist without conforming to the norm. Unlike Horovitz's depiction of a given and relatively static situation of oppression, Daniels pessimistically delineates the process of suppression of a perceived threat to the status quo, and the subtextual message proclaims that happiness and independence are only achieved outside the home which is actually yet another place of oppression. She explodes the myth of domestic fulfillment as the audience watches the destruction of the solidarity and community of the gut girls as these independent women are silenced by being forced into more traditional domestic, and therefore more acceptable, roles. Horovitz never gives his women voices of their own; Daniels shows how the capitalist, patriarchal society silences women when their voices become too loud and challenges us to create a world which valorizes otherness.

One way in which to discover the author's worldview is to examine the way in which s/he presents the female characters. The women in Horovitz's play are clearly erotic icons, whereas those in Daniels' constantly "slap the face," at least metaphorically, that tries to limit them in that role. *North Shore Fish* opens early in the morning as Porker, the male assistant, described in the cast list as "small, sadly comic,"¹⁰ readies the plant for the day's work. As he mops, he tries to sing a love song, "Strangers in the Night," but he forgets the lyrics so he makes up lewd verses, thus preparing the audience to look at the characters sexually. During the finale of the song, Florence Rizzo, the female lead described as "once a high-school bombshell," arrives dressed in "shorts, a bright blouse, carrying two largish pocketbooks, cigarette in her lips."¹¹ In the production at the Studio Theatre in Washington D.C., she enters on a walkway, approximately eight feet above the stage floor. This walkway extends from the upstage left entrance halfway across the stage. Thus Flo is immediately privileged visually—almost on a stage on the stage. After announcing her arrival by using foul language to disparage Porker's singing, she immediately takes off her shorts and her blouse

to reveal sexy underwear, of course announcing that she is changing and ordering Porker to "turn your head around!" which he does reluctantly only after he has watched the display meant for him. The spectator watches the disrobing as does Porker. Horovitz clearly displays Flo through male eyes as a sex object, as a passive figure to be viewed but lacking the power of viewing or ultimately the power of her own as subject.

Laura Mulvey, a feminist film critic, defines this passive role of female representation in her analysis of the male gaze:

The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness* . . .¹²

Sue-Ellen Case explains that "the gaze is encoded with culturally determined components of male sexual desire, perceiving 'woman as a sexual object,'"¹³ and so both male characters and all spectators perceive her in the same way. These characteristics are clearly evident in this first scene. Flo, from the beginning is displayed as object passed for viewing from the stage to the auditorium, and while she is the most prominent, she is certainly not alone—the overweight Josie also strips down for erotic viewing, and the stage directions actually read "wears lacy bra; flashes the men."¹⁴ In addition, the constant bantering among the women (which alternates between sexual nuance and outright "dirty talk" as Arlyne, the self-appointed prude, calls it) and the foreman's incessant patting of their behinds, pinching of their cheeks, and stealing kisses or more keep the women on display as sex objects. Women outside that paradigm are simply not women. The inspector, Catherine Shimma, so frustrates Sal with her rejection of his sexual advances and her apparent masculine authority over his future that he "trans-sexes" her through name-calling, labelling her a "bull-dyke" and endowing her with "dyke-balls." Horovitz, however, undermines this empowered woman by clarifying her actual powerlessness within the system when she angrily shouts to anyone listening, "You tell him I got people lookin' over my shoulder . . . and I'm covering my own ass, no matter what. Even if I have ta' close this plant down. If I hav'ta, I hav'ta! I'm just doin' a job."¹⁵ Catherine Shimma's plaintive justification of her actions depreciates her position of authority with the stage "audience" (the characters watching her "show") and also with the house audience.

