

Dartmouth Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

QUARTERLY

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Dear fellow MALS students, professors, alumni and friends,

Through the years as a student publication the MALS *Quarterly* had undergone numerous changes as editors and ideas have come and gone. This year our staff has decided to make another change, to move from a news-based publication highlighting current events and issues towards a scholarly publication focusing on students work. We hope the *Quarterly* will serve as a vehicle to share our work with one another and provide an outlet for students to publish their work.

In addition to changing the format we have also made a change to hard copies of the *Quarterly*. By switching from an online publication to a paper copy we hope to get our student's work out to a wider audience and have copies accessible to those unfamiliar with the *Quarterly*.

We look forward to feedback from fellow MALS students and seek to represent the ideas and talents of each other. We also hope these changes to the *Quarterly* will encourage more student submission and input on the future of our student-run publication.

Thank you and we hope you enjoy the new MALS *Quarterly*,

Jacqueline Sievert
Editor-in-Chief, MALS *Quarterly*

Cultural Globalization: Homogenization or Hybridization?

by Matthew Steele

All countries are basically social arrangements, accommodations to changing circumstances. No matter how permanent and even sacred they many seem at any one time, in fact they are all artificial and temporary... Within the next hundred years... nationhood as we know it will be obsolete; all states will recognize a single global authority. A phrase briefly fashionable in the mid-20th century—‘citizen of the world’—will have assumed real meaning by the end of the 21st century.¹

Written in 1992 by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, the proclamation summarized the optimism surrounding and predicting the future of the emerging globalization movement. The collapse of the Soviet Union a year earlier initiated a period of the United States as the unopposed economic and cultural hegemon, enabling the largely unresisted spread of neoliberal market principles and Western social ideals.² Furthered by rapid technological innovation, growing economic interdependence, and increased migration, traditional state boundaries and cultural identities were collapsing by the close of the twentieth century. This, according to Talbott, not only augured a future of economic and cultural convergence but also perpetuated the rise of a Global Federalism, “a union of separate states that allocate certain powers to a central government while retaining many others for themselves.”³

Three years earlier, Francis Fukuyama’s “The End of History?” came to a similar, oft quoted conclusion: “What we may be witnessing in not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history,

but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”⁴ Both Talbott and Fukuyama’s assertions emerge a point of contention in a modern globalization discussion that has largely abandoned its enthusiasm for the increased standards of living promised by globally integrated economies. Instead, the above assertions increasingly denounce the erosion of locally defined cultures by the callous mechanisms of self regulating markets.

In respect to both Talbott and Fukuyama’s statements, and to recent criticism of globalization’s effect on cultural sovereignty, three questions are significant. (1) To what extent is culture a fixed and static concept? (2) Can a shared global culture supersede regional value systems? (3) Where do international and local cultures converge, and what does this exchange produce? This study addresses each of these questions in the context of the broader economic, social, political, environmental and cultural shifts occurring during the period 1991–2007, termed modern globalization.

Criticism of modern globalization notes correctly that social dislocation and the dissolution of traditional and rural customs are direct consequences of expanding capitalist markets. Pre-capitalist and geographically sensitive practices of redistribution, tribal religions, and collective identities have been altered by advances in information and communication technology (ICT), lowered transportation costs, and the diffusion of goods from developed to developing countries. These practices initiated (what many fear is) a convergence of a single, Western-directed and capitalist culture.

However, the supposition of absolute cultural integrity is flawed for a number of reasons. Concerns over deteriorating regional identities presuppose that culture is non-permeable concept, fixed in specific locals with particular peoples. As Kwame Appiah asserts, this is not necessarily the case: “Cultural purity is an oxymoron... The connection through a local identity is as imaginary as the connection through humanity.”⁵ Cultural boundaries are, in this sense, illusory. The customs and traditions marking regional cul-

¹ Talbott, Strobe. “America Abroad: The Birth of the Global Nation.” *Time Magazine*, 20 July 1992. 70.

² The use of the term *unresisted* does not disregard the global counter-responses to self regulated markets, nor does it ignore the rapid accession of China as an emerging economic hegemon. The term simply implies the absence of countervailing international interest comparable in scope to the United States, as was formerly provided by the Soviet Union.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Fukuyama, Francis. “The End of History?” *The National Interest*, Summer 1989.

⁵ Appiah, Kwame. *Cosmopolitanism*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006. 113, 135.

tures are not endogenous occurrences, developing independently of external influence. Rather, cultural formation is in essence kaleidoscopic, continually drawing from or leaving alone external and dissimilar values. Far from a consequence of modern globalization, Appiah describes the process of cultural contamination as intrinsic to human history, “Alexander’s empire molded both the states and sculpture of Egypt and North India; first the Mongols then the Mughals shaped great swaths of Asia; the Bantu migrations populated half the African continent.”⁶ In short, the very foundation of cultural creation is based on and influenced by interaction with out-group values.⁷ Culture cannot be defined as distinct characteristics bound to a specific people and rooted in a specific location. Instead, culture must be understood as plastic, continuously appropriating, rejecting, and transforming out-group stimulus to fit the particularities of the local community, thus shaping what many term a hybrid culture.

This logic applies not only to the concept of culture, but also cultural property. As a response to the devastation of World War II, the United Nations established the Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in an attempt to protect universal human and cultural rights. At the Hague Convention in 1954, UNESCO issued the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, introducing nineteen provisions regarding the protection of “movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people...”⁸

Although its intentions are noble, the convention’s definition of cultural property is problematic. As cultural identities absorb and redefine out-group values, disentangling the influences on cultural products and assigning their ownership is nearly impossible. As a result, equitably repatriating or protecting objects of importance to the cultural heritage of specific peoples is unfeasible.

Cultural property does not exist nor it is created in a vacuum. Rather, property is produced through a highly integrated network of ideas, concepts, and inspirations that do not adhere to national and tribal boundaries. Franklin Foer’s study of European soccer is a clear example. Foer cites the Rangers Football Club, a Scottish professional team whose rivalry with the Celtic Football Club serves as the popular vehicle for Protestant/Catholic sectarianism as well as the cultural identity of the Scottish working class since the late nineteenth century. However, the Rangers cannot be viewed easily as a cultural product linked inextricably with the heritage of Scottish Protestants. Eighteen of the club’s current thirty players are foreign, the majority non-Protestant. Demonstrating the permeable concept of culture, Foer notes that many of the team’s Catholic members adopt the identity of their fan base and, perhaps unexpectedly, encourage vitriolic anti-Catholic chants as a peculiar example of team solidarity and identity passing.⁹ The result is a cultural property produced by out-group actors, yet possessed by Scottish Protestants.

