

ABSENCES THAT MATTER: PERFORMATIVITY AND FEMALE MASCULINITIES

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ABSTRACT

The theoretical and rhetorical apparatus that Halberstam deploys in *Female Masculinity* reflects an understanding of masculinity and of its relation with gender performativity that seems to be at odds with the most recognizable political objectives of his work. Given the importance of his work and, especially, of the rethinking of gender binarism, I will try to highlight what I see as a problematic subtext of *Female Masculinity*.

KEY WORDS: Female masculinity, performativity, citationality, performance.

RESUMEN

El aparato teórico y retórico que emplea Halberstam en *Female Masculinity* refleja una concepción de la masculinidad y de su relación con la performatividad de género que parece entrar en conflicto con los objetivos políticos más evidentes de su trabajo. Dada la importancia del mismo y, en especial, del replanteamiento crítico del binarismo genérico, trataré aquí de resaltar lo que veo como un subtexto problemático de *Female Masculinity*.

PALABRAS CLAVE: masculinidad femenina, performatividad, citacionalidad, performance.

Judith (Jack) Halberstam did not write *Female Masculinity* in order to answer the question “What is masculinity?” From the very beginning of his book, he states clearly that he has not “any definitive answer to this question” (1). Therefore, if we had to identify the actual purpose of his essay, we would have to look for it elsewhere. The easiest way to do it would be in negative terms: *Female Masculinity*, rather than producing new answers, is written to question and problematize our quotidian and academic understanding of masculinity. And that may well be the most productive effect of reading it, that is, the most powerful political effect of his groundbreaking work in the field of gender and queer studies.

Considered by itself, the critical task of exposing and dismantling historical prejudices in the understanding of masculinity is no novelty for the so called “mas-



culinity studies.” We could consider it as the inaugural goal of this field of academic inquiry. As the sociologist Michael Kimmel explains, masculinity, as an object of study, has enjoyed a very particular form of historical invisibility paradoxically linked to its omnipresence. It has always been there, implicit in all forms of cultural production but, paradoxically, it has not become visible until the very recent past:

Masculinity Studies were equivalent to the study of Literature, Philosophy, History or Political Science, etc., fields where women had been virtually excluded.

We did not start labelling them as “Masculinity Studies,” that is, to talk about masculinity as a factor, until very recently, at the beginning of the eighties, when academics trained in feminism started realizing that the gender system had been ignored in the analysis of men. (15)

The key role feminism has played in this process can hardly be overemphasized. Actually, for many,¹ the so called “masculinity studies” are nothing but a part of gender studies and, in this sense, of feminist thought. But when we think about Halberstam and his analysis of masculinity, this relationship becomes, if that is possible, more intimate. In fact, what he is interested in is not male masculinity but masculinity as it is lived, inhabited and embodied by women, that is, female masculinity.

Given this premise, Halberstam’s essay could be considered by some as a study on alternative masculinities with no more than a tangential interest, in the best of cases, for the study of masculinity as such. That is not, of course, the way Halberstam conceives his own approach to the question. Rather, this kind of strategic displacement of the target may well be the best, if not the only way, to really grasp masculinity: on the one hand, he tells us, because “masculinity must not and cannot and should not reduce down to the male body and its effects” (1); on the other, and this is the crucial epistemological point of his argument, because masculinity cannot be made intelligible unless it is separated from the male privilege inherent to white and middle class male bodies:

Masculinity in this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power of the state and to uneven distributions of wealth. Masculinity seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into the family; masculinity represents the power of inheritance, the consequences of the traffic in women, and the promise of social privilege. But, obviously, many other lines of identification traverse the terrain of masculinity, dividing its power into complicated differentials of class, race, sexuality, and gender. If what we call “dominant masculinity” appears to be a naturalized relation between maleness and power, then it makes little sense to examine men for the contours of that masculinity’s social construction. *Masculinity, this book will claim,*

¹ As Carolyn Dinshaw explains in “Perspectivas queer” (81-95).

*becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body.*² (24; italics added)

What Halberstam offers us, therefore, is a very patient analysis of a wide range of queer masculinities which is, at the same time, a study of masculinity *per se* and an exercise in critical thinking about the violence that masculine women face. A violence coming from what Wittig called the “heterosexual mind,” whether it is found on the outside or on the inside of feminist theories and practices. It is worth noticing that fighting the transgenderphobia that some women—but not only women—are exposed to is, or at least should be, as much a feminist concern as is fighting transphobia and homophobia, especially when these forms of violence are frequently undistinguishable from one another. Of course, this gathering of interests is not an unusual one in the theoretical space of what is sometimes referred to as queer feminism.³ Halberstam, for his part, considers the task to which he is committed as an important contribution to, simultaneously, “gender studies, cultural studies, queer studies and the classic debates on gender” (2).

FROM IMPENETRABILITY TO NONPERFORMATIVITY

To begin with, it is important to acknowledge that Halberstam’s point of departure is a distinction between dominant masculinity of white middle-class males and subordinated masculinities, a distinction that was already established in masculinity studies.⁴ However, Halberstam rethinks significantly this distinction

² The reference to “dominant”—or hegemonic—masculinities is a very common one in the field of masculinity studies. It was introduced for the first time during the eighties (Kessler et al; Connell, “Class”; Connell, *Which*). In order to understand masculinity it was necessary, in Connell’s terms, to take into account the distinction between hegemonic and subaltern masculinities (Connell, “Politics” 140). The cultural production of these two forms of hierarchical masculinity would be part of the game through which masculinity is socially constructed. In this sense, white middle-class masculinity could not be understood, nor exist, independently of the exclusionary process of distinguishing itself from subaltern forms of masculinity. In Connell’s work, this implied the oppression of the whole range of masculinities all along the axis of race, class and sexuality (Connell, “Politics” 143) that Halberstam also refers to. There is, however, an important distinction to make in the epistemological privilege Halberstam associates with the study of masculinities not embodied by white males. In his view, it would not be in the relations of hierarchical subordination as such that masculinity would become properly intelligible but, rather, in specific forms of queer masculinity—that is, in masculinity completely isolated from its privileges.

³ Although it has been a very contested one in the history of feminism, as exemplified by the proliferation of feminist cissexist authors who condemn transsexual F2M communities for diverse reasons. Halberstam reminds us, for example, of the way in which Janice Raymond and Mary Daly “and other feminists in the 1970s and 1980s saw male-to-female transsexuals as phallocratic agents who were trying to infiltrate women-only space” (Halberstam 149).

⁴ See especially R. Connell, *Masculinities* 79, 81, 191, and 242.



when he upholds the role masculine women have played in the construction of hegemonic or “heroic” masculinities:

Many of these “heroic masculinities” depend absolutely on the subordination of alternative masculinities. I claim in this book that far from being an imitation of maleness, female masculinity actually affords us a glimpse of how masculinity is constructed as masculinity. (1)

The way this construction is conceived is indeed different from the dependency, on the part of dominant masculinities, on the constitutive exclusion of subaltern masculinities, that is, of its exclusionary relegation to a constitutive outside.⁵ The examples offered by Halberstam show an interesting perspective upon the construction of heroic masculinity by both male and female bodies:

This book seeks Elvis only in the female impersonators Elvis Herselvis; it searches for the political contours of masculine privilege not in men but in the lives of aristocratic European cross-dressing women in the 1920s; it describes the details of masculine difference by comparing not men and women but butch lesbians and female-to-male transsexuals; it examines masculinity’s iconicity not in the male matinee idol but in a history of butches in cinema; it finds, ultimately, that the shapes and forms of modern masculinity are best showcased within female masculinity. (3)

Indeed, the book explores many of these silenced forms of female masculinities, not only in lesbian contexts. Some of the most interesting conclusions about masculinity are achieved by Halberstam around zones of indeterminacy between lesbians, transgenders and FTM transsexual identities and practices. Among them, we will focus on a figure of female masculinity that holds a privileged position in

