

Issue 30
2010

GENDER FORUM

An Internet Journal for Gender Studies



De-Voted: Gender and Politics

Edited by
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ISSN 1613-1878

Universität
zu Köln



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Editorial Deadlines

Spring Issue:

abstracts (October 1),

completed papers (January 1)

Summer Issue:

abstracts (January 1),

completed papers (April 1)

Fall Issue:

abstracts (April 1),

completed papers (July 1)

Early Career Researchers Special Issue:

abstracts (May 1),

completed papers (August 1)

Winter Issue:

abstracts (July 1),

completed papers (October 1)

About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Editorial

1 The topicality and complexity of issues of gender and sex/uality as key factors in the political arena has become apparent in recent political elections in different parts of the world. Matters of performance are determining criteria for the successful distribution and realisation of political aims. In this context questions about re-defining the political arena arise, as the proliferation of new media platforms provides alternative possibilities for voicing political ideas and building political movements outside of the classical institutions. In accordance with the complexity of the subject, the articles in this issue of *gender forum* engage with the interplay of gender and politics from diverse perspectives.

2 In “Gender Politics With Margaret Thatcher: Vulnerability and Toughness”, Anneke Ribberink traces the history of one of the most controversial political figures in British history. Referring to biographical sources and historical data, the author foregrounds the pressure inflicted upon Thatcher as a female leader in a specifically gendered historical and cultural environment, and analyses Thatcher’s political performance of toughness in the context of the patriarchal system in which she rose to power. Indeed, Ribberink claims “that Margaret Thatcher’s career can best be understood when interpreted as a combination of vulnerability and toughness, in which toughness was a shield against vulnerability.”

3 In contradistinction to Ribberink's investigation into the performative implications of female political leadership, Anna Schober's article, “Undoing Gender revisited”, probes into questions of parody as performative strategy of subversion within politics. Drawing on theories by Judith Butler, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri Anna Schober reflects upon the promises and limitations of subversive performances in an altered political landscape where “each individual is able to participate in various collective bodies at the same time and is inclined to change affiliations more quickly and more often.” According to Schober the change of the premises of politics because of the diversification and de-institutionalisation of fields of collective action, can be linked to a new impact of “lifestyle, i.e. a refined exhibition of differences in dressing-up, self-performance, inhabiting space and referring to aesthetic traditions (which) has become more important for the fabrication of connectivity.”

4 This phenomenon is taken up in Jianxin Liu’s article on “Gendered performances and norms in Chinese personal blogs”, showing how Internet blogs have become *the* preferred sites of personal lifestyle exhibition and self-performance. The author's analysis of popular blogs proves in how far “[p]erformances of gendered identities in Chinese personal blogs are

intertwined with or even constitutive of, power relations and struggles in Chinese society.” Thus the individual blogs can turn into political platforms building subversive collectives.

5 Anne Lauppe-Dunbar’s excerpt from her forthcoming novel, *Dark Mermaids*, provides yet another take on the complex interplay of politics and gender, as the book is based on the doping scam ‘Theme 14.25’ in the former German Democratic Republic. The extract featured in this issue takes the form of a flashback, condensing the sinister atmosphere set out in the novel’s first chapter, which was published in our most recent issue “Private Eye, Public Eye”.

Gender Politics With Margaret Thatcher: Vulnerability and Toughness

By Anneke Ribberink, VU University Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Abstract:

This paper looks at Margaret Thatcher's political career in the light of gender. The thrust of the argument is that Margaret Thatcher's career can best be understood when interpreted as a combination of vulnerability and toughness, in which toughness was a shield against vulnerability. Thatcher started her political career in the 1950s, at a time when very few women held parliamentary or government posts in the United Kingdom or any other country in Western societies. It was of paramount importance for female politicians in the past to downplay their gender. The important political figures were all male, so it was the male perspective that counted. Women politicians were less prominent and should be as self-effacing as possible. Margaret Thatcher tried to make herself invisible through perfection. A perfected political image and a perfected image of her private and family life was her answer to the problem of being a woman in a man's world and the vulnerability this implied. Margaret Thatcher's memoirs show just how vulnerable she was as a female politician despite the tough image she often projected.

1 In June 2002 I took part in a historical conference in Manchester, where I presented a paper on Margaret Thatcher. This led to a heated discussion among the audience, indicating how controversial a figure Thatcher still was in British history. A male historian summed up a prevailing view with the following verdict: "Margaret Thatcher is not a woman." Those who believe that only men think this way should prepare to be disillusioned by Jane Pilcher's article on 'The Gender Significance of Women in Power' of 1995 in which she quotes several women who categorically affirm Thatcher's so-called "unfemininity" during her time as Prime Minister. These women, from different age groups and political parties, had been interviewed in 1989 during Thatcher's third and last term as Prime Minister, a role that she fulfilled from 1979 till 1990:

I [the author] then asked what it was about Mrs Thatcher that made her "unfeminine": "Well, her dominance, you see" (...) [Another woman] "I can't stand her voice". [Another woman] "Well, she is getting more like a man everyday..." [Another woman] "I think she is dreadful... a dictator." (Pilcher 502,503,506)

Unflattering judgements to say the least. So how can we explain them? Are they justified? Was Thatcher unique or was her behaviour typical of female political leaders?

2 In this article I look at Margaret Thatcher's political career in the light of gender. The thrust of the argument is that Margaret Thatcher's career can best be understood when interpreted as a combination of vulnerability and toughness, in which toughness was a shield against vulnerability. Thatcher was already vulnerable by virtue of the fact that she came from the lower middle class whereas other female national leaders tended to have upper-class

backgrounds. (Genovese 21-24) But, in my opinion, Thatcher's vulnerability was related mainly to issues of gender.

Political image

3 Let's start with her political image: Thatcher actively contributed to the creation of her political image first, while in office, through attempts to control her media representations, and then by contributing to a burgeoning market in political apologia with her two-volume autobiography. The image that emerges is that of a happy childhood with loving parents who were proud of a studious and dutiful daughter, a happy family life with a rich husband and two lovely children, and a successful professional life as a good politician and a good Prime Minister. The question addressed by this article is: Why was this politically correct image so important to Thatcher? Was it somehow connected to gender concerns? To answer this question one needs to look at theories on image-building and the behaviour of female politicians from a gender perspective and at examples of other female political leaders from Thatcher's generation.

4 Thatcher was born in October 1925. She started her political career in the 1950s, at a time when very few women held parliamentary or government posts in the United Kingdom or any other country in Western societies. (Henig and Henig 2) There was a widely held belief that women did not make competent politicians. People thought that they lacked the necessary qualities to measure up to men. The following illuminating words were spoken by a Dutch female politician in the late 1950s:

I would like to remark, that it seems to me that men do not usually stimulate active political participation by women. They take women as read, but do not think positively about their capacities. (Quoted in Schokking 66)

The few female parliamentarians who did emerge after World War II were seen as exceptions to the rule. They were expected to confine themselves to policy areas traditionally regarded as suitable for women, such as health, social work and education, and to leave more weighty and prestigious fields such as economics, foreign affairs and defence to their male colleagues. The few women who dared to storm these male bastions tended to be stereotyped as "unfeminine". Such views contributed to significantly less political ambition among women than men. (Ribberink 1998; Henig and Henig; Lawless and Fox; Van der Steen; Mostert)

5 The Dutch historian Mineke Bosch has pointed out that it was of paramount importance for female politicians in the past to downplay their gender. The important political figures were all male, so it was the male perspective that counted. Women politicians were less prominent and should be as self-effacing as possible. The few female politicians with a

husband and children had to ensure that their family life looked perfect so as to avoid criticism which would increase their vulnerability. After all, the commonly held view was that married women ought to look after their husband and children and should not have a paid job outside the home, let alone participate in the male world of politics. Female politicians tended to be unmarried and tried to hide their private life: all that counted was their political – and public – career. (Bosch 55-62) A prime example in the Netherlands is Marga Klompé, the first female member of the Dutch Cabinet (1956). Klompé was unmarried and is famous for concealing her private life. She used to boast that the only difference between her and her male colleagues was her powder compact. She could not be persuaded to write her memoirs because – she told everyone – it testified to a kind of vanity. But her reluctance may have been linked to a fear of vulnerability. Hilda Verwey-Jonker, a famous Dutch social democratic politician and social scientist in the 1950s and 1960s, who was married and the mother of four children, did write her memoirs. But this piece of work, which is notable for its modesty in many ways and the writer's frequent contentions that her political acts and career achievements were un-important, could be interpreted as an attempt at self-effacement. The predominant view that women were less important than men was translated into invisibility.

6 Margaret Thatcher, however, was far from modest, and certainly not in her memoirs, but she too tried to make herself invisible – through perfection. A perfected political image was her answer to the problem of being a woman in a man's world and the vulnerability this implied. Invisibility could be achieved by going down the same road as Marga Klompé in government affairs. As far as political leadership was concerned, Thatcher did not wish to distinguish herself from men. She was tough in parliamentary and government affairs. As Prime Minister she could not conceal her private and family life, but she endeavoured to make it look as perfect as possible.

Vulnerability

7 Margaret Thatcher's memoirs show just how vulnerable she was as a female politician despite the tough image she often projected. As mentioned earlier, the picture the memoirs paint is of a rather perfect life and career. But between the lines Thatcher does, on occasion, criticize her own performance and does offer a view on the sexism she encountered. Precisely because in her later life and career Thatcher demurred to comment on the sexism she came up against in her past, these memoirs may be taken as a reliable source.

8 A few years after the birth of her twins in 1953, she applied several times to stand as a parliamentary candidate and appeared before several selection committees between 1954

and 1958, before eventually contesting the seat for Finchley, North London, in 1959. In her memoirs she highlights the questions asked by the committees:

With my family commitments, would I have time enough for the constituency? Did I realize how much being a Member of Parliament would keep me away from home? (...) And sometimes more bluntly still: did I really think that I could fulfil my duties as a mother with young children to look after and as an MP?

She continues:

I felt that Selection Committees had every right to ask me these questions. I explained our family circumstances and that I already had the help of a first-class nanny. I also used to describe how I had found it possible to be a professional woman and a mother by organizing my time properly. What I resented, however, was that beneath some of the criticism I detected a feeling that the House of Commons was not really the right place for a woman anyway. Perhaps some of the men at Selection Committees entertained this prejudice, but I found then and later that it was the women who came nearest to expressing it openly. (...) I was hurt and disappointed by these experiences. They were, after all, an attack on me not just as a candidate but as a wife and mother. But I refused to be put off by them. (Thatcher 1995, 94)

9 The United Kingdom was not particularly friendly towards women politicians. Immediately after World War II, women accounted for only around three or four percent of the membership of the House of Commons. Even by the late 1980s the percentage did not exceed six. (Oldersma 146) This is in stark contrast with the Scandinavian countries, which, with a female membership of over 30 percent, led the field in Western Europe. (Elgán 473) In addition, the Tory Party was not particularly feminist and had never had many women in leading posts. In 1959, after becoming MP for Finchley, Thatcher was "one of only twelve women compared to three hundred and fifty male Conservatives in the Commons." (Carol Thatcher 2008, 30) And yet, Margaret Thatcher owed her position and career in the Conservative Party to some extent to the feminist movement. The second feminist wave which lasted from the late 1960s to the late 1980s, tried, among other things, to increase the number of female politicians. Edward Heath included Thatcher as the "statutory woman" in his shadow and real cabinet because he had to pay lip service to the emancipatory mindset of the late 1960s. Thatcher had this to say about the shadow cabinet (1967-1970):

For my part, I did not make a particularly important contribution to the Shadow Cabinet. Nor was I asked to do so. For Ted and perhaps others I was principally there as the statutory woman whose main task was to explain what "women" – Kiri Te Kanawa, Barbara Cartland, Esther Rantzen, Stella Rimington and all the rest of our uniform, undifferentiated sex – were likely to think and want on troublesome issues.

In October 1974, when she had been Education Secretary for four years, she told the press:

I think it would be extremely difficult for a woman to make it to the top... I have always taken the view that to get to the very top one has to have experience in one of the three important posts...(Margaret Thatcher 1995, 144, 261)

She was referring to the posts of Foreign Secretary, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Home Secretary. And as she correctly implied, these were all posts, which had scarcely ever been held by women, not only in the United Kingdom, but in most western and northern European countries as well. (Henig and Henig 58,59)

10 A short while after this, in February 1975, Thatcher was elected Leader of the Conservative Party, the first female leader of a political party in Britain. There was much surprise inside and outside the party, and there were mixed feelings and resistance as well. In her biography of her father Carol Thatcher writes:

The grandees of the party couldn't bear the thought of being led by a woman, especially a "suburban housewife" brought up above a grocer's shop in Grantham – the wrong side of the tracks.

And:

After the excitement of victory – and the novelty of having a female leader – had worn off, sections of the press and the Conservative Party began promulgating the idea that Margaret's grip on the leadership was both tenuous and temporary. She was a misfit: a woman in a man's world, a political curiosity and – worse – a feminist experiment. How long could she survive before the Conservative Party regained its senses and dumped her for a man? Bill Shelton, who became one of her first parliamentary private secretaries, remembers, "For the rest of that year Ted ran a campaign: "She must be out by Christmas." Heath referred to her as TBW – That Bloody Woman – and he wasn't the only one. Many in the Establishment and the City were appalled to find Conservative MPs apparently embracing feminist principles. (Carol Thatcher 1996, 4, 103,104)

However, this did not mean that there were no advantages to being a woman, particularly, a young and beautiful one. This observation can be derived from Carol Thatcher's comment in her biography of her father on her mother's campaign for parliament in 1959: "A young, attractive woman destined for Parliament was wonderful material for the women's pages" (Carol Thatcher 1996, 80,85).¹

Leadership style

11 Part of Margaret Thatcher's political image was her leadership style. Much has been written about her demeanour and actions, from both (at least seemingly) gender-neutral and gender-specific perspectives. The term Thatcherism primarily points to her neo-liberal economic policy and her mission to restore Britain as a great power. But it is also taken to

¹ Also see Nunn 39.

include her militant, aggressive and authoritarian bearing as Prime Minister. (*Women as National Leaders* 200) According to the historian Peter Hennessy this "very personal style of government", in which an "over-mighty Prime Minister" dominated the cabinet, really took shape after the victory in the Falklands War in early 1982 when her popularity increased dramatically. (Hennessy 422,428)

12 The question of her so-called aggressive leadership should be approached with caution, because women are far more likely than men to be labelled arrogant and aggressive when they are behaving in a resolute manner. After all, such behaviour does not qualify as feminine. Notably, the other pioneer woman Prime Minister in the West in the 1980s and 1990s, Norwegian Gro Harlem Brundtland, as well as Marga Klompé and Hilda Verwey-Jonker were also accused of "arrogant and masculine" behaviour. Each of these women was different, but all of them regarded their leadership as thorough and vigorous and definitely not as authoritarian. (Brundtland 150, 151, 153; Sykes 219-229) But maybe, given the endless accusations levelled at Margaret Thatcher, none of them exercised such a dominant leadership style as she did. One telling example of Thatcher's leadership style can be found in a letter from her husband Denis to his daughter in 1983:

Some criticism has been made of the Prime Minister's "style". We all know she is brisk and determined, but leaks in Whitehall from Cabinet Ministers (amongst others) to the press accuse her of being "dictatorial"; this is clearly unfair. She has been rather hurt by this. I have tried to say "ignore it" but "remember not everyone can comprehend difficult problems and is able to think as fast as you can." (Quoted in Carol Thatcher 2008, 170,171)

Thatcher's drive for perfectionism instilled in her a desire to control.

