
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Power Counter-Strategies in Gender Relations

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| ABSTRACT

This article examines the potential of Queer Theory as a theoretical framework for gender relations and an alternative approach to mainstream power dynamics. The counter-discursive strategies under study draw upon the seminal critical contributions of Michel Foucault and his theories of power, Eve K. Sedgwick and her theory of the closet, and Judith Butler and her work on gender and performativity. The study finds that Butler highlights stylization as pervasive in performance. Integrating Sedgwick's queer theory and Foucault's critical analysis discourse, the study explores how theater challenges conventionality. Sedgwick deepens the understanding of fluid identities, complementing Butler's focus on embodiment. Through interdisciplinary analysis, the study explores the dynamics of power within theatrical representations.

| KEYWORDS

Gender, Power, Knowledge, Queer, Performativity.

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1. Introduction

As Kathleen Canning asserts, "it seems logical that the linguistic turn should lead gender studies towards an analysis of discursive constructions and power."¹ Power plays a pivotal role in the definition of gender, as it reveals the underlying issues at stake in the creation of sexual difference. If "Foucault's conception of power...is one of the points of departure...for queer theory and practice,"² as Marie-Hélène Bourcier puts it, it is crucial to examine how Foucault conceptualizes power and power dynamics.

In Foucault's view, power is both repressive and productive. He posits that power "traverses bodies, produces things, pleasure, forms of knowledge, and discourses."³ It is a pervasive phenomenon in society. "Power is everywhere; it is not comprehensive, but rather, it emanates from a multitude of sources."⁴ In a subsequent interview, the philosopher further elucidated his position, stating, "It is erroneous to suggest that power is a system of domination that controls everything and leaves no room for freedom."⁵ For Foucault, the concepts of power and resistance are dialectically linked. "Where there is power, there is resistance in the strategic field of power relations."⁶

¹ Kathleen Canning, "Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Issue 2, Volume 19, New York, 1994, p. 370-71. My translation.

² M. H. Bourcier, « Foucault et après... Théorie et politiques queers », *Nouvelles approches des hommes et du masculin*, Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2000, p. 176. My translation.

³ Michel Foucault, *Microphysique du pouvoir*, Einaudi, 1977, p. 13. My translation.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *La volonté de savoir. Histoire de la sexualité*, volume I, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, p. 122. My translation.

⁵ Michel Foucault, « L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté », dans *Dits et Ecrits – 1954-1988*, tome IV, Paris, Gallimard, p. 720. My translation.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *La volonté de savoir*, pp. 125-126. My translation.

Michel Foucault proposes a redefinition of sexuality as both a product of discourse and an effect of power. It thus appears as “the totality of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations by a certain device belonging to a complex political technology.”⁷ If we accept Foucault’s assertion that sexual identities are the consequence of disciplinary knowledge-power and that the body and truth are political⁸, should we resist? The question thus becomes: What strategies might be employed to resist this pervasive power?

One strategy proposed by Foucault is to rethink knowledge in light of a different representation of the world. This implies adopting a critical stance towards institutions with the objective of transforming them. Furthermore, he suggests that a strategic reversal of disciplinary discourses may be a potential avenue for change.

Neither discourses nor silences are inherently subservient to or opposed to power. It is crucial to recognize the intricate and volatile nature of the involved factors. Discourse can simultaneously serve as a tool and an outcome of power, yet also act as a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance, and the foundation for an opposing strategy.⁹

Foucault goes on to advocate the development of an “aesthetic of the self,” with sex as an anchor: “Sex is not a fatality; it is a possibility of access to a creative life.”¹⁰ In *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (1995), which has become one of the manifestos of Queer Theory, Halperin proposes to extend the Foucauldian list of discursive counter-productions. He suggests “creative appropriation and resignification”; “appropriation and theatricalization” (parody, for example); “exposure and demystification.”¹¹ The “Camp” mode—to which we shall return in our analysis—is a particularly illustrative example:

