

“It’s more of this like half-remembered dream or a spell of a *haunting* or something. If anything it’s an *unwell-made* play” (81) – or so *Red Light Winter* is described to the audience via its metatheatrical double, the play written within the play about the play. The author of *Red Light Winter*, Adam Rapp, based the 2006 play off of similar shenanigans from his own past travels to Europe with his best friend, adding a layer of the metatheatrical at the outset, a layer permeable between the reality of the author and the lives of the characters. The play tells a tale of miscommunication and the overwrought affection that develops between Matt, Davis, and Christina after the three of them meet when Matt and Davis are traveling through Amsterdam one winter. Matt, a developing insecure playwright, on antibiotics from giardia, is also recuperating from a devastating break-up, in which his now ex-girlfriend became the fiancé of his best friend, Davis, a book editor Casanova. In hopes of helping Matt ‘get back on the horse’, Davis buys him the services of Christina, a woman in the windows of the infamous Red Light District, though not without partaking in them first himself. This causes tension that is then exacerbated by the fact that Christina becomes infatuated with Davis, while Matt falls for her.

We are prompted by the words of the very characters themselves, in the specification of it as an “*unwell-made* play”, to interrogate what unfolds in terms unboundedness. Structurally, being “unwell” holds the play in contrast to the tradition of the “well-made play”, which relied on a strictness of technical procedures and resulted in artificial happy resolutions. Its successor genre, the problem play, on the other hand, explored issues like prostitution in a more realistic manner (“Well-made play”). Famous playwright Bernard Shaw, a fierce proponent of the problem play, said that its form in

contrast to the well-made play allowed it to properly address “conflict of human institutions with human feelings” (Shaw 58). It is this conflict that is at the center of *Red Light Winter*, which similarly exposes how our feelings and emotions, spots of vulnerability, often run against or cannot flourish in coexistence with structures and institutional patterns of human behavior. Rapp’s text is more closely involved in the work of “problem plays”, exploring sexuality in its raw and often unfriendly forms, but without the restricting borderlines of the well-made genre (“Problem play”). Handling artists and prostitutes, figures often on the margins of society, as well as taking place in the midst of travel, the play is forged by a breakdown of borders.

The play thus occupies a liminal space, between reality and a dream, which is set up in the very first lines when Davis is describing Amsterdam: “You’re missing all the fun. This place is a trip. It’s totally familiar but dreamlike at the same time [...] It’s like a fucking Tim *Burton* movie or something” (Rapp 8). This relation of their landscape to that of Tim Burton movie marks it as strange, exaggerated or distorted. Amsterdam is simultaneously estranged to them and close to their own reality: “It’s like some slightly refracted parallel reality” (9). This is further emphasized with Davis’ sighting of a homeless man with electric tape stuck in his beard, who pushes a shopping around with a duck inside, a man who is part of population of homeless drug addicts that are shuttled between New York, Zurich, and Amsterdam by their dealer. Recognizing the man from back home in the East Village, Davis notes that this “makes the world feel so small”, with the fantastical nature of the homeless man and his life situation collapsing into the experience of home (9). Though presumably having already toured and adventured around Amsterdam, Matt is excluded from this understanding. When Davis enters the

room, he tells him “You’re missing all the fun”, indicating the fun of the confusion of this “slightly refracted” reality is lost on Matt as he spends his time inside writing (8).

Matt’s writing acts as a site for the recurrence inherent in the unwell-ness of the play as a kind of “haunting”, dancing the line between a dream and reality. He writes two different plays, varying in kinds of metatheatricality: intertextuality and plays-within-a-play. The crumbling walls of one play into another, through the invocation of an important intertext, *The Seagull*, and the numerous plays-within-the-play, contribute to the notion of unboundedness as necessary to an understanding of *Red Light Winter*. Not adhering to strict rules or formulas, like well-made plays, the unwell-ness returns as fluidity of structure in its literary form of metatheatricality. This fluctuation invested in through the reliance on the many plays-within-the-play speaks to ideas central to the work of metatheater: that the world is a stage, and life is a dream (Abel 83). Any supposed clear demarcation--of life *outside* the theater as more “real” than what occurs on the stage--disappears, and so too does the attempt to bracket the stage; instead, the Shakespearean adage “All the world’s a stage” becomes overtly palpable. The disintegration of a hard and fast delineation between life and stage becomes entangled with similarly vulnerable relationship between reality and representation.

