

# CRITICALLY QUEER

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“Discourse is not life; its time is not yours.”

Michel Foucault, “Politics and the Study of Discourse”

**E**ve Sedgwick’s recent reflections on queer performativity ask us not only to consider how a certain theory of speech acts applies to queer practices, but how it is that “queering” persists as a defining moment of performativity.<sup>1</sup> The centrality of the marriage ceremony in J.L. Austin’s examples of performativity suggests that the heterosexualization of the social bond is the paradigmatic form for those speech acts which bring about what they name. “I pronounce you . . .” puts into effect the relation that it names. But where and when does such a performative draw its force, and what happens to the performative when its purpose is precisely to undo the presumptive force of the heterosexual ceremonial?

Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements which, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power.<sup>2</sup> Implicated in a network of authorization and punishment, performatives tend to include legal sentences, baptisms, inaugurations, declarations of ownership, statements that not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed. The power of discourse to produce that which it names is thus essentially linked with the question of performativity. The performative is thus one domain in which power acts *as* discourse.

Importantly, however, there is no power, construed as a subject, that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability. This is less an “act,” singular and deliberate, than a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive gestures of power. Hence, the judge who authorizes and installs the situation he names (we shall call him “he,” figuring this model of authority as masculinist) invariably *cites* the law that he applies, and it is the power of this citation that gives the performative its binding or conferring power. And though it may appear that the binding power of his words is derived from the force of his will or from a prior authority, the opposite is more true: it is *through* the citation of the law that the figure of the judge’s “will” is produced and that the “priority” of textual authority is established.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is through the invocation of convention that the speech act of the judge derives its binding power; that binding power is to be found

neither in the subject of the judge nor in his will, but in the citational legacy by which a contemporary “act” emerges in the context of a chain of binding conventions.

Where there is an “I” who utters or speaks and thereby produces an effect in discourse, there is first a discourse which precedes and enables that “I” and forms in language the constraining trajectory of its will. Thus there is no “I” who stands *behind* discourse and executes its volition or will *through* discourse. On the contrary, the “I” only comes into being through being called, named, interpellated (to use the Althusserian term), and this discursive constitution takes place prior to the “I”; it is the transitive invocation of the “I.” Indeed, I can only say “I” to the extent that I have first been addressed, and that address has mobilized my place in speech; paradoxically, the discursive condition of social recognition *precedes and conditions* the formation of the subject: recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject. Further, the impossibility of a full recognition, that is, of ever fully inhabiting the name by which one’s social identity is inaugurated and mobilized, implies the instability and incompleteness of subject-formation. The “I” is thus a citation of the place of the “I” in speech, where that place has a certain priority and anonymity with respect to the life it animates: it is the historically revisable possibility of a name that precedes and exceeds me, but without which I cannot speak.

## QUEER TROUBLE

The term “queer” emerges as an interpellation that raises the question of the status of force and opposition, of stability and variability, *within* performativity. The term “queer” has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names or, rather, the producing of a subject *through* that shaming interpellation. “Queer” derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult. This is an invocation by which a social bond among homophobic communities is formed through time. The interpellation echoes past interpellations, and binds the speakers, as if they spoke in unison across time. In this sense, it is always an imaginary chorus that taunts “queer!” To what extent, then, has the performative “queer” operated alongside, as a deformation of, the “I pronounce you . . .” of the marriage ceremony? If the performative operates as the sanction that performs the heterosexualization of the social bond, perhaps it also comes into play precisely as the shaming taboo which “queers” those who resist or oppose that social form as well as those who occupy it without hegemonic social sanction.

On that note, let us remember that reiterations are never simply replicas of the same. And the “act” by which a name authorizes or de-authorizes a set of social or sexual relations is, of necessity, *a repetition*. Let me, for the moment, cite Derrida:

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a “coded” or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a “citation”? . . . In such a typology, the category of intention will not disappear; it will have its place, but from that place it will no longer be able to govern the entire scene and system of utterance. (18)

If a performative provisionally succeeds (and I will suggest that “success” is always and only provisional), then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes a prior action, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices*. What this means, then, is that a performative “works” to the extent that it *draws on and covers over* the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized. In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the *accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force*.