Camp, after all, is a form of cultural resistance that is entirely predicated on a shared consciousness of being inescapably situated within a powerful system of social and sexual meanings. *Camp* resists the power of that system from within by means of parody, exaggeration, amplification, theatricalization, and literalization of normally tacit codes of conduct. . . (I’m thinking of codes of masculinity, for example).¹²

For David M. Halperin, Foucault’s position represents a reversal of the discursive position of homosexuality. This reversal takes homosexuality “from the status of that which is spoken about while remaining silent to the status of that which speaks.”¹³ This allows us to consider an identity without essence, which lacks a universal, standardized definition. Consequently, it is not based on any stable truth. Halperin argues that “those who knowingly occupy such a marginal location, who assume a de-essentialized identity that is purely positional in character are properly speaking not gay but *queer*.”¹⁴

Foucault understands homosexuality as “a strategically situated marginal position from which it might be possible to glimpse and to devise new ways of relating to oneself and to others.”¹⁵ According to Halperin, this perspective represents an anticipatory manifestation of Queer Theory: “AND SO IF Michel Foucault had never existed, queer politics would have had to invent him—and perhaps it has indeed invented him, or at least partly reinvented him.”¹⁶ In his analysis, Halperin draws upon Foucault’s work to define “queer” as a position that extends to any individual who refracts the sex/gender system. This reading allows for the concept in question to be interpreted in a multitude of ways, with the potential “to envision a variety of possibilities...for restructuring...the relations among power, truth, and desire.”¹⁷

The concept of queer identity emerges as “an empty placeholder for an identity that is still in progress and has as yet to be fully realized...as an identity in a state of becoming rather than as the referent for an actually existing form of life.”¹⁸ In light of this vision, Halperin develops the concept of “becoming queer,” which is predicated on Foucauldian notions of gay becoming: “one

⁷ Michel Foucault, *La volonté de savoir*, p. 168.

⁸ David Halperin, *Saint Foucault. Towards a Gay Hagiography*, pp. 55-57.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *La volonté de savoir*, p. 133. My translation.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, « Michel Foucault, une interview : sexe, pouvoir et la politique de l’identité », *Dits et écrits, 1980-1988*, volume 4, p. 735. My translation.

¹¹ David Halperin, *Saint Foucault. Towards a Gay Hagiography*, pp. 48-52.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 29.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 57.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 62.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 68.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 120.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 62.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 112-113.

can't *become* homosexual, strictly speaking: either one is or one isn't. But one can marginalize oneself; one can transform oneself; one can become queer."¹⁹

"To be gay is to be in the process of becoming...it's also a way of refusing the lifestyles on offer, it's to make the sexual choice the operator of a change of existence,"²⁰ Halperin states, citing Foucault. He defines queer as "a horizon of possibilities, an opportunity for self-transformation."²¹ As Lawrence Schehr notes, this process of "becoming oneself" is particularly evident "in a few metaphors that have become central to queer theory: the 'closet' (and the related 'coming out') and performance."²² In light of the above, it becomes necessary to define the theoretical concepts of the closet and performativity.

Four scholars have made significant contributions to the development of Queer Theory: Michael Foucault, Gayle Rubin, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and Sedgwick's two books, *Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire* (1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) are foundational works in Queer Studies.

In *Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire*, Sedgwick sheds light on the notion of homosociality, which she defines as follows:

'Homosocial'...describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with 'homosexual,' and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual.'²³

The term "homosociality" is used to describe a phenomenon that encompasses both homoeroticism and a further dimension:

Homoeroticism is no longer limited to the emergence of a socially repressed homosexual desire. Rather, it can be understood as a social structure, homosociality, where the bond between heterosexual men must be nurtured without allowing physical contact.²⁴

Taking up René Girard's theory of mimetic desire from a feminist perspective, Sedgwick develops her own vision of homosocial triangles, according to which the bonds between heterosexual men are founded on the double mode of exclusion of women and homosexuality. Didier Eribon suggests that it was "this kinship between homophobia and misogyny that interested Sedgwick, and so it is no exaggeration to say that it was heterosexuality that was the object of her analysis."²⁵