⁵ It is interesting to note that the kind of epistemological advantage attributed to non normative genders -although not in so direct a relation to masculinity- can also be found in Judith Butler’s work. One of the best known theoretical moves of *Gender Trouble* refers to the way incoherent embodiment of genders can produce—besides several forms of political resistance—a critical transformation of our understanding of gender. Butler conceives the performance of the drag queen, that is, hyperbolic femininity embodied by men in the theatrical contexts of performance, as an opportunity to unveil the way in which gender is constructed through mimesis and citationality. The incoherence between biological sex and the gender performed would favour the highlighting of the performative character of gender, exposing it not as something we *are* but as something we *do*. Furthermore, Butler also established a certain *continuum* between the gender subversion of the drag queen and that of the butch, in the following terms: “The notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities. Within feminist theory, such parodic identities have been understood to be either degrading to women, in the case of drag and cross-dressing, or an uncritical appropriation of sex-role stereotyping from within the practice of heterosexuality, especially in the case of butch/femme lesbian identities. But the relation between the “imitation” and the “original” is, I think, more complicated than that critique generally allows” (Butler, *Gender* 175).



Halberstam's study: the stone butch⁶—an especially masculine lesbian that Halberstam describes as a “dyke body placed somewhere on the boundary between female masculinity and transgender subjectivity” (124).

This queer limit of female masculinity holds a particular relation between the order of gender and that of sexual practices. Specifically, Halberstam explains, the stone is defined by the sexual practices that she does not perform: in the words of Merrill Mushrrom, a “stone butch” is “a butch who does not let her partner touch her sexually” (qtd. Halberstam 120); in Halberstam, “the “stone” in stone butch refers to a kind of impenetrability” (123). An impenetrability easily comparable—Halberstam is very aware of it—to the typical impenetrability involved in the construction of male's normative heterosexuality (149).⁷ However, in the case of the stone, her impenetrability has been a common target for normalizing discourses on the sexual practices associated with a “healthy sexuality”:

[the stone butch] seems to provoke unwarranted outrage not only from a gender-conformist society that cannot comprehend stone butch gender or stone butch desire but also from within the dyke subculture, where the stone tends to be read as frigid, dysphoric, misogynist, repressed, or simply pretranssexual. (124)

In his denouncement of this kind of pathologisation, Halberstam describes the relations between the masculinity and the sexuality of the stone. In doing so he moves away from Butler's theory of performativity, given that it would be unable to take into account certain forms of generic identification that tend to what he defines as “nonperformativity.” A negative version of performativity that he associates not only with the stone but with all forms of dominant masculinity. Now, what kind of nonperformativity is this one, and what relation does it maintain with gender performativity?

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Halberstam presents nonperformativity in relation to the stone's impenetrability in the following terms:

⁶ It is, however, necessary to clarify that Halberstam rejects the linearity of a gender model that polarizes masculinities between the limit of androgyny and FTM in a linear axis such as “Androgyny-Soft butch-Butch-Stone butch-Transgender butch-FTM” (151). The main problem of such a continuum, according to Halberstam (in agreement with Jordy Jone's “catalogue of transgender variety”) is its inability to understand the potential ubiquity of transsexual identities all along the axis, in addition to “make gender dysphoria the exclusive property of transsexual bodies or to surmise that the greater the gender dysphoria, the likelier a transsexual identification” (151).

⁷ On this topic, see Javier Sáez and Sejo Carrascosa: a reflection on the relations between the construction of masculinities and anal politics.



[It] oddly references the nonperformative aspects of this butch's sexual identity. The stone butch has the dubious distinction of being possibly the only sexual identity defined almost solely in terms of what practices she does *not* engage in. Is there another sexual identity, we might ask, defined by what a person will not do? What does it mean to define a sexual identity and a set of sexual practices that coalesce around that identity within a negative register? What are the implications of a negative performativity for theorizing sexual subjectivities? Furthermore, could we even imagine designating male sexual identities in terms of nonperformance? (126)

The slippage between the references to performativity (“nonperformative,” “negative performativity”) with the references to performance (“nonperformance”) should be stressed, especially when the conflation between the theatrical dimensions of performance and the related but also broader concept of gender performativity has already been a repeated source of confusion in the reception of Butler's positions.⁸ Moreover, in the following paragraph Halberstam reproduces, in my opinion, a good motive to insist in such distinction, when he argues that the fact that the stone is defined by practices she does not engage in somehow “challenges” the theory of performativity:

The stone butch again *challenges even this complicated theory of performativity* because her *performance* is embedded within a *nonperformance* [italics added]: stone butchness, in other words, performs both female masculinity and a rejection of enforced anatomical femininity. Nonperformance, in this formulation, signifies as heavily as performance and reveals the ways in which performativity itself is as much a record of what a body will not do as what it might do. (151)

While it seems clear that the repetition of gender performatives that is involved in the process of subjection for any generic position depends as much on what the subject actually does, repeats or performs, as it does on everything that the subject avoids doing, repeating or performing, we may also wonder if, in the case of the stone, by a simple inversion of perspective, we might consider that her sexual practices are not in fact also defined—this time, in terms of an active or positive performance—by the access to the body of her sexual partner.⁹ From such a perspective, the fact that this access is not a reciprocal one would not re-

⁸ I will come back later to this point, given the importance of distinguishing performativity from a strictly theatrical model of gender that may overemphasize the intentional control over gender performatives. As Sara Salih puts it “Crucially, Butler is *not* suggesting that gender identity is a performance, since that would presuppose the existence of a subject or an actor who is *doing* that performance. Butler refutes this notion by claiming that the performance pre-exists the performer, and this counter-intuitive, apparently impossible argument, has led many readers to confuse performativity with performance” (10-11).

⁹ Inversion of the terms which has also a place in the final chapter of Halberstam's essay, where the stone butch is referred to as “the partner who wanted to be “*doing all the doing*” (italics added, 276).



strict the identity of the stone to the practices that she does not perform, and we could thus simply state that the impenetrability of the stone is, as in the case of the traditional impenetrability of the heterosexual male, just the reverse of a set of practices in which the stone involves herself in a fully active way, even in the terms provided by a theory of performance. Actually, it may well be that there is no form of “nonperformance” that cannot be re-described by attending to the active part that the subject takes in the considered practice, however passive or negative it apparently may be.

Furthermore, outside the limits of performance, all forms of performativity are constitutively so compromised with everything they recite, as they are with all that is excluded from the act of recitation. This exclusion has, in fact, been an integral part of the concept of performativity since Austin introduced it in his speech act theory. Specifically, he considered diverse “masqueraded” forms of the performative that did not need any explicit grammatical or verbal articulation to exert its performative force (Austin 4).¹⁰

Through the “translation” of the theory of performativity to the field of gender studies, such silences, exclusions and “absences that matter” or, hence, everything that the body does not say or simply refuses to perform was situated at the centre of the performative articulation of gender identities. Butler defends that:

The redescription of intrapsychic processes in terms of the surface politics of the body implies a corollary redescription of gender as the disciplinary production of the figures of fantasy through *the play of presence and absence* on the body’s surface, the construction of the gendered body through *a series of exclusions and denials, signifying absences*.¹¹ (*Gender* 172; italics added)

It does not seem easy to understand these signifying absences as a peculiar characteristic of the stone butch in the terms suggested, nor that the “nonperformances” considered by Halberstam actually challenge the limits of the theory of performativity. Rather, the conflation of performativity into performance appears to be linked to the project of complementing the performative description of gender identities with the introduction of a negative or “nonperformative” performativity. The slippage of one category into the other would be an effect of forgetting—whether

¹⁰ Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick similarly reflects on the constitutive role played by silence with respect to performativity: “But, in the vicinity of the closet, even what *counts* as a speech act is problematized on a perfectly routine basis. As Foucault says: there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things... There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. ‘Closetedness’ is itself a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence-not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it” (3).

¹¹ See also *Excitable Speech*, where Butler assumed that “even a silent bearing would qualify as a linguistic performative to the extent that we understand silence as a constitutive dimension of speech” (175).



it is a momentary or a strategical act—that restriction is always already a constitutive part of any conceivable relation between gender and performativity. Otherwise it could not be widely assumed that the theory of performativity overcame the debate between essentialism and constructivism, and Butler's positions would be, once again, caricatured as a form of constructivist voluntarism.

The fact that it is also Halberstam, at the same time, who reminds us that Butler's description of the performative construction of identities cannot be reduced to any form of voluntarism (119) means that it is important to be cautious with the way he deals with the same kind of conceptual reduction. The consequences of this reduction are in a certain sense subtle throughout his text, but they are related to aspects important enough for the theorizing of masculinities to be, at least, highlighted.

