12-11-2017

Rocky Horror Sublimation: Identity as a Contingency of Experience

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Senior Thesis, Fall 2017

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(Photograph of Tim Curry as "Frank N' Furter", *RHPS* (1975), from fanpop.com, accessed 9/20/17; photograph of Laverne Cox as "Frank N' Furter", *RHPS: Let's Do The Time Warp, Again!* (2016), from vanityfair.com, accessed 9/20/17, photographs assumed to be in public domain).

Introduction

As of late, the queer academy has filled with responses to works of Judith Butler, Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, Donna Haraway, and others, who cumulatively formed the founding body of Queer Theory texts. A bulk of the responses come from epistemic positions that seem ignored by the first generation of Queer Theory, notably bi responses[1]. Around this time, Teresa Ebert (1992) decried the negative impacts which postmodernism as a wider cultural paradigm had on feminist theories, and that the approach to theory taken by Butler was a coy in-group signaling that "…puts in question one notion of theory (theory as explanatory critique) and favors another (theory as play, as affirmation and not explanation)" (1992, 11). Ebert's goal is to nudge Queer Theory away from obfuscated abstractions that reinforce the negative stereotype of academia as an ivory tower. This approach is one rooted in discourse theory as a means of getting at inequities through identity. How this perpetuates the harmful structures underpinning the discourse Butler examines will be the focus of this project. A reorientation of Queer Theory, away from a discursive-based identity, towards a material-based experience, can best handle critiques of Butler. Though an oversimplification, this project is: Marx instead of Foucault, Ebert (and Chomsky) over Lacan, with a splash of William James to ground critiques in a productive, flexible, durable epistemology.

The 21st century is rife with remakes of films from the prior century. One such film is the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (RHPS onward), which remade the 1975 original in 2016 to a version, which, to the cries of one critic, had lost its "subversive magic" (Genzlinger, 2016). Neil Genzlinger's remark that some of the changes in the remake are "… soul-killing in the same way

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[1] Notable works that have been highly influential upon subsequent thought are: Clare Hemmings' (2002) *Bisexual Spaces*, and Stephen Angelides' (2001) *History of Bisexuality*

that hearing a cherished rock anthem used in a television commercial [are]," (ibid) provides a point of entry for the next key component of this project.

Such soul-killing trends as that described in the *RHPS* remake already have a term, coined by Herbert Marcuse: *repressive desublimation*. This concept, which he applies to various trends of this capitalist consumer society, is the removal of imagination, contradiction, and criticism of the established reality so as to make consuming easier.

How Marcuse's social theory concept of repressive desublimation pertains to feminist theory may be unclear. Repressive desublimation as a trend is one wherein the unreal and/or imaginary are subsumed by the society's conception of reality, precluding critical reflection. As a founding voice in Queer Theory, Butler approached solving the socio-political harms of women's subjugation by focusing on what in society's framing of knowledge, its productive discourse, fostered such harms. Butler's approach preserves, rather than rejects, the patriarchy's desublimated epistemological position because a discursive-identity approach treats knowledge in the same problematic fashion: as discrete, truncated, committed categories, as reified, not living. Even so, Butler's skepticism of universalizing discourse is supported by philosophies of experience, and will be preserved to elaborate upon Marcuse's.

The critical evaluation of the identity-based approach Butler and others take to problematize hegemonic[2] knowledge frameworks is intended to posit historically sensitive, socio-imaginative experience as a more effective basis for Queer Theory. A number of theorists since – Elizabeth Grosz, Julia Serano, and Maria Pramaggiore – will be engaged anew with Butler's position through a Marcusian lens, to propose how a different framework, one focused

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[2] This term is a common denominator stand-in for what Butler calls the 'phallogocentric system,' Serano names 'oppositional sexist trends,' and what I will refer to as 'heterosexist.'

on the structure of heterosexist epistemology, is more productive. Reorienting Butler's criticism of gender inequality in the United States towards a view cognizant of the ecology that is knowledge, value, and experience will better allow a Queer Theory approach to evaluate the roots of societal perpetuation of subjugation.

Such an introduction is best elucidated by returning to the "subversive magic" (Genzlinger; 2016) that is Dr. Victor Frankenstein's transvestite counterpart, Dr. Frank N' Furter. To provide a grounding substrate upon which to examine the relevant theories, a comparison of the original to the remake of *RHPS* constitutes the first section. From there, the second section consists of terminology outlining the analogous points between the theory and the artistic/filmic examples, and sketches of Butler's theoretical framework alongside relevant contemporaries, like Sherry Ortner and Donna Haraway. The third section will be focused primarily on Butler's limited interactions with phenomenology as it pertains to discourse and identity, and how her approach could benefit from such interaction. Following from this foray into experiential philosophy, the fourth section will be putting William James and Marcuse into conversation, in order to illustrate how Butler's lens could benefit from some of their hues. The final section before the conclusion is perhaps the most critical of Butler, as it focuses on epistemic positions she ignores: bisexuality through Pramaggiore, and trans* experience through Serano.

Meant as a constructive critique, the goal of this project is not a rejection of Butler. Rather, the detailing exploration of certain blind spots of her theory is meant to make efforts towards preserving works foundational to this discipline, Queer Theory. Some humor is to be expected, as it is difficult to attenuate oneself to dense webs of jargon without it. If you have not yet done so, please turn your clocks to midnight as we examine *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

1. Polish, Sanitize, and Produce: Repressive Desublimation and the Flattening of Experience

An exploration of the relevant concepts through the *RHPS* helps to better render the nuances of this conversation understandable. The comparison between the original film and its remake serves not only this, but also opens critical, expository spaces to further examine matters of gender. Along the film's trajectory from original to remake (wherein the subversive magic is lost) are examples challenging the heterosexist epistemology without preserving its assumptions where said examples' "… struggle with history… [reaffirming that] previous modes of protest and refusal cannot be recaptured…" (Marcuse; 1969, 89). This dynamic illustrates how sublimative experiences initially empower individuals through revealing spaces wherein one can question an unquestioning society, and over time, what was once sublimating erodes in this "struggle with history" (ibid) until it loses that power. Thus, the need for ever-(re)sublimating is a narrative struggle. Thus, the possibility that the same tool, method, or act that was once sublimative may not be so any longer: a 1954 film about a giant monster destroying cities in Japan was powerful, and moved many to think about the way wars are fought, because it was in the context of less than a decade previously, two such monsters having been unleashed. Now, this trope, this character, has become a parody, a slogan, a meme. So much the fate for sublimative experiences left to erode. How the *RHPS* remake polishes and sanitizes key elements found in the original piece illustrates a resignation to desublimated life, rather than fighting against such norms.

1.1 Just A Sweet Transvestite: Subversive Eros and the Confluence of Flesh and Fiction

Both original stipulations of terms as well as Marcuse's own stipulations will inform the particular angles employed in a brief analysis of these films. First, polishing refers simply to professional avoidance of mistakes, inconsistencies, or rough edges (think of post-production techniques like airbrushing, or the norm for widely disseminated works to be typed, not hand-written); whereas sanitization is the removal of epistemological, aesthetic, and/or ethical conflicts that would be created by experiences that do not lay flush with one's own framework. Coming from Marcuse now, and reliant on efforts against the above-stipulated societal trends, is tension[3]. As this will be returned to later (Section 2.1), for now, consider that tension is simply the producing/produced dynamic growing out of sublimated experience. More relevant to this project, it sustains and is sustained by subversive inconsistencies experienced when challenging the viewing of the world through an uncontested, heterosexist lens. Both polishing and sanitization are techniques to preempt dissociation, and thus tension, when one is experiencing works of art and performances.

One of the protagonists in the film is Doctor Frank N' Furter, a transvestite scientist who is working to create a life à la Doctor Victor Frankenstein. The actor portraying this character is a masculine male, Tim Curry, who wears what Western society would consider female/feminine clothing: high heels, fishnet stockings, panties, and a bustier. In the 2016 version, the same character is portrayed by a trans*[4] woman, Laverne Cox, who wears instead a red sleeveless dress cut very short, studded with black, and shoulder-length gloves of the same material. Where

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[3] Tension is a technical term used by Marcuse to refer to contradictions between mutually opposed perception, experiences and/or thoughts.

