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Anthologizing Gwen Flager's plays in southern lesbian theater

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ABSTRACT

With limited anthologizing of southern United States lesbian theater, the purpose of this article is twofold: to anthologize the work of Gwen Flager, self-identified southern lesbian playwright and to interpret Flager's work as intentionally disruptive to gender and sexual norms through humor and a centering of southern lesbian identity. Flager is an award-winning playwright with U.S. southern roots. Born in Oklahoma in 1950, she spent many years in Louisiana and Alabama before relocating to Houston, Texas. Member of the Scriptwriters Houston, Dramatists Guild of America, and New Play Exchange, she won the 2017 Queensbury Theater's New Works playwriting competition for her original script, *Shakin' the Blue Flamingo*, which premiered in 2018 after a 12-month development process. By offering a series of untold stories about and from various perspectives of U.S. southern lesbian characters who navigate southern cuisine, history, identity, race, class, nationalism, and self-realization throughout the late twentieth century, Flager positions her characters and the plays themselves as owners of the best version of southern culture, shifting the center to an oft-marginalized southern lesbian identity.

KEYWORDS

Gwen Flager; southern lesbian theater; lesbian playwrights; lesbian theater; lesbian plays

Introduction

Lesbian theater companies are traditionally underfunded and do not attract mainstream critics or publicity, thus uncovering research in this field has its confines. As such, one must sometimes rely on the theaters' own pamphlets, reviews in alternative periodicals, and word of mouth (Case, 1992). Furthermore, "so many of the gay theaters, or at least it used to be [before many gay theaters closed in 2020 due to the pandemic], primarily had male artistic directors," explains Gwen Flager, award-winning and self-identified southern lesbian playwright (Flager, personal communication, February 10, 2022) (Figure 1). Flager continues, "I don't know, really and truly, if they are as interested in putting on a play strictly about lesbians,



Figure 1. Gwen Flager, <https://gwenflager.com>.

and oh, by the way, it might have a happy ending” (Flager, personal communication, February 10, 2022). While there are varied and nuanced definitions, definitions, and embodiments of this word, for the purposes of this article, I refer to the following: “lesbianism is not simply sexual but is a matter of resistance to patriarchy. Lesbianism is about being fully oneself rather than the stunted person that society thinks of as ‘woman’” (Phelan, 1994).

Thus, where might the reader and audience become acquainted with lesser known plays that feature U.S. southern lesbian experiences? Or where might one meet a talented, prolific, and witty southern lesbian playwright who is excluded from empowered venues, wealthy donors, well-known theater groups, and fancy literary reviews? Flager’s regional professional profile, vis-à-vis her tremendous talent, highlights the disparity in access to privileged venues in any field, and in this case, contemporary United States theater including exclusion from traditionally lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, two-spirits (LGBTQIAS2+) friendly arenas. As Flager herself states, “we need an advocate to say we need to tell these stories” (Flager, personal communication, February 10, 2022). There is limited anthologizing and production of southern lesbian theater, all the while, “this focus on space as a site of contestation serves as a dominant focus of feminist and queer geography. ‘Space isn’t natural, and it isn’t neutral’” (Harker, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this article is twofold: to anthologize Flager in the under-chronicled lineage of noteworthy lesbian playwrights in the United States, specifically as a southern author; and, to interpret Flager’s works as a queering of southern performativity via lesbianism portrayed in the playwright’s characters and in the plays themselves.



Figure 2. Scene from the August 2022 production of *Shakin' the Blue Flamingo*, produced by Dirt Dogs Theaters at MATCH in Houston, Texas. <https://gwenflager.com>.