For a better understanding of the way restriction, performance and performativity relate to each other—the constitutive presence of all that is excluded, not recited, all that which the body does not do—the following precision that Butler introduces can be very useful:

it is not only that there are constraints to performativity; rather, constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity. Performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance. Moreover, constraint is not necessarily that which sets a limit to performativity; constraint is, rather, that which impels and sustains performativity. (*Bodies* 95)

If a reduction of performativity to performance is in fact operating here, what are its consequences for the conceptualization of masculinities in Halberstam's text? In relation with the stone butch, the answer seems clear. A certain form of butch masculinity—and not just anyone, but precisely that which is recognized by its hypermasculinity—is characterized by a negative relation with performativity that somehow “challenges” the theory of performativity. The implicit risk is that refusing the performative conceptual frame in this way (in this move towards non-performativity) implies the loss of the links between masculinity—at least, of certain forms of masculinity—and gender performatives as such. In the absence of these links and, together with them, of the whole question of performative citationality of gender, would not the link between these masculinities and the idea of gender as something that we *are* not, but as something that we *do* also be lost? Would it imply a detachment of the constructed, imitative, citational character of gender with the result that it is somehow—in the most improbable of places, an essay on the historical construction of masculinity¹²—renaturalized?

¹² One that clearly deepens, as very few have, our comprehension of the fact that “masculinity, of course, is what we make of it” (Halberstam 144). What I look for in his theoretical turn is, so to speak, a theoretical subtext that interferes and even contradicts, to some extent, the overall aim of his work.

KINGING

In the chapter explicitly devoted to “Drag Kings: Masculinity and Performance” (231-267) Halberstam does not seem to go that far. Rather, he questions with ethnographical rigour the “tendency” of masculinity to “present itself as nonperformative” (236). This tendency is discussed in relation to theatrical representations of masculinity in the context of drag-king culture (a set of theatrical practices, developed within certain lesbian countercultures, devoted to the scenic representation of masculinity). As opposed to “drag queen culture,” drag kings face the fact that hegemonic masculinity offers, as Halberstam puts it, a low theatrical profile. For Halberstam, it is precisely the necessity to deal with the insidious naturalization of masculinity typical of popular culture that would have led drag kings to develop particular forms of performing masculinity. As a result, the performances of a masculinity which tends to present itself as not theatrical would have renounced the camp humour¹³ usually associated with drag queens. That is the reason why Halberstam introduces a new category of analysis specific to the drag king scene, which he baptises “kinging”:

Performances of masculinity seem to demand a different genre of humour and performance. It is difficult to make masculinity the target of camp precisely because, as we have noted, masculinity tends to manifest as nonperformative. When drag king performances are campy, it is generally because the actor allows her femininity to inform and inflect the masculinity she performs. Performances of humorous masculinity demand another term, not only to distinguish them from the camp humour of femininity but also to avoid, as Newton warns, the conflation of drag and camp with butch-femme. I want to propose the term “kinging” for drag humour associated with masculinity, not because this is a word used by drag kings themselves but because I think that a new term is the only way to avoid always collapsing lesbian history and social practice associated with drag into gay male histories and practices. (238)

The complexities of kinging are explored in a detailed discussion of the Hershe Bar Drag King contests, which were organized by categories (in a comparable manner to the *ball culture* of Harlem in the mid 80s, documented in Jennie Livingston’s film *Paris Is Burning*). Of those, the most closely associated to kinging is “butch realness,” a category usually preferred by butches who perform her own masculinity in a minimally dramatized way. As an explanatory example, Halberstam remembers the performance by virtue of which a drag king won the first prize for this category:

¹³ Characteristic of gay culture—and drag queen culture—which Esther Newton famously introduced in gender studies in 1979.