Further, as Appiah notes, products of culture often antedate the nations

that claim them: “When Nigerians claim a Nok sculpture as part of their patrimony, they are claiming for a nation whose boundaries are less than a century old, the works of a civilization more than two millennia ago, created by a people that no longer exists, and whose descendants we knew nothing about.”¹⁰ Both Foer and Appiah’s analyses reveal the weakness in interpreting culture as a fixed concept bound to specific communities and the relative impossibility in assigning cultural ownership to distinct peoples. However, this does not imply the absence of local particularities or the convergence of a single global identity with the advent of modern globalization.

States, as Talbott notes, are historically impermanent social arrangements, temporarily constructed and artificially imposed. Further, if states are understood primarily as containers—of both cultures and people—their apparent transformation during the period of modern globalization is unsettling. As capital, trade, and labor regulations undergo increasing liberalization, state’s boundaries have become increasingly porous. Undermined by transnational financial interests, portended by Thomas Jefferson nearly two hundred years earlier, states are no longer able to contain the physical and capital movements of the global marketplace.¹¹ The widespread diffusion of neoliberal economic principles and self regulating markets results often in the criticism of globalization as a veiled form of cultural imperialism. William Robinson cites: “the rise of a global ‘mass culture’ of petty consumption inspired by capitalist icons... Here the

6 Ibid, 112.

7 The term *out-group* defines a stimulus—person, value, or culture—that is external to a specific group.

8 United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. The Hague: United Nations, 1954.

9 Foer, Franklin. How Soccer Explains the World. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005. 39.

10 Appiah, 119.

11 Jefferson stated: “Merchants have no country. The mere ground they stand on does not constitute so strong an attachment as that from which they draw their gains.” Letter to Horatio Spafford, 1814.

Disneyfication or Coca-colonization of cultural life is the outcome of the homogenizing tendencies of a universal market ideology...¹²

Conversely, supporters of cultural globalization point to the potential dissolution of the synthetic concepts of nationalism and tribalism as well as the adoption of a shared and global identity. Appiah terms this phenomenon *cosmopolitanism*, a single culture that both emphasizes the shared commonalities of humanity while also acknowledging the historical and geographic differences inherent in societies and peoples.¹³ However, as Foer's study of the Rangers Football Club demonstrates, both Robinson and Appiah ignore an implicit desire in culture regardless of locality: collective identity through in-group/out-group division.

Despite the rapid transformations of cultural boundaries generated by modern globalization, the function and appeal of collective identities remain unchanged. Initially bound to tribal and nationalistic impulses, group identities are increasingly reinterpreted in modern and fluid contexts. The social dislocation and income uncertainty associated with the move toward globally integrated markets has both intensified, and redefined the nature of in-group/out-group division. Collective identity is no longer predicated on objective variables—such as heredity, ethnicity, or religion—but rather adopted by consumers in a modern marketplace of cultural identification. Foer's description of the Amsterdam Football Club (AFC) Ajax is a clear example. Initially a Jewish football club in the early twentieth century, a purge

Jewish members of Ajax occurred after World War II.

In a strange expression of Philo-Semitism, the removal of the club's Jewish members was countered by a widespread intensification of Ajax's symbolic Jewish identity. The result is an odd cultural appropriation where hundreds of thousands of non-Jewish Ajax fans paint the Star of David on their bodies and wave Israeli flags at club matches.¹⁴ Extending the logic of selective cultural identification, supporters of rival clubs knowingly deride non-Jewish Ajax players and fans with anti-Semitic epithets. This fluid adoption of non-authentic cultures and reinterpreted in-group/out-group interaction indicates that, although the boundaries of collective identities have been changed by globalization, their appeal remains largely unaffected. As Foer notes, "ethnic hatred makes good business sense. Even in the global market, they [clubs] draw supporters who crave ethnic identification—to join an existential fight on behalf of their tribe."¹⁵

The potential for a unified and global culture is not only undermined by the continued attraction of collective identities and out-group alienation, but also by the questionable success of imposed transnational values. Opponents of globalization often indict the West as the cultural hegemon, forcefully exporting its ethos of materialism, consumption, and profligacy. However, this assumption is flawed for two reasons. First, it presupposes that culture is a fixed and quantifiable concept that can be commodified for export. Second, it implies that the importing country is incapable of both rejecting

and reinterpreting values inappropriate to its shifting culture.

A number of cases suggest these assumptions are incorrect. Although Wal-Mart's recent failures in South Korea and Japan are often cited, the corporation's experience in Germany remains a compelling example. Beginning in 1997, Wal-Mart attempted to establish its presence in the European market by acquiring twenty-one *Wertkauf* supermarkets, followed by the purchase of seventy-four *Interspar* hypermarkets a year later. Although the total cost surpassed €1.6 billion, Germany's long standing post World War II relationship with the United States as well as its similar advanced industrialized economy suggested the acquisitions were relatively low risk and high reward investments compared to Wal-Mart's attempted entry into unfamiliar Asian markets. Following the takeovers, Wal-Mart became immediately Germany's fourth largest retail chain. Outsiders expected the corporation to apply successfully its innovative supply chain, "just in time" production model, and radio frequency identification (RFID) tracking system to the third largest economy in the world.¹⁶ However, this did not occur. By 2002, Wal-Mart fell to Germany's thirteenth largest retailer, and five years later, the corporation sold its eighty five stores to rival *Metro AG* at an estimated loss of \$1.0 billion. Upon formally divesting from the country, Wal-Mart Germany CEO David Wild accepted the criticism that the corporation simply disregarded the locality of its market by stating: "If you want to be successful in a foreign market, you have to know what your customers

12 Robinson, William. *A Theory of Global Capitalism*. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004. 31-32.

13 Appiah, 4, 134.

14 Foer, 81.

15 *Ibid.*, 40.

