

Julian Vigo

Performative Bodies, Hybrid Tongues



Race, Gender, Sex and Modernity
in Latin America and the Maghreb

PETER LANG

33

This book reconsiders the body in literature and makes a case for visual representation as a physical and gesticulative domain for rethinking the constructions of gender, nationalism and sexuality. Examining literary production from the eleventh century until the present, the author argues that the body in contemporary North Africa and Latin America serves as a physical and symbolic terrain upon which sexual, textual, national, racial and linguistic identities are vectored and through which postcolonial and hegemonic antagonisms of power and identity are resolved.

Rather than embracing “third world” identity as a residual repository of western thought, colonization and linguistic infusion, the author suggests that the paradigm of cultural identity in the Maghreb and Latin America is best understood through an examination of the emergent corporeal articulations of subjectivity prevalent in these literatures and visual cultures. The text examines the body as a critical landscape through which the various discourses of nationhood, gender and sexuality converge in order to construct a reading of the social that neither amasses subjectivity as singular under the rubric of the “third world”, nor couches the other within static notions of gendered, sexual or racial identities.

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**Performative Bodies,
Hybrid Tongues**

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Edited by
Claudio Canaparo



PETER LANG

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Notes on Transcription

Due to the fact that my research has included texts from eight different languages (also in which transliterations were produced), maintaining one common system of transcription is difficult since there are many accepted forms for transliterating both Arabic and Nahuatl. For example, the transcription for the letter *shīn* (ش) in a French text is often transliterated as *ch* whereas in an English text this same letter would be written *sh*. The transcription of Nahuatl, having been developed originally by Fray Bernardino Sahagún, presents fewer problems since there tends to be a general adherence to Sahagún's original work. Nevertheless, when transcribing from a language such as Moroccan dialectical Arabic, *derija*, which is a spoken—not a written—language, the transliteration depends entirely upon the pronunciation embraced by the author. For instance, in Fes it is quite common that men cannot (or do not) roll the *rā*^{◌◌◌} (ر) and instead enunciate a prolonged *a* sound as if the *rā*^{◌◌◌} were an *alif*(*l*). As such, I have included phonetic and transliteration guidelines to aid in the reading of this manuscript. I have left the transcriptions cited from secondary sources in their original form *except* in certain cases. In many older transcriptions apostrophes are used instead of the precise diacritical marks often causing confusion (especially since the *hamza* and the *ayn* are indistinguishable with many type faces). In these cases, I have replaced the apostrophes with either ^{◌◌◌} or ^{◌◌◌◌◌}. The following list shows the DNI transcription format while also including the other international transcription systems shown in parentheses.

Nahuatl Phonetics

In contemporary Nahuatl transcription, vowels are pronounced as they are in Spanish. Yet, while most consonants and their combinations are similar to those in English, there are the following exceptions:

cu	kw
hu	w
h without u	<i>glottal stop</i>
tl	<i>single consonant</i>
x	š
z	s

Arabic Transcription

ا, ء	ā, ° (â, a')
ب	b
ت	t
ث	ṭ (th, <u>th</u>)
ج	ġ (j, dj)
ح	ḥ (h)
خ	ḫ (<u>h</u> , kh, <u>kh</u> , x)
د	d
ذ	<u>d</u> (dh)
ر	r
ز	z
س	s
ش	š (sh, <u>sh</u> , ch, sch)
ص	ṣ (š, ç)
ض	<u>ḍ</u> (<u>ḍ</u>)
ط	ṭ (ṭ)

ظ	z (z̤)
ع	c (ʿ)
غ	ġ (gh, ġh)
ف	f
ق	q (ḳ)
ك	k
ل	l
م	m
ن	n
ه	h
و	w, ū (û, uw, ô, ou)
ي	y, ī (î, iy)
ى	ā (â, ÿ, á, a')
ة	h, t
گ	g
short vowels	a, i, u

INTRODUCTION

The Erasure of Language and the Production of Meaning

This manuscript reconsiders the body in literature and visual representation as a physical and gesticulative domain for rethinking the constructions of gender, nationalism, and sexuality. Primarily examining contemporary literary production, I argue that the body in contemporary North Africa and Latin America serves as a physical and symbolic space upon which sexual, textual, national, and linguistic identities are vectored and through which postcolonial and hegemonic antagonisms of power are engaged. Rather than embrace “third world” identity as a residual repository of western thought, colonization, and linguistic infusion, as is often conferred in critical theory, I suggest that the paradigm of cultural identity in the Maghreb and Latin America is best understood through an examination of the emergent corporeal articulations of subjectivity prevalent in these literatures and cultures. This book argues that the body is a critical landscape through which the various discourses of nationalism, gender, and sexuality converge in order to construct a reading of the social that neither amasses identity as singular under the rubric of the “third world,” nor couches the other within western identity.