Epistemology of the Closet adheres to the tenets of feminist thought, rather than Gay and Lesbian Studies. In this work, Sedgwick highlights the conceptual distinction between sexuality and gender, maintaining that these concepts are not necessarily synonymous:

The question of gender and the question of sexuality, inextricable from one another though they are in that each other can be expressed only in the terms of the other, are nonetheless not the same question...gender and sexuality represent two analytical axes that may productively be imagined as being as distinct from one another as, say, gender and class, or class and race.²⁶

Sedgwick identifies a series of interlocking polarities that all contribute to the construction of the closet. These include knowledge/ignorance, homosexuality/heterosexuality, masculine/feminine, secrecy/revelation, private/public, and natural/artificial. According to D. A. Miller, confession does not result in the dissolution of these dualities and the ideologies associated with them; conversely, it illustrates their potential for reinvention:

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 79.

²⁰ M. Foucault, *Dits et écrits*, vol. IV, p. 295. As cited by David Halperin in: « L'identité gay après Foucault », Didier Eribon (ed.), *Les Études gay et lesbiennes*, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1998, p. 120. My translation.

²¹ David M. Halperin, « L'identité gay après Foucault », *Les études gay et lesbiennes*, p. 92.

²² Lawrence Schehr, « Filiations queer ? », *Rue Descartes*, 40, Paris, PUF, 2003, p. 23.

²³ Eve K. Sedgwick, *Between Men. English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985, p. 1.

²⁴ J.-P. Rocchi, « Homoérotisme », *Dictionnaire des cultures gays et lesbiennes*, p. 252-53. My translation.

²⁵ Didier Eribon, « Traverser les frontières », *Les études gay et lesbiennes*, p. 14. My translation.

²⁶ Eve K. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990, p. 30.

The phenomenon of the 'open secret' does not, as one might think, bring about the collapse of those binarisms and their ideological effects, but rather attests to their fantasmatic recovery.²⁷

Sedgwick notes that the post-Stonewall era lives under the injunction of visibility. She borrows Miller's notion of the "open secret", which she also calls "the glass closet"²⁸, to describe the transparency of the "closet." The homosexual secret, destined always to remain a secret, is never fully and openly revealed. Consequently, "it attains public recognition; yet it must not disappear altogether, for then it would be beyond control and would no longer effect a general surveillance of aberrant desire."²⁹

In Sedgwick's analysis, the closet represents an unresolvable paradox. Homosexuals are never wholly inside or outside. Given that heterosexuality is the norm, gays are compelled to reiterate their confession according to the circumstances.³⁰ The lack of transparency surrounding the closet makes gays uncertain about the extent to which the general public is aware of their sexual orientation. This uncertainty allows gays to exploit heterosexuals' knowledge of them, a strategy that can somehow be expressed as, "I know that you know":

The position of those who think they *know something about one that one may not know oneself* is an excited and empowered one—whether what they think one doesn't know is that one somehow is homosexual, or merely that one's supposed secret *is* known to them.³¹

Through her key metaphor of "relations of the closet—the relations of the known and unknown,"³² Sedgwick constructs the closet as a political-discursive regime that confers on heterosexuals an epistemological privilege or "privilege of unknowing."³³ They can thus pretend not to want to know. By striving to make homosexuality a secret that must be demystified under their gaze³⁴, heterosexuals seek to preserve their privilege. For his part, Halperin underlines the interest of heterosexuals in maintaining the construction of heterosexuality as a privileged subject of knowledge, by constituting homosexuality as an object of knowledge subject to constant re-evaluation:

Heterosexuality thrives precisely by preserving and consolidating its internal contradictions at the same time as it preserves and consolidates its own ignorance of them, and it does that by constructing and deploying the figure of "the homosexual"³⁵.

