Breaching Bodily Boundaries: Transgressive Embodiment and Gender Queering in Contemporary Performance Art

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Abstract

This thesis asks: how have recent changes in body politics impacted on the themes and ideas explored in contemporary body-based performance? What aesthetic and formal strategies do artists use to attempt to challenge sedimented norms, hegemonies, and power structures related to gender and the body? Contributing to an emerging field of contemporary research which takes a queer, transfeminist methodological approach to disrupting conventional ways of seeing and thinking sex, gender, and other constructions of the body, this study centers on contemporary practices which utilise the performing body as a ground for negotiating social prescriptions, and nurturing new, alternative forms of embodiment.

This thesis undertakes the first detailed academic study of the performance practice of three under-researched artists: Mouse, Cassils, and boychild. Via close analysis of these case study examples it theorises specific deployments of the transgressive body in performance and argues that these bodies challenge assumptions of normative subjectivity through different strategies of queer intervention and subversion. Mouse exploits the disruptive potentiality in abject, grotesque, and parodic strategies; Cassils manipulates the binary structure of the heterosexual hegemony by queering the material form of her/his own body; and boychild's queer, black embodiment extends beyond sci-fi inspired, cyborgian aesthetics, toward a plotting of posthuman, afrofuturist politics.

Whilst each case study artist poses a challenge to bodily (hetero)normativity, each works in a different style or form to the next, using different aesthetics and appropriating from a range of 'low' or popular (sub)cultures. Consequently, the analyses in this study are formulated using a methodology which interweaves transdisciplinary 'high' theory approaches with non-academic literature on popular and/or subcultural forms. This thesis therefore makes contributions to knowledge primarily within the fields of body art and performance studies, but also within (trans)gender and (trans)feminist studies, queer theory, critical race theory and cultural studies.

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Chapter One: Introduction

"The body, I think, stands for a bounded system that has larger social echoes. We talk about the body of the church, institutional bodies. It seems to permeate everywhere, the system of the body."
Jenny Saville[1]

"Any body politics… must speak about the body, stressing its materiality and its social and discursive construction, at the same time as disrupting and subverting existing regimes of representation."
Janet Wolff[2]

"Artists' bodies seem to be communicating… a social critique in which the individual body stands in place of the social body and becomes a mirror for society… Artists use their bodies, not to tell us something specific about themselves, although that may be the source and starting point that they work from, but to tell us something about the human condition in general."
Tracey Warr[3]

Bodies fascinate. Their materiality, how they function, their form. How they differ from one another. How they connect with or disconnect from each other. How it feels to be in a body – materially, emotionally, sensorially – and how it feels to experience another's (or, more pointedly, as we shall see in the case studies of this thesis, an other's) body. I am curious about the body as entity, as object, as something one has; about the body as self, as subject, as something one is; about the body as process, as performative, as something one becomes. I attribute my enthusiasm for performance art practices which thematise the body and embodiment to these points of fascination and I make this attribution precisely because, whether consciously or not, all such practices grapple with these notions of the body as object/subject/process.

As indicated in the epigraphs above, this fascination is widely shared. The body has become a key dimension of the commonplace contention that art is political and not simply an epiphenomenal reflection of the world. Insisting that the

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[1] Jenny Saville in conversation with Martin Gayford, *Jenny Saville: Territories* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1999), exh cat, 29-31 (31)
[2] Janet Wolff, 'Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics', *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 81-99 (96)
[3] Tracey Warr, 'The Body in Your Lap', *Intimacy Across Visceral and Digital Performance*, ed. Rachel Zerihan and Maria Chatzichristodoulou (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 15-25 (24)

performing body can be used to contest hegemonic ideas of embodiment through various strategies of intervention, scholars have argued that body-based performance art has the capacity to reveal the artificiality of gender and other constructions of the body. This thesis affirms these claims but argues that the stakes of these exposures and contestations of hegemony are different today than they were in previous generations. In the context of twenty-first century body politics, where broader means of self-determination are emerging as bodily categories and identities shift and become less distinct, the need to devise new alternative schemes of thought regarding subject formation and representation has taken on a greater urgency. This thesis contributes to this emerging discourse through sustained engagement with three specific examples of contemporary performance art in which the artist's body is deployed as both subject and material object of the work. I analyse exposures and contestations of dominant notions of bodily normativity in each of the works examined and stake claims for their transformative potentialities in terms of how we think about bodies in the present context of an exciting, emerging field of shifting identities and body politics. As products of a still unfolding cultural moment, I argue that these radical counterhegemonic expressions of gender/sexuality/race also offer projective speculations on the future evolution of human subjectivity and corporeality.

Thesis Origins and Project Outline

On the fifteenth of January, 1972, exactly fourteen years to the day before I was born, Vito Acconci performed *Seedbed* for the first time. At intermittent intervals during the course of a fortnight[4], Acconci situated himself under a wooden ramp in an otherwise empty space at the Sonnabend Gallery, New York. According to the artist, the aim of the piece was to

> activate the room 'by my presence underground… by my movement from point to point under the ramp.' The goal was 'the scattering of seed throughout the underground area' by means of 'private sexual activity', aided by the sounds of spectators' footsteps on the ramp… In my seclusion I can have private images of [these spectators], talk to myself about them: my fantasies about them can excite me, enthuse

[4] Reports of the hours between which the performance took place vary even in contemporary reviews. For a collation of these varying reports see Kiff Bamford, *Lyotard and the 'figural' in Performance, Art and Writing* (London; New York: Continuum, 2012), 31.

> me to sustain – to resume – my private sexual activity. (The seed 'planted' on the floor, then, is a joint result of my performance and theirs.)[5]

Acconci's 'scattering of seed', put in baser terms, describes his activity of masturbating whilst concealed beneath a ramp, as gallery-frequenters walked over him in the space above. Speaking into a microphone, he narrated sexual fantasies, which were based on visitors' movements. His voice was projected through loudspeakers into the gallery. This seminal performance work was about presence, affect and reciprocal interaction; about the interplay between the psychological and the social; and about the breaching of boundaries between (bodily) interior and exterior, private and public, self and other.

In 2009, I met with Acconci at his studio in Brooklyn, New York to interview him about *Seedbed* and others of his works wherein he used his own body as both a space of enactment, and a vehicle or tool with which to communicate a politics. Each of these works were enacted during an "explosive and important period"[6] for performance art in the early 1970s. As such, my only means of studying them (prior to the interview) was through their documentation.[7] Curious about the body, whether performing or spectating, as a site and/or stimulus of sensation, I was especially eager to learn about the affective character of Acconci's body-based artworks. Interviewing Acconci presented me with an opportunity to engage directly with an artist from an earlier generation of performers, whose work I had not, and indeed could not, have experienced 'in the flesh'. Though, through direct engagement with the artist thirty-seven years after the live event, I could learn something about the affective character of *Seedbed* as it played out for Acconci, I would never be able to satisfy my intrigue for the work with respect to its affective dimensions from the point of view of and as an audience member. That which intrigued me most about the work – the *embodied experience* of it – eluded me completely. It struck me that, to be able to write

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[5] David Bourdon, 'An Eccentric Body of Art' (1973), *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock and Robert Nickas (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984), 183-193 (191). The quoted material in this account is taken from posters, handwritten by Acconci, which were present in the Sonnabend Gallery when the performance took place.

[6] Amelia Jones, ''Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation', *Art Journal* 56:4 (Winter 1997), 11-18 (11)

[7] In ''Presence' in Absentia' and elsewhere, Jones addresses the problematics of experiencing performance from a historical distance. These issues are engaged with fully at a later stage in this chapter.

analyses which followed on from the affects of live embodied performance, I needed to have experienced them myself. Reflecting upon this at the beginning of the present project, I therefore established early on that my 'being there' in the live moment of performance would form an imperative part of my research methodology.

My interests, theoretical inclinations and academic experience, including my research on and interview with Acconci, informed my commitment at the outset of this study to works of abject performance art. With particular reference to bodily boundaries, fluids and functions, abject art explores themes which transgress and threaten one's sense of propriety. Closely bound with the segregation between high and low culture, as well as the private/public dichotomies that lie at the foundations of polite society, abject art, as one manifestation of the 'dark' side of established culture, has been implemented as a means to rupture and/or subvert the existing social order. It has been employed as a potent instrument of transgression and resistance against dominant norms and hierarchies, and oppressive regimes of discipline and control. My theoretical inclinations toward abjection fuelled my critical interest in the relationship between artwork and spectator, or more specifically, my interest in the various means by which the (maker of the) abject artwork implicates the(ir) viewer, posing a violative threat to the physical and social boundaries of the spectatorial body.

At the time, I was especially captivated by controversial and taboo-breaking performance. Work of extremity and excess. Work labelled 'obscene'. Work that could stir an intense visceral reaction, be it disgust, shock, trauma, or even phobia. I was interested in artworks that foregrounded messy and volatile bodies, bodies of compromised integrity, bodies in pain, both triumphant and vulnerable bodies, bodies prone to failure. Ultimately I was interested in the body as a focus for transgressive and radical art practice, and in uses of the body to produce powerful affects.

This project initially began as an investigation into contemporary abject performance practice. By discussing works from performance and live art history from 1980 to the present, I proposed to track a shift in how the body has been

presented in abject performance and to what ends, and how current works sit in the context of an art historical canon of presenting the body as a space of enactment. I sought to address questions about the relationship of abject artistic practices to the audiences that witness them, and to a broader culture of performed embodiment. I sought possible responses to the questions: what does your encounter, as an embodied audience member, ask of you in terms of affective response to the embodied artwork? What politics does this bodily response bring to consciousness? I therefore pursued explicit and visceral performance, but most importantly, performance that I found challenging and difficult; work that was immediate in the sense of its liveness and affective sensibility, but not in the sense of its comprehensibility. I wanted to understand the political dimensions of this practice, and to make sense of my experience of and engagement with it. That is, I wanted to understand the impact and implications of those scenes of difficulty presented in abject performance work for its audiences, as an audience member.

As my study progressed, however, its strategic and thematic foci shifted. Bodily transgressions and transgressive forms of embodiment are still prevalent in contemporary performance practice, but the challenges that these works pose to normative body politics are made via a range of strategies, including but not limited to abjection. Additionally, the more live work I experienced, the more apparent it became that the number of performances which speak to feminist and queer identity politics has proliferated in recent years in line with changes emerging socially. In the current social climate, shifts and ruptures in gender categories and identifications have become increasingly prevalent. Meanwhile, gender non-conforming bodies, trans people and trans issues have gained presence and prominence in the Western world's mainstream media. This is not to say that the transgression of gender norms is an entirely new phenomenon, rather that, in the present social climate, the idea of a self-determined alternative to 'natural' binary categories has become a topical issue with substantial implications for the future of subjectivity and corporeality. In response to these observations, the shape of my thesis morphed in two ways: I broadened my thematic enquiry to encompass operations, interventions, and aesthetic articulations other than abjection, but which were no less corporeal for that. Meanwhile, I narrowed my focus in terms of body politics in order to

articulate and reflect upon what increasingly seemed to me to be the prevalent concerns in the contemporary performance practice I was encountering. Accordingly, this research is above all an enquiry into queer feminist gender and body politics; abjection takes its place as one dimension of certain practices within that politics.

Focusing on how the current upsurge of interest in queer subjectivity has reverberated through the field of performance I ask: how have recent changes in body politics impacted on the themes and ideas explored in contemporary body-based performance? What aesthetic and formal strategies do contemporary performance artists use to attempt to challenge sedimented norms, hegemonies, and power structures related to gender and the body? This thesis centres on contemporary practices which utilise the performing body as a ground for negotiating social prescriptions, and nurturing new, alternative forms of embodiment. It addresses performances that present a challenge to the hegemonic and heteronormative by resisting or subverting stereotypes, performances that present radical new ways of thinking about the body. Via close analysis of three case study examples, each treated both as a cultural text to be read and an affective experience to be reckoned with, I theorise specific deployments of the transgressive body in performance and argue that these bodies challenge assumptions of normative subjectivity through various strategies of queer intervention and subversion.

Certain aspects of the PhD project that I initially proposed remain fundamental to the present thesis. Firstly, my interest in the production and reception of culturally transgressive practices, or more specifically, my commitment to challenging and radical live art, which interrogates normative notions of embodiment, whilst also placing a strong emphasis on affective experience – one's embodied response to an embodied practice. And secondly, the drive to engage critically with the discourses woven into contemporary body-based performance on body politics, ideologies, and histories. Affirming or drawing out what might be the more progressive political potentialities of body-oriented practices is another concern that has been continually part of my project, but one that took greater prominence as my study progressed.

Before proceeding, I want to clarify my particular usage of some of the key terms around which this thesis revolves. 'Body' is predominantly used to refer to the physical and material corpora of humans. Usually it denotes a singular and specific referent – an artist, or a spectatorial body (usually my own) – though I sometimes use 'body' to refer to a collective, as in the social body at large. I engage with the notion of 'embodiment' succinctly summarised by Jennifer Parker-Starbuck and Roberta Mock as: "the sense of being in a body or having a body, a conscious engagement with the materiality of sensing bodies, or the experience of practices that are physically manifested."[8] I understand 'embodiment' as the means through which the body can be shown to function multiply and simultaneously as subject, object, process, product of inscription, and material (to be re-)inscribed. The term 'body politics' refers to those policies and practices which regulate the body, as exercised by both individuals and society. Throughout this study I work primarily from a definition of 'politics' as an ongoing process in which power relations are (continually re-)negotiated, rather than from an understanding of 'politics' as it pertains to a formal, constitutional edifice. That said, these denotations are, of course, entwined. Hence, when writing about 'the law' or 'the system' I am referring to a symbolic structure of signification but one that has real effects on real bodies in the material world. In this thesis specifically, the artist's body is both the site and the material on/in/across which the (re-)negotiation of power dynamics takes place.

Scoping the Field of Feminist Performance Scholarship

The body in performance is both mark-making tool and (marked) medium to be (re-)marked. I parenthesise 'marked' in acknowledgement of the fact that many or most bodies are already inscribed with the social markings of gender, race, class, and sexuality – markings that attest to a body's il/legitimacy and delineate its rank in the social hierarchy of dis/privilege. In today's culture, however, some bodies – strategically or otherwise – deny and/or challenge these markings; they problematise legibility. Driven by the internalisation of a

[8] Jennifer Parker-Starbuck and Roberta Mock, 'Researching the Body in/as Performance', *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, ed. Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 210-235 (212)

culturally-trained imperative to 'read' a body, one scans it for legible markings. But in some cases this attempt at reading falls short; one does not know what one sees.

Feminist scholars publishing work on body-based practices in the 1990s observed that, oftentimes, the body in representation sets out to foreground social markings and/or to re-mark the 'always already' marked body, in order to expose and/or trouble the processes and structures through which a body is ascribed meaning. This, they argued, is how the body in/as art has the potential to be radically political. According to film scholar, Jackie Byars, "representation is *not* reflection but rather an active process of selecting and presenting, of structuring and shaping, of making things *mean*."[9] Performance art, as a representational medium, can play an active and productive role in transforming the ways in which the wider social world (beyond the social context of the performance space) might be viewed and understood. These important insights are still relevant and applicable to the body in representation now, but, I would argue, in light of recent changes and the rise of the queer trans movement, a new process of exposure and deconstruction, beyond foregrounding and re-marking, is emerging in contemporary practices. Artists are using their queer bodies in/as performance to address society's preoccupation with surface legibility and its need to name and ascribe meaning to a body in accordance with decipherable visual markings. Through a process of obscuring the markings of the body or by presenting an ambiguously marked body, performers are seeking to activate audiences' cognisance of the fact that, in this era, the body is not *always already* marked, at least not in a clearly legible way.

Performance art has been recognised as a vehicle for social change by numerous scholars. For example, Kristine Stiles' essay, 'Readings: Performance and Its Objects' ends with the claim: "performance [is]… a concrete social practice that continues to redefine the meaning of the visual arts through the ways in which the presence of the body in real events provides a paradigm for social action."[10] Here Stiles renders performance as a direct means of achieving activist intentions. Whilst I do believe that performance *can* be activist, that the

[9] Jackie Byars, *All That Hollywood Allows: Re-reading Gender in 1950s Melodrama* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 69. Original emphasis.
[10] Kristine Stiles, 'Readings: Performance and Its Objects', *Arts* 63:3 (November 1990), 35-47 (47)

performing body *can* be utilised as a political tool for change, Stiles' assertion is not universally applicable in the manner that the words quoted above seem to suggest. Contrary to Stiles, Amelia Jones argues:

> body art is *not* 'inherently' critical… nor… inherently reactionary, but rather – in its opening up of the interpretive relation and its active solicitation of spectatorial desire – provides the *possibility* for radical engagements that can transform the way we think about meaning and subjectivity (both the artist's and our own). In its activation of intersubjectivity, body art, in fact, demonstrates that meaning is an exchange… Body art confirms what phenomenology and psychoanalysis have taught us: that the subject 'means' always in relationship to others…[11]

This quotation is taken from Jones' *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (1998), a now canonical text that marks a key moment in the reception of artistic practices which enact the body/subject. *Body Art* calls for an engaged, embodied, 'intersubjective' form of criticism and advocates for a performative analytic approach, which is explored in further detail in the anthology, *Performing the Body / Performing the Text* (1999), edited by Jones alongside Andrew Stephenson. The intricacies of the interconnected arguments which span across these two texts require some unpacking.

For Jones, the body as artwork is not inherently critical, nor does it directly and unproblematically communicate a singularly stable intended meaning to its viewer (as the close of Stiles' essay seems to infer). Rather, Jones argues, the radical potentiality of the body in performance emerges out of a contingent intersubjective relation which holds between the performing body and the spectatorial body. It is between these bodies, in the moment/space of engagement, that potentially transformative meaning unfolds. Meaning is therefore unstable. Produced through a dynamic interpretive process, meaning is negotiated or "worked out *as a performance* between artists… and spectators (whether 'professional' or non-specialist)."[12] The bracketed content at the close

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[11] Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 14. Original emphasis.

[12] Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson, 'Introduction', *Performing the Body / Performing the Text*, ed. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), 2. Emphasis added. Other scholars who attest to the performative nature of meaning-making and propose their critical writing as performance include Rebecca Schneider and Peggy Phelan, see: introduction to Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London:

of this quotation points toward a further development of Jones' argument: her feminist retort against modernist modes of artistic analysis (and tendencies within the art historical canon to perpetuate these analytic modes), which protect the authority of the (usually male, almost always white) critic or historian who presumes to be able to determine the 'inherent' meaning and value of an artwork through 'objective' criteria. Modernist formalist analytic models claim that the meaning of an art object is implicit within its forms, which "translate more or less directly the emotions and intentions of the making subject", and that the art critic/historian is a "privileged reader who possesses a special insight and a trained eye such that she or he can decipher this meaning and confirm this value."[13] To insist on a singularly conclusive 'universally correct' or 'valid' meaning for an artwork is to fix it, thereby closing it off to further engagement. It is for this reason, and also because she situates herself in feminist retaliation against the masculinism embedded in its assumptions, that Jones disputes formalist modernism and argues instead for a postmodern, feminist poststructuralist analytic approach.

She also contests formalist modernism's impulse to veil the interpreter's stake in the production of particular meanings under a cloak of 'neutrality' or 'disinterest', an impulse which purports to authenticate the unbiased authority of both the model and its implementor, as well as that implementor's reading. Contrarily, Jones places "emphasis on interpretation as a definitively *invested* kind of performance"[14]. In the charged moment of engagement, the embodied artwork solicits spectatorial identifications, interests, biases, and desires, and it is via these investments and engagements that the spectator formulates their interpretation of the work.[15] As a participatory and generative praxis, interpretation is thus termed as 'performance' because it is the product of a suggestive, open-ended process of exchange. Jones proposes that it is because the distance between (artist's-body-as-)artwork and spectator presumed in

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Routledge, 1997) and introduction to *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, ed, Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

[13] Jones (1998), 3, fn. 11

[14] Jones and Stephenson (1999), 3. Original emphasis.

[15] Susan Kozel makes similar observations when she argues that, in embodied practices, what is "at stake here is the myth of objectivity. *No one is uninvolved*. All those who experience a piece - performers, audience members, stage managers, journalists - do so from their own culturally situated positions, their own preferences, histories, bodies, and connections with the art world". Susan Kozel, *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008), 134. Original emphasis.

modernist analytic approaches is collapsed in performance, that the "reigning ideology of disinterested criticism" is "profoundly challenge[d]" by embodied practices.[16]

The primary concern of Jones' analyses of body art dating from the 1970s through to the 1990s is to determine the work's capacity to "instantiate the dislocation or decentering of the Cartesian subject of modernism."[17] To argue that such practices perform or embody the shift in subjectivity from a (coherent and unified) modernist to a (multiple and dispersed) postmodernist mode, she draws on theories of subjectivity postulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Lacan, as read and revised through Judith Butler, Simone de Beauvoir, and Luce Irigaray. Identifying her work as "phenomenologically inflected feminist poststructuralism"[18], Jones explains that she views body art as having enacted in the cultural realm what poststructuralism conceptualises philosophically. For Jones, the non-normative body in performance (as in all those bodies which go against the grain of the 'normative' straight, white, upper-middle-class, able-bodied male subject) exposes the "hidden logic of exclusionism underlying modernist art history and criticism… The more exaggeratedly… particularised this body is – that is, the more it surfaces and even exaggerates its nonuniversality… – the more strongly it has the potential to challenge the assumption of normativity built into modernist models of artistic evaluation…"[19]

Jones' work offered important new insights into how body art can be understood as an enactment of intersubjective and embodied self/other relations. However, postmodernist challenges to the coherence and self-claimed authority of the masculinist, modernist subject are, as Jayne Wark observes, "by now well established within art discourse"[20] (and she stated this in 1997 no less). Whilst my work is informed by a similar theoretical lineage and includes some of the aforementioned scholars, adding to an already rich field of poststructuralist critiques of modernism is not necessarily what drives me. Nor am I intent on

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[16] Jones (1998), 8
[17] Ibid., 1
[18] Ibid., 11
[19] Ibid., 9
[20] Jayne Wark, 'Review of *Body Art / Performing the Subject* by Amelia Jones', *RACAR: Revue D'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 24:2 (1997), 75-77 (75)

extending Jones' re-evaluation of formalist modernist criticism. Rather, *Body Art* resonates with my research in other ways. In terms of affinities this thesis: insists on the political potentiality of performance art; it is a feminist project of decentering phallogocentrism; and, using academic scholarship to theorise embodied practices, I too invoke and contribute to discourses that challenge and undermine hegemonic thinking. Analysing examples of the non-normative body in performance, I argue that these bodies are implemented strategically to challenge assumptions of normative subjectivity and present alternatives.

Another, more specific, point of relevance is that Jones' work contains key ideas about the production and reception of body-based art practices, chiefly, the idea of an embodied and intersubjective model of spectatorial engagement. A now fundamental approach to researching the body in and as performance, this model has been used widely in extant scholarship. To cite but a few examples, in *Contract with the Skin*, what Jones terms 'intersubjectivity' is described by Kathy O'Dell in terms of a tacit contract between artist and audience: "we, as viewers, are an active part of the artist's work."[21] Chris Burden's *Shoot* offers a clear example of O'Dell's theory. Before a small audience at a gallery in Santa Ana, California in 1971, Burden asked a trained sharpshooter to fire at his left arm from a distance of fifteen feet. Burden had instructed the shooter just to graze his skin, but a more serious wound resulted. For O'Dell, the key to understanding this piece lies in the respectively tacit and specified 'contracts' between those parties present: "audience members chose not to stop the shooting, just as the sharpshooter himself chose not to turn down Burden's request."[22] Also parsing it as a 'contract' Adrian Heathfield describes the "embodied scene of relation" between performer and spectator as "a zone of unpredictable exchange". The performer-spectator 'divide', he writes, is "precisely what performance puts into question, interrogating the often unspoken contract that exists between the two parties, and the ethical, moral and political notions upon which it is founded."[23]

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[21] Kathy O'Dell, preface to *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), xii

[22] Ibid., 2

[23] Adrian Heathfield, 'Alive', *Live: Art and Performance*, ed. Adrian Heathfield (New York: Routledge, 2004), 6-13 (11)

Emphasising the 'intercorporeality' of research processes in their chapter 'Researching the Body in/as Performance', Parker-Starbuck and Mock note that, as research methods into body-based practices are evolving, a greater breadth of bodily presences are being (literally) incorporated into them:

> … sharings, collaborations and exchanges take place between spectatorial researcher and performer, between performer-researcher and audiences, between researchers who write and the theorists that they read, and among researchers of different disciplines, all of which may be crucial to research methods that enrich understandings of the interrelationships that exist between networked bodies and performance.[24]

Parker-Starbuck and Mock highlight the range of interactive modes by which "the researcher's own body, connected to other bodies in the world"[25], becomes engulfed during the performative moment. At this juncture I want to state my awareness of intercorporeal research methods and writing approaches other than my own, and explain why I elected not to use them. I do not consider myself to be a "performer-researcher"; the research presented in this thesis was not conducted through practice. Instead, I used the protocols of academic research to attempt to "enrich understandings of the interrelationships" between (performing and spectating) bodies. In the earliest stages of my project I considered weaving creative and experimental passages of performative writing into and throughout my text. Subsequently, however, I resolved not to, so as to give the works analysed the benefits of a purely academic approach. My meaning here is threefold: the academic approach I have taken allows me to give as full an account of these works as possible; the lucidity of academic writing allows for these works to be engaged with by a wider readership; and it also (potentially) gives them longevity in the sense that future generations (who will not be able to experience the work first-hand) might still engage with these performances through my contemporaneous writing.