16 Also known as postponement modeling, *just in time* supply chaining refers to the reduction in inventory over surplus and storage costs by delaying the supply of goods until consumer demand is most accurately assessed. Because the process requires both high levels of cooperation between manufacturer and retailer, and also capital intensive communication technology, its application is difficult. However, Wal-Mart has succeeded primarily due to its dominant market share—enabling forced manufacturer cooperation—and its massive communication network, most notably the largest privately owned satellite tracking system in the world.

want. That's the most important lesson. It is not good to force a business model onto another country's market just because it works well somewhere else."¹⁷ Although partially correct, this conclusion ignores the regulatory constraints unique to the German market, and more importantly, Wal-Mart's attempt at compromising its business model to satisfy the demands of domestic unions.

Though this collapse occurred for a number of reasons, Wal-Mart's principal failure lay in its inability to acknowledge and structurally adapt to the fluid and locally sensitive characteristics of Germany's culture. In a study commissioned by the Institute for World Economics and International Management, Andreas Knorr and Andreas Arndt note that Wal-Mart Germany appointed and removed four CEOs in its first four years in operation, two of whom refused to learn German and required English as the corporation's official management language. Further, the questionable acquisition of *Intespar's* poorly maintained and isolated hyper stores, as well Germany's highly restricted work week and regulated store opening hours, undermined Wal-Mart's potential for reaching the economies of scale necessary to repeat its U.S. success.¹⁸ Without conveniently located super-centers and twenty-four hour service, Wal-Mart Germany was forced to rely on its relationship with independent manufacturers in order to distinguish itself from its three primary competitors: *Metro AG*, *Rewe Group*, and

the *Aldi Group*. As Susan Christopherson explains, Wal-Mart's direct access and coercive authority over manufacturers has been central to its supply chain and retail dominance in the United States: "Wal-Mart's ability to assume a cost leadership position depends on control of supplier firms in national markets as well as in international supply chains."¹⁹ However, lacking the market power to bypass wholesaler intermediaries, Wal-Mart Germany was forced to alter its supply chain and unable establish the dominant position over manufacturers necessary to drive down prices.²⁰ As a result, Wal-Mart's comparatively small number of super center—whose revenue represented 3% of the retail market—was incapable of undercutting its top five competitors who accounted for over 63% of the market share.²¹

More importantly, Wal-Mart's inability to fully integrate its U.S. centric employment policies caused continual conflict with Germany's influential labor unions. Knorr and Arndt note that, of Wal-Mart's more than one million U.S. employees, only twelve are confirmed union members. This staggering reliance on non-union labor has been critical in enabling Wal-Mart to maintain the low overhead costs necessary to undercut the prices of its U.S. competitors. However, in Germany's union dominant labor market, attempts to impose Wal-Mart's American specific business model were disastrous. In 2002, *ve.rdi*, Germany's largest labor union, staged walkouts of more than thirty stores and the fol-

lowing year filed antitrust litigation against Wal-Mart. In the context of cultural globalization, the 2002 protests provided an interesting example of what Appiah describes as shared but unevenly weighted values.²² Lacking a viable supply of non-union labor, Wal-Mart Germany immediately conceded to the country's market particularities and adopted unionized workforce. In addition, the corporation paid wages three percent higher than the estimated market value, a policy anathema to its U.S. business model.²³ By paying a significant wage premium, Wal-Mart executives assumed its employees valued improved living conditions more heavily than their insistence on union cooperation. This presumption was reinforced by the firm's undeniable success in the U.S. and its growing success in Mexico. However, these values were weighted differently in the German labor market.

Wal-Mart's attempt to subvert *ve.rdi's* demands for a recognized wage bargaining process by unilaterally extending an increased pay scale failed miserably. By late July, *ve.rdi* removed more than one thousand workers from Wal-Mart stores and successfully appealed to the German media through massive protests. In a matter of days, increasing revenue losses and intense public pressure forced the corporation to accept the union's requirements while continuing its policy of non-union cooperation by refusing to sign an agreement. The compromise did little to assuage *ve.rdi's*

17 Schaefer, Louisa. "World's Biggest Retailer Wal-Mart Closes." *Deutsche Welle World D.E.*, 28 July 2006. <<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,2112746,00.html>>

18 As of 2006, Germany had an average work week of 35 hours, and a legally enforced maximum of 80 store opening hours per week. In comparison, the United Kingdom has a maximum of 168, and France a minimum of 144 store opening hours. For further discussion, see: Knorr Andreas, and Arndt, Andreas. "Why did Wal-Mart fail in Germany?" Institute for World Economic and International Management, 2003. 18.

19 Christopherson, Susan. "Barriers to 'US Style' lean retailing: the case of Wal-Mart's failure in Germany." *Journal of Economic Geography*, 14 May 2007. 3.

20 In 2000, economists estimated that a turnover of at least €7.7 billion in food retail was necessary for Wal-Mart Germany to reach economies of scale, a figure far surpassing its €3.2 billion in sales. (Knorr and Arndt 14, 19)

21 Knorr and Arndt, 14. See also Fairlamb 2003.

22 Appiah, 66.

23 For a full description see Christopherson (2007:7). In short, Wal-Mart has consistently maximized its profit share by largely employing part time, rather than full time employees, thereby avoiding the cost of higher wage rates and medical benefits.

opposition, and by 2003 the union filed litigation against Wal-Mart Germany for breach of anti-trust and information disclosure regulations.

In the context of growing criticism of Western cultural imperialism, Wal-Mart's experience in Germany is interesting for a number of reasons. Distinct from the archetypes of its international failures—selling golf clubs in Brazil, ice skates in Mexico, and storing products out of the reach of its South Korean consumers—Wal-Mart Germany's collapse was not a reflection of blatant cultural ignorance, but rather a mismanaged attempt at regional sensitivity as well as an inability to adapt to the specific market and regulatory constraints. Because of land, labor, and antitrust laws ill-suited for its vertical and rigidly U.S. centric business model, the corporation could not achieve the economies of scale necessary to repeat its previous successes. Moreover, in attempting to concede to locally specific demands, Wal-Mart Germany misattributed the value of increased wages as absolute and culturally universal. However compelling, these failures do not indicate that German culture is quantifiable and fundamentally distinct from that of the United States. Rather, Wal-Mart was incapable of interpreting the shifting demands of a culture in a foreign context.

While perceiving culture as a fixed concept is problematic, this does not suggest that locality is irrelevant. Rather, historical and geographic differences produced clear cultural distinctions. Through decreased transportation costs, advances in information and communication technology, and transnational investment, these locally specific cultural values are

increasingly being exported to foreign markets. This provokes an uncertainty, and Wal-Mart's experience in Germany introduces a final question: to what extent and in what way do these external values affect recipient cultures? In contrast to Wal-Mart's failure in Germany, the McDonald's Corporation's entry into the French restaurant market is an interesting example of this transformation.

