

Caught 'n 'e Frame?

Queer embodiment under heteropatriarchy

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To speak about embodiment, or to speak about being an embodied subject who exists in a relationship to particular normative frameworks, requires an understanding of what it means to be a 'body that matters.'¹ To 'speak as' an embodied subject is to 'speak through' a body that is invested with particular markers that denote a range of social positions, such as those associated with race, class, gender and sexuality, to name but a few. One particular question that these points about embodiment beg, then, is: what does it mean to be a body that cannot (or will not) approximate certain social norms? Questions such as these, particularly as they are informed by the work of Judith Butler, are of central importance when examining representations of 'queer embodiment.' The challenge presented by such forms of embodiment is to examine how they may both resist and conform to the norms for embodiment that circulate under white heteropatriarchy,² and to identify some of the possibilities that may exist for speaking as an embodied queer subject.

In talking about 'queer embodiment,' I take my lead from the work of William J. Spurlin who, in proposing that Princess Diana can be understood as a 'queer icon,' suggests that the term 'queer' may have little to do with sexuality or sexual object preference, and more to do with the disjunctures or paradoxes that certain modes of being may engender. Spurlin suggests that Diana 'queers' the heterosexual norm because

photographed with Charles, [she] pierces, ruptures, and perhaps wounds the fantasy of the picture-perfect heterosexual couple; the spectator's attention seems drawn invariably to her, not to Charles and what he, and his family stand for.³

In this sense, to 'queer' is to destabilise, to challenge, or to present a critique of established norms. Taking this particular understanding of queer as my starting place, I want to consider what it might mean to engage in queer forms of embodiment: how are bodies materialised in particular normative ways under heteropatriarchy, and how may queer forms of embodiment challenge this?

In order to engage with these questions about queer embodiment, I consider one particular cultural enactment of queer embodiment within an Australian television programme. An examination of how the self-proclaimed 'gender illusionist' Courtney Act was represented and engaged with in the first series of

Australian Idol may assist in highlighting how gendered norms surrounding materiality are potentially queered or subverted, often at the very moment of their (seemingly normative) enactment. Thus the title of this paper is posed as a question: to what degree are subversive gender enactments caught in the frame of heteropatriarchy, and in what ways do such enactments generate the potential for rendering visible the ‘instability of positioning’⁴ that shapes the hegemony of heteropatriarchy? In other words, how do such subversive enactments not only demonstrate the formation of queer forms of embodiment, but also, following Butler,⁵ demonstrate the illusion of gender that structures heteropatriarchy? I would suggest that performers such as Courtney Act do more than simply make queer subjectivities visible within the media. They also unsettle the dominance of heteropatriarchy by challenging the *a priori* status of normative gendered embodiment. Such challenges may be a means through which to destabilise the *a priori* status of gender and sexuality as ‘material objects,’ and thus be a means to recognise the ways in which discourses of materiality shape queer bodies, and exclude them from representation. The task of this paper, then, is to keep these two understandings of materiality in flux, with the goal being an examination of how a politics of identification and embodiment may inform queer identities within, and perhaps beyond, heteropatriarchy.

Discourses of Materiality: Shaping the Illusion of Gender

In order to provide a theoretical framework within which to understand the queer embodiment of Courtney Act, it is important to elaborate briefly on the role that normative discourses of materiality typically play in shaping embodiment under heteropatriarchy. As Butler contends in her work on materiality, *Bodies That Matter*, the ‘existence’ of ‘the body’ is often taken as a bottom line argument: constructionist accounts of embodiment aside, there is always a body that pre-exists language.⁶ Yet, as Butler has highlighted, this purportedly ‘real body’ is always already configured within a matrix of particular social relations; relations that create grids of intelligibility in regards to embodiment. Within such matrices, particular bodies are taken as being more ‘real’ than others. Certain bodies matter, while others do not. Moreover, the conflation of a supposedly ‘prediscursive body’ with a particular set of markers (for example, the norms of white, middle-class, able-bodied heterosexuality) results in the reification of these particular bodily markers as *a priori* facts, or as self evidently true.⁷

This perpetuation of the belief that normative embodiment is located within ‘real bodies’ may be understood as founded upon the construction of certain forms of embodiment as deviant. In particular, normative assumptions surrounding gender and sexuality (as they are configured under white heteropatriarchy) only

make sense within a system of representation that valorizes particular forms of embodiment,⁸ the result being that the normative (white, middle-class) heterosexual body is very much predicated upon the positioning of certain ‘other bodies’ (or indeed “non-bodies,” as Butler suggests⁹) as being outside of heterosexuality. In this way, categories such as ‘the homosexual’ or ‘the deviant’ function to mark out the borders of the heterosexual norm in regards to materiality. To claim a viable location under heteropatriarchy is thus in many ways to be positioned in relation to the norms of heterosexual embodiment – norms that deny their constitutive instability through the oppression or marginalisation of non-normative forms of embodiment.

