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Gender Performance in the Work of Judith Butler and Cristina Peri Rossi's La nave de los locos

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...acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. [...] That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality [...] acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality.

Judith Butler, Gender Trouble

Introduction

Judith Butler's first theories of gender performance appeared as a controversial response to what she read as a feminist tendency to align femininity too closely to the body, thereby risking an essentialist discourse that subsumes the plurality of actual sexes/genders,

sexualities, and sexual preferences. For Butler, this theorisation attempts to subvert the patriarchal sexual economy, which, whilst being superficially enabling, only reinforces existing structures of power and oppression along a Hegelian master/slave dialectic. Butler instead suggests a rupture from the traditional distinction between sex and gender, claiming that “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive’, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts” (Gender Trouble, 11). Her theory is a radical reappraisal of gender and sex, in which cultural inscriptions upon the body become the basis for gendered (sexed?) identity. This article explores the cultural production of gender and examines how exactly a cultural knowledge of our self-identities can become interiorized and thought to be natural and prediscursive, how the notion of performance enables an understanding of our gendered identities as culturally inscribed and regulated. The Butlerian theories of intelligible gender, melancholic identification, the literalizing fantasy, sexual preference and gender parody are considered, drawing on examples from Peri Rossi’s La nave de los locos, a Uruguayan novel, whose links with Butlerian performativity have been identified by such critics as Geoffrey Kantaris and Mary Beth Tierney-Tello. The socio-political context of this novel, its engagement with authoritarian regimes and notions of exile, give rise to some fascinating ideas, which (self-consciously) chime with much Foucauldian thinking about the politics of identity. However, rather than reading La nave in this context through the specifically Foucauldian aspects of Butler, I am interested in how the workings of gender performance might be rendered problematic within the discourse of psychoanalytic theory and, drawing on such theory, how related concepts in the novel can either clarify Butler’s ideas, or elaborate on them.

Intelligibility, melancholic gendering, and the literalizing fantasy

Butler begins Gender Trouble by asking the question: “If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently, or does its constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation?” (Gender Trouble 11). If, as Simone de Beauvoir famously contends: “One is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one” (The Second Sex 301), one “becomes” gendered through a social construction, this is derived from a cultural compulsion in which gender is constructed along the same binary distinction as sex, and in which there is no question of the subject’s agency. The ‘I’ neither precedes nor follows the process of gendering, rather emerges through and as the matrix of gender relations. According to Butler, the seemingly inevitable mirroring between sex and gender arises from a necessity for intelligibility in cultural contexts:

‘Intelligible’ genders are those which in some senses institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire [...] 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 (Gender Trouble, 23-5).

The “cultural matrix” which regulates our gendered identities, then, is an intricate web of social and cultural assumptions founded upon the historicity of materiality and language. A socially acknowledged acceptance of its facticity becomes interiorized as a set of knowledges that we, as individuals, assume to know about ourselves, and that form our identities. In La nave, Morris takes a book he has written to a publishing house where he is asked to classify

its gender. Concerned that such categorical definition would be dishonest, he suggests that his book is androgynous; however, for the woman he is talking to, androgyny is impossible:

Todo el mundo se atribuye a un sexo. ¿No es cierto? Nos pasamos la vida afirmándolo. ¿Se da cuenta? Gastarla así. La vida entera procurando convencer a los demás y a nosotros mismos de que poseemos un sexo, con identidad propia, y de que lo usamos, lo mimamos, lo blandimos con propiedad (*La nave* 129).

The secretary thus implies that an affirmation of gender entails the existence of gender, that the “miming” of such identities renders them (culturally) “real”. She adds: “La ambición de un sexo es neurótica. Nos pasamos la vida en esa compulsión. Pero en fin, dado que éstas son las reglas del juego, dejémoslo así” (*La nave* 129). This significantly relates to Butler’s idea of a cultural compulsion to enact gendered identity within a regulated matrix. For the secretary, these are the rules of the game and one must endeavour to play along; in other words, ascribing to a gendered identity is inevitable, otherwise gender becomes unintelligible. If Morris is unable to declare his book androgynous, this is because, in Butler’s words,

...the specters of discontinuity and incoherence [...] 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 (*Gender Trouble*, 23).