This view of performativity implies that *discourse has a history<sup>4</sup> that not only precedes but conditions its contemporary usages, and that this history effectively decenters the presentist view of the subject as the exclusive origin or owner of what is said.<sup>5</sup>* What it also means is that the terms to which we do, nevertheless, lay claim, the terms through which we insist on politicizing identity and desire, often demand a turn *against* this constitutive historicity. Those of us who have questioned the presentist assumptions in contemporary identity categories are, therefore, sometimes charged with depoliticizing theory. And yet, *if the genealogical critique of the subject is the interrogation of those constitutive and exclusionary relations of power through which contemporary discursive resources are formed, then it follows that the critique of the queer subject is crucial to the continuing democratization of queer politics.* As much as identity terms must be used, as much as “outness” is to be affirmed, *these same notions must become subject to a critique of the exclusionary operations of their own production:* for whom is outness an historically available and affordable option? Is there an unmarked class character to the demand for universal “outness”? Who is represented by *which* use of the term, and who is excluded? For whom does the term present an impossible conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual politics? What kinds of policies are enabled by what kinds of usages, and which are backgrounded or erased from view? In this sense, the genealogical critique of the queer subject will be central to queer politics to the extent that it constitutes a self-critical dimension within activism, *a persistent reminder to take the time to consider the exclusionary force of one of activism’s most treasured contemporary premises.*

As much as it is necessary to assert political demands through recourse to identity categories, and to lay claim to the power to name oneself and determine the conditions under which that name is used, it is also impossible to sustain that kind of mastery over the trajectory of those categories within discourse. This is not an argument *against* using identity categories, but it is a reminder of the risk that attends every such use. *The expectation of self-determination that self-naming arouses is paradoxically contested by the historicity of the name itself:* by the history of the usages that one never controlled, but that constrain the very usage that now emblemizes autonomy; by the future efforts to deploy the term against the grain of the current ones, efforts that will exceed the control of those who seek to set the course of the terms in the present.

If the term “queer” is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that *which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes, and perhaps also yielded in favor of terms that do that political work more effectively.* Such a yielding may well become necessary in order to accommo-

date—without domesticating—democratizing contestations that have and will redraw the contours of the movement in ways that can never be fully anticipated.

It may be that the conceit of autonomy implied by self-naming is the paradigmatically presentist conceit, that is, the belief that there is a one who arrives in the world, in discourse, without a history, that this one makes oneself in and through the magic of the name, that language expresses a “will” or a “choice” rather than a complex and constitutive history of discourse and power which composes the invariably ambivalent resources through which a queer and queering agency is forged and reworked. To recast queer agency in this chain of historicity is thus to avow a set of constraints on the past and the future that mark at once the *limits* of agency and its most *enabling conditions*.

As expansive as the term “queer” is meant to be, it is used in ways that enforce a set of overlapping divisions: in some contexts, the term appeals to a younger generation who want to resist the more institutionalized and reformist politics sometimes signified by “lesbian and gay”; in some contexts, sometimes the same, it has marked a predominantly white movement that has not fully addressed the way in which “queer” plays—or fails to play—within non-white communities; and whereas in some instances it has mobilized a lesbian activism (Smyth), in others the term represents a false unity of women and men. Indeed, it may be that the critique of the term will initiate a resurgence of both feminist and anti-racist mobilization within lesbian and gay politics or open up new possibilities for coalitional alliances that do not presume that these constituencies are radically distinct from one another. The term will be revised, dispelled, rendered obsolete to the extent that it yields to the demands which resist the term precisely because of the exclusions by which it is mobilized.

We no more create from nothing the political terms which come to represent our “freedom” than we are responsible for the terms that carry the pain of social injury. And yet, neither of those terms are as a result any less necessary to work and rework within political discourse.

In this sense, it remains politically necessary to lay claim to “women,” “queer,” “gay,” and “lesbian,” precisely because of the way these terms, as it were, lay their claim on us prior to our full knowing. Laying claim to such terms in reverse will be necessary to refute homophobic deployments of the terms in law, public policy, on the street, in “private” life. But the necessity to mobilize “the necessary error” of identity (Spivak’s term) will always be in tension with the democratic contestation of the term which works against its deployments in racist and misogynist discursive regimes. If “queer” politics postures independently of these other modalities of power, it will lose its democratizing force. The political deconstruction of “queer” ought not to paralyze the use of such terms, but, ideally, to extend its range, to make us consider at what expense and for what purposes the terms are used, and through what relations of power such categories have been wrought.

Some recent race theory has underscored the use of “race” in the service of “racism,” and proposed a politically informed inquiry into the process of *racialization*, the formation of race (Omi and Winant; Appiah; Guillaumin; Lloyd). Such an inquiry does not suspend or ban the term, although it does insist that an inquiry into formation is linked to the contemporary question of what is at stake in the term.