Gwen Flager

Flager is an award-winning playwright with southern roots. Born in Oklahoma in 1950, she spent many years in Louisiana and Alabama before relocating to Houston, Texas, and more recently to Henderson, Nevada. Member of the Scriptwriters Houston, Dramatists Guild of America, and New Play Exchange, she won the 2017 Queensbury Theater's New Works playwriting competition for her original script, *Shakin' the Blue Flamingo*, which premiered in 2018 after a 12-month development process (Flager). Most recently, *Shakin' the Blue Flamingo* was produced by Dirt Dogs Theater Company and directed by Bonnie Hewett with a run at Midtown Arts and Theater Center Houston (MATCH) August 12-20, 2022 (Figure 2). Flager's other works have been produced at the 2019 Santa Cruz Actors' Theater 8 Tens @ 8 Festival, the 2017 Midwest Dramatists Conference, the 2015 Scriptwriters Houston 10×10 Showcase, the 2012 Scriptwriters Houston Fifth Annual Museum Plays and Theater Suburbia (Houston) 2010 Season (Flager, personal communication, December 22, 2021). She also served as playwright mentor to high school seniors selected for Houston, Texas' Student Playwright Festival, supported by a scholarship competition through Dirt Dogs Theater Company (Flager, personal communication, December 22, 2021). Flager's oeuvre centers on U.S. southern lesbian experiences vis-à-vis racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and nationalism with a gallant dose of witty, southern humor.

Flager draws on lived and observed experiences when crafting formidable characters, almost all of whom are women: Her upbringing in Louisiana

and Alabama and her strong sense of self are reflected in her award-winning plays. Her writings all have a southern flavor and embrace the strong unconventional women of the region: “Storming down the river roads of Mobile County and Caddo Parish offered many encounters with the women who fought for their way of life” (Flager, n.d.). Flager describes herself as “a storyteller at heart and good stories need to be told...[with] southern flavor.... I have created characters we all know, whether we want to admit it or not - characters who make us laugh and cry, who make us slightly uncomfortable and who know heartache” (Artistic, n.d.). Flager locates her work in the U.S. South with an honest portrayal of local racial, gender, and sexual violence accompanied by a tender rendering of her characters’ struggles and strengths. Flager’s plays deliberately act to move lesbian characters and relationships from the margin to the center, similarly decentering toxic forms of patriarchy that often occlude lesbian and other marginal identities. An example of this occlusion is evidenced by Flager’s play *Old Spice* (Flager, 2016a) that was altered without her consent in 2016 at Vox Feminina VII produced by Pandora Theater and Fort Bend County Libraries in Richmond, Texas. According to Flager, “this was the play that was ‘censored’ when the dialogue was changed to reflect a straight male character rather than gay as well as other lines of dialogue revised to then somehow make sense of the earlier changes” (Flager, personal communication, December 22, 2021). Thus, Flager does not consider this play to have been produced. This censorship furthers the imperative to understand Flager’s contribution to southern lesbian literature and how her characters claim and reshape narratives of power, place, and belonging.

Flager’s plays

Within the lineage of lesbian playwrights and performance artists whose work queers the concept of a single, unified subjectivity (Forte, 1990), Flager’s collected works offer a site of contestation for normative performance on stage and within or beyond the cannon, especially as this relates to southern lesbian identity. While Flager’s plays are conventionally structured, her act of writing and the placement of her work in contemporary United States theater speaks to a critical inquiry into the status quo that confronts predictable narratives of sexual identity politics and the U.S. South.

Ownership of space and regional identity are motifs throughout Flager’s plays. All set in the South or in the United States without naming a city or region, each work centers on southern lesbian identities vis-à-vis a tension of belonging and proprietary rights to southern culture. The playwright sets the antagonists, and conventional readings of the South itself, as adversaries to lesbianism, an identity that goes unnamed but not unnoticed. Her intentional contribution to the anthology of southern lesbian

playwrights is a welcome transgression and celebration that tells the untold stories of southern identity best performed by the lesbian characters she shares with her audience.