This self-reflexive attitude found in *Red Light Winter*, especially emblematic of its postmodern context, focuses on the structures involved, on construction of the play<sup>1</sup>. The pointed reenactment of the process the audience is simultaneously undergoing calls attention to the illusion involved and conveys skepticism about life, about what had been

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “postmodern” given the present lack of a widely accepted more specific classification and am aware that, especially with theatre which experienced many of the traits of the postmodern prior to fiction, it is a term that is still very much up for debate (Jernigan 2-4).

held more “real” than the stage (Hornby 47). The consciousness of its form simultaneously conveys a cynicism of the form’s ability to achieve mimeses, reinforcing the “aporia of representing the unrepresentable” (Fokkema 44). This awareness of lack imbued by the self-reflexive mode of the play regarding its theatrical construction, also plays out on the individual level in self-construction. Unwell-ness erupts in this emphasis on the making of self, with its undercurrent of anxiety surrounding borders and boundaries, and the instability of this process especially in relation to the body and illness.

Both Matt and Christina suffer from illness throughout the course of the play; however, it is Christina’s contraction of AIDS that best reveals the text’s concern with the making of self. Matt’s journey is one of recovery from giardia, but Christina’s is one of rapid descent into a life threatening illness. And AIDS, as opposed to giardia, has societal implications, with a history of stigmatization. These implications gain traction with Karen Zivi’s look at the intersection between the AIDS epidemic and Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, and how language of AIDS is inextricably enmeshed in the creation and protection of self and self-understanding. According to Kristeva, identity is formed out of abjection by determining the self as opposed to the other (Zivi 35). This process occurs by identifying the abject, which is often classified as waste or disease, dividing the abject, and then degrading the abject, such that a “clean and proper body” results. While this plays out on a societal level through exclusionary rituals, the individual also serves as a battleground with abjection “emblematic of the instability of order on the individual, psychic level” and this order being “achieved through erection and maintenance of boundaries between pure and impure” (36, 38). Identity is not only

formed out of this rupture, this distancing oneself from the abject, but is also born out of “the desire, the want, the void that is left in this process” (37). Christina comes to be defined as an object of desire, of abjection, with Matt and Davis’ security in themselves developing out of their ability to control and maintain their own boundary lines in a way that she cannot.

The lingering unwell-ness finds its home in the relationships within the play that unfold as rife with vexed intimacy, born out of vulnerability. Both Matt and Christina seek intimacy, but true intimacy never develops; both are left with unrequited feelings and a reified sense of difference between self and other. This intimacy is actualized as a kind of unboundedness, as being without fixed reality and having fluctuating boundaries, and experienced as vulnerability that opens up the possibility of deeper intimacy with others. When intimacy develops, it blurs the line between self and other, by uniting the privacy of self with the privacy of another. Yet the possibility of intimacy, of opened boundaries, is simultaneously the possibility of violation (Garner 160-163). The protection of one’s own boundaries is integrally connected to others, as boundaries are defined in relation to what is ours as opposed to someone else’s (Goldman 74-77). In spite of moments in which the characters desperately grasp towards such intimacy, the two most direct moments of expressing a desire for connection -- Matt’s confession to Christina and Christina’s to Davis – are unrequited. The possibility of reciprocation is undercut by violation of boundaries, in which Christina’s vulnerability is exploited to the benefit of Matt and Davis.

Matt’s attempts to recollect his own identity, his awakening to his embodied identity, come at the cost of relocating Christina as the abject. Christina’s self-

construction, as well as the audience's access to understanding her, is restricted. Given the split of Matt's self from her as the other, mimicking the unsteady metatheatrical relationship between the real and the represented, Christina is relegated to the realm of representation. She is without adept control of her own representation of herself, as drawn out in her embodied role an actress and prostitute. Christina, whose life is defined by her embodiment, is not afforded the same freedoms as Matt; and in the end, even her embodied presence does not fully belong to her. When boundaries are broken or penetrated, instead of inspiring renewal, there is a self-destruction. Her unboundedness ultimately proves detrimental and unrecoverably destructive in her contraction of AIDS and eventual suicide.

Christina's importance in *Red Light Winter* cannot be understood without first attending to the structures that place her as an object, as an object of abjection, and doing so requires an investigation of the unwell-ness that dominates the play. In a play whose brilliance is so frequently commented upon by critics as derived from the corrosive yet dynamic relationship between Davis and Matt<sup>2 3 4</sup>, it is easy to lose sight of Christina's character, for her – boundary-less and self-less - to melt into the frame of their story. However, the unwell-ness of structure and the unwell-ness of body throw Christina into relief, magnifying her unwell-ness of identity and, ultimately, the unwell-ness of intimacy. Reading the play through this lens of unwell-ness allows us to lodge a feminist

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<sup>2</sup> “I won't deny Rapp's flair for dialogue and character. At least the male characters here”... “the first twenty minutes of the play are by far the best. Rapp has built a terrifically entertaining--and recognizable--abusive friendship” (G.Playgoer).

