

# ALL MADE UP: Performance Theory and the New Anthropology of Sex and Gender

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## ABSTRACT

This review considers the impact of recent performance theory, especially the theory of gender performativity, on anthropological efforts to theorize sex and gender. In brief, the theory of performativity defines gender as the effect of discourse, and sex as the effect of gender. The theory is characterized by a concern with the productive force rather than the meaning of discourse and by its privileging of ambiguity and indeterminacy. This review treats recent performance theory as the logical heir, but also the apotheosis, of two anthropological traditions. The first tradition is feminist anti-essentialism, which first distinguished between sex and gender in an effort to denaturalize asymmetry. The second tradition is practice theory, which emphasized habitual forms of embodiment in its effort to overcome the oppositions between individual and society. In concluding, questions are raised about the degree to which current versions of performance theory enact rather than critically engage the political economies of value and desire from which they arise.

## *Introduction*

Until recently, anthropologists concerned to theorize culturally and historically specific forms of subjectivity and identity could rest assured that the material body would serve as the index of unity and continuity across time. But in an

age of surgical plasticity and prosthetic extension, it becomes necessary to rethink the nature of sexed bodies and gendered personhood on a new level (62). Fragmentation, which seems to have been as much a concern for Medieval Christians (21) as it is for anxious postmodernists, now returns to us—not as a violation of selfhood but as the paradigmatic form of subjective experience. And social theory gropes to account for that fact, half blind to its own ideological situation but seeking explanations in the logics of “flexible accumulation” (85) and late capitalist panic (141). The categories of sex and gender have fallen under the shadow of radical doubt and become the objects of an effort to retheorize the very nature of social subjectivity. Increasingly, gender is thought of as a process of structuring subjectivities rather than as a structure of fixed relations. Sex identity, once the bastion of nature, is no longer immune to ideological critique. Some of the most important interventions in this area have been made under the influence of postmodern performance theory, a discourse with roots in both classical social constructionism and Foucaultian analytics (cf 162). This review attempts to trace the impact and the effect of those interventions in the anthropology of sex and gender.

When Foucault published Herculine Barbin’s memoirs (51), he introduced one of the most poignant and provocative testimonials to the constructedness of gender ever to have been conceived. An eighteenth-century French “hermaphrodite” who was assigned an exclusively male identity after having lived as a female, Barbin seemed to condense the history of modern Western sexuality (as outlined by Foucault) in her/his very being. From an initial state of ambiguity in which practice and community membership rather than genitality determined gendered status, Barbin was forced by medical and legal authorities to adopt a single gender, which was reduced to anatomy and named as sex. Particularized and subjectivized to a degree that ethnographic description can never attain, the diary provided stunning evidence for Foucault’s (50) theory that the very perception of sex identity presumes a regulatory discourse in which the surfaces of bodies are differentially marked, signified, and charged with sensitivity.

This version of social constructionist theory found enthusiastic reception in anthropological circles, where it was greeted by many with a sense of recognition. It resonated especially well with the arguments of feminist anthropologists who had differentiated between gender and sex in an effort to refute the conflation of the universality with the biological necessity of gender asymmetry (101, 112, 113, 123, 125, 157). But it also transcended these arguments: If the distinction between sex and gender denaturalized gender asymmetry, it also demanded a theory of the relationship between them (25, 27). Foucault’s thesis on the discursive nature of sexuality responds to this problem of relation, inverting earlier feminist teleologies in which sex was defined as the

ground on which culture elaborates gender and replacing it with a notion of gender as the discursive origin of sex. De Lauretis (37) has focused this argument most pointedly by asserting that gender is a representation, and at the same time, that the representation of gender is its construction.

Under the influence of Butler's (18–20) re-reading of Austin's (7) speech act theory, the process by which difference and identity are constructed in and through the discourses of sexuality is referred to increasingly as gender performativity. Although this term introduces new issues, it remains deeply indebted to Foucault. Indeed, the impact of Foucault's original insights and the fortuitous historico-ethnographic data that Barbin's memoir offered the theory of sexuality can hardly be overestimated. *The History of Sexuality* prompted a veritable cottage industry of related ethnography and ethno-history, much of it stamped by longing for exemplary cases like Barbin's, in which the production of sexual difference and the elimination of categorical ambivalence can be seen—in the flesh.

Barbin's ambiguity was exceptional, however, and neither the memoirs nor the life history expressed therein can ever serve as anything more than metaphors for a more general process by which gender identity was assumed as a form of sexual dichotomization. Inspired by, but also departing from, Foucault's work, Laqueur's (79) monumental history of premodern Western sexuality also relies on the writings of extraordinary individuals, but it suggests that ambiguity may have been attributed to all bodies, if not all genders, during this period. Using copious textbook illustrations and correspondences, Laqueur argues that the dominant ideology of premodern Europe conceived of one sex and two genders, male and female bodies understood as mere inversions of a single morphological possibility defined by the penis (interior for women, exterior for men). Although Laqueur is quick to point out that this did not preclude a radically binary gender system, nor a habit of attributing gender differences to the particular configuration of bodily organs, his work forces readers to acknowledge that gender dichotomies can be imagined in a variety of ways, none of which are reducible to the absolute oppositions that contemporary biology posits in the so-called natural body. As Laqueur demonstrates, different consequences are entailed by discourses in which masculinity and femininity are imagined as matters of interiority and exteriority rather than the presence or absence of the phallus. This concern with the historical varieties of binarity demonstrates how a "sex/gender" system [to use Rubins's term (125)] that privileges the visible organ both reflects and enacts an epistemology in which reality is reduced to appearance, to visible surfaces. Laqueur criticizes Freud for submitting to this logic, and in doing so, he tacitly urges a history of gender that includes the rise of commodity aesthetics and the technologies of the gaze. It is a task for which anthropology is particularly well suited. Indeed,

the relativization of binarity already suggest the need for an anthropological intervention.