[4] I purposefully use trans* in order to defer to prior scholarship recognizing the vast diversity and multi-faceted dynamics of what tends too often to be turned into the monolith, "transgender". See April Scarlette Callis (2014) esp. 72-74; Ann Garry (2011) esp. section 3; and Julia Serano (2016) esp. 26-30, 95-100, 112-113.

Curry wears an exaggerated-size pearl necklace, Cox wears a choker studded with silver skulls; Curry has a perm and a full face of overdone makeup (with foundation several shades too light for his complexion) that would easily draw a grossed-out engrossment from onlookers, whereas Cox has a cropped spiked-up hairdo with expertly applied makeup that could draw attention, but without the potential for repulsion.

First, a discussion on the apparent quality of the films. The polish applied to the remake is distinctive of a big-budget Hollywood film, which already applies a more palatable and ordinary gloss. Cox's ensemble is a custom-made piece from an A-list movie wardrobe. Curry is wearing an ensemble cobbled together of iconic items worn by Drag Queens and Transvestites, especially of that era. If one were to accidentally walk into a theater showing either film, one would be surprised, shocked, and possibly disappointed at the everyday quality of Curry's 1975 portrayal, while one could watch Cox's 2016 portrayal without having to do anything but enjoy the consumption of a professionally made film. Simply put, this polish applied to the 2016 version has removed the opportunity for an audience member to feel dissociation in the (at least superficially speaking) low-quality of the film, and thus the opportunity to experience the tension caused by a previously untouched assumption typically held in the United States: low-budget equals low-quality.

Next comes a discussion of differences between the two actors, and the sanitization used to produce an easily commodified and consumed film. This is a very difficult subject to broach for those who appreciate the advances made for LGBTQ dignity because having a transgender woman like Laverne Cox in that role is empowering: it brings positive visibility to trans* people. However, the choice to have a trans* woman play the role of a transvestite (an archaic term often

conflated with transgender, and more often used pejoratively) vastly changes the value that can be assigned to that possibility for empowerment[5].

Discussing the actors simultaneously with the characters more fully captures the experiences the audience has of them. This ties in to a later discussion (section 2.2) on phenomenological interactions with a Butlerian approach. For now, entertain the indisseverability of actor and character.

1.2 He Sang, She Sang: Comingling Impacts Upon Characters by Actors' Sex and Expression

What follows from the imaginative treatment of characters and actors as indistinct is a problem for the *RHPS* remake. Tim Curry as a cisgender male, who from his secondary sex characteristics, offers little to no room for feminine perception and gendering. Frank N' Furter's gender bending comes from the clashing of a patently masculine body with feminine artifacts and performances, something precluded by the given dichotomous norms around sex and gender. Gender bending sustains the subversive force of non-normative experiences of gender. This is

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[5] For one, there is a dilemma of being seen as equivalent by those who do not understand the nuances of trans* experience. This is complicated by the ambiguity between a cisgender (or person whose gender identity and expression conform enough to their assigned sex so as not to cause dissonance) male and a trans* woman providing differing portrayals of a character identified as a transvestite. The appropriateness of the term transvestite is not so much the issue here, but rather whether or not a transvestite is distinct from a trans* person.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* 4 and 5 for psychology considers them distinct (transgenderism is not included as a mental health disorder). Many scholars have refuted this assertion, including Matt Drabek (2014), and Serano (2016); yet Schilt and Westbrook (2009) still categorize a broad swath of identities under "trans" (445), as does Heyes (2003). So as not to digress too much from the thesis, I will opt for a middle-ground stance and consider a transvestite to be different from a transgender person, with both still being intelligibly ascribed the umbrella label, trans*. (Note: this is not meant to be an endorsement nor a rejection of whether the *DSM* is problematically cis-centric, rather a sidestepping of a conversation outside of my academic realm of study). Laverne Cox and Tim Curry are portraying a trans* character (a transvestite), Cox as a feminine trans* woman, and Curry as a semi-androgynous cis man.

why Marcuse relies on imagination to inform resublimation. This concept of gender bending is also recurrent to the central argument being constructed

Ostensibly straight, male viewers will see the way Curry's buttocks are framed by feminine clothing; they will see legs sliding into pointed high heels, and how his bustier frames his torso. Such dress also reveals body hair around the thighs, on the chest, under the armpits, on the arms, and through his fishnet stockings. This, along with his broad shoulders and deep voice, create powerful dissociations and rough edges, against a normative portrayal of femininity. This is a sublimated portrait of a character meant to inspire not only desire but also repulsion. Particularly for the presumed heterosexual audience of both females and males, this produces a tension. For a typical straight viewer this is an inseparable mix of attraction, perhaps even lust, as well as repulsion, confusion, or a rationalized rejection of the felt attraction.

This confluence of dichotomy-breaking erotic experiences creates a tension between these newly perceived phenomena and the individually held-norms that a socialized normative framework has impinged on them. This experience is one of what is usually polarized as masculinity and femininity existing without desublimation into dichotomous absolutes. Such challenge to a viewer's assumptions sparks tension between the viewer's own instantaneous erotic reaction and subsequent socialized rationalization. "Am I straight?", "am I actually bisexual?", "why am I attracted to this… man?" such questions – which would not have arisen, had Curry not presented such a mix of specifically masculine and feminine traits – cannot be answered unless one's normative (in this case, heterosexist) framework is questioned. Cox's performance as an erotically dressed woman, hairless and with a beautiful figure, does not challenge gender norms, and does not create tension for the audience. Such tension, not necessarily involving the aesthetic but also the ethical, the epistemological, and their

combination, is key to the experience that is sublimated media. Consumption is a subduing, subdued experience.

1.3 Science-Fiction, Double Feature: Elaborating Upon The Struggle of Sublimating in Historicity

Not every work of fiction, or everything that is presented as unreal or fictive fosters sublimating imagination. The difference between Bram Stoker's 1897 *Dracula* and Stephanie Meyer's contemporary works about vampires –just as the difference between Curry's and Cox's portrayals of their character– is that the former uses the medium of unreality to forward criticism and express skepticism with the society in which the author lived, while the latter uses the same medium to *reinforce* norms and preconceptions of said society. Stoker uses the unreality to draw out assumptions and blind spots from the reality for the reader, and Meyer uses the unreality to further solidify the reader's assumptions and blind spots. In a word, in the uncritical and –for us– problematic case, there is no dissonance when nothing absurd, false, wrong, or strange to one's knowledge framework is presented.

Struggle –that of attraction and repulsion– is found abundantly in Bram Stoker's *Dracula.* This novel attempts also to subvert the dichotomous norms of heterosexism; though, rather than gender bend as does the *RHPS, Dracula* simply moves the loci of eroticism to androgyny. Consider Van Helsing's description the Count, "As he spoke he smiled, and the lamplight fell on a hard-looking mouth, with very red lips and sharp-looking teeth, as white as ivory" (Stoker; 1897, 15) and then, later, of the three incestuous sisters with which Dracula lives, "All three had brilliant white teeth that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips.