McDonald's introduction into the French market in 1972 represented a period of global investment following nearly two decades of unabated success. However, a decade later, the corporation's dominance in the U.S. contested fiercely in a saturated fast food market. The emergence of the Burger King Corporation, Jack in the Box Inc., and Wendy's International forced the corporation to consider both alternate business strategies and emphasize its international operations. By 2002, the McDonald's Corporation had experienced declining earnings in four consecutive quarters, while, paradoxically, its French operations were thriving. Operating 932 outlets, McDonald's France controlled over seventy percent of the domestic hamburger market. Moreover, French consumers spent more than twice the \$4 per visit U.S. average.²⁴ This discordant growth in the context of a broader decline demonstrates the company's success in reinterpreting its business model in a foreign market and creating a hybridized cultural product.

Originally, the McDonald's Corporation emerged as a response to a rapidly changing post-war America, offering quickly prepared and inexpensive food to consumers experiencing unparalleled automobile ownership,

surging employment, and increased incomes. The firm's U.S. business model was, and largely remains, predicated on capturing consumers demand for efficiency. Unnecessary input costs—appealing restaurant interiors, full time labor, and higher quality ingredients—were avoided, menus were standardized, and restaurants were franchised in order to provide the lowest cost food in the shortest amount of time. This model bears little resemblance to McDonald's France. Sparsely designed restaurants were replaced by, as Shirley Leung notes, one of eight culturally specific themes. The themes ranging from the *Mountain's* hardwood floors and marble walls “complete with a wood-beam ceiling reminiscent of ski chalet,” to the *Music's* dim lighting, headphones and access to DVDs, CDs, and multimedia players, resulted in increased sales by an estimated twenty percent.²⁵ In addition, the corporation altered its menu by offering a line of more expensive *Premiere* sandwiches as well regionally specific cheeses and deserts. McDonald's France also altered its association with the United States by removing the emblematic golden arches from its restaurants. Structurally, McDonald's France embraced locally specific business logic by investing heavily in design and labor costs, thereby narrowing its margin of profit and driving the prices of its products up. The result is a combination of U.S./French values by consumers and executives, transforming the corporation into a hybridized cultural product. McDonald's France president Denis Henniquen confirms, “We wanted not to be a pass-through restaurant but a go-to restaurant...”²⁶ “We have upgraded the experience,

24 Matlack, Carol. “What's This? The French Love McDonalds?” *Business Week*, 13 Jan. 2003. <http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/03_02/b3815047.htm>

25 Leung, Shirley. “McHaute Cuisine: Armchairs, TV's and Espresso — Is It McDonalds?” *New York, N.Y.: Wall Street Journal*, 30 Aug 2002. A. 1.

26 Ibid

making McDonald's truly a destination restaurant."²⁷

Nearly twenty years ago, both Strobe Talbott and Francis Fukuyama predicted the dissolution of formal nation states and the unification of single global authority.²⁸ The collapse of the Soviet Union and the diffusion of neo liberal market principles left the United States as an uncontested economic hegemon. In response, a counter-movement critical of the coerced import of American values, emerged and denounced the apparent cultural imperialism. Further, as modern globalization developed—

primarily through liberalized trade and capital flows, increased migration, and internationally integrated markets—the capacity of states to *contain* culture diminished rapidly. As a result, analysis of globalization often questioned the potential to preserve culture's locality in a period of accelerated transnational exchange. Although this is largely a correct criticism, it disregards the fluid, rather than fixed, concept of cultural boundaries.

However, this does not imply that single globalized culture is sustainable. Franklin Foer's description of evolving collective identities suggests globaliza-

tion has altered the composition but not the appeal of in-group/out-group distinctions. Moreover, as Wal-Mart Germany demonstrates, imported cultures cannot simply be imposed by hegemonic interests. Recipient cultures are equally malleable and locally constrained, suggesting that exchange is not a zero-sum asymmetrical transfer, but rather a reinterpretation of external values and a continuous hybridization of culture. This suggests that a single global culture is as unsustainable as attempts to maintain divided and independent cultures. ■

27 Matlack, 2003.

28 It should be noted Fukuyama concedes a single type of governance—Western liberal democracy—rather than simply a single global entity.

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Doppelganger

by Matthew Hull

I.

I have done my time in the low bandwidth of the morning
The streetlights click off before the sun comes up

I have been a prisoner of war and a sweetheart, a doppelganger
A thief who steals diamonds, steals nothing at all

I have swum across rivers of shame only to find that on
The opposite shore of abandon lies an empty lot

I have crawled on all fours across the carpet of a motel room
Looking for way out from behind the blackout curtain

I have stated my name a thousand times, I have written numbers
On the back of torn envelopes filled with invoices

I have dialed the phone, only to hear breathing on the line
Asked for answers, placed the receiver on the bed

I have smelled the rancid cough of the city, held a kerchief
In front of its toothless mouth, held my breath

I have stood in the intersection in the middle of the afternoon
Begging the tall stone buildings to collapse again

I have taken the elevator down, during the paradigm shift
Listened to the voice of a vampire on his way home

I have stomped the asphalt with a bare foot, waiting for a crack
In the earth to grow so wide as to swallow me whole

I have spoken in tongues, channeled the spirits of Norse Gods
Whose only fault has ever been the fact that they died

I have slipped through the night waving flags in elegy, waving
With cupped hands to the spectators of the ghost parade

I have wiped the dirt from a hoodlum's fist off of my face at dawn
Run up the road and locked the door behind me

I have kissed the cheek of a transvestite prostitute whose corner
Happened to lie just across the way of my window

I have slept naked on a bare mattress sticky from the heat
Waiting to be born.

II.

I have knelt in front of the altar, pockets full of change and detritus
Emptied them out before I took the wafer in my mouth

I have beheld citizens of the world walking with their heads angled up
Stumbled on the sidewalk searching for gold in every crevice

I have knocked on the doors of people that I used to know, smiled
Told lies that that wouldn't even get me past the threshold

I have woken from dreams not knowing the difference between days
Sometimes the slumber came when I least expected it.

