

Performance

Staging Psychoanalysis, Staging Race

Anxieties



Ann Pellegrini

PERFORMANCE ANXIETIES

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Ann Pellegrini

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The parallel that has been sketched here may be no more than a playful comparison.

—Sigmund Freud,

A Phylogenetic Fantasy

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**For my parents,
whose encouragement and love did not wait on understanding,
but were its grounds**

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THE *SEEN* OF DIFFERENCE

Re-Sighting the Performative

If we could divest ourselves of our corporeal existence, and could view the things of this earth with a fresh eye as purely thinking beings, from another planet for instance, nothing perhaps would strike our attention more forcibly than the fact of the existence of two sexes among human beings, who, though so much alike in other respects, yet mark the difference between them with such obvious external signs.

—Sigmund Freud, “On the Sexual Theories of Children”

Difference produces great anxiety. Polarization, which is a theatrical representation of difference, tames and binds that anxiety. The classic example is sexual difference which is represented as a polar opposition (active–passive, energy–matter—all polar oppositions share the trait of taming the anxiety that specific differences provoke).

introduction

—Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction:
Feminism and Psychoanalysis*

“DIFFERENCE,” Jane Gallop understates, “produces great anxiety.” But she holds out hope that feminism (and perhaps psychoanalysis) might be equipped to deal with this anxiety: “This problem of dealing with difference without constituting an opposition may just be what feminism is all about (might even be what psychoanalysis is all about)” (1982, 93). One of the things Gallop means to commend in feminism and in psychoanalysis is the way both discourses deconstruct and undermine binary oppositions.¹ How well they meet this commitment is, of course, quite another matter.

The radical promise of psychoanalytic thought lies in its destabilization of oppositions such as masculine/feminine or hetero/homo. There is, for example, a leading emphasis in Freud’s sexual theories on bisexuality, continua, degrees of difference rather than on absolute, ineradicable difference. Yet, there is also much ambivalence—perhaps even constitutive ambivalence—on this

front. At the same time that Freud calls into question the absolute difference between “man” and “woman,” he also reinserts sexual polarization: when he repeats what he himself terms the merely “conventional” alignment of masculinity with activity and femininity with passivity, when he asserts that the “truest” type of woman is the narcissist, when he shifts gears in the *Three Essays* to make reproductive heterosex the *telos* of female and male sexual development.²

Feminist theory, taking a page out of Freud’s book and writing it anew, has helped to uncover the hidden assumptions of Freudian psychoanalytic theory, indicating how masculinity—Freud’s protests to the contrary—slips back in as femininity’s ungrounded ground. But white feminism and feminist theory too have been susceptible to a particular form of backsliding. In their commitment to expose the blind spots of patriarchal ideologies they sometimes have been blinded to their own omissions. In this, feminist theory may seem to have taken over psychoanalysis’s virtual fetishization of sexual difference as its point of every return. However, I do not here want to elide important and enabling differences between and among feminisms. As Biddy Martin suggests (1994, 105), we do a great disservice to the enormous range of feminist approaches and to the women and men invested in (and by) them if we reduce these multiple feminisms to one feminism—and a guilty one at that.

Perhaps this is all to Gallop’s point; “dealing with difference” has been an ongoing problem for feminist (as for psychoanalytic) theory. Even good faith efforts to recognize differences, plural, *without* either reasserting polar opposition or (what may amount to the same thing) ranking them in order of presumed priority, can occasion their own anxieties—as both feminism and psychoanalysis have also discovered.

Race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, religion, nationality ... and other differences. This endlessly expanding enumeration of difference—an invocation as formulaic as any Homeric catalogue—is a gesture of inclusion, feminist in its commitments, yet exasperated in its tone. Where and when does this catalogue of identificatory markers end, if it does? And what is the relation between and among them? The attempt, feminist or otherwise, to interpret the relation or set of relations between and among these terms will fail if it is conditioned, as my sentence itself has been, by a logic of additive equation. The anxiety-producing challenge for feminist theory (and for a feminist-informed psychoanalytic critique) is, as Mary Ann Doane writes, “how to acknowledge and analyze a multiplicity of differences and articulate their extraordinarily complex relation to each other, without reducing the specificity of different modes of oppression” (1991, 9).