<sup>3</sup> “What follows is an unflinching, intense and often bleakly hilarious look at the dynamics of an old and almost outgrown friendship” (Mahoney).

<sup>4</sup> “Yet so much of "Red Light Winter" is so shrewd about the way certain male friendships exist on the knife edge of disaster” (Phillips).

critique at the gendered power structures that pervade *Red Light Winter*. In withholding a wholeness of identity from Christina, the play itself is attempting to construct meaning through erasure, a mission that will only thwart coherence and the possibility of intimacy.

## I

The metatheatrical mode of *Red Light Winter* is elucidated in the unboundedness, its fluidity of structure, which is permeated by an intertext and expanded through plays-within-a-play. The intertext, *The Seagull* by Anton Chekov, and *Red Light Winter*, align in the connections between characters, but there are some key changes in the development of those relationships that have drastically different ramifications. At the heart of Rapp's play is Matt, the playwright, and Davis, the book editor, who both become entangled with Christina, an ex-actress, and current singer and prostitute in the Red Light District of Amsterdam. This constellation of relationships in Rapp's play is reminiscent of *The Seagull* by Anton Chekov, in which there is a competition between Trigorin, novelist and philanderer, and insecure developing playwright, Treplyov, both to succeed in their careers and to win the affection of Nina, an aspiring actress. Nina is enthralled by and falls for Trigorin, and in end, Treplyov shoots himself. At one point early on in the play, Treplyov kills a seagull and lays it at Nina's feet, telling her "Soon, in the same way, I shall kill myself" (24). For Treplyov, the act of shooting the seagull and the act of killing himself become one and the same. Later in the play, at the height of her misery, Nina comes to identify herself with the seagull and signs her letters as such (42). These moments of exchange and identification are reworked in the context of Rapp's text, with the intertext highlighting moments of construction, and self-construction. This is especially clear with Matt's suicide attempt, which not only is not

successful, but also opens the play instead of closing it, thus opening up space for the potential of change.

One of the largest transformations between *The Seagull* and *Red Light Winter* is the exchange of the seagull. In Rapp's play, instead of shooting a seagull, Matt shares his plays with Christina. This act is inextricably connected to his attempt at suicide, but more closely related to the written word than with Treplyov. He later recounts his writing as serving as a stopgap measure: "I used to wish that I could make a painting of a dog eating spaghetti or like write a haiku or a fucking play that would push those thoughts out my head permanently" (84). His continuance of his life is aided by his artistic pursuit, specifically his pursuit of the written word. Within the span of the play, he works on two separate plays and it is the move between them that brings out the failure of metatheater to remain unrestricting. The shift away from a hope of free movement between boundaries is brought about through the names of the plays themselves. The first of which was originally entitled *Speckled Birds*, recalling Chekhov's play and embedding the title in its newest iteration, *Roundhouse Winter*. A roundhouse has numerous definitions that all in some way contribute to use of this word in *Red Light Winter*. A roundhouse is a depot for the service of trains, classically with a central turntable to rotate the cars, locating it as a site of renewal, as well as both movement and stagnancy. It can also be understood more figuratively as a site "where we can move from the track of one person's reality to another's" ("roundhouse, n. and adj.").

*The Seagull* thus foregrounds *Red Light Winter*'s work of jumping tracks, of shifting between realities, with an analogous transition occurring from *Speckled Birds* or *Roundhouse Winter* to the play Matt later writes about the events that make up *Red Light*



*Winter*. Instead of focusing on a space of renewal; his new play draws out other definitions of the word “roundhouse”: the bathroom of a ship, adding a dimension of the personal and also the filthy; a kind of curve or blow, contributing a visceral motion that is ultimately stagnant starting where it began; and a prison, which expands the notion of immobility existing within a space of flux. The instigator of Matt’s writing a new play is his encounter with Christina, setting her as an integral component in its construction. The movement between the plays is also a shift in attention away from Matt and his death wishes toward the vulnerable journey of Christina. In Chekov’s play, the exchange of the seagull stands as a pivotal moment in foreshadowing Treplyov’s future death, yet it is Christina who is seen leaving to commit suicide at the end of *Red Light Winter* (97). Her death is also foreshadowed by an exchange, like Treplyov. Not a true exchange, Christina does not come to identify with the plays like Nina did with the sea gull. Christina’s death is instead indicated in a more material exchange, foregrounding her character as defined by and as an object. Davis gives a snow globe to Christina and she mistakes it as a token of affection. To her, it acts as a reminder of their night together, a manifestation of some intimacy gained. Christina comes to identify herself by the object, as the intimacy she misreads becomes engrained in her vulnerability.