Sedgwick's interpretation of homosexuality presupposes that the individual "has somewhere in reserve a stable and intelligible definition for both what is 'really homosexual' and what is 'really sentimental.'"³⁶ Nevertheless, "those definitions are neither historically stable in this period nor internally coherent."³⁷ The intrinsic inconsistencies of homosexual identity, she argues, "are responsive to and hence evocative of the incoherences and contradictions of compulsory heterosexuality."³⁸

Sedgwick notes that, given the essential role of homosocial relations and the potential for every individual to be homosexual, homophobia becomes a regulating mechanism for gay desire and a common defense against "the swirls of totalizing knowledge-power that circulate so violently around any but the most openly acknowledged gay male identity."³⁹ This homophobia is the

²⁷ D. A. Miller, "Secret Subjects, Open Secrets," *The Novel and the Police*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, p. 207. As cited by Eve K. Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the closet*, p. 67.

²⁸ Eve K. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 80.

²⁹ Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics—Queer Reading*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 64.

³⁰ In his article, « Les familles homosexuelles aux Etats-Unis: dissolution d'un mouvement social ou redéfinition de sa portée politique?, » Guillaume Marche postulates that generational relations are an obstacle to the acceptance of homosexuality. "The parents' generation embodies, or even claims to embody, the heterosexual norm from which the homosexual person deviates, making the announcement of homosexuality problematic. What is more, parents often perceive their child's homosexuality as incompatible with the perpetuation of their lineage, which further complicates their acceptance of their child's homosexuality." *Revue française d'études américaines*, Issue 97, 2003/3, pp. 99-117. My translation.

³¹ Eve K. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, pp. 79-80.

³² *Ibid*, p. 3.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 8.

³⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 77-80.

³⁵ David Halperin, *Saint Foucault. Towards a Gay Hagiography*, pp. 43-44.

³⁶ Eve K. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 155.

³⁷ *Ibid*.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 81.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 164.

consequence of a historical and political construction designed to perpetuate the distinction between homosexual and heterosexual individuals.

Heterosexuals strive to read homosexuality in the closet through a grid of socially accepted meanings. In this complex semiotic logic, where homosexuality is more fantasized than vocalized, the figure of the gay man becomes a projection, a conceptual and semiotic reservoir for a multitude of incongruent and contradictory notions:

These contradictory notions not only serve to define the binary opposite of homosexuality by (and as a) default; they also put into play a series of double binds that are uniquely oppressive to those who fall under the description of 'homosexual,' double binds whose operation is underwritten and sustained by socially entrenched discursive and institutional practices. As constructed by homophobic discourse, 'the homosexual' is indeed and impossibly—and, it now appears, fatally—contradictory creature. For the 'homosexual' is simultaneously a social misfit, an unnatural monster or freak, a moral failure, and a sexual pervert...[heterosexuality] constantly produces as a manipulably and spectacularly contradictory figure of transgression so as to deflect attention—by means of accusation—from its own incoherence.⁴⁰

Beatriz Preciado sees the interpretation of signs in homosexuality as “a real lie within a lie.”⁴¹ She agrees with Sedgwick's analysis, stating that:

This system of truth in lies is similar to what Eve K. Sedgwick has called the epistemology of the closet. Homosexuality in the closet functions according to a paradoxical dialectic of the revealed and the obscured, and it will be recognized precisely through the marks it resorts to in order to conceal itself. Bodies, looks, silences, voice inflections and gestures are the eloquent figures of homosexuality. Homosexuality is a precise system for producing, codifying and decoding signs. Above all, it is a complex system of representation.⁴²

Unlike Sedgwick and Preciado, Lawrence R. Schehr⁴³ fails to capture the complexity of the closet, reducing it to a metaphor of repression/release:

The closet would be real, and the irony would be the transparency of the closet door and walls. All it takes is the ability to read to see through the walls or the door of the other's closet...Now, seeing through the other's closet is a refiguration of the panopticon: the gaze of the other who dominates, in other words, the heteronormative gaze. Thus, the other transformation would be "coming out": coming out of the closet as one would come out of Plato's cave. Moving from confinement to light and fullness, to aletheia. And again, the implication would be duality, the binarity of "in/out," inside/outside: the great problem with the closet metaphor is this duality it seems to encourage.⁴⁴