Butler’s argumentation about intelligible gender is convincing, but how exactly does a compulsion to enact gender become interiorized as a private identification? In her readings of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” and “The Ego and the Id”, Butler compares the

melancholic's incorporation of the lost object into the ego, to the loss that is enacted in the Oedipal situation:

In melancholia, the loved object is lost through a variety of means: separation, death, or the breaking of an emotional tie. In the Oedipal situation, however, the loss is dictated by a *prohibition* attended by a set of punishments. The melancholia of gender identification which 'answers' the Oedipal dilemma must be understood, then, as the internalization of an interior moral directive which gains its structure and energy from an externally enforced taboo (Gender Trouble, 81).

For Butler, the heterosexual incest taboo is necessarily preceded by a taboo against homosexuality [1]. This first taboo in fact instigates the formation of heterosexual dispositions, allowing for the possibility of the Oedipal situation. Drawing on Abraham and Torok's idea of incorporation, in which disavowed grief is sustained in the body, Butler declares that melancholic incorporation, in gendered terms, literalizes loss on the body as the anatomical facticity of sex. Thus, not only does gendered identity evolve through a melancholic refusal or disavowal, but a certain haunting takes place, an "internal ghost of sorts" (Bodies That Matter, 65). That melancholia is somehow bound up with the politics of identity is reflected in La nave, as the characters, particularly Equis, seem haunted by loss and exile (in a sense, a prohibition) which impact on their self-hood. When he claims to be suffering from depression, his doctor implies that this is a necessary condition of humanity (La nave, 70) and, indeed, Equis himself later affirms as much: "Todos somos exiliados de algo o alguien [...] En realidad, ésa es la verdadera condición del hombre" (La nave, 106). Equis continually searches for something, a lost object, perhaps dreamt (La nave, 27), and his quest is precisely for that which has been lost behind the discursive mask of identity

politics. For Butler, this mask is created as the structures of melancholic incorporation act out a literalizing fantasy which presents itself as prediscursive: "...the incorporation of an identification is a fantasy of literalization or a literalizing fantasy. Precisely by virtue of its melancholic structure, this literalization of the body conceals its genealogy and offers itself under the category of 'natural fact'" (Gender Trouble, 89). As such, pleasures which pertain to certain bodily organs relate to a body which is always constructed as gender specific, and here Butler draws on the Freudian notion that libidinal self-attention is precisely what delineates a body part *as* a part (Bodies That Matter, 59). The morphology of bodies and how they are materialized is thus anchored in the process of mapping involved in melancholic gendering. As such,

...pleasures are in some sense determined by the melancholic structure of gender whereby some organs are deadened to pleasure, and others brought to life. Which pleasures shall live and which shall die is often a matter of which serve the legitimizing practices of identity formation that take place within the matrix of gender norms (Gender Trouble, 90).

If, as Butler suggests, pleasures have come to correspond to certain parts of the already gender-specific body, Peri Rossi challenges this by describing Morris's delight in the hands and hair and innocence of the child Percival, or Equis's desire for the wrinkled skin of an old woman he has an encounter with. The literalizing fantasy, however, presents a body which is always already culturally construed, retroactively coded, a product of an engagement between language and materiality, psychic loss and disavowal of primordial attachments, and the influence of cultural power.

Passionate attachments, the Lacanian lamella, and sexual difference

In The Ticklish Subject, Žižek criticizes Butler's discussion of the primordial same-sex 'passionate attachment' and its disavowal on the grounds of her 'naïve' use of pre-Lacanian definitions of the superego and the ego ideal and a conflation of the terms of "fundamental fantasy" and "symbolic identification" [2]. He emphasizes that the guilt which materializes here is not as straightforward as it might seem:

...it is not the guilt caused by the failed emulation of the ego ideal, but the more fundamental guilt of accepting the ego ideal (the socially determined symbolic role) as the ideal to be followed in the first place, and thus of betraying one's more fundamental desire (the primordial 'passionate attachment', as Butler would have put it)? [...] In other words, far from feeding off some 'irrational' guilt, the superego manipulates the subject's actual betrayal of his fundamental 'passionate attachment' as the price he had to pay for entering the socio-symbolic space, and assuming a pre-determined place within it (The Ticklish Subject, 268).