## II

The instability of the body that threads throughout the play is foregrounded in the first scene, in which Matt attempts suicide by hanging himself with his belt on the wall hooks of his hotel, presenting the audience with a first image of his vulnerability. In his use of a belt, which is typically used to hold a person within their clothes, the audience gains a sense of his body’s inability to hold together. He had previously used his writing,

and the concept of artistic creation on the whole, to stave off his unbearable thoughts. Vanishing from his physicality, retreating from the world, is felt to be the only path forward, “I just wanted everything to stop” (Rapp 55). Matt later specifies his actions as reactions to his inability to sit with his own thoughts, “And sometimes disappearing seems like the only fucking answer. Just like ending it, you know?” (84). His thoughts threaten to break apart a stable sense of self, a sense of self built around the boundaries one maintains and protects. The self can be probed and influenced by media, markets, and ideologies and can also splinter from within (Goldman 74-77). The thoughts that spur his creativity and construct his self-identity, also threaten to destabilize him and disrupt any safety in his body.

Further contributing to his sense of broken boundary lines, is emotional loss and bodily instability. He is constantly managing his ravaged boundaries throughout Act One. He is rebuilding his confidence after his ex-girlfriend fell for Davis, an experience that had a profound toll had on him emotionally: “It was pretty fucked up for a while” (52-53). Wary about reconnecting with anyone physically, he admits to Christina he hasn’t slept with anyone since his previous relationship. At the same time, he is also recovering from bout of giardia that he contracted from contaminated food at an East Village restaurant. Giardia is a disease that takes its home in the intestines via a parasite that enters the body by ingesting food infected with feces. This prefaces Matt’s illness as a self-incurred penetration in the form of a parasite that attacks through the crossing of boundaries between discharge and intake. Due to his antibiotics, he is careful about his intake during his recovery, unwilling to smoke pot, and often experiences a breakdown of his physical capacity to even stand (13). In both scenarios, with the break-up and his

giardia, he is cautious and selective about whom he opens his boundaries for and remains, in many ways, detached from his body. To add insult to injury, he is also ridiculed about his body. Davis exploits Matt's vulnerabilities and uses them as a point of comedy, ceaselessly embarrassing him. For example, Davis needlessly dredges up Matt's history of body disorders, "When Matt was a kid he stammered", and he later insists on being right about the body part – Hallux – that Matt named his protagonist after in his play *Roundhouse Winter* (21, 40).

Matt is exposed as vulnerable in relation to his body, while his strengths align with the written word. When the audience settles into their chairs, Matt is already on stage at his computer writing, setting up his dedication and attention to his writing before the play has even begun (Lahr). In his first description in the stage directions, the reader is informed that he is in the presence of books. He brought one with him on his travels to Europe, a paperback dictionary, in order to continue his play while on vacation. This connection of Matt with the written word is deepened later on in the description of his apartment back in New York at the beginning of Act Two, which is filled to the brim with books. In addition to the books themselves, his walls are littered with "pictures and postcards of literary titans" such as "Henry Miller, John Fante, Jim Carroll, Fredrick Exley, Arthur Miller, Bertolt Brecht, and Raymond Carver" with a "large X scrawled over Carver's face" (7, 57). In surrounding himself with writers he admires, the setting reveals the ideals he holds for himself and his desire to be a great writer.

The necessary comingling of embodiment with his literary ideals is prefaced early on when Matt, in a debate with Davis on the merits of Raymond Carver versus Henry

Miller, defends Miller as one of his many heroes. He claims that Miller's literature will survive because of its material presence:

*A hundred and twenty years after that in some Parisian basement along the Seine, there will be an anticapitalist literary preservationist group binding Henry Miller bibles with thread spun from the intestines of poets. They'll be hand-sewing the spines. Knitting every signature. Each completed volume will be anointed like a sacrament. (26)*

In these lines, his language takes a distinctly embodied turn, with books compiled by preservationists "hand-sewing the spines". These texts are "bible'd" or made authoritative by thread made of "the intestines of poets". The intestines are where giardia does its parasitic work within the body, thus Matt here incorporates this illness and the fragility it causes into brilliance of Miller's works. This inclusion raises the text to the stature of an enduring "sacrament" for Matt, allowing it transcend even the vulnerability built into the material bounds of the book.

