Matriarchal Might: 4000 Miles of Feminine Perseverance, Wisdom, and Strength

Polly Rose Edelstein

Perseverance, wisdom and strength: all very similar words, but with enough differences to shape an individual. How does the theatre treat a wise, strong matriarch who perseveres against hardship? How can things such as strength be measured? In both brawny, physical stature and quiet confidence? And can such stereotypically masculine ideals be easily translated to a feminist outlook with an octogenarian woman as the figurehead, especially in a world where discrimination is not solely based on race/class/religion/ethnicity, but age as well? These complex and occasionally seemingly unanswerable questions are the tools that will be used to answer and uncover the feminist meanings in Amy Herzog's 4000 Miles.

Often feminism can be solely and unfairly labeled as militant or a 'manhating' feminism. This paper seeks to highlight and articulate both the palpable and understated feminism personified in the grandmother character Vera in Amy Herzog's *4000 Miles*, and how her age, gender, and spirit speaks to a larger society. The question of what feminism actually is, compounded with the supplementary information of Vera not only being a woman but an elderly woman, and how it relates to this play when there is often a lack of aggression towards the larger patriarchal society requires further study into the theory itself. To explore this hypothesis I will examine Toni Calasanti and Kathleen Slevin's "Gender, Social Inequalities, and Aging," Colette Browne's "Women, Feminism, and Aging," Gayle Austin's "Feminist Theories: Paying attention to women," and Jill Dolan's "The Discourse of Feminism: The spectator and representation" to better understand the feminist mindset and how it applies to Amy Herzog's *4000 Miles*.

To further understand Amy Herzog's 4000 Miles and its relation to feminism, it is important to understand both the family dynamic and political background of Vera. As the oldest member and matriarch of the family it is nearly impossible to view Vera as a sexual being because of a hegemonic structure that validates beauty as being held by the young, slim, conventionally attractive women. This notwithstanding, Vera is a forward thinking woman who is not easily made uncomfortable. When she first greets Leo, her grandson who has been missing in action from his cross-country bike ride (which he did without a cell phone), Vera is unafraid to bluntly ask Leo "Are you high?" (Herzog, 100) and to call his soon to be ex-girlfriend fat. She is physically described as "tiny and frail but not without fortitude" (Herzog, 99). She was brave and independent enough to get divorced in the 1950s when her husband continued to prove unfaithful and now has lived alone ever since her second husband died. Vera rejects the patriarchal society's idea that women should be inferior to men and even becomes a caretaker, both fiscally and otherwise, to her deadbeat-esque grandson with whom we later see her smoking something out of a pipe and getting high. To be unexpected and different as a woman is constantly looked down on by the patriarchy. She is consistently unafraid to speak her mind, even if her family constantly disregards her, due to her age. As a Marxist and a political communist, Vera's belief in the equality of people of all

races, ethnicities, genders, and financial backgrounds are not only quietly sympathetic feminist views but also show the feminist standpoint of not going with the societal norms and patriarchal views. Vera asserts her independence as a political activist, woman and octogenarian and shows her desire to be autonomous from societal expectations.

It is rare for the theater to feature octogenarians. This is largely because it is often difficult to find talented actors in that age range who are still working. Further, we, as a society, are often guilty of ageism, which is prevalently seen throughout Herzog's *4000 Miles*. In Toni Calasanti and Kathleen Slevin's *Gender, Social Inequalities, and Aging,* ageism, which was first terminologically coined by Robert Butler in 1969 states that it is:

The systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender. Ageism allows people to see the old as different, as other, as not like them, thereby making it easier to see the old as not humans. (19)

Vera may be a victim of ageism but she does not let herself feel victimized. She may have false teeth, a hearing aid, and need to wind up when she stands, but there is a quiet confidence and power apparent in her and her continued independence at the twilight of her life. Even though she has many family members that check in with her, including her two sons, who occasionally exhibit ageism by scorning her lack of computer knowledge and uncomfortable guest room bed, she chooses not to rely on a male family member but instead finds a somewhat friendly companionship in Ginny, her elderly neighbor from across the hall. She and Ginny share phone calls and the morning paper, but never enter each other's apartments. While many, including Leo, find this ritual to be a bit kooky, Vera tells us her arrangement with Ginny is a relationship, as Vera describes:

VERA: Where she calls me one night and I call her the next, that way if one of us turns up our toes it won't take until we start smelling to figure it out. (Herzog, 107)

Vera's maturity allows her to not have to be defensive but instead creates opportunity for her to be surer of herself and revel in her age and feminist beliefs.