And yet, Sedgwick insists that to come out does not end anyone's relation to the closet, including turbulently the closet of the other.⁴⁵ The metaphor Schehr uses to describe the closet as a place of power through transparency recalls Foucault's text on “Bentham's Panopticon”⁴⁶ and the trap of visibility. Let us recall the philosopher's description:

The peripheral building is divided into cells, each spanning the full thickness of the building; each cell has two windows, one facing in and the other out, allowing light to pass right through the cell. Through the effect of backlighting, we can see from the tower, cut out exactly against the light, small captive silhouettes in the cells on the periphery. So many cages, so many little theaters where each actor is alone, perfectly individualized, and

⁴⁰ David Halperin, *Saint Foucault. Towards a Gay Hagiography*, pp. 45-47.

⁴¹ Beatriz Preciado, *Manifeste contra-sexuel*, Paris, Balland, 2000, p. 130. My translation.

⁴² *Ibid.* My translation.

⁴³ Lawrence R. Schehr considers *Epistemology of the Closet* as “the most well-known version of the social constructivist view of homosexuality in literature.” As cited in *The Shock of Men: Homosexual Hermeneutics in French Writing*, Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 20.

⁴⁴ Lawrence R. Schehr, « Filiations queer ? », *Rue Descartes*, p. 23.

⁴⁵ Eve K. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 81.

⁴⁶ Conceived by Jeremiah Bentham in the 18th century, this architectural and optical device creates a surveillance system that induces a conscious and permanent state of visibility in the prisoner, who must never know if he is being watched.

constantly visible... Visibility is a trap... Those who are subjected to a field of visibility, and who know it, take on the constraints of power; they become the principle of their own subjection.⁴⁷

In « Après Stonewall, le déplacement de la frontière entre le 'soi' public et le 'soi' privé »,⁴⁸ American historian George Chauncey considers the closet as a process of homosexual political resistance. Chauncey and Sedgwick agree that homosexuality continued to flourish even under repression. Chauncey questions the "coming out of the closet" paradigm (pre-Stonewall *versus* post-Stonewall), preferring instead the "double life" paradigm.

Halperin invites us to replace Foucault's words "silence" and "discourse" with Sedgwick's⁴⁹ equivalents "ignorance" and "knowledge," thus summarizing Sedgwick's entire project. To illustrate, he points to this key passage from Foucault, quoted by Sedgwick: "There is not one but many silences (ignorances), and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses (epistemologies)."⁵⁰ Beyond a certain level of conceptual divergence, Halperin adds, it is enough to substitute "'homosexuality' for 'madness' et 'heterosexuality' for 'reason' in these formulations and you have...many of the grounding axioms of contemporary queer theory."⁵¹

Sedgwick's analysis, Halperin says, provides us with an excellent example of "the basic method of Foucauldian discourse analysis, which is to refuse to engage with the content of particular authoritative discourses—in this case, with the content of homophobic discourses—and to analyze discourses in terms of their overall strategies."⁵² Halperin then gives us his own Foucauldian reading of the "closet," as follows:

The closet is nothing, first of all, if not the product of complex relations of power. The only reason to be *in* the closet is to protect oneself from the many and virulent sorts of social disqualification that one would suffer were the discreditable fact of one's sexual orientation more widely known. To "closet" one's homosexuality is also to submit oneself to the social imperative imposed on gay people by non-gay-identified people, the imperative to shield the latter not from the knowledge of one's homosexuality so much as from the necessity of acknowledging the knowledge of one's homosexuality...*Coming out is an act of freedom, then, not in the sense of liberation but in the sense of resistance.*⁵³

In "Construire des significations queer"⁵⁴ (1998), Sedgwick argues for a non-separating, non-assimilating, multiple conception of humanity in terms of identity and sexuality. She sees queer as both "a stigma and a potentiality."⁵⁵ More specifically, she states:

The open matrix of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, resonances, failures or excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of one's gender and sexuality are not (or cannot be) constrained to monolithic meanings.⁵⁶

Sedgwick goes on to say:

Queer is a moment, a movement, a motivation that must continue, recur, swirl, and disturb. The word queer itself means across...across sexes, across genders, across "perversions". The concept of queer in this sense is transitive in many ways.⁵⁷

In a nutshell, Sedgwick offers us a vision of the closet that goes beyond the simple binary of inside/outside to emphasize the subtle dialectic of hidden/unseen. Exposure and concealment are not opposites, nor are they separable, for the unacknowledged secret

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*, Paris, Gallimard, 1975, p. 201. My translation.