The point may be taken for queer studies as well, such that “queering” might signal an inquiry into (a) the *formation* of homosexualities (an historical inquiry which cannot take the stability of the term for granted, despite the political pressure to do so) and (b) the *deformative* and *misappropriative* power that the term currently enjoys. At stake in such a history will be the differential formation of homosexuality across racial boundaries, including the question of how racial and reproductive injunctions are articulated through one another.

If identity is a necessary error, then the assertion of “queer” will be incontrovertibly necessary, but that assertion will constitute only one part of “politics.” It is equally necessary, and perhaps also equally impossible, to *affirm the contingency of the term*: to let it be vanquished by those who are excluded by the term but who justifiably expect representation by it, to let it take on meanings that cannot now be anticipated by a younger generation whose political vocabulary may well carry a very different set of investments. Indeed, the term “queer” itself has been precisely the discursive rallying point for younger lesbians and gay men and, in yet other contexts, for lesbian interventions and, in yet other contexts, for bisexuals and straights for whom the term expresses an affiliation with anti-homophobic politics. That it can become such a discursive site whose uses are not fully constrained in advance ought to be safeguarded not only for the purposes of continuing to democratize queer politics, but also to expose, affirm, and rework the specific historicity of the term.

## GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND DRAG

How, if at all, is the notion of discursive resignification linked to the notion of gender parody or impersonation? If gender is a mimetic effect, is it therefore a choice or a dispensable artifice? If not, how did this reading of *Gender Trouble* emerge? There are at least two reasons for the misapprehension, one which I myself produced by citing drag as an example of performativity (taken then, by some, to be *exemplary*, that is, *the* example of performativity), and another which has to do with the political needs of a growing queer movement in which the publicization of theatrical agency has become quite central.<sup>6</sup>

The misapprehension about gender performativity is this: that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothes in the morning, that there is a “one” who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will be today. This is a voluntarist account of gender which presumes a subject, intact, prior to its gendering. The sense of gender performativity that I meant to convey is something quite different.

Gender is performative insofar as it is the *effect* of a regulatory regime of gender differences in which genders are divided and hierarchized *under constraint*. Social constraints, taboos, prohibitions, threats of punishment operate in the ritualized repetition of norms, and this repetition constitutes the temporalized scene of gender construction and destabilization. There is no subject who precedes or enacts this repetition of norms. To the extent that this repetition creates an effect of gender uniformity, a stable effect of masculinity or femininity, it produces and destabilizes

the notion of the subject as well, for the subject only comes into intelligibility through the matrix of gender. Indeed, one might construe repetition as precisely that which *undermines* the conceit of voluntarist mastery designated by the subject in language.<sup>7</sup>

There is no subject who is “free” to stand outside these norms or to negotiate them at a distance; on the contrary, the subject is retroactively produced by these norms in their repetition, precisely as their effect. What we might call “agency” or “freedom” or “possibility” is always a specific political prerogative that is produced by the gaps opened up in regulatory norms, in the interpellating work of such norms, in the process of their self-repetition. Freedom, possibility, agency do not have an abstract or pre-social status, but are always negotiated within a matrix of power.

Gender performativity is not a matter of choosing which gender one will be today. Performativity is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norms by which one is constituted: it is not a radical fabrication of a gendered self. It is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, ones which cannot be thrown off at will, but which work, animate, and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged. The practice by which gendering occurs, the embodying of norms, is a compulsory practice, a forcible production, but not for that reason fully determining. To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate.

This failure to approximate the norm, however, is not the same as the subversion of the norm. There is no promise that subversion will follow from the reiteration of constitutive norms; there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion. Heterosexuality can augment its hegemony *through* its denaturalization, as when we see denaturalizing parodies which reidealize heterosexual norms *without* calling them into question. But sometimes the very term that would annihilate us becomes the site of resistance, the possibility of an enabling social and political signification: I think we have seen that quite clearly in the astounding transvaluation undergone by “queer.” This is for me the enactment of a prohibition and a degradation against itself, the spawning of a different order of values, of a political affirmation from and through the very term which in a prior usage had as its final aim the eradication of precisely such an affirmation.

It may seem, however, that there is a difference between the embodying or performing of gender norms and the performative use of language. Are these two different senses of “performativity,” or do they converge as modes of citationality in which the compulsory character of certain social imperatives becomes subject to a more promising deregulation? Gender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones which are almost always related to the idealization of the heterosexual bond. In this sense, the initiatory performative, “It’s a girl!”, anticipates the eventual arrival of the sanction, “I pronounce you man and wife.” Hence, also, the peculiar pleasure of the cartoon strip in which the infant is first interpellated into discourse with “It’s a lesbian!” Far from an essentialist joke, the queer appropriation of the performative mimes and exposes both the binding power of the heterosexualizing law *and its expropriability*.