The butch who won was a very muscular black woman wearing a basketball shirt and shorts. In her “sports drag” and with her display of flexed muscles, the contestant could easily have passed as a male, and this made her “convincing.” This contestant won through her display of *an authentic or unadorned and unperformed masculinity*. (246; italics added)

Halberstam contrasts vigorously this kind of performance with another category of the contest, the “femme pretender.” In this case, in a significant theatrical vein—flexing and exhibiting muscles are for some reason out of the scope of deliberate theatricality—the femme-pretender performs recognizably camp routines, typical of drag queen culture, superimposing masculine and feminine elements. Indeed, the camp aspect of her performance would be the result of the drag king’s express will to display her own femininity in her performance of masculinity:

One or two femme pretenders would appear in every drag king contest, and their performances often revolved around a consolidation of femininity rather than a disruption of dominant masculinity. The femme pretender actually dresses up butch or male only to show how thoroughly her femininity saturates her performance—she performs the failure of her own masculinity as a convincing spectacle. These performances *tend to be far more performative* [italics added] than butch realness ones, but possibly less interesting for the following reasons: first, the femme drag king has not really altered the structure of drag as it emerged within male contexts as camp; second, the femme pretender offers a reassurance that female masculinity is just an act and will not carry over into everyday life. (249-250)

It is somehow hard to understand Halberstam in his conviction that the femme pretender dresses and characterizes herself as a man as a way to consolidate her femininity. If we move from the doubtfully comprehensible order of intentions to consider the effects of her performance, it is quite possible that the mix of masculine characteristics (as king) and feminine ones (as femme) results in a destabilization of the binary structure of gender: if the femme pretender actually confuses the limits of masculinity and femininity, there seems to be no reason to consider that the way she cuts across gendered space performance “tends to reassert a stable binary definition of gender” (250). Halberstam’s statement that this category “has not really altered the structure of drag as it emerged within gay male contexts as camp” (250) turns out to be also problematic, and it raises the question of whether the femme pretender is like the drag queen because the drag queen has also the parallel objective of reinforcing her own masculinity—of showing to what extent she fails in her attempt to be feminine—or any other comparison that could be made between the more performative character of the femme pretender in opposition to kinging.

It is quite clear, though, that Halberstam considers, oddly enough, that the femme pretender transition through different genders—between the stage and quotidian life—tends to consolidate gender binarism, and that this mixture is for some reason “less interesting” than the pure masculinity proper of kinging.



However, it should be noted that, all through his analysis of kinging, Halberstam talks of a “tendency to present as,” rather than of some kind of privileged access of masculinity to any form of the “order of nature.” His proposal on kinging could thus fit, without further complications, in the general purpose of his essay, that is, to denounce the farce by virtue of which masculinity would have become the exclusive preserve of men.

We cannot overlook, though, the questionable distinction between the way men “tend” to present themselves as “natural” masculine men and the more obvious artificiality associated with feminine performativity—in relation to a normative femininity which, in contrast, would not tend to present itself as not theatrical, as well as in relation to camp, which would not have, in principle, to deal with that obstacle. This approach would fail to take into account the way in which all generic normativity depends on the tendency of the subject to perform gender as a natural and spontaneous fact, nonperformative and, thus, not theatrical. The readability of the subject as a real and authentic gendered subject depends, for its success, on offering itself to the other’s gaze under the guise of naturality, as if gender was nothing but the expression of an internal essence of the subject. From the point of view of Butler’s theory of performativity, social intelligibility of all genders also depends on their success in hiding the artificial nature of all cultural constructions of gender. A point of view that considers all gendered stylizations of the body equally oriented towards the production of the illusion of a nonperformative naturalness, without theoretically productive distinctions between masculinity and femininity:

Consider that a sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a “natural sex” or “real woman” or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions, and that this is a sedimentation that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another. If these styles are enacted, and if they produce the coherent gendered subjects who pose as their originators, what kind of performance might reveal this ostensible “cause” to be an effect? (Butler, *Gender* 178)

To point out that certain forms of masculinity tend to a nonperformative performance—in order to come to conclusions such as the difference between camp and kinging, among others—does not fully resolve the questions that we posed previously regarding the stone butch’s masculinity. More likely, it makes us confront them at a different theoretical level. Because, in the end, what kind of relation is that which links masculinity with the non-constructed and the non-theatrical in such a way that any particular relation between masculinity and nonperformativity can be considered?