There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear" (ibid, 55). Christopher Craft makes explicit the impact this would have on the heteronormative Victorian-era audience for which this was written, and the flood of questions ensuing from the dichotomy's subversion:

> Are we male or are we female? Do we have penetrators or orifices? And if both, what does that mean?... Furthermore, this mouth, bespeaking the subversion of the stable and lucid distinctions of gender, is the mouth of all vampires, male and female. (1984, 109)

The kiss of a vampire is laden with passion, fear, lust, and dread: the pleasure of its experience being unexplored, new, the confusion of eroticizing the mouth as ambiguously penetrator/penetrated, and the ensuing bite which brings with it gratification and mortification. When Frank N' Furter straddles the spread hips of the previously straight-laced character Brad Majors, Brad is in shock, becomes defensive, then accusatory, all the while he comes to embrace a strange eroticism. The silk curtain drawn around the bed during this scene contributes to this blurring of penetrator/penetrated, and this strange castle wherein Brad finds himself (not unlike the Count's residence in *Dracula*) seems to foster this mixes of unease, excitement, lust, desire, and confusion. Locations wherein one experiences eroticism comingle with the locations upon which one confers erotic energy:

> … compare love-making in a meadow and in an automobile, on a lover's walk outside the town walls and on a Manhattan street. In the former cases, the environment partakes of and invites libidinal cathexis and tends to be eroticized. Libido transcends beyond the immediate erotogenic zones… [In the latter cases,] libido becomes less 'polymorphous', less capable of eroticism beyond localized sexuality… (Marcuse 1964, 73)

This silk curtain is gone in the remake, and the new Brad is not careening through terrifying, new, erotic experiences; for sexual acts between Brad and Cox's Frank N' Furter would not be challenging Brad's assumptions that he is straight. Nothing in Cox's expression, artifacts, or presentation of self would belie that she is a woman, albeit a woman loudly dressed. Whether in

the land of the undying or the world of transvestite melodrama, there lies a palpable tension that the original works masterfully gift us with.

Compliant with socialized heterosexist norms, Cox as a woman has smooth, hairless skin that produces no rough protrusions through fishnets, dress, or neckline. Where Curry's pasty and unremarkably muscled chest reflects an "average" male physique, Cox's prominent bust aligns with what normative standards impinge on cis female Hollywood stars, she is conventionally attractive[6]. The same acts taken by Cox and Curry in their respective navigations of a fictional character have drastically different consequences for audience experience. What was a masterful caress of repulsed confusion, abject curiosity, and inexperienced lust in Curry's delivery of that line, "I'm not much of a man by the light of day, but by night I'm one hell of a lover" (O'Brien; 1975) does not invoke any of these when delivered by Cox. Obviously, she is not a man, and considering her delivery of this line as a trans* woman even seems to perpetuate a hint of transphobic views of passing as a different gender, instead of something that, when delivered by a transvestite played by a cis-man, is provocative, eyebrow-raising, and, as Susan Sarandon would sing later in the film, it "leads to trouble, and… seat-wetting" (O'Brien; 1975).

The desublimative force Cox's portrayal of Frank N' Furter fosters is comparable to Stephanie Meyer's treatment of vampires: wherein the human protagonist uses a search engine to quell her fears, and on some website, finding, "It was a relief, that one small entry, the one myth among hundreds that claimed the existence of good vampires" (Meyer; 2005, 70). Such a sanitization of the origins of the trope as a boundary-breaking, unsettling, irresistible force culminates in what the vampire of *Twilight* asks of the human protagonist, namely, "[d]o I dazzle

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[6] Socialized standards for beauty, and the array of harms which they impinge on individuals, could be a topic unto itself. Serano (2016) discusses the harmful effects which cis standards have on trans* persons, as well as there being a corpus of psychological, sociological, political, and philosophical corpus on this topic too vast to cite.

you? [emphasis omitted]" (ibid, 84). This obliterates the intended blending of erotic penetrator/penetrated that Stoker's focus on lips brought, and re-establishes the male as active/penetrator (the vampire's actor is a cis male), and female as passive/penetrated (the human's actor is a cis female).

By substituting a paradigmatically (rather, stereotypically) bodied man in full drag for an attractive woman in similarly revealing, though more professionally-designed, clothing, the producers of the 2016 *RHPS* have given eye candy to the audience *so that it can more easily be consumed*. Curry's portrayal of a transvestite character as a cis male is not insensitive to trans* experience, because the purpose is not to reaffirm the sexist or bigoted beliefs that make up society's normative framework, but to expose them and critique them. Rather, Cox's Frank N' Furter is problematic for promoting a misunderstanding of trans* people because of her (possibly unintentional) perpetuation of harmful cissexist views of trans* bodies. Furthermore, Curry's Frank N' Furter is a pariah that affords viewers the opportunity to question previously unexamined beliefs – a pariah whose very existence tears down the constitutive borders of cissexist norms. Juxtaposed to Cox's Frank N' Furter, tensions of a viewer's own sexual drives with the socialized norms of such a framework are sanitized, plucked, waxed, and desublimated until only a beauty queen remains where a drag queen was intended.

Yet, why are such changes harmful exactly? What impacts on life could the choices pertaining to presentation of fictional characters have on real life? Asking such questions begs another one: Why is what is real treated as discrete from what is fictional? It is through this question that the harms of truncating knowledge can be better seen, while in turn we come back to the other posed question.

2. Dissonance, Subjects, and The Body: Extracting Theoretical Threads From *Rocky*

Given the inadvisability of conducting an exhaustive analysis of the two films, the above analysis suffices to engage relevant issues and theories. This section will now focus on Marcuse's framework, discussing his notion of tension, to then introduce Butler's approach.

2.1 Second Chances Through Second Thoughts: Marcuse's Employment of Tension and Butler's Grappling with Phallogocentric Ontology

Recall from descriptions of Curry's portrayal of Frank N' Furter, that audience members are faced with a character that cannot cleanly be categorized by their normative framework. Such an experience leads to tension in Marcuse's technical sense. Tension, and the experience of and struggling through opposing beliefs, dissonant positions, and new experiences are challenging exertions that nourish imagination. In turn, this feeds back upon one's ability to navigate dissonance. This tension is experienced as a relation between oneself and the surrounding phenomena – pieces of art, persons, anything presented or represented through a medium and/or one's own experience – when the phenomenal experience breaks with one's prior conception of reality. Marcuse posits that desublimated experiences are one-dimensional, or trapped within the bounds of a singular reality that is controlled by larger social forces, and that (re)sublimated experiences extend into a second dimension of un-reality and imagination.

Phrasing matters in terms of sublimated and desublimated, real and fictional may deceptively appear to be dualistic. However, the mutual influence that unreality and reality ought to have on each other melds them à la Merleau-Ponty's flesh (see section 3.1), so that this splitting is purely analytic. When dissonance properly creates sublimated space, imagination

invigorates this vehicle by using "… the space for transcending historical practice…" (Marcuse; 1964, 23). Historical practice, for Marcuse, is the desublimating trend that supplants imagination with comfort so that "... an ever-growing number of people who, in a strict sense, cannot imagine a qualitatively different universe of discourse and action…" (ibid) from what is prescribed. Butler also builds her performative theory of gender on a similarly critical view of the normative force that a historical practice conveys. For her, this is the "phallic economy" (Butler; 1990, 64), wherein she builds from Lacan's signification in realizing that he

> … appears to refer to the appearance of 'reality' of the masculine subject as well as to the 'unreality' of heterosexuality… [and from this] two very different tasks can be discerned… the performative production of a sexual ontology, an appearing that makes itself convincing as a 'being'; on the one hand, masquerade can be read as a denial of a feminine desire that presupposes some prior ontological femininity… (ibid)

Such a passage not only lays some groundwork for Butler's approach, but is a good example of how she maintains certain heterosexist structures in her lobbying against heterosexist content: the phrase, "on the other hand" (ibid) is innocuous enough in rationalistic (in this case, also western) cultures wherein dichotomy reigns. But even such a simple turn-of-phrase belies an ignorance, ambivalence, a blind spot, to the issues below the surface of a signified skin.

It is pertinent also that Marcuse's treatment of history is not wholly opposed to Butler's take on history. Although Butler's approach to subverting the heterosexist framework relies on the same dichotomizing tendencies, she also avoids universalizing statements, and is aware of the problematic harms created by dichotomizing, at the very least. Though not looking at the sub-discursive structures below the nature/culture dichotomy, Butler condemns what she dubs the "existential dialectic of misogyny" (1990; 50) as "discourse [that] regularly figures nature as female, in need of subordination by a culture that is invariably figured as male, active, and abstract" (ibid). This particular dichotomy will be returned to in the next subsection, but it is

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noteworthy that Butler draws on similar scholarship around normative discourse, without recognizing that it is the dichotomy that figures male as " active, abstract" (ibid).