13 My research into female leadership indicates that this perfectionist urge to control, to being "brisk and determined" (to quote Denis Thatcher), coupled with an inability to delegate, is definitely linked to gender issues. In Thatcher's case, the urge to control was sharpened by her vulnerability as the first female PM in the UK. Another aspect of this urge, however, was a sense of deep personal involvement, as demonstrated, for instance, when the wife of Trade and Industry Secretary Norman Tebbit was paralysed in the IRA bomb attack in Brighton on 12 October 1984. Carol Thatcher writes:

...Mum arranged for Norman to move into Chequers, where he could be waited on hand and foot, and be close to the hospital to visit his wife. I remember seeing him there at weekends as he came to terms with what had happened.' (Carol Thatcher 2008, 175)

14 But Thatcher's alleged "masculine" leadership style did not deter her from exploiting her status as a woman. All her cabinets had exclusively male ministers, thus even further

emphasising the exemplary position of the Prime Minister. (Margaret Thatcher 1993, 865-882)² As mentioned before, being a woman did indeed have advantages. Thatcher's leadership style was marked by a high degree of skill in switching between gender roles: She was an expert "gender-bender". She used her toughness to confound her (male) colleagues, who were not sure how to react, precisely because she was a woman. On the other hand, she also used her feminine charms when necessary. The historian Eric Evans quotes one of Thatcher's advisors, a Hungarian emigrant, on her personality: "He believes that her 'perplexing charm' enabled her to 'be getting away with' political ploys and stratagems which a man would not." (Evans 44)

15 She paid a lot of attention to her appearance. Her love of clothes is legendary. On becoming Conservative Party leader Thatcher put herself in the hands of Gordon Reece, a former television producer who engineered the manufacture of her image. As the contemporary historian Peter Clarke argues in the London Review of Books

The hair was wrong, too suburban; it was restyled. The clothes were wrong, too fussy; they were replaced. The voice was wrong, too shrill; it was lowered in pitch through lessons from an expert in breathing. With singular dedication, Thatcher made herself into "Maggie", the leader who is remembered, and she did so knowing full well that she was not born to it, that it did not come naturally or easily.

Margaret Thatcher loved and relished her role as Prime Minister. It was, as her daughter Carol says in her latest book, the pinnacle of her political career. So, one might interpret the gender-bending game as an expression of her joy in the office she held.

Feminism, Competence and Vulnerability

16 Thatcherite policies have been much discussed by feminist critics, and an important aspect here is Thatcher's own gender identity. The verdict is far from positive: Thatcher showed no solidarity or sorority whatsoever with other women who shared political aspirations. As a Prime Minister, Thatcher made no attempt to promote the careers of other women. On the contrary, she sometimes even worked against the interests of women. Thatcher owes her successful career in part to the achievements of the women's movement, which pressed for an increase in the number of female politicians, but she never acknowledged this. She always claimed that she owed her success exclusively to her own performance and personal qualities. (Pilcher 495; Pugh 335)

² Lady Young was Leader of the House of Lords and LD Privy Seal from September 1981 until June 1983 Downing street years, 874, 875. Thatcher did have a female junior minister (of health), Edwina Curry, from 18 September 1986-20 December 1988.

17 Despite this justified feminist criticism, we should investigate the reasons for it. Wasn't Thatcher's lack of solidarity with her own sex prompted to a large extent by the fear of seeming weak? I have already quoted several examples of the resistance she met along her political career path. The antagonism she experienced from other women in this respect may have helped to shape a negative attitude. Her daughter Carol writes in 2008 about the relation between her mother and the feminist movement in the early 1970s, when Margaret was Minister of Education in the Heath Cabinet.

Feminists didn't think she was doing enough for their cause. This was the era of "Women's Lib" but my mother was a stratosphere away from the bra-burning demonstrations of the time. On the contrary, she felt the movement had done very little for her. She was a hard-working example of female success from relatively lowly beginnings who had achieved cabinet rank by pragmatically getting on with the task in hand rather than by manning barricades and wasting precious time protesting. (Carol Thatcher 2008, 47,48)

18 Thatcher needed to hold her own in a world where female politicians were in danger of not being taken seriously. The Henigs comment on how a British female member of parliament needed to behave in the 1960s as follows: "To be successful, and to make their mark in such a male-dominated environment, women had to compete with men on their terms and be tough." (Henig and Henig 19) Being tough as a female politician meant, among other things, to avoid 'women's issues', such as health, social work and legislative emancipation. In the course of her political career, Thatcher always sought to concentrate on 'men's issues' such as finance and economy. She had already specialised in fiscal law when studying for her second degree. Her ambition in the 1960s was to become the first female Chancellor of the Exchequer (Thatcher 1996, 95). But her fear of being undervalued as a woman surfaces in a remark she made when taking office as Prime Minister: "I don't think of myself as the first woman Prime Minister." (Quoted in Pilcher 495)

19 She strongly felt the necessity for competence and perfection in government affairs, as female politicians had always been in danger of being considered incompetent (*Women as National Leaders* 5). Communication lecturer Heather Nunn writes about Thatcher's time as Prime Minister:

Readers of biographies and magazine articles were continually informed that Thatcher only needed four hours sleep, exhausted all about her on walkabouts or political campaigns, cultivated backbenchers with "manic energy" (...), tirelessly researched, memorised detail and mastered any political brief. (Nunn 40,41)

20 I conducted some research into the question whether Margaret Thatcher was a competent politician in terms of the content of her policy. (Ribberink 2009) I concentrated specifically on two areas, her socio-economic and her foreign policy, which together formed

the core business of her term as Prime Minister. Of course, her policy was and still is highly controversial, especially on socio-economic issues. But after 2000, in contrast with the negative historiography of the 1990s, leading historians in this field started taking a more positive view, especially with regard to her foreign policy. Probably the time distance has worked to her advantage, assisted by the popularity of the Blair government in the beginning of 2000. The social democrat Tony Blair did not hide the fact that he greatly admired Thatcher's government and the legacy she left.³ Besides this, research on the elections she won in 1983 and 1987 indicates that most people voted Conservative on the basis of policy rather than personality. It appears therefore that her policy was popular with a large part of the public as well. (King)

21 A woman who thought and acted like Margaret Thatcher could not immediately be expected to show "feminist" solidarity by promoting the careers of other women. In spite of this she opened the doors for other women, however unintentionally. The historian Martin Pugh points out that Margaret Thatcher functioned as a role model. Through her political achievements she put a definitive end to the widely held view that women could not be skilled politicians. In the Britain of the 1990s a number of women were appointed to high positions, amongst others in the sphere of justice, the House of Commons and in publishing houses, profiting from Thatcher's shattering of the "glass ceiling." (Pugh 336,337; Pilcher 498,499) And if we look further afield, we find that women in the West acquired more political influence than ever in the latter part of the twentieth century. In the 1990s almost 30 percent of cabinet ministers were female in ten important European nations. (Henig and Henig 57) Although still far from being equal, this proportion was higher than ever. The development of the welfare state, better educational opportunities and new social movements such as second-wave feminism in the 1970s and 1980s prompted a rise in the number of female politicians and challenged the notion of female incompetence. But it is also very likely that a direct line runs from these developments to the performance of pioneers in political leadership like Thatcher and Brundtland.

Husband and Family

22 Carol Thatcher wrote two personal accounts, a biography of her father, published in 1996 and her own memoir in 2008. These provide an interesting picture of the role that

³ The historians with an overall negative view on Thatcher's government were Rodney Lowe, Kenneth Morgan and Eric Evans. A more positive judgement came from Brenda Maddox, Peter Hennessy, Anthony Seldon and Daniel Collings and John Campbell. Strictly spoken Heather Nunn is not an historian, but her book draws heavily on historical sources; although written in 2005, one cannot say that her book gives a positive picture on the Thatcher government.

husband and family played in Margaret Thatcher's life and career and how they relate to the question of toughness and vulnerability. In another article I pointed to the way in which the positive image of her marriage and family played an important part in Thatcher's media presentation as a successful Prime Minister. (Ribberink 2005) Similarly, modern American presidents have good reason for devoting so much attention to the presentation of their family life in the media. (Knapen) In this respect one should also consider Thatcher's political background. Part of the New Right ideology – later to become known as Thatcherism – focused on family and personal life. The core of these ideas was to be found in the idealization of the traditional family, accompanied in the 1960s by a rejection of the rising youth revolution and permissive society with its characteristic loose morals. A happy full-time housewife and mother and a happy, harmonious childhood for the children completed the picture. According to Nunn, “consumerism”, the pursuit of material goods and prosperity, was an integral part of the Thatcherite ideal picture of the family. Such an ideal family earned these goods by itself and did not rely on state welfare (Nunn 104-123). Throughout her political career and her time as Prime Minister, Thatcher presented this traditional model as an ideal – although it was at odds with her own reality as a paid working mother – and realized it in part by modelling her own family on a “desirable conservative” pattern. In her own words:

The family is the building block of society. It is a nursery, a school, a hospital, a leisure centre, a place of refuge and a place of rest. It encompasses the whole of society. It fashions our beliefs. It is the preparation for the rest of our life. And women run it. (Quoted in Nunn 126)⁴

Carol Thatcher's books provide sharper insight than her mother's memoirs into the role the family really played despite the almost saintly depiction of her father in his later years, which is however, qualified by Carol's criticism of his absence during her own upbringing.

23 In an article of 1990, the Dutch anthropologist Anton Blok states that in the past important female political leaders could only survive as leaders if they were free from male tutelage. They either had to be unmarried or widowed, or they had to be symbolically unmarried, i.e. their husbands played a secondary role. Inverting traditional gender roles the female leader had to develop into an „honorary man“, while her partner possibly played „the woman“. Blok pointed to Margaret and Denis Thatcher as perfect examples. But a distinction must be drawn between the period before and after Denis's retirement in 1975. You could say that Denis supported Margaret during their marriage, but before he retired his support was more passive, albeit loyal. His demanding job as an important business man made him a

⁴ Quoted from Thatcher's speech to the national conference of Conservative women in 1988.

mostly absent husband and father. His support was mostly financial, which was certainly important, because it made things a lot easier for Margaret. They both had a life and career in separate spheres, as was common in those days: „He had long ago perfected the art of compartmentalizing his life and never permitted his wife’s political activities to interfere with his own duties and interests...” (Carol Thatcher 1996, 4, 8, 76, chapter 3 and 4).

24 To understand Margaret Thatcher, it is necessary to bear in mind that politics and life as a politician came first, even superseding her family. She married Denis because it suited her political ambitions. After four difficult years as Prime Minister she said to her daughter in 1983: “I’ve had the best four years in one’s life.” And: “...it is the job I most wanted to do in the world...”, (Carol Thatcher 1996, 204; 2008, 102, 103). This does not mean she did not love her husband. Reading her memoirs and her daughter's books, one can conclude she loved her husband and children deeply. However, Carol makes it clear in her biography of her father that not only her father but both her parents were very much absent when she and her brother were little. Much of the upbringing was left to nannies and boarding schools. Of course, boarding schools are part and parcel of the British tradition, but questions can be asked about the decision to send children to them. Denis had disliked boarding school in his youth. Besides, the children were very young when they were sent away. Mark was eight and Carol was nine. Carol writes: “We were together as a family only at half-terms, summer holidays, Easter and at Christmas.” (Carol Thatcher 1996, 30, 85)

25 Nonetheless Margaret Thatcher had to cope with a double burden. As customary in the 1950s and 1960s, the mother was responsible for the household and the children. Margaret had to organise family life, with her husband so often away on business. What is more, Denis needed a lot of time for his hobbies, rugby and golf. And although the children did not see much of their parents, this does not mean that Margaret took no interest. From the accounts of her daughter it appears that she took her family very seriously in her own way: she knitted for the children, baked cakes for birthday parties, wallpapered their rooms herself, went to parent-teacher meetings and so on. Until the twins were five years old, Margaret was not particularly active in politics – she studied law during these years. (Carol Thatcher 1996, 71, 72, 86, 87; 2008, 17, 30, 31)

26 There would be little point in condemning Margaret Thatcher for the way that she tried to combine her duties as a mother with a political career. Not only were there few female MPs in the 1950s and 60s, in the United Kingdom as elsewhere in the Western world; but a large number of these women remained unmarried or only began a political career in later life when family obligations receded in importance. For most of them, the combination of parliamentary

work and raising children was simply too difficult. (Linders; Ribberink 1998) In this respect Thatcher was one of the exceptions, but she was in part able to take this position because she received support from other quarters.

27 One can, however, ask why Margaret Thatcher did not admit how difficult this combination of work and private life must have been for her, even though she had help from others. It is not enough to say that she preferred to avoid the subject because it was a sensitive one in right-wing conservative circles. An explanation can also be found in the importance she attached to a positive presentation of herself in the media. A toiling housewife and mother seemed less reliable and “perfect” as a political leader than someone who gave the impression that it was easy to juggle the demands of work inside and outside the home: better to be a “superwoman” than a household drudge. Carol Thatcher had good reason for using the description “superwoman” for her mother, and she writes: "Somehow she juggled working, studying, organizing the household, shopping, cooking, sewing, ironing and liaising with nanny." (Carol Thatcher 1996, 71)

28 It is striking how affectionately Carol writes about these things and how she bears her mother very little rancour for her youth. This is especially noticeable in her latest book, published in 2008, where her loyalty to her mother stands out. Indeed, this book looks like an answer to John Campbell’s rather critical biography of Margaret Thatcher, which she mentions in her bibliography. The following paragraph is most revealing about Carol Thatcher’s vision of her upbringing:

I was brought up to see home life as a base or launch pad for everything you did in the outside world. I didn’t always understand this as a child. I remember finding my mother in the kitchen one day making Scotch pancakes and I said: “Why can’t you be at home more? All my school friends’ mothers are around. Why can’t you be more like them?” She stopped making the pancakes. “Darling, you have to understand that you have a lot of benefits that other children don’t have: you can come to the Opening of Parliament and have supper at the House of Commons. You can go on overseas holidays.” She was quite right, of course, although it wasn’t until I was older and wiser that I realized it.” (Carol Thatcher 1996, 86, 87)

It is quite clear, especially from Carol Thatcher’s writings, that the family bond was strong when the twins were grown up. Denis and Margaret did not need to devote a lot of time to upbringing anymore – which neither of them wanted – and their children apparently appreciated their life of affluence with a famous mother.

29 The second period in the marriage of Margaret and Denis is a different story. Shortly after Margaret Thatcher became Leader of the Opposition on 11 February 1975, Denis retired, having turned sixty in June. This turned out to be very lucky for her. The available material suggests that he was indeed the ideal male consort, a role that he had to invent all by himself,

because there was no model available. Thatcher's three predecessors as female leaders of a nation were all widowed when they came to office.<fn>The predecessors were Sirimavo Bandaranaike (Ceylon and Sri Lanka; 1960-1965,1970-1977,1994-2000), Indira Gandhi (India, 1966-1970,1980-1984) and Golda Meir (Israel, 1969-1974).</fn> Denis helped and supported her wherever he could without claiming the limelight. On the contrary, naturally a shy man, he preferred to stay in the background, not least because he thought this better for his wife's sake. He did not interfere in political affairs. Many times he saved her from mistakes and from responding too emotionally and too hastily. Though she often followed his advice, she took crucial decisions alone. In the biography of her father Carol mentions that her mother alone took the decision to stand for the leadership of the Conservative Party: "Margaret's decision to stand had shocked him." But his typical reaction was: "Of course, I told her I'd support her all the way – that's what marriage is all about."(Carol Thatcher 1996, 2-4, 153) From different sources it can be concluded that he was the stable, calm factor in her life and career.

30 However, it is intriguing that in both her books (biography of her father in 1996 and her memoir in 2008) Carol Thatcher gives the impression that without the support of her husband Margaret Thatcher would have been a less competent politician and PM. This could lead to the conclusion that women cannot perform well in politics without male support, but there is no proof of that. On the contrary, Margaret Thatcher was a very good politician whatever you may think of her policies, and she would have probably performed just as well without the support of Denis. She would have found what she needed elsewhere. But it still stands that Denis's support was deeply important. Some examples from Carol Thatcher's biography of her father are quoted below. Quoting Gordon Reece:

He was wonderful with her and she was wonderful with him. People mustn't underestimate that she had loyalty to him; many think that it was his loyalty to her that mattered, but it was her loyalty to him that was even more important because she knew that he was the commonsense point of view. That's what Denis has always been.

Regarding Margaret's term as Prime Minister Carol writes about her father:

With his dry sense of humour and slow smile, he had the knack of defusing a panic. "Come off it, Love", he'd say when she was in the middle of a tantrum, "let's get relaxed," and offer her a drink. Sometimes when a crisis was brewing, someone from the Private Office would give Denis prior warning so that he could batten down the hatches before the storm arrived."