After his night with Christina, Matt posits something transcendent, something real too about their sexual encounter. Like Matt's espousal of the greatness of Henry Miller excelling through the very embodiment of the text, when Matt's describes his night of embodied intimate relations, their encounter is elevated beyond description:

*It helped me so much, Christina. In ways that I'd need like the twelve semitones of dolphin language to articulate [...] It was way bigger than that. And it was way bigger than a play or a paperback novel or like some precious cultural artifact or whatever. It was way bigger than anything I could ever fucking write about. (83)*

Though her, through his sexual interactions with her, he is "helped" and achieves an emotional cushion, indicating a hope of progress towards health. Even "dolphin language" does not suffice to express what occurred through his reattachment to his sexuality, to his own embodiment, and the transformative hope it inspired.

Continually attempting to recall that moment of the embodied intimacy, Matt engages his senses in order to trigger his memory. He does so by listening to a Tom Waits cassette and by sleeping with and bathing in the smell still left in Christina's red dress, both of which she left behind in the hostel (58, 85). His transformation is most poignantly seen in his interactions with her red dress. The night before Christina visits New York, he wears the dress as a way to get closer and reconnect with her:

I fucking put it on last night. I actually put on your red dress because I wanted to feel what it was like to be inside of you again. I actually slept with it and it was like we were holding each other or like slow dancing or something. That kind of slow dancing where you hardly move and you just sort of lean up against the person because you need the other person that fucking badly... I couldn't wait to be inside you again. You see, because sleeping is the one thing I look forward to anymore. Because I get to be with you. (86)

In his cross-dressing, Matt exhibits his unboundedness as well as a new capacity for his boundaries to be in flux in a way that feels safe for him. Namely, in his pursuit of intimacy, he now comfortably transgresses boundaries. In putting on her dress, he does not extend his boundaries to inhabit her identity; instead he wants to step inside her dress, in order to penetrate her again, such that his quality of life can improve. As in Aristophanes' play *Thesmophorizzusae*, in which "Pentheus dressed in women's clothing discovers for the first time the significance of his corporeal self – a flesh and blood body that is ultimately vulnerable", Matt's experience of cross-dressing ultimately only enables him to embrace his own body (Ferris 12). Christina's presence is reduced to an almost ghostly level, a stepping-stone in the building of his confidence surrounding the control of his own boundaries. Jill Dolan, in her work on the effect of impersonation on gender roles, highlights absence as a core component of drag performance, which relies on caricature:

Women are non-existent in drag performance, but woman-as-myth, as a cultural, ideological object, is constructed... The final paradox may be that theater uses the feminine for purposes of imagining a fuller model for the masculine self. (qtd. in Ferris 10)

Likewise Christina is not present for Matt in his motivation to put on her red dress, only a distortion of her available in his dream. He aspires to intimacy: “You see, because sleeping is the one thing I look forward to anymore. Because I get to be with you”, but this rests on a partner of his own construction. Ultimately this “fuller” model leaves Matt wanting. Through his reminiscing, he aspires to press against another, press against boundaries - “dancing where you hardly move and you just sort of lean up against the person because *you need the other person that fucking badly*” – solely driven by his needs (emphasis mine, Rapp 86). For intimacy to be fully developed, it requires mutuality, but his feelings are unreturned, leaving him with unfulfilled intimacy.

Matt’s hope of a transformative help and the dream state in which he develops freedom to cross boundaries for pleasure, exist only in an idealized realm.

As Aleid Fokkema explores in his piece entitled, “The Author: Postmodernism’s Stock Character”, “the ideology of ‘knowing’ through representation is shattered” (44). In not acknowledging or recognizing the reality of Christina, the intimacy he seeks is more abstract than can be fully realized. Even though he attempts a play about his encounter with Christina, by positing that his experience could not be expressed through words, the help he proposes that she gives him takes on an unrealistically idyllic quality.