Maintaining Butler's hesitation of universalizing critical concepts is meant to be "… cautious not to promote a politically problematic reification of women's experience in the course of debunking self-reifying claims of masculinist power" (ibid, 48). However, there will be a challenge in her maintaining such dichotomous frameworks in critiques of heterosexist positions from queer ones without any acknowledgement for the possibility of overlap, asymmetry, or category-blurring. In as many words, Butler makes the connection between a hegemony's ability to self-perpetuate with the general acceptance of harmful cultural values as natural. However, in her making this connection, she focuses on how *what* is being perpetuated is harmful; whereas it is *how*, through what structures such perpetuation can occur, that is a more crucial issue.

2.2 Queer Queries: Butler's Approach Outlined

If a character such as Curry's Frank N' Furter is disruptive to an audience member's framework, it is because such a framework is heterosexist, an argument Butler advances. Whereas Marcuse's argument is *that* the character creates space for critical inquiry *because* they are sublimating; for Butler the focus is *why* such a character would be disruptive and *how* that reveals aspects of the viewer's epistemological position. However, Butler does not transcend, but rather continues, the very historical practice of which Marcuse is skeptical. Nonetheless, it is not Butler's approach that will be criticized wholesale, as the tradition in which she writes has effectively sought to refute false knowledge frameworks that perpetuate harm. A rather interesting note worth digressing into, however briefly, is the intellectual culture that precedes

and influences Butler's work. As Ortner was refuting the west's false dichotomy theoretically; artistically and experientially, Richard O'Brien was doing the same – he wrote the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* as a play that released in the same year, and then later became a film.

Ortner's (1974) observation of the dichotomous approach to knowledge that shapes normative understandings of gender feeds back into Butler's theorizing of a phallic economy. Such a subordinating view in society perpetuates a reification of life wherein

> …[a] woman's body and its functions, more involved more of the time with "species life," [Ortner discusses functions like menstruation and childbirth] seem to place her closer to nature, in contrast to man's physiology, which frees him more completely to take up the projects of culture. (1974, 73)

Because female bodies are generally capable of processes society assumes are more natural, based on their relation to the life cycle, and because culture is an adaptation that *superficially* distances itself from nature, women are considered a separate and lower category (in a binary opposition) from men.

Though Ortner does not overtly mention religion in this piece, appealing to it is pertinent, as it is one of the primary ways of knowing in Western history and culture. Dichotomizing men and women in a markedly pejorative manner is explicit in religiously prescribed Judeo-Christian law, the same religious laws which underwrote the most prominent belief system of the West. Illustrative of how dichotomies, seemingly abstracted epistemological filters, can be subjugative is the law for dealing with menstruating women from Leviticus: "… if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be put apart seven days… And if any man lie with her at all, and her flowers be upon him, he shall be unclean seven days; and all the bed whereon he lieth shall be unclean" (KJV; 19, 15-24). Women experiencing a natural part of life were quarantined from the rest of society; how much this contributes to the range of negative emotions

men feel towards menstruation now is not certain, but women are shamed for this because of their being seen as closer to nature, more primitive, than men.

> With such biased observations occurring alongside the fact that every culture implicitly recognizes and asserts a distinction between the operation of nature and the operation of culture (human consciousness and its products)… [and culture] asserts itself to be not only distinct from but superior to nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform – to "socialize" and "culturalize" – nature. (Ortner 1974, 73)

It is in reaction to this contempt, fear, and subjugation of women through such a false dichotomy (as identified by Ortner) that Butler writes. This socio-ontological assumption of male over female is what Butler argues as foundational to why "… limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality" (1990, 12). With these constraints functioning unevenly, perpetuating the feminine pole of the dichotomy "… as the repudiated/excluded within that system… [and that] the disruptions of this coherence through the inadvertent reemergence of the repressed [sexuality] reveal not only that "identity" is constructed, but that the prohibition that constructs identity is inefficacious" (ibid; 1990, 38-39). What Butler hints at here as inefficacious is that the harms created by desublimating, thereby flattening gender into a dichotomy, can be challenged through resublimation. However, rather than a simple reversal of repudiation as is argued for by her, an opening of and blending together of all binary boundaries disrupts such constructions. This is where Curry's stereotypical physique, clothed in clichéd feminine ways, creates the pariah disruptive to a heterosexist framework that proves rather fallible. The susceptibility that Butler detected in this framework is paralleled by one of her contemporary theorists.

Haraway also argued against universalizing ways of understanding through a focus on the unjustifiable move to universal objectivity, which scientific rationality takes. A compatible conclusion was reached in her criticism that,

> [s]cience has been about a search for… universality – which I call reductionism only when one language (guess whose?) must be enforced as the standard for all the translations and conversions... That is the deadly fantasy that feminists and others have identified in some versions of objectivity, those in the service of hierarchical and positivist orderings of what can count as knowledge (1988, 580).

Such "positivist orderings" (ibid) can be as innocuous as making a fictional character intelligible to an uncritical audience. This would also increase its popularity, and politically could lead to more widespread awareness. Yet, this fosters desublimating foreclosures of experience by appealing to what is comfortable, rather than accepting a discomfort – tension – as a dynamic that opens spaces for a reflective life.

Butler also recognizes problems with such hegemonic hierarchies, but introduces sexuality as a new axis of analysis to rebut the binary of gender. Furthermore, by introducing sexuality, she aligns herself with Haraway in approaching criticism through something that cannot be reduced by "positivist orderings" (1988, 580) - sexuality, identity. An audience member watching the original *RHPS* through a heterosexist lens would see an ambiguously gendered character as challenging the gender binary by transcending labels through experience *unless* that tension is ignored. One way such tension is ignored is by attempting to critique the hegemony using structures comfortable to them—dichotomy. It is also possible that erotic character instead conforms to the binary, such as Cox's Frank N' Furter in the remake, so that no transcending experience occurs. Sexuality as identity effectively reveals the harms of a heterosexist framework, but without being grounded in experience, no space is created to disrupt the structures perpetuating such harms.

Employing sexuality as the vehicle to examine problematic assumptions on gender proves to be effective in producing critical reflection upon such presuppositions through dissociation.

3. Fleshing out My Bone to Pick with Butler: Feminist Appeals to Phenomenology Contra Butler's Structure of Signifier/Signified

This section interrogates Butler's marked avoidance of discussing phenomenology as it would or could apply to her discursive subject, something first observed by Grosz. This will be further explored, along with discussion of how a theory attuned to the lived experience of its theorized subjects can benefit.

3.1 Positivist Distinctions: Grosz on Butler's "Sexual Difference Feminism"

Grosz identifies feminist theory as the first widespread philosophical movement to break from the dichotomy that the predominant dualism of western philosophers perpetuates. In *Volatile Bodies* (1994), she identifies Judith Butler (among others) as a philosopher for whom,

> … the body is crucial to understanding woman's psychical and social existence… On one hand it is a signifying and signified body; on the other, it is an object of systems of social coercion, legal inscription, and sexual and economic exchange… There is a refusal or transgression of the mind/body dualism… (1994, 17-18)

This general approach Grosz identifies as "Sexual Difference" (ibid, 18) feminism has already developed a vocabulary that can more productively critique the "phallogocentric" (Butler; 1990) knowledge framework. Yet, even this description of the positive redress provided by Butler's approach mentions the body as a subject, and "on the other" (Grosz; 1994 17) an object: still a binary. The perpetuating of a binary, even for emancipation from different dichotomies, reproduces the problem.

Grosz calls attention to Butler's avoidance of Merleau-Ponty's decidedly non-dualistic theory of the body, and instead focuses on "… his understanding of sexuality…" (Grosz; 1994, 103). More closely examining Butler's critique of Merleau-Ponty will allow for a fair assessment of it, while also continuing a discussion of Butler's problematic reliance on the dichotomies she advances: the subject/body, and the gay/straight. Such an avoidance of Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body coincides with Butler's general avoidance of bisexual and trans* people, which perpetuates the dynamic wherein "…the construction of the human is a differential operation that produces the more and the less 'human', the inhuman, the humanly unthinkable. These excluded sites come to bound the 'human' as its constitutive outside…" (Butler; 1993, 8). Butler cannot use such a framework of omnipresent signification to discuss trans* people, because of her reliance on social constructionism backing her into a corner where anything other than full commitment to one's own assigned-at-birth gender is not impossible, but unintelligible, for it would be an unsignified subject.