The admiration was mutual. Carol quotes her father, who was proud of being married to "one of the greatest women the world has ever produced."(Carol Thatcher 1996, 113, 153, 290)

31 Denis was a mainstay for Margaret in her struggle to hold her own as a politician and as PM. But he was not indispensable. Margaret Thatcher was too strong and too competent a politician for that despite her vulnerability along the lines of class and gender. Her lower-middle-class origins contributed to her vulnerability in a political party that was famous for its aristocratic and upper class traditions. But she was not unique in this respect: her predecessor Ted Heath also came from relatively humble origins but he had less difficulty being accepted by the Tories than she. It is difficult to prove this gender-related vulnerability, because Margaret Thatcher did everything to hide it. But the way that she tried to maintain her perfect political image can be explained by her strong awareness that she, as the first woman Prime Minister, was in great danger of being shot down. Invisibility through perfection and toughness were the answers. She shared this role and position with other pioneer political women, particularly Gro Harlem Brundtland. It can be argued, however, that Thatcher was the most outspoken. This might be explained by the fact that her role as PM was more significant than that of any other female politician of her time, due to the powerful international status of the United Kingdom.

32 Many people hated Thatcher's "toughness". The label "iron lady" was well-earned. She did nothing to improve things when, as an old lady in the late 1990s, she poured oil on the flames of a public debate by calling the former Chilean dictator Pinochet an "excellent democrat" and "friend of Britain", because he had lent a helping hand during the Falklands War.⁵ But no one can deny that she made a huge imprint as political leader, who mastered the vulnerability of her position as a woman, albeit in a controversial manner.

⁵ NRC Handelsblad, 22 October 1999 and March 2000; Also see „Thatcher stands by Pinochet“, BBC News, 26 March 1999 (downloaded 16 August 2010).

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Undoing gender revisited: Judith Butler's parody and the avant-garde tradition

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Abstract:

The considerations outlined in this text are motivated by two interrelated phenomena: the passionate use that contemporary political movements such as the alter-globalisation movement or the queer movement make of aesthetic tactics such as parody, irony or alienation and the similarities and manifold relations that exist between this political practice and the feminist theory that has developed since the late 1980s.

1 The considerations outlined in this text are motivated by two interrelated phenomena: the passionate use that contemporary political movements such as the alter-globalisation movement or the queer movement make of aesthetic tactics such as parody, irony or alienation and the similarities and manifold relations that exist between this political practice and the feminist theory that has developed since the late 1980s. The writings of Judith Butler, in particular, have been widely received in the areas of critical theory and political practice. In her first internationally recognised book, *Gender Trouble*, she presented a strategy for the “subversion” of gender norms, which also became an important reference point for the formation of *queer theory*. Butler claimed parody and travesty were a “strategy of subversive repetition”, via which usual forms of gender appearance can be interrupted and so to speak revealed (Butler, 1990: 107ff.). This thesis was also adopted more recently in particular by parts of the alter-globalisation movement. Influential theoreticians of this movement, such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, refer specifically to Butler when outlining a “performative collective project of rebellion” of the multitude that is carnivalesque and “queer” (Hardt/ Negri 2004: 200).

2 The writings of Judith Butler as well as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri define important transformations of contemporary political mobilisation by highlighting two tendencies: On the one hand, political collective bodies today are emerging more and more in a contingent way outside classical “modern” institutions such as parties, associations, trade unions or clubs, they are sometimes short-lived, overlap with one another to some degree and usually unite people in a more temporary way. Thus each individual is able to participate in various collective bodies at the same time and is inclined to change affiliations more quickly and more often. On the other hand, lifestyle, i.e. a refined exhibition of differences in dressing-up, self-performance, inhabiting space and referring to aesthetic traditions has become more important for the fabrication of connectivity. In addition, discursive figures

such as “the people”, “workers” or “women”, which were formerly used so widely and in a universal way to address all of us, are now being called into question.

3 These changes in the contemporary political arena are read by Butler and Hardt/ Negri in an affirmative way, despite all the various alterations they propose. Connected to this, political “subversion” is almost euphorically asserted and celebrated. Political subversion is closely linked to the use of certain aesthetic tactics, which in this way become isolated and univocally judged as a means of undermining hegemonic politics. This way, the participation of these aesthetic tactics in generating “dominant” or “hegemonic” culture is overlooked. In this paper, the pattern of argumentation and acting passed on in these theoretical inputs and their adoption in contemporary political practice is examined in the form of a critical genealogy, with the focus being on feminist theory since the late 1970s and its reception in the contemporary activist scene. The goal is to more accurately understand these transformations in the contemporary political arena by taking into account the various effects of aesthetic tactics rather than just the politically undermining side of them and by examining the political consequences of such a schematic way of judging the aesthetic means.¹

4 The paper is organised as follows: As a methodological starting point in the opening chapter I outline aesthetic tactics as calculated though constitutively incalculable interventions into an interplay of a variety of lived, demonstrative and ideal bodies. Then I present Butler’s debut thesis on parody, compare it to Irigaray’s concept of mimicry and, in the following section, investigate how this thesis deals with the triad of lived-demonstrative-ideal bodies described at the outset of this text. Finally, I confront this with revisions Butler formulated in respect to parody and subversion in her later work and ask why these revisions did not assert themselves with regard to her debut thesis. In closing, Butler’s thesis of parody as subversive repetition as well as Irigaray’s concept of mimicry are discussed as being anchored in a shared process of the invention of an “avant-garde tradition”, which is interrogated with regard to its politically stimulating characteristics as well as its de-politicising effects.

Methodological starting-point: Interventions and the body as an existence-site

5 I have chosen an approach that makes the body into a starting point for such a genealogy – here I explicitly refrain from referring to the extensive “body debate”, especially in the German-speaking world, triggered by Judith Butler’s early writings (see Distelhorst 2007: 36ff. and 50ff.). When I speak about the body, I am not referring to a definitively fixed

¹ The text before you is based on the results of the research project “Picturing gender”, which I am currently conducting at the Philosophy Department at Verona University. This project received funding from the EU, Seventh Framework Programme, Marie Curie Actions, Grant Agreement No. PIEF-GA-2009-234990.

and thing-like entity, but to the body as an existence-site (Nancy 2000: 16). There are various bodies that are simultaneously present when we speak about “the body” – we can identify a triad of lived, demonstrative and ideal bodies: for instance there is one’s own, lived body that asserts itself by way of its often ungraspable extensions and insistent sensations. Then there are the perceived bodies of others, which can become demonstrative bodies of, for example, advertising or educational discourses or in the training situations we encounter in institutions such as the school, the military or the hospital. And there are the ideal bodies populating our imagination (Schober 2003: 70f., see also: Foster 1992: 482). We usually deal with several of these bodies, even when handling our “own body”, whereby this “own body” also appears to us as a perpetually different body – sometimes as imperfect, heavy, awkward and in need of perfection, care or “tailoring”; at other times, however, as desirable, beautiful, stately, full of energy, one that draws the gaze of others. The bodies of others, which we encounter in the workplace, on the streets or in the media, however, are for us the actually describable and orientation-delivering bodies – analogous to dancers at a ballet school, they can become “demonstrative bodies”. It is by watching them, that we learn how to move, to dress up, to flirt or to judge.

6 The exchange with others, however, also has consequences on how we ourselves are perceived. Because only by entering into an exchange with others, can we, in such a relatedness, be perceived and experienced as “one”, whereas when we are alone, we “dissolve” into various bodily sensations and psychic persons (Arendt 1971: 198).² Hence only in an exchange with others, are we able to show “who” we are, as distinct from a “what” – i.e. we can leave bureaucratic allocations such as gender, age, nationality behind and bring actions, judgements and viewpoints (Arendt 1971: 198) to the fore. Furthermore, part of this superimposition of sensations, imaginations, projection and images, which situates us in a bodily way, consists of “ideal bodies”. Usually – like the bodies ballet dancers in front of the mirror project for themselves into the future or which populate their fantasies – they feature everything lacking in our own hard-to-grasp and often in everyday life insufficient bodies.

7 Political power emerges anew in an exchange or struggle between a plurality of these bodies. Hence political power is not “something” that is given to some of these bodies once and for all – for example the “demonstrative bodies” of educational discourses, as some would assume. It cannot be forced by some bodies onto other bodies, but arises in an always up-to-date form via a process of exchange and struggle in which identification, rejection,

² For Arendt, this “dissolution” of the self that occurs when we are alone is also the condition for a “thinking conversation” that constitutes ourselves (Arendt 1971: 198f.).

projection, seduction and fascination or disgust are just as much involved as denominating, “knowing” allocation and training.

8 This, however, does not mean that all bodies participating in the formation of political power enter these struggles with the same amount of self-assertion. Some demonstrative bodies, for example those brought into play by institutions such as the church, the school or the educational system in general, the military or medical care, also incorporate the authority and the cultural capital of these institutions – a weight these bodies bring into these struggles. But the demonstrative bodies brought into play by political grassroots movements or oppositional groups often command a particular seductive force too, which results from the rejection of convention and the norms inherent in these bodies and from their dealing with a “something” that is felt to be lacking in the present environment.

9 No public action by either official institutions or political grassroots movements, therefore, ever intervenes in an initially empty, transparent or manageable space but in one that is always already populated by various perceived, demonstrative and ideal bodies and the identifications, desires and disavowals connected with and circulated between them. Aesthetic tactics of parody or alienation, on which there is so much emphasis in contemporary political practice, can be understood as encroachments in such an interplay of bodies, which also means that they interact with what is already present in an always unforeseeable and often surprising way.

Subversive body acts and mimicry

10 The aforementioned tradition of judging certain aesthetic tactics, such as parody, as being “subversive” has been expressed in particularly cogent terms in one of the theses developed by Judith Butler in her early writings, especially in *Gender Trouble*. Even if Butler herself soon started to put this thesis of parody as subversive repetition into perspective and to replace it at some points with a more cautious formulation (Butler 1997 and Butler 1998), it has been this debut thesis, in contrast to her later writings, that has remained outstandingly influential (see also Distelhorst 2007: 36ff), especially for contemporary political movements such as the queer or the alter-globalisation movements. This particular reception history is the reason for presenting the following critical discussion of this thesis and the particular relations between bodies that are solicited in it.

11 In *Gender Trouble* Butler presented a critical examination of the political practice of the feminist movements of her generation, in particular of their use of “women” as a collective subject of emancipation, and confronted this with seemingly novel political tactics

of “subversive repetition” (Butler 1990: 44). Her reasoning was: If bodily surfaces can in a “natural” way be made to appear as “male” and “female” – something the women’s movements are inherently involved in – there is also the possibility of using them for a de-naturalising, dissonant performance. There are forms of staging the body, so Butler, that can show that “gender” is usually produced in a performative way and can lead to a questioning of current forms of appearance. As a central aesthetic means for such a practice she chooses the form of parody: Via a parody of masculinity and femininity, according to Butler, gender binarity can be weakened and a multiplication of the sexes may be achieved (Butler 1990: 171f.).

12 Hence Butler starts with the assumption that the “naturalness” of gender is an effect that results from the steady repetition of ritual practices. From this she deduces that when we re-enact our performances of the self in another, parodic way, we interrupt this repetition and make a statement that she regards as one that destabilises the current order and can, because of this, be called “subversive” (Butler 1990: 107ff.).

13 Parody is an aesthetic tactic that participates in everyday processes and in which one utterance, i.e. a sentence, a performative act or an image insinuates another one with the intention of disfiguring it (see Dentith 2000: 6). By presenting her thesis of parody as subversive repetition, Butler, however, transforms the potential of parody to create attention and challenge the given into the certainty of a politically “subversive” position. She interprets parody not as an intervention that can give rise to various effects but equates it with “subversion” and with a feminist, deconstructive position. In doing so Butler disregards the fact that parody, if it is actually identified as such by the viewers or listeners, can also control and police what is legitimate to express in a certain situation – by mocking statements and innovations made by others – or that parody can induce some of the receivers to hectically reinstate the contested categories. At the same time, she also fails to take into account the fact that parody paradoxically also preserves the image it tries to disfigure and this way keeps the possible points of involvement for actual and potential viewers and listeners wide open. Furthermore, she also neglects dealing with the fact that even if parody leads to an interruption of the usual flow of meaning and of ruling certainties, such an interruption is still translated in a multifaceted way into the conceptual tracks of everyday communication.³

14 In formulating this thesis, Butler takes up what was already a pre-existing figure of argumentation even in the feminist field before 1990, failing, however, to negotiate it

³ For more on the genealogy of parody and irony and in particular on the political use modern emancipation movements since the French Revolution have made of these aesthetic tactics as well as on the various effects of parody and irony and the multiple ways of negotiating it in further detail see Schober 2009/4: 15ff.

explicitly in relation to the aesthetic tactic of parody. One of the theoreticians constituting this field was Luce Irigaray, who at the end of the 1970s presented a concept of “mimicry” (Irigaray 1985: 68f.) that very closely resembled Butler’s parody as “subversive repetition”. Irigaray, too, introduced mimicry as an emancipatory tactic suited to dealing with the exclusion of the female in the “economy of the same” (Irigaray 1985: 66ff.) as she calls patriarchal power regimes. The reason for this, she says, is that historically two modalities of speech were granted to the female – silence and mimicry; and even if, as she further shows, there is no “outside” from which such attributions could be questioned, there is still the possibility of inhabiting them differently and transforming them in this way. According to Irigaray, one can actively carry out mimicry in order to extract something different from ruling discourses, i.e. one can “play mimicry” in order to “make ‘visible’, by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language” (Irigaray 1985: 68).

15 The parallels are obvious: Both Butler and Irigaray call for the use of repetition in order to “reveal” or “unveil” something that is otherwise invisible – the constructed nature of gender identity (Butler) or the possible operation of the feminine submerged in the “economy of the one” (Irigaray). Butler distinguishes herself from Irigaray insofar as she categorically refuses to enquire about something like the “truth” or “authenticity” of the female or the masculine, and in contrast uses a genealogical critique in the effort to trace the ways in which “gender tales” are established and circulate (Butler 1990: xxxiv). To her – as she argues in discussing Irigaray’s approach in *Gender Trouble* – ideas such as the “possible operation of the female in language” indicate “totalizing gestures”, which feminists tend to oppose to what they see as a “masculinist signifying economy” (Butler 1990: 18).

16 In *This sex that is not one* Irigaray operates with two notions of difference.⁴ In contrast to Derrida’s understanding of difference, which denies any figure of origin, the one coined by Irigaray relies on a primal duality: in the order of the One, i.e. the phallogocentric discourse, the female, as excluded, sustains the functioning of discourse – here there is difference, but not genuine difference insofar as it is only “the other of the same”. However, in this order there is also a “beyond” that cannot be subsumed and which stands for the contingent par excellence. Irigaray refuses to define this “beyond”. At the same time though, she metaphorically states that the basis for this is the “sexual organ that is not one” (Irigaray 1985: 26). In relation to

⁴ In *Bodies that Matter* Butler tends to obliterate this difference in some places – something that Irigaray’s writing invites to some extent since it playfully re-inhabits notions, metaphors and images connected with the feminine. For instance, when reading Irigaray, Butler, without hesitation, equates in some places “the female” instead of “the contingent” with that which lies outside phallogocentric order. This leads her then to the critique that in Irigaray’s writing the female would monopolise the sphere of the excluded (see Butler 1993: 48).

this she uses the image of two touching lips, and in this way, parallel to Jacques Lacan's concepts but developing them in another direction, she constructs a theory of an alternative "sensible transcendental" in favour of symbolic change rather than explicit emancipatory activism.⁵

17 In both *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* Butler deals extensively with Irigaray's writings and criticises her, especially in her first book, sometimes vehemently (Butler 1990: 18). Nevertheless, in her second book she takes a conceptual turn that is basically similar to Irigaray's, even if the contact-points for identification she offers are different. As already mentioned, Irigaray argues that a phallogocentric order induces an outside that is constitutive and stands for the contingent par excellence, for which she coins the metaphor "the sex that is not one". This appears in *Bodies that Matter* in a mirrored way when Butler points out that the constitution of a subject is always and constitutively accompanied by exclusion. Butler then passes over this exclusion, which is constitutively part of the formation of any identity, referring on the one hand to the notions of "repudiation" and "abjection" borrowed implicitly from Lacan (Butler 1993: 3 and 111) that designate a process in which the subject abandons unliveable potentialities (see also Distelhorst 2007: 118f.). But on the other hand she superposes this exclusion with the notions with which Michel Foucault investigates the ways in which norms define who and what counts as reality and as a viable subject, and who or what is "fundamentally unintelligible" (Butler 2004: 28 and 30). This brings Butler to the conception that the heterosexual hegemony produces homo-, trans- or intersexuals as "unthinkable, abject, unliveable bodies" (Butler, 1993: xi and 3). Butler criticises Irigaray for, as she sees it, equating the outside of phallogentric order with "the female".⁶ Nevertheless, her writing also mirrors that of Irigaray in *Bodies that Matter* when Butler relates this outside of phallogentric order to the lesbian and ultimately the homosexual (Butler 1993: 51). In this way, however, as Butler contends, a competition in the sphere of the excluded and abjected emerges between the "feminine" and the "homosexual", one that is tantamount to a competition between (heterosexual) "women" and "gays/lesbians". This becomes evident when Butler states "that the feminine monopolizes the sphere of the

⁵ This metaphor of self-speaking lips contributed strongly to turning Irigaray into one of the most controversial figures of feminism at the turn of the millennium – this metaphor was often ridiculed and in this way trivialised and devaluated. In psychoanalytic theory, however, it is common to operate using sexual metaphors. Lacan's phallus metaphor for instance is understood independently of its biological reference, the penis. (Whitford 1991: 142 and 183; Frei Gerlach 2004: 250).