Instead of conceiving gender, race, and sexuality (to name the three terms of difference that will occupy me in this study) in analogical relation; or instead of hierarchically ranking them, assigning priority of history, social

meaning, and/or psychical force to one term over and above the other, it is necessary to rethink these differences as inter-implicating or “interarticulated.” In this model, the historical meanings and discourses of gender, race, and sexuality emerge through and against each other.

It is one of the claims of this study that the feminist project of analyzing and articulating the complex crossings of difference is implicated, for better and for worse, in psychoanalysis. This is so for a number of reasons. First, and perhaps most to my point, feminism and psychoanalysis have the “same” conceptual blind spot or—to use Gloria Anzaldúa’s term—“blank spot” (1990, xx). Both discourses have tended to emphasize sexual difference over and above every or (in the case of classical psychoanalytic theory) any other difference. Where “other” differences have entered the field of vision, they have, in the main, been taken up and absorbed into the framework of sexual difference. To the extent that it refers differences of race and sexuality, for example, to “the” difference above all—the difference “man”/“woman”—feminist theory is caught up in the act of reinstating the terms of its own critique.³ However, the way out of this impasse is not to abandon psychoanalytic categories or theory—as if psychoanalysis (and Freud) could be so easily bracketed from the narrative frame of modernity and postmodernity. What is called for is the engagement of psychoanalysis on very altered terms.

It is my own sense that feminism, as an historically situated intellectual and political project, cannot go forward without taking seriously the claims of psychoanalysis. Whether or not psychoanalysis is “true” in any descriptive sense is not the issue here (although let me “come clean” from the start and say that I believe Freud got a lot of things discomfortingly right in the theory, if not in the details). Rather—and this is my second point regarding the necessary connection of feminism and psychoanalysis—psychoanalytic claims and insights are now part of what modernity and postmodernity mean. Psychoanalysis is a powerful cultural narrative, providing patterns of order and interpretation for telling, retelling, and making sense of life experiences, and this is no less the case when the story told emerges in reaction against psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis constitutes a rich and necessary field of meaning for feminisms to challenge and contest.

This process goes both ways. To the extent that psychoanalysis, at its origins, was spoken through and against early twentieth-century European feminisms, it makes sense to speak here of psychoanalysis and feminism as themselves interarticulated discourses.⁴ Certainly, *this* study represents one such interarticulation.

When I refer to the historical and conceptual embeddedness of psychoanalysis in feminism and the “woman question,” I am thinking above all of Bertha Pappenheim, the Jewish woman at the center of Josef Breuer’s best known case study, “Anna O.” In the decades after she concluded her analysis

with Breuer, Pappenheim would go on to inaugurate a very different kind of “talking cure,” as founder and leading spokeswoman of the German Jüdischer Frauenbund, or “League of Jewish Women.”⁵ That feminism constitutes a critical backdrop for psychoanalysis is also clear from Freud’s frequent allusions to feminists, more specifically to the upset he is sure his theories of female sexuality and femininity will cause them.⁶

To some degree, then, the interarticulation of psychoanalysis and feminism I am here enacting “faithfully” reenacts the “origins” of psychoanalysis. However, to borrow a phrase from Donna Haraway’s “Manifesto for Cyborgs” (1990, 190), the “faithfulness” of my restaging should be seen not as reverent recapitulation or straightforward identification, but as the serious play of blasphemy. (As I will argue throughout this study, there is nothing straightforward about identification.)