At the core of my study is language. What is the relationship between language and the realities behind it? In the United States the language of “race” is categorized and utilized such that “race,” a fiction that has long been disproved as a valid qualifier, is still in flagrant quotidian and political (mis)use. We saw this most clearly in the US presidential primary races in 2008 wherein the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, was considered “black” by some, “mixed race” by others, and “half black, half white” by still more commentators. Yet, the notions of “pure race” as opposed to “mixed race” and of “half races” demonstrate how our cultures perceive “race” at

its very root as essentialized, as identifiable and basically as classifiable. So underlying each fiction of race is a discourse that is not scientific, not epistemological, but purely historiographical in that “race” can only refer to itself *as historicity*, as what it has been understood to mean until this very moment. In contradistinction, history teaches us that most humans are of “mixed race”, that heritage is necessarily untraceable for most groups and that “race” itself is an invention having obfuscated ethnicity or religious groupings. So, how to discuss the discourses of various cultural fictions such as race, gender, sexuality, and nationalism, which are to this day understood in western popular culture as realities?

This book examines how language is often too much or too little in dealing with identity politics and herein the reader will note my use of language that is constantly and consciously calling into question the *very words* I use. Certainly, my use of language may often seem to “contradict” itself for how can one deconstruct gender if the writer is using “masculine” and “feminine” as markers of something understandable and real? And this is the heart of my experiment, for this work both discusses the collapse of western parochialism and epistemological imperialism which adheres to strict alliances between language and gender, nationalism, sexuality and sex (ie. butch/femme, masculine/feminine, top/bottom, homosexual/heterosexual, black/white, etc.) while also calling into question the very dichotomies that are examined *by virtue of their being juxtaposed through language* (i.e. that one cannot be both butch and femme or that butch and femme are necessarily oppositions).

In a perfect universe, I would love to never again use the words “western” and “non-western”, “third world” and “first world” or “traditional” and “modern”, since as I later elaborate, these modalities are as real as they are fictive: these terms are as polarized by the myths of certain cultural settings as they are non-identifiable in the very cultures to which they refer. These binaries are as much a product of a certain historical and social consensus (of certain persons in certain places) as they are terms that are under erasure (by other certain persons in other certain spaces). This work attempts a critique of the “non-sense” of specifically western literary, anthropological, and philosophical discourses which on the one hand wish to collapse the binaries of identity and “liberate” the subject from

language, but on the other hand, disavow any possibility of such liberation since the transgressive act of renaming identity becomes re-interpolated into a system of categorization which necessarily throws the subject at the very mercy of language.

The first chapter, “Western Theories of Gender and Sex: Performative or Real?”, examines feminist and queer theories in the west which assume certain freedoms of sexual and gendered identities while simultaneously prescribing very rigid constructions of identity. Analyzing theories and practices of performance, anthropology, architecture and American land art, I offer various paradigms for unraveling the somatic/performative nexus constructed in much of gender theory. The second chapter, “Language and the Body in Barthes, Khatibi and Sarduy: The Intertextual and Intersexual”, examines the writings of Roland Barthes (France) focusing on his notion of *langage poétique* which is a fragmented and pluralistic space of nature and the body while looking at how this notion of corporeal fluidity is also re-articulated and situated outside the west by Severo Sarduy (Cuba) and Abdelkebir Khatibi (Morocco) as a posture for reading cultural inflections of gender, language, and nationalism specific to Latin America and North Africa. Chapter Three, “The Body of *Fitna* and the Intractable Feminine: Exile, Nomadism, Memory and the *Bi-langue* in Maghrebian Literature”, situates the body of polyvalent sexes and desires within Maghrebian literature, focussing on Khatibi’s *Le livre du sang* as well as other Maghrebian texts wherein the “sacred” and the “profane” are not so much dialectically related, as much as they are integrated within the scope of desire and subjectivity, contamination and death, as these writers grapple with Islamic notions of purity and transgression as well as postcolonial ties to western constructions of language, nation, and gender. In Chapter Four, “The Violence of Representation in Latin American Literature: *Realismo mágico* and *Neobarroco* Bodies of Gender, Race, Sickness and Terror”, I turn to contemporary notions of magical realism and trace the history of the magically real in Latin America from narratives of the Conquest through contemporary fiction which attempts to relocate the “truth” of history while also embracing the *mestizaje* of Latin American constructions of culture, language, history, race and gender. Chapter Five, “Hybrid Bodies and Border Crossings: Nationalism and Modernity in Morocco and

Mexico”, examines the interstices of various discourses of traditionalism and modernity in Latin America and the Maghreb focussing upon the visual representations of nationhood in Mexico and Morocco through the official portraiture of late King Hassan II and the paintings of Frida Kahlo respectively. Locating the body as the terrain upon which modernity and tradition are simultaneously articulated and recast, this chapter attempts to understand how modernity functions in each specific cultural paradigm and how identity operates within a larger global spectrum wherewith history is rethought, destroyed and imagined as a means of asserting that which is always lost and discontinuous.