⁴⁸ George Chauncey, « Après Stonewall, le déplacement de la frontière entre le 'soi' public et le 'soi' privé, » in *Histoire et sociétés*, 3, Summer 2002, pp. 45-59. Also *Gay New York 1890-1940*, translated from the American by Didier Eribon, Fayard, 2003.

⁴⁹ David Halperin, *Saint Foucault. Towards a Gay Hagiography*, p. 37.

⁵⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. An Introduction*, New York, Pantheon, 1978, p. 27. As cited in *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 3.

⁵¹ David Halperin, *Saint Foucault. Towards a Gay Hagiography*, pp. 39-40.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 38.

⁵³ *Ibid*, pp. 29-30.

⁵⁴ Sedgwick, « Construire des significations queer », *Les études gay et lesbiennes*, pp. 109-116.

⁵⁵ Robert Harvey, « Entretiens avec Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick », *Rue Descartes*, p. 51. My translation.

⁵⁶ Sedgwick, « Construire des significations queer », *Les études gay et lesbiennes*, pp. 115-16. My translation.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*. My translation.

may become an open secret once confessed. Thus, she concludes, the in/out dichotomy does not fit the epistemology of the closet.

With regard to the theory of performativity, Judith Butler proposes to interrogate the link between sex, gender and power in order to reveal the mechanisms that produce and regulate sexual difference and identities, and to denaturalize the sex/gender binomial, arguing that gender does not follow from sex: "gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality in general, does not seem to follow from gender."⁵⁸ Since sex is itself a product of gender⁵⁹, she rejects any exact correlation between sex/gender/sexuality.

Once gender is independent of sex and sexuality, as Butler suggests, it becomes a fluctuating signifier. In other words, a woman's or a man's body can indistinctly signify masculine or feminine:

When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.⁶⁰

In Butler's analysis, sex and gender are produced and conveyed by knowledge-power systems that operate on the dual basis of male domination and the constraint of heterosexuality:

The univocity of sex, the internal coherence of gender, and the binary framework for both sex and gender are considered throughout as regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalize the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression.⁶¹

Gender is the discursive or cultural means by which biological sex is established as pre-discursive or pre-cultural. Butler points out that power is the mechanism by which gender is created in order to naturalize and establish sex:

Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as "prediscursive", prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts.⁶²

Teresa De Lauretis also advocates this idea:

Gender is one such apparatus, with sexuality as its material ground and the body as its support or...then what produces and regulates a specific power differential between women and men through gender...is not 'biological fact' but rather the institution of heterosexuality.⁶³

In Butler's conceptualization, gender serves as the foundational element upon which the fictitious construction of a binary, hierarchical identity is erected. It is a pervasive imperative to ascribe cultural significance to the body. Consequently, she poses the following inquiry:

To what extent do regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity, the internal coherence of the subject, indeed, the self-identical status of the person? To what extent is "identity" a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience? And how do the regulatory practices of gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity?⁶⁴

According to Butler, identity categories are constructed by discursive practices and regulatory norms. Consequently, she argues that there is no identity in either gender or sex: "This construct called "sex" is as culturally constructed as gender, with the

⁵⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York & London, Routledge, 1990, pp. 135-136.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶³ Teresa De Lauretis, « Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness, » *Feminist Studies*, vol. 16, Issue 1, Summer 1990, p. 128.