To the extent that the naming of the “girl” is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain “girling” is compelled, the term or, rather, its symbolic power,



governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm. This is a “girl,” however, who is compelled to “cite” the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. Indeed, there is no “one” who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a “one,” to become viable as a “one,” where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms.

It is in terms of a norm that compels a certain “citation” in order for a viable subject to be produced that the notion of gender performativity calls to be rethought. And precisely in relation to such a compulsory citationality that the theatricality of gender is also to be explained. Theatricality need not be conflated with self-display or self-creation. Within queer politics, indeed, within the very signification that is “queer,” we read a resignifying practice in which the de-sanctioning power of the name “queer” is reversed to sanction a contestation of the terms of sexual legitimacy. Paradoxically, but also with great promise, the subject who is “queered” into public discourse through homophobic interpellations of various kinds *takes up* or *cites* that very term as the discursive basis for an opposition. This kind of citation will emerge as *theatrical* to the extent that it *mimes and renders hyperbolic* the discursive convention that it also *reverses*. The hyperbolic gesture is crucial to the exposure of the homophobic “law” which can no longer control the terms of its own abjecting strategies.

To oppose the theatrical to the political within contemporary queer politics is, I would argue, an impossibility: the hyperbolic “performance” of death in the practice of “die-ins” and the theatrical “outness” by which queer activism has disrupted the closeting distinction between public and private space, have proliferated sites of politicization and AIDS awareness throughout the public realm. Indeed, an important set of histories might be told in which the increasing politicization of theatricality for queers is at stake (more productive, I think, than an insistence on the two as polar opposites within queerness). Such a history might include traditions of cross-dressing, drag balls, streetwalking, butch-femme spectacles, the sliding between the “march” (NYC) and the “parade” (SF); die-ins by ACT UP, kiss-ins by Queer Nation; drag performance benefits for AIDS (by which I would include both Lypsinka’s and Liza Minelli’s in which she, finally, does Judy);<sup>8</sup> the convergence of theatrical work with theatrical activism;<sup>9</sup> performing excessive lesbian sexuality and iconography that effectively counters the desexualization of the lesbian; tactical interruptions of public forums by lesbian and gay activists in favor of drawing public attention and outrage to the failure of government funding of AIDS research and outreach.

The increasing theatricalization of political rage in response to the killing inattention of public policy-makers on the issue of AIDS is allegorized in the recontextualization of “queer” from its place within a homophobic strategy of abjection and annihilation to an insistent and public severing of that interpellation from the effect of shame. To the extent that shame is produced as the stigma not only of AIDS, but also of queerness, where the latter is understood through homophobic causalities as the “cause” and “manifestation” of the illness, theatrical rage is part of the public resistance to that interpellation of shame. Mobilized by the injuries of homophobia, theatrical rage reiterates those injuries precisely through an “acting out,” one that

does not merely repeat or recite those injuries, but that deploys a hyperbolic display of death and injury to overwhelm the epistemic resistance to AIDS and to the graphics of suffering, or a hyperbolic display of kissing to shatter the epistemic blindness to an increasingly graphic and public homosexuality.

## MELANCHOLIA AND THE LIMITS OF PERFORMANCE

Although there were probably no more than five paragraphs in *Gender Trouble* devoted to drag, readers have often cited the description of drag as if it were the “example” which explains the meaning of performativity. The conclusion is drawn that gender performativity is a matter of constituting who one is on the basis of what one performs. And further, that gender itself might be proliferated beyond the binary frame of “man” and “woman” depending on what one performs, thereby valorizing drag not only as the paradigm of gender performance, but as the means by which heterosexual presumption might be undermined through the strategy of proliferation.

The point about “drag” was, however, much more centrally concerned with a critique of the truth-regime of “sex,” one which I took to be pervasively heterosexist: the distinction between the “inside” truth of femininity, considered as psychic disposition or ego-core, and the “outside” truth, considered as appearance or presentation, produces a contradictory formation of gender in which no fixed “truth” can be established. Gender is neither a purely psychic truth, conceived as “internal” and “hidden,” nor is it reducible to a surface appearance; on the contrary, its undecidability is to be traced as the play *between* psyche and appearance (where the latter domain includes what appears *in words*). Further, this will be a “play” regulated by heterosexist constraints though not, for that reason, fully reducible to them.