### III.

The risk and vulnerability entailed in aiming for intimacy are never more apparent than with Christina and the loss of identity she faces throughout the play. Matt is affirmed by his play with boundaries and ability to cross them, yet Christina seems to

face a loss of self. Her construction of self is not within her own hands, instead she is constantly muted and othered by Davis and Matt. In Act One, for example, when Davis is out of the room, Christina asks Matt for a cigarette, which he doesn't have because he doesn't smoke. When Davis returns, Matt asks "Oh, by the way, can Christina have a cigarette?", not allowing her to ask or to have her own voice or agency. Additionally, in Matt's plays, she is othered and estranged<sup>5</sup>. In Matt's autobiographical play about their winter in Amsterdam, he renames himself and Davis simply as Matthews and Davison, yet transforms her into Yildiz, a torch singer from Istanbul (81, 93). Even though Matt knows she is from United States, in his processing of the experience, she is made foreign and exotic. As Yildiz, she is also the most embodied of the characters in his play. Her method of communicating is music, as made through her own body: "she has no recourse but to sing". Her body is of sole concern to Davis as well, who comments repeatedly on her beauty: "She's fucking beautiful, bro [...] A hundred and fifty fucking oyros pretty" (29). And in quantifying her physical attributes in terms of the money he spent on her, he further reduces her to a commodity. Though Christina exhibits similar traits as Matt – she writes her own songs and can speak multiple languages – the volume is turned so low, her capacities related to the written word are barely perceptible. Instead, she is viewed mostly in terms of her body, her body acting as a canvas for others, for Matt's writing and Davis' desires.

The ghostliness of Christina's presence, of a full identity, plays out in the change of her role within the metatheatrical structure and in her role as embodied. In *The Seagull*, Nina has ambitions and goals related to being an actress and achieving fame, but

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<sup>5</sup> Notably, in *Roundhouse Winter*, the women in the story are violently blown apart and killed in the hands of the protagonist, a young male train conductor.

Christina's motives and life goals are never fully drawn out. We know very little about her history, only that she was willing to abandon everything she ever knew because she never went home after her study abroad, and that she has an unspoken desire to be numb, as evidenced by her heroin use (50, 73). This locates her in a similar starting position to Matt at the beginning of the play, swimming in an unmanageable sea of pain. The unwell-ness and unboundedness of Christina's body are integral to her role as an actress. Friedrich Nietzsche had a theory of acting that held, "the actor served as a kind of boundary on what the self could be in a system of knowledge based around the body and its actions" (Kornhaber 244). The very role itself of an actor, reenacting another with her own body, creates a new realm, a potentiality for understanding the self in terms of such embodiment.

There are two problems embedded in this role: if one becomes too good at inhabiting a new role, "She can never truly *become*, she can only ever be *different*"; and on the other hand, if one is a bad actor, "she performs a role not of her own willing...in essence, she does not even have a body, only a copy of a body" (245). Christina seems to suffer both of these problems, lacking a grounded self outside the changingness and fluctuation of body. The instability of her *being* any one thing arises in the constant changing of her name, being taken as Christina, then Christine. Though she reveals her birth name is Annie, she is never referred to by that name for the rest of the play. The closest direct reference is when Matt addresses her shortly after this reveal, trying to account for the various identities she has inhabited: "...Christina. I mean Christine. I mean Annie" (Rapp 85). However, from this point onward in the play, she only slides



between them, ultimately putting the red dress back on and reinhabiting Christina during her encounter with Davis at the play's close.

She can only act out her embodiment without attachment to it; she can only present endless copies without inhabiting a body of her own. She is only performing "a role not of her own willing...in essence, she does not even have a body, only a copy of a body" (Kornhaber 245). To Matt, she looks like Jean Seberg, her beauty simply a reflection of an already present cultural reference and not a uniquely captivating quality (79-80). The boundlessness in which her body absorbs and takes on countless other bodies is the ruptured boundary of her self; her failure to act well or to even act with intention reveals a breakdown in the "boundary of what the self can be". The degree to which she is always becoming, always a copy, is even betrayed by the stage directions and the character of a playwright, revealing how the play itself acts as a pressure against the boundaries that would allow a unified self for Christina. When she is first introduced, the stage directions say: "She is generally quiet but when she does speak she uses a French accent" (Rapp 10). It does not say that she *has* a French accent or even that she *is* French. The word "uses" exposes that the accent is put on, and part of not her natural speech pattern. Not only does this indicate to the reader that she is not really French, but also indicates to the actress playing Christina in a performance that she should convey this accent as borrowed.

She does not inhabit even the role of a good actress. After being prompted with the question, "So you're an actress?", she responds, "I was, yes" (50). Thus, her putting on a French accent, her acting as Christina, is presented as not a conscious action of performing. Not only is she consistently changing roles, but also she is evacuated of a

stable self such that her acting has lost its ability to be a meaningful guide to self-understanding. The playwright within the play, Matt, is also quick to uncover her. After knowing her only for a short period of time, he correctly surmises that it is a front: “You’re not French, are you? I mean you might be, right? But I’m almost totally sure that you’re like this very talented imposter” (47). Here he accepts or affirms her ambiguity – “I mean you might be, right?”, but only in so far as it solidifies his conception of her. He insists on knowing what she ‘really’ is before sleeping with her: “So before we continue, I have to say something”. Although when he sleeps with her, he has yet to learn that her birth name is Annie – thus her ‘real’ identity continually evades and dissipates. Her lack of control over her representational self plays out in her body’s vulnerability and ultimate breakdown.

