

Advance Praise

“Cesi Davidson has collected for us here a wondrous trip around, through, and within the heart. These short journeys into the emotions of those who love and those who do not add to our understanding of what love is and what love isn’t. When you laugh, cry, and sigh with recognition, you will be reminded that you are not only a witness to, but also a participant in the emotional life of all those around you. I hope you will enjoy these jump-starts to the heart as much as I did.”

—Celeste Rita Baker, World Fantasy Award Winner,
author of *Back, Belly and Side*
celesteritabaker.com

“Cesi Davidson’s newest book of short plays is at the same time revolutionary and hilarious in its content and delivery. Appropriately, the first play is titled “Juicy,” and this book has so much sweet, liquid fun within. From the beginning, the reader experiences a trickle of exquisite sensuality running through each page. There is an emboldened message of contented sexuality in many of the pieces that I, as a woman, felt incredibly grateful to tune in to. Cesi gives a gift to those of us with female bodies—and that gift is permission to feel good, whatever it looks like, and to research what could feel even better! Like Chauncey, the husband whose wife keeps watch over his every move, the characters in these plays refuse to be imprisoned. They have reached a turning point, and we watch, delighted, as change washes over everyone like a gigantic, juicy wave.”

—Kim Chinh, actor, screenwriter, playwright,
author of “Reclaiming Vietnam”
kimchinh.com

“The writing smoothly creates images, colors, and situations that lead the reader into the different immersed situations. Within the landscape of these various situation life issues, for example, humanity, identity, roles, expectations, and the rainbow of emotions, etc. are being done without going into darkness. In between the plays the prose capsulized a prospective of the former that was out of plain sight. It was like a cleansing of the palate for the next situation.

“Personally, the reading experience felt like a nice girl’s erotic sexual liberation written in a beautiful picturesque code for those who can hear, see, and feel her liberation and emotions within the stories.

“Entertaining reading.”

—Aduke Mickey Davidson, Senior Choreographer
and Educator for “The Makanda Project,”
“Jazz Power Initiative,” and Mickey D & Friends
Dance/Music Co.

“Once again I was entertained, moved, and shocked by Cesi’s expansive imagination in this third collection of inventive and delightful short plays. Give yourself to Cesi’s words, and you’ll experience the true essence of love with plenty of laughter inside the rich world in which all beings are sentient, intelligent, and funny.”

—Rachel Lu (Actor, Elite Match)

Bilabials

Conversation Pieces



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by Cesi Davidson
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About the Aqueduct Press Conversation Pieces Series

The feminist engaged with sf is passionately interested in challenging the way things are, passionately determined to understand how everything works. It is my constant sense of our feminist-sf present as a grand conversation that enables me to trace its existence into the past and from there see its trajectory extending into our future. A genealogy for feminist sf would not constitute a chart depicting direct lineages but would offer us an ever-shifting, fluid mosaic, the individual tiles of which we will probably only ever partially access. What could be more in the spirit of feminist sf than to conceptualize a genealogy that explicitly manifests our own communities across not only space but also time?

Aqueduct's small paperback series, Conversation Pieces, aims to both document and facilitate the "grand conversation." The Conversation Pieces series presents a wide variety of texts, including short fiction (which may not always be sf and may not necessarily even be feminist), essays, speeches, manifestoes, poetry, interviews, correspondence, and group discussions. Many of the texts are reprinted material, but some are new. The grand conversation reaches at least as far back as Mary Shelley and extends, in our speculations and visions, into the continually created future. In Jonathan Goldberg's words, "To look forward to the history that will be, one must look at and retell the history that has been told." And that is what Conversation Pieces is all about.

L. Timmel Duchamp

Jonathan Goldberg, "The History That Will Be" in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996)

Conversation Pieces
Volume 84

Bilabials

Short Plays to Nourish
the Mind & Soul

by
Cesi Davidson





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For Aunt Kitty and Uncle Louie

Bilabials require two lips

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Foreword

She's a Wonder

Cesi Davidson is a wonder. There's no other way to describe her consistently prolific invention, the fertility of her imagination, or the stunning boldness with which she deploys it in this, her most recent exposition of short plays and prose titled *Bilabials*. According to Davidson, *Bilabials* is meant "to Nourish the Mind and Soul"; it certainly accomplishes that, and so much more. It astonishes.