But there is another way in which this study faithfully reproduces the mise-en-scène of psychoanalysis. From its beginnings, psychoanalysis was involved, through the person of Freud, in the question and the “problem” of racial difference, more specifically of *Jewish* difference. The “Jewish question,” at least as it was posed for psychoanalysis, will be the focus of Part I, “Jewishness.” For now, I want to make only these two related claims. First, within the anti-Semitic discourses operative in Freud’s day, “the Jew” (who was always a *male* Jew) was assimilated to the category “woman.” Second, Freud’s theories of sexuality and sexual difference may represent Freud’s attempts to work his own way out of the damning alignment of male Jewishness, the feminine, and sexual “deviance.”

To say this is not, however, to reduce all of psychoanalysis to a case history of Freud and Freud only. Quite the contrary: through carefully historicized readings of Freud, I believe it is possible to outline new analytical models in which racial and sexual difference are understood as co-implicating (though not co-extensive). This is the explicit ambition of chapter one, in which I reread Freud’s *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* in the light of recent historical work on Jewishness, “race,” and gender. Much of this work has concentrated its attention on the meaning of Jewishness for male Jews. In chapters two and three, I give Sarah Bernhardt and Sandra Bernhard, respectively, center stage as I try to complicate this history by asking how and what Jewishness means for Jewish women.

I attempt throughout this study to historicize the texts I am discussing. Among other things, this involves saying something about the social, cultural, and historical pressures operating on and through a given text and its author. This is not, I want to insist, a version of the biographical fallacy. Arguably, Freud’s struggles to dislodge his own identity as a male Jew from the problematic of psychoanalysis reveal at once Freud’s particular historical and symbolic frame *and* the regulatory effects of socially constituted, psychi-

cally instituted sexual and racial norms. The latter schema implicates all subjects, not just Freud.

Freud is not the only figure given back to history in this study. In Part II, “Blackness,” as I range across different geographical, political, and historical scenes, serving some biographical notice on Anna Deavere Smith, Frantz Fanon, and Albert Memmi becomes one way to denote the different historical meanings of blackness and the different ways in which subjects have been incorporated “as” black. Once again, however, if I mention the “interracial” marriages of Memmi and Fanon, for example, during my discussion of their erasure of women of color, I do not thereby refer either man’s analyses of cross-racial desire to questions of biography. Rather, I mean to mark the sometimes tense crossings of theory and practice (to cite a binarism which is not one). Rather than conceive discrepancies or contradictions which may arise between an individual’s theoretical claims and what she or he does in practice as always a question of hypocrisy, false consciousness, and/or the unconscious run amok (even if one or more of these factors may sometimes be at work), it seems to me more fruitful to reconceive such contradictions as a kind of crossing. This fraught crossing exposes the messy, often dangerous, and necessary endeavor of theorizing one’s life as a way to save it and gives the lie to the too-facile division of theory “versus” practice.

My understanding of the urgent necessity, for theory and for praxis, to develop psychoanalytic models attentive both to the racialization of sexual difference and to the sexualization of racial difference has been crucially informed by the on-going work of Judith Butler. From Butler, too, I (and many other feminist and queer theorists) have been brought to conceptualize the compulsory call and response of gender under the rubric of “performativity” and “citationality” (1990a and 1993a). One of the most notable strategic accomplishments of Butler’s theory of gender performatives is the way that it effectively cut through a theoretical knot, essentialism “versus” constructionism (AKA cultural feminism “versus” poststructuralism), which had been exhausting the energies and resources of feminist critique.⁷ What I am trying to do is extend the concepts “performativity” and “citationality” to the experiences and idea of “race.”

Instead of conceiving the relation between sex and gender as a matter of interpretation—more exactly, as a relation between *matter*, “sex,” and its *interpretation*, “gender”—Butler challenges feminist theory to understand their relation as a form of citational performance. The embodied subject is that form. It is not that there “is” some Platonic idea of “sex” out there, always on the verge of our vision, but ever not quite. Rather, “sex” is a regulatory ideal or commandment, to whose perfect measure gendered subjects must always hopelessly approximate themselves. The normalizing power of “sex” is functionally dependent upon its citation, that is, upon the compulsory

reiteration of the law of “sex,” and gender is the performative occasion of that approximation.⁸