⁶ This criticism is insofar not justified as Irigaray deals or rather "plays" with the fact that such an outside can only be grasped by re-inhabiting notions, metaphors and images taking part inside this order.

excluded” (Butler 1993: 48), an assumption she sets out to criticise.⁷ Such a bringing-into-competition also becomes evident when Butler critically discusses whether “gender” can be seen as a “code for homosexuality” (Butler 2004: 181) but then herself poses the question of whether “difference” could not be read as a “code for heterosexual normativity” (Butler 2004: 202).

18 Butler is very well aware that the “excluded” is a category that is constitutively produced by any order and that speaking about it or identifying it with certain groups of people is actually not possible and is not conceptually coherent. This, for example, becomes recognizable when she argues against a “theoretical gesture in which exclusions are simply affirmed as sad necessities of signification” (Butler 1993: 53). Or when she writes about the difficulties connected with “making the articulation of a subject-position into the political task”, since an increasing visibility of different identities would be accompanied by a multiplication of strategies of abjection and repudiation (Butler 1993: 112). Nevertheless, Butler in *Bodies that Matter* and in several subsequent texts does indeed take such a step, which can be interpreted only as a politically motivated step that is not, however, set out explicitly in the realm of the political but rather is smuggled in an untagged way into the analytical categories of how to explain the constitution of identity. Butler thus repeats – and shifts – what she initially accused Irigaray of, but also highlights other identification places and models. In this way Irigaray’s “phallogocentric order” becomes Butler’s “compulsory heterosexuality”, and the outside of phallogocentric order becomes first the unsymbolisable, the unspeakable, the illegible (Butler 1993: 190)⁸, and later the “derealised” (Butler 2004: 27) bodies of the heterosexual matrix.

The political and the trouble with representability

19 Butler’s conceptualisation of political power in relation to “gender” at the same time tries to evade any temptation to call for a “radical and inclusive representability” (Butler 1993: 53) at a political level since this would entail precisely the creation of a collective subject and the definition of a “positive” identity in search of emancipation of which she is so critical and which she sees first and foremost as being connected with the dangers of essentialism. As mentioned above, she then, as a kind of compromise, undertakes such a step

⁷ This way the debate still resides inside a paradigm that acts on the assumption that emancipation processes bring groups together united by certain characteristics, which makes those active in those groups “equals”, but also contends that this is incompatible with the actions of others who also aspire to emancipation but who to achieve that goal unite on a different basis (held together by different characteristics). This paradigm has been called “identity politics” (see Laclau 1996: 47ff.).

⁸ “The production of the unsymbolizable, the unspeakable, the illegible is also always a strategy of social abjection.” (Butler 1993: 190).

at another place – at the level of the analytical categories of how to explain subject constitution.

20 In order to understand this conceptual move that Butler undertakes, one needs to consider and discuss the fact that – based on Michel Foucault’s main works, one of the leading frameworks for her writings – it is very difficult to achieve a “positive” notion of the political or of resistance capable of guiding political action. Foucault investigates modern relations of power in a way that all notions remain at an analytical level and allow no normative conclusions. He is interested mainly in the processes of the production of “docile” bodies – for instance through modern, individualising, pastoral power. Thus he does not answer the question of what there is on the “subject side” besides self-insertion into the “individualising matrix” (Foucault 1983: 215) of confessional or pastoral power or where and in what way the smooth incorporation of individuals into subject positions, created discursively, might be interrupted. There is a perspective of disciplinary power as a monolithic machine and of the impossibility of resistance, which arises in view of Foucault’s main works (Hall 1996: 10ff.; Muhle 2008: 276ff.). And this perspective can then shift the search for the possibility of resistance onto an individual level. Butler exposes parody and drag as potential modes and sites of resistance and in doing so she refrains from further investigating how these aesthetic tactics participate in processes of a normalisation of “self-invention” which characterizes ruling hegemonic power relations too. Other readers of Foucault also take similar paths, for instance Michel de Certeau, who in *The Practice of Everyday Life* contrasts the strategies of institutions with “resistant tactics” of everyday life such as walking, dancing or dressing up (de Certeau 2002: 29ff.) and thus also overlooks mutual contaminations and articulations between these strategies and tactics.⁹

21 Ernesto Laclau formulated an answer to this desideratum of a “positive” notion of the political in Foucault’s reception by going back to Antonio Gramsci and by developing his notion of “hegemony”. In doing so he uses the term “political” for every public activity that calls into question restrictions on entering the stage of politics or other orders of things, proposes a different way of ordering the world and/or is able to expose something that actually appears as so far unachieved, desired and full of utopia. Laclau sees the sphere of politics in a narrow sense, composed of, for instance, parliament and parties, as being distinct from this larger public political sphere. At the same time, however, politics depends on voters and actions present in this sphere and is directed towards dealing with this challenging, loosely assembled terrain of the political (Laclau 1990: 68f.). In order to bypass the above-

⁹ In previous works I have shown that these “strategies” and “tactics” cannot be contrasted in as dichotomous a way as de Certeaus presents them, but are, instead, mutually contaminated (see Schober 2003: 70).

mentioned desideratum in the main works of Foucault, Butler in her approach accommodates at a certain point such a “positive” definition of the political via a reception of this theory of hegemony by Ernesto Laclau (and Chantal Mouffe) – however without revising her conception of “exclusion”, “repudiation” and “abjection” in connection with it and without pointing out how this can be combined with her scepticism in relation to political representability. And though just as abruptly as she started to include this strand of theory in her writings she also stopped pursuing it in her more recent works, the term “hegemony” continues to appear in her writings – albeit in a now not further defined way.

22 While Butler sees the sexes as both constructed in a way that reinforces heteronormativity without specifying the relation between them in more detail, Irigaray dwells on a fundamental asymmetry between them – “the woman” appears as the objectified “other” of the phallogocentric order – as well as the potential for a thus far unrealised “otherness”. (Soiland 2003: 161ff.) But beyond this, the differences asserted by Butler conceal the similarity in political tactics that both Butler and Irigaray postulate: both present certain kinds of repetition as an emancipatory political tactic that is able to “reveal” (Irigaray 1979: 78; Butler 1990: 200) and in the long run also overcome current ruling regimes in relation to sex and gender. At the same time both link this potentiality in choosing a “subversive” repetition instead of a usual one with a certain sovereignty on the part of the actors, which, however, they both appraised differently – something that in the reception of Butler’s texts made the question of “agency” so contentious.

23 In the early 1990s Butler’s *Gender Trouble* was received with a vehemence that led Sabine Hark to speak of a “discursive event” through which a new constellation of forces was established (Hark 2005: 271). By contrast, in such post-Butler readings Irigaray was often one-dimensionally charged with being an “essentialist” (for instance by Frey Steffen 2006: 63).

24 Butler’s performance thesis around 1990, however, was in itself caught in a net of equivalent argumentations: In the 1980s and 1990s a whole range of investigations coming from the newly established disciplines, such as cultural studies, cultural science, aesthetics or film theory, were similarly biased to *Gender Troubles* in describing aesthetic tactics such as irony, parody, montage or alienation as emancipatory ways of reading and as means by which various discriminated or marginalised groups could resist the dominating discourses (Schober 2009/4: 17ff.) In feminist theory, too, apart from Irigaray others also argued in a similar way. Donna Haraway for instance described irony as a “serious play”, as “a rhetorical strategy and a political method” capable of decentring and deconstructing patriarchal discourses (Haraway

1985: 65). In relation to such persistent staging of the political effectiveness of certain aesthetic tactics, Linda Hutcheon speaks of a “mainstream concept” of groups regarding themselves as oppositional (Hutcheon 1994, 30ff.).

A celebration of transgression and a new inequality of bodies

25 What forms of appearance of bodies and what relations between them are conceived in Butler’s thesis of parody as subversive repetition? In the formulation of this thesis Butler speaks of a new multiplication of configurations of gender identity through which the ruling gender binarity can be brought into disarray (Butler 1990: 171ff.). For her this connects with “subversive laughter”, caused by “the pastiche-effect of parodic practices in which the original, the authentic and the real are themselves constituted as effects.” (Butler 1990: 200)

26 Thus to her, confusion and laughter do not connect with the dominant, everyday situation comprised mainly of bodies that appear “natural” but with an aspect that stands out from everyday life through interruption and destabilisation caused by bodies that have become sites of “a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself.” (Butler 1990: 200)

27 Here Butler distinguishes between two kinds of bodies: the “natural” bodies of the majority, who are involved in a mere repetition of the status quo, and the bodies of a minority acting parodically, whose *mise en scène* “reveals” the illusion of gendered identity or deprives “the naturalizing narratives of compulsory heterosexuality of their central protagonists: ‘man’ and ‘woman’.” (Butler 1990: 200)

28 In this way, Butler presents a kind of celebration of transgression: On the one hand there is a majority of bodies imprisoned in illusion and repetition who only from the outside can be made to pause and reflect through parody. At the same time there are irony- and parody-practicing bodies that “uncover” illusion and “deprive” “current narrations of their central protagonists. These latter bodies seem to possess a knowledge that the bodies that make up the audience of such performances seem to lack.

29 At the same time Butler explicitly pursues an emancipatory project: she wants to “disrupt the foundations that cover over alternative cultural configurations of gender” (Butler 1990: 201), in this way creating the conditions for groups that have until now been seen as “deviant”, such as homo-, trans- or intersexuals, to be recognised in their struggle over the shape of past, present and future (Butler 1990: 105). Hence in Butler’s writing there is a discrepancy between the attempt to act as a stimulus for emancipation and the simultaneous operating with a new inequality of those involved.

30 By using notions such as “revealing”, “uncovering” or “subversion”, Butler repeatedly asserts a close, causal relation between a parodist intervention and a specific result on a political-ideological level. Even if she pauses at some point, stating that parody in itself is not subversive (Butler 1990: 189), she consistently stages the incorporated practice of parody in the direction of such a one-dimensional causality.

31 But what kind of bodies – and here I am referring to the triad of “perceived–demonstrative–ideal bodies” described at the beginning of this text – did Butler have in mind while formulating her thesis of parody as subversive repetition? From the viewpoint of the “naturalised” majority in her explanation in *Gender Trouble*, there are in the first place “demonstrative bodies” that use parody effectively to lead spectators to reflect on body *mise en scène*, gender, sex and societal power. The “perceived bodies” of this majority and the resulting possible self-experience as being imperfect and awkward or desirable and beautiful are missing, as are their dreams and wishes and the “ideal bodies” connected with this. From the viewpoint of a minority employing parody, however, the only mention is of their own energetic, almost omnipotent bodies, which seem to correspond to the ideal bodies of the imagination. Everything imperfect, painful¹⁰ or awkward in this perception of our “own” bodies seems to be overcome in this moment of employing parody. By contrast, the bodies of others are not described from this perspective as “demonstrative bodies”, or rather as demonstrative bodies only in a negative function, since they appear exclusively as bodies nourished by and caught up in illusion that have to be challenged and encouraged to reflect upon the situation they are in. In this way the audience for such parodic performances is portrayed as if it were caught in a kind of “false consciousness” but can be brought – via parody – to a revision of this false consciousness. Other demonstrative bodies, for instance those appearing via the media, other political grassroots movements or social reform programmes, that compete for attention with those using parody, do not appear here either.

32 Furthermore, if one takes the triad of perceived, demonstrative and ideal bodies as a starting point, it becomes apparent that every political-aesthetic intervention will always lead to various – including sexual and erotic – entanglements, attractions and repulsions between the various bodies populating the public sphere. The intention, so vehemently articulated in Butler's thesis, cannot control all the expressions inherent in an intervention as comprehensively as the author suggests (Derrida 1985. 307ff.).

¹⁰ Butler mentions psychic and bodily pain and vulnerability in her later works, especially in relation to what she calls the “de-realisation” of some bodies (Butler 2004: 27); she will rarely, however, mention it in relation to operative interventions into the gender of a person. If this is apparent as in the case of Brenda/ David, she articulates doubts about “who” is speaking: he or language, David or the “norms” as “the means by which he sees.” (Butler 2004: 70)

33 Moreover, with the formulation of this thesis, Butler, as Linda Zerilli, another critic, also shows, acts on the assumption that aesthetic language is a kind of “gender prison” from which every divergence would free us. (Zerilli 2005: 53f.). Relating to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Zerilli argues that divergence is always already part of our language and appearance, hence our dealing with unusual self-performances is considerably more flexible than Butler would permit. In the words of Ludwig Wittgenstein she contends that the actions we carry out as beings who are also sexually defined are governed by certainty and not by knowledge. Hence certainty is a doing, an acting, and not a knowing (Wittgenstein 1994: 150ff.), and this everyday, usual acting also might simply “swallow up” certain aberrations. According to Zerilli, this means if we encounter an action that is alienated aesthetically via parody or in any other way, we can pass it by without reacting, since our attention remains absorbed by the flow of everyday life, or noticing that we are dealing with “subculture” or “art”, we might switch to corresponding patterns of perception and acting. That we, in this way, are encouraged to practise a “critical” reading of the everyday is only one possibility – and, as Zerilli maintains, certainly not the most obvious one. But even if we do take this step, various forms of further negotiations of such an act are still possible. The use of aesthetic tactics such as parody is thus linked to uncertainty and unpredictability arising from the fact that the spectators are those perceiving parody or irony as such and will deal with it in infinitely different and often very creative ways.

Judith Butler and the avant-garde tradition

34 In her later work, Judith Butler implicitly deconstructs her thesis of parody as subversive repetition. Already in *Bodies That Matter* she points out that *drag* and travesty can “de-naturalise” as well as “re-idealise” gender norms (Butler 1993, 125ff.). In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997) she then proposes separating the power of speech from its meaning and presents an alternative view showing that even if language acts, this does not mean that it will directly or causally impact the receiver (Butler 1997: 105f.). Only a successful action, according to Butler now, “is one in which I do not only perform the act, but some set of effects follow from the fact that I perform it. To act linguistically is not necessarily to produce effects, and in this sense, a speech act is not always an efficacious act.” (Butler 1997: 17) While Butler in *Gender Trouble* repeatedly suggests a causality between the aesthetic tactic of parody and political subversion – and so gets caught in a means-end logic that obscures the various references of acting – in *Excitable Speech* she turns against such a causality. However – and this possibly is one of the reasons for the continuous influence of

her debut thesis – she does not deal with her previous thesis in relation to *drag* and travesty, but shifts the question into the legal realm. As an impulse for this re-formulation she mentions the repeated quoting of her former far-too-close connection of speech, norms and conduct in order to promote and to legitimise state intervention in practices of signification, for instance in relation to pornography – an intervention that Butler is firmly against, since she sees civil society as the only possible venue for various types of discussion of hate speech and of discriminating representations of the body. The closer the relation between speech and conduct, and the more obscured the difference between felicitous and infelicitous acts becomes, the more strongly state intervention in this respect is supported (Butler 1997: 23).

35 When she speaks in her later works about *drag* or travesty Butler indicates some shortcomings in her earlier approach to this – for instance when she says that she wrote this part of *Gender Trouble* “probably ... too quickly” (Butler 2004: 213) or that her writing was strongly influenced by her then identifications (Butler 2004: 213). However, she does not relate the conceptional revisions she arrived at in *Excitable Speech* continuously to her analysis of *drag*, and she tends to return to her first thesis and to re-affirm it, despite all revisions, which might be another reason for the lasting influence of her thesis of parody as subversive repetition.

36 Nevertheless, the main reason why the conceptual revision of Butler in respect to language acts was unable to assert itself against her initial thesis of parody as subversive repetition, which today still exerts widespread fascination in political activism, art and the discourses associated with them, does not lie in the writings themselves. Because at the moment of its appearance this thesis was already supported by a tradition that had been “invented” collectively in various milieus and in political practice as well as in cultural theory throughout the 20th century, and which can be called the “avant-garde tradition” or “tradition of the politically effective form” (Schober 2009/3: 27ff.).