Costumes, lighting, and blocking direct the spectator's vision, whether male or female, to see through male eyes, and the male-oriented presentation of woman

as "other" denies the female character any real desires or goals of her own distinct from those desired by the male subject. This presentation of woman as "other" not only denies the female spectator a reaction distinct from the male one, but forces her into an imagined feeling of superiority over the female character which precludes identification with that character and thus which subliminally coerces the female spectator into becoming an agent of her own oppression. Horovitz provides a flagrant example in a scene where the women are evaluating male decency by nationality. Having rejected Jews, Italians, Portuguese, Irish, and English, one suggests that Frenchmen might be decent, but Marlana quickly denies their eligibility with an anecdote. She and her husband were having a shed built by French workers, and one morning two asked to enter the kitchen for a glass of water. She confides so that we can almost hear a panting in her voice: "One . . . comes up behind me and like presses himself against me. The older one—with the muscle shirt—he presses himself against me, in front, kisses me. The younger one reaches under and up, around front,"¹⁶ but she cannot make a sound because her husband is shaving in the next room, and he would beat her up if he found out. That response alone calls into question her reaction to the incident, but just in case the audience misinterprets her represented desire, Horovitz has Porker break the silence after the story with the question, "So, what did you do?"—a question Marlana never answers. The impression is, of course, that this experience actually aroused her: the reaction desired by the male subject. It is important to emphasize that female as well as male audience members assume Marlana's titillation. Stripping the woman of her ability to represent a distinct point of view, trivializes her and denies her a voice, and it reinforces a profoundly conservative patriarchal ideology—a monoglossic worldview. This scene demonstrates that not only is the female character denied a voice; the female spectator is silenced as well.¹⁷ Before returning to the cultural assumptions that Horovitz implies, we need to contrast his presentation of the women with that of Daniels.

The gut girls present the opposite picture at the opening of Daniels' play.¹⁸ These women are working class and poor, like those in *North Shore Fish*, and they work under horrific conditions, portrayed not only visually in the set—a dirty, smelly, and bloody gutting shed—and verbally in vivid descriptions of blood up to their ankles, rancid smells, and a frigid environment, but also in the reactions of individuals entering the shed for the first time. The new girl, Annie, nearly faints and does vomit at the sight, and Lord Tartaden, who accompanies Lady Helena on her altruistic mission, passes out immediately after entering the shed. Lady Helena's garments that she wore on her visit smell so bad that she orders her maid to burn them. In addition, the workplace has no toilets, the girls eat their lunch in the sheds, and they receive no sick days. In spite of this

exploitation, these women are proud and joyful, and their exhilaration in their independent life-style is evident in the lilt in their voices, in their jokes with each other, in their ability to talk to Lady Helena as an equal, in their outrageous hats, and in their stopping off for beers after work. These women have their own identities and represent a different breed as expressed by the shocking revelation that they wear no undergarments. They are strong, and their powerful position is underscored in numerous ways: when they leave work, men clear the streets to let them pass; they intimidate Len, the inn-keeper, who is afraid to kick them out of his pub; and they harass a second-rate comedian who uses them as the brunt of his jokes until he leaves the stage. These women revel in life, and they celebrate their woman-ness, their alterity. By placing these women in the subject position so that the spectator must view them from at least two perspectives, Daniels injects heteroglossia into the play world, and that alternate voice means that these women also pose a threat to the status quo; they are outside the bounds of acceptable womanhood, and as such, they must be silenced, domesticated.

Luce Irigaray, in *This Sex Is Not One*, explains the potential threat of otherness as perceived by the dominant order when she asks how society would change if women were not oppressed and silenced:

What modification would this process, this society, undergo, if women, who have been only objects of consumption or exchange, necessarily aphasic, were to become *speaking subjects* as well? Not, of course, in compliance with the masculine, or more precisely the phallogentric, *model*. That would not fail to challenge the discourse that lays down the law today, that legislates on everything, including sexual difference, to such an extent that the existence of another sex, of an other, that could be woman, still seems, in its terms, unimaginable.¹⁹

That defiance of the law (the dominant ideology), of course, meets with vociferous resistance by those in power, and Daniels details that systematic suppression of an independent voice through the viewpoints of the many protagonists. The play dramatizes the process whereby independent women, considered by the rest of society to be social outcasts, misfits unable to perform in traditional roles of wife, mother, or mistress, are tamed and thus made socially acceptable or marketable—a process explained in more theoretical terms by feminist scholars like Gayle Rubin and Luce Irigaray. Starting from Levi-Strauss' premise that one organizing principle of society is gift-giving and the most precious "gift" is a woman, Rubin, in "The Traffic of Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," postulates that this "domestication of women" where women are relegated to the role of gifts exchanged by men for their own gain,

where they lose control over their own destinies, subordinates females to the position of: "conduit of a relationship [between men] rather than a partner to it."²⁰ Irigaray concurs, stating that