Her contraction of AIDS, a disease that attacks the immune system, attacks from within, presents her body as threatened by its very being. In spite of making her partners wear condoms, in spite of her attempted vigilance of her borders, her body is still outside her grasp. This disease on a larger scale locates her within a sphere of discourse about illness, locates her as the abject object. After revealing that she has AIDS, she is stigmatized and rejected: her Parisian husband disposes of her and she subsequently loses her work visa, forcing her to return to the US (71). Her abjection is more overtly explored through Davis’s actions, as these end in the deepest penetration of her emotional well-being<sup>6</sup>. He tells Christina false stories of sadness about his mother having cancer, breeding a false closeness, which creates a more impassioned output of energy on her

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<sup>6</sup> The violence inherent to his character is overt and palpable in the live performance of *Red Light Winter*, as noted in a review published by *The New Yorker* that calls Davis “enemy of all boundaries” (Lahr).

part for his pleasure (44-46). In a pointed moment of emotional openness, in the hopes of impressing Davis, she sings a song she wrote about unrequited love. Instead of supporting her writing capabilities as he had with Matt, Davis discounts her efforts altogether. Carelessly telling her “I’m a firm believer in organizing the information for your audience so they’re *in* on it. I mean, Rome wasn’t built in a day-care center”, he suggests that she is too green to create the stuff of Rome, that she is somehow outside the realm of such possibility, she is not “*in* on it” (40). Across these instances, he responds with cavalier disregard.

The climax of his insincerity is his pawning off a souvenir snow globe. No longer wanting to lug the snow globe that he purchased for his fiancé with him back to New York, Davis gives it to Christina, who mistakes it for a genuine token of affection. In this snow globe, this representation of a landscape, she imagines her belonging. Yet in this too, Davis demands control of the spheres which he can cross into--his life back in the non-snow globe New York--and she cannot. When she does finally seek him out in New York, he is nothing but cruel to her and further exploits her vulnerability and emotional attachment. She exposes her own emotions, admitting she visited New York because she missed him (93). He completely ignores her and refuses to reciprocate, refuses to let her in, after having led her believe that a connection had occurred between them.

Davis habitually rejects the abject and distances himself from it when he can. This attitude is prefaced in a heated moment of contention between Davis and Matt earlier in the play, when a hint of a homosexual past arises. After Davis insists that Matt own up to his writing success, to his history, and Matt retorts “Own your ass, buttfucker”, Davis hesitates, “Oh, we shan’t go there, shan’t we” (23). The ambiguity of Davis’ response,

bordering on a threat, reveals a potentially homoerotic past between them in college. More importantly, Davis is unwilling to even encounter the topic. The sense of validity, a safety around Davis' own history, being protected in attempts of self-affirmation is drawn out by maintaining a 'legitimate' sexuality that "can only be conceptualized through correlative notions of those designated 'perverted' or 'abberent', against which this putative 'normality' is defined" (Harradine 71). His reaction can be registered as responding to a threat posed by the object, experiencing "fear and loathing because it *exposes* the border between the self and the other as constituted and fragile, and threatens to dissolve the subject by dissolving the border" (72). While he registers fear against the intimation of anal sex, Davis experiences a reaction of loathing, and its innate counterpart of desire, for Christina in the last scene.

The heat of their desire for one another only leaves Christina scorched in his final act of aggressively determining her identity and then rejecting her for it. In a moment of vulnerability, in which Christina tries to recover her understanding of him, to recover the idea of an intimate unity having formed between them, he rejects the possibility and insists on her as unredeemably 'other' to him: "You're an idiot. You think you know me because I let you teabag my nuts for a few minutes? Because I stuck my finger up your ass while I fucked you like the whore you are?" (95). Here the difference is a striking double standard of pleasure, of who can enjoy it and partake in it. Though he allowed her to interact with him in an embodied and intimate manner, it was solely for him and did not give her access to him. He, on the other hand, through his penetration of her, assumes knowledge of her: despite her reintroducing herself, he insists on labeling her as a "whore". Soon after this outburst, he gets swept up in having sex with her. During this

moment of passion, while he and Christina are still in the middle of things, he answers his cellphone and says to his fiancé “I love you, too” (95-96). Like Nina in *The Seagull*, Christina grows attached to the snow globe, to the intimacy she thought it emblemized, but after this moment, she is unable to hold onto even that as a means of moving forward in her life; there is no landscape presented as safe or belonging to her. Instead of using the money Matt offers to her to go home and seek treatment, Christina plans instead to kill herself by stealing Matt’s pain pills at the end of the play.