GENDER AND PEDAGOGY: FEMININITY AS A RISKY PROSTHESIS

Halberstam offers some final reflections on the “pedagogy of gender” that, despite their presumable ironic quality, confirm finally his tendency to oppose masculinity and femininity in the exposed terms, towards a very particular but still problematic form of naturalization—not only of masculinity, whether it is the case that we refer to masculine masculinity or feminine masculinity or to generic binarism in a broader sense.

The conflation between performance and performativity arises one more time in the pedagogical recommendations that Halberstam suggests in relation to infancy and the development of gender. These adopt a form that, in my opinion, has to be understood as supporting the idea that masculinity is, or should be, associated with a healthier and more natural development of the subject (both in the case of girls and boys), thus characterizing femininity as a prosthetic cultural complement that could be added at a later stage:

While much of this book has concentrated on the masculinity in women that is most often associated with sexual variance, I also think the general concept of female masculinity has its uses for heterosexual women. After all, the excessive conventional femininity often associated with female heterosexuality can be bad for your health. Scholars have long pointed out that femininity tends to be associated with passivity and inactivity, with various forms of unhealthy body manipulations from anorexia to high-heeled shoes. It seems to me that at least early on in life, girls should avoid femininity. Perhaps femininity and its accessories should be chosen later on, like a sex toy or a hairstyle. In recent years, I believe that society has altered its conceptions of the appropriate way to raise girls; indeed, a plethora of girl problems, from eating disorders to teenage pregnancy to low intellectual ambitions, leave many parents attempting to hold femininity at bay for their young girls. Cultivating femininity in girls at a very early age also has the unfortunate effect of sexualizing them and even inducing seductive mannerisms in preteen girls. [...]

If masculinity were a kind of default category for children, surely we would have more girls running around and playing sports and experimenting with chemistry sets and building things and fixing things and learning about finances and so on. (268-269)

The strategical or, to some extent, ironic points that can be detected in this proposal are not enough to neutralize, from my point of view, the problems implied in the introduction of a strong distinction between femininity and masculinity on the basis of the weaker ties that would link masculinity to the question of theatricality, or with the assumption that masculinity looks “healthier” when we consider the restrictions frequently imposed on the corporal activities that a certain gender normativity considers proper of the feminine gender.

It is hard to overlook the importance of these final considerations on the development of boys’ and girls’ masculinities and the suggestion that femininity could be just added, later on, as an optional supplement. It is clearly shown here



that masculinity's "tendency to present as nonperformative" relies in a certain way on its more original character: the tendency to non-theatricality and nonperformativity would not be just another farce of gender normativity; it would be, rather, an intrinsic part of a masculinity that becomes, thus, the healthy support to which later on, occasionally, could be added the attributes of femininity.

Therefore, even though the grounding of this difference in the order of mere biology (or any other explanation we can offer to conceptualize the privileged access of male bodies to masculinity) may have been overcome, Halberstam's proposal presents a sort of theoretical commitment with the idea that masculinity escapes the order of performance and, in the same theoretical movement, of performativity. Nonperformativity, associated by Halberstam with the hypermasculinity of the stone, the rigid separation between camp and kinking (which includes a rejection of generic confusion as a "less interesting" gender performance) or the consideration of femininity as an optional complement which is healthier when it is added at a certain stage to the process of acquisition of gender, confirm, taken as a whole, a set of conceptualizations of masculinity that exert a difficult to ignore exclusionary force upon theatricality, camp humour and, finally, femininity as a risky optional prosthesis for child development that resonates, in a very special way, with the history of the category of performativity.

THE UNDECIDABLE: RECITING MASCULINITIES OR RESIGNIFYING FEMININITIES?

It is convenient to remember that performativity was introduced into philosophy of language in a book in which Austin devoted part of his theoretical efforts to the issue of delimiting what he called "serious" uses of performative utterances—and their corresponding contexts—persistently excluding from his arguments those related, precisely, with any form of theatrical performance (among other "parasite" uses of true performativity):

a performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken soliloquy (...) language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use-ways which fail under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language. All this we are *excluding* from consideration. (Austin 22; italics added)