What Butler calls 'the unthinkable' illuminates the structure of her critique: the heterosexist framework constantly marks and genders bodies, and an ungendered body is unintelligible to anyone operating from such an epistemic position. This position is hegemonic because it is self-sustaining – as all understanding requires existence within these boundaries – the boundaries are reinforced. She seeks to refute this by destabilizing it through sexuality, but her approach is inconsistent insofar as the constituted boundary beyond which an 'other' is constructed as unintelligible still haunts individuals not fitting cleanly into her subject/body and/or gay/straight dichotomies.

Merleau-Ponty's body pushes back against this position, made possible by splitting the signified subject from its constituted body, because his conception of the body is that it has

"…no sharp division between the sensing and the sensed, between body and things as one common 'flesh'" (Toadvine; 2016, 4). This underscores the need for an experiential approach: if the subject/body dichotomy can be mended, and Merleau-Ponty's "flesh" restored, then

> [b]odies can be represented or understood not as entities in themselves or simply on a linear continuum with its polar extremes occupied by male and female bodies (with the various gradations of 'intersexed' individuals in between) but as a field, a two-dimensional continuum in which race (and possibly even class, caste, or religion) form body specifications. (Grosz 1994, 19)

Grosz accounts for an ontologically constitutive dynamic wherein aspects of a person that are not static are nevertheless co-constitutive of the person. Class, caste, religion (as she discusses), and sexuality, gender identity, and gender performance, (as I will argue), are socially constitutive of, but are ontologically simultaneous with/in, the experiencing person.

For Butler, however, aspects that are constitutive of the person are exterior (discursive) and impinge upon the body, thus shaping the subject. This is evidenced by her argument against the collapsing of masculine into feminine through butch lesbian desire, because "[t]he idea that butch and femme are in some sense 'replicas' or 'copies' of heterosexual exchange underestimates the erotic significance of these identities as internally dissonant and complex in their resignification of the hegemonic categories by which they are enabled" (Butler; 1990, 168). A complete rejection of the (possibly overstated) similarities between heterosexuality and lesbian Eros ignores that a phenomenological subject-body (as opposed to her discourse-signified body discrete from a discourse-constituted subject) is not occupying static, absolute categories. While hegemonic influence does structure and even contain subversive acts like those of lesbian Eros so that they could lose their subversive power, Butler does not allow for that category performed through "resignification" (ibid) to be challenged.

Accordingly, if there was the distance Butler establishes between butch and femme from heterosexual Eros, then the subversive imagination of a character like Curry's Frank N' Furter performing the same erotic acts with different gendered individuals would be sanitized. Because this character occupies a both/outside of/between position of bending gendered dichotomies, the total parsing of sexual orientation of different gender-groups from one another would leave Frank N' Furter utterly incomprehensible and indescribable.

3.2 What Road Less Travelled? Discursive Power and The Precluding of Autonomy

Many Queer and Feminist theorists have followed a Foucauldian route to discuss power. For Sedgwick this became her cultural literary analysis; for Butler this became her focus on performativity and the previously discussed inefficacy of the system of power. Through such suppositions on power, however, comes the parsing of erotic acts by dichotomized sexuality through a power claim. This power claim is analogous to an old conjecture in media theory called the hypodermic needle theory. It was previously thought around a century ago that any information coming through any medium to readers/consumers would be wholly, instantly accepted. This founding hypodermic needle theory of society's understanding of communication media was similarly too hard-and-fast, too absolute, to accurately capture human experience. This conjecture assumes that the viewer wholly accepts intended messages without room for criticism, skepticism, and/or imagination.

Butler's counterargument in support of the above-cited lesbian/heterosexual split also commits such a hard-and-fast distinction. It creates a dynamic where

> [i]n such a break-down of bodily coherence, the category of sex could no longer operate descriptively in any given cultural domain… the social action of bodies within the cultural field

> [could] withdraw the very power of reality that they themselves invested in the category… power-relations can be understood, as I think they ought to be, as constraining and constituting the very possibilities of volition. (Butler 1990, 168-169)

The assumption made to maintain the coherence of Butler's underlying power system, namely that all are in fact "invested in the category" into which they are gendered, is refuted by appealing to trans* experience. Not only are trans* identities untenable and therefore ignored in Butler's approach, but within our "cultural domain" (ibid), there is a signifier she ignores that would undermine a binary separation of sexuality: that of the 'bisexual.' Bisexuality is a sublimating force for understanding knowledge projects when taken with Serano's discussion on trans* persons.

Returning momentarily to the idea of total investment in one's ascribed identity, trans* experience of gender provides a salient example of what any person, regardless of gender identity or expression, could signify.

> While our experiential gender is often shaped or influenced by our perceived gender (the gender others assume us to be), one does not necessarily follow from the other… [A male] identity never made sense to me given my constant struggles with gender *dissonance*, the persistent body feelings I experienced that informed me that there was something not quite right with my being physically male, and *my personal history of consciously exploring and expressing* my femaleness and femininity both in my imagination and in public [emphases mine]. (Serano 2016, 225)

It may seem too convenient that Serano employs the term dissonance, the same term used by Marcuse to describe a dynamic that fosters sublimation. However, gender bending and the eroticization of androgynous loci are two of many sublimating forces in fiction. That they are so also in the real world is only a jump when one continues to dichotomize "real" and fictive through a stifling of imagination. An innumerable variety of experiential dynamics (potential, imaginative, wishful, actual, or historical) can lead individuals to not only reject or be skeptical of the category into which the power knowledge structures place them, but individuals can also simply *be unsure*.

That this heterosexist discursive power would be absolute over individuals assumes identity-dichotomies wherein the only intelligible position is one of whole-hearted investment, regardless of the subjugation/status assigned by the binary. When dealing with categories as they relate to "bodily coherence" (Butler; 1990, 168), she is forced to contradict herself by making a generalizing claim about members of a category rather than attenuating such a claim as being true for a subset, or one possible means of experiencing one's identity. The stifling of imagination as a means for maintaining binary (desublimating) orderings will be further explored by examining how such experiences blend the lines of seemingly stable dichotomies.

Consider how one's investment in identity can be affected by that confluence of narrative, cognition, and experience we call life. From the final number in which Frank N' Furter is alive, Curry, in a solemn voice, sings

> Whatever happened to Fay Wray? /That delicate, satin-draped frame?/ As it clung to her thigh/ How I started to cry /'cause I wanted to be dressed just the same/ Give yourself over to absolute pleasure/ Swim the warm waters of sins of the flesh/ Erotic nightmares, beyond any measure/ And sensual daydreams to treasure forever. (O'Brien; 1975) [7]

Within such an exposition into one's history is desire for a person whose perceived gender is different from one's own while wishing also to be perceived like that person. It is not a butch/femme eroticism, as is intelligible in Butler's framework, because Curry's Frank N' Furter shares the physiological sexual characteristics of males. However, it is absurd to classify this as heterosexual, because the character feels a deeply emotional existential discomfort for how their gender is perceived: it would require the erasure of the character's experience to make such a claim. True disruption of the heterosexist paradigm will come not from using its own ontology to claim its ontology is problematic but from a reorientation. What we analytically parse into sex,

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[7] The woman he mentions plays the female lead in the 1933 *King Kong*.

gender, and orientation does not result in strict, finite, and discrete boundaries; rather, they are a

"blooming, buzzing confusion" (James; 1890, 488)

4. Experiential Dissociation: An Examination of Butler's Approach Through James and Marcuse

To justifiably advance the argument that experience is a better critical basis than identity, it must be substantiated. The piece pivotal to this thesis is, in part, that identity −as historical and narrative− is a dimension of experience. Rather than argue for a different paradigm, it is the case that the identity paradigm is subsumed by the broader multi-dimensionality of lived experience. Marcuse employs a (roughly understandable as) two-dimensional ontology as a means of interrogating the wide-ranging negative effects of society's flawed knowledge framework. Such an angle aligns with Grosz's own nod to the two-dimensionality of identity *not* fully captured by Butler's approach.