"Woman has functioned most often by far as what is at stake in a transaction, usually rivalrous, between two men, her passage from father to husband included. She has functioned as merchandise, a commodity passing from one owner to another, from one consumer to another, a possible currency of exchange between one and the other."²¹

As a commodity, the woman is silenced since goods do not speak, do not have a say in their exchange. Thus an essential aspect of being feminine is aphasia, and in order to become a valuable gift, the woman must become feminine, and, therefore, silent. This aphasia does not signify the inability to form the actual words; it connotes the loss of a voice distinct from the dominant patriarchal one. Daniels shows how silence is taught or beaten into these women who begin the play with what one character calls "irrepressible paganism." Maggie, the outspoken, abrasive gut girl, kind enough to catch Annie as she starts to faint on her first day, but brazen enough to let Lord Tartaden hit the filthy floor; strong enough to shoulder a whole beef carcass which Jim, the male assistant, struggles to lift; and confident enough to stand up for her rights even to her social superiors, is transformed into an obedient wife. In an early scene, she swears to her mother that she will never get married to become a drudge burdening herself with eleven children and more miscarriages like her mother, and later at the social club, set up by Lady Helena for the gut girls, she shows spunk bordering on insolence. On her way home, when Lord Tartaden attempts to rape her, she expertly defends herself with a large carving knife, a powerful phallic symbol, against his small pocket knife. That moment of role reversal is the climactic one in her story, for she then resolves never to return to the social club, and that decision prevents her from being placed in a domestic job after the slaughterhouse is closed. None of her possible leads ends in an independent job, and she must settle for marrying the inn-keeper Len just to get a roof over her head; she is condemned to the life of a drudge which she had rejected earlier.

One by one, the gut girls are silenced—Annie, the new girl, arrives in the gutting sheds timid and broken. She has just borne a stillborn baby, the result of repeated rapes by her former employer when she was in service, and she views herself as a fallen woman. With the gut girls, she develops a voice—confidence, joy in life, a sense of self-worth, which is ripped away when she must again enter service after the closure of the sheds. Kate is told she has the potential to become a nanny and that hope of advancement prevents her from talking even

briefly to her old boyfriend or Annie. Polly is imprisoned after she stops her abusive employer from beating her by punching him. Ellen, the former union activist, in a moving monologue, acknowledges her powerlessness against the system and renounces her radical politics. She will conform to survive. We watch the gut girls forced into more traditional, and therefore acceptable and marketable, female roles in spite of the fact that the transformation breaks their spirits—a fact underscored by the scenes of repeated physical and psychological abuse of Priscilla, the domesticated "society lady," wife to Arthur, one of the owners of the gutting sheds. The final image of the play visually reinforces the devastating power of the transformation of these women as Daniels juxtaposes Lady Helena, on one side of the stage, revelling in the success of her training the gut girls to be servants, an accomplishment that she truly believes is an improvement in the girls' lives, and Ellen, on the other side, showing the deadening results of that education.

The significance of the differences between these two plays is that they represent profoundly different ideological positions. While Horovitz acknowledges the problems with the capitalist, patriarchal system, he posits it as the best available. In spite of foregrounding women's issues, he reaffirms the dominant ideology by essentially establishing it as a non-ideology, as natural—the only option, a given. Things happen in the play, but there is not real movement in terms of awareness, understanding, or beliefs, and that static situation reinforces the status quo. The women, now out of work, look to the home for salvation—the possibility of a new husband or of luring a wandering husband home, a new baby, a first vacation after several years of marriage. The audience can feel bad that the plant has closed, but what can be done when jobs become obsolete? The audience member falsely assumes that s/he has more insight than the characters so the hardships they experience could not happen to him/her.²² When the author creates a non-ideology, Jill Dolan warns, "The perceptions of the more powerful have come to serve as standards for the less powerful, who do not have the same access to the media and artistic outlets that create public opinion . . . [so] less powerful people are subjected to social structures that benefit the interests of the more powerful."²³ The danger with Horovitz's play is that we fail to recognize its "perceptions."