I have dressed myself in costumes of the illiterate, pushed and rolled
Swaggered down the alleyway as if I knew where it would go

I have climbed the fire escape of centuries, ran around the rooftops
One small misstep and the fracture could never be cast

I have held the hand of the darkened room when I could not think
Of anything else to do but pace the hard wood floor

I have bathed in hot water that spilled from a metal spout, opened my eyes
Beheld imagined stars that resulted from oxygen deprivation

I have creased the lined notebook paper that I wrote upon, wrote upon
Torn it from the spiral binder and threw it in the trash

I have visited the homes of the well to do, dined at crowded tables
Waited until eleven and then snuck out the side gate

I have wiped up the bathroom sink with a piece of torn toilet tissue
Flushed it down after discovering that water melts ice

I have crowed at the rising, then buried my head beneath covers
That smelled like bleach and the fucking that I forgot

I have masturbated while thinking of a person whose name I thought
Would touch the tip of my tongue until the day that I died

I have sat on the bus for only so long as I could take it, then got off
Hailed a taxicab so that I could get there even faster

I have cried on the day that I was born, wandering around a dealership
That sold cars that I could not afford.

III.

I have fallen from a festival of branches, the canopy served as no more
Than the umbrella that let rain drop on every square inch

I have talked circles around shop keeps, hoping always that my check
Might clear before the burden of tomorrows deposit

I have stolen plastic wrapped spring rolls from a crowded Asian market
Keeping in mind that police dogs stood guard just outside

I have remembered you. I have remembered you. I have remembered you
The late mornings when we walked down a distant street in hope

I have ground the edge of a metal file against a slow spinning stone
The knife that I made sliced a draw in my finger's skin

I have tapped the trunk of a maple tree, letting the raw, bloodless blood
Drag the bucket down until my shoulder felt like it might tear

I have raked yards for pennies, the flawless leaves piling the October tarp
Burlap is the only thing that makes blades of grass insignificant

I have eaten with my hands, digging into a feast of chicken bones, chicken
Grease sliding on my lips and tongue, the closest thing to pussy

I have swung on playground swings; feet pumping back arched head dizzy
Felt that when the buckle of the rope caught, that I might tumble

I have died. I have died. I have died. I have. Resurrection is as easy as waking
It is the staying dead part that presents a more significant challenge

I have dragged my body behind me by my hands because my legs went numb
Kitchen tile felt so cold on my palms that I laid my head right there

I have ridden shotgun with an addict whose torch was lit as we stopped for gas
Bottles of water and bags of sand kept the flood from seeping under

I have turned into a pillar of salt, craning my neck to see the spirits burn
Effigy is a Sunday when the raft is set afire, sent out to sea

I have coasted on a blue bicycle, the tires un-vulcanized, air seeping out freely
One pedal fell off and the brakes squeak, but it gets me around town

I have wondered what will become of me. I have dreamt of a life in hotel suites.

On Baseball

by Christopher Tucker

Baseball season is an entity that transcends the seasons of the calendar; it's a twelve-month sport. Bart Giamatti, former commissioner of baseball, said it best himself: "It's designed to break your heart. The game begins in the spring, when everything is new again, and it blossoms in the summer, filling the afternoons and evenings, and then as soon as the chill rains comes, it stops, and leaves you...alone."

Baseball may be a sport designed to break hearts, but it can also be a soothing escape from the daily grind. For a baseball fan, there is no better feeling as the sun sets and a warm summer evening arrives than knowing that your team will be taking the field. For the next three hours, there is nothing else. It's almost as if, despite the thousands of people in attendance and the millions watching on television, these players are out there just for you.

But baseball fans are not naïve. We know they aren't playing for us. They're playing for a paycheck. Baseball is indeed a selfish sport, but not just for the players. Baseball is more about the fan than the player, because every summer evening, it is all about *you*. Your team, your sport. The sport itself, how the game is physically played, is selfish—the primary action takes place between one pitcher, one batter. The other men on the field are only supporting roles. As exciting as the background players may be, no one watches *Heat* for Val Kilmer—it's all about De Niro vs. Pacino.

Baseball season is more than the Hall of Famers of the past and the superstars of today. It's more than pop outs, bunts, ground-rule doubles, stolen bases, home runs. It's more than walk offs, strike-three-called, foul balls. It's more than ERA, AVG, IP, or RBI. It's a hell of a lot more than steroids and scandals, Barry Bonds and Roger Clemens, needles and pills. What baseball is truly *about* transcends them all.

Baseball season is about taking your firstborn child to her first game. Baseball season is about being a graduate student and still owning a poster of Mo Vaughn, because a childhood hero is forever—no matter how flawed he may have been. Baseball season is about families and strangers, fathers and sons, friends and lovers; it's about going to bed late and getting up early. It's never missing a game, even if it means neglecting the things you should do, because for 162 games you've become a part of something bigger than yourself. You may not be on that bench, you may not even be at the game, but whether you're watching on television, listening on the radio, or catching the highlights on ESPN, you are a member of the collective team known as "baseball fans."

Baseball season is about the unity you share with other fans of your team. It's the satisfaction you feel when you see a fellow fan celebrating a win, even if their win means your loss. It's the friendships you form with strangers when you witness a game-ending hit or a near-perfect game, or even when you're just watching from the bleachers in the pouring April rain. It's high fives, handshakes, and hugs, from living rooms to bar rooms. It's the elation you feel when a team that hadn't won a World Series in 86 years finally does. It's waking up your young children after midnight to witness baseball history as a family. It's choking up at the sight of grown men celebrating, like little kids who just won their local little league tournament. It's laying a flag on the grave of a dead relative who wasn't around to see it. It's seeing your favorite team win it all again. It's the hope, the desire, and the anxiety that comes every April and ends every October. It's "Dirty Water," it's "Sweet Caroline." It's more than a game. It's more than a season. It's baseball. ■

Beginning of an Aura: Duchamp, Benjamin, Viola, and Art in the Age of Informatized Production

by Alex Corey

Will and I stand in a small room of a museum. There is an opening behind us and one to our right. Displayed directly in front of me, there sits a Joan Miro painting, one with the squiggly lines, earth tones, and the primitive images with little dots reminiscent of faces. It is mostly earth toned. Next to that is an Yves Tanguy surreal-scape. Its composition resembles little bones in an environment that makes Mars look like the California during the harvest.