Specifically, Marcuse's theory implies the problems with a singular approach presupposing binaries, that in turn preempts critical thought by an "[a]bridgement of the concept in fixed images… [and] immunity against contradiction" (1964, 96). William James' metaphysics of experience provides a substrate upon which Marcuse's claim against society's treatment of knowledge as fixed can be further substantiated. Pushing back against society's flawed knowledge frameworks allows for specified critique of Butler's examination of that same heterosexist society.

Identity is a component of experience, not discrete from it. Establishing a body as a marked object in signifying discourse splits the subject from itself, and relegates experience to a contingent aspect of social and gendered power relations. By reorienting from identity to experience, the body and subject become indistinguishable, as noted previously in Merleau-

Ponty's "flesh"[8]. Butler's solution to minimize experience plucks bodies from their narratives, and treats the complexities of life as background noise to the variable under experiment: identity. Isolating bodies from life to analyze the out of context effects of discourse on identity is hyper-particularizing, and makes analytic categories "… constraining and constituting the very possibilities of volition" (1990, 169). However, there is still some measure of intersubjectivity when considering how complex and vast life is. Even between individuals who seemingly have nothing in common, the commonalities link all across such analytic orderings:

> my experiences and yours float and dangle, terminating, it is true, in a nucleus of common perception, but for the most part out of sight and irrelevant and unimaginable to one another. This imperfect intimacy… on the contrary, is fair to both the unity and the disconnection. (James 1904, 28)

Unity and disconnection of experience is, for James, what Marcuse and Serano paint as a sublimative potential through dissociation.

Where there is an unbridgeable schism between the experiences of a female and male body for Butler, there is a blind eye turned to common perception, and the intermingling of unity and disconnection in temporal experience. Commonalities of experience are necessary for any interaction to be possible: if a person's having certain genitalia preempts their intelligible signification, then gender in such a society would be red and green shapes performed to an "other" that is colorblind. The only discursive unintelligibility, if such a boundary can even be drawn, would be when commonalities are foreclosed by perceived differences. Solving this by appealing to James is an attempt to be fair "… to both the unity and the disconnection" (1904, 28).

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[8] Butler rebuts Merleau-Ponty's treating flesh universally and as implicitly male; this is a fair criticism insofar as this perpetuates what feminist theorists like Butler and Haraway critique as an oppressive move by a heterosexist epistemic framework. While there is not time to explore this more in-depth, a discussion of James with Merleau-Ponty would address her claims.

Treating any difference, whether signified, produced, or occurring as discrete streams in the discourse makes every individual's fringes of uniqueness preclude common intelligibility of what is shared by multiple lives. Between sameness and difference, in this project's view, swirls the unreal potentialities that do not exist, but can influence what does. Such an imaginary void, "… reflects the experience of a world antagonistic in itself… two-dimensional… In this universe, there are modes of being in which men [sic] and things are 'by themselves' and 'as themselves', and modes in which they are *not*…" (Marcuse; 1964, 125). Butler views all subjects as always already marked, and

> …that there is an 'outside' to the socially intelligible, and that this 'outside' will always be that which negatively defines the social… [t]o freeze the real as the impossible 'outside' to discourse is to institute a permanently unsatisfiable desire for an ever elusive referent: the sublime object of ideology. (1993, 207)

This is also what makes signification of discourse so irresistibly powerful in Butler's theory: that setting the real as the constitutive outside preempts any and every understanding of reality.

It is this very reliance on some singular reality alone that disrupts critiquing that the female/feminine is the excluded ontological 'other'. Frank N' Furter does not exist. Tim Curry, Laverne Cox, they do. However, by their imagining (acting) themselves to possess different narratives and/or characteristics, they produce something unreal that is intelligible. Even more explicit is a person with gender dysphoria imagining changes to their body: one can desire new, multiple, or no genitalia, all things unmarked by discourse, but still constitutive through experiencing the imaginary dismembering of reality's bounds. Just because a state of being, a thing, an experience is un-actualized does not make it unintelligible.

Butler uses the term "sublime" in describing the real that such excluding discourse cannot attain; but through sublimation as just described, the real becomes simply another component of

life, as impactful and co-constitutive as the unreal. Identity as a decontextualized plane cannot be the approach framing critical theory because life is ever-unfolding and unstable, so that labels upon experience will always be a step disconnected. This returns back to her elimination of autonomy because of discursive power: if these imaginative bodies of which we have spoken are marked by discourse even before coming into a perceived reality, then there would be a discursive determinism. Imagination opens sublimating experience because it allows one to traverse life, and its interwoven lusts, fears, calms, storms, contentments and desires all without being marked, if it were marked, there would be no need to explore it, for it would be labeled and always already known.

The performing and even understanding of significations from discourse are, experientially, always a step disconnected. Because of this, the attempts to use a gay/straight dichotomy to critique a male/female one produces monolithic lenses, perpetuating the problem. Framing queer theory through experience allows for understanding established truths, or constitutive boundaries (in Butler's terms) through falsity, potentiality, contradiction, absurdity, and common perception. Such a reorientation allows for Curry and Cox's Frank N' Furter characters to be reunited with the narrative bodies enacting them: just as Merleau-Ponty's flesh is an amalgam of the problematically split subject/object of experience, actor and character cannot be analyzed as disjoined or discrete. An identity dichotomy, instead of an experiential kaleidoscope, prevents dissociation by simplifying the living actor-character into two analytic categories. We are then left with incomplete analyses of either the character or the actor; and we either see two queer tokens of a subjugated monolith (if focusing on character) or a straight heterosexual male, further marking the non-straight, non-heterosexual, non-male others *as other*, and a queer person parodying such a mark in response (if focusing on actors).

Arguing that such a binary is the framework of outcomes for a dichotomous approach possibly places the argument on unstable ground. However, analogously to the body and subject being an inseparable blending of life, rather than analytic categories, the actor and the character in a film cannot be separated.

The experiential kaleidoscope allows for more nuanced investigation; how does the masculine body differ from the feminine body when exhibiting ambiguous sexual object choice, where do moments of vulnerability shift or destabilize? These are brief examples of sublimative questions that cannot be fully answered by a static framework focusing on identity categories. From a basis in experience, a furthering of an epistemological critique can come from perspectives that do not, and are for the most part ignored, by Butler: bisexual and trans* perspectives.

5. Resublimating Butler's Approach: The Bi, the Trans*, the Living

How experience frames a resublimated knowledge conducive to a queer critique of the heterosexist normative framework can best be explained by examining one of Pramaggiore's "fence-sitters". Furthermore, some commonalities of trans* experience, as elucidated by Serano, will be examined. Together, these epistemological positions can disrupt the still-artificial, dichotomous constitutive boundaries set by Butler.

5.1 Do Not Let Bi-gones be Bi-gones: Pramaggiore and Ambiguities of Identity

Marcuse's critique of the systemic desublimation of our knowledge underpins bi responses to Butler because the lived experience of bisexual persons, or "[f]ence-sitting… [as] a practice that refuses restrictive formulas that define gender according to binary categories… [and] refuse one-to-one correspondences between sex acts and identity, between erotic objects and sexualities, between identification and desire…" (Pramaggiore; 1996, 3).

The metaphor of fence-sitter is crucial to this critique, because the fence demarks but rests on no ground. Two neighbors have their respective backyards, and the fence demarks whose space is whose; however, there is no third, occupied space, rather, it is simultaneously neither neighbor's land and both of theirs. The bisexual, in dichotomous terms, is neither gay nor straight while being both: this is why a bisexual narrative is so disruptive, and so ignored, by Butler. A bisexual lives James' unity and disconnection, Marcuse's as themselves and as not-themselves.