(Mis)identifying “sex” as “nature” shores up the cultural imperatives of gender by giving them an approximate point of reference. Taken as the “natural” substance, which culture-bound understandings of gender conceal, “sex” emerges as the ultimate reality or transcendent referent of gender. In its inaccessibility to human experience, encrusted as it is in the sedimentations of discourse and history, “sex” holds out the anxious and eschatological promise of an elsewhere before discourse, outside history. Nonetheless, the theoretical limitations of thinking in terms of a sex/gender system (Gayle Rubin’s term [1975]), with all it implies in the way of a covert essentialism, might themselves be usefully redirected to another, avowedly feminist task: identifying the ideological strategies whereby culture seeks to pass itself off as nature. And it is the body which is posed as the last and first best hope of holding the line between nature and culture, “sex” and gender, and perhaps also “race” and ethnicity. The body, far from “realizing” nature, is a contested discursive site through which ideological concepts are naturalized as biology. What Freud names as the “working” requirements of psychoanalysis also feature prominently among the foundational ideological props of the body, masculinity and femininity:

But psycho-analysis cannot elucidate the intrinsic nature of what in conventional or in biological phraseology is termed “masculine” and “feminine”: it simply takes over the two concepts and makes them the foundation of its work. (1920, 171)

The line separating sex from gender, and masculinity from femininity, might also be called the heterosexual bar.

Let me be very clear on this matter from the beginning. To argue, as I do, that gender, race, and sexuality are cultural, historical, and psychical “productions,” and not natural givens, is in no way to deny their bodily or socio-psychical force. The point, my point, is not to establish the truth or falsity of these terms, but to point out their reality effects—which are at least conceptually separable from the facticity of their referents.

Like gender and the categories it authorizes (“male” and “female” or, in another and closely related scene, “man” and “wife”), race and racial identity are historically contingent, socially constructed categories of knowledge and bodily experience.⁹ As David Theo Goldberg suggests, the concept of “race” is both artifact of and instrument for boundary construction, “[serving] to naturalize the groupings that it identifies in its own name” (1992, 559). The divisions established by race—the divisions gathered under the sign “race”—have been linguistic, biological, genetic, social, cultural, geographic,

national, aesthetic, moral, intellectual. One constant in the conceptualization of “race” seems to be the idea of descent, the belief that whatever characteristics “race” stands for or realizes, they are somehow heritable—whether through genetic inheritance, cultural commerce between generations, social or environmental impact.¹⁰

At different historical moments, race has signified different relations between the body and society, in-group and out-group, and self- and group-identity. Or, to put the matter slightly differently, race has not always cut the same way; the boundaries keep moving. If Sander Gilman, for instance, can meaningfully ask whether the Jew is white (1991), this is because the ways “whiteness” and “blackness” have been imagined and mapped out in the modern West have not been continuous. This is not, however, to deny marked continuities in Western images of Jews or blacks throughout the modern era. Goldberg argues that race acquires significance and meaning “in terms of prevailing social and epistemological conditions at the time, yet simultaneously [bears] with it sedimentary traces of past significations” (1992, 559).

Racial difference, like sexual difference, provides one of the instituting conditions of subjectivity. It helps to set limits between self and other, precariously identifying where the “I” ends and unknowable other begins. Whiteness, for example, defines itself in opposition to blackness; the “I” knows itself by what it is not. Thus, an hypostatized blackness is actually part of the meaning of whiteness. The race of the Other, his or her “immutable” difference (and this is a difference that conventionally assumes also a moral form, of superiority/inferiority), announces and confirms the self-identity of whiteness. But it is a self-identity that must always look anxiously outside for its confirmation, disavowing any relation between inside and outside, self and mirroring image.

And what of those who are constituted as the outside of “whiteness”? For any subject, the Law—of gender, of race, of sexuality—represents an impossible ideal. However, for racialized others, subjectification to what Butler calls “annihilating norms” imposes still harsher realities (1993a, 124). A “racial epidermal schema” (Fanon’s term), imposed from without and incorporated as the “truth” of the subject, may render the body in pieces. Patricia J. Williams, Smith, Memmi, and Fanon (the subjects of Part II) speak to and detail, each in her or his own fashion, how racial identifications form and deform the bodily ego.