One implication which arises from the norms that inform discourses of embodiment within Western cultures (particularly for those of us who identify ourselves as gendered or sexed bodies that do not / cannot conform to these norms) is the risk of reinforcing the hegemony of normative discourses by accepting them as central to our own embodiment. Thus, instead of detaching gender from its mooring in ‘real bodies,’ a reliance upon materiality as a series of normative enactments may only serve to reinforce the locus of gender as being in specific corporeal locations. What I would suggest is required, then, is an approach to understanding queer embodiment that challenges the conflation of the categories of ‘sexuality’ and ‘gender’ with the physical markers presumed to represent these categories. As Butler suggests, this requires the problematisation not only of the category ‘gender,’ but also the ways in which gender achieves its semblance of materiality.¹⁰ Instead of simply understanding constructions of gender as if they were arbitrary categories placed upon an *a priori* body, we need to examine the discursive practices that render ‘the body’ intelligible as a privileged location in the first place. To write our lived experience as a destabilisation of this privileged assumption requires that we continually challenge the ways in which normative constructions of gender and sexuality work to assert the hegemony of heteropatriarchy. In this way, particular forms of materiality may be re-read in ways that allow for a queering of heteropatriarchal norms surrounding embodiment.

Idolising Gender: Reading ‘Queer Materiality’

One of the ways in which a theorisation of ‘queer materiality’ may subvert the hegemony of heteropatriarchal forms of embodiment is through the strategic enactment of particular gender norms in non-normative ways. In this way, a discourse of ‘queer materiality’ may work to destabilise, rather than reinforce, the hegemony of heterosexuality. As Butler suggests, “gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or

exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm.”¹¹ The enactments of ‘gender illusionist’ Courtney Act may provide one means through which we may better understand how gender norms circulate and how they can be challenged. It is to this end that I now turn to elaborate further on Ms Act’s role in demonstrating the potential for an understanding of ‘queer materiality.’

The screening of the first series of *Australian Idol* marked the television debut of a self-defined ‘gender illusionist’ - Courtney Act. Her appearances on the programme resulted in a wide range of responses from other performers in the competition, as well as from the show’s judges and hosts. These responses initially took the form of an inability to accept the category ‘gender illusionist’ and its implications, and instead Ms Act was referred to as a ‘drag queen’ and a ‘transvestite.’ Ms Act rejected these labels, and instead continued to reassert an identity as a gender illusionist. The apparent inability of one of the show’s hosts to accept this label demonstrates the ways in which Ms Act’s gender enactments were positioned. The use of the more familiar term ‘transvestite’ thus worked to render Ms Act’s enactments intelligible by positioning her as a man “adopting the dress or manner of the opposite sex.”¹² In this way the normative status of heteropatriarchal gender binaries was reasserted, and Ms Act was positioned as merely ‘a boy playing dress ups.’ Yet if we read Ms Act’s enactments through the lens of Judith Butler’s conceptualisation of gender as performative, then we may see how Ms Act’s gender enactments evoked a form of queer materiality that challenged the normative status of embodiment under heteropatriarchy.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler deftly argues for an understanding of gender that sees it as the result of iterations. According to Butler, the repetitive ‘doing’ of gender grants it a semblance of stability and, indeed, materiality. Such an understanding of gender highlights its constructed nature, yet does so in ways that move far beyond the typical understanding of gender construction that often simplistically evokes the notion of ‘choice.’ In understanding gender as performative, Butler states that ‘being gendered’ is never the reflection of a pre-existing state, nor is something that we can choose: our lives are gendered in ways that exceed the clothes we wear or the actions we perform. Rather, gender norms form the basis of how we are identified as gendered subjects within Western societies. To be gendered in certain ways is to be rendered intelligible as a speaking subject. Yet such intelligibility is always conditional: it is reliant precisely upon the repetitive iteration of gendered norms. In this way, Ms Act’s enactments of particular forms of gendered embodiment may be seen as precisely that. They are not an imitation of what a woman ‘truly is,’ but rather a set of enactments that stand alongside all other enactments of the category ‘woman.’ My

use of the word 'enactment' here is intended to render more clearly the difference between Butler's theory of gender as performative, and the enactment or 'performance' of particular normative gender roles as demonstrated by Courtney Act clearer. As Butler suggests, "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names."¹³ Thus gender as a social category achieves its semblance of materiality through repetition. This may be contrasted with an understanding of gender 'role play' (for which I use the word 'enactment'), where people (such as Courtney Act) take up varying subject positions that are made available through normative discourses of gender. In this sense such 'gender enactments' are potentially proscribed by the intelligible limits of the category of gender.