*In no sense can it be concluded that the part of gender that is performed is therefore the “truth” of gender; performance as bounded “act” is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s “will” or “choice”; further, what is “performed” works to conceal, if not to disavow, what remains opaque, unconscious, un-performable. The reduction of performativity to performance would be a mistake.*

In *Gender Trouble*, I rejected the expressive model of drag which holds that some interior truth is exteriorized in performance, but what I failed to do is to refer the theatricality of drag back to the psychoanalytic discussions that preceded it, for psychoanalysis insists that the opacity of the unconscious sets limits to the exteriorization of the psyche. It also argues, rightly I think, that what is exteriorized or performed can only be understood through reference to what is barred from the signifier and from the domain of corporeal legibility.

It would have been useful as well to bring forward the discussion of gender melancholia into the discussion of drag, given the iconographic figure of the melancholic drag queen. Here one might ask also after the disavowal that occasions performance and that performance might be said to enact, where performance engages “acting out” in the psychoanalytic sense.<sup>10</sup> If melancholia in Freud’s sense is the effect of an ungrieved loss (a sustaining of the lost object/Other as a psychic figure with the consequence of heightened identification with that Other, self-beratement, and the



acting out of unresolved anger and love),<sup>11</sup> it may be that performance, understood as “acting out,” is significantly related to the problem of unacknowledged loss.

Where there is an unrieved loss in drag performance (and I am sure that such a generalization cannot be universalized), perhaps it is a loss that is refused and incorporated in the performed identification, one which reiterates a gendered idealization and its radical uninhabitability. This is, then, neither a territorialization of the feminine by the masculine, nor an “envy” of the masculine by the feminine, nor a sign of the essential plasticity of gender. What it does suggest is that gender performance allegorizes a loss it cannot grieve, allegorizes the incorporative fantasy of melancholia whereby an object is phantasmatically taken in or on as a way of refusing to let it go.

The analysis above is a risky one because it suggests that for a “man” performing femininity, or for a “woman” performing masculinity (the latter is always, in effect, to perform a little less, given that femininity is often cast as the spectacular gender), there is an attachment to, and a loss and refusal of, the figure of femininity by the man, or the figure of masculinity by the woman. Thus it is important to underscore that drag is an effort to negotiate cross-gendered identification, but that cross-gendered identification is not the exemplary paradigm for thinking about homosexuality, although it may be one. In this sense, drag allegorizes some set of melancholic incorporative fantasies that stabilize *gender*. Not only are a vast number of drag performers straight, but it would be a mistake to think that homosexuality is best explained through the performativity that is drag. What does seem useful in this analysis, however, is that drag exposes or allegorizes the mundane psychic and performative practices by which heterosexualized genders form themselves through the renunciation of the *possibility* of homosexuality, a foreclosure which produces a field of heterosexual objects at the same time that it produces a domain of those whom it would be impossible to love. Drag thus allegorizes *heterosexual melancholy*, the melancholy by which a masculine gender is formed from the refusal to grieve the masculine as a possibility of love; a feminine gender is formed (taken on, assumed) through the incorporative fantasy by which the feminine is excluded as a possible object of love, an exclusion never grieved, but “preserved” through the heightening of feminine identification itself. In this sense, the “truest” lesbian melancholic is the strictly straight woman, and the “truest” gay male melancholic is the strictly straight man.

What drag exposes, however, is the “normal” constitution of gender presentation in which the gender performed is in many ways constituted by a set of disavowed attachments or identifications that constitute a different domain of the “unperformable.” Indeed, it may well be that what constitutes the *sexually* unperformable is performed instead as *gender identification*.<sup>12</sup> To the extent that homosexual attachments remain unacknowledged within normative heterosexuality, they are not merely constituted as desires that emerge and subsequently become prohibited. Rather, these are desires that are proscribed from the start. And when they do emerge on the far side of the censor, they may well carry that mark of impossibility with them, performing, as it were, as the impossible within the possible. As such, they will not be attachments that can be openly grieved. This is, then, less *the refusal* to grieve (a formulation that accents the choice involved) than a preemption of grief performed by the absence of cultural conventions for avowing the loss of homosexual love. And

it is this absence that produces a culture of heterosexual melancholy, one that can be read in the hyperbolic identifications by which mundane heterosexual masculinity and femininity confirm themselves. The straight man *becomes* (mimes, cites, appropriates, assumes the status of) the man he “never” loved and “never” grieved; the straight woman *becomes* the woman she “never” loved and “never” grieved. It is in this sense, then, that what is most apparently performed as gender is the sign and symptom of a pervasive disavowal.