37 In this tradition, several different artistic and political positions meet, such as Dadaism, Surrealism, neo-avant-garde groups in the 1960s and 1990s or the alter-globalisation movement as well as cultural-critical patterns of argumentation from film theory found in the British journal *Screen* up to and including some positions of today’s cultural studies or queer theory. Even when individual movements and standpoints react to very specific conditions and differ from each other often quite strongly, they have participated in such an “invention” (Hobsbawm 2005: 2f.) of a shared tradition through explicit reference, quotation, similarities, allusion, imitation or by certain especially pronounced reception histories.

38 In this tradition, too, the public is constantly presented as the ones who do not understand on their own and have to be disturbed, “awakened” or “illuminated” and not as those who do understand, love or become enthusiastic. Hence this tradition shows the same oscillation between an emancipatory orientation and the simultaneous establishment of new inequalities of the bodies involved as they appeared in Butler’s debut thesis on parody. At the same time, aesthetic procedures are likewise causally related to a de-legitimizing effect at a political level. (Schober 2009/3: 26ff.) In a nutshell, and in quoting one of Judith Butler’s (Butler 1997: 51) later arguments with which she negotiates the increase of the effectiveness of speech-acts through repetition, her advocating of parody as subversive repetition echoes the previous assumptions of all these other political and artistic actions and, in turn, these continue, until today, to enrich her then argumentation with authoritative force.

39 Luce Irigaray’s already-mentioned mimicry concept is also anchored in this tradition – i.e., despite all the differences highlighted especially by Butler, both hers and Irigaray’s approach reside in a shared process of invention. With the revisions in *Excitable Speech*, however, Butler comes in some way closer to Irigaray, who always emphasised the character of mimicry as a potentiality and the ambivalence connected with this – for instance by showing that mimicry is also involved in the “becoming woman” of the phallogocentric order, but that the playful “as if” also indicates an elsewhere of matter and of sensations that cannot always be subsumed (Irigaray 1985: 68).¹¹

40 There is thus an aspect of the unexpected and undisciplinable in our production of meaning and in particular in our use of parody. Parody has to be identified as such by the viewers or listeners, but even if it is identified, it still can be perceived as already mentioned in various ways. Parody, like irony to which it is related,¹² can have the effect of controlling and even policing what is expressed legitimately, it can lead to a hectic reinstating of the contested categories and, since it also preserves the image it tries to disfigure, it can also serve as a point of contact for other, even contrary, readings. Besides, even if parody leads to a disfiguring of meaning, such a dis-figuration still needs to be translated back into our dealing with everyday uncertainties, and the ways in which this is carried out are multiple too. This aspect of the unexpected and undisciplined in our production of meaning is also highlighted, for example, in Adriana Cavarero’s concept of “stealing” figures from the dominant imagery

¹¹ The sovereignty of acting is in Irigaray – as in the revised version of Butler and not in her previous one – strongly withdrawn: Acting cannot control the manifoldness of expressions it triggers, but is an initiative that depends on the continuation of others. On this notion of acting see Arendt 1989: 233f.

¹² Linda Hutcheon points out that irony and parody show a structural similarity: “Irony can be seen to operate on a microcosmic (semantic) level in the same way that parody does on a macrocosmic (textual) level, because parody too is a marking of difference, also by means of superimposition (this time, of textual rather than of semantic contexts).” See Hutcheon 2000, 54.

and relocating them (Cavarero 1996: 5ff.). This resonates Irigaray's understanding of mimicry. According to Cavarero any attempt at creating order consists also of leaks, tears and places of the symbolic and the imaginary that produce surprising, unintended meanings. (Cavarero/ Bertolino 2008: 134 and 147) Conversely, however, any attempt to put irony or parody into a concept disarms these aesthetic tactics since irony and parody are exactly what escapes every definition and what gets comprehensive speech into difficulties (de Man 1996: 163ff.).¹³

The ambivalence of being involved in tradition-building processes

41 This text has not been written in order to propose a clear-cut solution of how to deal with the tradition traced, in which Butler's thesis of parody as subversive repetition and the political activist adoptions it still triggers to this day are anchored too. However, in closing, one might maintain that this tradition has limited as well as stimulated and nourished political imagination. To begin with the latter: Butler's thesis has contributed to highlighting some spaces and forms of appearances where and through which political struggles are fought. For example, it draws attention to arenas of the public sphere, where entertainment and politics mingle and where something like "politainment" reigns, and highlights everyday gestures of our self-representation, such as dressing up, putting on makeup, moving, walking or dancing as sites for making politically challenging statements. Since the emergence of modern protest movements and especially since the students' movement and the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, clothing and the form of the staging of the self have played an important role in achieving public, political presence. Nevertheless, Butler's argumentation highlights the importance of this aesthetic dimension of public action even more, draws attention to the rising arenas of politainment and turns these into key phenomena for understanding contemporary political culture. The adaptations of her thesis of parody as subversive repetition in the visual arts and in popular culture were correspondingly insistent. It is here that very old myths – for instance in relation to hermaphroditism and androgyny as well as very recent practices of consumption and self-stylisation – are processed and often become entangled.

¹³ For example, irony is disarmed by reducing it to a practice or an artistic device that accentuates the aesthetic appeal of a thing or practice; or by assimilating it to a dialectics of the self as a reflexive structure; or by inserting ironic moments or ironic structures into a dialectics of history. The title of Kierkegaard's book, *The Concept of Irony*, must therefore be interpreted ironically – it mocks such scientific methods. See Kierkegaard 1992.

42 At the same time these tradition-building processes – and this perhaps is the more surprising feature – limit political imagination, even causing de-politicising effects. Why? On the one hand because they operate with the already-mentioned new hierarchisation of bodies and refer the audience back to a position where they do not understand the situation they are living in on their own and have to be “illuminated” – via aesthetic tactics such as parody.

43 The central de-politicising aspect, however, lies in the fact that the tradition-building process described above gets in the way of the second necessity of practice that consists in the capacity to deal with the unforeseen and the contingent (Hobsbawm 2005: 3; Schober 2009/4: 18.) This means that references, quotations and inherited concepts and judgements that we encounter in the course of this tradition-building process enable people to act and to find models and parameters for their deeds and in this way can fire their political and aesthetic imagination. But at the same time precisely the judgement patterns handed down by this process unconditionally ascribe a “subversive”, de-legitimising effect to parody and turn out to be an obstacle in dealing with political processes in a more flexible and farsighted way by taking the manifold contingent effects of one’s own actions into account. Thus it is the univocal judgement of parody as “subversive” that tends to de-politicise it. If one agrees with Hannah Arendt and defines “the political” as an action that can initiate something but depends on others who can on the one hand carry on what has been started but who, on the other, can also contest or ignore it (Arendt 1989: 233f.), one can refer to such rigid patterns of judging and of distinguishing between “subversion” and “affirmation” as “de-politicisation” – a “de-politicisation” that paradoxically emerges despite any attempt to politicise everyday deeds. Hence, by anticipating their results with notions of “subversion” or “reveiling”, the patterns of judgement handed down in this tradition decapitate precisely the processes of multi-voiced, plural further negation of what has been started. So, for instance, any proclamation of the thesis of parody as subversive repetition loses sight of the ways in which this thesis in itself shows equivalences to individualized and normalised processes of the finishing and re-invention of the self, which are also requested in several other places in society while usually being presented as mere histories of success, purged of all painful and problematic aspects. Besides, unintended relations to conceptions of the body as they can be found, for instance, in discourses dealing with reproduction technologies are also usually not negotiated.

44 Apart from this, through the fixation of Butler’s texts and their reception with regard to *drag* and travesty, all the other imaginations, inventions and transformations related to femininity, masculinity, “gender” and “difference” remain unconsidered and the contents as

well as the fascinations and disavowals connected with them remain undiscussed. This includes, for instance, not only the rise in the number of single households and the resulting need for each individual to develop and integrate capacities traditionally seen as “masculine” and “feminine” but also the dissolution of what was up to now known as “genealogy” (see Berkel 2006), which goes along with what is discussed as “patchwork-families”, new procedures of adoption and with reproduction technologies that include sperm- and egg-donors as well as surrogate mothers. And in the process, the force for involvement and projection that *drag*, tranvesticism and also so-called “shemales” exert as part of contemporary (erotic and sexual) culture in broad circles of society and their impacts on how “gender” is lived out, also remain overlooked.

45 However, by taking into account that there is such a simultaneous enrichment and impediment, one can keep the question open of how this tradition can and should be used and passed on in the future. In particular, the aspect of invention and imagination in political action (and artistic-political creation) steps to the fore in this way: for example, by focusing the discussion on the plurality of already-lived transformations and innovations in relation to “gender” and “difference” or by posing the question of how political imagination in relation to “gender” and “sexual difference” can leave rigid judgments and “frozen” discussion behind and take the line of more original paths.

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Gendered performances and norms in Chinese personal blogs

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on a study of identity-related performance in personal blogs. The study is based on an analysis of three A-list Chinese personal blogs (Muzi Mei's blog, Liumang Yan's blog, and Acosta's blog) selected from the top blog service providers in China between 2003 and 2006. A lifestyle mapping model composed of layers of social demographics, interests, activities, and opinions was employed in the data analysis. The analysis revealed that gender was a critical aspect of the performances in personal blogs. Their performances revolved around gendered social norms in terms of compliance, contention, negation, and recreation, even though the performances were diverse and heterogeneous. The study proposes that personal blogs have become an online space and medium for enacting gender and gendered performances.

Introduction

1 This paper analyses a study of gendered performance in personal blogs. The aim of the study is to understand the following aspects of performance in personal blogs: First, what is performed in personal blogs as related to gender? Second, in which way are their gendered performances enacted? Three Chinese A-list personal blogs (Muzi Mei's blog, Liumang Yan's blog, and Acosta's blog) were selected as cases and a lifestyle mapping model originally developed by Wei (2006) for marketing has been employed for the analysis. Personal blogs, as a sub-genre and the primary form of the blog ([Miller and Shepherd *Blogging as Social Action: A Genre Analysis of the Weblog*](#); [Miller and Shepherd "Questions for Genre Theory from the Blogosphere"](#)) can be regarded as instantiation of the blog. In many ways, personal blogs resemble ongoing diaries or commentaries produced by individuals. For personal blog authors, their blogs often are used not just for communicating but for reflecting and reconstructing their living experiences and emotions to seek ways of being, becoming, and belonging ([Thomas](#)). As Nardi et al. argue, the blog functions primarily as a form of personal expression. This is also a reason why micro-blogging such as Twitter that updates extremely detailed personal activities, feelings, emotions, and relations captures attention ([Wong](#); [Java et al.](#)). These kinds of personal blogs allow bloggers to share thoughts and feelings simultaneously with friends, family, and others.

2 In the article, A-list blogs refer to the most famous or popular blogs in a blog hosting portal or a blog service provider. They are not, however, synonymous with celebrity blogs as in other blog studies ([Trammell and Keshelashvili](#); [Keshelashvili](#)). A-list blogs are the blogs that are the most visited or linked to at the time of the data collection and are typical of personal blogs in one or several distinctive aspects. They can function as virtual spaces where various

parties such as bloggers and audiences congregate and interact, according to the long tail theory ([Anderson](#)). This is, however, not to suggest that non-A-list blogs are not significant and should be marginalized or neglected. Rather, each individual blog collaborates in shaping the virtual reality brought forth in the blogosphere ([Bruns and Jacobs](#)). Individualized experiences, feelings, and emotions are being transformed into and transforming human history. In the era of Web 2.0 ([a term coined by O'Reilly](#)), where user-generated content, interaction, and social participation are gaining prominence ([Davies and Merchant](#); [O'Reilly and Battelle](#)), the possibility that an individual blog will be noticed is greater than ever before.

3 In the following, I will first introduce some key features of blogs and personal blogs, and review the previous studies relating to the research questions of this study. This section will also include discussion of the connections between personal blogs and performances by referring to Judith Butler's ([Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'; Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity](#)) conception of performativity. The following section will provide an account of the three personal blogs; in particular, of their influence in the Chinese blogosphere and some of their characteristics. In the third section, I will describe the lifestyle mapping model used for analyzing the selected blogs. The section that follows will present the findings from the analysis as well as a discussion of the findings. The focus will be on the key features of lifestyle construction in the selected blogs, the forms of performative capital, and the ways in which gendered performances are related to social norms in personal blogs. In the conclusion, I will discuss how norms and gendered performances are signified as related to Butler's conception of performativity.

Blogs, personal blogs, and performances

4 The blog, also known as weblog, is a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so that the most recent post appears first ([Walker](#)). The blog is not a simple construct but rather a composite of multiplicities as a result of technological innovations and cultural and linguistic changes. In particular, blogs are locales where their owners can present themselves through multimodal semiotics resources such as written texts, emoticons, images, sounds, animations, and hyperlinks. The popularity of blogs depends largely on the performances of blogs rather than on technical add-ons such as tags, trackbacks, and links, and non-technical factors such as marketing promotions and blog service provider manipulation. What do blogs consist of and how do they essentially figure as role models in their reach to the wide websphere in that the majority of the audience may rely on contents or topics of interest for developing their social networks. They can either

do key word search in Google or Bing or get to know certain blogs through friends on other online locales, events, and channels such as emailing lists, discussion groups, forums, BBSs, and second life. A focus on the performance side of the blog, it seems, is a useful lens for understanding the emergence of the blogosphere.

5 Taking Butler's ([*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*](#); [*Butler Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*](#); [*Butler Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*](#)) conception of performativity as the theoretical underpinning, this study seeks to explain "how the subversion of power emerges within a dialectical relation between constraint and agency" ([Boucher 112-13](#)). It also tends to describe the culturally influenced character of identity. Identity is then generated through repeated citations of norms and their extensions. The starting point of Butler's argument is social constructivist in essence ([Boucher](#)). It rejects the essentialist conception of gender as a substantial difference expressing an underlying natural sexual (or biological) division. Gender is seen as being constructed through social rituals that are supported by institutional power. The implication is that gender is not the expression of a fixed entity but a naturalized social ritual of sexualities and therefore a repeated cultural performance ([Boucher](#); [Carver and Chambers](#); [Lloyd](#); [Jagger](#); [Thiem](#)).

6 Central to Butler's concept is iterability or repetition; that is, a performed action needs to repeat itself a number of times in order to be recognized as performance. Through iterability and re-iterability (Butler *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*) or recurrence (Lemke "Identity, Development, and Desire: Critical Questions"), a referent for particular identity categories is constructed both in the minds of speakers and in a large social discourse. As a key concept related to iterability, resignification further emphasizes that gender parody such as drag reveals that the original identity is in effect an imitation without origin. Gender, then, is not constative but performative. The binary division of gender identity is exposed as a fiction and a norm developing as convention over time. The drag queen's subversive repetition of gender norms displaces the hegemonic universality of heterosexuality, constituting a practical deconstruction of the politics of gender normalization. Resignification then helps subvert the derogatory connotation of drag and convert it into an affirmation of the norm and its constitutive exclusions (Butler *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*). The repetitive and de-contextualized character of performative utterances opens the possibility for the subversion of reigning gender norms through resignification; that is, the repetition of a signification in a new context.

7 A performative perspective approaches the processes through which multitudes of identifications are “authorized, legitimate and unmarked, and others are unauthorized, illegitimate, and marked” (Kulick 149), “undermining conscious attempts to produce and maintain subjective coherence and consistency” (Cameron and Kulick 139). Identifications as processes then view identities as always becoming and never finalized. To study identification is to study the processes by which the relational activities occur (Stone). How gendered norms are reified, rectified, or reversed through (re)iterability, resignification, and identification in a process of performing (Lloyd; Salih) is, then, central to Butler’s performative approach.

8 A Butlerian performativity perspective on personal blogs as performance helps avoid making essentialist divisions in identities such as membership and role (Cameron and Kulick; Coupland and Gwyn). It relates closely to the performative nature of personal blogs as a virtual presence and makes identification the focus. More importantly, with heteronormativity at issue, this performative perspective allows the study to explore how gendered norms are reified in personal blogs and how they are vested with power.