For Butler, the passionate attachment to the same sex is foreclosed, "in the radical sense of something which never positively existed, since it was excluded from the very start" (The Psychic Life of Power, 271). Yet for Žižek, her argument is based upon a mis-reading of Lacan and the notion of the real in sexual difference:

...when Butler rejects sexual difference as 'the primary *guarantor* of loss in our psychic lives' [...] she silently equates sexual difference with the heterosexual symbolic norm determining what it is to be a 'man' or a 'woman', while for Lacan sexual difference is real precisely in the sense that it can never be properly symbolized, transposed/translated into a symbolic norm

which fixes the subject's sexual identity – 'there is no sexual relationship' (The Ticklish Subject, 273).

Žižek's most important question about Butler's theory of melancholic identification is the very nature of the disavowal that takes place: "if we agree that the entry into the symbolic Law that regulates human sexuality is paid for by a fundamental renunciation, is this renunciation in fact that of the same-sex attachment?" (The Ticklish Subject, 275). If, as Butler contends, there is some part of the body which is not included in the process of sublimation, in the symbolic texture, a bodily remainder always having been destroyed, Žižek links this to the Lacanian lamella, the asexual organ-without-body. By definition, a lamella is a membrane of some sort, a metaphor Lacan uses to define the undifferentiated libido: "Notre lamelle représente ici cette part du vivant qui se perd à ce qu'il se produise par les voies du sexe" (Écrits, 847). A flat, amoeba-like organ, "large crêpe à se déplacer comme l'amibe, ultra-plate à passer sous les portes, omnisciente d'être-menée par le pur instinct de la vie, immortelle d'être scissipare" (Écrits, 845), the idea of the lamella highlights the permeability, mobility, and liminality of the undifferentiated libido. For Žižek, this asexual third object "is marked by a Sameness – however, this Sameness is not the sameness of the 'same sex', but rather the mythical asexual Sameness, libido not yet marked by the cut of sexual difference" (The Ticklish Subject, 276). Lacan's lamella is unreal in that it precedes the subjective it conditions, being in direct contact with the real; as such, it hovers nomadically around the boundaries of life and death as the un-dead organ which continues past all other organs. Žižek's suggestion that it is precisely this mythical asexual Sameness which is lost in the construction of gendered identity is fascinating. But how exactly is this undefineable liminality, this organ-without-body, a porous and fluid membrane, enabling? A consideration

here of the plurality of sexual preferences and gendered identity would help to answer this question. By delving into the masculine/feminine binary and beyond, perhaps we can clarify what lies beneath, what exactly has been lost or forgotten, in the process of melancholic gendering and cultural knowledge of the morphology of the body. I want to turn now to a closer exploration of La nave in order to tease out some of these ideas: if gendered identity is indeed performative in the Butlerian sense, then what is it covering up, and what exactly has been lost or disavowed?

According to Tierney-Tello, the central thread of La nave is the protagonist Equis's quest for a "harmony beyond the violence of binary oppositions" (Allegories, 182), a utopian vision of a place where the chaff is as beautiful as the wheat, an image in a dream which opens the novel (La nave, 9). Discomfited whenever placed within a traditionally male role, Equis reacts ambiguously towards gender categorization, indeed towards the act of naming itself: "En cuanto a los nombres, Equis piensa que en general son irrelevantes, igual que el sexo, aunque en ambos casos, hay gente que se esfuerza por merecerlos" (La nave, 25). Equis figures as a fairly androgynous character, in a way that renders his masculine gender a position rather than an essence. As Tierney-Tello has noted, "the way Ecks takes his name and even his gender draws attention to identity as performance or masquerade" (Allegories, 195). For Tierney-Tello, such pointers to the instability of gender do not erase the notion of sexual difference, rather "these strategies serve to point out how identities are always political: how they are construed and ultimately deployed within systems of power relations" (Allegories, 195). This is supported by Peri Rossi's explorations of the violence inflicted upon women within the patriarchal sexual economy through her discussions of rape, infibulation and the cultural mythology of Eve. However, if sexual difference is not erased, it

is definitely destabilized. If, according to Butler, the heterosexual matrix forms gendered identity to the exclusion of homosexuality, it seems pertinent to consider whether other sexualities are being denied or disavowed, and Peri Rossi successfully destabilizes sexual binaries here by describing gerontophilia and paedophilia in neutral and natural tones, designating sexual preference and desire as positional. Much of Peri Rossi's novel focuses on such a toppling of the binary hierarchies of the patriarchal sexual economy, however I want to turn now to a specific incident in the novel which is very much bound up with the nature of Butlerian theorisation, and which usefully illustrates notions about gender parody, performativity and the phallus.