Waiting to Be Mended (Flager, 2018) is a full-length play set in a small, unnamed town in Alabama. The action centers on Celia Baker and Melissa Wilson whose relationship faces constant peril from Elmer Whitman's violently religious persecution, symbolic of the region's "what will the neighbors think" ethos. In the opening scene, Elmer, upon seeing the exchange of a hug and a kiss between Melissa and Celia, assaults the former who is practicing polka in the church parking lot with the latter. Through a series of subsequent events, Elmer's spouse, Gloria Whitman, rented a bedroom to Melissa who Elmer beats in the church parking lot. Layered into the play are complex, intertextual threads including mental illness, southern cuisine, family secrets, access to education, classism, gossip, hidden matriarchs, unmarried sex and childbirth, and destabilizing heteronormativity hinged on fault lines of the façade of religious superiority. Elmer performs his southern religious righteousness while Gloria unravels his hypocrisy by appropriating scripture. Gloria speaks about Melissa as God's child, further angering Elmer. Through Elmer's unraveling violence, Flager shifts Gloria, Melissa, and Celia into the center of southern generosity and hospitality. Furthermore, the matriarch emerges as lineage for owning and transmitting the more correct version of southern kindness: Gloria ensures that Melissa aligns with her families' birthright to inhabit the southern home, both tangible and intangible. In the end, Gloria and Melissa take ownership of the house, a gesture the playwright scripts to shift the center from Elmer's patriarchy to Gloria, Melissa, and Celia's matriarchal, lesbian rethinking of southern identity.

Flager's kindness toward her characters, even toward her less likeable ones, is reflective of a tender yearning toward a visibility and reconciliation of southern history, identity, and queer politics. For example, the only demonstrable show of physical intimacy between women in *Waiting to Be Mended* (Flager, 2018) takes place in a church parking lot through stage directions: "Melissa puts on music; dances very exaggerated and overly dramatic; when the song finishes, Celia rocks Melissa's hand back and forth as if swaying with the evening breeze. Celia leans against Melissa, grasps both hands, and as she lay her face against Melissa's cheek, whispers in her ear. Celia steps back. Melissa takes Celia's face in her hands, kisses her and hugs her." One might unravel this scene on numerous levels: the reader or audience cannot access the privileged exchange of whispered words; both women have autonomy and sexual agency; the power of this interaction sets in motion the rest of the play. In this intimate moment, Elmer enters the scene and invokes God as his justification for assaulting Melissa. While Melissa and Celia's immediate fate is disrupted, the characters and action weave together as to ensure their promise of futurity.

Insofar as Melissa merely kissing Celia triggers instantaneous patriarchal, homophobic, and religious rage, therein lies how Flager positions the visibility of lesbian identity. So threatening to the status quo, to the compulsory heteronormativity, to the conflation of national and regional identity, religion, agency, and pleasure, Melissa and Celia's tender kiss has the power to upend the (fragile) social order. Elmer unravels in his church and community: "happy, cohesive homosociality relies on the denial or prohibition of the homosexual, whose eroticizing of the social bonds threatens its collapse" (Bell & Binnie, 2000).

Whereas heteronormative sex acts are naturalized into invisibility, the public lesbian sex act, as performed by Melissa and Celia for example, disrupts the confluence of public space with normative models of citizenry. Furthermore, Elmer's violent response reveals the slippage between sexual citizenship and heteronormativity. Reduced to physical violence, Elmer invokes the repressive state apparatus of public versus private in that both spatial-political categories are exclusionary to queer identities. Moreover, "the cleaning-up of sex zones goes hand in hand with an ideology of production of safe domestic space, where families can occupy space without the threat of contagion from alternate forms of intimacy" (Bell & Binnie, 2000). Melissa and Celia have safe access to neither sphere until Gloria makes them a home by leveraging her knowledge of southern kindness, righteousness, and matriarchal power. Hughes and David hold, "the performative nature of queer lives involves a continuous negotiation between our sense of private and public selves that does not always amount to seeing these two areas as discreet" (2000). Flager draws upon the "open secret" motif of lesbian identity: her characters face being noticed but unnamed, and she provides their identities a concrete place and time.