Read in the light of Butler's notion of gender as performative, we may understand that the positioning of Ms Act as a 'drag queen' or 'transvestite' within the programme was necessary in order to shore up the illusion of a 'gender reality' that was presumed to pre-exist and thus underpin Ms Act's enactments. In *Australian Idol*, this was achieved through reference to the 'materiality' of Ms Act's embodied performances. Much emphasis was placed on Ms Act's simulation of 'a real woman' – the clothing, makeup, performance, and particularly the use of prosthetic breasts were often referred to. Interestingly, these responses mirrored the feedback given to many of the 'women' in the competition, who generally received far more comments about appearance than their 'male' counterparts. So while on the one hand Ms Act's enactments were initially framed as simply being those of a boy dressed up as a girl, as the series progressed the reliance on normative discourses of materiality to interpret gender meant that Ms Act was gradually and subtly re-positioned as 'being' a woman.

However, while we may understand this to be a demonstration of the instability of heteropatriarchal framings of gender and embodiment, there were continued attempts within the programme to position Ms Act's gender enactments as anomalous. There was little attempt to reflect upon the inadequacy of normative accounts of gendered embodiment when interpreting Ms Act's enactments. In one particular episode, which took place roughly half way through the series, the remaining contestants, half 'men' and half 'women,' gathered together to perform a song. And then there was Ms Act. This framing of Ms Act as being neither man nor woman was played upon in order to make possible a humorous interpretation of the gender illusionist's location within the group. In this way, the unsettling that Ms Act's enactments produced was managed through a reassertion of the supposedly untransgressable nature of gender. The question that must be asked, then, is how can it be possible to perform

subversive gender enactments that challenge, rather than simply reinforce, the illusion of gender? One example of this appeared in a clip that was shown of Ms Act subsequent to her eviction from the programme. In this *Australian Idol* episode, Ms Act was shown performing on stage in a nightclub. One of Ms Act's outfits involved a padded bustier, alongside an (equally padded!) codpiece. That this particular outfit was commented upon by one of the hosts after the clip was shown demonstrates that such subversive enactments of gender could not be as easily assimilated into a normative framework for understanding gender as Ms Act's previous enactments had been. Ms Act's earlier performances on the show may thus be seen as a prelude to later, more subversive, challenges to heteropatriarchal gender binaries. In other words, while there were repeated attempts to stabilise Ms Act's gender enactments into some form of coherent narrative that could be seen to mirror normative forms of embodiment, Ms Act on the whole refused to be party to these attempts at co-option. As a result, although some of the responses to Ms Act's enactments sought to frame them within heteropatriarchal understandings of embodiment, the enactments often exceeded, and indeed questioned, such narrow boundaries.

Towards a Queer Politics of Identification and Embodiment

Having elaborated how Courtney Act may be seen to have refused a normative location within the first series of *Australian Idol*, it is nonetheless important to return to my earlier question: how may any gendered enactment, no matter how 'subversive', be proscribed by the limits set for intelligibility under white heteropatriarchy? I believe that this question necessarily draws our attention to how intelligibility works in the service of hegemony. In other words, how does the imperative to 'be intelligible' reinforce certain normative frames of reference for interpreting gender? I would suggest that it is often the case that there is a requirement that any engagement with queer materiality remain intelligible in order to avoid a failure of recognition in regards to how queer bodies are read.

These challenges in relation to intelligibility point toward the inability of binary distinctions to adequately account for a queer politics of identification.¹⁴ What this suggests to me, then, is that we require an approach to understanding both queer identification and embodiment that recognises the utility of working subversively with/in heteropatriarchy in order to demonstrate the instability of the system itself, while acknowledging how such acts of subversion can potentially work in the service of particular norms. This proposed approach to a queer politics of identification may take as its starting place the legitimacy of queer identities and forms of embodiment *in their own right*. The goal of starting