This work is an experiment in the erasure, collapse and reconstruction of language, performance and the body and the spaces between each: the language of performance and of the somatic; the performative of language and the body; and the body as language and as performance. In attempting to remain as critical to my own use of language as I do the discourses I critique, I inevitably enter into a *glissement* of language where to use a certain word might seem limiting, but not to use it would obscure meaning. This book aims to work with the nuances and contradictions of language as a I excavate the words as textures in literature and visual culture which, like the body, must confront the conterminous excess and paucity of meanings imposed from inside and out, forever changed by their erasures and rescriptings (ie. the *mestizo* as that “mixed race” that discounts racial purity while at the same time including it in that “mixed” refers to original purities). Indeed the body is a physical text and performative space which is as much a terrain for understanding the heterogeneous cultural and political realities of Latin America and the Maghreb as it is a tool for enacting the “magically real” topographies of nationality, gender, language, race and sex. Ultimately, this book investigates the possibility for the subject to name herself and to perform, rewrite, erase and reconstruct the very language through which she is rendered and brought into being.

Western Theories of Gender and Sex: Performative or Real?

Como todos los hombres de la Biblioteca, he viajado en mi juventud; he peregrinado en busca de un libro, acaso del catálogo de catálogos; ahora que mis ojos casi no pueden descifrar lo que escribo, me preparo a morir a unas pocas leguas del hexágono en que nací Muerto, no faltarán manos piadosas que me tiren por la baranda; mi sepultura será el aire insondable: mi cuerpo se hundirá largamente y se corromperá y disolverá en el viento engendrado por la caída, que es infinita.

— JORGE LUIS BORGES, “La Biblioteca de Babel”, *Ficciones*

Over the past century in the West, gender has been examined as a factor which is automatically posited as either part of an integral dimension of personhood or as a locus of difference—be it biological, linguistic, cultural, or sexual. As such, in the past fifteen years gender has become a point of contention within identity politics (specifically feminist and queer theories) since the “realness” of gender as *linked to certain sexed bodies* has come under scrutiny. Older forms of interpreting and constructing gender as difference have been resurrected from the cinders of linguistic, ontological and epistemological discourses and reanimated within current social and theoretical fabrics. Likewise post-structuralist theory has attempted to corrode the very Manichaen tendencies in Western thought which heretofore sought to tease out and separate one gender from another. Not surprisingly, much of post-structuralist theory has led to an even greater entrenchment of these very dichotomies of gender. Certainly, the inherent presupposition of gendered difference which automatically marks subjectivity within the preordained schemes of being of *either feminine or masculine*

inevitably maintains all identity as real, pervasively homogeneous, intractably different, and inevitably stuck within the tradition of Cartesian metaphysics in which discourses of the other are necessarily inveterate.

One of the most notable studies of gender and philosophy of recent years is Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble* (1990) wherein she critiques the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray. I would like to turn here to all three writers and attempt to review certain historical "givens" of gender. De Beauvoir argues in *Le deuxième sexe* that the feminine gender is Other, and hence women, being defined in terms of their sex, hover under the bodiless, universal construct of the masculine for whom sex as identity is incidental. Considering the strategies of Freud, Lacan, Barret, Cixous, de Lauretis, Wittig, just to name a few, one can hardly deny the notion of woman as "other". But what does this positing of "other" really mean for gender and feminist theories today? And what is the nature of alterity as a linguistic nominate and a discursive locus in a world where the division between language and identity is increasingly becoming blurred? The problem that immediately comes to mind when confronting recent discourses of alterity is that there is clearly a cultural schizophrenia when dealing with gender in the West. On the one hand, when reading women as "other" the feminine inevitably remains the singular object of a discourse which insists upon a dissolution of its language consequently marking its marginalization—that the feminine can somehow be liberated through the destruction of the very language which *others itself*. And conversely, the discourse of the feminine as other inevitably struggles with language that does not position the feminine as the negative dialectic of the masculine—that there is a certain investment in maintaining the binary structure masculine/feminine whereby each maintains its "difference". Certainly, the discourse of woman as "other" is highly problematic: for how can woman be represented if the language of the masculine (and its traces) must be destroyed in order to faithfully represent her, while nonetheless the signification of the feminine is based upon gender being two-fold: masculine/feminine.

Luce Irigaray, in her work entitled *This Sex Which is not One*, questions the very bases upon which are grounded the traditional dichotomies of active/passive, penetrator/penetrated, and then masculine/feminine.