Dominic Johnson encapsulates the logic of intersubjectivity when he argues that creative movements of artistic practice produce meaning outside of themselves in the space of the viewer, the "engaged witness". Johnson's stance is useful in

[24] Parker-Starbuck and Mock (2011), 232
[25] Ibid., 233

another way (that differs from Jones' specifically) when he adds that, without the *liveness* of the performance practice, the "unity of meaning" which holds between (artist-as-)artwork and viewer is lost.[26] Unlike Johnson, Jones rejects the notion that one needs to 'be there' in the live moment of performance. Though I find many aspects of Jones' methodological approach important for performance scholarship – for example, I concur with the proposition of a contingent relationship between artist and spectator, and accordingly I approach performance works throughout this thesis via a model of embodied engagement (as detailed in the 'Structure and Methodology' subsection of this chapter) – I deliberately depart from her approach on this point because, for me, the spur of performance scholarship comes from accounting for the affective experience gleaned from 'being there', engaging in a raw encounter with the live.

In her review of *Body Art*, Jennie Klein contends that the stance "one cannot 'know' the meaning of a performance without actually being there when it happened… has its roots in the modernist belief that the object of art is immediately and completely intelligible, [and thus] precludes anyone who wasn't there at the time of the performance from a critical engagement with it."[27] I do not wish to stake claims for any of these assertions. Whilst I do insist on the value of 'being there', I do not wish to restate the modernist presumption of fixed legibility. None of the performances analysed in this thesis are "immediately and completely intelligible", nor do I claim any special privilege in 'knowing' their 'meaning' (note Klein's intentional reference to a singular meaning) on account of my having been there to witness them. Neither am I arguing that close proximity ensures 'knowledge' of an artist's subjectivity or intentionality. Like Jones, then, I do not subscribe to the belief commonly reiterated in writings about performance that artists who use their body as their medium are somehow able to transcend the frame of representational structures and present an unmediated self to their audience.[28] "[B]y virtue of their

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[26] Dominic Johnson, 'Geometries of Trust: Some Thoughts on Manuel Vason and Photographic Conditions of Performance', *Dance Theatre Journal* 20:4 (April 2005), 12-19 (12)

[27] Jennie Klein, 'Keeping up with the Jones's', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 21:2 (May 1999), 116-21 (119)

[28] For example, Catherine Elwes claims that performance art offers "a unique vehicle for making that direct unmediated access" to the audience. "Performance is about the 'real-life' presence of the artist… Nothing stands between spectator and performer." Catherine Elwes, 'Floating Femininity: A Look at Performance Art by Women', *Women's Images of Men*, ed. Sarah Kent and Jacqueline Moreau (London: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1985), 164-193 (165)

operation within the field of art, which is always-already-and-forever the field of representation, the symbolic, the metaphor"[29] the artist who uses their body in/as performance cannot be 'known' or experienced as unmediated. Live performance allows for a more immediate experience in terms of proximity but it is, nevertheless, always representation. That said, to return to Johnson's point, it is important to note here that liveness is the medium of that representation and that live artists make use of the media of their form in their practice. Working with and manipulating that form, using its very liveness specifically, 'immediacy' might well be a part of that form's properties. For work that was made to be experienced in its live dimension, liveness is that work's materiality. One *can* view such works through documents, or read about them, but that is to be removed from their material, live dimension. Thus, I agree that one *can* engage critically with performance without having experienced it. Having cited historical performance examples in previous academic studies (whilst researching Acconci's performances, for instance), I encountered and analysed those works via photographic, video, and textual documentation (reviews, printed texts, articles, and the documented reactions of others). Having employed this approach when she wrote *Body Art*, Jones argues that documentation can engage the viewer/critic in a reciprocal relationship just as readily as live performance.[30] I do not dispute this. However, what I do wish to stress about the live encounter is that spectators gain a unique form of *bodily* 'knowledge' from 'being there', which cannot be gleaned from documentation.

Live practice happens in front of, with, and around us in a specific time and a specific place. Peggy Phelan declares, "Performance's only life is in the present."[31] Though, as I have stated, in modes of documentation performance *does* have another life that is not in the present, I wish to draw emphasis to that charged present moment/space as one within which questions, thoughts, and feelings proliferate in the spectator. To cite another critical voice that has come to impact significantly on scholarly thinking about performance, in an

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[29] Kathy O'Dell, *Toward a Theory of Performance Art: An Investigation of its Sites* (PhD Thesis, City University of New York, 1992), 44

[30] "While the live situation may enable the phenomenological relations of flesh-to-flesh engagement, the documentary exchange is equally intersubjective." Jones (1997), 12.

[31] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 146

introductory essay for the anthology *Live: Art and Performance*, Adrian Heathfield emphasises the immersive, haptic, and interactive nature of live performance. The phrase 'embodied event' appears just once and without fanfare in Heathfield's essay, but it strikes me as a key term which communicates much, very economically about the performer-spectator dynamics around which live performance revolves.[32] 'Embodied event' describes performance that thematises the body/embodiment, but it is also an appropriate descriptor for the embodied responses elicited by such performances. Indeed, what intrigues me most about the embodied artwork is its capacity to instil a multi-sensorial, affective response in its spectator, a visceral bodily experience which documentation cannot match for intensity. This is not to say that an image, whether photograph, video or film, cannot be powerfully affective. Only that an image-as-relic of a live performance is, in terms of affective power, lesser than the event itself.

Whilst I do not dispute the validity of historiographic methodologies, such an approach would have been inappropriate for this thesis precisely because the performances discussed are characteristically visceral works. Each case study artwork addressed in this thesis both *stages* and *activates* an 'embodied event'. I selected these performances, in the first instance, based on my affective connection with them and it was from these initial affective-intersubjective engagements that I subsequently formulated my analyses. I therefore established early on that my commitment to being present in the live moment of performance was an imperative part of my research methodology. To have experienced those works studied in detail 'in the flesh', to have connected with them sensorially and emotionally, as well as intellectually, was crucial.

Thus far I have discussed feminist critiques of canonical modes of approach to performance and stated my own position in relation to these ideas and methods. This thesis affirms this feminist lineage by: attesting to the political value of performance; formulating complex theoretical readings; approaching performance via an embodied, intersubjective mode of engagement; and emphasising the crucial value of one's presence in the live moment. In more recent scholarship, however, new and alternative models of engagement are

[32] Heathfield (2004), 7

emerging, models which emphasise multi-disciplinarity and the crossover between artistic and non-artistic forms. To establish a context for and to situate my work in relation to contemporary research and performance revolving around body politics, I want to turn my attention from published texts to event-texts.

Scoping the Field of Queer Trans Theory in the Discursive Context of Contemporary Event-Texts

As will be detailed in the chapters that follow, the work in this thesis emerges, in the first instance, out of my embodied experience of a live performance work. Alongside live performances, I attended (or engaged remotely with) a number of events throughout the UK, which encapsulated contemporary debate revolving around gender, sexuality, queerness and race. My experience of these events was such that they offered a discursive contextual frame for the live performance work that I was encountering. They helped me to fulfil one objective of my project, which was to examine the links between the performances explored and emerging social and cultural discourses on bodies and embodiment. Those which were of particular pertinence to my project were 'Charming for the Revolution: A Congress for Gender Talents and Wildness', held in The Tanks at Tate Modern, London (February 2013)[33] and a series of festivals hosted by Arika at Tramway, Glasgow, especially episodes five, six, and seven: 'Hidden in Plain Sight' (May 2013), 'Make a Way Out of No Way' (September 2014) and 'We Can't Live Without Our Lives' (April 2015).

Enabling interaction across artistic and non-artistic disciplines, these events forged local, national, and international networks of arts practitioners, theorists and activists, as well as medical and legal professionals, to facilitate cross-disciplinary debate on the shifts occurring in and affecting contemporary body politics. Multiform in approach, their programmes included presentations, discussions, workshops, screenings and live performances. Engaging with these particular events, as well as their participants and attendees, helped me to deepen my knowledge and understanding of the current social climate and allowed me to reflect on the changes occurring in contemporary body politics via

[33] Video documentation of the event can be found here: <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/charming-revolution-congress-gender-talents> accessed 25/01/16

different critical perspectives. Furthermore, the multi-disciplinarity of these events – the fact that they drew participants together from a variety of fields in order to discuss issues collectively but from a range of viewpoints – contributed to the heterogeneous shape of my thesis. As such, my engagement with them forms an important strand of my methodology. Detailing the events specified above – those which I found to be most directly relevant to my study – will allow me to articulate the key themes, approaches, questions, and ideas that were raised and explain how they resonated with my project or impacted on my thinking.

"[E]xperientially rich, aesthetically demanding, and philosophically provo[cative]"[34], Arika's programme of public events (or 'episodes') foreground performance, critical debate and collective learning. Promoting interactive exchange between invited participants and festival attendees, each episode is intended as a "convivial, exploratory cross between a salon, festival and live magazine"[35]. Thematically, episodes five through seven revolved around queer and/or black sociality. These episodes involved a questioning and queering of normative identity categories. Not to seek assimilation into a conservative and exclusionary system, nor to alleviate its symptoms of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia, but to challenge *the cause* of such symptoms by rejecting social conditioning and radically re-thinking the body/self. Rejecting and challenging the oppressions of compulsory heterosexuality, described by Arika as "society's prescribed script"[36], Arika celebrates those communities whose politics and art forms expose the artificiality of mainstream societal distinctions, communities who organise in the face of multiple oppressions.

Arika's episodes develop iteratively, each one informing the next. Episode five explored the connections between queer art forms (voguing, drag, lip-synching, and ballroom and deep house music) and the kinship structures and politics of the communities that produced them – politics of race, class, gender, affect, and emotion. Episode six explored the gap between the presumed social norms of race, sex, gender, and sexuality, and the lived experiences that those norms

[34] Jay Sanders, Curator at Whitney Museum of American Art, made this endorsement of Arika's curatorial practice <http://arika.org.uk/about-us> accessed 15/07/16
[35] <http://arika.org.uk/about-us> accessed 15/07/16
[36] <http://arika.org.uk/events/episode-5-hidden-plain-sight/introduction> accessed 15/07/16

exclude. Episode seven refused the refusal of "the so-called right to be a human, a citizen, a subject" and invited participants to consider "how we might give humanness a different future"[37].

There are points of crossover between Arika and 'Charming for the Revolution' insofar as both events hosted rigorous debates on the policing of sex, gender, and sexuality, and each facilitated collective thinking about ways to resist and challenge norms related to these identity categories. I unpack key points from these debates in my summary of 'Charming for the Revolution' below. This is not to say that the points made at one event were repeated verbatim at the other, but I want to articulate something that was valuable to me about Arika, which was not addressed at 'Charming for the Revolution': Arika's programme informed and inspired my research in that it provided a way in to thinking about queer(ing) black subjectivity. Whereas debates around queer subjectivity inform this thesis as a whole, the ideas discussed at Arika on the intersection of queerness and blackness had especial impact for Chapters Four and Five of this thesis. Since the subject matter here relates to a particular case study artist yet to be introduced, I will reserve an unpacking of this content for a later stage of the chapter. In the meantime, I want to resume my examination of these event-texts as platforms for critical conversations about body politics, and spaces that enabled discourse on self-determined bodily presentations.

'Charming for the Revolution' was comprised of a series of manifesto presentations and discussions amongst major international artists, activists, curators, and scholars. The proceedings were convened by multi-disciplinary artist, Carlos Motta, whose work engages with histories of queer culture and activism. Speakers invited to present manifestos included artist, Del LaGrace Volcano[38], Professor of English and Gender Studies, J. Jack Halberstam[39], and philosopher and queer activist, Beatriz Preciado.[40] Of all the congress speakers, I foreground these three, because their thinking and their output regarding the

[37] <http://arika.org.uk/events/episode-7-we-cant-live-without-our-lives/introduction> accessed 15/07/16

[38] Volcano creates deeply personal photographic portraits of 'gender variant' or 'herm' individuals, those who are trans, intersex and/or genderqueer.

[39] Also an invited speaker at Arika's episode five, I saw Halberstam present the same material there as he delivered at 'Charming for the Revolution'.

[40] Now Paul B. Preciado.

presentation of new/queer subjectivities, have been especially influential to my project. Exploring the work of these figures, renowned in the context of gender and sexuality studies, through 'Charming for the Revolution' and beyond has stimulated my thinking and prompted my own process of knowledge production. Furthermore, by blending art and politics to produce an "art activist practice"[41], Volcano, Halberstam, and Preciado's queer feminist methodological approach to disrupting conventional ways of seeing and thinking sex and gender resonates with my own approach and aims within this study. Exploring radical expressions of sexuality and gender, 'Charming for the Revolution' delegates sought to unpick pressing questions of contemporary body politics and to explore strategies that might destabilise normative binary gender and its representations. The aim of the event was "to assess and debate an exciting, emerging field of shifting identities, active communities and political dreams."[42] The aims stated here chime with my own.

That the congress unfolded at Tate Modern is significant for a number of reasons. It took place specifically in The Tanks, three former oil chambers and adjacent spaces in the basement of the building which opened in July 2012, described by Tate as "the world's first museum galleries permanently dedicated to exhibiting live art, performance, installation and film works."[43] By bringing work typically experienced in alternative spaces into the museum-institution, Tate's new designated space marks an embrace of live work as an important part of the art historical canon.[44] It also signals the increased resonance in contemporary culture which live art has recently been experiencing. Today, live

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[41] Del LaGrace Volcano, presentation delivered at 'Charming for the Revolution: A Congress for Gender Talents and Wildness', The Tanks at Tate Modern, 02/02/13 <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/charming-revolution-congress-gender-talents> accessed 25/01/16

[42] <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tanks-tate-modern/eventseries/charming-revolution-congress-gender-talents-and> 18/04/16

[43] Tate. 'New Tate Modern Tanks open to the public.' <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/press-office/press-releases/new-tate-modern-tanks-open-public> accessed 21/04/16. The Tanks were the first phase of a major redevelopment project at Tate Modern. In April 2013, shortly after 'Charming for the Revolution', the spaces were closed to the public so that a new ten-storey high building could be erected on top of them. The Tanks re-opened in June 2016 when the new Tate Modern building was unveiled.

[44] It is important to note that these spaces remain raw and industrial. They are dissimilar to the 'white cube' gallery spaces in the main part of the building. Moreover, as literally underground spaces, their situation within the bowels of the building seems appropriate to the art form to which they are dedicated, an art form which has been somewhat 'underground' in relative terms, in the sense of its non-integration into the mainstream. As such, the space within The Tanks is left as 'found space' to acknowledge and reflect the experimental and avant-garde roots of live performance work.

art and performance has a context, in terms of festivals, funding, and the academy, that it did not have when it came to prominence in the early 1970s. I would not argue that it has been institutionalised, as such (though it has a context it is not considered on a par with, say, theatre and visual art. In fact, alongside these art forms it has hitherto been marginalised in terms of critical consideration) but the contemporary landscape for performance is certainly different than that of earlier time periods. As if acknowledging the relative lack of critical engagement with performance, Tate's (now former) film curator, Stuart Comer describes The Tanks as not just a gallery or auditorium, but a "political-aesthetic forum" in which socially engaged discussions can collide, conflict and potentially or perhaps partially be resolved.[45] That the preeminent institution in the UK for modern and contemporary art should host an event which incorporates performance in its programme and speaks directly to current concerns and developments in the cultural landscape, indicates an acknowledgement of and an attempt to keep up with more than one 'emerging' cultural turn or 'shifting' moment. It suggests recognition of the growing prevalence of these moments (the "emerging field of shifting identities", as well as the need for further (critical) engagement with live performance work) and the potential magnitude of their impact both socially and in terms of cultural production. That 'Charming for the Revolution' took place at a time contemporary to my project and at an institution of such stature, attests to the timeliness, urgency, and cultural value of research within this field; the import of analysing queer body politics in performance now.[46]

[45] Stuart Comer, opening address delivered at 'Charming for the Revolution: A Congress for Gender Talents and Wildness', The Tanks at Tate Modern, 02/02/13 <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/charming-revolution-congress-gender-talents#open275727> accessed 21/04/16. Since 'Charming for the Revolution', Comer has moved on to MoMA, New York as Chief Curator of Media and Performance Art.

[46] Two further studies within the field of performance scholarship and thematically dedicated to 'trans-', which attest to the timely import of examining queer body politics and their impact on performance are: a forthcoming issue of Performance Research journal, due for publication in October 2016, and the American Society for Theatre Research's (ASTR) annual conference, due to take place in November 2016. Though the call for papers for each of these studies seeks submissions which address trans modes of *embodiment and performativity* (transgender subjectivities and the discourse around transgender politics), these particular studies encompass sites and spaces other than the body, such as geographical, conceptual, and linguistic connections with 'trans', as in transnational, transcultural, transmigration, translation. Where these spaces for the study of 'trans in performance' differ from my own is in their broader focus.

Wary of the implications of the institution as a space of hierarchy, a symbol of establishment and law, and a place engaged with capitalist transaction, in his opening address, Motta asked: "What do we gain or lose by entering the international market of ideas sanctioned by large-scale institutions such as this one?" Disclosing his awareness of Tate's "influence as a legitimising agent of culture", he also expressed an awareness of using the institutional platform operatively for politically progressive means: "It is not a coincidence that we have gathered here today to speak about transforming institutions, to speak about and to the margins from the centre."[47] Motta suggests then that the congress gathers within a space that symbolises the power matrix to position itself not compliantly, but rather invasively. Indeed, both the aims of the congress and the urgency of its manifesto presentation format communicate a clear commitment to revolutionising the system, as opposed to a desire to be assimilated into it. That is, the motivation is not toward inclusion within discriminatory systems, but toward resistance and (hoped for) transformation of those structures.

Also suggesting a rationale as to why the event was held in a museum context, Preciado claimed: "politics have to be re-thought as art. As a kind of experimental research practice… That's why I'm always dealing with artists. I cannot deal with people working within the political. I think the political is invented by artists and that's why we have gathered here together and *reclaimed* the museum as a political space."[48] Preciado's proposed strategy of mediating and challenging politics through art or the artist('s body) is precisely concordant with the approach taken in this thesis. I argue that the embodied artworks discussed in the proceeding chapters prompt cognisance of issues relating to specific politics of the body, that they incite debate, that they respond creatively and experimentally to contemporary bodily and social concerns.

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[47] Carlos Motta, opening address delivered at 'Charming for the Revolution: A Congress for Gender Talents and Wildness', The Tanks at Tate Modern, 02/02/13 <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/charming-revolution-congress-gender-talents#open275729> accessed 21/04/16

[48] Preciado, discussion at 'Charming for the Revolution: A Congress for Gender Talents and Wildness', The Tanks at Tate Modern, 02/02/13 <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/charming-revolution-congress-gender-talents#open275729> accessed 21/04/16

'Charming for the Revolution' is Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz's phrase, composed as the title of their film (screened at the event) about small but significant acts of resistance.[49] Also framing the event's thematic focus are the concepts of 'wildness' and 'gender talents', the latter of which is a phrase borrowed from the work of another congress speaker, medical doctor, sexologist, and trans activist, Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad. Benestad's phrase inverts those negative classificatory terms ordinarily used to diagnose and identify gender difference. Having gained knowledge and experience of life from a subject-position alternative to the 'norm', the gender non-conforming trans body is reaffirmed here as uniquely talented. Another of Benestad's semantic inversions is 'gender euphoria', a phrase which responds to the psychiatric profession's tendency to pathologise gender non-conformity, to declare trans individuals as 'suffering' from 'gender dysphoria'.[50] Benestad's transposition of negative terms into positive ones functions as both a form of self-empowerment and an opportunity to reject social condemnation. Both Benestad's semantic inversions and hir[51] symposium manifesto emphasised two key points which recurred throughout the congress: an advocacy of shifting from a binary view of gender to a multiple view of gender (whilst also acknowledging the position of no gender), as well as a recognition of the social anxieties regarding the transgression of gender norms.

This transgressive departure from normative and dichotomous thinking feeds into the concept of 'gender wildness', a notion alluded to within Del LaGrace Volcano's manifesto and indeed embodied by them.[52] Volcano's manifesto was

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[49] The film presents a radical re-imagining of the 'housewife' as a queerly ambiguous figure with an open future. This character thrives in the defiance of convention. Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz, *Charming for the Revolution*, 2009, 16mm, 12 min.

[50] Seven years after homosexuality was removed from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, a classification manual published by the American Psychiatric Association, transsexualism was added in 1980. That entry was replaced by the terminology 'gender identity disorder' in 1983, which was superseded again in 2013 by 'gender dysphoria'. This revision of terminology, which lessens the stigmatic connotations of the word 'disorder', was applauded by many in the trans community. To clarify: 'gender dysphoria' is a phrasing which is usually considered acceptable in the trans community. That said, Benestad's semantic inversion is targeted at the psychiatric profession which tends toward treating transness as a pathological issue rather than a matter of diversity.

[51] An open trans person who presents as both male and female, Benestad uses the pronoun 'hir'.

[52] I refer to Volcano here using the third person plural 'they' as a singular subjective pronoun, so as to retain a gender-neutrality or non-specificity that correlates with Volcano's intersex identity. According to Lisa Newman's transcript of a dialogue with the artist, Volcano "does not often use gender-neutral pronouns in real life but prefers them in writing". Lisa Newman, ''What have you done for me lately?' The Institutionalisation of Queer Feminist

about their own self-formation, about a celebratory disruption or 'wilding' of the binary system, and about illustrating a spectrum of sex and gender. Volcano lay continual emphasis on the body as a site of resistance. They also reiterated the violence of classificatory systems and the need to reject such repressive logics, such underminings of difference. The points raised by Volcano – the presentation of alternative forms of embodiment; an exposure of the instability of gender categories; an affirmation of bodily queering; technologies of self-construction – are fundamental to proceeding chapters. Moreover, the deconstructive reasoning that Volcano outlined and the positioning of the body at the centre of it, corresponds directly with the standpoint from which I base my arguments. In essence, this thesis takes issue with and debates those tenets of bodily existence which are assumed as given. Arguing from a resistant point which refuses to accept the oppressive and normalising discourses of dominant ideology, I seek to expose these givens as props which maintain dominant systems of power. My work emerges from a field which has shared these aims and exposed on these terms and has thus been formative for me. I add to this discourse by writing detailed case studies of specific works by three contemporary artists, each one embodying different interventional strategies than the next.

"*I name myself*. A gender abolitionist. A part time gender terrorist. An intentional mutation and intersex by design (as opposed to diagnosis)…"[53] Volcano's is a body that refuses to subsist according to the sex assigned at birth, a body that refuses to accede to the conformity of binary gender. Neither female, male, nor transsexual, Volcano identifies primarily as intersex. A general term used for a variety of 'conditions', 'intersex' is a status conferred upon bodies according to anatomical variations usually diagnosed at birth. For example, an infant born with 'ambiguous' genitalia that cannot be identified as exclusively female or male, may be diagnosed as intersex. So too might a newborn who appears female externally, but has mostly male-typical anatomy internally or vice-versa. Born in 1957, Volcano was assigned female at birth and named Debra Dianne Wood. In 1979 she renamed herself Della Grace. Then, in 1995, Della began to embark upon an explicit transformation from a lesbian

Art Histories', *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*, ed. Amelia Jones and Erin Silver (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 331-339 (332)

[53] Artist's statement (2005) <www.dellagracevolcano.com> accessed 22/01/16, original emphasis

identity to a transgender subject-position, taking testosterone and adopting the name Del LaGrace Volcano.[54] Volcano is not transitioning toward an endpoint from 'female' to male. Their hermaphroditic sex positions them outside of the binary gender model and their decision to valorise their "mutant maleness"[55] by taking testosterone is a self-determined extension of that queer positioning. Volcano is wilfully suspended in a transitory and variant space of genderqueerness.

Conscious to react against the diagnostic model and transcend its attendant narrative of conferred 'abnormality', Volcano differentiates their own intersex status by describing it as an "intentional mutation". Repudiating the shame that intersex individuals are told they must feel in order to enter into civilised society, Volcano's is "a body that has chosen to amplify rather than erase its intersexiness"[56]. The artist also identifies as "gender variant"[57], criss-crossing at the borders of additional identifications such as genderqueer and "hermaphro*dyke*"[58]. Their body can also be described as trans-masculine.[59] Whilst muscularity and facial hair facilitates their ability to pass as male in daily life, Volcano sometimes chooses not to, subverting the normative codes of maleness by wearing make-up or donning some other garb or accoutrement typically coded as feminine. Ultimately, Volcano celebrates in-betweenness. Their embodiment illustrates and amplifies the fragmented and multifaceted nature of subjectivity.