Amy Herzog has been quoted as saying that her plays represent her family and that Vera, one of the main characters in the play, is representative of her own grandmother who she respects, admires, and loves dearly. Much like Vera, her own grandmother lives an independent life in an apartment in New York City, not needing to rely on family or professional help for aiding in her living.

To better recognize how Amy Herzog's *4000 Miles* acts as a feminist theater piece, it is imperative to have a multi-faceted introduction to the different feminist theories, especially in reference to theater and performance. In "Feminist Theories: Paying attention to women", Gayle Austin accurately states that:

A feminist approach to anything means paying attention to women. It means paying attention when women appear as characters onstage and noticing when they do not. (136)

This simplistic statement appeals to a gentler, more pragmatic style of feminism that Vera inhabits throughout the play.

Herzog automatically achieves one of the standards of feminism with her characters. *4000 Miles* features 3 women: Vera, Bec, and Amanda, with Leo being the sole male character. This fact alone is significant as the vast majority of published and produced work is not only written by men but includes casts where the number of male characters far exceeds the number of female characters. Moreover, all of the women, especially Vera, are powerful and independent women with Leo, the one male character being dependent on them for money, love and gratification. Vera is a woman who has lived through decades of conflict and hard times, only to now reach an age where people, through their ageism, try and fail to discredit her knowledge and power. Bec is a young, passionate feminist who has begun to eliminate some of her self-doubt by honestly seeking out the things she is interested in and not just following Leo's lead. Amanda is a fireball of a young woman who is full of energy and strong opinions, neither of which she is afraid to share. Even Leo, who in some ways shares the protagonist spotlight with Vera, has good feminist qualities with his treatment of women and disdain for labels.

Throughout history men have been portrayed as the protagonist, with other men being "encouraged to identify with the male hero in the narrative" as Jill Dolan states in *The Discourse of Feminism: The spectator and representation* (287). This feminist viewpoint, with the women being more grounded and powerful than the male character, may not be directly correlated to the central energies of *4000 Miles* but is an important tactic utilized. Furthermore, it brings up the idea of cultural/radical feminism, a topic I will later discuss, that is minutely used to enhance the meanings of the play.

The central conflict in Amy Herzog's 4000 Miles is between Vera and her grandson Leo. Leo has been biking cross-country with his friend Micah who was killed in a freak accident part of the way through their journey. He ends up at his grandmother's apartment in New York. Vera is pleased to see him yet their time together becomes challenging almost immediately. Firstly, it becomes apparent the Leo is not the most stable human being out there. He has biked across America and now plans to sleep in a tent somewhere in the city, much to Vera's chagrin. More importantly, Vera and Leo have very different value systems. While it would be safe to call both of them feminists, they still have very different beliefs. Vera, while revolutionary in some ways, is more traditional and holds to values indicative of someone of her generation. For example, she does believe that if Leo were a woman his trip would have included men trying to extract sexual favors from him, saying "If you were a woman it would probably have been different; you probably would have run into all kinds of things like that" (Herzog, 110). Leo rejects these ideals and traditional gender normative ideas vehemently. Yet Leo is not without flaw as he is guilty of other prejudices, such as ageism as he is often seen viewing his grandmother skeptically, almost like a victim, while she revels in being independent and strong for someone of her advanced age. In this way he is not

unlike his father and his uncle who, although we never see them in 4000 Miles, treat Vera as an inferior. They buy her a computer but do not teach her how to use it and then judge Vera for her lack of knowledge. Like them, Leo is aghast when he realizes his grandmother cannot use a computer but still uses the yellow pages to look up the information she needs. Continually, we hear about Leo's mother who excuses her lack of militant beliefs by saying she "votes Democrat" (Herzog, 114) as if that is all encompassing of feminism. Finally, Vera's next door neighbor Ginny, the other unseen character, is another form of judgment from Leo as he does not understand the cultural differences that make Vera respect her neighbor's privacy and keep a more formal relationship with her than Leo is accustomed to. All in all, Leo's more radical, cultural feminism is in opposition to Vera's liberal feminism, yet it does not necessarily make him more open-minded or well-rounded than she is.