I turn to the left and laugh. A urinal sits on a white pedestal. It is signed “R. Mutt” on the front of the base, and it has been rotated 90 degrees and placed in an art museum. Glancing at the urinal skeptically, I see a question forming in Will’s eyes.

The work of cultural production¹ we are contemplating is Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain*, a piece with which both of us are familiar but have not previously seen in person. The question is not whether this object is art, or even what this object of cultural production does/did for art. Will turns to me and pops the question, instantly revitalizing Walter Benjamin’s *Artwork*² essay. After a slow percolation of thoughts and concepts, Will asks, “Does this object have an aura?”³

A critical juxtaposition of Ben-

jamin’s *Artwork* essay and Duchamp’s *Fountain* intends to invigorate the tension between Time and Space, as well as to define a potential role of the artist in the current, *informatized*⁴ age of cultural production. While both Benjamin’s essay and Duchamp’s *Fountain* emerged during the age of industrial production, a contemporary critic must extract each one from its distinct moment of creation while absorbing himself in the work. The dialectic that becomes apparent, as distance (both in Space and in Time) grapples with proximity, and promises to inform a new understanding of both historical texts. Through an investigation of the various distances, proximities, alienations, and appropriations that emerge while considering these two works, we are able to establish that Duchamp’s *Fountain* does have an aura. Finally, that an appropriated object has an aura, that a *mass-produced* object has an aura, gives hope of a post-Benjaminian utopian space to art in the age of *informatized production*. This utopian space can be experienced in Bill Viola’s video art piece *Five Angels of the Millennium*.

In order to proceed down this post-Benjaminian line of thinking, we must first have a clear understanding of the aura. The aura of an object of cultural production derives from the embeddedness of that object in tradition, from its

uniqueness, and from its mystical cult/ritual value.⁵ Although Benjamin begins his discussion in his *Artwork* essay with religious art, he recognizes the importance of non-religious art, writing that “as art becomes secularized, authenticity displaces the cult value of the work.”⁶ Benjamin’s authenticity depends on the uniqueness, the physical singularity, of an object of cultural production. He defines the aura of a natural object as “the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.”⁷ The aura of both natural and produced objects is rooted in the Spatial domain. Synchrony is pre-supposed; it is apparent only at that moment when we allow ourselves to recognize the interplay between the distance and the proximity of the object.

In the Temporal domain, just as in the Spatial, distance and proximity relate dynamically. Thus, it will be helpful to relate the idea of the aura to a contemplation of historical time. In space, we can perceive the aura during the moment of recognition of distance and proximity in a perceived object. An uncanny, mystical element shrouds and illuminates our understanding of the object. Similarly, an illuminating dialectic develops in the moment we simultaneously extract an object from its time and absorb ourselves in the timeless contemplation of the object.⁸

1 I choose to use the phrase “object of cultural production,” as opposed to “art object”, in order to distance the discussion from the presupposition that this is or is not art. The goal is to focus on experience and perception, both of which have very little to do with the question of art.

2 Benjamin’s *Artwork* essay is cited under the full title: *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproduction*.

3 While the location of this anecdote is fictional, the question and conversation we had is not. Will and I did have this conversation, it was just via cell phone when I was at a rest stop in Vermont.

4 This idea of the *informatized* age of production comes from Hardt and Negri’s essay *Postmodernization, or the Informatization of Production*.

5 This cult value, or use value, is distinct from its exhibition value. Cult value gives a sense of private space as opposed to public appreciation.

6 Benjamin, Walter. (2007). The work of Art in the age of its technological reproduction. In Simon During (Ed.), *Cultural Studies Reader, 3rd edition*. (p. 75). New York: Routledge.

7 Ibid, p. 63.

8 Walter Benjamin’s discussion of distraction and concentration (*Zerstreuung und Sammlung*) in section XV of his *Artwork* essay proves helpful: “Distraction and concentration form an antithesis, which may be formulated as follows. A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters the work...By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves.” (Benjamin 72)

In extracting it from its time, we maintain a critical distance, since we relate to it as a historical object outside its context. When we absorb ourselves in timeless contemplation, we immerse ourselves as participators. During this moment, as we oscillate between “critical distance and participatory immersion,”⁹ Benjamin argues that the potential Messianic redemption may occur.¹⁰ Human time stops, and Messianic time emerges.¹¹

Through an assertion of Messianic time, a historian “grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time.”¹² Here, Benjamin’s assertion of a spatial understanding (e.g. a constellation) of history highlights the fluid dynamism with which he approaches time. *Benjamin sees diachronic time synchronically, and then he arranges this synchronic space diachronically.*¹³ Arranged spatially, the constellation of time is synchronic; all eras are visible at the same time. Arranged sequentially, the linear view of history affirms the diachronic approach that each era leads to another.¹⁴ What is seen in the synchronic approach informs what is arranged diachronically. In his *Theses*, Benjamin proposes that the historical materialist must be able to access both approaches simultaneously. This dialectic of spatial temporality (and the synchronically diachronic) shocks us out of our own moment between the present, which is the future of our past, and the future of this present. It encap-

ulates “the presence of the now;” the *Jetztzeit* emerges when the synchronic and diachronic must be seen together.

And so we return to Duchamp’s *Fountain*. Originally, it was a mechanically mass produced urinal.¹⁵ Thus, due to its inauthentic nature (since it was not produced singularly), and its existence strictly outside the realm of tradition, the original urinal had no aura. Duchamp takes the urinal out of its original context as a basic hygienic artifact and recontextualizes it in an art gallery. Duchamp embeds this piece of porcelain into tradition, by placing it—a mass-produced object—into a gallery in which only non mass-produced objects previously belonged.¹⁶ Without physically creating the object, he endows it with an aura.

Fountain provides a complex set of alienations and appropriations that, when considered together, challenge previous assumptions of property and authenticity. As a mass-produced object, the urinal began as an object alienated from its producers. Duchamp alienates the urinal from its mass-produced origin and appropriates it as his own. However, Duchamp attaches another name to the work at the moment he submits it, thus publicly alienating himself from it. Finally, contemporary art history attributes to a singular creator this alienated object of wage-labor that had been re-alienated from its conceptual as well as material producers. Thus, the tradition into which Duchamp embeds it retroactively establishes its authenticity. *Fountain* is an inimitable, *irreproducible* piece of art in the age of

mechanical reproduction.

