

Gendered performance and systems of knowledge/power: A Foucauldian analysis

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There I sat, knees together, feet turned into one another, hands resting on the edge of the bed so that my shoulders were raised and I could coyly tilt my head so that it rested on my left shoulder. And there he sat, sprawled out on the chair, his leg languidly resting on the desk. He looks at me, "Aw, you look very cutsie." I slowly, distastefully shift out of my position. Cutsie?

How did I learn how to sit that way and why was it in such marked contrast to how my heterosexual male friend sat? And how did I find myself dressed in a low-cut camisole and he in a tight shirt that made his toned physique strikingly evident?

These are questions dealing with the subtlety of everyday behavior, the degree of agency we exercise in such behavior, and how such behavior is interpreted both by others and by ourselves. Issues of identity – particularly *gendered* categories of identity – are readily emphasized in this discourse of performance. The ideology of external expression of the internal is reflected in "the experience of one's body failing to conform to one's identity, and the conflicted desire to change that body" (Heyes 2003: 1098). Thus we have come to "construe the body as a resource," (Gremillion 2001: 383), a tool with which a person can express his/her authentic self. Yet, this identity-based approach obscures the *relational* experience of the body and how institutions of knowledge and power (Foucault 1980) have influenced and *disciplined* behavior as a whole. Foucault reminds us to "ask, instead, how things work at the level of ongoing *subjugation*, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our *bodies*, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviours, etc." (1980: 97, emphasis added). Contrary to the popular capitalist ethic of self-possession (our body as our property), the bodies

can equally be “vehicles of power” (Foucault 1980a: 98), such that power creates systems of knowledge and expertise so that it may reinforce its power over the subject [and his/her body].

The issue in this essay is not so much whether the body is being used adequately to express a given identity, but rather, how is the body shaped by the institutions of power/knowledge in the context of gender, sex, and sexuality? I endeavor to show how, although identity categories may shift over time, the circulation of power (Foucault 1980) and the disciplining of bodies persist. I argue that personal gender performances are more readily a subordination to a pervasive Foucaultian power scheme (which generates knowledge to compel self-disciplining) rather than exercises in self-actualization, but also that this very subordination is complemented and compromised by a subject’s acts of agency and resistance *within* the given power scheme.

◆ *A critique on the uniqueness of the female experience*

Firstly, it is critical that we demystify the exclusivity associated with the female body and the pains of performance. Feminist literature has developed an increasing fixation on the female body as the epitome of gender subjugation.¹ The approach is reductionist, in that “a woman’s sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from her person, *reduced* to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her” (Bartky 1982: 130, emphasis added). Thus, for women in particular, the body has been problematized – readily acknowledged as a way of expression, but stigmatized if she acquiesces to what Bartky calls “feminine narcissism,” the “*infatuation with an inferiorized body*” (1980: 136, emphasis in original) which is “a major articulation of capitalist patriarchy” (1980: 135). But how is this so different from the experience of the male body? Or the transsexed body? Or the body of *any* subject in a given society? It is certainly important to elucidate the specificity of experience in gendered contexts so as to avoid overgeneralization, but I contest that such need not be done to

¹ Even alternative female gender identities are painted as victims – such as the plight of lesbian would-be mothers whose bodies may be interpreted as unconventional outlets for medicalized processes, e.g. insemination in lieu of sex (Lewin 1998).

the the point where a sentiment of *exclusive victimization*² arises, as has occurred with the focus on the *female* body.

Though Foucault does not address gender, he indeed confronts the issue of the body: “the body is directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it,” (1995: 25). In crafting a feminist discourse about how the body is used and manipulated not only by the individual subject but by the power scheme as a whole, it is critical to understand the importance of power that is central to Foucault’s argument: “power is neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised, and...it only *exists in action*,” (1980a: 89, emphasis added). This goes against the popular conception of power as something almost of a material quality, as a definitive degree of influence and control that is ‘held’ by key institutions and/or persons – Foucault urges us to conceptualize power as “something which circulates” (1980a: 98) through a “network” of relations (1995: 27). Furthermore, “[w]e are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth,” (Foucault 1980a: 93). This “truth” is manifested through discourses esteemed as legitimate, reliable knowledge, and it is such that “power produces knowledge,” (Foucault 1995: 27). How does this all coalesce at the nexus of the body? Foucault emphasizes that it is simply not the body in and of itself, in its corporeal form, but that:

One would be concerned with the *‘body politic’*, as a set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them by turning them into *objects of knowledge*. (1995: 28, emphasis added)

Such it is that our bodies come to serve as “vehicles of power” (Foucault 1980a: 98). Foucault focuses on the body as an *undifferentiated* embodiment and dynamic reproduction of power/knowledge schemes, and he presents the subject – the common citizen – and, by extension, the subject’s body, as the primary nodes of power: “Power comes from below,” (1980b: 94).