Volcano's call for revolution was echoed by Halberstam and Preciado. The interventions called for in their respective manifestos were similar to one

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[54] Biographical details and part of my definition of 'intersex' drawn from Dominic Johnson, 'Transition Pieces: The Photography of Del LaGrace Volcano', Jones and Silver (2016), 340-355 (343)

[55] Volcano is the subject of a painting by Jenny Saville entitled *Matrix*. 'Mutant maleness' is Volcano's own term used in a text written for Saville's exhibition catalogue. Del LaGrace Volcano, 'On Being a Jenny Saville Painting', *Jenny Saville: Terrains* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 1999), exh cat, 24

[56] Volcano, 'Charming for the Revolution' presentation, The Tanks at Tate Modern, 01/02/13

[57] Artist's statement (2005) <www.dellagracevolcano.com> accessed 22/01/16

[58] A self-constructed identification conjugating hermaphrodite and dyke, coined by Volcano and printed in 'Hermstory', *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones, 2nd edn (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 27-30. Original emphasis.

[59] "'Trans-masculine' is a catchall term that denotes a spectrum of bodily types, identities, and modes of aesthetic and personal comportment by individuals nominally assigned female at birth, from those who wear traditionally masculine apparel as butch dykes, to trans-identified persons who attain the signifiers of maleness through more invasive techniques." Johnson (2016), 354, fn. 6

another's, though formulated through different theoretical lexicons. Both stated cases for the end of social norms, the decaying structures of binary gender, and the technological reinvention of sexuality, gender, and reproduction. Foregrounding points that correlate strongly with the ideological underpinnings of this thesis, both theorists identified the need for a new feminism and a new politics of gender in light of these metamorphoses of life and the body in contemporary society. Furthermore, Halberstam's and Preciado's projects correlate with mine in that each entails an exploration of different strategies of destabilisation. Each scholar's manifesto summarised the arguments disclosed in their respective contemporaneous publications: Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism*: *Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* had been released in September 2012, and the English translation of Preciado's *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* was forthcoming, scheduled for release in September 2013.

Concepts of anarchy, disordering, revolution, transformation and rebellion have always been prevalent in Halberstam's writing, but they take prominence in *Gaga Feminism*, in all its manifesto spirit. *Gaga Feminism* was written in light of a changed landscape of gender and sexuality in the Western world. A landscape in which gender roles are crumbling and definitions of masculinity and femininity are under pressure, having already mutated into new categories of difference. A landscape in which gay and lesbian partnerships and same-sex parenthood are granted unprecedented state recognition.[60] The book unravels this unfolding contemporary moment of subjective, corporeal, social evolution and argues that these changes should help us to rethink normative standards. Meanwhile, Halberstam remains aware that oftentimes, whilst such transformations (gay marriage or same-sex parenthood for example) disrupt the status quo, they

[60] At the time of Halberstam's writing this recognition was unprecedented though not universal. Since the publication of *Gaga Feminism*, further developments have been made. On 26 June 2015, the US Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriage is a legal right across the United States. And on 31 March 2016, the Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples could legally adopt children in all US states.

In terms of UK law: legislation to legalise same-sex marriage was passed in England and Wales in July 2013 and took effect in March 2014. In Scotland that legislation was passed in February 2014, taking effect in December 2014. A legal challenge to Northern Ireland's ban is currently pending in the judiciary. With respect to same-sex parenthood, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (2008) was particularly significant for same-sex couples as it allowed, for the first time under UK law, a child to have two mums or two dads named as legal parents. For detailed information and links to further resources, see <http://www.stonewall.org.uk/help-advice/parenting-rights> accessed 12/09/16.

paradoxically reinforce it by reinvesting in (hetero)normative hegemonies. In response, Halberstam works at the crossroads of popular culture and academic theory to propose a model for public political engagement using the metaphor of Lady Gaga. Often in tension with the specific person, actions, and positions of Lady Gaga herself[61], gaga feminism "derives from Lady Gaga and has everything to do with Lady Gaga but is not limited to Lady Gaga."[62] Rather, Halberstam identifies two useful aspects of the Lady Gaga phenomenon: her ability to speak directly to a new generation of 'women' (defined broadly in the wake of destabilisations of the gender system wrought by the visibility of trans people and the prevalence of alternate family structures[63]), and Gaga's propensity to twist expectations: to turn meat into a dress, sexploitation into feminism – to take the assumptions of 'normality' and, with them, go gaga. Halberstam's project is about breaking from a second-wave strategy of "coming to consciousness" as women and instead continuing to develop the notion of "unbecoming woman"[64], and also about engaging in imaginative improvisation as a means to make sense of the world. Gaga feminism champions a commitment to instability and anarchy, proposing a practice of critical nonsense[65] that refuses to yield to the authority of social discipline.

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[61] To cite an example: "I build gaga feminism on the bedrock of the outrageous performance archive that Lady Gaga has created and not in relation to her speeches on behalf of marriage equality or gays in the military, positions that offer no critique of marriage on the one hand or the military on the other." J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012b), 104

[62] Ibid., xii

[63] Ibid., xv

[64] Ibid., xiv. The notion of 'unbecoming woman' recurs throughout Halberstam's published works. The main thesis of *Female Masculinity* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1998) is that masculinity should not be synonymised with the male body (nor femininity with the female body) as social structures dictate. Instead, Halberstam argues that the potential to generate a change to the dictated 'norm' of male masculinity lies with alternative masculinities. The refusal to comply with social dictates, explored through cataloguing a diverse range of gender expressions in *Female Masculinity*, is extended in *The Queer Art of Failure* wherein Halberstam advocates for a feminist politics that issues "not from a doing but from an undoing, not from a being or becoming woman but from a refusal to be or to become woman as she has been defined and imagined within Western philosophy." (Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2012a), 124) Halberstam asks: "If we refuse to become women… what happens to feminism? … Can we find feminist frameworks capable of recognising the political project articulated in the form of refusal?" (Ibid., 126) *Gaga Feminism* returns to these questions and represents the possibilities for a feminism which is no longer tied up in trying to stabilise the feminist referent 'woman'. For Halberstam, the instability of sex and gender does not represent the death of feminism, rather, he posits it as a crucial insight for feminism.

[65] Halberstam's framing of gaga feminism as nonsensical and unstable carries an implication of randomness and disorganisation which seems contrary to activist aims; it suggests that gaga feminism achieves disruption but that it does so without intent. To rectify this potential misconstrual and clarify his meaning, Halberstam explains that gaga feminism "is a form of

Outlining a newly emerging regime of power, Preciado's congress manifesto also rejected the idea of a feminism still organised around the "biopolitical fictions"[66] of male and female embodiment. Post-World War II, Preciado argued, the production and control of subjectivity has been dominated by new technologies of the body (biotechnology, surgery, endocrinology) and new forms of representation (photography, cinema, television, internet) which have infiltrated daily life like never before. Her/his manifesto and *Testo Junkie*, the text from which this research is extracted, systematically lists technological regimes that have medically, pharmaceutically, and audio-visually regulated the body politic and produced new forms of prosthetic subjectivity. The invention of the Pill as a contraceptive technique; the commercialisation of Viagra as the chemical treatment for erectile dysfunction; the production and circulation of psychotropic drugs – prozac, ecstacy, heroin; the development of plastic, cosmetic, and sexual surgeries; the global diffusion of pornographic images via print, audiovisual technologies, and the internet; the digital transmission of information – these developments characterise a shift from a regime of discipline to a new form of control.

> The changes in capitalism that we are witnessing are characterised not only by the transformation of 'gender', 'sex', 'sexuality', 'sexual identity', and 'pleasure' into objects of the political management of living… but also by the fact that this management itself is carried out through the new dynamics of advanced techno-capitalism, global media, and biotechnologies… We are being confronted with a new kind of… capitalism. Such recent transformations are imposing an ensemble of new micro-prosthetic mechanisms of control of subjectivity by means of bio-molecular and multi-media technical protocols.[67]

To distinguish this capitalism from the nineteenth-century disciplinary regime by which sex and sexual subjectivity were produced and controlled, Preciado terms it 'pharmacopornographic biocapitalism'[68]. In response to this context Preciado calls upon a new feminism with a new grammar of gender to "turn

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political expression that *masquerades* as naive nonsense but that actually participates in big and meaningful forms of critique." Halberstam (2014), xxv. Added emphasis.

[66] Preciado, 'Charming for the Revolution' presentation, The Tanks at Tate Modern, 01/02/13

[67] Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013), 25, 33

[68] Ibid., 35

pharmacopornographic hegemony upside down."[69] S/he also identifies a "need to invent new practices of gender and sexual resistance within global capitalism."[70] Preciado's interventions are thus couched theoretically, but also exercised in practice; concepts and material realities are brought to bear on one another, as the analyses of gender presented in *Testo Junkie* are interspersed with and enriched by Preciado's diaristic accounts of self-administering testosterone on a daily basis. Rationalising her/his use of T, Preciado writes:

> It's not a matter of going from woman to man, from man to woman, but of contaminating the molecular bases of the production of sexual difference, with the understanding that these two states of being, male and female, exist only as 'political fictions', as somatic effects of the technical process of normalisation. It's a matter of intervening intentionally in this process of production in order to end up with viable forms of incorporated gender, to produce a new sexual and affective platform that is neither male nor female in the pharmacopornographic sense of the term, which would make possible the transformation of the species. T is only a threshold, a molecular door, a becoming between multiplicities.[71]

Preciado's radical project of bodily experimentation and gender adjustment is a resistant practice which works simultaneously within and against dominant understandings of sex and gender in that s/he uses her/his own material body to show how entrenched notions of biological sexual difference are actually technologically/chemically produced and maintained fictions. Preciado's form of practice-as-research incites a reconsideration of the assumption that sexual difference is a biological given, and argues instead that life does not exist outside of technoscience's interlacing of production and culture.[72]

Both Halberstam's and Preciado's calls for insurrection hinged on notions of bodily (un)becoming, as well as a rupturing of existing categories, a shattering of binaries into multiplicities. These notions underpin the discussion throughout this thesis but are most prominent in Chapter Three, as will be elaborated in the proceeding subsection.

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[69] Ibid., 82
[70] Preciado, 'Charming for the Revolution' presentation, The Tanks at Tate Modern, 01/02/13
[71] Preciado (2013), 142-3
[72] Ibid., 43

The event-texts outlined above are examples of the subculture that is forming in response to the imperatives of the contemporary Western social context. On the one hand, this is a context which grants unprecedented legal recognition to same-sex partnerships and parenthood, a context within which broader means of self-determination are emerging as bodily categories and identities shift and become less distinct. On the other hand, some members of contemporary society are resistant to these changes. For example, whilst, in recent years, a historic growth in trans visibility and awareness has had positive impacts, inciting progressive transformation in terms of how the body politic at large comprehends sex and gender, this rise in visibility has seen an increase in violence against trans and genderqueer identified people.[73]

Reacting against the injurious parameters of heteronormativity, queer communities and their allies are creating and occupying queer spaces, forming subcultures as sites for the development of queer counter-publics. Given the transgressive, transformative, and 'anti' (-establishment, -institutional) spirit of live art, it seems wholly appropriate, then, that these events should incorporate live performance strands as part of their programmes. Situated "across, in between, and at the edges of more traditional artistic forms"[74] (such as theatre, dance, or visual art), live art defies categorisation, enacting a challenge to established practices. It is itself a subcultural form. Moreover, performance is a social practice that "seeks to be alert and responsive to its contexts, sites and audiences"[75]. Queer (or queer thematic strands within) performance art festivals and events like the ones described in this subsection, aim to support the artistic manifestation of political struggles and desires through practices of sociality. By inviting the participation of individuals and communities both locally and internationally, they attempt to account as broadly as possible for cultural

[73] Conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality, the 2015 US Transgender Survey is the largest survey examining the experiences of transgender people in the US, with 27,715 respondents. According to the survey report, over the course of one year between 2014 and 2015, forty-six percent of respondents had been verbally harassed and nine percent had been physically attacked. Reporting systematically on the hardships and barriers faced by trans people in terms of legal documentation, healthcare, employment, housing, and police interaction, the survey reports that, struggling under these systems, forty percent of respondents had attempted suicide in their lifetime. Sandy E. James, Jody L. Herman, Susan Rankin, Mara Keisling, Lisa Mottet and Ma'ayan Anafi, *Executive Summary of the Report of the 2015 US Transgender Survey* (Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016)

[74] <http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/about/what-is-live-art/> accessed 18/01/17

[75] Ibid.

diversity, drawing together a range of people who labour under different permutations of intersecting oppressions: the imposition of normative notions of race, sex, gender, sexuality, and attendant geographically-specific criminalisations and pathologisations. Through sharing and exchanging (art)work and ideas, the community-building, network-expanding ethos via which these creative and cultural ecologies operate, seeks to generate solidarity and "bring together allies through new, shared experiences."[76] It is important to note that the community of people in attendance at queer live art events is diversely mixed. Typically, audiences are comprised in large part of arts practitioners, alongside community organisers and activists, as well as performance and (body) art scholars. Other academics from a range of disciplines across the arts, humanities and social sciences might also be present. Audiences are comprised of those who are invested in the issues raised and addressed, as well as those who are curious and interrogative – both queers and non-queer-identified allies are present. In terms of my own positioning, I participate in the subculture of queer (trans) performance by attending its events and committing intellectually, socially, and emotionally to its practices. I therefore position myself as sensitive to, engaged with, and embroiled in the politics of this 'scene', not as a queer (trans) identified individual, but as a cisgender feminist ally. In this study, I analyse a cross-section of contemporary performance practices, locating the three artists focused on as part of the queer subcultural live art community described here.

Structure and Methodology

Experiencing live work at performance art festivals throughout the UK has been an essential part of my research methodology. Between 2009 and 2016, I attended New Territories, Behaviour, Buzzcut (all Glasgow-based), Fierce (Birmingham), In Between Time (Bristol), and Spill (London/Ipswich), the latter of which has been a key festival for my thesis, given its focus on radical and experimental body art. I also attended club nights incorporating live performance, such as those hosted by Arika, and the one-off curated event, Queer Futures, held at The Arches, Glasgow. Most of these events provided a

[76] <http://arika.org.uk/about-us> accessed 15/07/16

platform for emerging artists, whilst also showcasing the work of more established UK-based and international artists. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to have experienced such a varied range of work across the breadth of these festivals and events over the years.

Each year, the number of performances that speak to feminist and queer identity politics seems to proliferate. There are many contemporary performance artists who currently make body politics and the queering of gender norms a central part of their practice. Notable examples include Christeene, Ann Liv Young, Lauren Barri Holstein, Rosana Cade, Narcissister, Juliana Huxtable, Wu Tsang, Micha Cárdenas, Nina Arsenault, Zackary Drucker, Kris Grey, many of whom I have seen perform live. This thesis could have been structured so as to include some of these artists as case studies. However, whilst many of the uncited performances that I have experienced over the years have informed my thinking, I deliberately chose to narrow my focus by examining the work of three artists: Mouse, Cassils, and boychild.[77] My focus on this small number of artworks has allowed me to engage with them in depth.

Methodologically, my approach to researching Mouse, Cassils and boychild began with me experiencing their performances live and connecting with the affective charge of their work. Each respective practice triggered a set of questions about transgressive or non-dominant embodiments which I responded to through the development of theoretical analysis, in order to enable and contribute to conceptual readings of body-based live art practices which have wider socio-cultural implications. Reading the works through critical theory and formulating my analyses was also a means by which I could make sense of my sense of each work, a method through which I could process my perceptions (or 'bodily knowledge' gleaned from 'being there') and shape them (it) into a written

[77] Also known as Heather Cassils, the artist tends to no longer use her/his first name, now going by the mononym, Cassils. I wrote to Cassils to ask which pronouns s/he uses for her/himself to which Cassils replied: "Generally, when writing about my work I prefer to avoid pronouns altogether. Some people write about me as male, some as female. I suppose I don't mind, as it continues to spur on the crisis in that we feel there ought not to be a correct choice. So yes, s/he is fine." Email correspondence, 04/05/14. From a writerly point of view, I favour a mixed pronoun for its awkward effect of syntactical interruption, as I feel it echoes Cassils' aim to cause a disruptive intervention in naming sex and gender. For that reason, throughout this thesis I refer to Cassils using the mixed subjective pronoun s/he and the objective her/his.

boychild considers her onstage persona to be female. Since I am writing about her body in performance, I use female pronouns to refer to her throughout this thesis.

account, making the sensible, legible. I chose not to interview the artists represented in this thesis because I did not want my analyses to be constrained by the artist's intentions. The decision to omit comprehensive performance histories or trajectories for each artist was made because I wanted to maintain my commitment to devoting detailed attention only to works that I had experienced live. On a related note, I chose not to offer biographical narratives on each artist because such details felt secondary to the experience of the works; my contributions to conceptual readings of embodied practices are guided, above all, by my experience of the works themselves. Moreover, my primary concern is with these performances as they relate and critically respond to a socio-political context; I am not intent on foregrounding the individual.

I term my chapters as 'case studies' in the sense that each is a sustained, detailed, and intensively focused analysis of a single artist's practice. My criteria for choosing these case studies and the themes that apply broadly to all three are that they all make works with, in and across their own bodies, using the body as both means and site of expression. All of these performing bodies are non-conformist and non-normative. All are solo performers. All of the works discussed were performed in the presence of a live audience, of which I was part.

As bell hooks argues, performance is a "space for awakening"[78]. It can function by playing a part in actively (re)shaping the ways in which the wider social world (beyond the social context of the performance space) is viewed and understood. I identify each of the pieces I examine as work that questions. Though it may not necessarily provide answers, it does provide the stimulus for critical thinking around subjectivity and embodiment. I believe that each case study demonstrates different potential ways of exposing and resisting against dominant oppressive constructs and systems relating to the body, and that each harbours the potential for a transformative ideology.

Not all of my reasons for bringing these artists together relate to shared characteristics. I selected them as much for the differences between them as

[78] bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1994),

their similarities. Whilst each case study performance thematises the body and embodiment, each represents particular strategies of intervention against normativity. I argue that Mouse exploits the disruptive potentiality in abject, grotesque, and parodic strategies; that Cassils manipulates the binary structure of the heterosexual hegemony by queering the material form of her/his own body; and that boychild's queer, black embodiment extends beyond science-fiction inspired, cyborgian aesthetics, toward a plotting of posthuman, afrofuturist politics.[79]

Although this thesis is structured by case study chapters into areas of debate, these debates are not always entirely discreet from one another; there is a degree to which some body politics bleed between case studies. For example, the notion of (non-)viability raised and partially explored in relation to Cassils, in terms of heteronormative dictates on who or what counts as a viably sexed or gendered body, is given due focus and expanded to encompass other additional identity differentials beyond sex and gender in the closing chapters on boychild.

Acutely aware that Chapters Two and Three focus on performances by white artists, I turn in the final two chapters to the artist boychild and to a discussion of sexual difference that is crossed with a discussion of 'race'. Therein, the threads already woven in preceding chapters concerning the instability of sex/gender distinctions are further developed and interwoven with a questioning of blackness. The politics of gender cannot be treated in mutual exclusivity to those of other identity differentials. Given that gender is inextricably bound to other aspects of identity, it is imperative that race is addressed and that there be diversity amongst the artists analysed within this study.

A further dissimilarity between my case study artists is that, whilst I identify their practices as socially engaged, each connects with body politics differently: Mouse perhaps not at all intentionally, Cassils explicitly, and boychild enigmatically. In the spectatorial moment, I was simultaneously sensorially engaged with Mouse's work and able to begin to situate her performing body

[79] Foregrounding black agency and creativity, afrofuturism encompasses historical fiction, fantasy, myth, and magical realism and draws from non-Western cosmologies to interrogate current conditions of blackness, to examine past conditions, and to envision different futures.

within/against a set of existing critical discourses. For me, the actions and images presented were productive in opening up debate. Whether or not Mouse performs with the *intention* of staging a politics is unclear. Thus, Chapter Two argues that her brand of performance is politically *provocative*, that it harbours a political *potentiality*. Cassils, on the other hand, explicitly frames her/his work as politically invested. Prior to my experience of Cassils' *Becoming an Image*, from two sentences in the festival programme that briefly glossed the performance, I knew only that the work would "address LGBTQ archives"[80]. The day after the performance, Cassils elaborated on this during a presentation in which s/he detailed the inspiration, research, and physical preparation that had gone into making *Becoming an Image*. I therefore had a clear understanding of the political resolve that had motivated Cassils' artistic production before I began my post-performance research. Having had my experience of boychild's practice framed by debate around the intersections of queerness and blackness at Arika, I expected to encounter her work as radically politically implicated. Instead, the politics within boychild's practice were veiled and ambiguous. According to Johnson:

> The visible elements of a theatre production are… ghosted by ideas, identities, and histories that may evade full representation. This is not to say that theatre's inability, reluctance, or refusal to show certain things is a weakness. On the contrary, theatre often plays powerfully with the anomalous visual effects of hiding and revealing.[81]

Chapters Four and Five read boychild's performances in a similar manner, as ambivalent and contradictory, ghosted by ideas, identities, and histories that evade full representation and comprehension. Rather than argue that her work necessarily imparts a clear and emphatic political message, my chapters on boychild stake a claim for her practice as politically *engaged* and dialogic in form.

To shift tone somewhat, at this juncture I want to circle back to the aforementioned event-texts of Arika to explain how the ideas discussed during their episodes had especial impact for Chapters Four and Five of this thesis on

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[80] Spill 2013 festival programme booklet (Pacitti Company, 2013), 65

[81] Dominic Johnson, foreword by Del LaGrace Volcano, *Theatre & the Visual* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 6

boychild. The programme notes for episode six (the episode after the one at which boychild performed) cited jazz musician and cosmic philosopher Sun Ra, and queer black science-fiction writer Samuel R. Delany, two artists whose otherworldly outputs suggest imaginary practices of flight from imposed norms and their oppressions. "In flight from this world, [Sun Ra and Delany] created worlds within it, organised around their collective desires – and from there, they fantasised about… another world yet to come."[82] Drawing together black subjectivity, sci-fi aesthetics, and the notion of forward projection or "prophetic blackness"[83], Arika pointed in the direction of afrofuturism, though the term itself was never explicitly addressed at their events. Working at the intersection of imagination and technology, afrofuturist politics are concerned with a deconstruction and affirmative re-invention of blackness. I use afrofuturist theory in the final chapter of this thesis as a framework through which to analyse boychild's sci-fi inspired lip-synch practice. Whilst this critical perspective was not explored explicitly at any of Arika's festivals, the programme notes for episode six suggest that Arika had recognised and were attempting to reflect on the provocative constellation of politics and aesthetics presented in boychild's work at episode five. Their citations from black sci-fi and fantasy culture sparked my curiosity. Textual exploration of this material brought afrofuturist theory to my attention, giving me the tools to theorise the political implications of boychild's queer black posthuman embodiment.

> Dominant Western ideas of who can call themselves human have historically been used to enslave, colonise and kill. These ideas are still used to justify treating people as disposable no-bodies. But what if our idea of being human goes beyond these constraints? What if we don't agree with what a 'normal body' looks like…? What if we practice multiformity instead…?[84]

These questions, posed at episode seven, speak directly to another field of critical enquiry which I had, by that point, already been researching: the posthuman. Dominant Western ideas of the human exclude 'non-normative' subjects – those who are other than heterosexual, white, able-bodied and male.

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[82] <http://arika.org.uk/events/episode-6-make-way-out-no-way/introduction> accessed 15/07/16

[83] Ibid.

[84] <http://arika.org.uk/events/episode-7-we-cant-live-without-our-lives/introduction> accessed 15/07/16

Posthuman theory proposes an alternative. Highlighting the ways in which technology is becoming ever-increasingly entangled, incorporated and/or melded with the flesh to unprecedented degrees of intrusiveness, posthuman discourse relates a historically specific conception of human subjectivity. It is a means with which to explore ways of engaging with the human and humanity in the context of the present condition. It represents a conceptual shift in paradigm resultant of the rise of technological developments, bringing with it a shift in ways of conceiving of bodies and the world in which they function. The posthuman proposes a re-invention or queer figuration of the human, which offers the promise of something alternative to and more inclusive than existing notions of the human. As was the case with afrofuturism, none of the invited academics or artists at Arika's episodes spoke from a posthuman theoretical viewpoint, but questions similar to those posited above surfaced again and again in conversations at episode seven. In particular, the notion of 'being or having no-body' as a consequence of one's exclusion from Western conceptions of what it is to be human, has helped me to think through some of the more philosophical, existential issues related to queer black subjectivity, which are addressed in my final chapter.

Though generalised spectatorial responses are occasionally suggested in this thesis, I write for the most part from and of my own spectatorship. In each case study chapter, I offer my own experiential account of the performance analysed. These accounts do not (attempt to) reproduce the performance event itself. Indeed, this would be an exercise in futility. As an art form that exists first and foremost in the present moment, that, in Phelan's words, "becomes itself through disappearance"[85], performance has an ephemeral ontology which resists documentation. For Phelan, writing about the live, temporal act of performance presents a paradox because, in order to testify "to the power of the undocumentable and nonreproductive", one must "engage the document of the written reproducible text"[86]. By submitting live performance to the written word, its ephemerality is paradoxically rendered permanent. Moreover, performance can never be faithfully preserved, recorded, or documented in writing, for the act of writing itself is not inconsequential: "the labour to write

[85] Phelan (1993), 146
[86] Ibid., 31

about performance (and thus to 'preserve' it) is also a labour that fundamentally alters the event"[87]. To describe a performance event is thus to recreate or restage it, such that it becomes a representation (of a representation) but never a verbatim transcription.[88] What I try to reproduce for the reader then is *my experience of* the performance event to provide the set up for my subjective reading. An element of me as experiencer is therefore embedded in these accounts, since each one emerges out of my memories of my sensorial perceptions of the event in question. And indeed, since writing is not a neutral, inactive process, my authorial presence is also apparent in these accounts.