In Benjamin’s Artwork essay, the discussion of the aura in relation to the privation of an aura recalls Marx’s assertions on property in bourgeois capitalist society. Benjamin proposed his idea of the aura at a time when mechanical reproduction, photography, and cinema were threatening the aura’s very existence. Thus its appearance as an aspect of art criticism is due to the increasing lack of aura in objects of cultural production. Much in the way that bourgeois society, in Marxian thinking, depends on the apparent existence of a proletarian lack of property, Benjamin’s concept of art in the age of mechanical reproduction depends on the apparent lack of aura in certain objects of cultural production. A Marxian utopian space develops when no one is denied property—hence the idea of property is abolished along with property itself. Likewise, if an artist is able to establish authenticity through the affirmation that the object does not have a “not aura,” then the object delineates a (post-Benjaminian) utopian space.

Duchamp’s ready-made suggests emphatically the possibility of this post-Benjaminian utopia, and video art instillation can manifest this utopia. In the post-Benjaminian utopian space, there would be no apparent lack of aura because the authenticity requisite of the aura would be in the experience of the piece and not in the material presence of the piece. In video instillation, this authenticity of experience¹⁷ overtakes physical authen-

9 Meek, Allan. *Benjamin, the Televisual, and the ‘Fascist’ Subject*. Retrieved 15 September 1998.

10 This idea of Messianic redemption is a key theme throughout the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.

11 Benjamin writes, in section XVIII of his *Theses*: “The present, which, as a model of Messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgement, coincides exactly with the stature which the history of mankind has in the universe.” (Benjamin, *Theses* 263)

12 Benjamin, Walter. (1988). *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. In Simon During (Ed.), *Cultural Studies Reader, 3rd edition*. (p. 263). New York: Routledge.

13 This idea is extrapolated from Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: Human history, on its surface, is most readily perceived as a diachronic progression. But when all history is compressed into a moment, it becomes synchronic. Then it rearranges into a new sequence that operates on Messianic time. The sequence must be diachronic, but the understanding of Messianic time must be synchronic and loaded in a *Jetztzeit*.

14 This approach leads to Benjamin’s idea that each generation is endowed with a “weak Messianic power” (Benjamin, *Theses*, XX)

15 It is important to note, in the context of Benjamin’s *Artwork* essay, that it was not a reproduced imitation of an authentic piece of cultural production.

16 And he didn’t even succeed! The piece was removed from its show before the show began.

17 The notion of authenticity of experience draws on Hardt and Negri’s idea of a service economy. It would make sense for physical authenticity to be at stake during the age of industrial production and experiential authenticity to be at stake in the age of informatized production. Experiential authenticity, in a video, would not actually mimic the experience of “being there;” it would solidly root the view in “being here.” The void in between the “here” and the “there,” which is both spatial and temporal, is the space where an aura would not be lacking.

ticity. In the current age of Hardt and Negri's *informatized* production, video instillation contradicts and confirms Benjamin's assertions from his *Artwork* essay. Physical authenticity would cease to exist and would simultaneously cease to be relevant, and Benjamin's claims about photography and cinematography changing the world of art achieve a level of prophetic clarity. But authenticity would be apparent everywhere in this space since authenticity would not be lacking anywhere, and thus the aura would not disappear. This contradicts Benjamin's claims about the disappearance of aura. A work that achieves this lack of "no aura" would induce a state of *immer wieder Jetztzeit*. The void between proximity and distance would reach its limit.

Duchamp's *Fountain* derives its aura *in spite* of its physicality, not on account of it. It transcends the material originality formerly prerequisite of the object of "art." Only *after* Duchamp signs this piece with a false name and submits it for an art show does it acquire an aura. With the ready-made Duchamp asserts the intellectual, i.e. thought, as art's realm, and thought exists in the dimension of Time (not Space). He subordinates materiality

for the intellectual. The ready-made sets the stage for the conceptual, and the *experience*, to overtake the physical as paramount authenticity in cultural production. Furthermore, the ready-made directs our gaze from diachronic space (the superficial history of that object) into Benjamin's constellation of Time. We do not need to be in the physical presence of the contemplated object anymore to detect the aura. Space becomes the grumpy handmaid of Time. In the space between eras that form Benjamin's constellation of history, the aura is now apparent in the temporal distance between the object and the viewer. The aura becomes *temporal* just as time becomes spatial.

And so we enter Bill Viola's *Five Angels of the Millennium*. Through these black curtains of the Whitney Museum on Manhattan's Upper East Side, a *immer wieder Jetztzeit*, a post-Benjaminian utopian space, envelops us. The piece assaults all senses as it settles them; five large screens are arranged around a dark room with a rumbling, ambient soundtrack filling the space. Each screen repeats a slow-motion image of a diver either entering water or emerging (in reverse dive) from the water, interspersed with long periods of the

surface of the water infused with warm or cool light. Each moment a diver breaks the surface, a *Jetztzeit* shocks us into a new understanding of the piece. If we are facing that screen, a stunning visual kaleidoscope becomes apparent. If it is behind us, which inevitably some of the screens are, our ears tell us what our eyes are missing. It is repetitive but unpredictable, a smooth sequence that jars us out of comfortability. The instillation simultaneously affirms and denies human temporal understanding. The authenticity of the *experience* takes precedence over the authenticity of the *material* which Viola manipulates into this technologically produced instillation. An aura develops as the distance of the reproduced image contradicts the proximity of the individual experience.

Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* provided the conceptual shock that allowed for the development of this kind of art. Walter Benjamin's *Artwork* essay and his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* provide the theoretical framework that allow us to understand this utopian space. Informed by the work of Benjamin and Duchamp, Bill Viola renders a post-Benjaminian utopian space in the age of informatized production. ■

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Performativity and Identity Politics: Calling the Notion of Authentic Gender into Question

by Lindsay Davis

Butler begins “Subversive Bodily Acts” with a critical analysis of the assumption that biological sex assignment always equals a specific gender identification. Rather than relying on biology as the primary grounds for identifying with a particular gender, Butler cites the impact of history and culture on gender identification. Instead of the socially constructed and bound gender binary of the male and the female, Butler questions the very notion of the traditional idea of an authentic gender. Specifically, she asks, “Is ‘the body’ or the ‘sexed body’ the firm foundation on which gender and systems of compulsory sexuality operate? Or is ‘the body’ itself shaped by political forces with strategic interests in keeping that body bounded and constituted by the markers of sex?”¹ In other words, if sex is biological, then what is gender? Is it the result of sex assignment or is it a way of behaving informed by other factors?