The previously mentioned activism that Vera has supported and engaged in throughout her life has many parallels to feminism and brings me to two of the branches of feminism I would like to briefly explore: liberal feminism and cultural/radical feminism. Liberal feminism is loosely described by a multitude of feminist scholars as "developed from liberal humanism, stressing women's parity with men, based on 'universal' values" while Cultural aka 'radical' feminism "stresses that women are both different from and superior to men and often advocate expressing this fact through female forms of culture" (Austin, 137). Feminist theater, and therefore playwrights like Amy Herzog and stories like 4000 Miles, exists because of the cultural and radical feminists. To start a new movement in theater, politics, or life in general, the movement is often founded in anger. For feminist theater, the movement was created due to a hegemonic, patriarchal culture that was lacking in opening up a non-homogenized style and form for female playwrights, performers, and more. While this discrimination is often touted as being 'inadvertent' it does not diminish its existence. As Vera says to Bec, Leo's ex-girlfriend,

VERA: I was trying to say...men sometimes do things that can be very...but you have to remember that it's more out of stupidity than anything else. It's not, whaddayacallit. Malicious. It's just stupid and childish. (Herzog, 127)

The epistemology of feminist theater is often greeted with derision from the large hegemonic majority. However, amongst feminists the idea of liberal feminism versus the aforementioned cultural or radical feminism is scorned as well. Liberal feminism is often discounted or given a shorter treatment by feminist scholars, yet it is this quiet, understated feminism that, as Austin says, has

been used mostly in getting more women employed in certain fields of theatre and in forming certain groups, such as The Women's Project and the original Women's Program of the American Theater Association. (138)

The idea of liberal feminism serving as mostly a marketing tool is not entirely untruthful. I would wager a guess that it sells more tickets than a radical feminist piece. Still, it is this liberal feminism that is seen in *4000 Miles*. There is no radical,

feminist slant. It is written in the narrative, naturalistic and realistic style that is often viewed as a hegemonic device as men throughout history have so often operated it. Yet the mere existence of the play 4000 Miles is intrinsically feminist because, instead of viewing Amy Herzog as buying into the greater societal constraint of writing in a 'typical' narrative format, I would argue that she is representative of the liberal feminism ideas of integrating oneself into the male cultural world and then adjusting said world to showcase women in a light that male playwrights often refuse, or more likely are unable to do as they are unable to understand the feminine perspective. Furthermore, Vera represents this style of feminism, as she has nostalgia towards a past way of life that she believes is superior to modern thinking and beliefs. This conservatism for an earlier wave of feminism is represented in the interactions she has with Leo, where she is soft and firm, strong and gentle, opinionated and open-minded. It is worth noting that in some ways this feminism, even if it is considered conservative, can be more feminist than radical, third-wave feminism as it is a more useful style of feminism given the time and place. As stated previously, this understated, liberal feminism deserves just as much, if not more, recognition as it highlights and opens up understanding amongst a heterogeneous assortment of people, no matter one's age or gender.

This is not to discount the need for acknowledgement and recognition of a slightly more aggressive form of feminism. As Gayle Austin discusses, the feminist approach "means making some invisible mechanisms visible and pointing out, when necessary, that while the emperor has no clothes, the empress has no body" (136). Without a body you have no voice and Vera is an example of a woman who is, at times, voiceless. She is often discredited by those around her due to her age and gender. Her sons poke fun at her lack of computer knowledge and complain about her hard guest room bed. They admonish her lack of knowledge and action; vet do nothing to help solve the problem. The most poignant remarks, however, are made by Vera herself. She talks about how "it's really disgusting" when she can't think of her words and when "her head really isn't right" (Herzog, 109). This moderate self-loathing is scorned by the greater society as we are supposed to portray our 'best' selves to the world but is celebrated by radical feminism as it rejects the norm. Vera, while a woman with feminist values, has lived in an era where there are societal expectations that she does not always adhere to due to her feminist beliefs and now lives in an era where she still does not meet expectations, due to her independence so late in life and society's expectations of the elderly. Vera stands strong against a societal construct of what people think when they think of old people and shines as a beacon of what people aspire to be as an independent matriarch worthy of respect, even if it is only for her seemingly insignificant day to day victories she achieves as an independent octogenarian woman.