Having explained earlier that Jones' text, *Body Art*, explodes the myths of disinterested spectatorship, I want to invoke that point now and be clear in acknowledging that I understand spectatorial readings to always be invested in some way. According to Jones, though art historians/critics try to legitimate their readings by suppressing their investments, they will always fail in this endeavour; one can never occupy a position of absolute neutrality. The values and meanings (as in, what one understands of one's encounter with the work) that one assigns to artistic practices are not inherently there, rather, they are teased out via an interpretive process, which will inevitably be informed by one's cultural, social, and political positionings. The moment an artwork enters into the spectatorial realm its creator loses control over its affect. The affect produced during one's encounter with a live performance can differ from one person to the next depending upon their culturally situated position, their personal preferences and histories, their discursive framings, and the nexus of social conditions that they are subject to. For instance, I acknowledge that my positioning, as speaking from a white, cisgender, feminist, middle-class, academic place of experience, has an impact on how I view things.[89] It is likely

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[87] Ibid., 148

[88] Johnson articulates something similar when he writes: "Performance is, like memory, unable to preserve itself across slices of time. Durations enact changes that blur or reconfigure the present-present, also augmenting the remembrance of lost past-presents. Thoughts on performance, including memories of the event, fail to represent a present in the past, a time that spoken language also fails to offer us." Johnson (2005), 15. Heathfield's introduction to the anthology *Shattered Anatomies* also grapples with the paradox of taking the liveness out of live performance by submitting it to the written word. See *Shattered Anatomies: Traces of the Body in Performance*, ed. Adrian Heathfield with Fiona Templeton and Andrew Quick (Bristol: Arnolfini Live, 1997).

[89] My feminist approach engages with queer theory and is heavily influenced by postmodern and poststructuralist thinking in its interrogation of existing categories and systems and exposure of them as constructions. Though I do explore different forms of feminist politics

then that, for other spectators, the works discussed within this thesis make affects in ways other than in the analyses offered here. To be clear: my views are present in the theoretical perspectives employed, in the particular performances and debates that I engage with, as well as in my critical stance in relation to these points. Perhaps some of the connections that I draw are not detectable in the work for others, however, it is hoped that this thesis will produce new and different perspectives, which will, in turn, stimulate further engagement and negotiation. I am not trying to offer a definitive reading of each work analysed, nor to make claims for the intentions of each respective artist. Instead, my analyses emerge out of the interactive and subjective moment/space between live performance and myself as spectator.

Sometimes my analyses are deliberately unresolved. For example, in Chapter Two on Mouse I examine a range of different and conflicting ways of engaging with the work, employing a dialectical approach which makes a virtue of its ambivalent political character. Whilst this approach highlights the provocative tensions within the performance itself, it is also a productive way to work through and around my own ambivalence, torn as I am between the different political potentialities that emerge out of the work's affect. Ambivalence is likewise a characteristic of boychild's work. Actively blocking clear decipherment, the incessant instability of her complex, layered, and contradictory performances calls for continual re-negotiation. Accordingly, certain aspects of my analysis of this work are deliberately open-ended. This is especially so in Chapter Five, as I present a nuanced examination of the contradictory tone of boychild's work, her flickering back and forth between dispositions of defiance and defeat. Whilst Chapter Four stakes a claim for the *progressive potentiality* of boychild's posthuman embodiment, Chapter Five complicates this perspective by reflecting on the work's intermittently pessimistic tone.

Asserted through the case study examples out of which my formulations arise, my methodology is to draw from theorists across disciplines to proffer a critical

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and how they relate to the practice discussed in this thesis (especially so in Chapter Two), the feminist position that I ultimately speak from is my own, hence I am writing about or from my own feminist spectatorship. I am not attempting to speak from the point of view of the examined artists and assuming that I know all about their feminisms.

transgressive or queer politics of the body. I draw from existing scholarship on abjection, carnival/grotesque, (trans)gender studies, feminist psychoanalysis, the posthuman, race theory, afrofuturism. I choose this trans-disciplinary approach because I believe that the performance works analysed intersect with multiple discourses. Working through a combination of discourses rather than pursuing connections with just one over-arching theory allows me to illuminate and expound upon these points of crossover. I conduct detailed literature reviews of the specific works used from within the above listed fields within the context of proceeding chapters. I also summarise what these theories enable me to do in the chapter abstracts below. Rather than repeat that work here, I want to make a broad statement which applies to each and every one of the theories scrutinised in proceeding pages. I have elected to work with and through these theories because they all have in common a radical aim: they suggest ways of challenging systems. This drive to disrupt is of crucial importance to my research precisely because this thesis is designed to explore how transgressive forms of embodiment in performance attempt to affect body politics progressively. Whilst analysing performance through academic theory has helped me to make sense of my experience of each work, this method of reading and critically engaging with theory through concrete examples has also helped me to understand dense and complex ideas, some of which are couched in particularly abstract terms.

Whilst each of the case study artists of proceeding chapters poses a challenge to bodily (hetero)normativity, each works in a different style or form to the next, using different aesthetics and appropriating from a range of 'low' or popular (sub)cultures. During the course of my study, I have identified a trend in contemporary performance art: a doubled route of appropriating from non-artistic subcultures and weaving these remnants into a more established artistic practice. Thus, the performances focused on in this thesis are marked both in terms of gender (and other constructions of the body) and in terms of the cultural prestige of their mode. To circle back once again to the literature reviewed in the event-texts subsection of this chapter, I want to locate a further point of crossover between Halberstam's work and my own in terms of approach. *Gaga Feminism* employs the methodology of 'low theory' delineated by Halberstam in his previous book, *The Queer Art of Failure*. Low theory represents a departure from those conventions of scholarly research and writing

which, in the service of 'intellectual rigor', dismiss and thereby devalue non-academic modes of thinking and theorising. I endorse Halberstam's strategy of entwining "high and low culture, high and low theory, popular culture and esoteric knowledge"[90] and employ a similar methodology in this thesis.

Whilst Halberstam frames low theory as "chaotic", ruminating on the merits of losing one's way and writing in support of results yielded through "intuition and blind fumbling"[91], my methodological approach is more deliberate and considered than Halberstam's words suggest. The connections drawn between popular or subcultural forms and critical theory in this thesis are led by references which I identify in the performances themselves. Whilst this involves intuitiveness in the first instance, in the sense of my being receptive to and able to recognise such references during the live moment of performance and in terms of my desire to understand the significance of these reference points within each work, post-performance I always employed the same somewhat 'traditional' research method of "searching for an intersection of relevant ideas"[92]. That images, sounds, and modes of performance appropriated from 'low' culture were identifiable in each work, necessitated their close analysis; I felt compelled to research these forms in detail. In part, the value of my work in this thesis lies in my forging of connections between 'high' and 'low' to formulate robust analyses.

Extant literature used in Chapter Two is drawn from the academic fields of anthropology, literary theory and (post)feminist studies. Meanwhile, the connection between the artist in question and the subcultural scene she participates in forms an integral part of the discussion. Mouse has worked in the sex industry for a number of years, performing internationally on straight, fetish and gay circuits. She also has a regular performance slot at cabaret nightclub, The Box, in London's Soho, a venue with a reputation for debauched burlesque and fetish acts. That Mouse performs in nightclubs as well as in arts settings is crucial to my argument in Chapter Two in terms of how her work produces affects differently across different spaces.

[90] Halberstam (2012a), 2
[91] Halberstam (2012a), 2, 6
[92] Parker-Starbuck and Mock (2011), 219

Led by references in the works, in Chapters Three, Four and Five I use one or more established academic theory in conjunction with literature on a non-artistic subculture to develop a framework through which to stake my claims for the political value of the works analysed. In Chapter Three I draw the history of the strongman and writing on the subcultural form of bodybuilding together with psychoanalytic theory on subject formation. Drawing parallels between these subcultural performance-aesthetics and psychoanalytic theorisations on embodiment, I construct an argument which attests to the political power of the performance analysed in terms of its presentation of an alternative mode of embodiment and its queer disruption of normative sex and gender appellations, identifications and performances. Like Preciado, the case study artist of Chapter Three exposes the biopolitical fictitiousness of male and female embodiment via a material process of molecular transformation. Where their strategies of self-construction differ, however, is in their choice of technology. Whereas Preciado's disruptive process of (un)becoming is affected via chemical alteration, Cassils transforms the gendered body via a physical training regime: bodybuilding. Cassils can be said to engage with the pharmacopornographic in that her/his muscular morphology corresponds with cultural representations of masculinity, and yet s/he queers this pharmacopornographic hegemony. Self-identifying as non-binary trans, Cassils presents a counterhegemonic embodiment (or perhaps more aptly, a counterhegemonic enfleshing) of masculinity, one that (in line with Halberstam's call for an alternative masculinity) undoes idealised male masculinity via a technique of queer resignification allied to a strategy of *bodily* queering. Rather than seek to transform her/his body verbatim into popular culture's idealised male body, Cassils' project complicates the very idea of this ideal.

The performances by boychild discussed in the final chapters of this thesis mobilise an eclectic mix of popular culture and subcultural references – a consequence perhaps of her being a self-proclaimed 'post-internet' artist, an inhabitant of a world in which a plethora of references are immediately available via online channels.[93] Thus, my entwining of 'high' theories and 'low'

[93] boychild proclaims "I exist in a world that comes after the internet" in an interview with Hili Pearson, 'Truth in Gender: Wu Tsang and boychild on the Question of Queerness', *Live Art Almanac Volume 4*, ed. Harriet Curtis, Lois Keidan and Aaron Wright (London: Live Art Development Agency and Oberon Books, 2016), 268-272 (268)

cultures becomes especially complex in Chapters Four and Five, as I deliberate over science-fiction, pop music, the stagecraft and history of ventriloquism, and the art of lipsynching – a performance practice that has been popularised as a queer art form by drag acts. Analysing boychild's use of sci-fi aesthetics in tandem with posthuman theory, I argue for her hybridised cyborgian body in performance as one which poses a radical challenge to heteronormative body politics. Turning my attention to ventriloquism and lip-synching, as forms emblematic of a multiplicity of voice and identity and concerned with a postmodern division or fragmentation of the subject, these modes of performance link with the instability and plurality of meaning within the posthuman. Examining ventriloquism and lip-synching through philosophical and psychoanalytic frames, I unravel the complex politics of presence and power that are integral to the disembodied, re-embodied voice. I then use these ideas to theorise the political implications of boychild's ventriloquial voice.[94]

Taking existing critical theories from a range of academic disciplines and combining them with literature on 'low' cultures, I scrutinise these ideas in relation to performance examples to show that the amalgamation reveals unique and useful insight. This thesis therefore makes contributions to knowledge primarily within the fields of body art and performance studies, but also within (trans)gender and (trans)feminist studies, queer theory, critical race theory and cultural studies. Moreover, as an unconventional form of knowledge production which does not conform to disciplinary correctness or academic purity, my approach reflects the spirit of non-conformity which characterises and threads through each of the works discussed.

In proceeding pages, I undertake the first detailed academic study of the performance practice of three under-researched artists. To date, I have been unable to find any studies on Mouse's practice. Attending to this gap, my analyses extend visibility and legibility to a practice which has not, as yet, received due attention. Whilst I have been working on this project, momentum has built around Cassils and her/his practice. Though a small number of articles

[94] The level of detail required to unpack these intricacies explains, in part, why my analyses of boychild's practice span across two chapters. The other, and more significant reason, is that boychild's work speaks to body politics which are under-discussed in preceding chapters, namely, the politics of blackness, race, and disembodiment.

have now been published on Cassils, this development in terms of (critical) interest in her/his work has been modest in comparison to that of major artists. Moreover, my work developed independently of this reception. To my knowledge Cassils' performances have not been analysed via a psychoanalytic critical perspective, nor has the subcultural form of bodybuilding been scrutinised in conjunction with her/his practice in any great detail. Halberstam wrote a short essay on boychild for an exhibition catalogue[95] and he has mentioned her during his lectures on 'wildness', but beyond that I have found no further critical engagement with boychild's practice within the academy.

The Case Studies

Chapter Two: The Revolting Body

Bodies, their boundaries, and their functions are governed by socially dictated systems. Bodies must adhere to a set of socially (re-)enforced rules as to what constitutes acceptable and appropriate behaviour. Rules of propriety dictate, for example, which functions and sites of the body can permissibly be laid bare and which are to be kept private, hidden from view. Mary Douglas' work on social customs, and ideas of pollution and taboo arrived at by social consensus, shows that the primary concern of such a symbolic system is to maintain social hierarchy and order. Though largely concerned with maintaining social order, Douglas' analyses acknowledge that an unruly body, a body of questionable integrity, symbolises a dangerous threat which is powerful in its disruptive potentiality.

To revolt is to induce an affective response, to disgust, to nauseate. To revolt is also to take action against an established system. Foregrounding revolt in both senses of the word, Chapter Two asks how a revolting body, one which transgresses the boundaries of social propriety, might be strategically deployed to affect revolt against systematic social order.

[95] Jack Halberstam, 'Angry Women: boychild in the Wilderness', *Stand Close, It's Shorter Than You Think: A show on feminist rage*, ed. Katherine Brewer Ball and David Frantz (ONE Archives at the USC Libraries, 2015), exh cat, 24-29

Another critical framework which revolves around a body politics of revolt is Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque. Two subtexts run throughout Bakhtin's theory: 'carnival', a subversion of and liberation from the dominant ruling system through humour and chaos, and 'grotesque realism', the essential principle of which is degradation, the lowering of all that is spiritual, noble and ideal to the material level. Employing Douglas' theorisations on abjection, pollution, and taboo, as well as Bakhtin's writing on carnivalesque grotesquerie, I explore the political potentiality of these concepts as symbolic strategies of subversion, through the oeuvre of self-titled 'orificial' performer, Mouse.

Mouse makes performances which are, by her own admission, both "ridiculous" and "vile". Via a comedic, grotesque register, her works riff on striptease acts and sex show stunts. To raise an example: inserting a funnel into her vagina and contracting her pelvic floor muscles, Mouse siphons water into her body, which she then expels into the air and across the floor of the performance space, spattering her audience in the process. Another of her tricks is to insert sparklers into her rectum before setting them alight with a lighter produced from inside of her vagina. Wearing a wildly unkempt wig and gaudy drag-queen make-up, Mouse performs with excessive exuberance, punctuating each action by following it up with a prolonged mischievous grin at her audience; she revels in her abject body. Her ridiculousness excites laughter, whilst her vileness incites recoil.

With this case study chapter, I consider the question of how Mouse's revolting carnivalesque body can be read as a body in revolt. Addressing this question entails an interrogation of the productive tensions within and between feminisms, a dissection of the tropes traditionally assigned to the body gendered female, as well as an exploration and contestation of existing cultural representations of the female body. Investigating these identities and representations, I assess them for both their positive and negative aspects, using Mouse as a case in point.

Chapter Three: The TRANSformative Body

Socially and culturally determined systems govern gender appearances, behaviours and practices, delimiting what counts as a viably sexed and gendered

body. Judith Butler argues that these 'naturalised' reiterations of identity are constrained in relation to subversive, queered copies of identity. Building on Butler's ideas, Chapter Three argues for a queer disruption of normative sex and gender identifications and performances through an analysis of Cassils' performance work.

Cassils uses her/his body in performance as a tool with which to render form, a medium that can be sculpturally manipulated and an object for visual consumption. For the endurance performance *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011), Cassils built up her/his muscle mass to maximum capacity by honouring a strict bodybuilding regime and adhering to a sports competitor's diet. In 23 weeks s/he gained 23 pounds of muscle. Cassils set out to transform the sexed body through exercise and diet, without the use of hormone treatment or surgical procedures. Cassils' performance of trans explores how a physical sculpting of the body can affect a queer challenge to established gender morphologies. Prompting a renegotiation of terms and ways of thinking that have acquired the aura of 'fact', Cassils implores us to question the 'reality' of sex and gender categories. In doing so, that which is invoked as 'natural' is shown to be revisable.

Exploring how sexual difference and gender are expressed through the material form of bodies, this chapter focuses initially on the physical sculpting of bodily materiality, asking: how and to what extent can the materiality of the body be manipulated to affect a transformation of sex and gender? I then shift focus toward a psychoanalytical structure of bodily formation using Jacques Lacan's writing on 'The Mirror Stage'. I employ a psychoanalytic approach not only for its thematic relevance in theorising the formation of a bodily self or self-image, but also because the binary structure of sexual difference imposed by Lacan reflects the socially embedded heterosexual hegemony, a rigid schema that has become universalised in Western culture. To date there has not been an academic study published which addresses these particular aspects of Cassils' practice in detail using this critical perspective. Through a psychoanalytically informed reading of Cassils' performances I argue that s/he contests the binaries of sex and gender at the level of bodily materiality and form. Continuing with a deconstructive approach to psychoanalytic frameworks, the final part of the

chapter argues for the destabilisation of sex and gender binaries through transference and resignification of the phallus. This chapter uses Cassils' work as a case study with which to demonstrate the instability of those heteronormative power structures which dictate how the sexed and gendered body should look and behave.

Chapter Four: The Posthuman Body

In the present epoch, boundaries between the human and non-human are becoming blurred by the effects of continually developing scientific and technological advances. Alongside these transformations, the need to devise new alternative schemes of thought regarding subject formation and representation is emerging. Whilst projective speculation on subjective and corporeal evolution is part of the discussion on Cassils, this subject matter takes centre stage in Chapters Four and Five on queer, black, trans artist, boychild.

Employing a science-fiction inspired aesthetic, boychild presents audiences with a vision of the future of human embodiment. Stark partial and/or strobe lighting effects make her body appear either fragmented or as if it were a hologram. She holds an electronic light in her mouth that flickers out from behind her teeth. Her black body is smothered in white paint. Her head is shaved, her eyes obscured by whited-out contact lenses. boychild's is a body interfaced with and transmogrified by technology. Such sci-fi aesthetics make her appear as if she were non-human, either alien or cyborgian. Moreover, whilst boychild considers her onstage persona to be female, her body reads as ambiguous. The queer form of embodiment she presents transgresses the lines of demarcation between the supposedly polarised categories of organic/machine, male/female. The queer form of embodiment she presents is both posthuman and post-gender.

boychild's ambiguous embodiment poses critically provocative questions about gender, queerness, and blackness, and about one's viability as human in view of one's status with regard to these identity differentials. Rosi Braidotti's writing on the posthuman exposes the human subject of traditional humanist discourse as a model which forges an exclusionary dialectic of self and other. The humanist subject is white European, heterosexual, able-bodied and male, and this subject is the idealised norm against which all others are differentiated and

constituted. Chapter Four uses boychild as an example with which to demonstrate how those positioned as 'other' have been excluded from traditional discourses of the human, how they have been historically subjugated, reduced to less-than-human status.

The posthuman figuration that boychild images forth in her performances closely resembles the vivid descriptions of the cyborg that Donna J. Haraway offers in her manifesto. Haraway's cyborg manifesto provides a metaphorical model for the destabilisation of existing binary thought and the forging of new political affinities. Reviewing Haraway's cyborg politics and re-reading them through boychild's practice, I argue that boychild's engagement with the posthuman in her performances does not end with aesthetics, rather it extends to the plotting of a posthuman politics. Implementing the theoretical principles of both Braidotti's anti-humanist concept of the posthuman and Haraway's cyborg politics, I read boychild's posthuman body in performance as one which poses a radical challenge to heteronormative body politics.

Chapter Five: Embodiment/Disembodiment/Re-embodiment: The Politics and Poetics of Being/Having No-Body

Those who are othered by the hegemonic system, excluded from post-enlightenment formulations of the human and thereby reduced to less-than-human status, are left feeling dejected, as if they no longer or never even existed. If one's body is not recognised as a body by those who have the power to delineate or designate what counts as a body, then one's ontology, one's very subjectivity is called into question and rendered ambiguous. The sense of existential ambiguity experienced by excluded others is added to with a feeling of voicelessness, a feeling that, when one sounds in social spaces, nothing is heard. This chapter broaches philosophical questions related to othered bodies about the existential crisis of feeling metaphorically disembodied, the feeling of being/having no-body and of having no voice.

Using the same case study artist as in Chapter Four, Chapter Five continues to theorise the posthuman but it does so in relation to specific formal aspects of boychild's work, most markedly, her technologised 'voice' and her technologised body. boychild's performances consist of her lip-synching to a recorded backing

track comprised of pop song remixes with heavily distorted vocal samples. Rather than communicate with her own voice, she re-embodies disembodied voices that have been recorded, modified and mediated through various audio technologies. Moreover, with the use of strategic stage-lighting, her body appears either partial or as if it were a projection or hologram; it is, in other words, rendered ontologically ambiguous.

This chapter argues that boychild's style of performance is a form of ventriloquism, as she 'speaks' with the voice of another or the voice of another speaks through her. In order to analyse boychild's lip-synch performances and indicate the broader political implications of her ventriloquial voice, I use philosophic psychoanalytical theory by Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek in conjunction with Steven Connor's literature on the history of ventriloquism to unpick the intricacies of (bodily) presence and power inherent to the (disembodied, re-embodied) voice.

boychild's works are haunted by the spectres of race-related oppressions; she includes latent references to slavery in her vocal samples and also in the visual language of her performances. These allusions to racial power dynamics and the historical context of an alienating dehumanisation of black bodies necessitate thorough analysis. As such, the second half of Chapter Five engages in detail with those politics of the body which pertain to race. With reference to key critical theories of race, such as Frantz Fanon's important work, *Black Skin, White Masks,* I trace a lineage of critique regarding the idea of fixing the black subject in and with accordance to their own skin. This exposure of the complexities underlying notions of blackness lays the groundwork for the proposed afrofuturist re-imagining of blackness examined in the final stages of the chapter. Afrofuturism denotes both an aesthetic and a form of critical race theory which simultaneously imagines the future and re-examines the past through a lens of African diaspora. I use this framework to theorise boychild's queer black posthuman embodiment and to make suggestions as to what her work implies about the future of gendered and racial subjectivity.

Chapter Two: The Revolting Body

A performer stands atop a podium, dimly lit with a sombre red haze. Taking its cue from a droning buzz in the soundtrack, the auratic glow enveloping the podium swells up and a garish white spotlight illuminates her. With wild, crimped blonde hair and gaudy, over made-up features, Mouse is revealed in all her crude and tawdry vulgarity. She slowly unzips her dress and slinks out of it, leaving her nude, except for her high heels. From the props beside her podium Mouse selects a butter dish. Punching into a block of butter and rotating her wrist, she coats her clenched fist in the unctuous grease. Turning her back on her audience and kneeling on her podium, Mouse inserts her fist into her rectum. She then performs an acrobatic contortion such that she is balancing on her anally inserted fist, her legs extending skyward. Disentangling herself from this position, she returns to standing, withdraws her fist and gluttonously licks it clean from the buttery residue, sucking each finger one by one. Assuming a bent over posture not unlike a 1950s pin-up girl, a stream of buttery saliva trickles from her lips to the stage. Mouse then concludes her opening party trick with a prolonged mischievous grin at her audience.

For her next act, Mouse positions a clear plastic chair on top of her podium. Selecting a cigarette box and lighter from the prop paraphernalia, she seats herself and lights up three elegantly long cigarettes. With excessive exuberance she takes long drags on all three cigarettes at once. Then, splaying her thighs, she plucks one cigarette from her mouth and places it to her vulva. Through contracting and protracting her abdominal and pelvic floor muscles, Mouse ‘inhales’ and ‘exhales’ not with her lungs but with another part of her anatomy, ‘smoking’ vaginally. Alternating each cigarette between one set of lips and another, Mouse uses two of her orifices interchangeably. Once content with her nicotine fix, she stamps out the butts and sets aside her chair before flashing a sneerful smirk at her audience.

For her finale, Mouse becomes a human fountain. Lying supine, tilting her hips to the ceiling and inserting a funnel into her vagina, she siphons a milky liquid into her body. Using her pelvic floor muscles, the liquid is sucked into her body

before being released and expelled into the air and across the floor of the performance space. This action is also performed anally.

Skidding on her milk-spattered podium, Mouse awkwardly clambers back into her dress. The bright spotlight that illuminates her fades out and she is once again plunged into a murky blood-red haze. She stands there clutching the hemline of her dress just above her pubic area, exposing her genitals. Through the obscurity a spectral grin can be seen creeping across Mouse's red lipsticked mouth. Her lips draw apart and her teeth glint eerily in the darkness.