#### IV.

*Red Light Winter* approaches many things, approaches a freedom of relaxed boundaries both metatheatrical and embodied, approaches a path towards health, but ultimately accomplishes neither of these things. A path to health is charted in the possibility of intimacy, but missed connections and mismirrored vulnerability impedes either well-madeness or wellness from coming to fruition. Though Matt is afforded the freedom to explore his boundaries in a way that is no longer self-destructive, and though he is “helped” by Christina, he never regains full bodily stability. He is described as breaking into moments of hyper-fragility: “He falls to the floor” when he sees Christina in New York and later “almost passes out” in his frenzy to impress her (60, 77). Matt is still physically vulnerable after leaving Amsterdam, if not more so.

Matt’s ‘recovery’ throughout the play maps onto an empowerment manifested as unboundedness, an ability to play with boundaries. His power is executed poignantly through his writing. Both he and Davis, as writer and editor respectively, are linked as

working with the written word, while Christina is aligned with her work as a prostitute<sup>7</sup>. However, even this unboundedness encounters limits “language is both the only key to the writer as subject and the final barrier that withholds his presence” (Fokkema 45-46). Though Matt can never fully inhabit the realm of presence, his identity is more fleshed out than Christina’s. As Peggy Phelan argues in *Unmarked: the politics of performance*, there is a way to revalue “that which is not ‘really’ there” in such a way that actually brings it to light (2):

“Identity emerges in *the failure of the body to express being fully* and the failure of the signifier to convey meaning exactly. Identity is perceptible *only through a relation to an other- which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other. In that declaration, there is always loss, the loss of –not being the other and yet remaining on that other for self-seeing, self-being*” (emphasis mine, 13).

Here Phelan tracks the instability of the body to express completely as well as the process of abjection – “resisting and claiming the other” – as integral to identity; and both are inextricably related to “declaring” a boundary. Identity emerges through declaration, an articulated statement or determination of boundaries. Only appearing so in relation to another, to Christina, the power of Matt and Davis’ expression is wrapped up in a misunderstanding of the real and the representational, as well as the self and other. The topic of love, especially erotic love, forms an interrogation of the division between self and other; with the embodied presence of theater, and its pattern of disappearance, mimicking love’s illusions (121).

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<sup>7</sup> The end of the play affirms this power imbalance in relation to words even in the realm of music, supposedly Christina’s domain. After Davis exits, Christina listens to the Tom Waits cassette briefly, before she too leaves. She stops it before Waits begins to sing. The play concludes with Matt, after reentering his now empty apartment, starting the cassette again where she left off so that the lyrics can be heard (97).

In addition to the failure of the body, metatheater cannot fully express its aims within the world of *Red Light Winter*. While there is an embrace and collapse of other texts into its seams, Matt, the character of the playwright, representative of the playwright at large, insists on boundaries between real and representation. Matt seeks something “real” and transcendent. Matt claims that the paramount moment was when during sex, “something real passed between us”, a moment echoed in the stage directions during the scene itself, a moment affirmed by the play itself (56, 83). In maintaining this divide between the real and representational, Christina reduced to a solely representational role, restricted from even fully representing herself, not to mention inhabiting both realms.

Finally, as a result of these failures, the project of intimacy within *Red Light Winter* is likewise doomed to fail. The characters never encounter a deep, mutually compassionate intimacy, though the opportunity and hope for its development is presented. As Leslie Wade explores, while postmodernism is often conceived of as sliding gradients of value and concepts of truth, there is also a note of resistance: “Despite strong dominance of relativism, there is a strain of postmodern ethics that focuses on the imperative of relating to one another” (285). The care Matt takes in listening to Christina’s life story and his offer to help pay for her train ride home, as well as Christina’s faith in a spark of goodness residing somewhere in Davis, speak to a kindness that can make way for the incorporation of and intimacy with others (50, 75, 94). However, ultimately, such intimacy appears to succeed only unfathomably given the risk and vulnerability involved. Intimacy, occurring within the unboundedness of a metathreatrical framework, can have no fixed reality and is only a possible within an idealized hypothetical or dream-like state. The tragedy of the ending, with its loose

strings: Matt left alone in his apartment and Christina presumably close to death, does not leave the audience with much hope for the possibility of such intimacy: off, or on, the stage.