As stated above, Vera is not the only female character in this play and is not the only feminist character in this play. Bec, Leo's former girlfriend, awkwardly meets Vera for the first time. When Vera and Bec are sitting in the living room, drinking tea and waiting for Leo to return, Vera regales Bec of tales from her life and first husband. She speaks in almost a reminiscent way about the women her husband engaged in sexual affairs. One woman in particular, a Hollywood movie

personality, got the brunt of Vera's honesty: "She was rich and neurotic. *Muriel*" (Herzog, 127). This Muriel followed Vera into a cab where, as Vera recounts, the following conversation transpired:

VERA: One time we were all at Café Society...I guess they were back from California...? And she followed me into a cab and said, 'Can't we be friends? It eats away at me that you're angry at me,' and so forth. And I said 'Listen Muriel, there are people you like and people you don't and I don't like you and I want you out of this cab'. (Herzog, 127)

Vera tells this story not with scorn but with a laugh at the foolishness of this Muriel and at a memory that, once salty, has now become sweet. Stories like these show that Vera, while feminist, is more reminiscent of the days of old where women did not bond solely because they were women but bonded for more reasons than inherent feminist beliefs. In some ways this makes Vera significantly more radical than Bec as she goes against a societal construct and prejudice of banding together with someone just because of their gender (or race, religion, etc.) and a hegemonic idea of the 'grouping' or 'othering' or 'categorizing' of people. It is also easy to make the argument that she was a product of the world around her where women blamed other women for cheating husbands and men were untouchable. Her conservatism for the days gone by and first-wave feminist beliefs are in opposition to Bec.

Bec believes in a more active, radical feminist outlook and therefore is appalled by these stories. She fervently says:

BEC: I don't know what you want me to—why are you telling me this? [...] This woman, who you tried to push out of a cab, you should have pushed *him* out of a cab, she was coming to you/for understanding—(Herzog, 127)

This exchange with Vera and Bec illustrates the palpable and understated feminism. Bec's radical feminist mindset does not allow her to see Vera's exhusband as anything other than a villain while Vera's quiet confidence is more akin to the liberal feminist beliefs, a subdued reaction to the injustices happening around her.

Many would argue with Bec that Vera should have left this man much earlier, but this extremist mindset goes against feminism as a whole as it is more of a hegemonic, masculine quality to be extreme versus a more feminine and pragmatic viewpoint. Furthermore, Bec has yet to reach the maturity level of Vera, although Bec does grow towards the end at the play as she uncharacteristically responds positively to Vera saying:

VERA: You know Leo was the one who brought her to the hospital. He took care of everything, he stayed with her until they brought her into the, whaddayacallit. He was really...he was very much a man. Oh I'm sorry, you don't like it when I put it that way." (Herzog, 168)

While to many it may seem like Vera is the ultimate winner here as she has convinced Bec to see feminism in a different light, I believe that this is less of a win/lose movement and more of a reflective, learning moment where both women have acknowledged that they are flawed and both women are willing to view feminism and ideas in a different light. People may be prejudiced and judge Vera based on her gender, age and belief system, but it is these qualities about her that make her a wiser, stronger matriarchal character and it is also these qualities that allow her to continue to learn and keep an open mind.

Once upon a time, a woman living until her 80s/90s would have been something to revel in, as it was so rare. Throughout history, women have been more susceptible to dying young for a number of reasons, such as childbirth, and more value being put on male health and longevity. Nowadays and as it is in 4000 Miles, women are living longer than ever and older people in general are maintaining more independent, pleasurable lifestyles due to technology and modern medicine. Vera is a strong example of this as she is an independent woman with her own wants and desires living alone in New York after the death of her husband, Joe. Early in the play she reveals to Leo that she has been part of an "octogenarian club", although she is the last member as she was coming home from the funeral of her former cohort. Vera states:

VERA: There were seven of us, octogenarians, and we had dinner once a month for a lot of years and we were all lefties and there were a lot of memories and laughs and the last one just died, besides me. (Herzog, 120)