Gender parody, performance, and the lesbian phallus

Towards the end of the novel, Equis experiences a recurring dream, an enigma whose solution brings an end to his quest for harmony:

En el sueño, había una pregunta que flotaba como un enigma, como aquellos acertijos que los reyes, enamorados de sus hijas, proponían a los pretendientes. Príncipes, caballeros degollados en el insensato afán de resolver la oscura adivinanza que conservaba a las hijas para los padres. En el sueño, Equis escuchaba la pregunta: ‘¿Cuál es el mayor tributo, el homenaje que un hombre puede ofrecer a la mujer que ama?’ (*El nave*, 163).

As Tierney-Tello surmises, the king, father in symbolic law, makes it impossible for anyone to answer the riddle, as he retains ultimate control over patriarchal signification, and the meaning of the question: “By putting themselves into play, the princes both accept the king's law and risk decapitation, a symbolic ‘castration’” (*Allegories*, 191). For her, the dream

allegorizes the patriarchal sexual economy: “the way women are scripted as pawns in ritualistic exchanges among men, the way all possibilities for signification are controlled by a phallic power, the way assuming the active subject position in such a structure revolves around a (male) Oedipal crisis” (*Allegories*, 191). What, then, is to be Equis’s solution? What answer can possibly disturb the power of the patriarchal sexual economy, and the predominance of the Oedipal situation as a primary taboo? After his experiences journeying pregnant women to an abortion clinic, and an incident with a prostitute, Equis wonders whether what a man can offer to the woman he loves is his impotence. However, it is in a theatre that he finds the answer to his question, in a highly complex episode that exposes the significance of gender parody. Equis witnesses Lucía, whom he is in love with, in a pornographic show, dressed up in a top hat, a tie, and baggy trousers, “imitando a Charlotte Rampling en *Portero de noche*, quien imitaba a Helmut Berger en *La caída de Dioses*, quien imitaba a Marlene Dietrich en *El ángel azul*. Siendo, entonces, Marlene Dietrich, el origen y el desenlace de toda simulación” (*La nave*, 191). Lucía, then, is a woman, imitating a woman, imitating a man, imitating the woman that she is being. The layers of simulation and copy seem endless, and yet they do end, not with Lucía herself, but with Marlene Dietrich, the beginning and end of all simulation, which again means that they do not end. As in the theatre of Jean Genet, one cannot speak of real identity; mask and copy are the representations of an original that no longer exists. Performance and masquerade, then, have become integral to an already theatrical scene. The use of drag renders the situation even more fluid, and if Lucía’s gendered identity is complex, her partner’s is even more so: “un hombre disfrazado de mujer, o una mujer, un travesti, uno que había cambiado sus señas de identidad para asumir la de sus fantasías, alguien que se había decidido a ser quien quería ser y no quien estaba determinado a ser” (*La nave*, 191). Although the partner’s gender is

obscured, she plays the part of Dolores de Río in what becomes a lesbian pantomime. If, for Butler, “in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency,” (*Gender Trouble*, 175, emphasis in original), this scene clearly exposes her contention, as neither Lucía’s, nor her partner’s, gendered identities are reducible to an essential core, existing as layers upon layers of simulation. As with Genet, this scene exemplifies that there is no original: “indeed, the parody is of the very notion of an original [...] gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without origin” (*Gender Trouble*, 175) [3]. Peri Rossi’s approach here can be characterised in terms of the lamella, and this mythical object that is lost in the production of masculine and feminine identities can be understood as that which is not, that which does not quite exist. It is precisely the loss of that which does not exist (in Symbolic terms at least, for if it does exist, this is in its very liminality as undifferentiated) that paves the way for a performance of the idealised identities that are part of cultural knowledge.

Yet, perhaps the lamella is not always inevitably and entirely lost in the inscription of gender, but its liminality somehow sustained in a residual manner within the Symbolic. When Equis sees Lucía after the show, half-undressed, half-dressed as a man, his riddle is answered: “Descubría y se desarrollaban para él, en todo su splendor, dos mundos simultáneos, dos llamadas distintas, dos mensajes, dos indumentarias, dos percepciones, dos discursos, pero indisolublemente ligados, de modo que el predominio de una hubiera provocado la extinción de dos” (*La nave*, 195). This realization of the possibilities of doubleness has led both Kantaris and Tierney-Tello to conclude that when Equis declares the answer to his riddle to be the offering of “su virilidad”, the offering of phallic power (both his and hers) to the woman he loves, a double discourse is created in an atmosphere of equality. By offering