I first met Cesi Davidson lifetimes ago. Friendships are sometimes like that.

We were at Woody King Jr.'s New Federal Theater for an evening playwriting workshop. I arrived late and struggled to find a seat at the table. Eight writers were seated ready with their scripts on the table. The sagging metal chairs made balance difficult. The table didn't easily accommodate adult sized bodies. Its cafeteria-style edges were blunted by generations of St. Augustine's catechism students, most of them young, gifted, and Black. In the sanctuary, you could see the old "Slave Gallery" that still hung over congregational activity. Woody King had a small suite of offices behind the sanctuary, and from there, he ushered us into the world of theater.

Neither the physical discomfort nor challenging late night hours stopped Cesi's prolific outpouring. Week after week, she wrote play after play, sometimes bringing two or three startling new works in an evening. She listened to feedback, with regal composure and genuine

studiousness. She followed her north star until the quality, often coveted, but rarely understood, became her trademark. She's authentic as hell.

Davidson's collected works span three volumes, *Fricatives*, *Articulation*, and this new edition, *Bilabials*, comprising a theatrical opus. Each of the small works contains elements of the epic as well as the personal. In *Bilabials*, she treads fearlessly through love and loss, displacement, alienation, grief, sexuality, and we go with her to the depths and the summit of human experience. Her willingness to show a character's complexity and contradictions, their good and bad days, their nice, their ugly, gives us a window into Black women's lives and a healing bridge to universal truths.

It is tempting to compare Davidson's theater to that of Ionesco, Strindberg, Genet, or Cocteau. Like them, Davidson confronts a world where human connection is tenuous, where chaos and violence are imminent, a world where we must use language as a sword to cut through the noise, the lies, and the fears we hide from one another. Her short plays are epigrammatic in nature; they condense lifetimes of experience into brief encounters and present large, existential questions in spare, elegant dialogue. With skillful brevity, she constructs not just a mirror to hold up to our lives, but a many-sided prism through which we may ponder the nature of our reality. Deceptively simple at first glance, the plays are all highly organized and full of complexity that challenge and excite the reader or theatergoer.

And then, there is the wonder of humor. Davidson's collected works contain satirically humorous characters in situations that lay bare hypocrisy and deflate pomposity. In our time of cultural malaise, Cesi Davidson's

works provide an antidote to mediocrity and spur us towards a more creative future.

It's been a long time since we sat in wobbly chairs and read our scripts at tables with bent edges. But I always knew Cesi Davidson would stand among the extraordinary dramatists of our day. She is part of a continuum, a tradition of fearless and truthful creators. Like Bessie Smith's "Ma Rainey," like Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theater of Harlem, Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series, and Ntozake Shange *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, she's here, and she's bringin' it.

Thea Martinez

Author of numerous choreopoems;
performing with the Nuyorican Cafe Theater,
and contributed choreography to the original
production of *For Colored Girls* at Woody
King's New Federal Theatre

Preface

Welcome to my bouquet of plays and prose. In short, welcome to my words. Some related. Some, not so much. All have something to say as they give voice through the experience of Fem. And like a bouquet, you can enjoy each flower for its individuality. You can also consider how the individuality adds to the composition of the whole arrangement.

I hold these flowers in my arms and offer them to you. Read them in any order that suits your “Fem Fancy” or inquisitive “Fem Curiosity.” Stand up, sit down, squat, lie down, roll over, step into, or jump through the words. From my body to yours, with love. Some stems have thorns. Watch out or not. You may bleed. Some have lingering beautiful aromas. Perhaps, resonating with your own scents. Some stink profusely. That’s life. Everything beautiful isn’t beautiful. But I can assure you, that there will be petals.

As a child I loved the beauty of flowers while being afraid of them. Love them. They die. Drying their flower bodies never felt the same. Then growing into “woomankind,” I learned that there is never a beginning, or an end. Joy is infinite and filled with changes. The experience of being human is that nothing changes unless it changes. Change means we are spiritually alive, and transforming.

The final arrangement of this book bouquet is up to you. You’re also invited to compost: renew, regenerate, restore.