Daniels, on the other hand, has written a call to action, to a revolutionary overthrow of the dominant ideology which is presented as constructed, not given, as the one system which currently has the power but which is not the only viable one. By depicting what should not happen in vivid and frightening detail in the multiple stories of the oppressed women, Daniels challenges the *audience*, particularly the women, and not the characters, to change the story. Her awareness of the revolutionary nature of that challenge is obvious in the very

structure of the play: in the episodic narration of a variety of stories. Bell Hooks, in *Talking Back*, warns that "oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, *telling their story* [italics mine]."24 Every liberation, she asserts, begins when individuals traditionally viewed as objects, insist that they be acknowledged as subjects, as the gut girls did forcefully and successfully for a time. By beginning with this community of rebellious women who are clearly viewed as a threat to the established order and thus are systematically suppressed by capitalist forces and patriarchy, Daniels alerts the spectator to the very real possibility of failure of the revolution to establish a new ideological structure. And she encourages us to direct our energies and our anger not just against the abstract oppressive societal forces, but more significantly against ourselves for not insuring that the revolution succeed.

The inconclusive ending of *The Gut Girls* offers a stark contrast to the ending of *North Shore Fish* where Ruthie gives birth to a daughter on the premises of the fish packaging plant. Unaware of the closure of the plant, she happily coos to the baby that the little girl will become the next generation of packers. Horovitz portrays the women reveling not only in motherhood, but in the merger of the two roles of home and work. The highest commendation for a workplace in *North Shore Fish* is not job satisfaction or a sense of self, but one of the most domestic of activities—the birth of a baby. The implication is that as far as happiness is concerned, the woman is better off in the home. Daniels, on the other hand, shows how the loss of their jobs and therefore their independent identities force the gut girls into the roles of wife/servant, identical hidden forms of oppression, and, more importantly, she insists that the women themselves are responsible for their oppression by letting their communality be broken. By showing failure here, Daniels also points out a way to break the cycle.

Jill Dolan insists that "ideology is implicit in perception, and therefore in any critical or creative act—analysis, description, or interpretation"²⁵ and quotes Michelle Barrett's definition of ideology to support her assertion:

Ideology is a generic term for the processes by which meaning is produced, challenged, reproduced, transformed. Since meaning is negotiated primarily through means of communication and signification, it is possible to suggest that cultural production provides an important site for the construction of ideological processes . . . [L]iterature [read "theatre"] can be usefully analyzed as a paradigmatic case of ideology in particular social formations.²⁶

If "all representation is inherently ideological"²⁷ as Dolan asserts, and ideology provides us with a way of seeing, knowing, and understanding our world, then we have a responsibility to know what is being taught. And to take this notion one step further, if ideology, and by extension art, is knowledge-making, it is of crucial importance to understand what is being constructed. Foregrounding female characters, as does Horovitz, does not necessarily valorize gender differences and can, in fact, reinforce the dominant culture. Only by challenging hidden ideological assumptions, as does Daniels, can knowledge be reconstructed to celebrate otherness.

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Notes

1. Dario Fo and Franca Rame, *Female Parts, One Woman Plays* (London: Pluto Press, 1981) 6.
2. 6.
3. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Carl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 49.
4. 332.
5. 368.
6. 411.
7. 324.
8. 3.
9. 414-15.
10. Israel Horovitz, *North Shore Fish* (New York, 1989) 11.
11. 16.
12. Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989) 19.
13. Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1988) 118.
14. Horovitz 21.
15. 52.
16. 47.
17. See Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1988); Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*; Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984); and E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983).
18. Sarah Daniels, *The Gut Girls* (London: London, 1989).
19. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, tr. Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1985) 85.
20. Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic of Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975) 174.
21. Irigaray 157-58.
22. Richard Foreman explains this phenomenon in "Ontological-Hysteric Manifesto II" [in Kate Davy, ed., *Richard Foreman: Plays and Manifestos* (New York: New York UP, 1976). 148] where he writes that an audience must be constantly reminded that the world is not a coherent ordered whole:

A realistic (which means comforting-style) work can tell the story of shipwreck, and sentiments of shipwreck can be expressed because man can handle that emotionally by looking at it as ONE EXPERIENCE out of so many . . . and so his conscious thinking makes him feel O.K. even in the face of a momentarily disturbing STORY about REAL PEOPLE.

23. Dolan 15.

24. Bell Hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989) 43.

25. Dolan 15.

26. 15.

27. 41.