Describing herself as an 'orificial' performer, Mouse's performances consist of her inserting "foodstuffs, fists and firecrackers into her vagina and rectum" and spattering her audiences with foamy water or milky fluid expelled from her orifices.[1] She has worked in the sex industry for a number of years, performing internationally on straight, fetish and gay circuits, as well as in the arts. She has performed in art installations for Matthew Barney, Ron Athey, Marisa Carnesky and Lauren Jane Williams and collaborated with performer/photographer Manuel Vason for images printed in his book, *Double Exposures*.[2] Mouse is also a sex columnist, a dominatrix, and a life model.

Her messy, pantomime style is humorous and revolting rather than erotic and her performances are often embellished with kitsch aesthetics and involve her adoption of eccentric personae. Take, for example, Mouse's appearance on *The O Show*. *The O Show*, hosted by artist and self-taught therapist Oriana Fox, is a performative take on the daytime chat show format featuring interviews with artists and performers, how-to advice and makeovers.[3] In this particular episode of Oriana Fox's chat show, Mouse was dressed as the fetishised incarnate of a

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[1] Dominic Johnson, 'Intimacy and Risk in Live Art', *Histories of Live Art*, ed. Deirdre Heddon and Jennie Klein (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 122-148 (146)

[2] Manuel Vason, *Double Exposures: Performance as Photography, Photography as Performance*, ed. David Evans (London: Live Art Development Agency; Bristol: Intellect, 2015)

[3] Oriana Fox is an artist working primarily with performance and video to critique the depiction of women in both contemporary media and the work of feminist artists from the late 1960s to today. See <www.orianafox.com> accessed 02/03/16. I state here that *The O Show* is a 'performative take' on the daytime chat show. Of course all chat shows are 'performative' to varying degrees but what I mean here is that the artist takes the chat show format and uses it as the basis for a performance piece. *The O Show* is performed in front of a live audience and it is primarily a live performance work. For documentation purposes, *The O Show* performance referred to above was filmed. The footage can be viewed on the artist's website.

sugary Goldilocks character, appearing like an overgrown woman-child.[4] Whilst Mouse's attire for the performance described at the opening of this chapter was not so costume-like, her unkempt hairstyle and exaggerated drag-queen make-up retained that caricatured pantomime style which is so intrinsic to her work.[5]

My account of Mouse's performance is of her live show at Chelsea Theatre, London in October 2012, wherein Mouse appeared as a guest performer in Dominic Johnson's live tattooing piece *Departure (An Experiment in Human Salvage)* alongside tattoo artist Alex Binney and live performers jamie lewis hadley and Hellen Burrough (Traumata).[6] As the performance unfolded, I engaged with the affectively charged images that Mouse was presenting in a primarily visceral way, meanwhile revelling in the debauchery of it all. I enjoyed the meretriciousness of the performance in much the same way as I enjoy the bawdy glorification of the abject in a John Waters film.[7] Moreover, as an academic researching a PhD project revolving around body politics, my engagement with the work, both during but more markedly post-performance, was inevitably tinged by my familiarity with and prior knowledge of literature on the politics of abjection, the carnivalesque and (post)feminism. I identified points of crossover and tension between those discourses and the questions staged with/in and across Mouse's body.

Bearing in mind that Mouse performs in nightclubs as well as in arts settings, the political intentionality of her performances is open to debate; perhaps she is driven by the impetus to entertain more than the impetus to critique. And yet

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[4] The full episode can be viewed online in three parts: <http://vimeo.com/39885118>, <http://vimeo.com/39893524>, <http://vimeo.com/39922042> accessed 02/03/16

[5] The artist's statement section of Mouse's website cites pantomime, "twisted Disney", and the "classic English smut" of Carry On films as influential to her work. <http://www.carryonmouse.com> accessed 02/03/16

[6] Mouse's actions are discussed here in isolation to the remainder of the performance because the tensions specific to her part in the piece bear strong thematic relevance to my thesis on body-based performance, which engages with feminist and gender-critical body politics.

[7] For example, in order to reinstate her tabloid-given title as the 'Filthiest Person Alive' (a title in which she takes great pride), protagonist Babs Johnson (played by infamous drag queen, Divine) eats dog faeces at the end of John Waters' film, *Pink Flamingos*. The excrement eaten was purportedly real. Upon the film's release in 1972, selected movie theatres issued patrons with 'Pink Phlegm-ingo Barf Bags'. Tongue firmly in cheek, this playful gesture pokes fun at both the film's disgusting content and the extent to which audiences partaking of it might react. Though Divine's action is viscerally nauseating, her comedic performance rouses amusement by dint of its excessive ridiculousness. My experience of Mouse's work was such that it roused a similarly affective reaction, a perverse mixture of disgust and laughter.

for me, her work had thrown up contentious issues and posed provocative questions. Rather than arguing necessarily for political *intentionality* in Mouse's work, I want to argue for political *potentiality*. To invoke again Amelia Jones' useful point, cited also in Chapter One, oftentimes there is nothing inherently critical or reactionary in performance but, in its opening up of the interpretive relation, it provides the possibility for radical engagements.[8] Whether or not Mouse performs with the intention of staging a political argument, the potential for radical engagement is there. Perhaps other audience members were similarly theoretically aware and thus identifying references close to mine. Though I cannot speak for my fellow audience members, I can speak for myself: my engagement with Mouse's work was certainly politically invested. That said, I do not feel that I was making projections *onto* the work as a result of my own interests and academic agenda (though, of course, this is inevitable to an extent given the interpretive nature of performance engagement), rather, what testifies to the presence of these debates *in and around* the work itself is context.

Figure 1 - Dominic Johnson, *Departure: An Experiment in Human Salvage* (2012). With Alex Binnie, Mouse, jamie lewis hadley, Hellen Burrough. Chelsea Theatre, London. Photo: Magnus Arrevad.

That the performance by Mouse which I experienced had been re-appropriated by Johnson, a body-politics-savvy and queer academic/artist, and re-

[8] Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield in conversation for an event titled 'The Fate of Performance' as part of *Activations*, a series of presentations and debates at Tate Modern, 02/10/04 <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/amelia-jones-adrian-heathfield-fate-performance> accessed 03/03/16. See also Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 14

contextualised from a subcultural club setting into a (in relative terms) 'high-art' theatre environment, suggests to me that my identification of a political dimension to the work was not unfounded. As both an academic and a performance practitioner, Johnson is well versed in terms of theoretical discourses and also keenly aware of the visual language of performance in the sense of its capacity to enable political tensions to emerge through the juxtaposition of loaded performative actions.

Subsequent to the 2012 performance at Chelsea Theatre, I experienced two further performances by Mouse in 2014: one at Spill festival, Ipswich, and another at the Glasgow School of Art's student union as part of the city's annual queer arts festival, Glasgay! In both of these instances, Mouse was programmed as a late-night club act at each respective festival's closing party. Performing as a club act at an arts festival, Mouse simultaneously straddled the two performative modes or platforms in/on which she usually stages her work. Though her performances were staged at after-parties, the most informal time/place within an arts festival programme, given the fundamental drive or ethos of each festival, inclusion of Mouse's practice suggests that curators had identified a cultural politics within her work. Part of Glasgay!'s 'mission' is to promote, present and produce social, cultural and educational activities. Dedicated to LGBTQI inclusivity, Glasgay! draws together "radical, counter-cultural voices" and aims "to embody practice that engages and encourages reflection" on social issues affecting queer communities.[9] Meanwhile, Spill is an international festival of live performance dedicated to giving a platform to "radical", "agitating" and "uncompromising" "experimental arts practice"[10]. Significantly, many of Spill 2014's live performances, including Mouse's, took place in a derelict building which was almost completely unchanged from its previous use as a police station. With law, (il)legality, and its attendant power regimes as backdrop, "a strong spirit of defiance" ran through Spill 2014, as it set about its aim to "demand resistance". As Artistic Director and Curator, Robert Pacitti declares, "from the transformative brilliance of Ron Athey to the sheer guts of Mouse, [Spill's 2014] festival amplifies its contempt for our

[9] <http://outspokenarts.org/artistic-policy/> accessed 09/03/16. Since 01/09/15 Glasgay! has renamed itself Outspoken Arts Scotland.
[10] <http://spillfestival.com> accessed 02/03/16

increasingly homogenised world."[11] Both of these arts festivals lay emphasis on difference, as well as challenges to (hetero)normative, homogenising, hegemonic categories and systems. With this case study chapter, I consider the question of how Mouse's revolting body can be read as a 'defiant', 'resistant' body in revolt.

Whilst Mouse's performances revolve around the abject – orifices, bodily matter, fluids and functions taking centre stage – she retains a tongue-in-cheek, parodic tone. What I find particularly striking and intriguing about Mouse's work is her tendency toward the comedic, her marrying of the abject and the humorous. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's theorisation on the carnivalesque, which channels this tension between abjection and laughter, I argue that Mouse's grotesquerie might be read as strategic, and consider the ends to which this practice is deployed. Foremost in my analysis is the necessity to determine the meaning and political implications of both 'abjection' and the 'carnivalesque grotesque', and to clarify the relation between these concepts and the social order, so as to establish a theoretical framework. I will then highlight the ways in which this framework is evident within Mouse's performance practice, identifying the abject materials and processes as well as the grotesquerie within her work and laying the foundation for understanding audience responses to them.

The abject is that which transgresses boundaries and disturbs order, inducing cognitive discomfort as a result. Positioning abjection within a social context, Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* presents an analysis of the ways in which ideas of pollution, taboo and uncleanness reverberate throughout different sectors of society. Douglas begins her introduction with the assertion that "dirt is essentially disorder"[12]. Any attempt at eliminating dirt should be regarded not as a negative movement, but as a positive effort to reinstate a sense of order to the environment so as to make it conform to a preconceived idea, this idea being the socially enforced consensus as to what constitutes cleanliness.

For Douglas, "pollution ideas" operate as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order, whilst taboo operates as a device for protecting this

[11] <http://spillfestival.com/show/welcome-to-spill-festival-on-surrender/> accessed 02/03/16
[12] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966), 2

consensus, safeguarding its distinctive categories and thereby reducing social disorder. "Taboos depend on a form of community-wide complicity"[13] she argues; they must be upheld by the majority to have any clout. Non-adherence to the coding practice of taboo carries with it the threat of danger. Compliance is thus reinforced by the dread of repercussive penalties such as fear of contagion. A generalised view with regards to what constitutes pollutive threat, as well as a widespread support and defence of safeguarding taboos thus maintain a prevalent and dominant social order.[14]

In describing the boundaries and margins of socially inscribed pollution and taboo consensus, Douglas admits to having made society appear more systematic than it really is. Yet, she believes that an over-systematised method is necessary for an analysis of "pollution ideas" or "beliefs", since she maintains that these beliefs function to impose system upon a disordered experience. It is only by means of exaggerating the differences within these experiences that a semblance of order is created. In this sense, Douglas is aware of her over-systematised, over-rigid social structuring and the criticisms that this structure might provoke. Moreover, she is careful to make clear that pollution ideas will differ from one individual to the next: "there is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder."[15] Indeed, she continues to engage with and extend this concept throughout her text, as she explains the difference in notions of cleanness in various sectors of society. Douglas maintains that she does not wish to argue for the absolute rigidity of the cultures in which ideas of pollution and taboo flourish. In fact, she argues for quite the contrary, stating that ideas of purity/impurity are sensitive to change, that they are in a continual state of flux. "The same impulse to impose order which brings them into existence can be supposed to be continually modifying or enriching them."[16] Douglas thus attempts to cover all her bases, defending her theories against any accusations of over- or under-systematisation that they may be subjected to. She attempts to preserve the idea of a structured social system whilst

[13] Preface (2002) to ibid., xii

[14] Also noting social order, the following of Julia Kristeva's words read much like a recourse to the theories set out by Douglas: "It is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules." Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4

[15] Douglas (1966), 2

[16] Ibid., 5

accommodating an inherent flux.

Despite these attempts to defend against criticisms of over-systematisation, the social ordering outlined by Douglas is largely conservative in its aims to enforce limits by means of preserving existing rules and conditions. Indeed, Douglas herself acknowledges that "The idea of society is a powerful image. It is potent in its own right to control"[17], to define and continually enforce pollution ideas and taboos which are, by and large, collectively complied with. What I want to highlight then is that Douglas' analyses of conservative social ordering can be used to mobilise a subversive politics: if taboo protects the established order, then taboo-breaking infers a ready embrace of disorder. Whilst the disorder caused by abjection "is destructive to existing patterns", Douglas also recognises the potentiality in this unruliness: "It symbolises both danger and power… The danger which is risked by boundary transgression *is* power."[18] Douglas' work thus provides a framework for disruption. It registers the potential that abjection has to disturb systems and interrogate ideologies, showing how abjection can be used as a critical tool and employed for political means.

The foregrounding of abjection and the breaking of sexual and bodily taboos are rife in Mouse's performances. In addressing manifestations of the abject in Mouse's practice, what becomes discernible is that her abject performance is allied with laughter and humour. It seems reasonable, then, to formulate an analysis of her work using a conjunctive theoretical framework which acknowledges and encompasses this tension. Thus I propose a journey into the world of the carnivalesque.

Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* is a work of literary criticism, exploring François Rabelais' Renaissance novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.[19] Two subtexts run throughout Bakhtin's book: 'carnival', a subversion of and liberation from the dominant ruling system through humour and chaos, and 'grotesque realism',

[17] Ibid., 141
[18] Ibid., 117, 199. Added emphasis.
[19] With this text, Bakhtin's intentions are twofold. Firstly, by his own admission, he seeks to restore to Rabelais his place in history among the great writers of European history, acknowledging the pivotal role Rabelais plays in understanding the development of the folk culture of humour. Secondly, Bakhtin seeks to conduct an analysis of the Renaissance social system in order to discover the balance between permitted and forbidden language.

the essential principle of which is degradation, the lowering of all that is spiritual, noble and ideal to the material level. Degradation, Bakhtin explains, "digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one."[20] Which is to say, it is not simply obliterative but rather transformative. Indeed, Bakhtin's work on the carnivalesque grotesque repeatedly lays emphasis on revival, renewal and regenerative power as opposed to bare negation.

Bakhtin's model has endured as the preeminent influence in studies of the grotesque and cultural politics because, as Michael Holquist writes, "directed to scholars anywhere at any time", the "theoretical implications" of Bakhtin's *Rabelais* are "not limited by its origin in a particular time and place"[21]. Its continued relevance across time-frames comes down to the enduring applicability of its symbolism with regards to the body politic. As Mary Russo explains, Bakhtin uses the carnivalesque "to conceptualise social formations, social conflict, and the realm of the political. In the language of classical political theory, it is a virile category associated with the active, civic world of the public."[22] Rather than a complete break from the law, carnival is a permissible affair, a celebration of "*temporary* liberation… from the established order", marking only "the *suspension* of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions"[23]. Immediately after the disruptive moment, the boundaries waived during carnival are reinstated, all excesses are neutralised and normal practice resumes. As an affair licensed by the law, carnival can in fact have the effect of reaffirming the status quo. That said, whether or not there is any seepage into the culture in general, the difficulty of producing lasting social change from carnival cannot eradicate its usefulness as a symbolic model of transgression. It is still political. The carnivalesque grotesque body is about the revolting body in both senses of the word. It signifies a transgressive practice.

Whilst Bakhtin's text pertains to literature, it is applicable to the present work for its meditations on the body, its exposure of the constraints imposed by social

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[20] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 21

[21] Michael Holquist, Prologue to Bakhtin (1984), xv

[22] Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (New York; Routledge, 1995), 8

[23] Bakhtin (1984), 10. Emphasis added.

systems and suggestions of ways to overcome these, and for its crossovers with performativity in terms of the carnival form.

During carnival, usual social hierarchies and proprieties are upended, rendering all the symbols of carnival emblematic of change and renewal. Characteristic symbols of the carnival idiom include parodies and travesties, to which I shall return at a later stage in this chapter, humiliations and profanations, and inversion, whether it be a turning inside-out or a shifting from top to bottom or from front to rear.

Comic folk elements identified by Bakhtin as key to Rabelais' writing are equally present in Mouse's performance practice; elements such as popular laughter, clowning, parody, extreme grotesque exaggeration and the material bodily 'lower stratum', the encompassing term given to denote the belly, buttocks and genitalia. Let us first examine bodily materiality and the grotesque.

In Rabelais' writing the materiality of the body plays a prominent role. Emphasis is placed on the body in its open dimension and in its connection to its surroundings as well as the life of the community. That is to say, the body in grotesque realism has an "all-people's character". It is "not individualised", rather it belongs to "the collective ancestral body of all the people", acting as a universal symbol or representative of the social body at large.[24] In contrast to the smoothed-out, closed-off completeness and individuality characteristic of both classical and modern images of the body, the grotesque body emphasises its openness, its penetrable sites and its lower stratum. As Bakhtin phrases it: "Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits."[25] Emphasis is given to those parts of the body which are "open to the outside world"[26]: apertures, convexities, protruding sprouts, buds and offshoots. This characteristic of the grotesque is clearly discernible in Mouse's performing self, as her body is presented as permeable, seemingly volatile and unstable, its sites of focus orificial. Additionally, intermittently during the course of her performance, inorganic materials alien to the body,

[24] Ibid., 19
[25] Ibid., 26
[26] Ibid.

such as funnels and cigarettes, protrude from Mouse's orifices. As such, her performances include a penetration of the body by external entities as well as an excretion of once internalised matter from within. People squirm in response to this because they are confronted with a body that appears uncontainable, erratic and unruly; a body whose boundaries can be transgressed, a body that "does not respect borders, positions, rules" in the Kristevan sense of the abject.[27] This is not to say that the performer herself is not in full control of her body and what she is doing with it, but what I mean to draw emphasis to is the affect of uneasiness that is induced by Mouse's emphatic bodily permeability and the ease with which a traversal can be made from her bodily interior to exterior and vice versa.

Figure 2 - Mouse performing in Dominic Johnson's *Departure: An Experiment in Human Salvage* (2012). Chelsea Theatre, London. Photo: Magnus Arrevad.

This sense of unease is also symptomatic of the fact that we rarely see 'inside' bodies, even our own bodies and, moreover, that the orifices under discussion here are usually kept private. Civilisation of the body has entailed a policing process in which the range of acceptable and appropriate behaviour has become increasingly narrowed and defined. This process has included a gradual exclusion and privatisation of certain sites of the body, specifically those which are most closely related to the body's functioning. By making public parts of the body which are ordinarily kept private, Mouse breaks these socially enforced bodily taboos. If, as Douglas has shown, the body operates as a symbol of society across

[27] Kristeva, (1982), 4

cultures, and the boundaries concerning bodily behaviour can be understood as the functioning of social rules and hierarchies, then body parts or bodily refuse 'out of place' constitute a perversion of normative bodily regimes and it is this disruption of order that induces discomfort.

In a manner that recalls Douglas' and Kristeva's theses in which abjection displaces systematic order, Bakhtin writes:

> The grotesque ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon. The grotesque image displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs. The outward and inward features are often merged into one.[28]

At this point in Bakhtin's commentary on the grotesque, a step beyond the blurring of the interior/exterior bodily boundary is taken; limiting surfaces are no longer transgressed but obliterated altogether and now the body is turned completely inside out. A direct mapping of this notion of the body turned inside-out is not possible with regard to Mouse's performance but it is certainly possible to argue that 'outward and inner features are merged' in the instance of Mouse's fisting action, where an outward body part is merged with or enters into the interior of the body; her fist, wrist and lower forearm receding into her rectum.

Figure 3 - Mouse performing in Dominic Johnson's *Departure: An Experiment in Human Salvage* (2012). Chelsea Theatre, London. Photo: Magnus Arrevad.

[28] Bakhtin (1984), 318

Describing "the new bodily canon", Bakhtin explains the parameters within which bodies may permissibly be presented in twentieth-century literature:

> The new bodily canon… presents an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual. That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits and a new one begins) is eliminated, hidden, or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable façade. The opaque surface of the body's 'valleys' acquire an essential meaning as the border of a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world.[29]

Though referring to a modern literary image, the body presented here is not too distantly removed from the body image upheld by contemporary society today – a body that adheres to a set of socially (re)enforced rules as to what constitutes acceptable and appropriate bodily behaviour and is compliant with the general consensus as to what constitutes a healthy and clean body. Again, there is recourse here to Douglas' work on social customs which shows that the primary concern of such a symbolic system is to maintain social hierarchy and order.

In the 'new canon' described by Bakhtin, the body's more abject sites of function have been transferred to the private and psychological realms where 1) their connotations cease to be linked universally with society but instead pertain to the individual and 2) where they can no longer perform their former philosophical functions of upending social propriety. By contrast,

> In grotesque realism the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people… this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words… The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable.[30]

These ideas go some way in explaining why one would use abjection as a focal point; taking that which is ordinarily socially concealed and undiscussed, and

[29] Ibid., 320
[30] Ibid., 19

exposing and exploring it for its symbolic potential – this is what the abject facilitates. By rejecting the disciplined, self-contained body and presenting instead as a Bakhtinian excessive and open material embodiment, Mouse's body in performance highlights the rigidity of the social system and its stringent parameters. It disturbs because it transgresses the boundaries of social propriety; between private and public, inside and outside (of the body), self and other. This disturbance can be regarded as positive in that it represents a form of escapism from an ever-more homogenising system.

A further development of the 'unfinished' and 'open' grotesque body is that it is susceptible to becoming blended with the world and its objects, affecting a continuous amalgamation of the body with that which surrounds it. Bakhtin expresses this notion of an unfinished body transgressing its own limits through imagery which begins with the mouth, a feature which is for him the utmost of all human features for the grotesque.[31] He then refers to the mouth in its functioning capacity, as the site within which matter is ingurgitated and swallowed down into the body's digestive tract, journeying further downward into the "bodily underworld" of the bowels. Bakhtin pessimistically describes the action of swallowing as the "most ancient symbol of death and destruction."[32] Finally, this orificial imagery culminates in the assertion: "…the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world…"[33] Mouse can be seen to 'blend with the world' through her expelling fluids, the link between her body and her surroundings being continuous in the moment of this expulsion, the boundary between inside and out becoming blurred. Here the body swallows a part of the world, a milky fluid, if only to eject it back out again, returning it into the world from which it came. This traversal of bodily interior and exterior blurs the boundary between body and not body, world and not world. Hence the moment of Mouse expelling fluid can likewise be understood as the inverse, the body being swallowed by the world.

[31] Ibid., 317
[32] Ibid., 325
[33] Ibid., 317

Figure 4 - Mouse performing in Dominic Johnson's *Departure: An Experiment in Human Salvage* (2012). Chelsea Theatre, London. Photo: Magnus Arrevad.

Bakhtin's dark imagery pertaining to his description of swallowing as symbolic of death and destruction suggests an irksome sense of impending danger, a catastrophic moment in which the individual teeters on the cusp of annihilation. For me personally, I experienced no such feeling in response to Mouse's 'swallowing' and 'swallowed' body. Rather, as I experienced it, and so it seemed for those around me, it was more that a sense of disquiet had taken prominence in the performance space, as people flinched and squirmed in their seats and averted their gaze, murmurs of unease rippling through the audience. For some audience members, the laughter that escaped almost involuntarily from their bodies was audibly tinged with anxiety, as the uneasy product of perturbation; laughter that was perhaps the result of an uncertainty as to how to react. Here laughter acted as a defence mechanism. It functioned to restore order and serve as a means of regaining control, thus allowing those who felt disturbed or challenged to feel less powerless. As Kristeva states: "Laughter is a way of placing and displacing abjection."[34] By this rationale, laughter was utilised in response to Mouse's actions in a positive effort to reinstate a sense of order, the sense of order that was disturbed by abjection in the first place.[35]

[34] Kristeva (1982), 8

[35] From the slightest murmur to the heartiest guffaw, as a simultaneously vocal, expiratory and muscular act, laughter is an immensely bodily action. In the final chapter of *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva argues for laughter as something which produces "a kind of infinite

As well as a traversal from inside to out, a carnivalesque inversion of the bodily strata, a shifting from top to bottom is equally prominent in Mouse's practice. According to Bakhtin, in such instances the "topographical element of the bodily hierarchy [is] turned upside down; the lower stratum replaces the upper stratum."[36] This is particularly evident during Mouse's vulvic cigarette smoking where one orifice is used in place of another; an inversion of the upper and lower strata is affected, and the vulva appears to perform an action ordinarily executed by the mouth. Indeed, throughout her performance, an inversion of the upper and lower strata recurs, the vulva and vagina recurrently performing the potential functions of a mouth. Whilst this vulvic mouth does not speak, it arguably does 'smoke' and, in the case of the 'swallowing' and expulsion of milky fluid, it 'consumes', if only to expel again, 'spitting' or 'spewing' this imbibed substance back up.

Figure 5 - Mouse performing in Dominic Johnson's *Departure: An Experiment in Human Salvage* (2012). Chelsea Theatre, London. Photo: Magnus Arrevad.

catharsis" in its capacity to diminish the horror of extinction by allowing for a physical expulsion of dread. For Kristeva, the act of laughter brings one back to the materiality of the body. That is, the vivacity of laughter confronts and displaces the annihilatory threat of death. As noted above, I did not experience Mouse's abject performance as symbolically evocative of annihilatory threat. As such, my application of Kristeva's notion that "laughter is a way of placing and displacing abjection" is less to do with existential crisis and more to do with social propriety.