One-to-one correspondences of identity are not possible due to the fluctuations of influencing perceptions from any number of individual interactions throughout a given person's

life. However, even the inconsistencies within a single given life must be denied when Butler dismisses the sort of continuum/not-continuum proposed herein. For Butler, this understanding of sexuality as allowing for a fence-sitter de-excludes the requisite excluded middle, "… then that subject forecloses the kinds of contestatory connections that might democratize the field of its own operation…" (1993, 115). Contained in this passage is a determinism by-way-of discourse signifiers that perpetuates heterosexism through the construction of oppressed persons as binary monoliths that ignore individual histories, personalities, convictions. Accordingly, she is backed into a corner where she must claim that "…[i]t may be that if a lesbian opposes heterosexuality absolutely, she may find herself more in its power than a straight or bisexual woman who knows or lives its constitutive instability" (ibid)[9]. Here, bisexuality is only employed as a proxy for a woman coerced by the identity category investment she advances, which is reliant on the already-debunked hypodermic needle theory.

Pramaggiore's category-bending theory reveals where Butler's approach is inconsistent: in that bisexuality there is an unreal other still intelligible, for if it were not intelligible, it could not be denied as legitimate. Other spaces excluded by such theory include any fringes of identity-skepticism, any narratives simultaneously lived as both and neither of her binary categories, basically, and any of the upside-down space that allows follows from the inside/outside.

Recall briefly that Ortner observes the root binary opposition as one which dichotomizes men/civilization and women/nature. From this stems the societal harm of men dominating women analogous to civilization dominating nature; In turn, from this valuing of male over female flows the valuing of masculine over feminine, and subsequently straight over non-straight, cissexual over trans*. In short, the confluence of bigotries that Serano terms

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[9] This passage is even more interesting by it being her only mention of bisexuality in the entire text of *Bodies That Matter*.

"oppositional sexism" (2016, 13). Serano's framing nicely captures the underlying problematic

dichotomies surrounding the various experiences, expressions, and eroticisms of people, not just

the subjugation functioning as a by-product of such binaries. It also would problematize the

move Butler takes by simply reversing the value polarity of good/bad and straight/gay to

good/bad and gay/straight. Returning to the original comparison of Marcuse and Butler's

variations in focus (2.2), it is not *what* the subjugated/subjugator or privileged/other binaries

contain, but *that* the binary is constructed, and the categories are placed oppositionally.

The overlooked dynamic in such a reversal is that which James forwards as common

perception. Consider how Curry's Frank N' Furter appeals to new value judgment relationships

with a variety of shared epistemic and aesthetic experiences. Curry blends solid lines of society's

knowledge framework by pulling fishnet stockings over hairy legs. Cox simply illustrates that

someone who was once, but does not feel, express, or live as masculine can make the leap across

the dichotomous chasm to the feminine, maintaining those solid lines. The central problem is not

that a chasm allows some to jump but not others, but that there is such a rift where instead, to put

it post-modernly, a thousand plateaus exist. Butler makes the same move theoretically that Cox's

character does in *RHPS* in an attempt to refute it. Yet both Butler and the *RHPS* remake projects

remain desublimated because they minimize the possibility for dissociative tension – which is

the blending of solid lines.

Butler ignores bisexuality as a vehicle for sublimated spaces, presenting it at best as a

middle ground between homosexuality and heterosexuality, as a middle-to-be-excluded: a

maintaining of solid lines where life reveals them blended. This forcing of various identities into

middle exclusion is evidence that Butler's critique of the male/female and masculine/feminine

dichotomy framework is informed by a new dichotomy, that of gay/straight. As a by-product of

this new dichotomy, this excludes many subject-positions like bisexual, including trans* and other gender queer and non-monosexual identities. The following will blend trans* and bisexual critiques of queer theory to elucidate the integral work experience lends to critical theory.

Queer Theory's difficulty to account for bisexuality, as well as other such as non-binary forms of gender identity, is related to how it attempts to deconstruct the dichotomous structure of society's normative framework for knowledge. The attempt to problematize the normative false dichotomies of female/male and feminine/masculine is not a project that should be abandoned, however Butler's approach through a gay/straight dichotomy reveals that Butler has "… been trapped by two poles of a tempting dichotomy on the question of objectivity" (Haraway; 1988, 576) by her turning on its head, but not cracking open, the heterosexist framework. In short, the refutation of false dichotomies (such as straight/gay, male/female) is beneficial to a resublimated knowledge project.

In sum, the main problem with the framework for critique that Butler creates is her preservation of binary oppositions. Julia Serano articulates that such oppositions reproduce "oppositional sexism" (2016, 13), which is a dynamic of prejudice that encompasses many kinds of phobia, specifically those having to do with gender, sex, sexuality, and expression – transphobia, homophobia, misogyny.

5.2 Transgressing Acceptance Through Palatability: The Primacy of Critical Inquiry over Comfort

Understanding this in terms of *RHPS*, it is empowering to see a trans* woman fulfill a serious and beautiful role without the transphobic cinematic tendencies towards parody or

revilement of trans* people (Serano, 2016, 195-212). However, the false dichotomies of straight/gay and cis/trans* are not disrupted specifically because Laverne Cox does not occupy a place beyond this dichotomous epistemology, and is situated neatly on the polarized ends of each of these dichotomies. Cox's secondary-sex characteristics are reasonably perceived as female, where Curry's secondary-sex characteristics are reasonably perceived as male. Cox's dress, behaviors, and dispositions align with her gender to underscore the solid line of the gender dichotomy, whereas Curry's blend that line by his fence-sitting between and around femininity, masculinity, and androgyny.

In terms of sexuality, whereas Curry's male-body engages in erotic acts with same and different genital-people creates a tense space through bisexuality; Cox's female-body's engaging in the same act can be explained, without dissociation, by an audience operating with a cis straight framework. This is made possible by an epistemological contortion of female sexuality called "performative bisexuality," which is a social dynamic enfolding only female genders, and is "…defined primarily as engaging in homoerotic acts with other women, usually in front of men and most often in the context of social settings like fraternity parties, bars, clubs and other crowded sexualized spaces" (Fahs; 2009, 432). Because of the power dynamics elaborated upon by Ortner and other feminist theorists, in cases of performative bisexuality – like that which Cox's Frank N' Furter engages in on screen – there is no breakdown of problematic dichotomy because it is something acceptable erotic for male viewers. Furthermore, these acts do not disrupt constitutive boundaries because it is bisexuality for non-bisexuals, as Serano claims of most trans* representations in the media, a parody for the enjoyment of a cis audience. Fahs goes on to contextualize this to reveal its problematic nature for feminine-expressing/identifying bisexuals in that

…bisexual behavior for women is a turn-on for heterosexual men (Kimmel & Plante, 2002), and because women engage in experimental bisexual behavior, particularly with their female friends, at an increasing rate (Thompson, 2007). Several television shows have begun to explore women's bisexuality, often involving a story arc in which the character explores their bisexual feelings and then ultimately reverts back to identifying as mostly heterosexual… Notably, however, none of these women remained bisexual or lesbian… (Fahs 2009, 434)

Curry's male body can interact in bisexual ways in society, and produce that twin mixture of repulsion and attraction, due to a blending of the gender stereotypes. Cox's female body cannot successfully achieve the same sublimating effects, because of sexual double standards that mark the same act for a man to be subversive and erotic, and for a woman, innocuous and erotic. There is no "estrangement effect" (Marcuse; 1964, 67) produced by experiences not considered subversive.

A collapse of sublimated space (as follows from queer theory's approach) reinforces the previously discussed heterosexist normative framework by removing critical positions from which one can attempt refutation and improvement of harmful ways of knowing. Curry's portrayal presents viewers coming from a place where straightness and cissexuality are viewed as normal (ostensibly in good faith), and attraction to anything other than bodies with different genitalia, and feeling and/or expressing differently than one's assigned-at-birth sex is abnormal. Curry's ability to occupy a space between/beyond –blending– the binaries of straight/gay and cis/trans* fosters dissonance and an audience member's introspection of such dichotomies and the harm they perpetuate. Note, this unified/disunified/living/fence-sitting sublimates insofar as a body that is considered unreal can realize itself through imagination. Its impact on viewers is to attempt reconciliation of this by tinkering with one's assumptions about reality through dissociation. It is time to talk about *Paris is Burning*.