Vera takes pride in her Marxist beliefs, liberal feminist beliefs, and age; however, many of those around her try to discredit her because of her advanced years and the failing of some of her faculties. In Colette Browne's "Women, Feminism, and Aging", she discusses aging and ageism in regards to feminism stating, "Feminists and society at large should be more concerned with societal change in its treatment of the aged" (54). From the feminist standpoint it is often hard at times to acknowledge ageism; however, its prevalence needs said acknowledgement as it is a driving force in *4000 Miles*. Leo constantly either discounts Vera or tries to take advantage of her by borrowing money and making snide comments about her lack of ability to be quite as sharp as she once was, really letting her have it when she accuses him of stealing her checkbook stating:

LEO: I didn't take it! I didn't take it I didn't take it I didn't take it. Yesterday you lost your keys, there were three days you couldn't find your hearing aid, there was the priceless morning your teeth went missing, you think I took those, too? I didn't take your fucking checkbook. God. (Herzog, 158)

Bec treats Vera awkwardly, like an 'other' being that she cannot relate with and scorns for her choices and the choices her generation has made. Notably, the most scornful and ageist character is Amanda, the person we see the least of, who is seemingly Vera's polar opposite by every stretch of the imagination.

A positive minded feminism and a moderate amount of ageism ebb and flow with the action of the people until we meet Amanda. Amanda is the ultimate consumer. She is the 'anti-feminist' and, as she is a first-generation Chinese-American woman, is against communism and Marxism. She appears with Leo late one evening after a night of drinking and general revelry. The idea of sleeping with him excites her, not for any meaningful reasons but for the superficiality of him being someone different, as she says:

AMANDA: I'm just kidding, I'll totally sleep with you. I mean probably. I like you. You're like a mountain man. Like a real live mountain man. Of the mountains. You live outside of society's, like... (Herzog, 142)

This objectification of Leo is indicative of Amanda's rejection of the feminist mindset and extreme superficiality, be it cultural or liberal feminism. She is self-centered and immature, unwilling to think too far beyond her circle of life expectations and shallow desires. As she and Leo continue their evening it appears that she has just been faking being drunk, using it as an excuse for bad behavior. These extreme anti-feminist mindsets make her the antagonist of the play in some ways as she shines a light on many of the problems inside the world of the play. Furthermore, it is revealed that Amanda's parents escaped Communist China for a better life in America. As both feminism and Marxism try to promote the idea that we are all equal or that we should all be treated equally at least, it is feasible that a descendant of those who flee communism would be suspicious of this mindset.

It becomes clear that Amanda is also the character who is the guiltiest of ageism. When she sees Vera for the first time she is shocked, exclaiming "Oh my *God!* That scared the *shit* out of me! She looked like a ghost! She looked like a little white-haired old lady ghost!" (Herzog, 144) This overdramatic response to Vera's appearance is unwarranted, although partially excusable in a way as Vera appeared without her teeth in while Amanda and Leo were passionately kissing on the couch. Were it only a reaction of surprise, Amanda would not necessarily be in such opposition to Vera as ageism is not just being startled by an older person. In this case, it goes beyond that. Amanda is not only disgusted by Vera's age. She fears it. Amanda later states "I don't want to get old and lose all my teeth, that shit is so *fucked*" (Herzog, 144).

While I judge Amanda, and while I am sure everyone who reads Amy Herzog's 4000 Miles judges Amanda in some way, she articulates the heart of ageism: fear. Most people fear getting old, because it means they will be closer to death, or their body will start to deteriorate, or all of their friends and family will be dead. Unfortunately, the only cure for not getting old is to die young, an alternative that is in no way superior to living a long, full life. When we see Leo, Amanda, and Vera on stage they are doubly triangulated as the feminists and the anti-feminist, and as the young and the old, showing that while we are all similar in many ways, we are all also very different. Although discrimination and prejudice is wrong in all ways, be it being sexist against feminism or judgmental and ageist towards the older generation, it all stems from a fear that we as a hegemonic society have. This fear of the different, the 'other' has to be and should be recognized to

move on and accept the strengths that both women and the elderly have. Vera, who is representative of both, is much stronger and wiser than Amanda and therefore should not be feared but respected and revered, something Leo is finally able to realize towards the end of the play.