It was only through the Derridean critique of these exclusions that performativity was able to reveal itself as a category of critical interest for gender studies, primarily by virtue of the citational character that Derrida attributed to all performative expressions—the very same citationality that Butler situated at the centre of her formulation of gender performativity. Both Derridean and Butlerian critiques of performativity proposed that performativity was an unavoidable part of all significative utterances, thus extending its importance far beyond the con-



stative/performative distinction,¹⁴ at the same time that the importance given to citationality undermined the serious/non serious opposition so cherished by Austin. Considering this, it may not be so surprising that once performativity had extended its theoretical influence over any kind of gender traits this opposition between serious and non serious uses has found a way to reformulate itself—typically, in the theoretical space usually known as queer theory. After all, it is so deeply rooted in western philosophy that we could easily trace it back to Plato’s treatment of poetry. Interestingly, once performance and performativity overlap or simply collapse into each other, it is performativity as a category that is at a certain extent “challenged” for its lack of seriousness, while nonperformativity is privileged because of the very same lack of theatricality that Austin considered essential in order to find, paradoxically, true performatives.

It can be useful, when dealing with these kinds of conceptualizations of gender, to have in mind that Derridean introduction of citationality implied criticism of the concept of “context” (Derrida 320-321), which implied that the context where we find any performative—in relation to which we could try to distinguish between “serious” and “not serious” uses of language—is always impossible to delimit in any definitive way—hence making the distinction, at the end, undecidable.

Following Derrida, we can consider that, in the same manner, any taxonomy of masculinities or, for that matter, of different femininities and masculinities considered by its stronger or weaker relation with theatricality will always be doomed to failure, partly because there is not any useful criteria that permits us to sustain that it is less theatrical to pick out a pose that heightens muscles, wearing sports clothing or not, than to wiggle the hips; no way to measure the “tendency” of heels being offered as non-theatrical as compared to ties; no theoretical way to come to any conclusion as to whether casting a hard gaze while tensing the jaw is more or less performative than smiling openly and sweetening the expression. Overall, there is no stable context that allows us to decide in advance if, at the end of the day, any of the cited gender performative should be considered masculine or feminine.

What we overlook when we choose not to pay attention to this kind of intrinsic undecidability of gender attributes is, ultimately, everything which links generic variability to resignification. Halberstam chooses, for many reasons, female masculinity as a strategic position in order to resist binary and oppositional gender norms. The problem is that, in spite of the diversity of bodies and genders taken into account, he overlooks the fact that some of the girls and boys who choose, let’s say, to get involved in intense sporting activity are not consequently opting for masculinity, nor rejecting femininity. It may well be that they are just producing forms of femininity that resignify the norm of what is expected and what is sanctioned “within” femininity.

¹⁴ As Butler puts it, “the constative claim is always to some degree performative” (*Bodies* 18).

This considered, we can come to the conclusion that there is an always unsolvable distance, contextually and strategically variable, among, at least, three different dimensions: female masculinity, reinvention of femininity and the production of new genders. To ignore this distance would imply the assumption of a rigid division between masculine and feminine attributes, between masculine and feminine performative. As a result, the binary and oppositional norm that we were trying to fight could be, in fact, being restrengthened. Otherwise, in relation to what norm can the failure of a femme pretender in her attempt to perform masculinity, or the lack of interest in her recombination of gender attributes, be judged?

In a very interesting article in which she carefully analyses the use of the category in the works of C.J. Pascoe and Adrienne Harris, Judith Kegan points out a similar concern about the use of the concept of “female masculinity”: “The very category of ‘female masculinity’ then, may reinforce the tendency even for feminist analysis to remain only within the gender binary and to valorize masculinity over femininity” (631). Against this tendency, Kegan suggests that at least some of the gender practices that are being labelled as “female masculinities” should be acknowledged as alternative femininities or “of new, less gender-saturated categories” (632). Although I do not know what might qualify as a less “gender saturated category,” I definitely agree that “female masculinity,” despite all its subversive potential, can become an umbrella term that minimizes the destabilizing effects that the production of new femininities can have over gender binarism.

Even the political significance of the tomboy could be lost if we were to postulate it (or, in fact, any given form of embodying gender) as a “standard” option for girls, especially if we ignore the coexistence, the unavoidable confusion and indiscernibility, between female masculinities—which resignify masculinity, expropriating it from male bodies—and all those femininities that reinvent femininity while producing—whether it is “for” it or even “departing from” it—unexpected attributes.

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