Similarly, in *Sing Me to the Other Side* (Flager, 2019b), a two-act play set in Bynum, Alabama, two lesbian characters, Katie and Irma Lee, live their open secret in a deeply racist, homophobic, and dangerous setting. Indeed, their lives are stitched into the Civil Rights movement vis-à-vis familial and societal ideologies that culminate with a bus bombing. Noble and fraught, the play takes place on Mother's Day. Lorean is the mother, and her son-in-law, her daughter Mary Jean's husband Larry, is suggested to be a member of the Ku Klux Klan who is set on bombing a bus of Freedom Riders arriving from Atlanta. The action unfolds as Katie, another of Lorean's daughters whose lover is Irma Lee, prepares for Mother's Day in conversation with Mary Jean. Simultaneously, Lorean's third daughter Chrissy is slated to arrive on a different bus line. All the while, Lorean's son Buddy, the butt of jokes as he works for Calhoun Country Fish and Game and not the police department, is tempted to join "the council," and racial violence is destined to impact the family.

In *Sing Me to the Other Side* each character is determinant to the plot, action, theme, and resolution in the play. More specifically, Lorean's

motivations are presented at the tender and precarious nexus of family, friends, and history. She embodies her role as matriarch through humor, kindness, and a quiet steadfastness demonstrated through her lines, gestures, and related stage directions. Larry is also instrumental, and while one might find it difficult to identify anything redemptive about his persona, he is critical to the evolving action. Joe is an important foil to Larry: Joe is Lorean's graciously kind long-time neighbor and friend who embodies quiet resistance. Meanwhile, Larry represents aggression. His presence looms, like racial danger and history itself, just beyond, in an elusive place where Lorean, Katie, Irma Lee, Joe, and the play itself cannot reach. Similar to Elmer in *Waiting to Be Mending*, Larry represents the stereotypical loci of southern identity: White, rigid, racist, homophobic, heteronormative, and hyper masculine. Nevertheless, Flager slowly writes Larry out of the center of southern identity, all the while ensuring that Irma Lee and Katie, along with Lorena, become the more desirable representation of southern politeness, kindness, hospitality, and righteousness.

The setting and related timing are bold and necessary right down to who is bringing what to supper along with "what will the neighbors think." Through setting and the aforementioned dialogue, Flager saturates the reader or audience with southern culture through perfectly placed details such as green stamps in Anniston, a twenty-two with shells in jewelry box, Picayunes in Irma Lee's glove box. Similarly, the word "table" appears repeatedly throughout the play, a timely southern symbol for family, dialogue, politics, reconciliation, and war. Flager captures these themes seamlessly and with a precision and gentleness that cannot be overstated.

To further explain, the play is bookended by Katie's hospital scenes. It becomes quickly apparent that something major is at stake, all the while channeling the reader or spectator through the nuanced and careful conversation around Alabama's racial violence. Flager centers the plot on a White family's fracturing during this time. Some characters are treated with varying degrees of political and racial insight while others are appropriately characterized as White supremacists. Mary Jean's journey parallels the south's journey with the arrival of the Freedom Riders on Mother's Day. No one gets away really, nor the characters nor the reader or audience. The climatic action of the bus bombing in tandem with the ending scenes might leave the reader or spectator with a sense of desolation; nevertheless, the play is a nod to pockets of hope and a sense of overdue honor to individual and collective action against seemingly insurmountable odds. When considering Flager's characters such as these, their "infelicitous performances...risk punishment and prohibition, including bodily harm and death" (Warner, 2013).

Regarding the dialogue in *Sing Me to the Other Side*, the exchanges between Lorean and Mary Jane, loving mother and daughter, underpin the tension of the plot and action. Lorean's comprehension of Irma Lee,

her daughter Katie's lover who she sweetly refers to as "Oscar Lee," is an endearing malapropos. All the while, Mary Jane echoes the pathos of the era. The highly contextualized dialogue places the setting squarely in the deep south with layered and humorous quips that center on neighbors, silverware, drinking, religion, maintaining appearances, and what may be said and what may not be said in the God fearing public. The dialogue is replete with nuances and subtleties such as Joe saying: "Katie, thank you for the compliment. But I can't sit at your table." Similarly, the language around Irma Lee brings forth that which cannot be named but pervades the human condition. Once again, Flager ensures that lesbianism not only emerges from noticed to named to celebrated, but also recognizes the embodiment of righteous southern performativity.