Jill Dolan discusses that typical, hegemonic performance often features "the male spectator as an active subject [whereas it tends] to objectify women performers and spectators as passive, invisible, unspoken subjects" (288). In 4000 Miles. both Leo and Vera, the two leads in the play, are equally active subjects. Dolan continues to discuss the "feminist spectator [and how] she cannot find a comfortable way into the representation, since she finds herself, as a woman, excluded from its address" (289). Vera is the way in to 4000 Miles. Herzog writes Vera as a new representation of strength and power because of her intimate knowledge of how the elderly can be strong. Herzog makes Vera an older character to show that you don't have to be young and attractive to be relevant to the feminist mindset. Being old is just as relevant and just as powerful in feminism as showcasing not only strength and power but wisdom and perseverance against the patriarchal society and hegemonic normality that people believe is the only 'right' answer. At the end of the play, after extending his visit in New York much longer than anticipated, Leo announces he is leaving for a job in Colorado. This happens after Vera's across the hall neighbor Ginny has died, found by Leo after he heard some noises coming from her apartment and decided to run to the rescue. Vera is disappointed yet resilient. At the final page of the play Vera is describing her former neighbor as being "a pain in the ass" (Herzog 166). But sometimes a woman has to be a pain in the ass to be acknowledged. Throughout the play Vera is sometimes a pain in the ass to Leo. But it is better to be acknowledged as a pain in the ass than to not be acknowledged at all.

4000 Miles is not the perfect play, nor is it free from current cultural biases. What it articulates, however, is growth. Before the events of the play, Leo suffered a tragic loss with his friend Micah dying in a freak biking accident. He appears in the first scene as superficial and not completely healthy, suffering from his loss and his lack of knowing his place in the world. Bec is similar in many ways, radical in her beliefs but with very little substantial evidence to back them up. She grows and is able to become a little wiser and smarter, maybe only days older but in some ways more like Vera in her ability to accept the things she cannot change and the wisdom to tell what she can and cannot fix. Amanda, while only with us a short while, is able to grow from a superficial drunk judgmental person into a woman who can articulate why she is judgmental and who can ultimately see that she has made a large error in some of her choices and is able to fix them at the last moment.

Most importantly, Vera shows that growth is not just for the young. She is steadfast in her confidence and strength yet allows herself to be changed by Leo. She opens her mind to acknowledging that the world is a changing place and that she needs to change with it. Moreover, this growth is comparable to the growth of feminism. Feminism and the coined terminology may have 'officially' begun sometime around the women's suffragist movement but has since evolved. Some would argue that *4000 Miles* is not a typical feminist play as it does not overtly make a statement on the condition of women and women's rights. What it does instead is go beyond the almost hegemonic idea that feminism has to be one thing

and instead encompasses a variety of thematic moments that are sympathetic towards the feminist mission.

4000 miles is a long way to travel. Leo does it both literally and figuratively, as do many of the characters in the play. The relationship between Leo and Vera travels from a tenuous understanding often fraught with moments of discord to a harmonious appreciation for how the other one lives. Living an independent life full of possibility is Vera's objective, even at this late stage in the game. Leo brings that possibility to her. While they may have a different belief systems originally, at the end of their journey they reach a point where they're both sympathetic to each other's political, feminist beliefs and emotional beliefs. Vera is the quiet, strong matriarch who has and continues to persevere against hardship. Her feminism is both palpable and understated and even though she is perhaps an atypical representation, she represents the feminist mindset as well as any radical feminist would. While many would view her age and gender as a hardship, it is her spirit that is the most important thing and it is that spirit that makes 4000 Miles, a voyage of ups and downs, of triumphs and hardships, a journey worth taking.

## Works Cited

- Austin, Gayle. "Feminist Theories: Paying Attention To Women." *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*. London: Routledge, 1998. N. pag. Print.
- Browne, Colette. *Women, Feminism, and Aging*. New York: Springer, 1998. Print.
- Calasanti, Toni M., and Kathleen F. Slevin. *Gender, Social Inequalities, and Aging*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2001. Print.
- Dolan, Jill. "The Discourse of Feminisms: The Spectator and Representation." The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance. London: Routledge, 1998. N. pag. Print.
- Herzog, Amy. *4000 Miles: Two Plays*. New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, 2013. Print.