Moreover, it is precisely to counter this pervasive cultural risk of gay melancholia (what the newspapers generalize as “depression”) that there has been an insistent publicization and politicization of grief over those who have died from AIDS; the NAMES Project Quilt is exemplary, ritualizing and repeating the name itself as a way of publicly avowing the limitless loss.<sup>13</sup>

Insofar as the grief remains unspeakable, the rage over the loss can redouble by virtue of remaining unavowed. And if that very rage over loss is publicly proscribed, the melancholic effects of such a proscription can achieve suicidal proportions. The emergence of collective institutions for grieving are thus crucial to survival, to the reassembling of community, the reworking of kinship, the reweaving of sustaining relations. And insofar as they involve the publicization and dramatization of death, they call to be read as life-affirming rejoinders to the dire psychic consequences of a grieving process culturally thwarted and proscribed.

## PERFORMATIVITY, GENDER, SEXUALITY

How then does one link the trope by which discourse is described as “performing” and that theatrical sense of performance in which the hyperbolic status of gender norms seems central? What is “performed” in drag is, of course, *the sign* of gender, a sign which is not the same as the body it figures, but which cannot be read without it. The sign, understood as a gender imperative, i.e. “girl!”, reads less as an assignment than as a command and, as such, produces its own insubordinations. The hyperbolic conformity to the command can reveal the hyperbolic status of the norm itself, indeed, can become the cultural sign by which that cultural imperative might become legible. Insofar as heterosexual gender norms produce inapproximable ideals, heterosexuality can be said to operate through the regulated production of hyperbolic versions of “man” and “woman.” These are for the most part compulsory performances, ones which none of us choose, but which each of us is forced to negotiate. I write “forced to negotiate” because the compulsory character of these norms does not always make them efficacious. Such norms are continually haunted by their own inefficacy; hence, the anxiously repeated effort to install and augment their jurisdiction.

The resignification of norms is thus a function of their *inefficacy*, and so the question of subversion, of *working the weakness in the norm*, becomes a matter of inhabiting the practices of its rearticulation.<sup>14</sup> The critical promise of drag does not have to do with the proliferation of genders, as if a sheer increase in numbers would do the job, but rather with the exposure of the failure of heterosexual regimes ever fully to legislate or contain their own ideals. Hence, it is not that drag *opposes* heterosexuality, or that the proliferation of drag will bring down heterosexuality; on the contrary, drag tends to be the allegorization of heterosexuality and its constitutive

melancholia. As an allegory that works through the hyperbolic, drag brings into relief what is, after all, determined only in relation to the hyperbolic: the understated, taken-for-granted quality of heterosexual performativity. At its best, then, drag can be read for the way in which hyperbolic norms are dissimulated as the heterosexual mundane. At the same time these same norms, taken not as commands to be obeyed, but as imperatives to be “cited,” twisted, queered, brought into relief as heterosexual imperatives, are not, for that reason, necessarily subverted in the process.

It is important to emphasize that although heterosexuality operates in part through the stabilization of gender norms, gender designates a dense site of significations that contain and exceed the heterosexual matrix. Whereas it is important to emphasize that forms of sexuality do not unilaterally determine gender, a non-causal and non-reductive connection between sexuality and gender is nevertheless crucial to maintain. Precisely because homophobia often operates through the attribution of a damaged, failed, or otherwise abjected gender to homosexuals, that is, calling gay men “feminine” or calling lesbians “masculine,” and because the homophobic terror over performing homosexual acts, where it exists, is often also a terror over losing proper gender (“no longer being a real or proper man” or “no longer being a real or proper woman”), it seems crucial to retain a theoretical apparatus that will account for how sexuality is regulated through the policing and the shaming of gender.

We might want to claim that certain kinds of sexual practices link people more strongly than gender affiliation (Sedgwick 1989), but such claims can only be negotiated, if they can, in relation to specific occasions for affiliation; there is nothing in either sexual practice or in gender to privilege one over the other. Sexual practices, however, will invariably be experienced differentially depending on the relations of gender in which they occur. And there may be forms of “gender” within homosexuality which call for a theorization that moves beyond the categories of “masculine” and “feminine.” If we seek to privilege sexual practice as a way of transcending gender, we might ask, at what cost is the *analytic* separability of the two domains taken to be a distinction in fact? Is there perhaps a specific gender pain that provokes such fantasies of a sexual practice that would transcend gender difference altogether, in which the marks of masculinity and femininity would no longer be legible? Would this not be a sexual practice paradigmatically fetishistic, trying not to know what it knows, but knowing it all the same? This question is not meant to demean the fetish (where would we be without it?), but it does mean to ask whether it is only according to a logic of the fetish that the radical separability of sexuality and gender can be thought.