Feminist film theorists have long been concerned with the processes by which power and visibility have been entwined and allocated to the masculine along with the right to look (see especially 36, 102). However, many anthropologists have implicitly reproduced and extrapolated a phallogocentric logic by defining visibility and power as synonymous terms rather than as historically related positions. This is especially true in analyses of domestic and public domains. The anthropology of gender that is emerging under the influence of performance theory resists such connotations, however. Instead, it is concerned with the relationships and the dissonance between the exclusive categories of normative sex/gender systems and the actuality of ambiguity, multiplicity, abjection, and resistance within these same systems. Oscillating between a desire to unseat the hegemony of sexual dichotomies in the modern West through exemplary counter-example and a yearning to locate resistant practices in non-Western systems, much of the new anthropology of gender seeks its Barbins in the examples of “institutional transvestism” such as the *berdache* of North America, the *hijra* of India, or the *kathoey* of Thailand. Or it looks to societies wherein gender is explicitly marked in rites of passage, where the production of difference as power is more transparent by virtue of ethnographic estrangement.

Given that the constructedness of bodies becomes most visible when it deviates from the expectations of the dominant ideology from whence the writer comes, it is not surprising that so much of the work on embodiment and the performative constitution of gender should focus on cases of seemingly ambiguous genders, whether these are institutionalized, temporary, or even theatricalized states. Ambiguity is the taboo of medicalized bodies, the impermissible threat against which hormone therapies and surgical intervention are marshalled so relentlessly (69, 93). Yet the fascination with ambiguity in such theory often exceeds its comparative role. Although Foucault observed that discourse produces its own points of resistance, and although anthropologists generally share his vision of power as something immanent to culture, anthropological uses of performativity theory rarely interpret ambiguity as one discursive effect among others. More often than not, ambiguity is postulated as the ground and the origin of sexual and gendered difference: as a prediscursive, preontological dimension of bodiliness (61). Accordingly, it is also assigned an explanatory force. For much gender theory, ambiguity has become that which permits and even necessitates the formation of gender difference: the word that demands the flesh made gender (44, 54). How has this become the case? What kinds of questions does the theory of discursive or performative gender seek to answer that the notion of ambiguity can provide so potent

and all-encompassing an explanation? What social and historical forces are implicated in this discourse? And what might be its consequences?

*The Difference a Name Makes: Practice, Performance, Performativity*

Although much performance theory has entered anthropology surreptitiously, through the back door of ritual studies—where life-cycle rites have provided a seemingly ideal venue for the exploration of gendered subject formation, it is doubtful that the notion of performativity would have found a place in the absence of practice theory, which had emerged from the works of Bourdieu, de Certeau, and Sahlins, among others. Indeed, the current fashionability of performativity lies mainly in its promise of a delayed resolution to the crisis of structuralism that appeared during the late 1970s. Performativity theory emerges from and extends the anti-structuralist (but often neo-structuralist) critiques that were made under the related rubrics of practice anthropology (13, 35, 112, 127, 128), difference feminism (23, 67, 94, 130, 151), and resistance studies (e.g. 1, 2, 12, 26, 77, 92, 111, 122, 134, 135, 149). Like those earlier theoretical gestures, performativity theory addresses itself to the lacuna in structuralist explanation, namely the problems of individual agency, historical change, and plurality within systems.

Perhaps what made practice theory most attractive to constructionist anthropologies of gender was its promise to overcome the Manichean oppositions between the given (which is not here reducible to the natural) and the constructed, with a more dialectical sense of how what is socially constructed comes to have the force of the given in individual lives. In Bourdieu's work (13, 14), which provided the exemplary discussion of practice, that dialectic was located in the habitus (a term he appropriated from Mauss) and was imagined as a set of "structuring structures" that produced and were produced by specifically embodied subjects. Embodiment became a key term in such discussions, providing a way to address the productivity of collective representations in material rather than mentalist terms (28). Embodiment was also a temporalizing concept. By questioning the ways in which social and ideological structures are actually made operational in time, and not just in relation to time, and by locating this process in the socialization of the flesh, Bourdieu helped to withdraw the anthropology of the body from its confinement in the hermeneutics of metaphor.

There is a certain amount of irony in this, given the paucity of reference to actual bodies in Bourdieu's work, but *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (13) had a programmatic impact nonetheless. Among other things, it staged the discussion of ritual efficacy in terms that would resonate with Austinian—and hence Butlerian—notions of performativity, emphasizing forced and forceful reiteration rather than meaning. In this manner, it actually helped to facilitate the

current efflorescence of performativity theory in anthropology.<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that the trajectory has been one of smooth or progressive elaboration. If reiteration would be understood as the site of difference in later theories of gender performativity, Bourdieu himself was unable to rescue it from the logic of reproductive enactment. Indeed, the idea of the habitus was underwritten largely by structural-functionalist teleology; materialized in architecture and other spatial forms, it could only shape ideal subjects who would then reproduce the habitus in an almost hermetic circle.

Other versions of practice anthropology include Sahlins's (127, 128) theory of cultural history and de Certeau's treatise (35) on everyday acts. In the former, historical metamorphosis is said to be the product of competing interests that are differently advantaged at particular moments in history. Here, as in Bourdieu's work, change is the effect of strategic action by differently positioned actors, and culture remains an inviolable structure of meaning and order that both facilitates transformation and sutures the new order back into a history of collective remembrances. De Certeau (35), on the other hand, introduces a critique of strategic reason by arguing against the conflation of representational ideals and actual, everyday practice. For him, strategy presumes a totalizing and temporally abstracted vision in which the subject is objectified even to him or herself. In contrast, practice pertains to the meandering, improvisational acts of individuals who must move through the systemized world of collective schemes and images. Practices, for de Certeau, are not functionally subservient to cultural reproduction but instead are creative gestures incommensurable with, but not completely outside of, structural principles.