The three Chinese personal blogs

9 Three personal blogs were selected as the cases for this study. The first blog is Muzi Mei’s blog (muzimei muzimei) that was dubbed ‘the mother of Chinese blogs’ and the first de facto A-list personal blog in the Chinese blogosphere (Fang). Muzi Mei was the blogger’s Internet blog name. She was reported to be Li Li (lili) in real life, working as a journalist for a metropolitan magazine in Guangzhou. In mid 2003, Muzi Mei published a number of entries on her blog (Muzi Mei De Boke) describing her sexual encounters with a number of male celebrities. In only a few days, her entries had captured enormous public attention and visits to her blog surged. Blog China (Boke zhongguo at www.bokee.com), the BSP that hosted her blog, broke down as the unprecedented traffic triggered by Muzi Mei’s blog had topped its designed volume. As her blog was visited and continuously reported, Muzi Mei’s popularity shot up and the new technology she was using for her writing was soon recognized by Chinese Internet users. Boke, a Chinese term for the blog, gained instant media currency both online and offline. Muzi Mei was then nicknamed ‘the mother of Chinese blogs’ (zhongguo boke zhimu) on many occasions in acknowledgement of her influence upon Chinese blogs (Fang).

10 The second blog is Liumang Yan’s blog (liumang yan liumangyan) that describes life transitions of a ‘middle-aged’ woman who divorced her husband and migrated from the

countryside to the city to seek employment and ultimately a new life. Liumang (流氓) means hooligan, rascal, or rogue characters that have little respect for laws and rules. It used to be a gendered term in Chinese referring to male violators often associated with sexual harassment (predominantly of women) as shua liumang (耍流氓), a kind of male-initiated action and behavior which is often condemned by women in Chinese society. Unlike other female bloggers before her (e.g., Muzi Mei, Zhuying Qingtong, and Sister Lotus), Liumang Yan did not acquire her publicity or ‘notoriety’ in the Chinese blogosphere as an Internet newbie; she was rather an experienced Internet user or veteran (daxia 大侠).

11 Under her assumed net name or ID (*wangming* 网名) Yuyan Danfen, which literally means *a swift flies alone*, Liumang Yan actively and extensively participated in discussions at Tianya (literally meaning ‘the corner of the world’) BBS (Bulletin Board System), one of the earliest and most influential BBSs in the Chinese Internet. However, her vigorous contribution did not disseminate her name beyond the local virtual communities at Tianya. In April 2004, she altered her net name to Liumang Yan and started blogging on Tianya’s newly launched blogging service as a registered user. On 23 March 2005, Liumang Yan uploaded two of her nude photos exhibiting her so-called ‘old woman’s body’ (*lao nüren de shenti*). In just a few hours’ time, her blog was inundated with a large number of visits and comments, which temporarily paralyzed the BSP hosting her blog. Reports, comments, and criticisms of Liumang Yan’s blog from newspapers and tabloids were searched on major web searching engines such as Baidu (www.baidu.com), Google China (*Guge* www.google.com.cn), and Yahoo China (*Yahu* at www.yahoo.com.cn). In just a few days, Liumang Yan’s blog reached celebrity status in the Chinese blogosphere. She was listed as a representative of Chinese women online who use their body as a tool and a place for publicity (*shenti chaozuo*) and named one of the top ten ‘shameless Chinese women’ of the year 2005 together with *Furong Jiejie* (sister lotus) and other Internet notorieties and celebrities. As a result of the sensation her blog had triggered, ‘the phenomenon of Liumang Yan’ became a nominee of the top 10 Chinese Internet Events on Xinlang Web Portal in 2005 (*2005 zhongguo hulianwang shida xianxiang*).

12 The third blog is Acosta’s blog, a blog of a young man whose lifestyle is seen as iconic for young men of the emerging middle class in China and their pursuit of masculinity, which in Chinese can be rephrased as “manly demeanor” (*nanxing qizhi*) or “determined and decisive” (*yanggagn zhiqi*). Given that equivalent terms and concepts for masculinity are not available in Chinese, masculinity in this study is viewed as “being and becoming men”; that is, as a concept and processes that entails fluidity and changes in context (for detailed

discussion of this concept in Chinese context, please see the discussion section). The blog's Chinese name, Jidiyangguang (极地阳光; literally meaning *polar sunlight*), first appeared in March 2006 on Xinlang BSP. The blog was also widely known as Acosta, which is a Portuguese surname referring to people living by the sea. It is used as a part of the web address of the blog (<http://blog.sina.com.cn/acosta>). The name Acosta, as an interview on Chinese Business Morning View in 2006 (<http://ent.sina.com.cn/s/m/p/2006-07-10/10461152107.html>) revealed, had been used by the blogger for five or six years prior to his commencement of blogging. The appearance of Acosta's blog in the Chinese blogosphere was sensational. In just three months, between March and June 2006, Acosta's blog hit the Chinese blogosphere with 40 million visits. This number has continued to increase ever since. According to Xinlang BSP's A-list ranking at that time, Acosta's blog was the third most visited blog in China, marginally falling behind two celebrity blogs. One is Laoxu's blog authored by a super star (singing, acting, and directing) in show business and the other is Han Hai's blog whose author is known nationwide as a prodigious writer and a Formula 4 racer. Acosta was depicted, by contrast, as a common person who was only known by a handful of people before he started blogging. As a result, his blog was advocated as a victory by the grassroots over the elite and the powerful.

Personal blogs and lifestyle mapping

13 The majority of personal blogs concentrate on personal experiences, activities, opinions, interests, and attitudes ([Herring et al.](#)), which makes content a significant part in examining blogs' performance. Content is similar to what Lemke ("[Travels in Hypermodality](#)") terms presentational meanings. In Lemke's (*Textual Politics: Discourse and Social Dynamics*) conception, presentational meanings refer to the construction of how things are in the natural and social worlds by their explicit description as 'participant', 'process', 'relation' and 'circumstance' ([Halliday](#)), standing in particular semantic relation to one another across meaningful stretches of text, and from text to text. Lemke ("[Travels in Hypermodality](#)") argues that presentational meanings are those which present several state of affairs. People construe a state of affairs principally from the ideational content of texts, that is, what they say about process, relation, event, participant, and circumstance. As Kress and van Leeuwen ([1996](#)) argue, the same terms can be applied to images, recognizing what is shown or portrayed, whether figural or abstract.

14 In fact, those aspects of content can be viewed as elements that contribute to the imaging of a bloggers' lifestyle. Presentational meanings of personal blogs in this regard can

be directed at investigating different aspects of lifestyles on blogs. The fact that personal blogs function as lifestyle media suggests that content analysis of personal blogs should focus on lifestyle features. Therefore, instead of following a linguistic approach to examine the ideational functions of personal blogs, this component of the analysis examines four dimensions of lifestyle based on Wei's (1993) framework: 1) activities, 2) interests, 3) opinions, and 4) demographics. Relating blog content to lifestyle identification personal blog as identity construction is concerned with questions relating to one's being, becoming, behaving, and belonging. As Wei's lifestyle positioning originally was designed to investigate the market related to consumers and their consumption, this study repositions them to accommodate these characteristics of personal blogs. Figure 1 sums up the four dimensions of the adapted framework.

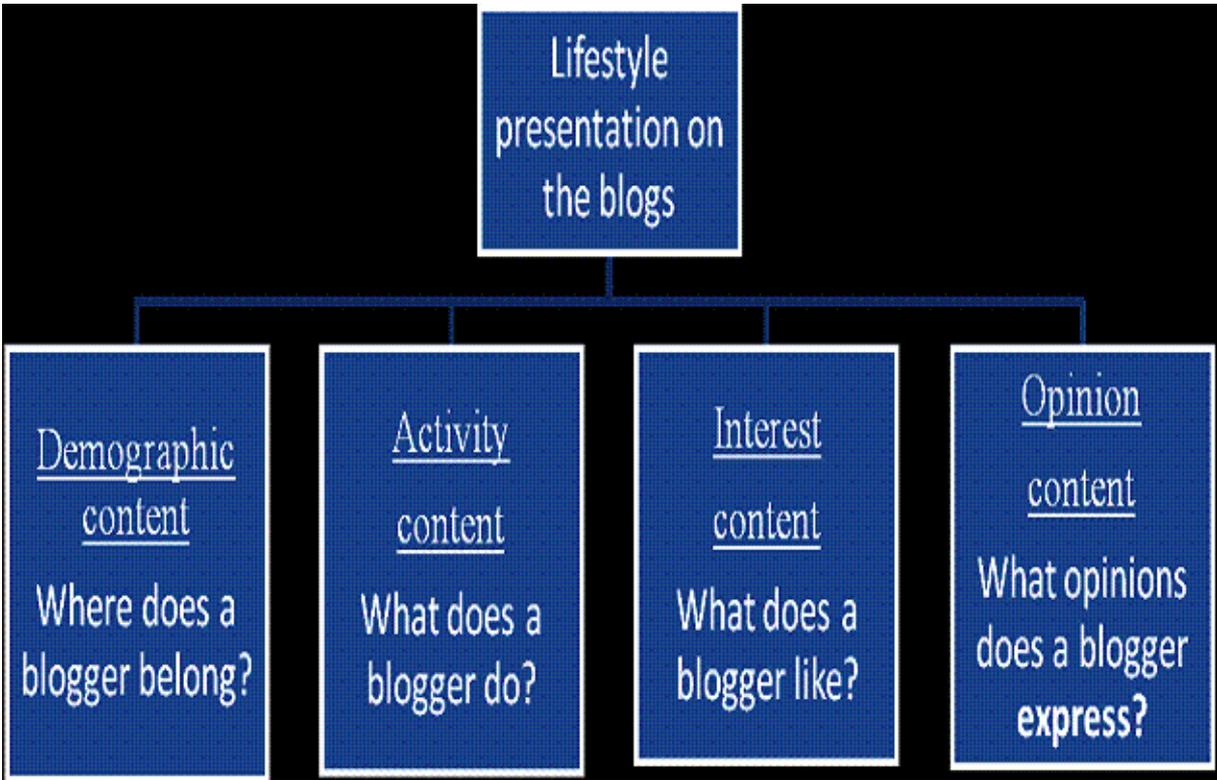


Fig. 1: Dimensions of lifestyle content

15 In this model, activity content focuses on activities that a blog may present about the blogger and others. The analysis focuses on deeds, experiences, and actions. Activities such as going shopping, participating in charity groups, or doing sports for leisure are all taken into account. Opinion content focuses on views and attitudes a blogger expresses regarding social, economic, political, and cultural issues, events, phenomena, institutions, and people. Interest content refers to the blogger's preference for particular phenomena, institutions, relations,

events, and people. Demographic content, which differs in definition from that used by Wei in her research, relates to spatial and institutional aspects that bloggers or other people were involved with or were affiliated with geographically, culturally, and institutionally. Where bloggers were born, raised, have worked, or have travelled helps construct and represent bloggers' course of being, becoming, and belonging, persistently contributing to their identification and position in the blogosphere.

16 Content analysis in terms of activity, interest, opinion, and demographic is undertaken at two levels, that is, the blogsite level and the blog entry level, both of which are related to each other. At the blogsite level, major themes are identified and discussed. Identifying the content themes at this level largely depends on observation since a blogsite is above all a visual composition. At the blog entry level, the content of all entries within the designated data collecting period are re-categorized in terms of activity, opinion, interest, and demographics. The entries are numbered and labeled with their names and the date of publishing. The content of each blog entry is read and categorized into related dimensions of personal lifestyles. Themes (such as sexuality, desire, alienation) that surfaced through the data analysis are identified and used to label the collected blog entries. It is argued that these dimensions of content in personal blogs are not just indicators of lifestyle patterns but are also an index of various identity-related performances.

Gendered performances relating to norms

17 The analysis revealed that performances in the three blogs were constructed through semiotic references associated with gender, each of which has its own idiosyncrasies. Table 1 summarizes the lifestyle features of the three personal blogs.

Table 1 Lifestyle mapping of the three personal blogs

	Muzi Mei	Liumang Yan	Acosta
Demographics	living in a southern metropolitan city; a school student; a college graduate; having extended families; a magazine journalist; an experience	a 'middle-aged' woman; a woman with extended families; a divorced single woman; a mother; a woman raised up in the countryside; a high school graduate in a rural area; a self taught writer; a private school	a Chinese young man; a Chinese metropolitan; a rich person; a middle-class member; a man with wide social connections and relations

	Internet user	teacher; a data entry worker in a small market company; an experienced Internet user; an active BBS participator; a women's rights activist; a migrant (from the countryside to the city and from the east of Mainland China to the southwest)	
Activities	blogging; Internet surfing; writing; partying; smoking; love making; reporting and editing; socializing; shopping; travelling	data entering; Internet surfing and flaming; socializing; writing	travelling; blogging; acting; reading; socializing; hanging out with friends; volunteering; photographing; performing; shopping; walking pets
Interests	sex-related topics and practice; gender relations; men; literature; philosophy; thinking	different types of men; gender relations	writing; reading; making friends
Opinions	gender relations; gender socialization; gender divisions and hierarchies	sex issues; women's rights; gender relations; different types of men; different types of women; family relations	Devoted to charity; valuing friendship; befriending pets; valuing family ties and relations

The table shows that the performance of the three personal blogs concentrates on performing gendered roles and relations. Muzi Mei's blog and Liumang Yan's blog are representative of conflicting images of women whereas in Acosta's blog, an image of the "new man" is presented. Notably, the three personal blogs are associated with the bloggers' sexualities. Muzi Mei's blog constructed a rebellious and self-contained femininity. In Liumang Yan's

blog, macho (being manly) and emphasized femininity (stereotyped femininity) are intertwined with several different types of masculinities such as hegemonic and feminized masculinities. Macho femininity alludes to women with traditionally masculine characteristics, being physically strong, mentally tough, and independent while emphasized femininity reinforces the image of women being weak, soft, and dependent on men. They are certainly categorizations built upon stereotyped perceptions of sexualities and should be introduced with precautions. Acosta's blog, on the other hand, establishes a representation of harmonized masculinities, which corresponds closely to the recent ideological advocacies of the Party for building a harmonious society.

18 Clearly, relations and connections with other people play a significant role in representing their performances. In Muzi Mei's blog, such relations are demonstrated mainly as interactions with other men and women in her professional practice as a journalist, an organizer of a student literary association, and her socializing activities such as partying as well as her interactions with the other gender (boys mainly) in school life. In Liumang Yan's blog, such relations are manifested mainly in family relations, her socializing, and mostly in her online participation. Demographics such as age, location, space, education are equally important in the bloggers' performances, each of which reflect on the bloggers' lifestyle differently and create difference in terms of class and wealth, namely, migrant workers (Liumang Yan), professional writers (Muzi Mei), and the wealthy middle upper class (Acosta).

19 Although both Muzi Mei's blog and Liumang Yan's blog are authored by women, the two women and their femininities are contrastive. Muzi Mei is a metropolitan young woman who was born, raised, educated, and employed in the city and whose lifestyle construction revolves around her professional practice. Because she was a financially and socially able woman, Muzi Mei seemed to be independent of men apart from forming sexual relations. By contrast, Liumang Yan is a migrant woman worker from the countryside where men had dominant influences on women. The legitimization of her as a woman was mostly realized through constant relations to men. The performance of the women in the two blogs is, to some extent, reflective of layers of social norms and of the bloggers' perception of them. In Butler's notion of performativity, gendered norms may be reified, rectified, or reversed in a process of performing through resignification ([Lloyd](#); [Salih](#)). In the following, I will discuss the particular ways in which performances in the three personal blogs are related to gendered norms.

Norm corresponding and compliance

20 Whatever kind of gendered performance an A-list personal blog may fashion, be it a particular kind of woman or sexuality, it either conforms with the mainstream social norms of gender or foresees, evokes, and models a growing trend of gendered norms. Muzi Mei, for example, is representative of the frontier of urban professional women whose lifestyles are knitted closely with those of women worldwide ([Rofel](#); [McLaren](#)). The alienated yet independent woman of Muzi Mei somehow mimics the women in postindustrial countries and entails a desire to become a member of their community. Liumang Yan by contrast depicts migrant women workers' struggle in cities in the era of the computer, Internet, and social networking media ([Han](#)). The appearance of her blog to some extent displays a different life path for women in the countryside. That is, digital participation may create an interface that has dissolved the divide between the urban and the country, drastically altering lifestyles and even redefining the process of urbanization. Undoubtedly, Acosta's harmonized masculinity swiftly echoes the media creation of men's crisis and the desire for new models of masculinity that can accommodate the changes of Chinese men and the social conditions. In order to stand out as A-list, it seems, personal blogs need to connect their gendered performance to upcoming desires of the societal in various ways. For example, alongside his reflections of life, Acosta expresses his desire for friendship and public service as shown in the following:

Extract 1

“We can be happier with friends' company. With friends, we are no longer a lonely island. We will no longer feel lonely, cold, and weak when waves arrive.”