In theories such as Catharine MacKinnon’s, sexual relations of subordination are understood to establish differential gender categories, such that “men” are those defined in a sexually dominating social position, and “women” are those defined in subordination. Her highly deterministic account leaves no room for relations of sexuality to be theorized apart from the rigid framework of gender difference or for kinds of sexual regulation that do not take gender as their primary objects (i.e. the prohibition of sodomy, public sex, consensual homosexuality). Hence, Gayle Rubin’s influential distinction between sexuality and gender in “Thinking Sex” and Sedgwick’s reformulation of that position have constituted important theoretical opposition to MacKinnon’s deterministic form of structuralism.

My sense is that now this very opposition needs to be rethought in order to redraw

the lines between queer theory and feminism.<sup>15</sup> For surely it is as unacceptable to insist that relations of sexual subordination determine gender position as it is to separate radically forms of sexuality from the workings of gender norms. The relation between sexual practice and gender is surely not a structurally determined one, but the destabilizing of the heterosexual presumption of that very structuralism still requires a way to think the two in a dynamic relation to one another.

In psychoanalytic terms, the relation between gender and sexuality is in part negotiated through the question of the relationship between identification and desire. And here it becomes clear why refusing to draw lines of causal implication between these two domains is as important as keeping open an investigation of their complex interimplication. For if to identify as a woman is not necessarily to desire a man; and if to desire a woman does not necessarily signal the constituting presence of a masculine identification, whatever that is, then the heterosexual matrix proves to be an *imaginary* logic that insistently issues forth its own unmanageability. The heterosexual logic that requires that identification and desire are mutually exclusive is one of the most reductive of heterosexism's psychological instruments: if one identifies as a given gender, one must desire a different gender. On the one hand, there is no one femininity with which to identify, which is to say that femininity might itself offer an array of identificatory sites, as the proliferation of lesbian femme possibilities attests. On the other hand, it is hardly descriptive of the complex dynamic exchanges of lesbian and gay relationships to presume that homosexual identifications "mirror" or replicate one another. The vocabulary for describing the difficult play, crossing, and destabilization of masculine and feminine identifications within homosexuality has only begun to emerge within theoretical language: the non-academic language historically embedded in gay communities is here much more instructive. The thought of sexual difference *within* homosexuality has yet to be theorized in its complexity.

Performativity, then, is to be read not as self-expression or self-presentation, but as the unanticipated resignifiability of highly invested terms. The film *Paris Is Burning* has been interesting to read less for the ways in which the drag performances deploy denaturalizing strategies to reidealize whiteness (hooks) and heterosexual gender norms than for the less stabilizing rearticulations of kinship that the film offers. 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 particular, the redefining of the "house" and its forms of collectivity, mothering, mopping, reading, becoming legendary, that the appropriation and re-deployment of the categories of dominant culture enable the formation of kinship relations that function quite supportively as oppositional discourse within that culture. These men "mother" one another, "house" one another, "rear" one another, and the resignification of the family through these terms is not a vain or useless imitation, but the social and discursive building of community, a community that binds, cares, teaches, shelters, and enables. This is doubtless a task that any of us who are queer need to see and to know and to learn from, a task that makes none of us who are outside of heterosexual "family" into absolute outsiders to this film. Significantly, it is here in the elaboration of kinship forged through a resignification

of the very terms which effect our exclusion and abjection, a resignification that creates the discursive and social space for community, that we see an appropriation of the terms of domination that turns them toward a more enabling future.

How would one ever determine whether subversion has taken place? What measure would one invoke to gauge the extent of subversion? From what standpoint would one know? It is not simply a matter of situating performances in contexts (as if the demarcation of context is not already a prefiguring of the result), of gauging audience response, or of establishing the epistemological ground from which one is entitled to “know” such effects. Rather, subversiveness is the kind of effect that *resists calculation*. If one thinks of the effects of discursive productions, they do not conclude at the terminus of a given statement or utterance, the passing of legislation, the announcement of a birth. The reach of their signifiability cannot be controlled by the one who utters or writes, since such productions are not owned by the one who utters them. They continue to signify in spite of their authors, and sometimes against their authors’ most precious intentions.

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 ever 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 which one is, as it were, used by, expropriated in, as a continuing condition of the “one” and the “we,” the ambivalent condition of the power that binds.