It is sobering to note how little the issue of gender entered into the major works on practice during the late 1970s and early 1980s, especially given the ascendancy of feminist thought in the academy at that time. In Bourdieu's writings, gender remains an unquestioned principle of dichotomy. In Sahlins's work, it is a positionality like any other. In de Certeau's essays, it is a palpable absence. But it is in reference to the sexual and gendered practices that, like de Certeau's perambulatory speech acts, elude dominant representations that the transformation from practice to performativity has occurred. That metamorphosis has taken place largely through the efforts of feminist and queer theorists in the radical constructionist camp of the continuing debate with essentialism (see 22, 52, 53, 55, 60, 71, 82, 98, 129). In some senses one can see this shift as a movement from representation to formation, from meaning to force.

Reaching back to Austin's (7) notion of the performative as the act of enunciation that brings into being the object it names, Butler argues that gender is not a fact or an essence, but a set of acts that produce the effect or

<sup>1</sup> In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler explicitly and approvingly cites Bourdieu's concern with the temporality of social process (20:246, n. 8).

appearance of a coherent substance (20). Here she reiterates West & Zimmerman's (160) somewhat more prosaic claim that gender is something people do rather than an entity or a quality they possess. Butler goes further than this when she argues that, although gender is a set of acts, it works and derives its compulsive force from the fact that people mistake the acts for the essence and, in the process, come to believe that they are mandatory. Performatives are thus both generative and dissimulating. Their effect, if not their purpose, is to compel certain kinds of behavior by hiding the fact that there is no essential, natural sex to which gender can refer as its starting point (see also 50, 60, 136). Sex identity is said to be materialized by the gender system in the imitation or reiteration of ideal corporeal styles.

The motivating question of this theory concerns non-normative practice: Whence does it come? The sustaining question has to do with the origins of difference itself. Explaining the compulsory logic of gender performativity, Butler insists that the masculine and feminine morphologies by which Western gender systems naturalize difference as sex are always ideal constructions against which all subjects must experience their bodily selves as, in some senses, inadequate (20). This is because the variegations and multiplicities of bodily surfaces always exceed the slender categories of anatomy (however that is defined) to which they are supposed to correspond (see also 61). Thus, from the beginning, sex/gender systems mark individuals with the possibility of being other than ideal, a possibility that is represented by the normative system as failure, but that may be embraced by individuals in courageous and joyously subversive ways. Herein lies much of the appeal of performativity as a theoretical construct and of Butler's work in particular. By asserting that the body assumes its sex in the culturally mandated practices of everyday life, the theory of gender performativity offers the possibility of restyling that same body in non-normative and occasionally subversive ways. This approach resonates well with the recent ethnography of homoerotics, especially with work demonstrating that in many cultural contexts erotic activity and genitality do not necessarily constitute fixed sexual identities, and even that many heterosexualities can and do accommodate activities that would be read as homosexual in the terms of Western and many other sexual binarisms (31, 78, 114, 118, 150, 161, 168).

In the current ethnographic literature on sex and gender, one finds two distinct but intimately related and often overlapping tendencies, both of which derive from the presumption that gender is arbitrary but determining, constructed but given by history. The first of these might be called the anthropology of making difference. It focuses on the ways in which cultural orders construct gender and create subjects. Often, it includes detailed discussions of bodily techniques and of ideological or symbolic representations that motivate and valorize particular forms of difference. Frequently, it focuses on rites of

passage in which gender is publicly marked. The second strand of thought might be termed the anthropology of decomposing<sup>2</sup> difference. This literature focuses on the institutions of ambiguity, and it encompasses everything from institutionalized transgending in non-Western societies to specifically framed gestures of parody and transgression in North American theater. Whether concerned with the creation or the subversion of particular systems, these literatures are defined by a doubled frame of reference: One frame is the normative system of the culture under discussion, the other is that of the ethnographer. Often, the production and decomposition of difference in other contexts is a kind of proxy subversion of the binary gender system that defines the anthropologizing culture. In this manner, ethnographies are as much about performing gender as are the cultures about which they speak.

### *What is Written on the Body: Composing Difference*

One of the most luminous discussions of gendered practice in a non-Western context appears in Tsing's (152) account of shamanism among the Meratus Dayak. Tsing describes a society in which universal humanness is understood to be feminine, although particular historical circumstances have enabled men to assume political power. In a postcolonial context of rural and urban peripheries in which the ability to traverse distance is a source of authority, including the authority of empowered speech, Tsing tells of male shamans who use stories of traveling in curative ritual. A narrative return to origins gives the healer access to universality and its therapeutic powers. In telling the story of his own birth, which is metaphorically linked to that of all other births, the shaman travels back to a maternal body, enters it, and becomes one with it. In doing so, writes Tsing, the shaman becomes a woman with a penis. It would perhaps have been better if Tsing had read the shaman as newly gendered, neither a woman (with a penis) nor a man (with a womb), but a transformed exalted being. However, she does note how different are the notions of gender in Meratus from those of the West, where femininity is precisely the lack of the phallus and genitality is the point beyond which gender cannot be pushed. The theory of performativity allows her to apprehend a system in which genitality and gender are not only independent of each other, but shift constantly depending on the performative, which is to say social and political, context of the body.

Tsing's account is particularly lucid, but it is not unique. The processes by which different sexes are written on bodies has become the subject of proliferating discussion in anthropology. Unfortunately, the emerging concern with

<sup>2</sup> I use the term decompose rather than deconstruct to avoid assuming the full burden of Derridean theory, which implies more than I mean here.



performativity often depends on a suspicious literalization of the rhetoric of inscription. This is especially true when ethnographers address issues of bodily reform such as circumcision, scarification, and infibulation. Broch-due (15, 16), for example, uses the rather dramatic vocabulary of “carved bodies” when she describes the constitution of sexual identities among the Turkana. By her account, a Turkana child is linguistically marked as neutral or androgynous until initiation rites, when “she” or “he” assumes a sex identity in a system of binary opposition. This new identity, while substantive, is also said to be threatened by the incorporation of a (differently sexed) partner’s substance during intercourse. For women, that incorporated substance finally acquires a critical mass and leads to the birth of a child, which, having been formed by a union of different substances, is thought to be androgynous. Drawing heavily upon postmodern performance theory, Broch-due reads this cyclic oscillation as evidence of the dichotomy’s instability, but only insofar as it necessitates rites of differentiation. In her account, the indeterminacy of gender in the androgynous stages of the Turkana life cycle is temporary. However, it is not presented as a dimension of gender’s temporality, as would be the case in more radical understandings of performativity.