Even within the same generation and geographic region, the meaning of race or experience of racialization is by no means uniform or univocal. If what and how race means differs, for example, between whites and blacks, it also differs *within* those social groupings (and within individuals). The expectation that all blacks should speak as one is no less impossible a dream or coercive a hope than the demand that all women should speak in one voice, feminist.¹¹ Of course, the denial or erasure of differences *within* marginalized or oppressed

classes has much more often been a tactic imposed from “above” than asserted from below in the name of liberation. Homogenization, the refusal to recognize particularity, is one of the better-known mechanisms of subjugation.

It is this awareness of the way group identity has historically been forced on the colonized Other that makes Fanon so skeptical of negritude and its claims to group empowerment. For Williams and Smith, on the other hand, blackness is able to provide “moorings.” Yet, differences between these self-representations of blackness are not just an effect of their different national and generational locations, but may also reflect the different positions subjects of blackness occupy at the “crossroads” race/gender. Racial difference is imbricated in other socio-psychical processes—of gender, sexuality, class, and religious-cultural identity, for example.

My own examples, or re-presentations, of the complex crossings of racial and sexual difference are drawn from a diverse range of sources, both “popular” and “elite”: film, theater, professional bodybuilding, psychoanalytic texts. In reading psychoanalytic texts through and against *other* performance texts (and vice versa), I am arguing not just the impossibility of drawing the line between psychoanalysis and performance, but the hopelessness of trying to demarcate where performance ends and any “real” begins. Moreover, through the particular version of intertextuality I am enacting I mean explicitly to counter a whole series of not unrelated splittings: *physis* “versus” *psyche*, materialist critique “versus” psychoanalytic theory, Marx “versus” Freud, the boys “versus” the girls, center “versus” margin.¹²

Perhaps it is one index of my stubborn resistance to thinking in twos that I have divided this study into three and each third into three again. These three parts and the terms each is working—“Jewishness,” “Blackness,” and “Womanliness”—are not discrete. Rather, in keeping with my theoretical stress on the interarticulation of gender, race, and sexuality, the three parts of this study are in conversation with each other. Although one term might become the focal point of a particular part or chapter, points of contact are never far from view. In Part III, “Womanliness,” for example, attention to the racial subtext of Joan Riviere’s 1929 essay “Womanliness as Masquerade” in chapter seven names whiteness and suggests that gender masquerades are never only about gender. The focus of chapter eight narrows to a consideration of sexological accounts of “the” lesbian’s gender trouble. Attention to the interarticulations of gender, race, and sexuality returns to orient my discussion of *Pumping Iron* and *Pumping Iron II* in chapter nine.

Where psychoanalysis in particular is concerned, the hybridity of this study does not depart from, but actually retraces the path already taken by Freud (and Fanon). Freud’s psychoanalytic *corpus* is a fantastic demonstration of intertextual citationality: to make his case, he repeatedly turns to examples from literary, theatrical, and folkloric sources. Even Freud’s case histories take on the

aspect of a popular romance or melodrama in which Freud comes to supplant his analysand as the central subject. (As I will argue in Part I, Freud's recognition of the way his own "definite position" as a Jew implicates him in, for example, the scene of hysteria launches, in its turn, a series of displacements.) Fanon too proceeds by way of literary example. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, his principal case studies come not from "life," but from literature. Freud's and Fanon's dependence on citation does not, I suggest, constitute any deficiency in either man's methods, but their provocation. Two questions, no answers: If postmodernity is characterized as the hyper-real, hybridity verging on pastiche, am I here making psychoanalysis over in postmodernity's image? Or is the always already "mixed" medium of psychoanalysis the tale waving postmodernity's proverbial dog?