Similarly, *In Flight* (Flager, 2012) is a one act play set in a Texas art museum. This play is partially written, and the action centers on a dialogue between Edgar and Fern who hold seemingly different philosophies on the value of birds: the former hunts them with little luck and the latter appreciates their beauty. A chance encounter, these two polite characters mirror birds "in flight," something they both agree is a compelling sight to behold. Through this short play, Flager bridges opposing vantage points, easily paralleling a politically divided nation, through tender and playful dialogue. It becomes evident that both Edgar and Fern have something meaningful, grounding, and enduring in common.

A tenderness may also be found throughout *Tattoos and Taters* (Flager, 2016b), a full-length, humorous play set for production in October 2023 at The Shawnee Playhouse: Theater in the Poconos. The play's action is located "somewhere in West Texas," and centers on the Anderson family's conflict with Opal Jones, the town meddler who owns the prominent grocery store. Lily Anderson, mother to two daughters Charley and Ouisie, is supportive of Charley's lesbian relationship with Joey Garza who owns the town's tattoo parlor, Rainbow Ink. Moments after meeting Joey for the first time, Lily teases her: "You're a brave woman to keep company with Charley" (*Tattoos*, 2016). Through Opal's status as the grocery store owner with a sister who works at Town Hall, Flager reveals the heteronormative corrections intended to thwart Charley and Joey's same-sex relationship by ostracizing Lily. When Charley refused to marry Opal's son Duane, Opal sets out to block Lily's sewing enterprise by ensuring no one will sell her fabric nor invite her to sewing circles. Meanwhile, Opal steals Charley's dog Tater, and Duane, through a series of defiant acts against his controlling mother, returns Tater to Charley just before he leaves for New Mexico to marry someone else. Once again, Flager displaces the conventional location of southern identity by undermining Opal's sewing circle and Duane's supposed destiny to take over the town grocery. In turn, Opal becomes the site of gentle humor where the

playwright unfolds the tension between supposed proper southern identity and lesbian southern identity, with the latter outperforming the former. Flager ensures that the lesbian characters move to the center: the sewing circle becomes less valuable than the tattoo parlor and Opal's status becomes less valuable than Joey's kindness.

Shakin' the Blue Flamingo (Flager, 2018), a full-length play staged in 2018, is a nod to Mart Crowley's 1968 play *The Boys in the Band*, "the first gay play to attract a large crossover audience with its bold language, humor, and frank, though downbeat, portrayal of contemporary gay lifestyles" (Mambrol, 2021). Flager is not the first lesbian playwright to rescript and revision *The Boys in the Band*: "Jane Chambers' popular *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove* 1982 is considered a distaff version of *The Boys in the Band*." (Mambrol, 2021). However, unlike Crowley's work or even Chambers' refashioning, Flager's play, set in a "southern city," culminates in the promise of an affirming southern queer prom for both the seven central characters, all middle-aged lesbians, and more broadly for the southern youth of today and tomorrow. The action centers on the intertwined lives of seven friends: Anne, Billie, Cory, Mac, Rosemary, Taylor, and Wendye. Through clever and well-paced dialogue with references to iconic southern locales such as Chapel Hill and Durham, North Carolina, Mac and Rosemary's ill-fated night in college evolves into a romantic reunion as they ready for a prom that now belongs to them (Figure 3).