Peace and Love, Cesi
May 2022

Rose was gorgeous
She had one physical eye
Four fingers on each hand
Her cleft lips had been poorly repaired with surgery
Her left arm was shorter than the right
She wrote poetry and signed contracts with her left hand
Her legs reached from the hip sockets to the knees
Her genital worked perfectly
Rose knew that a woman is responsible for her own
joy and possibilities
She was boundless
Rose was a self-loving woman

Juicy

Characters

Karen: Woman in her early thirties

Lee: Man in his late thirties

Setting

Springtime. A park bench. New York City.

(Lights Rise)

LEE: (Looking straight ahead) Lovely day.

KAREN: (Looking straight ahead) Yes it is...a lovely day.

LEE: Expect rain?

KAREN: No. You?

LEE: No. A little cloudy.

KAREN: Yes, just a little. Could be rain. James took his trench coat to work.

LEE: Yes, could be.

KAREN: What?

LEE: Rain

KAREN: Could be... How's your Mom?

LEE: Oh, Oh, Mom's great! She had her annual physical. Good heart, lungs, stamina, everything. Doctor says, physically she could live for years and years. Still a beautiful woman. We had dinner together. I almost thought she recognized me. She looked at me. Didn't

say anything. But she looked at me. But then again, she seemed to be doing more looking at everybody yesterday. Last month she wasn't looking at all, just rocking back and forth. If it was possible to look inside yourself, that's what she was doing. I remember, in January when she was looking all the time, she had a special look for me. I know it was special for me. I know it was. She looked at my eyes, and it seemed like she was trying to hold on to me with her eyes. She didn't do that with anyone else. I think she wanted to say my name because her jaw dropped open wide like she was saying /l/ for "Lee," but no sound came out. I thought that maybe by springtime she would be saying more. It's still spring, it's still possible.

KAREN: I'm sure it's possible Lee.

LEE: The Good Shepherd Home accepted her. I'm taking her on Tuesday. I'm so lucky. So lucky. They're clean. The nurses are licensed, and most of them were nice when I visited.

KAREN: People usually have a hard time taking care of their family...when you know...they stop remembering so well.

LEE: I remember, just before the Christmas holiday Mom left all the burners turned on and left the house. She didn't have her coat. Went out in her housedress and her slippers. The super found her sitting on the curb at the taxi stand across from our building. She had forgotten where she lived. After that I knew I couldn't leave her alone in the apartment any more. Even with neighbors looking in and checking on her it just wasn't safe.

LEE: (Hesitation and despair in his voice) I sold her acres in Alabama to make a down payment on the nursing home. The insurance hasn't kicked in yet. Did you know old people can't have assets to get the long-term government insurance? Doesn't matter I guess. She doesn't remember Alabama or anything else.

KAREN: You did what you had to do.

(Lee and Karen look at each other. They penetrate each other with their eyes. Movement in unison. Lee takes two plums from a paper bag. He holds them with a single cupped hand with parted legs next to his genitals. Karen takes plums from her paper bag. She holds one in each hand next to the nipples of her breasts. Then in unison they place the fruit on the park table in front of them.)

LEE: I always wash my hands before I eat plums. A lot of men don't do that you know. I think it's respectful.

KAREN: Women appreciate when a man washes his hands first. I know I do.

LEE: (Points to one of the plums on the table) That one is a Goldenrod Plum.

KAREN: I've sucked on other types of rods before but never a Goldenrod.

LEE: It has firm flesh and a small pit inside.

KAREN: Pits are important. I like to have my pit touched. Sometimes a firm fleshy plum has a soft, chewy pit.

LEE: When the pit is soft, I chew on it and swallow it.

KAREN: (Indicating one of the plums on the table) I enjoy sucking.

There are dry plums, and there are juicy plums. I can tell if the plum is juicy when I look at the outside. I hold the plum in the palm of my hand, and I make just a little nip in the flesh. Just enough for the juice

to start dripping out. Then I start to suck. I let it drip on my face. Suck and drip, suck and drip, suck and drip, swallow.

LEE & KAREN: (Orgasmic moment) JUICY

LEE: Do you stroke the flesh while you suck?

KAREN: Yeah Baby.

LEE: Do you hold on to the flesh tight?

KAREN: I make magic with my mouth. Nip, suck, drip, stroke, nip, suck, drip, stroke, and pull.

LEE: JUICY

KAREN: When I finish...I don't like it when I'm still hungry!

LEE: You already told me how you feel about your pits. Big Daddy can take care of some pits.

KAREN: Most men don't know how to take care of pits, and the whole experience just becomes so unpleasant!