Friendship is praised as essential for interpersonal relationships and is viewed as universal. Similarly, voluntary work and charity projects are also highly evident through the blogroll of Acosta's blogsite as well as his blog entries.

Norm revival and reinforcement

21 One way of corresponding to social norms is to revive and reinforce them with newly added elements. Traditional and extant norms are not useless but can be used to manipulate social dynamics and emotions. Many of them are indeed very noteworthy and influential in conveying a blog's performance. For example, Acosta's harmonized masculinity is reminiscent of traditional scholarly masculinity, which is characterized by absolute loyalty to the monarchy. For some researchers, scholarly masculinity may be reflective of scholars' desire, following Confucius's tenets, for absolute control of power in the name of doing social

deeds as a philosophical king, which can be interpreted as an elite ideal that combines knowledge and power or as a the saint and the king (*neisheng waiwang*) ([Fowler and Fowler](#); [Leezenberg](#)). Such masculinity has been criticized as feminine submission to patriarchal power which in the past in the monarchic period was embodied by the royal successors ([Song](#)) and in the socialist China by the Communist Party and its leaders ([Lu](#)).

22 The currently dominant ideology in China of building a harmonious society caters to this scholarly desire and advocates returning to the nation's traditions for a reconstruction of the 'Chinese' so as to consolidate the submission to the Party and maintain social stability and solidarity ([Dillon](#)). Relating his "feminized" masculinity to his metropolitan and globalization peers, Acosta, for instance, reinvigorates his male blog persona and masculinity to comply with mainstream patriarchal norms ([Evans](#)). In Liumang Yan's blog, traditional femininity is not abandoned but rather regarded highly as an emphasized or ideal femininity that symbolizes morality, cultivation, and grace, seemingly superior to other types of femininity and unattainable for most women. By reinforcing the superiority of the traditional or classic emphasized femininity, Liumang Yan, to some extent, expresses her consensus with social order between men and women, especially the ideal match ([Zhong](#)) between the scholar (*caizi*) and the beauty (*jiaren*). In the following extract, Liumang Yan encouraged men to have more than one sex partner.

Extract 2

"I always object to the norm that men should have only one sex partner in their lifetime, which would be boring. A perfect metaphor for that would be a single note in an entire composition."

Liumang Yan concluded that an ideal man should keep his virginity for the woman he loved before marriage and his loyalty to his wife throughout their marriage.

Norm interrogation

23 Questioning norms indicates the bloggers' awareness of some of the thinking that has been taken for granted and the tensions between bloggers' performance and the existing social norms. Some of these norms may hinder bloggers from expressing themselves. Liumang Yan, for example, reinterpreted the Chinese ideographic character for men so as to interrogate gender relations between men and women. Men's dominance in China ([Zheng](#); [Barlow *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*](#)) in her interpretation is not only questioned but also challenged by her tentative suggestion that men are in fact at the service of women in sexual intercourse as indicated by the Chinese character for man (*nan* 男). Liumang Yan reinterpreted the Chinese character for man (*nan*) as follows:

Extract 3

“The character for man (nan男) shows that Li (strength 力) is beneath Tian (land田). Please note that Li’s not beyond but beneath Tian, which means men are those who can’t help but labour on the land. Men are nothing but convenient tools for women to use for their sex arousal.”

Labour on the land is a pun in Chinese. It can be read ideographically as a man working on the farm or as having cultural associations of sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. A woman or a woman’s vagina is compared to a patch of land which a man can till (with his penis) in the missionary position. Liumang Yan’s reinterpretation argues that the position should be reversed, with a woman’s vagina riding on a man’s penis. This comparison is much too obscene for the average Chinese to agree with because using sexual intercourse positions as metaphors is seen as taboo in China ([Pan](#)), which may have contributed to the blog’s quick popularity.

24 Muzi Mei further challenges men’s dominance over women in her response to a male journalist’s request for an interview. On 23 August 2003, in response to a journalist’s request for an interview, Muzi Mei blogged,

"[for an interview?], only if you agree to make love to me first... The length of the interview depends on how long you can last in bed."

This response was truly embarrassing for a journalist at that time in China when gender relations including discussions of sex were considered secret or were taboo in public ([Farrer](#)). The journalist had never anticipated that his request for an interview would turn out to be a media fuss. He hesitated and eventually chose to withdraw the request. In this incident, Muzi Mei’s blog persona was in control of not only sexual intercourse but also of the professional practice of interviewing. The function of sexual intercourse was not only questioned but otherwise redefined instrumentally as a facilitator of professional interaction. Questioning gendered norms, then, may be an important aspect in a blogger’s performance.

Norm negation and renunciation

25 On some occasions, bloggers may choose to refuse and negate certain social norms in the process of enacting their gendered performances when particular norms are no longer of relevance or have become blockage. Negation is necessary in creating room for bloggers to dissociate with old or obsolete norms and to proceed with new or useful ones, the extent of which depends on their purposes of blogging as well as the available resources for enacting their performances. Renouncing social norms in the two female blogs may entail actions that deny the dominance of particular gender norms which are no longer held valid or relevant to

the bloggers and their groups and communities. Muzi Mei viewed ordinary socializing occasions with ‘good men and women’ as unbearably boring and was determined to seek alternatives.

Extract 4

“I feel extremely bored each time I get together with good men and women. I can’t stay with ‘normal’ people. They don’t belong to my ‘comfort zone’.”

Liumang Yan dismissed women’s dependence on men and encouraged women to seek pleasure from their sexual encounters. Liumang Yan urged that women “should practice hooliganism” on men to seek sexual pleasure actively rather than passively. For instance, women should take revenge on men and do what men could do such as having mistresses or extramarital affairs, expressing a very strong feminist discontent with the gender status quo in China. For Liumang Yan, sex is a defining character of a woman and an integral, vital part of a woman’s body that gives life as the extract below indicates.

Extract 5

“Most importantly, with sex, I’m still a woman; without it, I am void.”

For a middle-aged woman, sex is even more important. She likened sex to a woman as rain to plants: without sex, a woman’s life is singular and boring. Liumang Yan contended her claim that sexuality is important for women and a vital connection between men and women. She also emphasized the relevance of sexuality to a woman’s life course and explored various ways to present sexuality through body and performance while differentiating sexuality from libertinism.

26 In Acosta’s position, however, renouncing gender norms initiated an affirmative action that connects his performance to the mainstream or the emergent mainstream norms. For example, alongside hanging out with friends, going to the cinema, and walking his pet, Acosta also describes his activities at home. Interestingly, it seems that part of his daily routine is also related to household chores as the following image extract illustrates:



Fig. 2.

In fact, it is not common in many parts of China for men to help in the kitchen. In many villages and towns, it is still considered a disgrace for men to help with dinner preparation and other household chores. In the city, however, a defining character of a so-called ‘new good man’ (xinhao nanren) is the willingness to share housework with women. By distancing himself from Mao’s advocacy for proletariat masculinity (muscular, strong, illiterate, labourer) (Louie; Zhong), Acosta realigned his blog persona of a new man with the desire of the newly emergent middle class in Chinese society (Goodman; Dillon) and strove to become a spokesperson for them. This negating process, as Butler (*Undoing Gender*) suggests, is not necessarily rebellious, defiant, or revolutionary; oftentimes, it is simply a need to remove the old norms to accommodate the new ones.

Norm reclaiming and remaking

27 In order to enact their performances, bloggers may also take extreme actions to reclaim and sometimes remake social norms. For example, in the following extract, Muzi Mei’s elaborate recount of her smoking experience was not to categorize her woman as ‘bad’ or ‘indecent’ but rather to provide her woman with an instrument to become equal to or, as normal as, men.

Extract 7

“Three years ago, when I was still at college, a photo in which I was smoking was published in the supplement of a newspaper with a special topic on woman writers who smoke. Together with me were writers such as Zhang Mei, Zhang Niang, Yi Lichuan, and so on, but I wasn’t a writer and I was the youngest.”

Similarly, sex is seen by Muzi Mei and Liumang Yan as a social action for women’s empowerment both physically and symbolically. Liumang Yan in particular viewed sex as an instrument to defy men’s economic and sexual dominance over women and demanded remoulding gender relations. Sexual intercourse was then seen as a field and action for women’s empowerment. Norms that were distributed by others or other genders are then entangled in their blogging and refashioned for their own use.

28 Liumang Yan’s blog name as a textual avatar in effect exemplifies this reclaiming process. The first part of her blog’s name *Liumang* (流氓) refers to hooligan, rascals, or rogues who retain little respect for laws and rules. This term used to be a gendered term in Chinese derivatively associated with men’s sexual harassment of women (*shua liumang*). Using this term as a part of her blog name, Liumang Yan seems to declare her sexual prowess over men and reject the image of women as prey or victims in cases of sexual harassment. Reclaiming and remaking gender norms may be seen as a way to gender empowerment, although it most commonly refers to women’s empowerment (Yan).

29 The ways that the two female blogs relate to social norms seem more complicated and multidimensional than in the male blog. Instead of being compliant to norms, they problematize, challenge, and negate many of the norms. Whether they are aware of their gender status as women and their feminist position, their blogging portrayed them as repressed, victimized, and dominated by men. Nevertheless, they were obliged to revolt through interrogating sexual norms, which in developed countries has posed a threat to men's dominance and induced discourses on the crisis of men or masculinity (Laughey; Whitehead). By contrast, women do not seem to play any role in Acosta's submission to social norms in that women are not regarded as a threat or powerful others. Rather, Acosta's harmonized masculinity is a combination of the traditional pious masculinity characterized by scholars and officials (Song) and the new globalized masculinity that conforms to a "superior" culture and ideologies (Pan). Recognized as effeminate and subordinated to hegemonic masculinity, this kind of masculinity may relate itself to the powerful "us": the nation state, the Party, and their institutional power (Zhong; Brownell and Wasserstrom "Introduction: Theorizing Femininities and Masculinities"). Through performing and disseminating such masculinities, powerful social groups and institutions are sending messages to other less powerful social groups their expectations of male behaviors (and lifestyles) for the sake of maintaining social solidarity and stability.

Conclusion

30 The women performed by the two female blogs are representative of diverse social classes and their struggles while the young man in Acosta's blog entails a call for reconstructing Chinese masculinities. It may be, in effect, a counter against so-called Western hegemony that is rendered by Chinese authorities and intellectuals as victimization through feminization of Chinese men (e.g., Barlow *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*; Zhong). This reconstruction may be realized by such means as capitalizing on Chinese economic growth to be more internationalized or globalized and reviving the traditional notion intellectual masculinity as physically lacking but mentally loyal and submissive, as also noticed by other researchers (e.g., Brownell and Wasserstrom *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*). Unlike the two female blogs, Acosta's performance was enacted without the presence of women and direct referencing to gender relations. His blog entries center on performing a new man and a new type of Chinese masculinity recognizable as 'harmonized masculinity'. His new man may be a timely response to the Party's propaganda for building 'a harmonious society', which is built upon

China's economic progress and the Party's endeavor to prevent social crisis (Dillon). The performance of Acosta's new man and masculinity, similar to that of the two female blogs, is also conditioned by layered social norms and conventions. The three blogs may have some norms in common and some norms favored by one blog may be challenged or negated by the other two blogs or vice versa. The reasons for this can be related to their performances on one hand; on the other hand, they can be again related to their differences in lifestyle positioning.

31 Nevertheless, the key to (re)signifying social norms in the performances of the personal blogs depends on (dis)identification as argued by Butler ([*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*](#); [*Butler Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*](#); [*Butler Undoing Gender*](#); [*Butler Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*](#)) and other researchers ([Lloyd](#); [Loxley](#); [Robinson](#); [Salih](#)). It seems, however, identification itself cannot be seen as a singular or a coherent process. Rather, it can be refashioned as corresponding identification (solidarity), re-identification (with something old or modified), and dis-identification (with something viewed as useless, outdated, malicious, or problematic) ([Fuss](#); [Brody](#)). Identification, being elastic, mobile, multiple, and volatile, stresses the process in which the kind of performance is recognized in relation to certain norms. It does not matter whether this process is established explicitly by the blog through manipulating forms of social capital or implicitly by the audience's recognition of various gendered social norms. Dis-identification emphasizes that some norms can be taken away or abandoned in performances. Re-identification may realign or revive some norms in performances. Their relations are not only structural relations between an individual and a collective but are also 1) the outcome of the reflective process that relates self to collective, and 2) reproduced through shared symbols (of solidarity). Nevertheless, performances on personal blogs reveal that norms are strategically associated in layers of identification that are contentiously configured ([Paechter](#); [Rasmussen](#)).

32 Due to the diversity of performances in blogs, gender in this study is, then, produced at the individual level while it entails a fundamental aspect of human society, be it online or offline. Personal performances are social and may constitute social relations, actions, and consequences of various kinds and at various scales, depending on the performers' positions and the niche in which the performances are staged ([Alexander](#)). More importantly, personal blogs, as the earliest and the most common type of blogs, are the typical media, means, and sites for bloggers to construct their identities through expressing opinions, emotions, and above all, the self or selves of bloggers, whether the blogger is owned by a single author or may be a creation by many authors. The prevalence of normativity or heteronormativity (in

form of laws, rules, regulations, or conventions) of a society ([Butler *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*](#)), is in effect an embodiment and coercion of heterosexuality. Unveiling and challenging norms in personal blogs involves examining their very grounding in gender performances and their representations, realized not only in subversive practices such as interrogation, confrontation, and negation but also in seemingly submissive practices such as confirmation, compromise, and even reinforcement. As can be seen here, gender identities are at the same time discursively (and semiotically) produced and destabilized while the social order still rests on heteronormativity ([Gamson and Moon](#)). Performances of gendered identities in Chinese personal blogs are nevertheless intertwined with or even constitutive of, power relations and struggles in Chinese society.

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Dark Mermaids

By Anne Lauppe-Dunbar

1 The girl woke. She'd been dreaming of swimming through thick water, watching light ripple and snake across the pale blue and white tiles that lined the bottom of the pool. She'd been swimming as if life depended on speeding through the white water, hitting the pool wall just right, shooting under-and-through in a practised arch. She'd bit down against the need for breath – and glimpsed, just for a moment, barely an inch of time, the wavering figures leaning over the pool edge, their skin and eyes boiling to fuse as she gasped and swam deeper. Under the water the world had been silent apart from a distorted clicking and the distant splash of other swimmers. But then the water had curdled; lumpy and wrong, turning red.

2 Slowed by fear she'd blinked, turned to escape but a thick wet object bumped, drifted past her shoulder. The thing slid through her hand then drifted away as a second white spot in the distance came closer. It was, she realised, a delicate thing, drifting, bumping and riding the water – a child's limb, alabaster against the sticky redness.

Now she woke, sweaty from her nightmare, to nightingale song that lilted and warbled a strange melody through the night's sweet summer scent from the trees by the lake. Warm air itched the curtain from its metal frame in idle waves. In the gap, a sliver of moonlight rested, rippled across her bed, stretching its finger to the door that led out into the small hallway into the dark. As the curtain settled the light wavered then disappeared to sink into grey night.

She lay still, watching the returning moon's light for what seemed like forever, slowly waking, picking up the sounds from the adjoining room. There was a sultry murmur, that rose to reach a crescendo of frenzied gasped shouts, a moan that turned to a swear word, rich and guttural. Then the rhythm began - this time to shouts of encouragement and laughter. It was, she realized, the trainer's turn to perform.

3 The nightingale paused, hushed, as some dark predator stalked the base of one of the many trees that surrounded the one-story lodging. The bird sang again, this time close to the window – the sound thrilling, a vibrant aria that felt a natural part of the night's dark magic.

Sophia's skin was on fire. She showered, lathered on body lotion, stole some of Diertha's nail varnish and painted each nail in a hideous coat of purple. The paint felt heavy and connected, as if her fingers were webbed. She considered a dip in the lake that lay only feet away from the door, but knew because she'd fallen asleep; she hadn't left enough time.

In the next room, the trainer and girl were reaching a mutual climax, the bed heaved - one two three four, against the wall, dislodging a tiny slice of paint from the ceiling that floated like angel hair to the floor, delicate and insubstantial.