In this play, according to Block, "Flager's work reveals the lives of lesbians who grew up in a time when it was neither fashionable nor safe to claim such an identity" (Block, 2022). Furthermore, Flager positions the characters in this play as agentic protagonists vis-à-vis hegemonic culture that sidelined their relationships earlier in their lives. The play centers on a couple of days as the friends regroup in a coffee house to plan a queer prom for the local



Figure 3. Scene from the August 2022 production of *Shakin' the Blue Flamingo*, produced by Dirt Dogs Theaters at MATCH in Houston, Texas. <https://gwenflager.com>.

school. It becomes clear that the women are looking forward to attending the prom, and they dawn the dresses and tuxedos as evidence. With the plot centering on the rekindling romance between Mac and Rosemary, Flager elevates this relationship to the pinnacle of promise: the couple's lesbian identity is the promise of both present time and futurity as the play closes with the two dancing on stage. In this play, while there is no overt antagonist such as Elmer or Larry, time and place have served as adversaries to these women as they tried to live their full and realized identities and journeys. Flager gives the characters the gift of performing wholeness by centering their lives and loves as the central protagonist vis-à-vis an unnamed, but not unnoticed, heteronormative world beyond the stage.

Similar to the previously summarized full-length plays, *Jornada del Muerto* (Flager, 2015), a one act play set on a “sidewalk on a busy city street,” curates religion, more specifically Christ's bearing of the cross, allusions to the AIDS crisis including the relationship between lesbian caretakers and gay men, and performative drag culture. Bobbi is a Black gay man in drag rushing from an angry off-stage mob, and Murphy, a butch White lesbian, assists him in gathering his things and carrying on (Figure 4). Flager appropriates Christianity to queer the story of Jesus bearing the cross toward his death; however, in Bobbi's case, Murphy hands him his crown with a promise of salvation for the complex intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and hope.

The setting in *Jornada del Muerto* is similar to *Shakin' the Blue Flamingo* in that both plays respond to the external, unnamed threat of heteronormative violence. In *Jornada del Muerto*, the audience does not see the angry mob, but intuits the physical and psychological imposition of



Figure 4. Scene from *Jornada del Muerto* produced at the 25th Annual Scriptwriters Houston 10x10 Showcase in Houston, Texas, in August 2015, <https://gwenflager.com/>.

compulsory heterosexuality. While the geographical location is not defined in this play, Flager situates the two characters as equals, a kind of couple meritorious of attention. Pervasive throughout the dialogue and action is a mutual kindness often associated with southern identities; however, Bobbie and Murphy embody a quintessential element of southern culture: Christianity. Here, they are the true Christians, both persecuted and redeemed.

Another one act play, *O The Wild Charge* (Flager, 2019a), centers on the remembrance of Alice who died living a ferocious life due to drugs and alcohol. Alice's friend Peggy and her estranged sister Lana untangle their allegiance to Alice, to their own unexamined biases, and to missing memories of Alice's life. Set in Mobile, Alabama, the play is grounded by stabilizing details such as Alice and Lana's father's missing Rolex, Alice's red cowboy boots, and a Zippo lighter. The play features an appearance of a deceased Alice, rendered plausible and indispensable through precise stage directions including lighting. As with her other plays, Flager moves Lana and Peggy from the periphery to the center by weaving together a history of their missteps and connections that were complicated by patriarchy as represented by external forces that pushed Alice from their lives. Once again, Flager renders her lesbian character, Alice, with tenderness as if she were the true embodiment, albeit unsalvageable, of kind and genteel southern identity. In Alice's absence, Peggy and Lana become the storytellers, keepers of memory and identity despite the external forces that pulled at the center of their lives.

Clean-up on Aisle Seven (Flager, 2020), another one act play, provides a hopeful outcome for Tina who suffers an episode of her father's abuse in the grocery store. Two older ladies, Bea and Charlotte, intervene to separate Roy from abusing Tina, all the while affirming Tina's choices and desires. With savviness and sense of belonging, Bea ensures that Roy will finally face consequences for his pattern of abusing women. With a friend in the grocery store's cashier and with cameras throughout the store, Roy is sure to end the day in hand-cuffs while Bea and Charlotte plan to visit with Tina and Tina's grandmother, once again reassuring that a hidden and compelling matriarch prevails.