Whatever differences of genre or audience may be identified between my preferred performance texts, they share this common feature: each seems to me to represent the nonreferentiality of representation. That is, what Freud's analysis of Dora has in common with Sandra Bernhard's black (and white) masks, to take just one of my examples, or what Fanon's white masks have in common with Smith's multiple voices, to take another, is the way each unsettles what it means to "have" or "be" a subject, to "have" or "be" any identity at all.

Paradoxically, each of these "performance pieces" succeeds only to the degree that it brings its audience to identify with it. They are "collaborative" events or occasions.¹³ And collaboration, as Wayne Koestenbaum reminds us, is notoriously double-edged (1989). It invites the happy scene of individuals making common cause—*identifying*—with each other. But collaboration also conjures up the troubling specter of the double agent, that treasonous representative of misplaced identifications.

It seems to me that this crisis of identification, which I am "identifying" as the critical method and madness of performance (and, so, of subjectivity), may also provide some first response to the question I have so far suppressed. Namely, where is performativity—that is, the theory of performativity—taking "us"? (And who are "we" to be taken?) If everything is performance, and everyone, at once performer and performed; if there is no "Real," but only its endless dissimulations—what (and wherefore art thou) next? Surely, no theory could have been more fit for the postmodern scene we now inhabit than this. The "trick" is to exhaust the trope of performance before it exhausts "us"—at any rate, before I have exhausted my readers with it.

In saying this, I do not align myself with those who, with something of the paranoid's air, regard poststructuralism and postmodernism as the grandest of conspiracy's theories. If theories of performativity are such a good match for our contemporary situation, this is because performativity seems actually to describe the postmodern condition. Infomercials and "reality" programming;

talk shows and shock radio; criminal trials and court tv; electronic communities and virtual reality; transglobal economy and disappearing (or was it: movable?) national borders—in everyday experience, the line between “fact” and “fiction” has been blurred, if not erased.

Something more than description is needed. The political and, dare I say, ethical direction of this study consists in my attempt to tease out of the performative another (though related) challenge for theory and for practice: the challenge of identification. In psychoanalytic terms, every identification entails, at the same moment, a (corresponding?) disidentification. The classic Freudian scene of identification is the “seen” of sexual difference: seeing what the other hasn’t becomes the model for all of life’s misrecognitions, big and small. Fanon recapitulates Freud on identification, but with this difference: for Fanon, it is the difference white/black, not male/female, which makes all the difference in the world.

Within either conceptual frame, Freud’s or Fanon’s, what is clear is the alternating pleasure and danger of identification. As Freud and Freud’s own textual identifications certify, identification is a restless and unpredictable process. It is less a matter of arriving at a fixed and final destination as it is of stopping off at points along the way to a somewhere or someone else. Processes of identification are the subject’s constitutive condition. Through identification, individuals effectively solder their egos to others, both real and imagined. Psychoanalytic accounts of identification, of the subject divided from itself, wreak havoc on identity politics as “we” know it. Slipping the grasp of will or exceeding the wishes of conscience, identifications, unconscious and unruly, disturb the smooth surface of all-for-one and one-for-all to leave their mark on the futures, coalitions, theories, and politics we dream *and* the ones we won’t. If, as Diana Fuss remarks, “identification is never outside or prior to politics” (1994, 39), neither is politics ever outside or prior to identification. Throughout this study, I try to mark the co-implication of the psychical and the political in a way that does not assign priority to either one but engages and operates through their tension.

I try to trace, as well, identification’s troubling tendency to cross over into desire and vice versa. In this, I take my cue from Freud’s sometimes contradictory, but always fascinating theories of identification and desire. But psychoanalysis does not just frame the other performance texts. It is also framed by them. So, for example, if my reading of Anna Deavere Smith’s *Fires in the Mirror* is filtered through Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, the converse is also true. I re-view Fanon’s *Masks* through Smith’s looking glass. The center cannot hold, because the margins keep on moving. I also want to see what happens by centrally engaging the performance in performativity *and* in psychoanalysis.¹⁴

If I try to get to what performativity means by citing specific performances; if I try to make the interarticulation of gender, race, and sexuality in some way