Like Broch-due, Talles (148) describes the infibulation rites of Somali women as the actual and deeply visceral “materializations” of a sex identity that is defined in terms of purity and in opposition to an earlier androgyny. There is a vast literature on “surgical engenderings,” some of which reads them as the mutilation of an already existent body rather than the production of new sexual subjectivity. Although there is an obvious analogy between carved flesh (17) and discursively constructed bodies, the overliteralization of this theory may actually obscure more than it reveals. If bodies are inscribed in ways that both imbue them with meaning and mobilize them into particular sensuousness, physical demarcations may be as much a recognition of the body’s perceived resistance to symbolic refiguration as of its receptivity to inscription. This is not to say that the limits of the body can be known in advance. Everything from Turkana ritual to transplant surgery suggests otherwise. However, the issue of how people conceive and act upon bodily limits must be sought through careful ethnographies in which local understandings of materiality are made explicit.

Talles (148) attempts such an ethnography when she describes excision rites in local terms, as a removal of the male-identified hard parts, which would otherwise prevent the maturation from androgynous childhood to adult female purity. But this begs the question: Whence comes the telos of this body or of the androgynous boy’s body, which will be freed of its soft, “feminine” foreskin in circumcision? Infibulation and circumcision are undoubtedly crucial acts in the process of gendered subject formation. So are tattooing, piercing, dressing, and undressing—to say nothing of plastic surgery and hormone

therapies. But they only constitute sex identity within an already elaborated discourse that perceives, adjudicates, and regulates bodily identity within gender. The assignment of eligibility for sexual markings is as crucial in the analysis of subject formation as is the act itself, even if cutting, tattooing, shaving, and re-dressing are all phenomenologically formative moments for the person who is being made, remade, or just made up. Austin's and Foucault's shared emphasis on the act of naming would be well remembered in this context.

Perhaps the most serious failure of the work that focuses on spectacular events lies in its confusion of ritual as reiteration with ritual as originating act. As formulated by Butler, the theory of gender performativity would probably eschew ethnographies in which a discrete ritual act or series of acts is seen as the source of sexual and gendered identity. Indeed, it rejects the notion of founding acts and posits gender as the product and process of repetition. One might say that the works of Broch-due and Talles confuse performativity with performance. However, the tension between the spectacular and the repetitive dimensions of ritual is not unique to the anthropology of gender. It is especially visible in works that treat ritual as a site of resistance or transgressive practice. If ritual is reiteration, as the etymology of the word suggests, whence comes the new or non-normative act? Until recently, and with the notable exception of Turner's (156) later work on liminality and creativity, ritual was identified almost exclusively with the reproduction of society. Bloch's (11) study of male initiation rites in Madagascar represents one of the more extreme returns to the Durkheimian position in which ritual is understood as the antithesis of creativity. However, one could as easily look to Bourdieu's study of Kabyle marriage ceremonies (13) to find treatments that, although ostensibly concerned with social process, are beholden to a notion of ritual as mere reenactment. In his more recent work, Bourdieu (14) even reduces the ritual function in Kabyle society to the serial unification and separation of opposed terms.

In her account of Okiek initiation rites, Kratz (76) insists that ritual be understood as a performance whose affectivity and formative power is derived from the simultaneous deployment of different media. Kratz goes beyond Malinowski's classic notion of ritual pragmatics and provides a technical theory to augment Turner's (154, 155) concern with the affective potency of ceremonial symbols. However, while Katz situates ritual in the everyday through a notion of performance that serves as a technology of remembrance and evocation, ritual remains for her a framed moment in a system of forceful reproduction. Indeed, it is theatrical in the sense of occupying a "subjunctive frame" (132). The idea of a framed moment that exerts an influence over subjects—as objects—is still not the same as the argument that there is no subject before or outside of practice. This may be why Seremetakis (138)

eschews the notion of the performative in her efforts to describe the endless constructions or poesis of everyday life in Greece.

Some of the more interesting work on this topic comes from scholars who work in contexts that feature elaborate rites of physical engendering, but who nonetheless avoid reducing the discursive production of sex to its material inscriptions. Among them, Boddy (12), Combs-Schilling (29, 30), and Lindisfarne (81) all suggest that the discourse of honor and shame in North Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East can be read as rhetorical systems that privilege certain body parts, especially the hymen, as metonyms of sex identity, but also of purity and of relation within a system of hierarchical opposition. Combs-Schilling (29, 30) and Lindisfarne (81) claim that virginity must be made visible and destroyed for witnesses in order for women and men to assume and maintain their adult identities within the normative system of compulsory heterosexuality. But by attending to the ways in which people conspire to both subvert the taboo on premarital sex and hide its transgression, these writers also show how the audience's validation of a performance serves to constitute reality. Their accounts of wedding rituals share an affinity with Diamond's (39) description of realist theater as a mode of performance in which the audience conspires with the performers to produce a contractual reality by verifying (or rejecting) the truths presented by the actors. Those who witness the display of blood can either accept or reject it as hymenal, and in that moment, they retroactively create or deny the virginity of the bride, even as they reiterate the value of virginity itself. It is significant that these ethnographers resist the temptation to cease analysis here, at the level of local ideology, where the hymen is fetishized and only female gender seems to be in question. Lindisfarne (81) describes the erotic and homosocial bonding between men that occurs in response to the display of hymenal blood and suggests that it is as important in the production of general masculinity as is the act of defloration (or faked defloration) in the more particular achievement of adult sexuality for the groom and the bride. In many ways this is a more modest version of Devereux's (38) theory that kinship and marriage systems, as well as the discourses of shame that surround virginity, are an avoidance of primary homosexual desires between men (see 56, 57). But in an irony intrinsic to ethnography, empiricism prevents the slide into essentialism. Thus Combs-Schilling (29) describes the use of symbolic substitutes such as henna in ritual displays of hymenal blood and focuses as much on the play that such deceptions permit back stage as on the masculine reality that is forged in and for the audience. In its attention to creative dissimulation, her analysis permits us to see how the disjuncture between body and representation, rather than the collapse between them that is entailed by more literal notions of inscription, can be manipulated in ways that both support the normative ideology of

virginal purity and permit a certain freedom of action—including, in this case, premarital sex.