Discussion of key themes in Flager's plays

Lesbian identity and the south

Flager's work creates a counter-narrative for the definition and ideation of the U.S. South by staging the lived experiences of southern lesbians as they encounter homophobic violence, racism, classism, oppressive religion, access to formal and informal education, love, loss, and community, all

within a regional context evidenced by well-placed southern language, props, setting, historical references, and humor. According to Flager herself:

I think growing up in the 60s, when we talk about growing up in the South, it was terrifying to know that you were different. If I didn't know earlier than that. I would have never in a million years told you I'd be writing stories about lesbians. I think when *Waiting [to Be Mended]* came out, and it was selected in a reading series as one of six plays, I thought, "well, the cat's out of the bag now." Not that the cat hadn't been out of the bag. But I think it's the oddest thing to think of something that was so terrifying as a young woman could be, on the flip side, so fulfilling to write about, to talk about it and not be scared about it. Maybe that (Flager, personal communication, February 10, 2022).

Indeed, Flager treats her heroines as if they had a transgressive and transformative power to leverage southern identity, to perform it better, and to queer the concept of southern belonging. At the end of each play, the lesbian characters become the epitome of southern heritage through their piety, kindness, hospitality, and sense of being and belonging. In the end, her characters are the most southern as she reshapes repressive narratives to position and re-center the lesbian identities as the keepers of "true" southern identities. Flager designs her characters as if they owned the South, thereby exposing the false alignment between heteronormativity, patriarchy and citizenship.

Gender performativity

Considering Flager's collective work, her characters align with Warner's (2013) assertion: "sexual minorities can boast of a rich performance history of entertaining audiences (both straight and gay) in bars, comedy clubs, and drag shows, but historically we have been most skilled in the art of carefully crafting personas that enable us to survive the drama of compulsory heteronormativity." This is certainly the case with Charlie and Joey in *Tattoos and Tater* as well as the host of other lesbian characters that take center stage in Flager's plays such as Irma Lee in *Sing Me to the Other Side* who navigates a homophobic and hostile 1960s rural Alabama as a lesbian.

Irma Lee performs her gender-nonconforming identity through her dress, through her profession, and through her resistance to normative culture. In Act II, the stage directions read, "Irma Lee in shorts/man's shirt with work boots" (Flager, 2019b). Her girlfriend Katie enters the room and says, "I love that look" (*Sing*, 2019). All the while, they are preparing for a Mother's Day meal, preceded by church service. As Warner (2013) holds, "Gender performances involve complex, and often contradictory, enactments of compulsory and elective behaviors, gestures, and attributes whose truths are performatively produced through one's fidelity to prescribed social and cultural scripts." Irma Lee's character is emblematic of this performativity

and non-conformity and Flager gives a tender, humorous nod through Katie's mother Lorean, who embraces their relationship and refers to Irma Lee as Oscar Lee: "Oscar Lee, I borrowed a pair of your overalls. I like the loose fit. And the pockets. I could put a pint of Wild Turkey in this one pocket. Let's get this party started" (Flager, 2019b). However, with the exception of Katie, Lorean, and Lorean's neighbor Joe, Irma Lee's identity is a threat to normative gender protocols in the broader setting.

Homophobia and violence

In *Sing Me to the Other Side*, Irma Lee may be found drinking in the morning in the town's offbeat bar, Poochies Ice House, usually reserved for men. Flager brings violence to the doorstep of the bar and to Irma Lee's via Joe's warning when another patron, Dean, exits the stage: "Dean's got a title now with the white council of Calhoun County. A card-carrying member with benefits if you know what I mean." Joe continues, "Be easy. He comes hair-triggered. Drunk or sober. Women like you worry him. Be careful he doesn't decide you need fixin'" (Flager, 2019b). While physical violence does not befall Irma Lee in this play, there is racially motivated mass violence when Dean and Katie's brother-in-law Larry work as part of the Ku Klux Klan to bomb a bus headed from Atlanta to Anniston.

Physical violence also presents *Waiting to Be Mended*. In the opening scene, Melissa and Celia share a dance and a tender kiss in the church parking lot in an unnamed town in Alabama. Elmer, the church deacon and self-affirmed moral compass of righteousness and southern Christianity, witnesses the display of affection. He responds by beating Melissa: Elmer's violent response illustrates the omnipresent threat of social repression and physical violence for Flager's women and lesbian characters who resist normative gender performativity.