“Political forces” mentioned above include the (Western) tendency to establish categories based upon physical means of classification to maintain a perceived sense of order and organization. This is where the theories of heteronormativity come into play. The presupposition of the heterosexual association of all (rather than a percentage of) members of a certain population governs the exchange between the dominant group and the Other, thus effecting the construction of identity politics and the hierarchical setup of the social system. Butler argues that this method of bifurcation establishes gendered hierarchical systems by creating or exaggerating differences between the sexes as well as those who do not conform to the socially constructed set of gender norms.

In this way, the role of the “Other” or the “polluted body” becomes central to Butler’s argument. The Other is the sacrificial victim of the majority group, thus producing (for the dominant group) an internal sense of exclusivity, security, and “boundedness.” For example, the homosexual male exemplifies the Other by representing one case of the so-called polluted body and its threat to the stability of the social hegemony. “The rites of passage that govern various bodily orifices presuppose a heterosexual construction of gendered exchange, positions, and erotic possibilities. The deregulation of such exchanges [through the practice of homosexual sex acts] accordingly disrupts the very boundaries that determine what it is to be a body at all.”² With this in mind, what is at stake in maintaining boundaries of heterosexual exchange and the male-female system of categorization? What happens when this boundary—which is viewed by the dominant group as both natural and necessary—is erased?

According to conventional assumptions regarding gender, any unraveling of the gendered framework could result in upheaval and unrest. As some skeptics of flexible gender identification argue, routine gender distinctions exist as a way to “protect against social anarchy.” This reaction, informed by the assumed imperativity of sexual distinction, appears initially as a rational and reasonable supposition. By maintaining physical and symbolic distinctions between men and women on a gendered level, the act of both labeling and signifying becomes suddenly powerful and viewed as a necessary policy of legalized segregation based on heterosexual principles.

According to traditional theorists, marginalizing practices that produce the Other (as a method of stabilization) appear as natural. Yet, perhaps it is the reliance on a certain “sacrificability” of an outside group that perpetuates the existence of the Other, or, in some cases, the existence of the *homo sacer*. The *homo sacer* translates to the “sacred man” or a group or entity that can be sacrificed to produce stability and sovereignty.³ The homosexual as *homo sacer*, excluded because taboo behavior and nontraditional acts, allows the dominant group to practice segregation and other exclusionary tactics to maintain a larger sense of political control and sovereignty. Though there is no physical act of murder of the Other, methods of social and political exclusion based on “alternative” gender identification can nonetheless be violent and fatal in nature. Systems based on modes of structural violence inevitably use the lower position of the Other to prop up the dominant social group. The end of gender distinction eliminates the category of the *homo sacer* by leaving a social void.

Butler argues that this mode of differentiation exists as a means of maintaining a male-dominated hegemony rather than a general requirement for order. It is not about protecting against chaos, but rather a way for the dominant group to hold onto its particular version of power. Using the example of unisex bathrooms at the University of Vermont (UVM), the erasure of the gender distinction by way of anatomical difference in terms of who uses what bathroom has not resulted in chaos. The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning and Ally Services (LGBTQA) at UVM argued its case for the change by stating

1 Butler, Judith. (2007). Subversive bodily acts. In Simon During (Ed.), *The Cultural Studies Reader* (p. 372). London: Routledge.

2 Ibid, p. 375.

3 Agamben, Giorgio (1998). *Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

that it is vital to “recognized that gender variant people may not match the little signs on the restroom door” (LGBTQA website). Anatomical structures do not necessarily imply a simple identification with the socially established “corresponding” gender. Despite skeptics’ concerns about negative public reaction or violent protest, the creation of unisex bathrooms at UVM—and other campuses around the country—has not resulted in “chaos.” The shift represents a new way of applying a genderless approach to practical operations.

Following Butler’s assertion that gender is not an automatic result of biology, one must consider from *where* gender identification comes. It is here that Butler reveals herself as a true Foucauldian thinker. Just as Michel Foucault identified the soul as the modern disciplinary target of the penitential system in *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), so too does Butler rely on the soul and its ability to perform gender. The identification of gender as informed by the soul allows a person’s “maleness” or “femaleness” to be manipulated, changed, improvised, and parodied. Under this new gaze, Butler argues that gender is simply one big performance.

Gender performativity depends upon the repeated production of certain acts. These acts are mutable and, at times, discontinuous rather than stable or concrete modes of expression. “That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notion of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femi-

ninity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender’s performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality.”⁴ The crux of the “sex equals gender” assumption depends upon the *absence* of performance. Butler’s argument is revolutionary in a sense because it highlights the explicit as well as implicit performative nature of gender as inscribed by historical and cultural events.

For example, Butler highlights the role of drag as a parody of the system of arbitrary gender classification. The mutability and improvisation of the drag performance, in Butler’s view, shows the way in which gender can shift and blur by way of stylized performance. “Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of the radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of casual unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary.”⁵ Drag recognizes the “imitative structure” of gender performance and reveals how it can be manipulated outside the bounds of heteronormativity.

In this way, the mere recognition of gender performance and parody becomes a “subversive bodily act.” Assumptions by the dominant social group are undermined and weakened, thus leaving room for fluidity within the heteronormative power structure. “Parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist

gender identities. Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization.”⁶ The reinterpretation of gender as a series of repeated and imitated practices, rather than behaviors informed automatically by the logic of biology and anatomy, allows different version of gender identification and sexual preference to enter the dominant framework and redefine what it is to be “normal.”

Judith Butler establishes an important framework to examine the implications of the traditional gender binary. By considering the impact of cultural and historical events on the construction and performance of gender, Butler introduces a new way to consider personal identity as well as the general composition of the dominant social order. If gender is indeed a continuously evolving and changing set of performative acts whose basis have little or nothing to do with biology, then the entire structure of the social system should, in theory, operate under a new set of standards and assumptions. According to Butler, “gender can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived.”⁷ The erasure of masculine and feminine categories, while resulting in major implications for the hegemonic order, could allow greater potential for legitimate gendered modes of expression as well more inclusive and representative social, political and cultural policies, and methods of organization. ■

4 Ibid, p. 382.

5 Ibid, p. 379.

6 Ibid, p. 379.

7 Ibid, p. 382.

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