Even so, it is unclear in these accounts whether such rites actually produce women as women and men as men (as these authors claim), or whether they produce women as brides and men as grooms. How stable and how fundamental is gender identity? What is the implicit status of gender that certain rites can only produce what already exists? Has the dissolution between the categories of sex and gender (55) permitted gender to simply replace biology as destiny? Can we avoid such recourse to teleology? Boddy's (12) work on hymen repair and the reproduction of virginity in the Sudan suggests that, even within cults of virginity, women's identities may be deemed highly unstable and in need of constant reaffirmation. This appears to be especially true in lower class and nationally peripheral communities. These instabilities are not synonymous with ambiguity or androgyny, although there are some slippages in Boddy's text; rather they are of a specifically feminine nature. In fact, Boddy's account rehearses a more familiar (to Westerners) paradigm in which women are subjected to patriarchal authority precisely in the process of being defined as volatile. In this case, indeterminacy is a selectively attributed quality of gendered being and an instrument of power that produces inequality and dependencies.

Recent work by Strathern (147) suggests an alternative way of comprehending these processes. In many ways echoing Broch-due (15, 16) and Talles (148), Strathern describes the seclusion of Daulo girls and the ritual initiation that takes place during that period as a transformation that moves an androgynous person into a single-sexed state. But she makes a good case for considering these kinds of ritual processes (and the ethnographic literature is bursting with accounts of them) as a general mode of fragmentation, in which sexually whole and in some senses individual persons, namely children, are socialized into relations and dependencies of kinship, age, sexuality, and gender. One might add here race, ethnicity, and class, although such terms seem to have limited applicability to the Daulo case. This notion of "making incomplete" is in many ways assumed by Strathern's earlier analysis (145, 146) of gift exchange in Melanesia, which she describes as a process in which "dividual" selves are able and even mandated to circulate crafted objects and, by extension, aspects of themselves in a process of endlessly deferred self-completion. Such an understanding of adult identity—one should probably say identification—seems to resonate well with much of the work on what Herdt (65) calls "ritualized homosexuality" and Elliston (43) more cautiously terms "semen practices" in Melanesia. Such practices, which require boys and young men to be in some way inseminated by older men, often initiate and physicalize a form of dependency and receptivity that will later be realized in other kinds of exchanges, exchanges that are at once the prerogative, the obligation, and the

object of desire for adult men. Ironically, efforts to distinguish these kinds of relations from the forms of homosexual identity more familiar in the West have tended to reify them in exclusive typologies with sexuality at their center (3). However, the notion of “dividuation” opens outward from the problem of gender, recognizing the partiality and indeterminacy of adult subjectivity even as it imbricates gender in widening if not always integrating spheres of discourse and practice.

Emphasizing an indeterminacy that other theorists of gender performativity [notably Butler (19, 20)] have located at the heart of the performative itself, Strathern suggests not only that we read exchange in its gender (145), but that we understand gender as part of a complex, temporally extended system in which issues such as renown, age, and rank are all at work. Perhaps this will be anthropology’s gift to performance theory: the recuperated gift, first offered by Mauss, of a whole that is always on the horizon, begging individuals to reach for it and in so doing to become social and to become a social subject. The structural deferment of identity is, after all, the object of much postmodern performance theory. However, it remains to be seen whether the same processes exist in other societies. To speak of fragmentation and indeterminacy is to invoke the image of a coherent subject, either as a prior entity or as a counterpoint. Can one use these terms in reference to societies where ritual is thought to realize rather than to transform identities or contexts where the subject is never fully individuated? And what of those societies in which androgyny or ambivalence are not primary states but are produced during initiation rites, as in the case of the Thai Buddhist novitiates described by Keyes? (74)

### *Decomposing Difference: Thirdness and the Critique of Binarity*

The foregoing literature might well be classified under McLaren’s (89) term, as an anthropology of enfleshment. Focusing on the ways of assuming a sex and of becoming different, it goes beyond earlier anthropologies of the body in which flesh was construed as a surface ripe for signification and/or as a metonymic switch point between individual and society (42, 88, 153, 157). The complement to this work is in the literature that emphasizes moments of collapsed, blurred, or subverted difference; instances of secondary ambiguity; and so-called third genders—all of the forms that would be pathologized by the discourses of medicalized sexuality in the West. The attention to such forms is not new. At least since Mead’s (90, 91) discussion of comparative gender roles, anthropology had been asked to provide testimonial examples of sex/gender systems less rigid or constraining than those of the postindustrial West. The vast literature on institutional transvestism, transgendering, and/or third genders (9, 31, 66, 69, 70, 83, 97, 103, 106, 115, 124, 163–167) provides a case in point. But such phenomena have added appeal for contemporary

performance theory, and much of that appeal is instrumental. In the first place, ambiguous and/or third genders refuse to be collapsed into the system of metonymic representation that operates in the modern West, where certain body parts are charged with the task of signifying and predicting gender. But more importantly, these forms serve a metaphoric function. When theorists of gender performativity (18, 19, 20, 44, 54) say that all gender is a form of drag, they mean that, like drag, the Western system of compulsory heterosexuality is a set of imitations. What is being imitated is the ideal of binary difference, a difference that not only prescribes social roles but also is supposed to determine sexual desires. This is why Weston (162), following Silverman (139), can speak of transgenering as a double mimesis, the imitation of an imitation. In this context, cases of third genders and/or institutionalized transvestism can be treated as framed examples of the performativity that underlies the entire logic of binary sexuality.