[36] Bakhtin (1984), 309

Figure 6 - Mouse performing in Dominic Johnson's *Departure: An Experiment in Human Salvage* (2012). Chelsea Theatre, London. Photo: Magnus Arrevad.

As Bakhtin notes: "The entire logic of the grotesque movements of the body is of a topographical nature. The system of these movements is oriented in relation to the upper and lower stratum; it is a system of flights and descents into the lower depths."[37] A simple expression of this principle and the example given by Bakhtin is that of the cartwheel, during which a continual rotation of upper and lower parts takes place. Just such an inversion, a 'grotesque movement of the body' takes place in Mouse's performance when she balances on her anally-inserted fist, her legs outstretched above her head, the position of her upper and lower strata reversed.

Given the numerous parallels that can be drawn, Mouse's performance practice is evidently rife with imagery of inversion. In symbolic terms, inversion brings about a new perspective, a new conception of the world and its hierarchical ordering, a turning of the system on its head. Having read Mouse's performances through Bakhtinian theory and acknowledged the destabilising potential of transgressive corporeality, I would argue that she exploits the carnivalesque suspension of hierarchical ranks, privileges, norms and prohibitions to demonstrate a carnivalesque liberation from the established order. Mouse's boundary transgressions are legible as symbolically powerful gestures in the

[37] Ibid., 353

manner that Douglas and Bakhtin describe in that they present a challenge to or a ridiculing of organised authoritative systems by showing body parts and (metaphorical) bodily matter 'out of place'.

Figure 7 - Mouse performing in Dominic Johnson's *Departure: An Experiment in Human Salvage* (2012). Chelsea Theatre, London. Photo: Magnus Arrevad.

This chapter does not argue that Mouse is merely an example of abject unruliness, but that she can be read as a body engaged in subversive play with existing conventions. That said, I argue from a position of awareness with regards to the pitfalls that run alongside the staging of a naked female body, especially one which is performing lewd actions whilst employing a grotesque, abject aesthetic. These pitfalls are a consequence of altogether negative historical and cultural associations between the female body, abjection, and the grotesque.

According to Western phallogocentrism, during the ideological constitution of the subject and the cultural inscription of the body, men are granted with the prerogative of a universal, autonomous subjectivity and women are constrained to their bodies and thus inherently identified with corporeality. Here a masculine "disembodied universality" exists alongside a feminine "disavowed

corporeality".[38] This corporeality is sexualised, pathologised, mystified or rendered abject, in accordance with the stereotypes of virgin, whore and mother; the impenetrable, the corrupted or corruptive and the pregnant body, respectively.[39] According to the patriarchal system, woman is inevitably and inescapably embodied. She is marked, inscribed, even marred by her bodiliness.

Perhaps the key studies on the subject of woman rendered abject and marred by her bodiliness are Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque* (1995) and Margaret Miles' *Carnal Abominations: The Female Body as Grotesque* (1997). Russo begins her study by noting how the link between women's bodies and grotesquerie has been forged linguistically through the Latin root 'grotto', meaning cave. Writing of a metaphorical connection between cave and vagina, Russo identifies similarities between these respectively earthen and corporeal entities in terms of the "Low, hidden… dark, material, immanent, visceral."[40] Historically, associations of the female with the earthly (as in mother earth, or in the sense of archaic goddess cults or matriarchal cultures) have been celebrated as connotative of a powerful creative energy, but, Russo continues,

> It is an easy and perilous slide from these archaic tropes to the misogyny which identifies this hidden inner space with the visceral. Blood, tears, vomit, excrement – all the detritus of the body that is separated out and placed with terror and revulsion (predominantly, though not exclusively) on the side of the feminine – are down there in that cave of abjection.[41]

Perceptions of the female body as leaky and excessive, as moving beyond its boundaries, have contributed to a proliferation of negative artistic figurations and metaphors surrounding the female body as grotesque and/or abject.

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[38] Here I have appropriated Judith Butler's terminology from *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York; London: Routledge, 1990), 16. Cultural associations of masculinity with the mind and femininity with the body are well documented in both philosophical and feminist literature. See Elizabeth V. Spelman, 'Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views', *Feminist Studies* 8:1 (Spring 1982), 109-131. Spelman's article includes a discussion of Plato's writing on the soul/body distinction and its connection to men and women, followed by a deliberation over feminist revisitations to the concept of mind/body dualism, some of which Spelman implies are interpretable as 'somatophobic', fearful of the body in their eagerness to "insist that woman's 'essential self', just as man's lies in her mind, and not in her body" (123). Spelman is critical of such feminists and argues instead for a position that challenges the oppressive legacy of mind/body dualism.

[39] Anna Kérchy, *Body Texts in the Novels of Angela Carter: Writing from a Corporeagraphic Point of View* (New York, Ontario, Wales: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), 39

[40] Russo (1995), 1

[41] Ibid., 2

As Michelle Henning asserts: "Femininity… had historical associations with fluidity – the female body 'spills over' while the (idealised) male body has defined boundaries."[42] Henning's words here recall the earlier noted point that the open and penetrable grotesque body is founded upon its difference from the closed classical or normative body, but here these bodies are ascribed gender positions. That historically classical/normative bodies have been assumed male and that grotesque bodies have been gendered female is key to both Russo's and Miles' theses. Like the statues of antiquity, the classical body is smooth, ideally-formed, self-contained and impenetrable. In relation to this classical 'male norm', the female body is situated as penetrable and secretory, thereby deviating from and exceeding beyond the norm and into the realm of the grotesque.[43]

Another point which suggests a gendering of the grotesque body as female is Bakhtin's choice of form to illustrate what he considers to be the grotesque image par excellence. This image can be found in the Kerch terracotta collection, which includes figurines of senile pregnant hags.[44] These figures conflate different biological stages or periods of woman's life – pregnancy and senility – in one image, representing birth and death simultaneously.[45] Indeed, the three main acts that Bakhtin identifies in the life of the grotesque body, "sexual intercourse, death throes, and the act of birth"[46], are amalgamated in this image of pregnant hags. Though the grotesquerie of a "pregnant death, a death that gives birth"[47] is irrefutable, the implication of Bakhtin's imagery here is disturbing in more ways than one. By locating the epitome of the grotesque in

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[42] Michelle Henning, 'Don't Touch Me (I'm Electric)', *Women's Bodies: Discipline and Transgression*, ed. Jane Arthurs and Jean Grimshaw (London; New York: Cassell, 1999), 17-47 (26)

[43] Though male bodies typically represent normative bodies, neither Russo nor Miles deny the relatively anomalous existence of male depictions of the grotesque. However, both theorists agree that when male bodies are subject to grotesque figuration, they take on precisely those characteristics usually attributed to female bodies; "they lose form and integrity, become penetrable, suffer the addition of alien body parts" (Margaret Miles, 'Carnal Abominations: The Female Body as Grotesque', *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections*, ed. James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates (Michigan; Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 83-112 (91)). Male grotesques discussed in Russo's text are "set apart as heterogeneous *particular* men rather than the generic or normal men who stand in for mankind." (Russo (1995), 13, original emphasis)

[44] Bakhtin (1984), 25

[45] Miles (1997), 103

[46] Bakhtin (1984), 352

[47] Ibid., 25

this image, he positions female bodies *in general*, as well as their natural reproductive functions, as grotesque. Thus, as these examples show, in terms of both anatomy and bodily function, "it is not merely that some women were thought of as grotesque in socially defined, culturally specific ways, but that an element of grotesque is present in every woman."[48] If, as Russo and Miles suggest, the grotesque is typically gendered female, and if the form and functional processes of the female body always render it intrinsically grotesque, then the implications of this in terms of how female bodies are read are immense. Far from challenging then, Mouse's carnivalesque brand of performance may thus be read as a reinforcement of these negative conceptions of the female body.

Whilst strongly aware that patriarchal culture's grotesque figurations of the female body have made re-appropriation a difficult and contradictory pursuit, both Russo and Miles, as well as Janet Wolff in her essay *Reinstating Corporeality* (1997), stake the claim for a potential feminist redeployment of the grotesque. 'Potential' being the operative word here given the risk of re-inscription, these theorists argue with "guarded optimism"[49] for the affirmative disruptive potentiality of the grotesque with regards to other cultural constructions of the female body – those which idealise, objectify and sexualise.

As argued earlier, in line with society's ideological construction of a particular notion of subjectivity, the body and certain of its functions have been systematically repressed in Western culture. This policing of the body and its boundaries has been enforced with especial vigour upon female bodies because woman's 'essential' grotesqueness has had to be stabilised and concealed. Only through careful adherence to approved social propriety, could women be seen as obedient, 'good', desirable even. It is for this exact reason, therefore, that some feminists urge a "cultural and political intervention which is grounded in, and which employs, the body."[50] Loathe to accept culturally inscribed repressions of the body, Russo, Miles and Wolff push instead for a foregrounding

[48] Miles (1997), 85
[49] Janet Wolff, 'Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics', *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 81-99 (90)
[50] Ibid., 82-3

of the body. Supporting the possibility of a feminist cultural body politics, Wolff argues that there is every reason "to propose the [female] body as a privileged site of political intervention, precisely because it is the site of repression and possession."[51] These theorists argue that when suppressed features erupt into visibility, that is, when the female body is displayed in defiance of dominant suppressive ideals, acknowledging, or even (as in Mouse's case) amplifying the functionality of corporeal existence by exaggerating bodily productivity and process, this can constitute an intervention. I want to elaborate now on the ways in which Mouse's performance can be read as challenging in this manner with reference to another feature of Bakhtin's subversive comic grotesque model: parody.

The format of the performance described at the opening of this chapter is derived from a sex show or striptease aesthetic, a setting reserved ordinarily for voyeuristic gratification. In Mouse's case however, that format is taken to excess. As Bakhtin states, "Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are fundamental attributes of the grotesque style."[52] Mouse's brand of sex show is not erotically titillating or sensuous, rather, her actions come across as revolting and nauseating.

Ordinarily a sex show is performed for the erotic pleasure of its viewer. Did anyone at the Chelsea Theatre performance experience erotic pleasure from Mouse's act? Perhaps there were audience members for whom Mouse's orificial performance was a turn on, but for the majority – certainly for me and so it seemed largely for the audience that I was a part of – Mouse's work roused disgust rather than sexual excitement (vocal expressions of disgust from those around me allowed me to read these audience reactions). Testimony to this arousal of repulsion, during their exchange on *The O Show*, when Oriana Fox asked Mouse if she thought of her work as erotic, Mouse replied: "I think more ridiculous. More disgusting and not erotic, I don't feel erotic. More vile."[53] By describing her work as 'ridiculous' and 'disgusting', Mouse highlights the absurdity of her actions as well as their morally transgressive nature. The

[51] Ibid., 82
[52] Bakhtin (1984), 303
[53] Oriana Fox, *The O Show*, episode two, part one: <http://vimeo.com/39885118> accessed 02/03/16

ridiculous being that which excites laughter, and the disgusting being that which incites recoil, she also implicitly references audience responses to her work.

Excitation of laughter and moral transgression are two key features of Bakhtin's carnivalesque grotesque idiom, within which parody has its place as part of the culture of folk humour. For Bakhtin, carnivalesque parody is "far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Folk humour denies, but it revives and renews at the same time."[54] Ever-fixated on the concept of renewal, Bakhtin's brand of parody is imbued with a transformative political power. In a similar vein, Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody* (1985) provides some insights on how parody might be employed for "provocative and revolutionary"[55] political means. She writes that "parody can, like the carnival, also challenge norms in order to renovate, to renew. In Bakhtin's terminology, parody can be centripetal – that is a homogenising, heirarchicizing influence. But it can also be a centrifugal, de-normatizing one."[56] Which is to say that parody can be used to re-code stereotypes constructed as 'norms'. In Mouse's practice, parody inverts and subverts the aesthetic form upon which her performance is modelled. Her grotesque parody of a sex show has the potential to induce a reaction in its audience which deviates from that of sexual gratification. Inducing repulsion rather than attraction, Mouse destabilises any concept of idealised female beauty and realigns the mechanisms of desire, problematising that other dominant cultural coding of the female body as sexualised object of/for the 'male gaze'.[57]

It is important to be mindful, however, of just how dramatically this line of argumentation is affected when Mouse performs the same act in a different context. Outside of an arts framework and, for example, in a fetish club, the likelihood that Mouse's actions do rouse erotic pleasure is much stronger. In such a setting her body is presented precisely as the fetishised phallic object, the

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[54] Bakhtin (1984), 11

[55] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth Century Art Forms* (New York; London: Methuen, 1985), 76

[56] Ibid.

[57] I use inverted commas here because, in literal terms, the gaze which meets Mouse's body is not necessarily emitted by a male subject. The possessor of the gaze can of course be gendered other than male and indeed audiences at each of the performances I experienced were comprised of people of all genders. What I mean to refer to is that the gaze in general is identified as the objectifying 'male gaze', as in the gaze which regards the female body as phallus, as fetish object.

object of/for sexual gratification. In which case, whatever challenge to the 'male gaze' she might be posing when she performs her grotesquely parodic sex show in a non-fetish setting collapses when the same act is staged in a fetish club.

Dominic Johnson makes the following assessment of Mouse's practice: "…the work suggests a post-feminist politics, where the body is reclaimed as a sexual entity, exceeding and burlesquing the anachronistic cliché of the 'male gaze'."[58] Before addressing Johnson's statement, it is valuable to unpack one of the terms that he uses to describe Mouse's performance, 'burlesquing'. Burlesque is a loaded term with multiple connotations all of which are useful and applicable to the case study subject of the present chapter. Burlesque means droll, jocular, clownish in appearance; a derisive imitation, tinged with irony; a type of dramatic representation which aims at exciting laughter by caricature, or by ludicrous treatment of subjects; an action or performance which casts ridicule on that which it imitates or is itself ridiculous; a mockery; or it is the collective term for a variety show, frequently featuring striptease as one of its components. With this term alone, Johnson is able to allude to the genre of Mouse's performance, the manner in which she performs it, and the striptease/sex show form that she ridicules.

One interpretation of Mouse's performance is that it acknowledges the oppressive patriarchal system to which Johnson alludes and attempts to turn it upon itself; that Mouse strategically uses a marginalised body coded as grotesque to negotiate a stereotype. She takes the stereotype of woman as erotic object and subverts it through a parodic revelling in the grotesque; her grotesquerie apes the eroticised body. She embraces the abject as a means of challenging patriarchal conventions surrounding bodily attractiveness. Through her exuberant over-embodiment, to reappropriate Johnson's terms, she 'exceeds' and 'burlesques', subverting the way that the naked female body might ordinarily be viewed and 'reclaiming' it. In this manner, grotesque embodiment can be emancipatory in the sense of its potential to destabilise the limitations imposed by patriarchal ideologies and stereotypes via transgressive means. In Mouse's performance one might see a transgressive re-inscription of

[58] Johnson (2012), 146

the body.

On the other hand, in order to subvert, she has to adopt a hideous persona without which the gesture would not be radical. This leads me then to question the applicability of the notion of reclamation here. What is the body being reclaimed as? If, in order to 'reclaim the body as sexual entity', one must assume a perverse, mutated figuration, is that really a subject position to be celebrated – especially by women? Can that be called reclamation, given the historic proliferation of metaphors surrounding the female body as grotesque and/or abject? Mouse's revolting body and her revolting gestures could simply be read as reinforcing such views rather than reclaiming them.

With the exception of saliva (in the instance of Mouse dribbling buttery residue licked from her fingers onto the stage), actual bodily secretions are barely present in Mouse's work. That said, her performances are interwoven with strong references to those fluids and base functions of the body associated with the grotesque, as she squirts milky fluid across the floor of the performance space both vaginally and anally. Furthermore, orifices, such as the mouth, vagina and anus, disrupt the clarity of the body's boundaries, symbolising the liminal zone between inside and outside. By making these liminal zones the focal point of the action, Mouse emphasises the tension between inside and outside that the grotesque and the abject epitomise. As these examples demonstrate, in line with Russo's, Miles' and Wolff's proposed 'feminist' re-appropriative strategy, Mouse's grotesquerie may well destabilise the idealisations of female beauty and subvert the stereotype of the eroticised female body as desirable object of/for the 'male gaze' (though this argument is subject to collapse when Mouse is performing as erotic object on the fetish scene), but in the same strike she re-inscribes the notion of the female body as abject. In the same instance as she (potentially) challenges some dominant modes of thought surrounding women, she reinforces others, opening herself up to reproaches of anti-feminism.

A return to Johnson's statement will offer some insight on this charge of anti-feminism. Johnson states that Mouse's practice suggests a "post-feminist" politics, but without unpacking this term it is difficult to determine with any

real confidence exactly what he means here, since postfeminism is itself a contentious issue. Having identified an ambivalent tension within Mouse's work, I think it important at this juncture to expound upon the layered meanings of postfeminism in some detail.

Exactly what postfeminism constitutes is a matter of debate. As government and industry initiatives motioned to promote the 1990s as the decade of 'gender equality', references to postfeminism came to prominence in late-1980s mainstream media, indicating the inauguration of a new era.[59] One assumes that any such era labelled as postfeminist might be characterised by such progressive socio-political advancements that its body politic has become liberated from the ideological shackles of a now outdated equality-focused feminist movement. To thus infer a clear and singular definition of postfeminism is to assume incorrectly. Indeed, these are just some of the chimeras of postfeminism exposed by Vicki Coppock, Deena Haydon and Ingrid Richter in their aptly titled book, *The Illusions of Post-feminism*. Noting the irony that proclamations of postfeminism occurred at the same time that feminist studies (including their own) were demonstrating that women's actual advancements were limited, Coppock, Haydon and Richter summarise: "'post-feminism' has rarely been defined. It remains the product of assumption."[60] According to Sarah Gamble, postfeminism "lacks both an agreed-upon set of ideological assumptions and any prominent figureheads. […] It is telling," she adds, "that most – if not all – of the women who are widely identified with postfeminism have not claimed the term for themselves, but had it applied to them by others; nor does a great deal of solidarity exist between them as a group."[61] With no unanimously clear politics or universally emblematic representatives, postfeminism is both an amorphous term and an amorphous concept.

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[59] Vicki Coppock, Deena Haydon and Ingrid Richter, introduction to *The Illusions of 'Post-feminism': New Women, Old Myths* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995), 3

[60] Ibid., 4. To dispel the myth of gender equality (in terms of the pay gap and other such 'illusions of 'post-feminism'') is precisely what Coppock, Haydon and Richter's text sets out to do. An indication as to whether theorists interpret postfeminism positively or negatively is sometimes denoted grammatically. Generally speaking, those who read the term negatively insert a hyphen between 'post' and 'feminism' and/or they blockade the term within inverted commas to signal their disputation. Coppock, Haydon and Richter use both of these signals.

[61] Sarah Gamble, 'Postfeminism', *Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. Sarah Gamble (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), 36-45 (37)

Ambivalence surrounding postfeminism stems at least partially from the semantic uncertainty generated by its prefix. 'Post' is definable in the sense of something that comes after but it does not necessarily denote complete rejection. Yet many feminists argue that postfeminism constitutes precisely that: a betrayal of historical feminist struggle and a rejection of the hard-won gains that feminism is responsible for. A key proponent of this conception of postfeminism is Susan Faludi. For Faludi, the agenda of postfeminism was being set by the media and manufactured to undermine existing feminist achievements and goals. "We're 'post-feminist' now, pop culture's ironists assert, meaning not that women have arrived at equal justice and moved beyond it, but simply that they themselves are beyond even pretending to care."[62] The media had persuaded women that feminism was no longer fashionable, that it was "the flavour of the seventies", and had been superseded by postfeminism headed by a "younger generation who supposedly reviled the women's movement"[63]. Faludi saw these strategies as "an attempt to divide and isolate women at a crucial moment in the struggle for equality, independence and autonomy."[64] Similarly negative but arguably more antagonistic than Faludi, Tania Modleski spits venom at postfeminism, dismissing postfeminist texts as "texts that, in proclaiming or assuming the advent of postfeminism, are actually engaged in negating the critiques and undermining the goals of feminism – in effect, delivering us back to a prefeminist world."[65] Modleski denounces postfeminism as anti-feminist in sentiment.

Yet one can also argue that the prefix does not necessarily suggest a relapse back to a former set of ideological beliefs. Its trajectory uncertain, it could indicate the continuation of the originating term's aims and ideologies from a new critical standpoint. Rather than assuming a supersession of patriarchal discourses, a more positive conception of postfeminism is that it engages these discourses critically. "In this context," Gamble explains, "postfeminism becomes a pluralistic epistemology dedicated to disrupting universalising patterns of thought, and thus capable of being aligned with postmodernism,

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[62] Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 95

[63] Ibid., 14

[64] Joan Smith, preface to ibid., xiv

[65] Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a 'Postfeminist' Age* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), 3

poststructuralism and postcolonialism."[66] A postfeminist approach, which participates in the discourse of the postmodern dispersed unstable subject, questions ideological constructions such as those oppositional categories within the gender binary, radically disputing fixed and entrenched notions of identity and the subject. According to Elizabeth Wright, rather than relying on a stable concept of woman as feminism did (which led to essentialist debates), postfeminism subjects 'woman' to critical analysis.[67] Wright continues: "Postfeminism is continuously in process, transforming and changing itself. It does not carry with it the assumption that previous feminist… discourses… have been overtaken, but that postfeminism takes a critical position in relation to them."[68] Wright argues for postfeminism not as something opposed to feminism but as a continuation of its endeavours.

Another advocate of this approach is Ann Brooks, who appropriates the theories of scholars such as Judith Butler, Rosi Braidotti and Laura Mulvey for postfeminism, claiming that such writers have "assisted feminist debates by providing a conceptual repertoire centred on 'deconstruction', 'difference' and 'identity'."[69] Traditional feminism's emphasis on collective action revealed internal tensions within it, which were resultant of its neglect of difference. The deconstructive brand of postfeminism outlined by Brooks seeks to remedy this by representing difference; by engaging with other socially-focused philosophical and political movements for change in order to conceive of pluralistic forms and applications of feminism.

Acknowledgement of the internal divisions within feminism has, in turn, allowed us to acknowledge its plurality; there is no universal feminism that speaks to or for the oppressions of all. Though it is a heterogeneous movement, feminism, in each and every one of its forms, is driven by a politics of positivity which seeks

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[66] Gamble (2001), 41

[67] Elizabeth Wright, *Lacan and Postfeminism* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2000), 3. Making a similar observation, Michèle Barrett notes: "contemporary Western feminism, confident for several years about its 'sex/gender distinctions', analysis of 'patriarchy' or postulation of the 'male gaze' has found all these various categories radically undermined by the new 'deconstructive' emphasis on fluidity and contingency." Michèle Barrett, 'Words and Things: Materialism and Method in Contemporary Feminist Analysis', *Destabilising Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, ed. Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992), 201-219 (202)

[68] Wright (2000), 5

[69] Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms* (London: Routledge, 1997), 132

to affect progressive transformation. Postfeminism on the other hand could even be anti-feminist. Whether it is characterised as a backlash against traditional feminism's struggle for women's equality, or whether it works in the continued service of that which precedes it, postfeminism is "a phenomenon held in suspension between the opposing definitions indicative in its use of the prefix"[70].

During the course of her in-character interview on *The O Show*, when questioned as to whether Mouse thinks of herself as feminist, she replied: "I think being asked if I'm a feminist is a bit of an old-fashioned question. I'm a bit beyond that. I am myself. I'm a powerful woman; I make my own money. It's not even a question I can relate to at all. It's kind of done – the feminist thing."[71] That she calls feminism "old-fashioned", and describes herself as "beyond that" suggests that Mouse is *post*-feminist in that she regards the feminist movement as outdated and no longer relevant. Oriana then asks: "So you don't think there's any work to be done in terms of gender inequality?" To which Mouse responds: "Well, actually I consider myself to be more of a man than any man I know. When I've got my strap-on on, you're finished. I am all man and all woman and half bear. I've made my own way in life, male or female really."[72] Referencing a strap-on dildo, Mouse alludes here to the primacy or elevated status of the phallus as all-conquering in terms of power dynamics. This sort of commentary perpetuates phallic supremacy and a phallocentric worldview and is thereby constitutive of a type of repetition that halts change and contradicts any delusion of having reached and extended beyond gender equality. To my mind, such commentary is detrimental to achieving the goals of gender equality that many feminisms strive for, including Oriana's by implication of her question. More than that, by describing herself as "more of a man than any man I know", Mouse implies that the success, power and affluence that she feels she has achieved have only been obtainable for her because of her 'manliness'. Rendering success, power, and affluence as 'masculine' attributes which only men can attain, she reiterates a phallocentric worldview once again.[73] Thus,

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[70] Gamble (2001), 41

[71] Oriana Fox, *The O Show*, episode two, part one: <http://vimeo.com/39885118>

[72] Oriana Fox, 'All Man, All Woman and Half Bear: Club Performer Mouse Interviewed by Artist Oriana Fox on The O Show', *Dance Theatre Journal* 24:3 (2011), 31-40 (36)

[73] I am reminded here of Joan Riviere's essay 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10, (January 1929), 303-313 in which she pioneered the idea that

Mouse seemingly comes across here as postfeminist in the negative, or as Modleski would put it, anti-feminist sense of the word.