Irigaray argues that women are the “sex” which is not “one”—that is the sex which is unequivocal, unrepresentable—since there is an inherent linguistic opacity in a language which elides the polyvalence of identity thus making the construction of the subject and the Other as integral to the creation of the masculine, excluding the feminine entirely from the process of representation. The female sex for Irigaray constitutes that which is not “one” but multiple: “She herself enters into a ceaseless exchange of herself with the other without any possibility of identifying either. This puts into question all prevailing economies: their calculations are irremediably stymied by woman’s pleasure, as it increases indefinitely from its passage in and through the other” (p. 31). What Irigaray unfolds, unlike Freud’s concept of woman as lack with respect to the phallus and de Beauvoir’s concept of woman as the negative of man, is a system which sets out to deploy the feminine as insufficient—that the economy of signification within the system of representation based on the archetype of Western metaphysics is simply a mirror which necessarily employs phallogocentric language *of* and *for* a construction of masculine identity.¹ According to Butler, Irigaray’s notion of gender is left in a position of linguistic and mimetic aporia while for de Beauvoir the female subject is “always already masculine” (Butler, p. 11).

- 1 Butler writes: “Beauvoir and Irigaray clearly differ over the fundamental structures by which gender asymmetry is reproduced; Beauvoir turns to the failed reciprocity of an asymmetrical dialectic, while Irigaray suggests that the dialectic itself is the monologic elaboration of a masculinist signifying economy. Although Irigaray clearly broadens the scope of feminist critique by exposing the epistemological, ontological, and logical structures of a masculinist signifying economy, the power of her analysis is undercut precisely by its globalizing reach. Is it possible to identify a monolithic as well as a monologic masculinist economy that traverses the array of cultural and historical contexts in which sexual difference takes place? Is the failure to acknowledge the specific cultural operations of gender oppression itself a kind of epistemological imperialism, one which is not ameliorated by the simple elaboration of cultural differences as ‘examples’ of the selfsame phallogocentrism? The effort to include ‘Other’ cultures as variegated amplification of a global phallogocentrism constitutes an appropriative act that risks a repetition of the self-aggrandizing gesture of phallogocentrism, colonizing under the sign of the same those differences that might otherwise call the totalizing concept into question” (p. 13).

Yet, I would argue that both claiming the impossibility of representing woman, as in the case of Irigaray, and maintaining that any representation of woman is necessarily the negative of man, as in the case of de Beauvoir, are equally problematic solutions. For de Beauvoir, woman cannot *truly* be represented since any such interpretation necessarily denies all essence (truth) of the feminine as the body of woman is subject to cultural taboos and readings² and for Irigaray any representation of woman is necessarily flawed. In representing woman, de Beauvoir sees language as simply *not enough* (language as castrated from signification), where for Irigaray language *is defective* (scarred by the traces of phallogocentrism).

I see the problem of gender representation as not simply that language is “not enough” or “scarred”, but instead I view the problem of representation as located in *how* we are posing and answering questions of gender. In the West an economy of signification which relegates feminine/masculine within the bifurcating structures of the familiar dichotomy of subject/object is part and parcel of an all too familiar cultural dilemma. More to the point, Western culture is obsessed, quite literally, with making intelligible identity—be it sexual, gendered, national, ethnic, just to name a few—in terms of clear, concise and unquestioned boundaries. In the United States, for instance, quotidian experiences wherein individuals complete forms in which they must indicate their “precise” race, ethnicity, and sexuality, verify the cultural weight of identity as intransigent and fixed. We now live in societies which both deny and expand the possibilities of the somatic and identity is rendered paradoxical—for while the discourse of a singular “race” and sex is constantly underlined by the cultural mainstream, sex and

- 2 De Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex*: “[A] society is not a species, for it is in society that the species attains the status of existence—transcending itself toward the world and toward the future. Its ways and customs cannot be deduced from biology, for the individuals that compose the society are never abandoned to the dictates of their nature; they are subject rather to that second nature which is custom and which has always reflected the desires and the fears that express their essential nature. It is not merely as a body, but rather as a body subject to taboos, to laws, that the subject is conscious of himself and attains fulfillment—it is with reference to certain values that he evaluates himself” (p. 36).

sexuality are more increasingly being self-inscribed by the living subject, rather than being proclaimed and assumed over the body of the newborn. Similarly, this centrifugal force of separating “opposites” has a contagious effect both within the structuring of language that “teases out” identity as well as within normative cultural practices which mark gender and essentialize difference—usually the feminine body—as unified, and single. As such, the drive to polarize masculine from feminine, active from passive, et cetera, becomes a force laden with cultural baggage, assumptions, and recastings, thus further eradicating the very possibility of emancipating the subject from a discourse of gender asymmetry.

What all these theories eventually hook into as part of their radical discourse of gender signification is the physical element of the female body—that which again falls into the Cartesian trap as being controvertly opposed to the male body and derivatively equated with the feminine. Butler, however, argues for an elucidation of the space between the mind/body construct and states: “This association of the body with the female works along the magical relations of reciprocity whereby the female sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed, becomes, paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensibly radical freedom” (1990, pp. 11–12). Demonstrating the problematic explicit within the Western philosophical tradition which associates masculinity with the mind and femininity with the body, Butler examines how these systems are simply reproduced throughout feminist discourse of the twentieth century. She concludes that feminist theory attempts a revolutionary liberation of the feminine through fantasy in which the mind “flees the body” (p. 12) while confirming that the structures which name the masculine signifying economy as totalizing fall short of viewing other constructs which have nothing to do with a universalizing disembodied masculine marginalizing the corporeal feminine (in questions such as race, class, and heterosexism). Butler’s work seemingly throws a wrench into feminist theory while bringing to the fore necessary dimensions of identity that feminist theory has by and large elided for most of the twentieth century.