5.3 *Paris Is Burning*: A Dismantling of Butler's Singular Approach to Trans* Experience

This 1991 film about Harlem drag shows touches on many of the same issues this project has engaged. Also, it is an opportunity to again agree with some of, and critique other, parts of Butler's approach. Her prescription, following from much of Queer Theory's approach to heterosexist norms, is not to avoid such oppressive categorization, but rather, "… precisely because such terms have been produced and constrained with such regimes, they ought to be repeated in directions that reverse and displace their originating aims" (Butler; 1997, 383). Herein again is the agreeable aim to disrupt coercive, oppressive forces of heterosexist norms; and herein again is the myopic approach to reversing, rather than blending, the value-epistemology of the framework. Though Butler concedes that drag is a means of exposing heterosexuality as having "… an anxiety that it can never fully overcome" (ibid, 384), this approach also entails that "… such films [like *Paris is Burning*] are functional in providing a ritualistic release for a heterosexual economy that must constantly police its own boundaries against the invasion of queerness…" (ibid 385). This policing of the boundaries of heterosexuality, masculinity, femininity, and the maintenance of unstable binaries so as to exclude minority positions is something Serano identifies as cissexual privilege.

This dynamic is as much a contradiction within the heterosexist framework as what Ortner discusses, because it "…is the idea that cissexuals inherit the right to call themselves male or female by virtue of being born into that particular sex… [but] many (if not most) cissexuals in our society tend to look disparagingly upon societies and cultures that still rely on class or caste systems…" (Serano; 2016, 168). What makes a gender caste necessary for heterosexist norms, regardless of its flaws, is that it fosters the perpetuation of a male/female dichotomy wherein males hold power over females. If individuals are allowed to blend the categories, or transition

from one to the other, the hegemonic power structure becomes destabilized. This gender caste, when it comes to cissexuals, makes it "… easy for them to dismiss the legitimacy of transsexuals' identified and lived sex" (ibid, 168-169). The couching of such discussions in terms of natural misunderstands the history of trans* persons being coerced into stereotyped monoliths, helps perpetuate other gender power imbalances, and forecloses critical examination of society's gender norms.

Therefore, it is problematic that Butler employs the same grounds of natural and "denaturalization" (Butler; 1997, 384) to discuss drag and non-cis experience, as well as focusing on the case of a drag queen (Venus Xtravaganza) who seeks "… becoming real, becoming a real woman…" (ibid, 387). Trans* people who desire to pass as a "natural" or "real" person of the "opposite" gender are ontologically maintaining the harmful binaries; this is why I agree with Butler that drag is not necessarily subversive. Referring to cases of individuals who have internalized the harms of society's norms to underpin a discussion of the feasibility, legitimacy, and justification of such marginalized positions is not emancipating, but subsuming of such positions back into the hegemony.

Drag, especially for those individuals like those in *Paris is Burning* who seek to fully live as a different gender than they were ascribed at birth, is "… neither an efficacious insurrection nor a painful resubordination, but an unstable coexistence of both" (ibid, 392). In a sense, these individuals are all "fence-sitters" in a variety of ways. For that disruption of heteronormative dichotomies they suffer, and some die. These deaths can be laid at the feet of an unscrupulous dependence on the hegemony; and vocabularies of gender as natural, naturalizing, denaturalized, and artificial maintain the hard-and-fast categories that lead to these such tragedies. Ortner already discussed the subjugation that comes from treating sex as a dichotomy, and in turn

treating nature and civilization as polarized. A trans* person's narrative can only deceptively

share enough common experience to "pass" in some binary category, passing is a desublimation

of the resublimating imagination that comes from instability, tension, and fence-sitting. It is in

bending the unwilling, brittle distinctions impinged upon gendered experience that brings the

vicious backlash of normativity, seeking to police boundaries, allow their crossing, but never a

meandering. In this backlash, the death of Venus Xtravaganza opens the space for a final

comparison to Dr. Frank N' Furter.

6. "I'm Going Home": Frank N' Furter's Last Song, and Possibility of Opening Dichotomy

On account of the imminent spoiler lurking in the next sentence, these concluding thoughts must open with an apology to those who have not seen *RHPS*. Frank N' Furter is murdered at the end of the film, and just preceding this sings a final number entitled, "I'm Going Home". The lyrics do not change, yet the differences between Curry's and Cox's performances exemplify the importance of resublimating knowledge projects.

Both actors are standing on a stage facing an empty theater, save for the five or six other cast members in the scene. Right before their on-screen death, they sing a song, excerpted here:

> [o]n the day I went away, goodbye/ Was all I had to say, now I/ I want to come again and stay, oh my my/ Smile, and that will mean that I may/ 'Cause I've seen blue skies, through the tears/ In my eyes/ And I realize, I'm going home/ Everywhere it's been the same, feeling/ Like I'm outside in the rain, wheeling/ Free, to try and find a game, dealing/ Cards for sorrow, cards for pain. (O'Brien; 1975)

Though Cox's character does not have any tattoos, the fake tattoo Curry as an actor wore to portray a heart tattoo on his Frank N' Furter had been smeared and mostly washed off from the scene prior. Curry's hair is wet and matted around his face, and lipstick completed rubbed off. Cox has expertly done-up hair, unaffected from the scene prior, wherein the main cast was all swimming. Cox's makeup is precise and not smudged. Seeing the weary, smeared face of Tim Curry ever-so-slightly well-up with tears at the thought of going home, seeing the places where Frank N' Furter's body had been washed over by water juxtaposed to the dreary hopelessness of the line, "Like I'm outside in the rain" (O'Brien; 1975), one sees the toll taken by rejecting dichotomy. The closing scene of *Paris is Burning*, too, reflects the morose grappling with dejection that Curry's Frank N' Furter exemplifies. One of the drag cast members is being interviewed about why they entered the drag scene after the audience learns of Venus Xtravaganza's death. This cast member is not hopeful, happy, or serene as Cox's portrayal in

"I'm Going Home" belies. Rather, they let out a hollow laugh at their younger self, for thinking they could attain the glamour, recognition, and status of cis women that they desired (Livingston; 1991). Juxtaposing such a fall with the dream Venus had of passing, ending in her murder, illustrates that something as innocuous as either/or, as a dichotomy, have grave consequences.

Cox has a wonderful voice, and fills the room with sadness expertly, but the discordant tones of Curry's unprofessional singing highlights the mix of happiness, nostalgia, fear, desire, pain, and pleasure that this song conveys. At the end of the song, there is even a frame where Curry almost trips while wearing heels that he wore without any such problems prior. He is tired, death is close; and though Cox's Frank N' Furter dies all the same, the mistakes in costuming, in singing, in blocking, are not there. Hers is a death portrayed as a glide from life into death, the transition being as smooth as a closed-casket funeral. The death of Cox's Frank N' Furter is a clean jump across the dichotomous gender wall: it is palatable, sympathetic. Curry's is a struggle, his life was a constant, unsustainable meandering on gendered chasms, his death was no more clean, definite, or satisfying of a transition.

What creates sublimating space for Curry's Frank N' Furter, for Stoker's Count, is the androgyny, the vicarious maintenance of instability, the tossing and turning in chaotic, kaleidoscopic life. Cox's Frank N' Furter, like the drag queen Venus Xtravaganza, like Meyer's vampire; subdue unbridled imagination in order to more intelligibly conform to analytic categories established by society, not to accurately capture life, but to control and simplify it. In a word, this horrifying comfort which comes from dissecting and bisecting oneself for the easier gaze of the hegemony, and thus, chances at a less painful, uncertain, queer narrative, is the desublimation of life.

44

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