An enormous range of phenomena is covered in this body of work, and Weston (161) has provided an admirable summary. The history of that literature is particularly revealing of performance theory's impact. Earlier analyses of transvestism and transgenering often expressed suspicions of homosexuality and reduced the practices of habiliment to sexual orientation. Institutionalized transgenering was said to be a site for legitimized "same-sex" relations that would not otherwise be sanctioned by society (108). But what can be meant by same-sex relations when the partners involved are considered by themselves and their societies to be different? When it comes to erotic practice, the concept of gender often seems to collapse into mere body parts, or it vanishes altogether. But if erotic practice entails more than genital contact—and clearly it does—and if it is central in the constitution of gendered subjects—and clearly it is—we need to understand how it is imbricated in other gendered relations and in the general economies of desire.

The new literature on homoerotic relations among gay-identified men and lesbian-identified women, much of it from "the native's point of view" (80), offers an instructive alternative. Far from suggesting that genitals provide the stable sexual reality behind the mask of institutional transvestism and other forms of ambiguous gender, this new work testifies to the variety of ways in which ostensibly same-sex relations are gendered. Faderman (48) uses the term heterogenderal to describe the many forms of sexual engagement between lesbian-identified women, but as the work on butch-femme aesthetics suggests, more colloquial language also provides a cornucopia of terms to indicate how variously the self-same body can be imagined, understood, and experienced within the seemingly stable categories of (homo)sexuality (24, 47–49, 72, 107, 126). Nor can these genderings be reduced the metaphors of a sexual binary. As Rubin (126) points out, terms like butch and femme are not elaborations of masculine and feminine, but are tense relations between multi-

ple layers of gender that are assumed at different times, not as the negation of more primary identifications but as ironic and unstable commentaries upon them (see also 33).

There is considerable debate about whether these forms of multiple and ironic identification should be termed third genders, although there has been a greater willingness to use the term in application to non-Western contexts. Wikan (166) was one of the first to refer to a third gender in her work on *xaniths* in Oman. But the concept has also been applied to *berdaches*, *kathoeys*, *hijras*, and others (see 66 for an overview). Unfortunately, too few analyses concerned with third genders, transvestism, or transgendering look beyond triadic typologies to explore the ways in which thirdness is distributed and manipulated. In many places, the potency, distinction, and/or pollution that accrues to people so defined derives from the tension between different levels of gendered identity as these are assumed at particular moments. Often, the prerogative or stigma attached to those who inhabit these categories is restricted or assigned to individuals who have achieved a particular identity through the habits of everyday activity and who become third or transgendered only in relation to a prior socialization or expectation. Sometimes, that thirdness acquires the aura of the natural and the irrevocable. Sometimes it is a temporary state, to be transcended or abandoned at other moments or later in life. And occasionally, it is self-consciously manipulated, at which point it can become a means of self-empowerment. Given this range of possibilities, thirdness and transgendering may be better understood as forms of identity that are embedded within other sets of gendered relations in a variety of ways and in a range of temporalities.

Weston's (161) suggestion that the *berdache* (and other forms of transgendering) be considered less as stable institutions than as forms of double mimesis, in which individuals parody the society's representations of ideal gender, is provocative in this context. We cannot assume a priori that the so-called thirdness of transgendered identities represents a point of pure mediation or liminality between genders in a system of binary opposition and contradiction (cf 54). But it remains to be seen whether the notion of double mimesis, which is essentially the logic of camp, can be transported so easily to other cultural contexts. For one thing, double mimesis suggests a unity and singularity of identity and purpose that reduces the totality of a *berdache's* being to his/her gender, and in this context we would be wise to entertain the lessons of difference feminism. If a woman is not Woman, she is also not just a woman. The same can be said for the *berdache* who, if not a woman [or a man (131)], is not the just the mimicry of Woman (or Man) either.

These are issues of conceptualization. But there are also historical issues to be addressed and questions to be asked about the kinds of reformation that take place when different sex/gender systems collide or, as is more likely the case,

when one system is encompassed by another. The first gestures in that direction are now being made. In the anthropology of native North American sexualities, for example, writers have begun to address the effect of colonialism on the institution of the *berdache*. Opinions range from Williams's (167) claim that the institution has persisted with formal differences emerging as a result of contact, to Herdt's (63, 64) insistence that colonialism unequivocally destroyed it, and Roscoe's (124) more nuanced assertion that the *berdache* has both continued and been encompassed by other forms of self-conscious sexuality under Anglo-American influence. My work on the changing status of *kathoey*s in Thailand also suggests that they have been repositioned in response to the "transnationalization of gay identity" (4) and awkwardly inserted into an emergent regime of binary sexuality. Murray's (104) efforts to correlate the "feminization" of homosexuality in Meiji Japan with the rise of a mercantile class points out the need to link the histories of sexuality with the political economies of patriarchy. More historical accounts will no doubt be forthcoming from other areas, as the forms of Western sexuality continue to expand via the technologies of transnational representation. Stoler's (143, 144) work on Indonesia has already provided an example of how an historical anthropology can shed light on the effects of colonial regimes that have regulated sexual practices and identity in order to protect the racial purity of dominant cultures. Other studies might reveal more about how particular discourses of sexuality literally engender subjects, even in the absence of legislative endeavors. These studies will be necessary contributions to the nonanthropological theory of gender performativity, for which history remains more a principle of temporality than the actual, if selectively remembered, experiences of a shared past.