4 She didn't know their names. The girls had arrived the day before, raucous and bold, they'd steamed and grunted their way through training; the boy's voices were just as unfamiliar. Sophia took off her nightgown as the second pair yelled. A gasp followed, then brief moment of silence before more laughter followed applause, then murmuring voices and running water: doors opened and slammed as the boys left the room.

5 In the mirror she could see her stomach flat and muscled, her arms hulking on either side, too cumbersome for her body. Like a man's she thought, and stared down at her navel. Although she'd shaved that morning, pubic hair sprouted from her belly button down between her legs. She ran her hand through the wiry growth and wished they'd hurry, wished they would never come, wished she had some other way to appease the itching inside her. To make the time pass she decided to steal even more from nasty Diertha's make up kit and applied the cheap mascara along with electric blue eyeliner. Sophia's shoulders were so big that when she stood straight on she couldn't see them in the reflection. Like a giant bloody mermaid she decided and imagined the lake's water closing around her heavy muscle, pulling her down into the murky pond weed.

6 She heard them outside the bungalow window, Diertha's throaty laugh accompanied by a shriek as someone grabbed her and *squeezed*. There were four of them, late from an extended training session, high on drugs and success; because they'd smashed yet another record. Sophia's pulse began to race and she recited her weekly rule: never miss training, never ever miss training. Her coach had laughed when she had been foolish enough to ask him why they felt like they did. The need for sex. The crazy itching inside.

7 "You girls," he said. "You can't get enough can you? So, ok. Sex is good. Work hard, play hard." But he'd looked at her differently, squeezed up against her whenever he had the chance. Then one night he came along with the others; after the training session - to keep an eye on her he said as he moved above her; his eyes tight, mouth panting to reveal a coffee-stained tongue.

The four of them burst in the door, jostling, laughing as they stripped. Diertha laughed and blatantly stroked her first choice. She pulled him towards the second small bed, waving the others toward Sophia.

"She'll do what you want." She said.

8 The three remaining boys watched the two moving on the bed. They giggled, looked sideways at one another. One began to masturbate. The second turned and moved clumsily toward Sophia as she lay, legs spread, on her bed. He propped himself above her, shut his eyes and entered her hard and fast.

Sophia knew he was thinking of Diertha: her coy teasing come-on laughter, her explicit suggestion. The boy pushed into her again and muttered someone else's name and 'fuck,' as she lost herself in the sensation of movement. This was bliss. Her body and the heat, the clamour of her mind dimming until she felt only skin and sensation, a push of life, a glorious wave of relief and the silky explosion as she groaned and gasped.

The next moved to take his turn with gasp and jabbingly quick ejaculation; and the group roared with laughter. The boy flinched, blushed and edged away to watch some more.

9 Air thickened, turning purple and blue as the third one came. He turned her over to open her wide, bruise then caress. Sophia heard the door open and more boys arrived. The girls from the next room burst in and beds were hastily created on the floor, sheets and blankets protecting skin as the seething, jerky, fluid, motion escalated. Sophia opened her eyes. She could see the moonlight bend its light across naked flesh. Such beauty, she thought, such ugliness.

She sensed him standing, waiting in the shadows and knew he would be patient, his hand moving in practised rhythm, so she closed her eyes and lost herself once more.

10 Before dawn they left, some in pairs, some alone. Sound died. Shouts faded to murmurs and laughter. Then without warning she felt him, pulling her close, rougher than the others, making her bleed, cry out in pain and pleasure. Finally she could feel only the cool air on her skin, and hear the final notes of birdsong.

11 She woke the second time with the boy sleeping beside her. Lay stunned, thinking fast. They were punished if they didn't report for training by six a.m. well rested, ready for their training session. If they missed their classes they risked compromising the reputation of the training facility. Bad things would happen – not to them, they were too valuable, but to their family. The confiscated TV making a mockery of her parent's reputation, shopping tokens that never arrived, the car could be taken away, travel permits refused, your parents taken into Stasi headquarters for questioning.

12 She turned her head and looked at the boy. He was younger than she remembered, with dark hair, full lips, and a determined chin. He held her even whilst asleep. She wondered for a moment why. But he woke and in a seal-like movement turned and entered her, kissing her into silence, whispering that it was early yet, time enough to sleep after he'd gone. They

gasped as they moved together. Sophia staring into his eyes, aware they were steel grey and blue, his face holding the possibility of a cruel side, one that lay in the tight yet plump set of his mouth. He smiled making her heart tremble, kissed her mouth once more, and slid out of the bed pulling his trousers on in a long flowing movement. He was she realised, quite beautiful. Then she slept again dreaming of stillness, clean white sheets, winning the Olympics and escaping from this place forever.

13 Six in the morning and wide awake. Sophia tasted the night's deep sleep on her tongue, like tangy liquorice, blood, or metal, clear and optimistic. She tilted her nose, noticed the second bed was empty and Diertha wasn't in the shower and sniffed in the morning air smiling. Today Diertha was leaving.

14 Because she had a little time, she cleaned. Scrubbed all traces of Diertha's yellowing tobacco spit from the sink, dug her sticky pubic hair from the shower plug, and finally, with more force than necessary, Sophia shoved Diertha's clothing tightly into the bottom drawer of the clothes cupboard and stripped the bed. Diertha's razor, shampoo, towels, and toiletries were now wedged into the smallest corner of the bathroom window ledge.

15 Even though she knew it was going to be ok, she panicked every time someone came near the bungalow. She imagined Diertha coming through the door, turning on Sophia because she was touching her stuff, and you never touched Diertha's stuff. But each time the sound of feet continued past, and each time that happened, Sophia had stood taller and breathed easier - now all she had to do was insist she kept the room to herself.

16 She'd known for two long weeks that Diertha would be asked to leave. People like her roommate pushed too far, they ignored the obvious warnings and played too hard. Everyone knew that you could play, as long as long as you trained harder; and Diertha had done pretty much no training over the last few weeks. She'd been drinking and smoking, missing her exercise classes, disappearing all day to come back at night with boys from the training centre and then men. Men had little to do with the sports centre, men who wanted her for different reasons, men who hurt her.

17 It was too early to swim. If Sophia went to the pool, she risked being trapped in the empty changing rooms; her trainer would stand too near, no way out than to oblige him – her mouth, his dick. So she stood outside her room, head raised, smelling the sun-soaked grass and dried conifer - breathing in the thrill of being alive and giddy with anticipation. No training today. She was going to race against her one real competitor today and win. When she won she would have a room of her own.

18 Sophia grinned, rolled her shoulders to ease any tension and decided to walk to the lake jetty to watch the sun come up. Near the lake the small family of ducks had their heads tucked under their wings, one shook his head at her then waddled into the water to plunge, tail-sticking upright as he tipped upside down, looking for food.

God she was happy, something not felt for so long she wondered at the sensation, the warmth, the goldenness of not being tired, not having to escape from the constant threat of Diertha's teasing and bullying.

19 The jetty was covered in a thin veneer of pale algae. She walked lightly, with care, considering amused, that even if she were to fall in, the water was her friend, her ally, her place, much more so than the land. At the very end of the wooden platform, she sat cross-legged and gazed across the grey elbow shaped lake. The sun was mellow, creating a gentle dawn heat, it rose slowly, an orange-misted circle that sent mosquitoes into a zigzagging frenzy as the sun-heat met the lake. Water swirled in the distance; a fish blowing a circle of bubbles flipped its brown silver-finned body out into the air, then sank. More bubbles appeared and Sophia noticed a thick pelt of green pondweed near the jetty edge. It smelled of meat and sour apples. She leaned over the jetty side to get a better look. Bubbles trickled to the surface. A sweet and sickly stench, not apples. She leaned out further. A dead fish, or one of the many foxes that roamed about all night. With a gurgling sound, like a plug being pulled, the shape bobbed up and down then sucked itself out the water.

20 Sophia saw the top half of Diertha balloon from the water. Her legs were weighed down by metal disks and chains, her eyes purple and swollen. There was a squawk from the ducks as they took to the air, alerted to danger, wheeling high into the sky as Sophia ran towards land.

**Socially Constructed Inclusivity: Eric Anderson's *Inclusive Masculinity*:
*The Changing Nature of Masculinities***

By Jon Robert Adams, Western Michigan University, USA

1 As the sub-title indicates, Eric Anderson's *Inclusive Masculinity* describes changes in the ways some men conceive of and enact their masculinity. Employing ethnographic methods and "social-feminist thinking" (14), Anderson claims that "university-attending men are rapidly running from the hegemonic type of masculinity that scholars have been describing for the past 25 years" (4). In the "acknowledgments," Anderson dedicates his volume to three of those scholars: Michael Messner, Michael Kimmel and Donald Sabo, whom he credits for having published "academically accessible, cutting edge, meaningful gender scholarship" (xi). In so doing, Anderson effectively (unwittingly?) establishes the bar for his own work. *Inclusive Masculinity* readily achieves that bar, being both "accessible" and "cutting edge," and will, in this reader's opinion, eventually exceed it by proving not only "meaningful" but also prescient.

2 To support "the premise of [*Inclusive Masculinity*]" that "esteemed versions of masculinity among university-attending men are changing" (5), Anderson adds recent ethnographies of "white, university rugby, cheerleaders and soccer players, as well as the members of a racially mixed university fraternity" (4) to his prior research on gay athletes (published, beginning 2002). Anderson conducts his studies in both Britain and the United States and, in hopes of measuring "freedom [. . .] for variable conceptions of athletic masculinity," on athletes from "both low and high quality teams" (9). Anderson fully impacts the significance of *Inclusive Masculinity* when he asserts that though he is "not alone in suggesting that the dominant form of masculinity [. . .] can change" (emphasis in original) his study is among the first to "show that things are now finally beginning to change" (emphasis added). Moreover, Anderson adds a note of hope about the future when he reminds readers that informants for his various ethnographies "account for a demographic that is likely to have significant influence in shaping the culture of masculinity in the future" (15-16).

3 Seeing his results as part of a 'cultural zeitgeist' of increasing inclusivity, or "the increasing loss of our puritan sentiment," Anderson indicates that "changes [. . .] occurring among young men are not germane to gender alone" (5). In claiming that "the Internet has sparked a sexual revolution," Anderson locates other cultural shifts contributing to those he notes regarding masculinity, including: "the growing percentage of people who engage in pre-marital intercourse, the social and legal permission for divorce [. . .], a lessening of the

traditional double standard for heterosexual intercourse,” and, what Anderson labels as the “most important” to his theory, “the markedly expanded social and political landscape for gays and lesbians” (5). In facilitating this expanded landscape, according to Anderson, the Internet has also been “instrumental,” decreasing the social stigma surrounding homosexuality by “exposing the forbidden fruit of homosexual sex, commodifying [sic] and normalizing it in the process.” As a result of this exposure and “combined with a strategic and political bombardment of positive cultural messages about homosexuality” media and popular venues have “sent a message that while homosexuality is okay, homophobia is not” (6)

4 To account for the new sexual revolution fomented by the Internet so described and its attendant positivity surrounding homosexuality, Anderson suggests that this particular cultural moment is one of gradually diminishing “homohysteria,” which Anderson defines as combining “a culture of homophobia, femphobia, and compulsory heterosexuality” (7). Anderson links changes in cultural attitudes about sexuality to changes in gender by alluding to his “driving theoretical hypothesis” that “homophobia directed at men has been central to the production of orthodox masculinity.” At this point, however, Anderson recognizes the problem created when traditional means of producing masculinity—homophobia directed at men—wane, and he seeks a means to explain both why the changes occur and what expectations of gender performance result from them. For Anderson, then, the academically prevalent means for defining masculinity—R.W. (now Raewyn) Connell’s 1987 definition of “hegemonic masculinity”—emerges as insufficient for describing “the complexity of what occurs as cultural homohysteria diminishes.” To rectify this shortfall, Anderson proposes “inclusive masculinity theory,” his own “new social theory” (7). In so doing, Anderson provides an incredibly useful tool for gender and cultural theorists alike, one that is sure to keep scholars reading and citing Anderson’s work for some time to come.

5 To define “inclusive masculinity theory,” Anderson explains first that the theory “conceptualizes what happens concerning masculinity in the cultural zeitgeists of three periods within Anglo-American societies.” He labels those periods as:

1. Moments of elevated homohysteria;
2. Diminishing cultural homohysteria; and,
3. Diminished homohysteria. (7)

At this juncture, Anderson more fully elucidates how Inclusive Masculinity will utilize the term ‘homohysteria’ as a relative measure for the cultural periods he outlines. Saying that he uses homohysteria “to describe the fear of being homosexualized,” Anderson indicates that the term “incorporates three variables”:

1. mass awareness that homosexuality exists as a static sexual orientation
2. a cultural zeitgeist of disapproval of homosexuality, and the femininity that is associated with it; and,
3. the need for men to publicly align their social identities with heterosexuality in order to avoid homosexual suspicion. (7-8)

“In other words,” Anderson claims, “a homophobic culture might look disparagingly at homosexuality, but without mass cultural suspicion that one might be gay it is not a culture of homophobia” (8). Anderson asserts that levels of cultural homophobia are directly proportional to the importance of homophobia in policing masculinity.

6 Perhaps because historical beginnings and endings cannot be stipulated for the cultural zeitgeists he identifies, Anderson instead chooses to depict the periods using descriptions of the cultures themselves. For example, Anderson states that “in cultures of diminishing homophobia [zeitgeist 2, above], two dominant (but not dominating) forms of masculinity will exist: one conservative and one inclusive”. He defines “inclusive masculinity” as one in which “heterosexual men [. . .] demonstrate emotional and physically [sic] homosocial proximity,” claiming that heterosexual men “include their gay teammates, and are shown to value heterofemininity” (8). In a culture of “diminished homophobia” (zeitgeist 3, above), on the other hand, “homophobic discourse is almost entirely lost” (8) and “multiple masculinities will proliferate with less hierarchy or hegemony” (9). Anderson hopes that inclusive masculinity theory will provide athletes with “an alternative pathway to constructing their masculinity” (17), an admirable, worthwhile, and (this reader hopes), achievable goal and not just for athletes.

7 *Inclusive Masculinity* is so cogently argued and so judiciously presented that attentive, well-informed readers in the social sciences or in gender and queer studies (the fields most likely to find interest in Anderson’s text) should find few objections to the text, its methods, or its conclusions. I specify ‘attentive’ and ‘well-informed’ readers because those who are not research professionals in these fields might not notice the careful manner with which Anderson tags key terms, such as ‘masculinity’. Nearly every use of the term is preceded by a modifier such as ‘traditional’ or ‘hegemonic’ or ‘inclusive,’ and such descriptors might slow down readers with less experience in the fields and render the book a bit less accessible to a general readership. For professionals, however, the modifiers highlight Anderson’s assiduousness, create precision, and thus add to the excellence of the book.

8 Despite Anderson’s care, however, some readers may nevertheless bristle when Anderson discloses his methods and his positionality vis-à-vis his informants. He writes: I do not believe in social distance between lecturer and student. I maintain that the best teachers

are mentors, and the best mentors are friends. I therefore join my students for lunch, run with them after class, and socialize with them in my office. I even go clubbing and drinking with them. I desire to project this open attitude with them from the first day, providing them with my mobile phone number. (13) Though certainly Anderson presents this detail as a means of fully explaining how data for these analyses were gathered (and in line with precepts of ethnographic research), this reader cannot help but wonder whether the specificity—no to mention *insistence*, as when Anderson states “I maintain that remaining closeted constitutes a deeply socio-negative act” (13)—of the statement is also meant to situate Anderson within debates about ethnographic and/or anthropological methods. That said, *Inclusive Masculinity* elucidates very clearly why Anderson makes the research choices that he does, and the book speculates convincingly, in this reader’s opinion, about the benefits of those choices. Moreover, the consistency of findings across Anderson’s research groups buttresses Anderson’s contentions.

9 But perhaps the most delightful revelation in this delightful book is *Inclusive Masculinity*’s tracking of the rapidity of change in cultural attitudes about homosexuality and the performance of masculinity. Anderson follows the change from an anecdote of a gay bashing in 1995 to his statement that “this year (ostensibly 2009, when the book was published) for the first time, no incoming freshman suggested that gay men should be excluded from playing on straight teams” (12). This overwhelming reduction in homophobic sentiment confirms my own observations of the same in (the same) 15 years of University teaching. Thus the affirmation of this book is personal, hopeful, and ultimately anxiety-relieving. It’s not often that an academic study makes one feel better about being in the world, yet Eric Anderson’s *Inclusive Masculinity* does

List of Contributors

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