from such a place (as queer theory has long elaborated) would not simply be to attain 'equal rights' within a system structured for heterosexuals, but would rather be to develop understandings of queer forms of identification that do not simply reinstate the normative binaries of heteropatriarchal categories of gender and sexuality. Thus, in contrast to the concept of 'identity politics' – which has been used by various marginalised groups of people to fight for 'equal rights' – a queer politics of identification may take as its starting place a desire to challenge notions of identity which reflect the taken-for-granted status of sexuality and gender under white heteropatriarchy.¹⁵ Likewise, a queer politics of identification may examine the ways in which certain forms of identity and embodiment are rendered intelligible, while others are marginalised or silenced. This would require a focus on the processes of identification, through which cultural artifacts such as 'identity' and 'sexuality' take on their semblance of materiality. A queer politics of identification may take, therefore, as its central concern a) the ways in which certain embodied subject positions and bodies achieve hegemony, and b) the possibility for making alternate identifications that subvert normative claims to embodiment. The challenge, then, for a queer politics of identification is to keep in flux the conceptual tools which could otherwise result in fixed or stabilised understandings of identification.¹⁶ In this way, queer identification need not be understood as the 'opposite' of heterosexual identification. Instead, queer identifications may come to constitute a radically different understanding of desire, being and embodiment.

In her formulation of what she terms the 'lesbian phallus,' Butler suggests that subversion or reinscription can occur as a result of the fact that

the signifier can come to signify *in excess* of its structurally mandated position; indeed, the signifier can be repeated in contexts and relations that come to *displace* the privileged status of the signifier...Moreover, if the phallus symbolizes only through taking anatomy as its occasion, then the more various and unanticipated anatomical (and non-anatomical) occasions for its symbolization, the more unstable that signifier becomes.¹⁷

That what is signified can have little or no 'originary relation' to how it is signified highlights the radical potential that a politics of queer identification and embodiment may hold. In other words, queer embodiment may be far less about mimicry or approximation, and far more about a style of signification. This style is premised upon the incommensurable difference between the claimed correspondence of signifier (for example, certain body parts) and signified (for example, gendered embodiment) that informs normative forms of materiality under heteropatriarchy. Such a style of signification may produce a form of queer materiality that refuses any claims to a one-to-one correspondence between 'the

body’ and identification. In regards to Courtney Act, this would suggest that rather than reading Ms Act’s gendered enactments as ‘approximating a female body,’ we may read such enactments as challenging how we read embodiment. It may well be precisely because of the paradoxical relationship between what is presumed to be Ms Act’s ‘real body’ and the gendered enactments that we were presented with in the context of *Australian Idol* (and beyond) that we can see one form of queer embodiment taking shape.

These points about the formulation of one mode of queer embodiment are highlighted in a lyric from Ms Act’s debut single: “I’m a walking contradiction – why is that?” This lyric demonstrates what we may term the ‘critical irony’ of Ms Act’s gendered enactments. On the one hand, Ms Act acknowledges the ‘contradiction’ that a gender illusionist presents, while on the other hand, Ms Act asks an important question: “why is that?” What is it about white heteropatriarchy that makes a ‘gender illusionist’ so contradictory, and what is it that a gender illusionist is actually in contradiction to? Is it because ‘looking like a woman’ when you are ‘known’ to ‘be a man’ is a contradiction in terms of normative gender binaries? This may well be the case, but I would suggest that Ms Act’s claim to be a “walking contradiction” signifies much more than this. Ms Act’s enactments may not solely contradict normative gender binaries. They may also suggest that these binaries are themselves a contradiction: they exist because of reiteration and enactment, not because they have any internal consistency or ‘material reality.’

To return to the challenge that a queer politics of identification and embodiment may present to normative understandings of materiality as it is configured under heteropatriarchy: we may understand that while normative forms of materiality are accorded a semblance of intelligibility and continuity that continues to render them important sites of difference in Western societies, there still exists a great potential for queer understandings of materiality to destabilise heterosexual hegemony. By pointing towards the instability of positioning that underlies heteropatriarchy, queer forms of embodiment may work to bring into question the intelligibility of all gendered enactments, rather than simply those that are designated as non-normative. By examining queer embodiment under heteropatriarchy, it may be possible to understand both the ways in which queer materiality is often enacted within a relationship to heteropatriarchal norms, but also to render visible the ways in which such norms are themselves founded upon (or indeed founder upon) a disavowal of queer materiality. For, if we are to understand the heterosexual imperative as always already structured through the disavowal of that which is positioned as non-normative, then heterosexual embodiment is queered precisely at the moment of its iteration. In other words, to