Butler’s *Gender Trouble* situates the dilemma of gender not as a paradigm in which the masculine dominates the feminine, as within the “master/slave” tradition, but instead locates the discursive construction of

gender as burdened by the effort to separate and make “intelligible” the relationships between sex, gender, and sexuality:

“Intelligible” genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire. In other words, the spectres of discontinuity and incoherence, themselves thinkable only in relation to existing norms of continuity and coherence, are constantly prohibited and produced by the very laws that seek to establish causal or expressive lines of connection among biological sex, culturally constituted genders, and the “expression” or “effect” of both in the manifestation of sexual desire through sexual practice. The notion that there might be a “truth” of sex, as Foucault ironically terms it, is produced precisely through the regulatory practices that generate coherent identities through the matrix of coherent gender norms. The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between “feminine” and “masculine”, where these are understood as expressive attributes of “male” and “female”. The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of “identities” cannot “exist”—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not “follow” from either sex or gender. (p. 17)

In Butler, the body *is* the canvas incarnate which, correlative to its sex, is saturated, marked, and encoded with fixed cultural, epistemic and linguistic markings of gender and sexuality. As such, the body is both the space of performance and the site of subversion or even redemption of gender, sex and sexuality. Reciprocally, it might follow that the performance of gender and sexuality would necessarily subvert the discursive markings of the body, invoking a restructuring of the relationship between the somatic and the performative. But this is not possible according to Butler’s reading since she views the body as both the site of designating and subverting identity. The somatic is the mirror of language for Butler—it either confirms that which we already knew and named, or it completely opposes it, toppling the linguistic structures of knowledge. And this is the point of incision in which the lack of language that de Beauvoir evidences and the flaw of language that Irigaray discusses emerge in Butler. She does not entirely resolve the problem of representation as effective, as seamless, and instead of positing the language of representation as being flawed or as lacking, Butler invokes the body as the “signifying lack.” In her critique of

Foucault's notion of power, she translates the "interior psychic space" (the soul) as that which "contests and displaces the inner/outer distinction," the performative encoding the body.³

Butler offers two spheres of signification for the body, the physical (sex) and the performative (gender), in which the body is marked by the performative and ergo becomes the site for inscribing identity because it is always lacking. Unlike Foucault, Butler maintains that the real and the representational are interdependent wherein each reads the other.⁴ By making a distinction between the physical and the gesticular and by stressing the power of performativity, Butler opens up the possibility for examining the body as the exterior shell upon which meanings are inevitably inscribed instead of being the coded transmitter which designates identity and gender:

- 3 Butler discusses Foucault's notion of the spirit and the body, arguing against his notion that the body (materiality) precedes signification: "The figure of the interior should be understood as 'within' the body is signified through its inscription *on* the body, even though its primary mode of signification is through its very absence, its potent invisibility. The effect of a structuring inner space is produced through the signification of a body as a vital and sacred enclosure. The soul is precisely what the body lacks; hence, the body presents itself as a signifying lack. That lack which *is* the body signifies the soul as that which cannot show. In this sense, then, the soul is a surface signification that contests and displaces the inner/outer distinction itself, a figure of interior psychic space inscribed *on* the body as a social signification that perpetually renounces itself as such. In Foucault's terms, the soul is not imprisoned by or within the body, as some Christian imagery would suggest, but 'the soul is the prison of the body'" (p. 135).
- 4 Peggy Phelan in *Unmarked* gives an excellent analysis of this point: "Identifying with a gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms that are not realizable, and whose power and status precede the identifications by which they are insistently approximated. This 'being a man' and this 'being a woman' are internally unstable affairs. They are always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a norm that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse, resignify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely" (pp. 126–127).

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. As much as drag creates a unified picture of “woman” (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.* (p. 137)

Discussing drag performance, Butler initially grounds her theory of gender as that which “imitates” when there is an “incongruity” between the somatic and the performative—that is when gender and the body are, under conventional standards, antagonistic. Later in her discussion of the performative, Butler uses the discourse of drag to question the very performativity of gender when “incongruity” is not an issue: “If the body is not a ‘being,’ but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, then what language is left for understanding this corporeal surface?” (p. 139). In effect, Butler locates gender as the posturing and stylization of the body and not vice versa, the body dictating the performance.⁵

- 5 Butler continues: “Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted *social temporality*. Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (pp. 140–141).