Southern identity and resistance

Indeed, Irma Lee, Melissa, Celia, and the vast majority of Flager's other characters are southern, and thus perform their identities within an intentionally curated southern context. Here, location, gender, regional identity, and belonging meet at the nexus of the South: "rural queerness is enhanced by feminist and queer geography, which has provided new paradigms to theorize how ideologies order and impede our understanding of space and how different configurations can remake that space" (Harker, 2018). The familial and societal configurations are remade in *Tattoos and Tater* in that Flager positions her characters in the center of the South through identity, space, and belonging, often captured in stage directions, thereby detangling the mainstream confounding narratives of southern identity such as

heteronormativity, traditional familial structure, and racist and classist ideology. For example, Charley's mother Lily, thwarted by the town's businesswoman Opal, befriends Charley's girlfriend: "Do you think your friend, Joey, might like a pillowcase? Tell me more about her. Might have some fabric that would be perfect. I have a couple of yards of pictures of Route 66. Think she might like that? She's a bit cosmopolitan, isn't she?" (Flager, 2016b). Flager offers a hint of humor for the audience with the reference to Route 66, all the while restructuring familial and societal ties. Eventually, Lily will set up her sewing business inside Joey's tattoo parlor, and Opal and her own business will come undone by the refusal of the heteronormative expectation in her son's unwillingness to marry Charley and vice-versa.

In *Sing Me to the Other Side* (Flager, 2019b), Katie's sister, Mary Jean, voices the open secret: "I'm tired of being ridiculed. I've got a queer sister living with a woman who dresses like a man and a little brother who can't see how he's wasting his life. And a mother -." At this moment, Joe interrupts Mary Jean to truncate her litany of insults. Through this interruption, Flager truncates Mary Jean's performance of conventional southern norms—performed outrage at gender non-conforming identity—instead turning the attention toward Mary Jean's own sad and violent heteronormative marriage. Mary Jean says, "I could not endure the shame of a failed marriage" (Flager, 2019b). In this scene, Flager upends normative rules of gender and southern belonging by "outing" the unhappy heteronormative marriage and by ensuring Joe's alliance with Katie and Irma Lee.

By offering a series of untold stories about and from various perspectives of southern lesbian characters who navigate history, identity, race, class, nationalism, and self-realization throughout the late twentieth century, Flager's plays and characters resist and transgress normative southern culture by appropriating, and then bettering, southern tropes of politeness, religion, cuisine, and family. The lesbian identities represented in these plays out-perform the best of southern culture.

Conclusion

Through Flager's characters, identity markers such as gender, sexuality, race, class, and geography are reshaped to reveal the strength and integrity of her protagonists. In doing so, lesbian subjectivity upends how power is produced and maintained. In turn, theater is an ideal space to render this instability as a performative act. Recalling the threats posed by emblematic characters such as Elmer, Larry, and Opal, and recalling that *Old Spice* was censored in Texas, destabilizing normative power structures on and off the stage must continue. Flager's plays, through tenderness, humor, violence, homophobia, and reconstituted power, underscore the imperative for lesbian representation. Characters such as Celia, Melissa, Joey, Charley, Irma Lee, Katie, Rosemary, and Mack

are positioned as owners of the best version of southern culture, shifting the center to an oft-marginalized southern lesbian identity.

While Flager's plays resonate with a "return to earlier waves of LGBT activism in order to identify the felt dimensional and missed opportunities of our unrealized past" (Warner, 2013), her work is much more than this. Flager ensures that southern history is her characters' history and that southern stories are their stories. Until recently, little work existed acknowledging and historicizing the history, subject, and subjectivity of the intersection of literature by lesbian writers, specifically U.S. southern lesbian playwrights. Flager positions her art to resist the mainstreaming of sexual convention through an anthology of plays that deserve their place in the history of southern lesbian literature and, indeed, in Lesbian Studies more broadly.

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