his virility, the privileged male access to phallic power is shared out, and at the end of the novel, the symbolic king shrivels up and dies. However, perhaps what it underscored here, rather than doubleness, is the possibility of plurality, through performance. For Butler, “a perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities” (Gender Trouble, 176). Therefore, it seems that when the two worlds are opened up to Equis, though the nature of the spectacle as pornographic remains inscribed within the Symbolic, a plurality of thought and representation is opened up within these patriarchal Oedipal structures, in which the fluidity and liminality of identity can be explored. It seems pertinent here to consider Butler’s notion of the lesbian phallus, which trips up the Lacanian orders of having and being, at once wielding the threat of castration and suffering castration anxiety. That a performance of drag and a lesbian figuring of desire enables Equis to recognise the answer to his riddle as “su virilidad” (again, his and hers) highlights the plasticity and transferability of the phallus. And as Butler puts it:

If a lesbian “has” it, it is also clear that she does not “have” it in the traditional sense; her activity furthers a crisis in the scene of what it means to “have” one at all. The phantasmatic status of “having” is redelineated, rendered transferable, substitutable, plastic; and the eroticism produced within such an exchange depends on the displacement from traditional masculinist contexts as well as the critical redeployment of its central figures of power (Bodies That Matter, 88-9).

Here, then, in the very plasticity of the phallus lies the residue of the lamella, the libido in its undifferentiated and mobile state, a trace of the permeable membrane that confounds duality

within the Symbolic. At the end of the novel, the tapestry of the Creation is incomplete (as the real tapestry in Girona is), raising questions about our very structures of representation. Intelligible gender does and must exist, and one cannot refuse representational politics: “The juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power; hence, there is no position outside this field, but only a critical genealogy of its legitimizing practices” (Gender Trouble, 8). The heart of Butler’s project, as Peri Rossi’s text helps us to understand, is exactly a critique of those legitimizing practices of representation, cultural knowledge that has become represented as anatomical fact. For Symbolic representation can only be critiqued, never refused, but the figuration of a phallus that somehow undoes itself, as the residue of the lamella, somehow unsettles absolute signification within the politics of gendered identity.

Conclusion

I have attempted here to unravel the workings of gendered identity as a cultural inscription, and to think about what might be lost or covered up by layers of performance. Butlerian melancholic identification and disavowal demonstrate that a forgetting of certain taboos leads to a haunting or incorporation, and a mythologization of the Oedipal situation, determining gender along binary terms. Peri Rossi’s representations of gender imply that what has been lost has never existed, symbolically, and I have figured this through Lacan and Žižek’s idea of the lamella. The loss, then, is the loss of undifferentiation, of mobility, of liminality, even of absence. Ultimately, what the performance of masculine and feminine identities conceals is a void: there is no original, there is no essential identity, merely amoeba-like fluidity and permeable boundaries. In these terms, the cultural compulsion to declare

gender is based upon a cultural assumption, as the materiality of the body is formulated through a complex interchange of social and linguistic iterability. Butler's notion is that gender is similar to other ritualistic social dramas: "gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Gender Trouble, 179), and as Paul Connerton has comprehensively argued, rites and rituals are intrinsic to how societies remember and construct their identities (How Societies Remember). Gendered identities, then, can be seen as a set of stylized performances, culturally regulated, that societies and individuals adhere to in order to construct their intelligible selves. Yet, there is always a remainder, always some residue of the (utopian?) lamella, that features in moments such as drag as over-performance or the lesbian phallus. And though these figurations can never undo the structure of the Symbolic, their play with gender and sexuality does trip up its hegemonic discourse, catching it in its own act, even if this can only be glimpsed, as in Equis's vision of undifferentiation, in fleeting moments.

Notes

[1] A similar 'panic' about homosexuality leading to foreclosure and the formation of heterosexual identities figures in Butler's readings of Plato and Irigaray in *Bodies that Matter*.

[2] Perhaps Žižek somehow misses the point of Butler's argument and her play with rhetorical devices (which often overturn her *own* arguments) to trip up dominant discourse. However, his criticisms of her lead to an interesting discussion of the *lamella* which is particularly enabling here.

[3] It should be noted that, for Butler, the performance of gendered identity is never produced through a singular (or solely theatrical) act, but constituted through its very iterability as citation.

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