be a heterosexual subject who is always already in a relationship to those who are positioned as 'outside' the norms of heterosexuality is to be reliant upon the very existence of those who are located outside: there can be no constituted heterosexual interior without the corollary queer (or non-heterosexual) exterior. In this way, heterosexual embodiment may be understood as always already in a relationship with that which it disclaims. In other words, it can never be free of those upon whose difference the supposed sameness of heterosexuality is founded. Although this does not prevent heterosexual norms from being oppressive and violent, it does provide a space through which the instability of heteropatriarchy can be exposed, and queer embodiment claimed as a form of identification in its own right.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to demonstrate the potentials and pitfalls of using existing gender categories when attempting to challenge the hegemony of heteropatriarchy. Through a brief examination of the enactments of 'gender illusionist' Courtney Act, I have sought to examine some of the very complex issues that surround the deployment of a queer discourse of embodiment. The example of Courtney Act, I believe, highlights the role that subversive enactments of gender can play in drawing attention to the foundational instability of normative forms of embodiment, predicated as they are upon an assumed relationship between what is being signified, and what does the signifying. By disrupting this assumed relationship, queer forms of embodiment do more than simply provide examples of boys dressing up as girls. Rather, an example such as Ms Act challenges precisely what it means to be intelligible 'as a boy' or 'as a girl,' and thus demonstrates how intelligibility most often comes as a result of the oppression or marginalisation of non-normative forms of embodiment.

To return to the question posed in my opening paragraph, we may understand the paradoxical similarities and incommensurabilities that exist between 'being a (normative) body' within normative frameworks, and 'being a body' that cannot (or will not) approximate social norms. While to be a body that refuses (or is refused) a normative position under white heteropatriarchy often means to live a life of oppression, this does not necessarily tell the entire story. For, similarly, to be *any* body seeking intelligibility under heteropatriarchy requires the assumption of a wide range of norms around embodiment. Gender norms oppress us all, albeit it in highly differential ways. This exemplifies Spurlin's point about the term 'queer,' where he suggests that engaging in acts of 'queering' may well have very little to do with sexual identity, and everything to do with resistance to oppressive norms. Although gender norms operate in a field

of power relations that continue to proscribe certain forms of materiality, there is nonetheless the potential for signification to be disrupted, or more precisely, to be shown up as always already disrupted, incomplete, and open to contestation.

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- ¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- ² The term white heteropatriarchy may be understood here as referring to an institutionalised set of practices of domination and oppression that privilege the values of white, heterosexual, middle-class men. Of course, this is not intended to suggest that all white gay men or all white lesbians or all heterosexual white women etc. do not share in these privileges or benefit from the oppressions that they are founded upon. Rather, to refer to 'white heteropatriarchy' is to refer to a set of norms around gender, race and sexuality that privilege particular forms of intelligibility over others.
- ³ William J. Spurlin, "I'd Rather Be the Princess than the Queen! Mourning Diana as a Gay Icon," in *Queer Theory*, Iain Morland and Annabelle Willox, eds. (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2005), 162.
- ⁴ Niamh Stephenson, "'Speaking as Woman': Agency in Intersubjective Communication," *Australian Psychologist* 36 (2001): 119-26.
- ⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- ⁶ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 66.
- ⁷ See also Damien W. Riggs, "The Politics of Scientific Knowledge: Constructions of Sexuality and Ethics in the Conversion Therapy Literature," *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review* 5 (2004): 14-20.
- ⁸ Beryl C. Curt, *Textuality and Tectonics: Troubling Social and Psychological Science* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1994), 144.
- ⁹ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 15.
- ¹⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 70; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 26. For more on this in relation to constructions of gender and sexuality, see Valerie Harwood and Mary Lou Rasmussen, "Problematizing Gender and Sexual Identities," in *Out in the Antipodes: Australian and New Zealand Perspectives on Gay and Lesbian Issues in Psychology*, Damien W. Riggs and Gordon A. Walker, eds. (Perth: Brightfire Press, 2004).
- ¹¹ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 10.
- ¹² *Macquarie Concise Dictionary Third Edition* (NSW: Macquarie Library, 1998).
- ¹³ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 2. See also Jane Selby, "Psychoanalysis as a Critical Theory of Gender," in *Recent Trends in Theoretical Psychology*, Leendert P. Mos, Warren Thorngate, Bernie Kaplan and Henderikus J. Stam, eds. (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1993).
- ¹⁴ Diana Fuss, "Inside/out," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, Diana Fuss, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 5; Elspeth Probyn, *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1993), 11.
- ¹⁵ Damien W. Riggs and Lauren D. Riggs, "Talking about Heterosexism: Politics, Complicity and Identification," in *Out in the Antipodes: Australian and New Zealand Perspectives on Gay and Lesbian Issues in Psychology*, Damien W. Riggs and Gordon A. Walker, eds. (Perth: Brightfire Press, 2004), 417.
- ¹⁶ Ann Pellegrini, *Performance Anxieties: Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 17.
- ¹⁷ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 90, original emphases.