His focus on the *body* as simply a body is not meant to devalue gender, but to deductively

² My term.

say that gender performance is an extension of use and manufacture of the subject and his/her body by the power/knowledge scheme. “Gender proficiency”³ becomes not only a task for the woman who is compelled to wear make-up when she goes out dancing but also for the straight man to refrain from wearing cologne that smells like fruit or for the gay man to exhibit a sense of elevated fashion sense – all resonate the dilemma of what it is to be a ‘proper’ *body*, yet who/what dictates this propriety? The discipline of the body depends on categories of identity, indeed, but Foucault would argue for the importance of the *processes and behaviors* themselves in lieu of a focus on the malleable categories of identity. As gender expectations shift over time, especially in the face of different political economies, the idiosyncrasies of each gender category change as well. Either achieving or being ascribed a certain category does not preclude a change of behaviors in order to affiliate more closely with the newly defined categorical identity – and it is this gender performance that results in the disciplining of the body, a body which stands out as an undifferentiated subject. Disciplinization escapes no individual body because, regardless of the assumption of any given identity, there exists the need to fulfill that identity via performance, manifesting corporeally as self-policing, and self-subscription to and internalization of discourses of knowledge that reify power systems.

◆ ***Loci of power/knowledge over the body***

The processes that we engage in everyday in our performance are testament to our own self-discipline of our bodies. But a simple glance will reveal how the material realities of our performances are strangely uniform despite individual variation: as a woman, my collared shirt is cut to hug my waist and bosom, while a man’s collared shirt falls more slack, emphasizing the shoulders. Regardless, we are both wearing a collared shirt and dare not to wear a flimsy camisole or seductively tight t-shirt to the office. Our gendered performances are underscored by the pervasive regulation we impose on ourselves in certain spaces, negotiating between personal ‘want’ and acknowledged propriety, bowing to *the power of what is thinkable* for all of us, as

³ Heather Paxson’s concept of gender proficiency “entails the ongoing, everyday public negotiation of moral proscriptions for being good at being a man or a woman.” (2004: 12)

social actors:

Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere...power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a *complex strategical situation* in a particular society. (Foucault 1980b: 93, emphasis added)

The word of the expert, the declaration of the courts, the tenets of formal education, peer pressure – all are Foucault’s examples of “what might be called ‘local centers’ of power/knowledge” (1980b: 98) that help to explain how we come to embody a social ethos, such as capitalistic, achievement-driven capitalism in much of Euro-America. But how does this have relevance to the gender/sex system? How is it that we may interpret gendered performances as having particular significance in this system of subordination and self-discipline?

The answers partly lie in the professionalization of knowledge, as Foucault would argue. ‘Experts’ have the final say in what is definitively ‘good’ and the ‘truth,’ as “ ‘[t]ruth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements,” (Foucault 1980a: 133). Gremillion (2002) documents how doctors treating anorexic patients may disagree with one another but proffer a final ‘diagnosis’ as a cohesive entity, a “unified, ‘expert’ opinion” (2002: 405) – and in this way, medical expertise becomes internalized as truth. The patient is forced to reconcile her bodily perception with the prescription of her doctors, and the body becomes a battleground for discipline. Her bodily performance is disciplined not only by her ‘pathology’ but increasingly by the dictates of truth, knowledge, and power. This power allows for the “constant surveillance and manipulation of the body on a very intimate scale” (Gremillion 2002: 388) that characterizes the daily lives of patients. No one doctor nor nurse hovers over with threat of violence if the patients fail to eat their set number of calories, yet the patients self-govern in this particular medicalized sphere of influence.

In this sense, bodies serve not only as the main prop for our ultimate lived performance, but also as intermediaries between the disciplinary propriety of the changing spaces in which we engage and degrees to which we apply certain motivations and desires in those particular spaces

as opposed to others. For example, the desires of the patients to remain thin compromise the desires of the medical staff to foster an ethos of health, yet the patients acquiesce in their own self-governed bodily discipline despite the contradictions. This is not to say that any given subject blindly becomes the pawn of a totalizing power/knowledge system, but that there is a degree of agency that the subject employs to function in a given arena of a specific power/knowledge discourse, as is seen in this example. The contradictions between the desires of the patient and the desires being mandated upon her naturally engender resistance in the patient, but the key to this resistance is that it manifests *within* the given power/knowledge scheme, as Foucault offers, “Where there is power, there is resistance...this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power,” (1995: 95). Lila Abu-Liughod furthers this theme by inverting it and asserting that “where there is resistance, there is power” (1990: 42), thus characterizing resistance as the subject’s [either conscious or unconscious] indication of the power scheme in which he/she (and his/her resistance) is inevitably enmeshed. Resistance, therefore, does not directly translate to a complete rejection of the system; instead, it shows how subjects manage to reconcile their own protestations within a pervasive, inescapable power/knowledge scheme.