⁶⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, pp. 16-17.

consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all."⁶⁵ The gender identity that emerges from the intertwined concepts of sex, gender, and desire is a mere chimera for her: "The parodic repetition of gender exposes...the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance."⁶⁶

Butler envisages heterosexuality⁶⁷ as a "matrix of intelligibility,"⁶⁸ elucidating the manner in which sexual difference and the mechanisms of its institution give rise to bodies, identities, cultural roles, and knowledge: "The term 'heterosexual matrix'...designate[s] that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, gender, and desires are naturalized."⁶⁹ Queer Theory engages with the social representations⁷⁰ that appear to be closely aligned with the matrices of intelligibility as described by Butler: "The domains of political and linguistic 'representation' set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject."⁷¹

In Butler's analysis, the assumption of the existence of the gender binary implies the tacit recognition of the mimetic relationship between sex and gender: "The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it."⁷² The question of identity, she insists, is relevant to changing the paradigm of worldview:

The unproblematic claim to 'be' a woman and 'be' heterosexual would be symptomatic of that metaphysics of gender substances...this claim tends to subordinate the notion of gender under that of identity and to lead to the conclusion that a person is a gender and is one in virtue of his or her sex.⁷³

Butler proposes the constructivist idea of a *continuum* of sexes and genders in which identity is constantly reshaped. Drawing on the philosophy of language, she defines gender and gender identity as performative. According to John L. Austin, the performative indicates that "to say" is "to do,"⁷⁴ as in "I now pronounce you man and wife." Since identity is inherent in performance, there is no reason for Butler to naturalize gender difference: "The gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality."⁷⁵

As Butler mentions, gender results from the repetition of norms that determine meaning and the relationship to the body: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."⁷⁶ Here, the body acquires an identity through the constant representation of gender:

Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.⁷⁷

The illusion of a masculine or feminine disposition is thus created by directed actions, gestures and desire:

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 7.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p. 146.

⁶⁷ Monique Wittig was the first to consider heterosexuality as a system of power in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1992; *La pensée straight*, Paris, Baland, Le Rayon / Modernes, 2001.

⁶⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 17.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 151, n5.

⁷⁰ Denise Jodelet defines social representations as "a form of knowledge that is socially elaborated and shared, has a practical aim and contributes to the construction of a reality common to a social whole". Social representations are also, in her words, "systems of interpretation [that] govern our relationship to the world and to others, and guide and organize social behavior and communication. Denise Jodelet, « Représentations sociales : un domaine en expansion », *Les représentations sociales*, Paris, PUF, 1989, p. 36.

⁷¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 2.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 6.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 21.

⁷⁴ J. L. Austin, *Quand dire c'est faire*, Paris, Seuil, 1970, pp. 41-42.

⁷⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 136.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 33.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 136.

Acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality.⁷⁸

In Butler's view, the genre is a parody, an imitation without an original: "The parody is of the very notion of an original."⁷⁹ The performance of drag and butch/fem role plays overplays and thwarts the cultural mechanisms that produce the coherence of heterosexual identity and the practice of compulsory heterosexuality. Gender parody is employed with the intention of overturning gender stereotypes, which may be described as *genderfucking*:

The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities...it gives us a clue to the way in which the relationship between primary identification—that is, the original meanings accorded to gender—and subsequent gender experience might be reframed.⁸⁰

In conclusion, it is our intention to draw attention to the contribution of Butler's theory of performativity to the field of theater. Her reflections on the art of cross-dressing and the repeated stylization of bodies align with the imitative structure of theater, defined by Bruce Wilshire as "the art of imitation that reveals imitation."⁸¹ Herbert Blau also corroborates this idea: "Theatre implies no *first time*, no origin, but only recurrence and reproduction."⁸²

Thus conceived, the theatrical device makes it possible to account for illusions of substance and to unmask the myth of the authentic. Such perspectives allow us to understand that in theatrical performances, characters are created through role-playing, appearing as "desubstantialized" figures, pure outsiders without an established identity. The question of whether the disembodied figures in question are necessarily de-eroticized is of great interest. This would mean that there is no desire inherent in the scene. Is this interpretation consistent with the nature of desire and the appeal of theater?

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⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

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