So what, exactly, does the body imitate and what is the identity created? For if, as Butler asserts, identity must be comprised as “social temporality” and if gender is truly “internally discontinuous”, then the body becomes a manufactured identity for which there is no “real” and, conversely, where there is no “play”:

The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction. If gender attributes, however, are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal. The distinction between expression and performativeness is crucial. If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. (p. 141)

The problem with Butler’s theory here is that one cannot simply wipe away “preexisting identity” as if there were never a referent to some “true” or historically configured gender. If this were the case, then there would be no possibility of gender subversion, no space of play. In attempting to bring forth a discourse of subversion, Butler stumbles between her allegiance to “true” and “abiding” genders while claiming, simultaneously, that there is no fixed identity. Moreover, Butler fails to return to the body as the fabric of subjectivity and relies so heavily on the performative of gender and sexuality that the body seems to be incidental on the stage of gender performativity.⁶

6 Butler then turns her attention to sexuality as the site for destabilizing gender categories: “In this sense, *gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence. Hence,

At this point at least one question remains: if there is truly an “arbitrary relation” between somatic identity (the sexed body) and the performative (gender and sexuality) in which there are no “real or distorted acts of gender” and where the body is liberated from “domination and compulsory heterosexuality”, why then is the body, in Butler’s reading, the sole space of singular sexed inscriptions and never an agent of its own disruptibility? Moreover, how can we discuss the relationship between the somatic and sex, gender, and sexuality without constructing yet another facile discourse which seeks either to reverse the dichotomies of feminine [female] passivity and corporeality to masculine [male] activity and intellectual energy by eliding the body, or to nullify the historical remnants of these discursive markings which might possibly serve as an arena of subversion or creation?

Returning to de Beauvoir and Irigaray, if language is always lacking or defective when referring to gender, would Butler’s subversion (the body as lack) offer a solution to the heterosexual dichotomization of gender or merely serve to underline the linguistic and ontological artifices of her own argument? For instance, a man in woman’s clothes *has to be* funny according to Butler merely because the spectator realizes that the juxtaposition of gender is “confused” and *not* “normal”. Despite her effort to subvert the body, Butler nonetheless bases her notion of gender subversion on an *original gender* located within very heterosexual, dichotomized models of gender and sex that she sets out to critique.⁷ Presently, I fail to see any sort of *effective* subversion in Butler’s critique, and instead I notice a reinstallation of “traditional”

within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed... The repetition of heterosexual constructs within sexual cultures by both gay and straight may well be the inevitable site of the denaturalization and mobilization of gender categories. The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original” (pp. 20–31).

- 7 Discussing Jameson’s notion of parody and pastiche, Butler writes: “The loss of the sense of ‘the normal,’ however, can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when ‘the normal,’ ‘the original’ is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one, an

gender roles (hence “traditional” readings of sexuality) in which meaning takes hold at the very moment in which the previous (albeit stereotypical) heterosexual models are collapsed in favor of a consciously queer model—a queer which is as equally problematic as the heterosexual model Butler vituperates. As Butler compels the performative to efface the social regulatory practices on the body—and even the body itself—, she fails to allow for an all-encompassing range of freedom for all possible sexes, genders and sexualities. Butler’s argument presents a major stumbling block for gender theory which, like many discourses of freedom, issues promulgations of liberation through the destruction of “all things traditional”. By focusing on subversion to which she tenaciously clutches as a performative through which the historical modalities of an *original* body and gender are confused and displaced, Butler loses all sense of free play of the body. She simply elides the possibility that the traditional models of sex, gender and sexuality which she spends much labor critiquing might, in fact, not at all be so “normal”, or at the very least, might just prove to be as subversive as the queer models she promotes.

After all, what is subversion really, if not a temporal jarring of the cultural traditions and the language of reading a certain, singular identity? Certainly in subversion there is necessarily a marking of the “real” or the “original” against which the subversive act is fighting. Fundamentally, I find Butler’s reading of the body and gender quite problematic since the somatic necessarily retains all traces of history and language without ever taking on a singular meaning. Butler’s assertion that the body is the object, not the subject, of performative inscription (remember, she posits the body as the lack for “that which cannot show”) becomes the site for locating a new queer schizophrenia in which heterosexuality is denied (except as performance), masculinist discourses disappear, and the body is never enough. In shunning all access to language by virtue of performance, Butler creates the terrain for reading a kind of “polymorphous perversity” in which sustained gender performances enact arbitrary “gender realities.” And Butler takes

ideal that no *can* embody. In this sense, laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived” (pp. 138–139).

this issues up once again in *Bodies That Matter* wherein she de-emphasizes subversion and argues for the body as the site of denaturalization through performance.⁸ Analyzing drag culture in Jenny Livingston's 1992 documentary *Paris is Burning*, Butler asserts that the gender performance of the drag balls is not at all subversive but rather evokes a construction of the *traditional* norms of society:

The drag balls themselves at times produce high femininity as a function of whiteness and deflect homosexuality through a transgenering that *reidealizes* certain bourgeois forms of heterosexual exchange. And yet, if those performances are not immediately or obviously subversive, it may be that it is rather in the *reformulation of kinship*, in the redefining of the "house" and its forms of collectivity, mothering, mopping, reading, and becoming legendary, that the appropriation and redeployment of the categories of dominant culture enable the formation of kinship relations that function quite supportively as oppositional discourse. (p. 241)

The obvious question, then, is why in *Gender Trouble* is drag subversive when it reveals gender as a "falsely naturalized" moment of heterosexuality, yet later in *Bodies That Matter*, in considering class and race as well, Butler maintains that there is no "pure subversion" of gender since the drag balls of *Paris is Burning* are about reformulating other equally traditional concepts of being: wealth, collectivity, house and kinship? Could it be that Butler fails to read subversion where she sees gender co-opting static, *real* points of identity and power—whiteness, wealth and community (as if these modalities were any more real than gender)—wherein the subjects adopt a language which is not *their own* in order to take possession of an identity

- 8 "The goal of this analysis, then, cannot be pure subversion, as if an undermining were enough to establish and direct political struggle. Rather than denaturalization or proliferation, it seems that the question for thinking discourse and power in terms of the future has several paths to follow: how to think power as resignification together with power as the convergence or interarticulation of relations of regulation, domination, constitution? How to know what might qualify as an affirmative resignification—with all the weight and difficulty of that labor—and how to run the risk of reinstalling the abject at the site of its opposition? but how, also, to rethink the terms that establish and sustain bodies that matter?" (p. 240).

which was never *theirs* in the first place?⁹ It would seem that Butler selects which moments of identity and language are *real* and which are not by positing the *real* as stable, as transcendental (i.e. class and race) while still marking gender and sexuality as ambivalent. Livingston's film prompts the spectator to fathom the multidimensionality of class (the "house" itself as an elite group within the lower class) and race (the many possible readings of bloneness, whiteness and blackness) every bit as much as it questions the performativity of gender and sexuality.

Butler's following book, *Bodies That Matter* (1993), delves into the very fabric of identity—race, class, sex, gender—and seeks to understand language as that which is outside of materiality (the body). Yet by making a split between performance as transcendence and stabilizing (in *Paris is Burning*) and performance as parody and subversive, Butler necessarily ends up rereading static sexual, economic and racial relations between the body, society and language. While on the one hand, she maintains that there may be (but there is not always) a correlation between language and materiality such that representation of gender and sex is possible, on the other hand Butler denies that language can fully represent materiality.¹⁰ Where, then,

- 9 "It is one of the ambivalent implications of the decentering of the subject to have one's writing be the site of a necessary and inevitable expropriation. But this yielding of ownership over what one writes has an important set of political corollaries, for the taking up, reforming, deforming of one's words does open up a difficult future terrain of community, one in which the hope of every fully recognizing oneself in the terms by which one signifies is sure to be disappointed. This not owning of one's words is there from the start, however, since speaking is always in some ways the speaking of a stranger through and as oneself, the melancholic reiteration of a language that one never chose, that one does not find as an instrument to be used, but that one is, as it were, used by, expropriated in, as the unstable and continuing condition of the 'one' and the 'we', the ambivalent condition of the power that binds" (pp. 241–242).
- 10 "To posit a materiality outside of language is still to posit that materiality, and the materiality so posited will retain that positing as its constitutive condition. To posit a materiality outside of language, where that materiality is considered ontologically distinct from language, is to undermine the possibility that language might be able to indicate or correspond to that domain of radical alterity. Hence the absolute distinction between language and materiality which was to secure the referential function

does this leave the relationship between language of representation and the body if not in an aporia of awaiting a moment in which naming might be fully compatible or stable? Or perhaps, the subject will perpetually seek a language that might very well be constituted from outside and not within as Butler's argument of *Paris is Burning* indicates (since one can only transcend by escaping the *real*):¹¹

Therefore, if Butler's work is to have any relevance at all, it must be because the body—sex more specifically—does not lose its ability to name or to act as an imaginary field of signification as Butler professes, and because the body maintains all the vestiges of language, power, the imaginary and history effecting subversions even within white, male heterosexual performance (which, after all, is every bit as performative as drag balls in Harlem). In attempting to de-essentialize gender, Butler ends up essentializing race and class (as well as gender) as she consolidates certain identities as *play* and other identities as *real*, while never taking into account the pervasiveness of performance in *all* gender and class roles/performances. I would even go so far as to say that in all performance—sexuality, gender, race and class—there is no line between the real and play, as Victor Turner's work on the liminal as well as current performance theory demonstrates. In *The Anthropology of Performance* Turner writes:

This opposition between social life and dominant genre is also related to what I have called in several publications "liminality". A *limen*, as the great French ethnologist and

of language undermines that function radically. This is not to say that, on the one hand, the body is simply linguistic stuff or, on the other, that it has no bearing on language... But if language is not opposed to materiality, neither can materiality be summarily collapsed into an identity with language" (p. 68).