### *Performing Gender Twice Over: Drag and the Theory of Performativity*

The issue of how gendered subjectivity is related to institutional politics has been difficult for the theory of performativity to address. Beyond studies of ritualized homosexuality in age-graded societies, little anthropological literature has explored the connections between sexual practice and political process. Exceptions include Lancaster's (78) work on male sexuality and patriarchy in revolutionary Nicaragua, and Mageo's (83) argument about the transformative role played by male transvestites in Samoa. They can also be read in some of the more acutely politicized treatments of sexuality, AIDS, and social policy (see 161 for a summary). However, the work on performativity has concerned itself mainly with the politics of parody and with the subversive power of irony, both of which are strongly identified with drag, and especially with camp aesthetics. Indeed, the theory of performativity has turned to drag for its metaphors, its exemplary instances, and its structural models. The



literature on this topic is divided between works that treat transvestite and transgendered performances as subversive of the dominant sex/gender system and those that see them as an element buttressing and reconfirming binary opposition through an instructive but ultimately resolved blurring. The extremes of this debate are represented by Newton (108), who, in her early work, claims that transvestism would not exist (would be unnecessary) in the absence of societal contradictions associated with homosexuality, and by Garber (54), who defines transvestism as the very ground of gendered systems. Somewhere between these poles lie Robertson's (120, 121) analyses of Takarasuka performers in Japan. Robertson emphasizes the subversive dimension of transgendering within a rigidly binary system, but she also addresses the ambivalence of that subversion and the degree to which its radical possibilities are contained by other identity structures—in particular class—that are gendered without being reducible to gender.

In a provocative discussion of transsexual striptease, Meyer (93) shows how drag and its reverse unveiling can mirror and parody the narratives of natural sexual difference that are built into medical discourse. Ian (68) makes a convincing case for including bodybuilding under the heading of drag, as a means of exploding and defeminizing the body. Both forms of performance draw attention to that space, already discussed by Butler, between the lived body and its morphological ideal-type. There is an almost Brechtian element in this theory, one that reads transgendering and regendering as devices of alienation. By making gender so fabulously artificial, these performances are said to show up the artifice of gender. But we need to ask whether the acts of self-conscious self-constitution in drag are in fact related and not merely analogous to normative styles of gender. When habitual acts are brought into consciousness and objectified, they are transformed; practice becomes representation, and everyday acts become strategies that presume a timeless and totalized vision (13, 35). Is parodic gender really the same as normative gender? Or is it, as Rubin (126) suggests, a new form of relational gender, in which difference is refracted along a temporal axis and precisely not naturalized? What is the status of consciousness in this theory? What is the status of intentionality?

In the end, one also must ask: Is drag really a performance about gender? Or, to phrase the question differently: Are maleness and femaleness the only aspects of identity at stake in transgendering and cross-dressing? Are there limits, such as race and ethnicity, that cannot be crossed or effaced in the same manner (45, cf 142)? And what happens when such performances are commodified? Class, the star system, and beauty are all objects of identification in professional cross-dressing, and the oppositions at play have as much to do with the nature of the gaze and with the signifying power of visible surfaces as with gender. It is even possible to read the parody of professional drag as being

about commodity aesthetics, which happen to be gendered in particular ways, rather than about gender itself. Of course, these issues can only be resolved with ethnographic investigation. Newton (109, 110) has done just that with her description of a conflict that arose in Cherry Grove, New York, when lesbians attempted to enter a drag show and gay men rejected their right to masquerade in the feminine. Somewhat soberingly, accounts like these indicate that, even when self-consciously addressed to the matter of gender, drag can reinscribe dominant ideology—not because it provides an exemplary resolution into that system [as in the literature on ritual reversal (115)] but because the subject of conscious manipulation can never fully enter into the realm of the unconscious.

These issues of consciousness and ironic resistance in transgendering are acutely focused in the phenomena and discussions of spirit possession. Several recent accounts attempt to understand possession rituals as kinds of cross-dressing wherein the assumption of costume and new bodily postures signifies and effects the vehicle's transformation from one gendered state to another (12, 77, 86, 87, 95, 111). In many cases, possession rites seem to permit women to take on the attire and gestures as well as many of the privileges normally denied them in everyday life. On the surface, this seems to entail the medium's transformation from female to male and often from lower status female to higher status male, although movement is often along the vector of class only. Thus common women and men appear to assume the personae of similarly gendered monarchs or, as in Rouch's film, *Les Maitres Fous*, those of colonial officials.

One of the most thorough attempts to read possession rites as ironic transgressions of the normative rules by which men and women are engendered appears in Boddy's (12) account of the Sudanese *Zār* cult. In her rendition, the cult provides a context in which women are not only possessed by male spirits, but they can appropriate and play with the sexual and social prerogatives of masculinity without, in some senses, ceasing to be women. Of course, to read possession as a kind of transgressive shape-shifting requires that personal identity be coextensive with bodily integrity and that subjectivity transcend the fact of possession. Different cultures may conceive of personhood in this manner, and certainly this is the logic that operates in the modern (if not the postmodern) West (100). Yet there are other ways of imagining subjectivity, and in many contexts, possession is seen as evidence of a disjuncture between body and subject and of an ontological distinction between medium and spirit. When the moments and personae of possession are thus separated, discussions about irony, parody, and resistance become tenuous and caution seems necessary. Rubin's (126) thesis of layered and relational genders, which works so well in application to professional drag, seems less effective here. However, it may have more utility in cases like those in Zimbabwe (77), where possession

states are manipulated consciously toward political ends and where they both influence and are influenced by mundane subjectivity. Just as lesbian butch and femme can be read as secondary elaborations upon a more primary but still constructed femaleness, so the monarchical masculinity of the Zimbabwean possessing spirits can be seen as secondary elaborations upon an initial construction of specifically ethnicized maleness.