LEE: I have magic fingers. (Indicates one of the plums on the table) See that one. I would work the front and the back. It has a beautiful little stem. Most men neglect the stem.

I would hold the front and the back. I would gently twist the stem.

KAREN: See that's what I'm talkin about. Do you think that's pleasant? Having a stem twisted?

LEE: Well I thought

KAREN: Yeah, you guys always think...

LEE: I'm sorry Karen.

KAREN: Just make it right!

LEE: (Indicates the other plum on the table) I would hold the plum gently for a few minutes until it felt warm and comfortable in my hands. Then I would softly and patiently caress the flesh from all directions. Being very sensitive. I would touch one part, watch for a response, then caress again depending on how the flesh reacted. You know...if the flesh sprang back or retracted in my fingers. It's all about communication with your fruit. I think that's where most men go wrong. They stop communicating with the fruit. Then I would take my thumb and my index finger and insert them in the front and in the back at the same time. I would move my fingers in motion together like I was composing a song. I'd move my fingers fast, slow, faster, slower, faster, faster, faster.

KAREN: (Vocal expression)

LEE & KAREN: JUICY

(Lights Out)

(Lights Rise)

Setting

Next Morning. The Park.

(Lee is sitting on the bench. He looks at his watch. Karen rushes in. Lee looks up.)

LEE: There you are. I have some delicious...

KAREN: (Throws a bag of fruit at Lee) Here's your fruit.

(Lee looks at her, puzzled. Then he opens the bag. He takes one less than desirable plum out of the bag.)

KAREN: I could only get one.

LEE: (Opens the bag and takes the plum out) Brown rot? It has brown rot. (Banging the plum on the bench) This plum isn't juicy. It's rotten, and it's hard.

KAREN: It's the best I could do.

LEE: (Handing Karen a bag) Look at what I brought you.

KAREN: (Opens the bag, looks, and tosses it back to Lee) You. Does it always have to be about you? We're moving to Phoenix. James got a promotion. He'll be head of the division there.

LEE: (Looking straight ahead) How soon do you leave?

KAREN: How soon do I leave? Is that what you want to say to me? Lee. Lee.

KAREN: I'll have a good kitchen. Even an "LG"—you know a "Life is Great" refrigerator. Yes, a "Life is Great" refrigerator. Double doors. Nice, big, storage bins for vegetables and FRUIT! James said, there wouldn't be any reason for me to leave the house. We'll have everything we need. I won't be shopping anymore. We'll shop on line and have home delivery. I'll make his breakfast.

He'll go to work.

I'll make his lunch.

He'll go to work.

I'll make his dinner.

I'll order the food on line. We'll get delivery the next day.

I'll make breakfast.

He'll go to work.

The delivery will come before noon.

I'll make his lunch.

He'll come home, eat lunch, and then we'll discuss...

Yes, we'll discuss dinner.

He'll go to work.

I'll make dinner.

We'll eat together.

I'll go on line, order next day delivery.

It's a little more in my routine but I'll get used to it.

I'll have a "Life is Great" refrigerator.

James said, clients would come to the house. I will cook, entertain, and look pretty.

LEE: Here, take your fruit.

KAREN: No, you keep them. I want more than fruit. I want... Can you feel what I want Lee? Can you? I suppose we can't always get what we want; we get what we're due. I'm getting a new refrigerator.

LEE: (Looking at the sky) A little cloudy. Maybe rain.

KAREN: Do you hear me? Can you understand anything I'm saying? Do you care?

LEE: Yeah, maybe rain.

KAREN: I won't have to think about rain anymore. I'm moving to the desert. My grandma in Kingston used to say that a woman shouldn't get involved in a relationship unless she's ripe. Well I'm ripe Lee and I want to be picked, eaten and enjoyed. Are you ready to pick me? Pick me Lee. Pick me.

LEE: Karen, you know I

KAREN: Yes I know. Forget it. Forget about me. I'm going to start eating dried fruit.

Juicy fruit is over rated. Maybe I'll start eating prunes. It'll keep me from getting constipated, like some people. When you're constipated you have a whole lot stuck up your... (Begins to exit, then looks back at Lee) I wish your Mom all the best.

(Karen exits. Lee watches her leave. He picks up one of the plums he bought for Karen and eats the juicy plum.)

(Lights Out)

End of Play