However, her "male or female" ambivalence at the close of her statement suggests a postfeminist focus in the sense of the aforementioned poststructuralist discourse of an unstable subject. In fact, Mouse's description of herself as "half bear" is arguably her most radical interruption of that hegemonic ideological construction, the man/woman binary. If this statement is read as an extension of her grotesquerie, here Mouse disassociates herself from humanity even and refers to herself as part animal, a reference which is also evident in her stage name. In doing so she manifests yet another feature of the grotesque: hybridity. This suggests that her use of grotesquerie as subversive strategy is striving for something more besides a disruption of dominant conceptions of femaleness.

I believe that Johnson's use of the term 'post-feminist' to describe Mouse (as opposed to feminist) is deliberate in that he means to retain the ambivalence inherent to the term. He writes post-feminist (including the hyphen) because he means to refer to Mouse as someone who sees herself as beyond feminism, but I think he also means to allude to postfeminism in the positive, poststructuralist sense of the term, as a movement which develops on from feminism's endeavours. Describing the male gaze as an "anachronistic cliché", Johnson attests that it is a concept which has been done to death in feminist theorisation. By describing Mouse's performances as "exceeding and burlesquing" this concept, Johnson suggests that her work derides this simplistic and now outdated reading and offers something more in the way of subversion than just a denial or complication of the male gaze. So if the male gaze is an anachronous and overused point of critique, what other target could Mouse's

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gender is constructed according to social codes whereby the subject becomes gendered by a process of mimesis. Riviere's essay exposes the social tendency to code success as 'masculine' and cites a female case study who 'wishes for' these attributes. Riviere's case study subject is an intellectual woman who, through displaying her proficiency in public discourse as a speaker, lecturer and writer, performs as if she had taken up the phallic position/the place of the father – that is, she performs as a subject in language, a sign-user rather than a sign-object. Though this woman 'wishes for masculinity', she puts on a flirtatious "mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men." (303) Riviere thereby codes femininity as flirtation or a masquerade used to hide rivalry with men. Mouse, however, makes no attempt to mask her 'masculinity'. At the close of this chapter I offer an explanation as to what her performance of masculinity might mean.

transgressive body politics be speaking to?

If in order to deconstruct one conception of woman (woman as erotic object), one must assume a persona that runs the risk of reinscribing another equally demeaning conception of woman (woman as grotesque), it stands to reason to attempt to interrogate the category of 'woman' in all its guises, to attempt a (postfeminist, as Wright and Brooks would term it) subjection of 'woman' to critical analysis.

Comedy, hyperbole, parody and a tone evocative of clowning are used by Mouse to perform gender. Mouse is a female performing a female yet she presents a grotesquely deviant brand of femininity, a garish hyperbole of the feminine, administered with pantomime theatricality. In referring to pantomime performance here I deliberately intend to call to mind and acknowledge the fact that in pantomime, the grotesquely parodic female characters, the 'ugly sisters' of a production, are often played by men. Here a further idiosyncrasy of the grotesque is riffed upon by Mouse, namely travesty: an alteration of dress or appearance, or a disguise solicited by dressing in the attire of the 'opposite sex'.

On the subject of gender performance, and incorporating theorisation on travesty and drag, Butler's canonical text, *Gender Trouble*, argues that gender is a reiterated social performance rather than the expression of a prior reality. In her preface, Butler references John Waters' film, *Female Trouble*, which stars drag queen, Divine, in the leading role. Divine's impersonation of women, Butler argues:

> implicitly suggests that gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real. His/her performance destabilises the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates. Is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatise the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established? Does being female constitute a 'natural fact' or a cultural performance, or is 'naturalness' constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?[74]

[74] Preface (1990) to Butler (1990), xxxi

Butler's concept of gender performativity argues that certain signifying acts and gestures produce the effect of an internal core on the surface of the body. These acts and gestures correspond to a set of meanings which are already socially established. They are performative in the sense that the internal gender identity that they purport to express is a fabrication manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other socially regulated discursive means. In her chapter on 'Subversive Bodily Acts', Butler discusses parody as a politics of disruption, a means to rupture societal gender norms (that is, the gender ideologies upheld by the dominant culture, which are in fact idealisations but have been naturalised as 'norms'[75]). The notion of gender parody that she defends does not assume the existence of an imitated original. "Indeed, the parody is *of* the very notion of an original"[76] because, as her concept of gender performativity shows, the inner 'truth' of gender is but an illusion. Postulations of a 'true' gender identity are revealed as fictitious. She continues by arguing that the "perpetual displacement" affected through parody "constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualisation; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture… of the claim to naturalised or essentialist gender identities."[77]

Mouse hyperbolically impersonates her own 'natural' gender. As such, it is the parodic context of her performance which brings into relief the performative construction of that gender. In terms of visual appearance, her garish make-up and over-sized wigs contribute to her hyperbolic performance of constructed femininity. Whilst Mouse grotesquely imitates the female gender, she can be said to dramatise the culturally stereotyped significations through which that gender is established, thereby revealing the imitative structure of gender itself. A further example of this might be found in Mouse's choice of persona for her performance at Spill festival. Holding an umbrella, Mouse entered the performance space wearing an ankle-length skirt, a high-collared button-down blouse and long overcoat, accessorised with hat, scarf and gloves. Her choice of

[75] For writing on how gender ideals are normalised, see Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 13-32
[76] Butler (1990), 188, original emphasis
[77] Ibid.

character was the well-mannered, prim and proper protagonist of the 1964 Disney musical, *Mary Poppins*. Before long, the piece descended into chaos, as Mouse performed her usual party tricks, presenting a grotesque caricature of Mary Poppins and the sort of thing she "might get up to on her day off, away from those children"[78]. Nevertheless, by opening her act by playing the role of a wholesome, authoritative motherly figure, Mouse had cited another example of traditional 'femininity' before degrading that image with carnivalesque relish and offering an anarchic alternative – a body that no longer respected borders, positions, rules. That Mouse adopts personae is testimony to a proliferation of identities and that which proliferates is, in its fluidity, open to resignification. As Butler states: "The parodic repetition of 'the original'… reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original."[79] In this sense, Mouse's 'drag'-like personas represent an exaggerated parodying of the culturally constructed stereotypes of 'woman', a disputation of entrenched notions of identity and the subject.

Figure 8 - Mouse, promotional image for the show *Mary Pop-Ins* (2014). Old Police Station, Ipswich. Photo: Eddie Boldizsar.

Interpreting the bodies of female characters in the novels of feminist and magical realist author Angela Carter, Anna Kérchy argues that Carter's heroines

[78] <http://spillfestival.com/show/mary-pop-ins/> accessed 30/03/16
[79] Butler (1990), 43, original emphasis

highlight the performativity and the artificiality of gender through a spectacular fusion of femininity with grotesquerie. Kérchy makes her case with the assertion that Carter's characters corporealise "a feminist version of the grotesque, (re)incarnated by a mockingly over-embodied, fleshly, de/re-feminising, even self-queering subjectivity-in-process, dwelling in the metamorphic state of 'becoming a(-)woman', a self-stylised, marvellously-monstrous 'un-womanly woman'."[80]

There are parallels here between Carter's heroines and Mouse, firstly in terms of a tendency toward a body in process, suspended in a continual state of metamorphic becoming in the open-ended, seemingly unfinished permeability and volatility of Mouse's body; both ingurgitating and excretory, her body swallows and is swallowed by the world. Equally evident in Mouse's practice is a hyperbolic sense of mockery, both of the sex show format – her act being "more vile than erotic" – and of the feminine in a way that recalls pantomime dames. Every excess, both in terms of action and appearance, escalates toward producing an over-embodiment that hyper-feminises so much so that it de-feminises, causing Mouse's self-stylised persona to exceed almost to the point of monstrosity. Lastly, in Mouse's nod toward travesty, masquerade, and drag, she achieves a sort of failed feminisation that culminates in the image of an unwomanly woman.

According to Kérchy, Carter presents a feminist re-writing of the carnivalesque tradition, an exposure of the heterogeneity of the subject that allows for empowering identities to issue forth, identities born out of deconstructed grotesque embodiments.[81] For Kérchy, grotesque embodiments deconstruct that which has been culturally and socially constructed. Such bodies expose naturalised conventions, their "performance designed to parody their cultural construction."[82] Here, Kérchy acknowledges the subversive power in the marginal realm which constitutes the carnival world. The self-same strategy can be mapped onto Mouse's work. Her use of parody and the grotesque re-code the body she constructs and in doing so she encourages a move away from traditional tropes of 'feminine' or 'womanly' identity and body politics.

[80] Kérchy (2008), 37
[81] Ibid., 37-38
[82] Ibid., 38

Inherent to Mouse's interview responses on *The O Show*, performed masculinity is, relative to performed femininity, a lesser though still present part of her practice. I am referring here not just to Mouse's remark about a strap-on and her subsequent identification with the male sex, but I am also alluding to the phallic imagery in the performance described at the outset of this chapter, specifically, in the instance of Mouse's vaginal cigarette 'smoking'. According to Butler: "The univocity of sex, the internal coherence of gender, and the binary framework for both sex and gender are… regulatory fictions that consolidate and naturalise the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression."[83] She then goes on to speak of *Gender Trouble*, as "an effort to think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalised and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power…"[84] Butler's summation of what she seeks to achieve in the pages of *Gender Trouble*, leads me to question whether Mouse's performance practice could be described as attempting to do the same. If Mouse's performative self is an intervention, if she exposes and displaces cultural configurations of femininity and masculinity and questions the categories of identity that contemporary structures naturalise and immobilise, then surely she could be described as having affected a troubling of that entrenched system which upholds a uniform binary gender identification. First, I must elucidate what I mean by 'the system', the structure of signification that is the symbolic order.

Jacques Lacan contends that the social world of linguistic communication, intersubjective relations, knowledge of ideological conventions and the acceptance of the law are constitutive of what he terms the symbolic order. Closely bound up with the phallus, the symbolic order and its laws exist with accordance to a patriarchal economy of meaning. According to Lacan, divergent sexual positions within language are denoted through either a 'being' or 'having' of the phallus. Rebecca Schneider neatly summarises Lacan's engendering thus: "She is the phallus, he has the phallus, she is the phallus he has."[85]

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[83] Butler (1990), 46
[84] Ibid.
[85] Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 67

Revising Lacan's charge that either 'having' the phallus (the position of man) or 'being' the phallus (the paradoxical position of woman) is denotative of two mutually exclusive positions, Butler argues to the contrary that these positions are in fact interdependent: "To 'be' the phallus is to be… the object, the Other of a (heterosexualised) masculine desire, but also to represent or reflect that desire… to signify the Phallus through 'being' its Other, its absence, its lack, the dialectical confirmation of its identity."[86] As Butler's words reveal, Lacan's engendering of the symbolic order includes a latent clause which contradicts his claim. Man in fact needs woman (as phallus) to feel whole, she is his constitutive other. Butler continues, "for women to 'be' the Phallus means, then, to reflect the power of the Phallus, to signify that power…"[87] By this rationale, in feminist retort to Lacan, it is woman who wields the position of power in this dynamic through embodying the position of lack. Butler then goes on to further complicate the Lacanian schema by arguing that Lacan's 'having' and 'being' positions can equally be described as "non-positions (impossible positions, really)."[88] Indeed, for Butler, the pinning down of 'positions' is an exercise in futility. She writes of the interdependency of these 'positions' as a "failed model of reciprocity", arguing ultimately for the instability of the structure of sexual difference that dictates that men have the phallus and women are the phallus. "Part of the comedic dimension of this failed model of reciprocity, of course, is that both masculine and feminine positions are signified, the signifier belonging to the Symbolic that can never be assumed in more than token form by either position."[89]

Consider Mouse's performative self as a literal embodiment of this 'comedic failure'. Mouse can be said to both embody and not embody each and every one of these positions; to 'be' the phallus, 'have' the phallus, and yet equally set herself in opposition to both of these positions. Given her attestations to power and self-made affluence on *The O Show*, perhaps she thinks of herself as assuming dual positions of power, as in, a feminine position of lack with the power to destabilise the masculine, and meanwhile wielding the power of the phallus via her strap-on. But there are also clear arguments for how she fails in

[86] Butler (1990), 59
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid., 62

both of these positions.

Mouse is the 'object' of the other in that she presents her body as there to be viewed but whether or not she reflects desire is debatable. Her 'being' the phallus, being desirable, is problematic given her garish persona, her arousal of disgust, her comedic grotesquerie. Likewise, her 'having' the phallus is equally problematic given the orificial emphasis of her performances, her revelry in pulling focus to the body's most abject sites. In presenting herself as exaggerated aperture, she exaggerates her lack. Even when wearing a strap-on dildo or with the addition of a vaginally inserted cigarette, rather than reading as surrogates for the physical male appendage these protuberances could be regarded as grotesque deformities, genital mutilations, the body made monstrous. Under such circumstances Mouse places herself in dual positions of weakness, the inverse of Lacan's positions, where she neither *is* nor *has* the phallus.

It is possible to argue however that, as phallic 'signifiers', the non-corporeal protuberances incorporated into Mouse's body image are more successful. According to Butler: "To operate within the matrix of power… offers the possibility of a repetition of the law which is not its consolidation, but its displacement."[90] Perhaps Mouse sees herself as 'operating within the matrix of power'. To draw on phallogocentricity does not necessarily suggest a position of coercion but perhaps rather one of invasion with the potential to displace and overturn. Mouse performs 'man' not in the sense of artifice, not in drag, nor with the intention of passing as male, but by donning phallic appendages and dubbing herself as "more of a man than any man I know". Perhaps then she does this in order to reveal the performance of masculinity, to suggest that all masculinity is just a posture, a strap-on, thereby highlighting the Butlerian illusory binary structure and making preposterous these 'repeated impossibilities' as Butler dubs them, through exaggeration and humour and ridicule.

[90] Ibid., 42

Conclusion

Mouse's performances, as grotesquely re-coded sex show acts, provide the stimulus for critical thinking around the subjects of: social propriety and order as it relates to the body and its boundaries; socially and culturally inscribed constructions of 'woman' as well as either feminist challenges to that category or what might be termed anti-feminist re-inscriptions of it; and more broadly, it provides the stimulus for critical thinking around gender itself as a discursively constituted performative construction.

As I stated at the outset of this chapter, Mouse's performance practice stages questions which pertain to these issues. It does not present a clearly defined politics. To have argued conclusively for a single stake in the work would be to have excluded other entirely valid readings. Since the work engages with such contentious issues, it has the capacity to divide opinion strongly. For this reason, I have demonstrated and critically responded to a range of different possible interpretations of Mouse's practice throughout the course of this chapter.

I have shown that there is potential to disrupt in all of the strategies employed by Mouse. Her foregrounding of abjection brings with it a strong possibility of visceral agitation. Her embrace of chaos and disorder expresses a resistance to or a carnivalesque liberation from systematic order, a contempt for homogenisation. Her celebration of all things erratic and their insubordination to form proposes the mobilisation of an alternative, disorderly, anarchic politics. Through parodic strategy, hers is a body engaged in perversive play with existing norms, conventions, and stereotypes. These are the ways in which a transgressive politics can be traced in Mouse's practice and her actions can be read as subversive.

This potential is, however, met in equal measure with the dangers of negative reinforcement and thus always at the risk of being undone. Once released into the public sphere and laid bare for interpretation, a carnivalesque image of the female body may suggest an ambivalent redeployment of those taboos which represent the female body as abject and grotesque, thereby perpetuating a dominant misogynistic representation of women by men. Any attempt at

feminist re-appropriation might be misconstrued and read instead as an uncritical re-inscription. Mouse's actions easily risk confirming derogatory delimitations of woman to the corporeal. Her performances might simply be read as an emphatic underscoring of the female body as penetrable and leaky.

For me personally, I believe that Mouse's presentation and use of an unruly body, one which defies systematic order and revels in breaching boundaries, is symbolically powerful in the manner set out by Douglas and Bakhtin. Her delight in deliberately breaking sexual and bodily taboos clearly demonstrates her counter-position against organised authoritative systems. This in itself constitutes a transgressive politics. I cannot, however, agree with arguments that Mouse's employment of grotesque strategy is effective in terms of re-appropriating grotesquerie for feminist ends because the risk of re-inscription with regards to this particular case study artist is too great. Feminist re-appropriation of the grotesque is a problematic premise in any case but especially so when applied to Mouse because of the different contexts in which she stages her work. Whilst in a theatre context there is an argument for the subversiveness of Mouse's grotesquely parodic re-codings of the sex show format, the same argument holds less traction in the context of the fetish club. To argue, via a (post)feminist poststructuralist approach, for Mouse's revolting body as a body in pantomime-drag-inspired queer revolt against a heteronormative binarised gender system is, I think, a compelling reading, but again one that depends heavily on context and reception. Festival attendees at both Spill and Glasgay! may have arrived at such a reading, having had their experience of Mouse's work framed in the context of a radical, counter-hegemonic cultural programme, but this is not guaranteed. Forgoing humour but still foregrounding the materiality of the body, gender performativity is taken up in greater detail in the proceeding chapter but there the discussion is concerned less with performative signifiers and more so with the incarnation of these signifiers as flesh.

Chapter Three: The TRANSformative Body

Transgender is the name given to a general category of cross-identification, often used as an umbrella term for gender variance. Transgender describes a gender identity that is at least partially defined by transitivity and that may or may not stop short of transsexual surgery.[1] Cassils, the case study artist of this chapter, identifies as transgender.

Cassils' artistic production constructs a visual critique and discourse around gender ideologies, histories and politics. Concerned with the disruption of sexual difference, Cassils seeks a transgression of the binary between 'male' and 'female', s/he[2] seeks alternative modes of being and forms of embodiment; the production of possible bodies through a transformative queering. Cassils explains: "…partially what I'm trying to do is to offer an indeterminate representation, offer a certain slipperiness and offer different visual options for people."[3] Cassils is driven by a motivation to open up both the lived space and the space of representation for gender variations, proposing a spectrum of different inscriptions of the sexed body.

Before continuing I want to explicate how the terms 'sex' and 'gender' operate within this chapter. To make a distinction between sex and gender is to risk buttressing the argument that sex is biologically dictated and seemingly fixed

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[1] Initially, my understanding of the term 'transgender' and its differentiation from 'transsexual' was established through reading Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1998). Distinctions between 'transgender' and 'transsexual' are made throughout Halberstam's text but, for an in-depth discussion of the politics revolving around these terms, see chapter five, 'Transgender Butch', 143-173. It is important to note, however, that this terminology is constantly evolving; much has changed since 1998. Whilst the term 'transsexual' is still embraced by some – those who value its specificity, those who prefer not to be grouped under the umbrella term 'transgender' amongst all other forms of gender non-conformity – others feel that 'transsexual' is now an outdated term. For a more up-to-date and broadly encompassing guide to trans nomenclature see: Scottish Transgender Alliance <http://www.scottishtrans.org>; Gender Identity Research and Education Society <http://www.gires.org.uk>; National Centre for Transgender Equality <http://www.transequality.org>. Conscious of the fact that trans terminology is varied and still evolving, the resources noted here state with awareness that the definitions supplied are neither exhaustive nor infallible and that they are meant only as a guide.

[2] Throughout this chapter I refer to Cassils using the mixed subjective pronoun s/he and the objective her/his. As explained in Chapter One, from a writerly point of view, I favour this mixed pronoun for its awkward effect of syntactical interruption, as I feel it echoes Cassils' aim to cause a disruptive intervention in naming sex and gender.

[3] Quotation taken from a recording of a presentation given at Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Montreal, Canada on 11/03/13 <http://ellengallery.concordia.ca/en/audio-video.php> accessed 19/09/13

whereas gender is culturally constructed and is, in relative terms, less fixed. A critical response to this distinction might be that it permits of gender a multiple interpretation of sex, that is, gender is not mimetic of, nor does it logically follow on from sex. Yet, for Judith Butler, this response is not critical enough, as it leaves the category of sex unquestioned. Thus, for Butler, the very distinction between sex and gender is problematic. She asks: "Can we refer to a 'given' sex or a 'given' gender without first inquiring into how sex and/or gender is given?"[4] Butler contests the seeming immutability of sex, arguing against its 'givenness', instead attesting that sex is as culturally constructed as gender. "Indeed," she writes, "perhaps [sex] was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all…"[5] Describing the construction of sex, Butler continues: "gender is the discursive/cultural means by which… 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive', prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts."[6] For Butler, sex is constructed as radically unconstructed. She argues that the cultural construction of gender casts sex in a prediscursive domain and that this process conceals the discursive production of sex. That is to say, the sexed body does not exist prior to social and cultural signification, as the sex/gender distinction would have us believe, rather it is *produced by* this signification. Thus we can understand sex in the same way that we understand gender.

For Butler, gender is a doing as opposed to a being. Rather than an ontological fact, gender is enacted performatively. She describes gender performativity as a repetitious, temporal process of citation, reiteration and 'naturalisation' in the context of a body, a "set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."[7] The word 'appearance' here exposes this congealment or naturalisation as a deceptive, socially imposed practice. Extending the notion of performativity, Butler argues for sex as a "performatively enacted signification"[8] that is as performative as gender. "Released from its naturalised interiority and surface, [sex] can occasion [a] parodic proliferation and subversive play of

[4] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York; London: Routledge, 1990), 9
[5] Ibid., 9-10
[6] Ibid., 10
[7] Ibid., 45
[8] Ibid., 46

gendered meanings."[9] Indeed, Butler's writing is driven by the impetus to think through potential ways of subverting the reified notions of sex and gender that support hegemonic and heterosexist power.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler examines how the power of the heterosexual hegemony forms the 'matter' of bodies, sex, and gender. She argues that this hegemonic power operates to constrain and delimit what counts as a viable sex. Butler writes: "'Sex' is not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which one becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility."[10] Hegemonic power creates, dictates, and maintains a domain of intelligible bodies that conform to a set of norms through citation, reiteration, and 'naturalisation'. In establishing an ontology of legitimate bodies, a category of false, unreal or unintelligible bodies is established in turn. Insisting upon an extension of legitimacy toward this latter category of bodies, in both *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter,* Butler repeatedly attempts to theorise the constraints of 'naturalised' reiterations of identity in relation to their subversive counterparts in 'bad' or queered copies of identity. Using drag as an example, Butler asks us to think beyond drag as simply an imitation of gender. Rather she posits drag performance as a dramatisation of the signifying gestures through which gender(s) are established. Here Butler seeks to "expose the tenuousness of gender 'reality' in order to counter the violence performed by gender norms."[11]

In the same vein, through her/his artistic practice, Cassils manipulates the power structure of the heterosexual hegemony, seeking "to rupture societal norms"[12], to agitate, to make a different option viable. Prompting a renegotiation of terms and ways of thinking that have acquired the aura of 'fact', Cassils implores us to question the 'reality' of sex and gender. In doing so, that which is invoked as 'natural' is shown to be revisable. Once read through Butler's paradigm, a radical challenge against normative sex and gender

[9] Ibid.
[10] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York; London: Routledge, 1993), xii
[11] Preface (1999) to Butler (1990), xxv
[12] 'About' section of Cassils' website <www.heathercassils.com> accessed 19/09/13

identifications and performances can be seen to be posed within Cassils' works. Accordingly, Butler's model of sex and gender is applied throughout this chapter.

A visual artist with crossovers into performance, Cassils envisages her/his body as "both an instrument and an image."[13] Cassils' body is thus simultaneously a tool with which to render form, a medium that can be sculpturally manipulated, and an object for visual consumption. Exploring how sexual difference and gender are expressed through the material form of bodies, this chapter focuses initially on the physical sculpting of bodily materiality, asking: how and to what extent can the materiality of the body be manipulated to affect a transformation of sex and gender? I then shift focus toward a psychoanalytical structure of bodily formation using Jacques Lacan's writing on 'The Mirror Stage'. Through a psychoanalytically informed reading of Cassils' performances, I argue that s/he contests the binaries of sex and gender at the level of bodily morphology, and at the level of the symbolic, through a questioning and transference of phallic power, as well as through the concept of the fetish.

Initially commissioned by the ONE Archive,[14] an LGBTQ archive in Southern California, Cassils' performance *Becoming an Image* responds to the statistical evidence of an increase in violence against trans and genderqueer individuals. Cassils cites the following statistics as having informed the work: "Worldwide transgender murders increased by 20% in 2012. Gender-queer and trans brothers and sisters are 28% more likely to experience physical violence."[15] I experienced Cassils' performance of *Becoming an Image* at National Theatre Studio, London as part of Spill festival in 2013. The work unfolded as follows:

In groups of twenty, audience members are ushered into a pitch-black vestibule area. Once gathered inside, an attendant hushes us into silence, explaining that we must wait here momentarily to allow our eyes to adjust to the darkness. We

[13] <http://ellengallery.concordia.ca/en/audio-video.php> Accessed 19/09/13

[14] ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives is the largest repository of LGBTQ materials in the world. Founded in 1952, ONE Archives currently houses over two million archival items. The archives have been a part of the University of Southern California Libraries since 2010. <http://www.onearchives.org> accessed 09/01/14

[15] Cassils cited these statistics at a presentation delivered at the Whitechapel Gallery, London as part of Spill festival on 14/04/13.

are told that upon entering the performance space we must position ourselves either standing, backed up against the walls or seated on the floor; either way the floor space in the centre of the room must be left clear. Then we are led on.