What is the status of gender in these rites of re-dressing? Considering the Oyo Yoruba, Matory (87) has argued that, even when possession entails such crossing, gender may not be the primary object of identification. Ethnic or class affiliation, and especially royal prerogative, may be values of equal significance. Although possession does not entail a crossing of genders, it may still be gendered. We need a conceptual vocabulary that permits discussion of engenderings that are multiply refracted in and through other categories of identity that are not reducible to gender. Articulation theories invariably reify the opposition between gender and race, class, or ethnicity are ultimately inadequate to the task. We still need good ethnographies that explore the constitution of racialized and ethnicized genders and/or genderized races and ethnicities.

### *Reformations: The Limits of Resistance*

A number of directions might now be pursued. One of the issues that needs revisiting is the different status of ambiguity and indeterminacy in different social and historical contexts. The tendency in much nonanthropological performance theory has been to valorize and even ontologize ambiguity, often in a manner that brings Freud's doctrine of primary bisexuality to mind. However, ethnography complicates the matter endlessly. In Strathern's (147) account of Melanesia, indeterminacy appears as the result of a child's entry into the world of obligation, exchange, and desire. Broch-due (16) describes a context in which ambiguity is an original state of bodiliness and a function of intercourse. And Boddy (12) tells of a society in which instability is a particular dimension of femaleness. In each of these cases, ambiguity or indeterminacy has been explicated with reference to a vast arena of exchange systems, power structures, and social relationships. But what of the modern West? What of the extraordinary resonance between the notions of ambiguity in performance theory and the principle of general equivalence that defines the commodity economy in which that theory has emerged? As Simmel (140) observed in his analysis of money, the principle of general equivalence is, in the end, a form of emptiness. A fantasy of utterly unfettered, purely elastic gender seems to underlie much of the work on performativity. And often, the pursuit of a freedom from essential categories seems to entail the ironic effacement of gender itself (37). When is ambiguity a principle of "general" emptiness in

this theory? And when does that emptiness become the vehicle for an asocial, ahistorical idealism?

The risks of such idealism are great, as Errington (46) well knew when she argued, echoing Lacan, that a distinction might be made between “sex” and “Sex,” between the brute stuff of the world and the socially ordered systems of representation in which bodies are said to have a particular sex identity. Errington’s gesture is, I think, intended to prevent the kinds of voluntarist accounts of gender of which postmodern performance theory is accused in its hasty search for resistance (34). Beyond the issue of idealism, however, it is still not clear that a proliferation of gendered forms necessarily constitutes a resistance to hegemonic sexuality. In his account of Renaissance England, Greenblatt (59) shows how the State imagined and encouraged subversiveness to advance its own ends, expanding its reach by reencompassing the seeds of resistance that it planted itself. Similarly, Goldberg’s (58) account of Spanish colonialism in the Americas demonstrates how the circulation of an ambiguously defined term like sodomy could facilitate alterior practices but not without producing the object of genocidal warfare. Both cases suggest the need for a more scrupulously self-aware contextual analysis.

Some of the most incisive critiques of new performance theory have come from within performance studies itself (10, 39, 116, 117, 119, 133). Anthropology may do well to consider these debates now, as the notion of performativity begins its ascent both as an analytic paradigm and as the latest “romance of resistance.” Diamond (39, also 18), in particular, has cautioned against equating irony and parody with resistance. In the theater, she notes, realism does not just imitate reality, it produces it by asking spectactors to recognize and verify its truths. Yet it does so by mystifying the process of theatrical signification and by naturalizing the relation between character and actor. In this manner it works analogously to ideology—and gender itself. Diamond follows Brecht when she argues that, in order to understand how ideology has falsified the relationship between a signifying system and a particular reality, the two dimensions of the performance—the actor and the character, the sign and the signifier—must be alienated from each other. Only then can the inadequacies of realist mimesis be overcome—not with an anti-mimetic representation but with a better mimesis. Exaggerated mimicry is one method by which the failures of a particular mimetic representation can be shown up, and in this way, argues Diamond, mimicry can serve as an alienation effect. In fact, this is how most anthropologists of resistance seem to treat parodic performance—whether it is encountered in drag shows, in spirit possession, or in the poetic oratory of peasant women. What is forgotten in many of these analyses is the final step in the Brechtian system, namely the transcendence of the bastard mimesis with a “truer,” more “adequate,” or more “liberating” mimesis. In the absence of that final moment, it may be more appropriate to speak of

ritual reversal, liminality, anti-structure, or even play, than resistance. And when recognizing the lack of resistance in parodic performance, we may also be forced to consider some of the more coercive structures in operation, the structures that mitigate against voluntarist forms of performative self-constitution even as they summon creative forms of subversion and opposition.

Like practice before it, the idea of performativity offers much to a constructionist anthropology, but it has yet to fulfill its promise to explain the relationships between difference and normativity, society and individual, history and its transcendence. Thinking of how to proceed from here, I am reminded of a dream sequence from Maxine Hong Kingston's (75) novel, *The Woman Warrior*. In an ethnic Chinese family, a young woman is summoned by her parents to have her flesh inscribed with their remembrances. Of a ritual that anticipates the future as much as it memorializes the past, the woman says, "My father first brushed the words in ink, and they fluttered down my back row after row; then he began cutting.... The list of grievances went on and on. If an enemy should flay me the light would shine through my skin like lace." Few images probably capture more perfectly the aspirations of an ethnography grounded in performance theory. Here, history is written on the body, not by abstract structures but by those who inhabit and comprise them. The inscriptions are made of words, but they are words with force, that cause pain, and that produce an awful beauty. Artifice and an improbably delicate art, this bloody calligraphy is nonetheless lived as the irrevocable knowledge of a body, as the indelible effect of a practice that history seems to demand. That the lacerating words of a patriarch could produce for his daughter the bizarrely feminine (and bourgeois) image of tatted lace suggests much about the complexities of gender and its formation in particular historical circumstances. Yet, the novelist reminds us that authority has its limits and that the father's words can be read in myriad ways. Let us not forget that this young woman, her back burdened by history, identifies herself with a warrior—a woman warrior, against all odds.

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