- 11 "If, for Lacan, the name secures the bodily ego in time, renders it identical through time, and this 'conferring' power of the name is derived from the conferring power of the symbolic more generally, then it follows that a crisis in the symbolic will entail a crisis in this identity-conferring function of the name, and in the stabilizing of bodily contours according to sex allegedly performed by the symbolic. *The crisis in the symbolic, understood as a crisis over what constitutes the limits of intelligibility, will register as a crisis in the name and in the morphological stability that the name is said to confer*" (p. 138).

folklorist Arnold van Gennep has pointed out, is a “threshold”, and he uses the term to denote the central of three phases in what he called “rites of passage”. He looked at a wide variety of ritual forms, taken from most regions and many periods of history, and found in them a tripartite processual form. Rituals *separated* specified members of a group from everyday life, *placed them in a limbo* that was not any place they were in before and not yet any place they would be in, then *returned* them, changed in some way, to mundane life. The second phase, *marginality* or *liminality*, is what interests us here, though, in a very cogent sense, the whole *ritual process* constitutes a threshold between secular living and sacred living. The dominant genres of performance in societies at all levels of scale and complexity tend to be *liminal phenomena*. They are performed in privileged spaces and times, set off from the periods and areas reserved for work, food and sleep. You can call these “sacred” periods and areas reserved for work, food and sleep. You can call these “sacred” if you like, provided that you recognize that they are the scenes of play and experimentation, as much as of solemnity and rules. Western views of ritual have been greatly influenced by Puritanism. At any rate both the performances and their settings may be likened to loops in a linear progression, when the social flow bends back on itself, in a way does violence to its own development, meanders, inverts, perhaps lies to itself, and puts everything so to speak into the subjunctive mood as well as the reflexive voice. Just as the subjunctive mood of a verb is used to express supposition, desire, hypothesis, or possibility, rather than stating actual facts, so do liminality and the phenomena of liminality dissolve all factual and commonsense systems into their components and “play” with them in ways never found in nature or in custom, at least at the level of direct perception. (p. 25)

The social is performative regardless of certain phenomena being center or margin, sacred or taboo, public or private; for every performance, there is always another which contests the previous, thus making identity always already plural:

And so we find performances about performances about performances multiplying. Of course, as Goffman and others have shown, ordinary life in a social structure is itself a performance. We play roles, occupy statuses, play games with one another, don and doff many masks, each a “typification.” But the performances characteristic of liminal phases and states often are more about the doffing of masks, the stripping of statuses, the renunciation of roles, the demolishing of structures, than their putting on and keeping on. Antistructures are performed too. But, still within the liminal frame, new subjunctive, even ludic, structures are then generated, with their own grammars and lexica of roles and relationships. These are imaginative creations, whether attributed to individuals or “traditions”. (Turner, p. 107)

Different from Butler, Turner sees all identity as a play of simultaneously wearing and stripping identities, reversal and abolition of roles and even as the creation of structures and anti-structures. Butler's thesis would certainly seem far more interesting and plausible were we to assimilate it with Turner's liminal, given that gender roles, reversals, and recreations are performances that neither fully adhere to nor negate the centers and margins of society. Rather, these performances (and performances about performances, and so forth) serve to highlight the impossibility of understanding gender as *real* any more than it is possible to understand gender as singular, homogeneous or binaried. Just as Butler cogently argues for a dissolution of older subject-positions in the effort of creating newer ones, she views the expropriation of language as an unstabling force in many communities, rather than as a strengthening force which coalesces difference under various rubrics of *community*. By denying body language and the imaginary (since one is a rudiment of heterosexism and the other escapism, according to Butler), she denies the body access to a quotidian existence in which the performative might actually be not at all indistinct from the real. Turner indicates that a metalanguage is needed to discuss the "social drama", whereas Butler denies any such language.¹² This merits further investigation.

- 12 "The social drama, then, endures, while the genres which cultural development has detached from it, and thereafter elaborated, multiply in a manner consistent with Kurt Gödel's theorem on the impossibility (under certain circumstances) of formalizing a consistency proof for a logistic system (here in the sense of a system of symbolic logic) *within* that system. Such a proof demands a metalanguage for talking about the system in terms not derived from it. Similarly, the redressive machinery of spontaneous social drama, judicial and ritual, attains only a limited degree of reflexivity, lying as it does, on the same plane as the agonistic events being scrutinized. Other languages or metalanguages, nonverbal as well as verbal, other scrutinizing procedures are required—particularly when societies advance in scale and complexity, often with sharp increases in the rates of spatial and social mobility. Such languages and procedures have antithetical qualities to the spontaneous dramas which they have to deal with. They have not only to recapitulate the sequence of agonistic events, but also to scrutinize and evaluate them. The enactment is framed as a performance, but it is a metaperformance, a performance about a performance" (pp. 106–107).