## NOTES

1. The following is indebted to Eve Sedgwick’s “Queer Performativity,” published in this issue of *GLQ*. I thank her for the excellent essay and for the provocations, lodged in her text and perhaps most poignantly in earlier drafts, which have inspired this essay in important ways. A different version of this essay is published in Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (Routledge, 1993).
2. It is, of course, never quite right to say that language or discourse “performs,” since it is unclear that language is primarily constituted as a set of “acts.” After all, this description of an “act” cannot be sustained through the trope that established the act as a singular event, for the act will turn out to refer to prior acts and to a reiteration of “acts” that is perhaps more suitably described as a citational chain. Paul de Man points out in “Rhetoric of Persuasion” that the distinction between constative and performative utterances is confounded by the fictional status of both: “. . . the possibility for language to perform is just as fictional as the possibility for language to assert” (129). Further, he writes, “considered as persuasion, rhetoric is performative, but considered as a system of tropes, it deconstructs its own performance” (130–131).
3. In what follows, that set of performatives that Austin terms illocutionary will be at issue, those in which the binding power of the act *appears* to be derived from the intention or will of the speaker. In “Signature, Event, Context,” Derrida argues that the binding power that Austin attributes to the speaker’s intention in such illocutionary acts is more

properly attributable to a citational force of the speaking, the iterability that establishes the authority of the speech act, but which establishes the nonsingular character of that act. In this sense, every “act” is an echo or citational chain, and it is its citationality that constitutes its performative force.

4. This historicity of discourse implies the way in which history is constitutive of discourse itself. It is not simply that discourses are located *in* histories, but that they have their own constitutive historical character. Historicity is a term which directly implies the constitutive character of history in discursive practice, that is, a condition in which a “practice” could not exist apart from the sedimentation of conventions by which it is produced and becomes legible.
5. My understanding of the charge of presentism is that an inquiry is presentist to the extent that it (a) universalizes a set of claims regardless of historical and cultural challenges to that universalization or (b) takes an historically specific set of terms and universalizes them falsely. It may be that both gestures in a given instance are the same. It would, however, be a mistake to claim that all conceptual language or philosophical language is “presentist,” a claim which would be tantamount to prescribing that all philosophy become history. My understanding of Foucault’s notion of genealogy is that it is a specifically philosophical exercise in exposing and tracing the installation and operation of false universals. My thanks to Mary Poovey and Joan W. Scott for explaining this concept to me.
6. Theatricality is not for that reason fully intentional, but I might have made that reading possible through my reference to gender as “intentional and non-referential” in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.” I use the term “intentional” in a specifically phenomenological sense. “Intentionality” within phenomenology does not mean voluntary or deliberate, but is, rather, a way of characterizing consciousness (or language) as *having an object*, more specifically, as directed toward an object which may or may not exist. In this sense, an act of consciousness may intend (posit, constitute, apprehend) an *imaginary* object. Gender, in its ideality, might be construed as an intentional object, an ideal which is constituted but which does not exist. In this sense, gender would be like “the feminine” as it is discussed as an impossibility by Cornell in *Beyond Accommodation*.
7. In this sense, one might usefully construe the performative repetition of norms as the cultural workings of repetition-compulsion in Freud’s sense. This would be a repetition not in the service of mastering pleasure, but as that which undermines the project of mastery altogether. It was in this sense that Lacan argued in *Four Fundamental Principles of Psychoanalysis* that repetition marks the failure of subjectivation: what repeats in the subject is precisely that which is not yet mastered or never masterable.
8. See Román.
9. See Kramer; Crimp and Rolston; and Sadownick. My thanks to David Román for directing me to this last essay.
10. I thank Laura Mulvey for asking me to consider the relation between performativity and disavowal, and Wendy Brown for encouraging me to think about the relation between melancholia and drag and for asking whether the denaturalization of gender norms is the same as their subversion. I also thank Mandy Merck for numerous enlightening questions that lead to these speculations, including the suggestion that if disavowal conditions performativity, then perhaps gender itself might be understood on the model of the fetish.
11. See “Freud and the Melancholia of Gender” in *Gender Trouble*.
12. This is not to suggest that an exclusionary matrix rigorously distinguishes between how one identifies and how one desires; it is quite possible to have overlapping identification and desire in heterosexual or homosexual exchange, or in a bisexual history of sexual

practice. Further, “masculinity” and “femininity” do not exhaust the terms for either eroticized identification or desire.

13. See Crimp.
14. This may be a place in which to think about performativity in the sense outlined here in relation to the notion of performativity offered by Ernesto Laclau in *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*. This convergence has been usefully explored by Anna-Marie Smith.
15. Toward the end of the short theoretical conclusion of “Thinking Sex,” Rubin returns to feminism in a gestural way, suggesting that “in the long run, feminism’s critique of gender hierarchy must be incorporated into a radical theory of sex, and the critique of sexual oppression should enrich feminism. But an autonomous theory and politics specific to sexuality must be developed” (309).

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