Furthermore, consider the popular television show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* in which five gay men (the Fab Five) re-make a straight man, both body and lifestyle. As evidenced by the show, professionalization need not reside in a formally recognized realm such as medicine or jurisprudence. In this instance, the identity category itself – that of the stylish gay man – functions as a stronghold of power/knowledge. Again, the body serves as a resource, yet it needs to employ other resources in order to undergo the “task” that the capitalistic ethos of achievement so trumpets. Here capitalism becomes one of those “‘local centers’ of powerknowledge” (1980b: 98). The gendered category of gay man, previously stigmatized, transforms into a novel and reliable resource for the ‘finer’ things in life. That ‘finer’ life is painted as achievable, which reinforces the capitalistic sentiment of status achieved through

individual hard work rather than inherent worth. And to demonstrate the feasibility of accomplishing that achieved status [of a ‘proper’ body of a heterosexual man], the show capitalizes off the stigmatized category of gay man as an ‘expert,’ showing how transformation despite apparent lack of power or social capital is indeed possible if not seemingly easy. The desire to cultivate the ‘proper’ body and lifestyle becomes integrated into a bodily performance of achievement, but it is that same desire that is generated by capitalism and the entertainment industry’s inclusion of the achievement ethic. Regardless of authenticity of identity, the performance itself relies on the self-disciplining of the subject. The body becomes a vector of political economy in this sense – such that capitalistic individualism is a governing factor of the body and the subject’s efforts to manipulate it. The knowledge of the Fab Five channels the power of that capitalism into a knowledge and expertise which supersedes identity (i.e. the marginalized status of the gay man) and imposes on the body of the subject an ideal way of acting so that the subject may achieve a status, fulfill notions of propriety, and in doing so, reinforce the power/knowledge scheme that esteems such things.

This knowledge/power influence flows into sexuality as well. Rubin (1984) argues how “the ‘modernization of sex’ has generated a system of continual sexual ethnogenesis” (1984: 287) such that sexual categories have become communities. The body is particularly evident here since it is the corporeal experience itself that defines the identity categories. But the interesting power/knowledge aspect of this “ethnogenesis” is that fragmentation of these “erotic dissidents” (Rubin 1984: 93) relies on their ostracization from the social power scheme; yet, they appropriate this exclusion and their bodily performance becomes a source of pride – this Goffmanesque transformation of stigma to community testifies to how actual *behavior* itself provides the impetus for reorganization. The physical performance that marginalizes these particular queer bodies is yet another example of resistance from within, an insurrection that serves not to change or disrupt the power/knowledge system but to carve out an alternative lifestyle using the system’s own dictates: the queer communities coalesce and thrive, but in

doing so, highlight their peripheral status in the power/knowledge hierarchies of sexuality (Rubin 1984). Within the community there is a supremacy of their 'perverse' performance above the rejected normalcy, evidencing how power/knowledge manifests within a greater scheme of propriety but also within subcultures of that scheme. The malleability of power, in this sense, is similar to that of identity categories in that it allows power to flow from and between groups and individuals, conferring legitimacy and influencing self-consciousness and self-discipline.

◆ *Conclusion*

I have attempted to address how gendered performances reflect power/knowledge systems and how the bodily manifestation of these performances cannot be exclusively claimed by women. All subjects reside in their bodies, and as the modern sense of body relies so heavily on its capacity to serve as a resource, it is through the body that not only performances are enacted, but the identities solidified. These identities depend on the relational nature of performance – in that our bodies serve as social intermediaries, displaying certain characteristics that clue others into how they should approach us such that each performance is influenced by the other performances. I have not emphasized authenticity and consistency of identity in this paper partly because such categories of identity are subordinate to the manufacture of truth, knowledge, and power, and their circulation throughout the daily negotiations of bodily self-discipline. When looking at ourselves in the mirror in the morning and deciding what we should do and how we should look, questions of loyalty to our 'chosen' identities of course arise, yet we should not overlook how our gendered performances rely not so heavily on these identities themselves but on our consciousness of them. Being aware of what we define ourselves as is one thing, but having the 'will' to enact said identity, however loosely defined it may be, is another. The continual policing of the body depends on our own self-persuasion, as is incorporated into every decision of our lives, how we reconcile our performances with what is thinkable. *Where* those notions of propriety emerge are based in the loci of power/knowledge and our enactment of shifting requisites of identities reflects a manipulation of our ultimate resource: our own body.

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