I am amongst the last group of twenty to enter the performance space and, as we trail in slowly in near silence, we draw close to one another. Tightly packed, the audience encircles a totemic block of clay[16], leaving around it a perimeter of vacant floor space, as per the attendant's instructions. The room is murky. A muted, centrally positioned spotlight suffuses the darkness, dimly illuminating the clay slab. I have but a moment within which to register these surroundings before the spotlight fades out and the room is engulfed in darkness.

For a moment, nothing. Then, with my visibility denied, my aural sense is heightened and I hear: bare feet shifting over the concrete surface underfoot; short, sharp exhalations; flesh slamming and slapping into clay; grunts of exertion; laboured but controlled breath. A torrent of activity has been unleashed which I cannot see, only hear.

An electrical, high-pitched whining hangs momentarily in the air, recognisable as the sound of a camera flash charging up. Then, for a fraction of a second, the action is brightly, almost blindingly illuminated as a camera shutter sweeps open and snaps shut. In that brief flicker I see Cassils for the first time, battling to bore into the clay slab with her/his fist. As the room plunges back into darkness, the intensity of the camera flash has left a residual effect. The sudden overwhelming light has produced a retinal burn that stays with me and I still see the artist, as if her/his image had been scorched into my eyes by a searing white heat. Each time I blink, that image duplicates, leaving a ghostly light trail that gradually fades in intensity, an ephemeral image that withers and tapers to the point of extinguishment.

After two or three flashes of the camera it becomes apparent that there is another body present in the performance space besides Cassils and the audience. The camera is not a remotely-operated static fixture. Instead, it is

[16] According to the Spill festival programme, the clay column weighed 2,000 pounds and measured around 1.7 meters in height.

operated by a photographer who likewise circles the clay slab, echoing the artist's footing. With no means of framing the photographic subject, the photographer must sense their way through the darkness and shoot intuitively to capture the action. This photographer is as much a performer in the work as a documenter.[17]

Throughout the performance Cassils is blinded by the darkness, as is the audience, as is the photographer. The act of photographing is the only way in which the performance is made visible and has an effect such that the live performance is experienced not in continuous motion but as a fractured series of images. Sometimes the gaps between flashes of the camera are drawn out and my experience of the work is predominantly aural. At other points in the performance, when the camera flashes and the shutter clicks in quick succession, a disorientating light-strobing occurs and a layering of scorched residual images are conjured forth, cluttering my vision in a messy, brawling entanglement.

For the duration of the action, Cassils beats the form of the clay, a sculpting process emerging from her/his assault.[18] With each camera-flash illumination, the contours of the clay shift. Gouged and gored by violent actions that wound and scar its surface, the material transforms.

[17] At the presentation delivered at the Whitechapel Gallery, 14/04/13, Cassils revealed that Manuel Vason was the photographer in this performance of *Becoming an Image*.

[18] Cassils' fighting capabilities result from her/his experience as an ex semi-professional boxer. S/he also trained with a professional muay thai boxer in preparation for the performance. These details were disclosed at the presentation delivered at the Whitechapel Gallery, 14/04/13.

Figure 9 - Cassils, *Becoming an Image* (2013). National Theatre Studio, London. Photo: Cassils with Manuel Vason.

The air in the performance space becomes stuffy, gravid with the body warmth of the densely packed audience as well as the heat emanating from Cassils' body. S/he toils in the increasingly oppressive heat and the atmosphere shifts back and forth as the artist appears to tire or be propelled by the on-surge of an adrenaline rush.

Eventually the camera flashes cease. Listening intently, I no longer hear the impact of flesh on clay, only Cassils' breath as it quietens and becomes distant. Then silence resumes in the darkness and I realise that both Cassils and the photographer have exited the space. A spotlight swells up again, illuminating the clay mass. It now stands at about half its original height, it's neat totemic form pummelled into a messy, lumpen heap. The audience disperses, some members stepping forward to make a closer inspection of the beaten body of clay. Squinting and blinking, we emerge from the performance space. The piece had lasted for twenty-five minutes.[19]

[19] At the Whitechapel Gallery presentation, Cassils revealed that the duration of *Becoming an Image* is dependent upon her/his energy levels. When Cassils' oxygen levels are exhausted, the action ends.

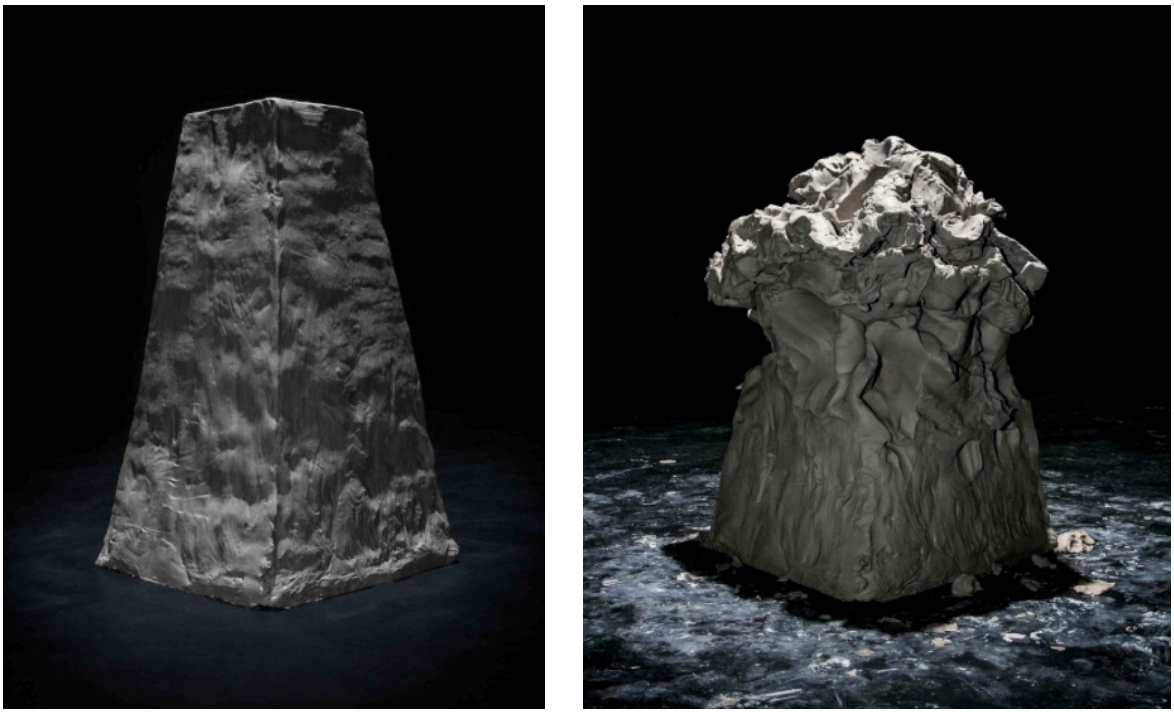

Figure 10 - *Before, 2,000 pounds of modelling clay* and *After, Clay Bash/Performance Remnant* (2014). Sculptures from a performance of *Becoming an Image*. Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Toronto. Photo: Cassils with Alejandro Santiago.

It is important to unpack the resonances of the title *Becoming an Image*, layered as it is with multiple meanings, before proceeding any further. As a noun, the word 'becoming' is inseparable from Cassils' practice, it's very definition being a process of change, transition or transformation. Furthermore, 'becoming' pertains to a temporal process. The 'about' section of Cassils' website bears the following description: "Cassils performs trans not as something about crossing from one sex to another, but rather as a continual becoming, a process oriented way of being…"[20] This transformative process of becoming could be read progressively, as a sort of blossoming. Yet, within any process of becoming, something in turn must unbecome. Cassils' transformation is thus equally legible as an undoing, a type of non-conformity, a refusal to acquiesce to dominant forms, a critique that posits a generative, counterhegemonic alternative. I do not mean here to posit a binarisation, to suggest that Cassils is striving toward an endpoint. Rather, I mean to establish that Cassils' transformative practice is as much about unbecoming as it is about becoming and that each of these modes, as processes, are temporal and continuous. As an adjective, 'becoming' can signify attractiveness, or attest to what is appropriate, suitable or proper.

[20] <www.heathercassils.com> accessed 19/09/13. It is important to note that trans is not defined exclusively in this transitory way. It can be about reaching an 'endpoint', but for Cassils this is not the case.

Conversely, 'unbecoming' attests to that which is unattractive or unbefitting. Within Cassils' oeuvre, these terms can be said to pertain to the sexes, as the artist's work asks: what is (un)attractive or (in)appropriate to what sex and in relation to what and/or whom?

As a noun, 'image' can refer to a physical likeness; an optical counterpart, such as a reflection in a mirror, a projection onto a surface or a refraction by a lens; or a type of semblance, as in the phrase 'created in God's image'. As a verb, 'image' denotes the process of bringing something forth in the mind, through words, or through a medium. 'Image' can pertain to a certain look or styling, the assumption of a persona – such discourse revolving around body image is provoked by Cassils' work. Additionally, the photographic image plays an integral part in the performance, as does the ephemeral image in the residual trace left by the retinal burn.

In terms of becoming-an-image, is Cassils becoming more of an image than a real body? Something unobtainable, imaginary, immaterial? Is s/he becoming an image in the sense of becoming an object, a commodity? Or is Cassils becoming the image that the viewer wants to see? An image to look up to, an image that turns "stigma into strength"[21]? Taking *Becoming an Image* as a starting point, what fascinates me is the notion of image-becoming in Cassils' performance works.

At the outset of the performance, measuring a similar height to Cassils, a block of clay in the performance space is evoked as a corporeal surrogate, a presence in the absence of a body. As an object acting as proxy for a body, the clay is not figurative. It is not a fully imaged body. And yet, I perceived it as a body, bodily, or evocative of body parts. It was as if the clay matter were beaten into some semblance of bodily forms, which were then, in turn, beaten out of it. Crevices and bumps, like rippling musculature, were materialised from and through the clay surface only to be flattened and eliminated prior to another configuration, followed by another and another. The clay oscillated continually between bodily becoming and unbecoming throughout the performance, evoking ambiguities as to which body was more trans, Cassils' or the clay.

[21] Halberstam (1998), xii

Figure 11 - Cassils, *Becoming an Image* (2013). National Theatre Studio, London. Photo: Cassils with Manuel Vason.

Keeping in mind the commission context, the performance relates the enactment of a violent outburst on a trans or genderqueer body. In that sense the clay body reads as a possible mirror to the artist's; Cassils, as non-binary trans, could be the victim of such violence. That said, Cassils' role in the piece as aggressive agent overshadows her/his victimisation. As such, I would like to take a moment to consider the relationship the work has to violence.

Hegemonic power dictates descriptive and prescriptive systems that govern gender appearances, behaviours and practices, delimiting what counts as viable in terms of sex and gender. These powers maintain a domain of intelligible bodies that conform to a set of norms through citation, reiteration, and naturalisation. In establishing an ontology of legitimate bodies, a category of illegitimate bodies is established in turn. Those who do not conform, such as trans and genderqueer persons, are thus subordinated by hegemonic ideas and practices, subject to "the violence performed by gender norms."[22] The violence imposed by gender norms is resultant of the need to enforce and maintain

[22] Butler (1990), xxv

dominance, to continually constrain what counts as viable. Such discriminatory or dehumanising violence can manifest itself both physically and non-physically. As the aforementioned statistics cited by Cassils disclose, physical violence against genderqueer and trans individuals is on the increase. In *Becoming an Image* Cassils performs a transphobic act of violence, a 'queer-bashing'. Casting her/himself as masculine aggressor s/he enforces hegemony, maintaining or recovering 'order' through violent means. Beating the clay into a bodily semblance, then eradicating its bodiliness, it is as if Cassils makes repeated futile attempts to enforce conformity upon the clay body, to make it assume a 'normative'(ly gendered) human morphology. In *Becoming an Image* Cassils enacts the violence imposed by the constraints of a heteronormative hegemonic schema, one that delimits what or who counts as a viably sexed body or gendered subject.

Figure 12 - Cassils, *Becoming an Image* (2013). National Theatre Studio, London. Photo: Cassils with Manuel Vason.

Making a performance out of sculpting, *Becoming an Image* prompts questions about 'matter', 'form' and the process of giving form to matter. To open up a discussion about each of these terms, let us consider their classical etymologies. Originating from the Greek for wood, timber or material, the term *hyle* also denotes origin and development. Aristotle adapted the word to mean 'matter' or

substance and this matter receives form or determination from outside itself.[23] As Butler explains: "For Aristotle, the soul designates the actualisation of matter, where matter is understood as fully potential and unactualised."[24] In *de Anima*, Aristotle writes:

> [the soul is] the first grade of actuality of a naturally organised body… That is why we can wholly dismiss as unnecessary the question whether the soul and the body are one: it is as meaningless to ask whether the wax and the shape given to it by the stamp are one, or generally the matter [*hyle*] of a thing and that of which it is the matter [*hyle*].[25]

In the original Aristotelian Greek, the phrase 'shape given by the stamp' is denoted by the single word '*schema*', meaning form, shape, figure, appearance, character.[26] Applying Aristotle's terminology to Cassils' performance of *Becoming an Image*, for the duration of the piece, albeit through the unleashing of an aggressive assault, Cassils gives form or *schema* to the clay matter or *hyle*. This ascription of form to matter is a duplicate of the process enacted in Cassils' performance, *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture*, the work that preceded *Becoming an Image*. In *Cuts* the matter to be formed was that of Cassils' own body. *Cuts* was a six month long endurance piece[27], during which time Cassils was devoted to building up her/his muscle mass to maximum capacity. In 23 weeks s/he gained 23 pounds of muscle by honouring a strict bodybuilding regime.

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[23] Definition of 'hyle' extracted from the Oxford English Dictionary. Butler also gives definition to the term in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), 7.

[24] Butler (1993), 8

[25] Aristotle, 'De Anima', *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), book 2, chapter 1, 412b7-8

[26] Butler (1993), 8

[27] *Cuts* is not just an enduring performative action. The work also exists in the format of an exhibition installation comprised of the following: photographic ephemera; a three channel video installation documenting Cassils' bodily transmogrification process titled *Body Composition*; a more stylised two channel video installation, *Fast Twitch // Slow Twitch*; a pin-up image entitled *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis*; and the publication *LadyFace // ManBody*. The two latter components will be discussed in detail at a later stage of this chapter.

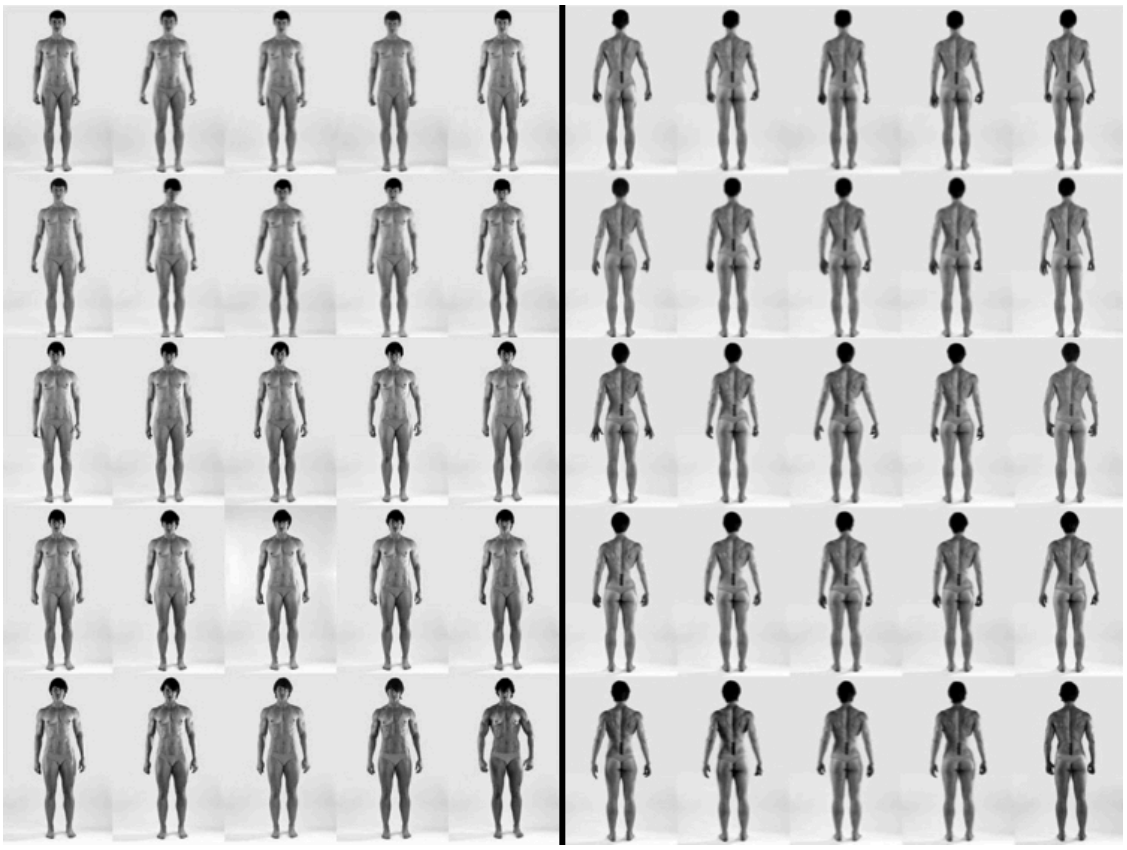

Figure 13 - Cassils, *Time Lapse, Front and Back* (2011). Photo: Cassils.

As a mode of construction, bodybuilding is a formalising and idealising process of sculpting within which the body is the medium. Bodybuilding is a sport in the sense that it is a type of athletic training for competitive ends, but it can also be understood as an art form or an aesthetics. The product of the bodybuilder's training is a body which has been crafted solely for exhibition. The competitive bodybuilder is evaluated aesthetically, scrutinised and judged against criteria which rewards bulk, but is equally concerned with form. Judgement is passed on symmetry, proportion; each individual muscle should be cleanly divided and discernible, with such clarity of definition that the striations of the muscle tissue can be seen through the surface of the skin. The muscles should sit just below the skin's surface and be prominent and chiselled rather than blunted by an overlay of subcutaneous fat.[28] Carving away fat with clarifying exercises that leave only muscle, bodybuilders undertake a process which they term 'razoring', 'ripping' or 'cutting'.[29] These are the 'cuts' to which the title of Cassils' endurance piece refers. Within the six-month timeframe of Cassils' performative

[28] For an expansion of the criteria against which competitive bodybuilders are judged see Charles Gaines and George Butler, *Pumping Iron: The Art and Sport of Bodybuilding* (London: Sphere Books, 1977), 168-172.

[29] Ibid., 44

transformation, her/his bodily contours became defined sculptural forms. *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* and *Becoming an Image* converge in that each performance revolves around a process of bodily transmogrification (in literal and metaphorical terms respectively).

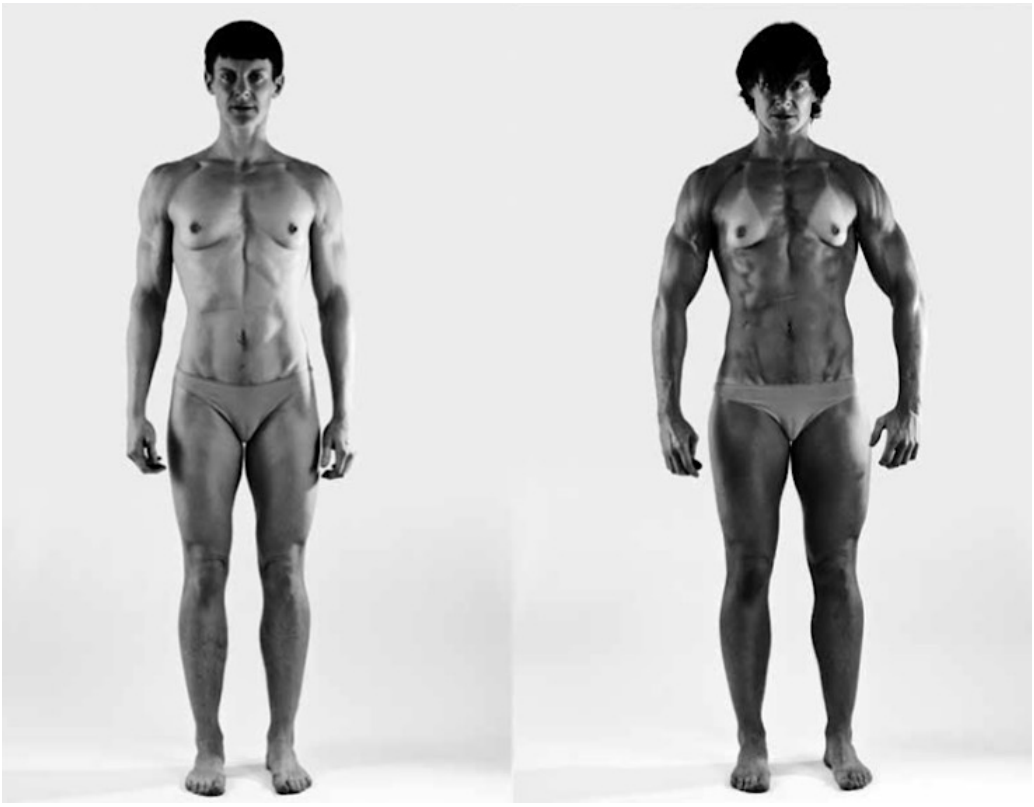

Figure 14 – Cassils, *Day One, Day One Hundred and Sixty One*, detail from *Time Lapse, Front* (2011). Photo: Cassils.

As well as a sculptural art form, bodybuilding is also performative. Competitors are judged on poses or 'shots'[30] that give expression to the physique. Firstly, a set of compulsory poses that showcase each muscle group must be performed, followed by a self-styled pose routine set to music, allowing for expression of individuality. A mixture of sporting prowess and theatrical spectacle, the performativity of contemporary bodybuilding grew out of the stage act of the nineteenth-century European strongman.

[30] For a glossary of terms specific to bodybuilding see Thomas E. Murray, 'The Language of Bodybuilding', *American Speech* 59:3 (Autumn, 1984), 195-206. 'Shots' is defined on p. 201.

One such strongman was Eugen Sandow. Hailed as 'the perfect man' by physical fitness experts and journalists alike[31], Sandow's bodily contours were likened to the idealised forms of classical sculpture. Aesthetically, Sandow set the standard. His physique represented an embodiment of both scientific training and classical form, which had been hitherto unmatched by earlier strongmen. He exhibited the bulk, proportion, and symmetry sought after in contemporary competitive bodybuilding. Sandow initially emerged as a strongman on the English music-hall stage. He then made his American debut in 1893 in New York City. Touring continually thereafter, he made live appearances at vaudeville theatres across the United States until 1906. Sandow would begin his acts by striking poses to exhibit the muscularity of his form, before lifting dumbbells and barbells and turning backflips. Each show climaxed with the performance of some enormous feat of strength, for instance, "perform[ing] a regulation army drill with a good-sized man instead of a musket."[32] The popularity of Sandow's demonstrations of strength, and the excitement that he instilled as a result of his physique, roused an inspiration for bodybuilding in early twentieth-century America[33], resulting in him being dubbed the 'father of modern bodybuilding'.[34] My reasons for digressing momentarily into the realm of the strongman are threefold: firstly, to trace the performative roots of bodybuilding in its current competitive form and indicate Cassils' appropriation of both the sculptural and performative modes outlined. Secondly, to situate the present discussion in America, or more specifically in the context of California, where bodybuilding attained a prolific popularity in the twentieth-century, as proceeding paragraphs impart. Thirdly, so as to narrativise the development of a masculinised history of becoming an armoured subject. An explanation of what I mean by this last point requires extension beyond the territory of the strongman.

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[31] See John F. Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001) for his chapter 'Who is the Perfect Man? Eugen Sandow and a New Standard for America', 21-76.

[32] Kasson (2001), 36. *Becoming an Image* is in that trajectory of performance as a demonstration of strength, endurance and prowess, as in vaudeville theatre. Whilst *Cuts* is equally demonstrative of these qualities, they are not witnessed live 'on-stage'. Rather, the work is evident in the form of the body itself, a body which has been crafted for exhibition.

[33] For a detailed history of bodybuilding from its beginnings up to 1977 see Gaines and Butler (1977), 109-131. For a more contemporary history, citing aesthetic shifts that emerged during the 1980s and 90s and the resultant impact on bodybuilding up to 2010, see 'Part 1: Hyper-Muscular Bodies' of Niall Richardson, *Transgressive Bodies: Representations in Film and Popular Culture* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 25-72.

[34] Kasson (2001), 7

Sandow became prominent in America at a time in Western society when appreciation of the male body was at an unprecedented low. In the art world, interest in the female nude had surpassed its male counterpart, Victorianism had covered the body, and the Industrial Revolution had devalued it, "making physical strength largely unimportant for the first time in history."[35] Reasserting strength, Sandow imaged forth a masculine embodiment to aspire to, a muscularity that clad the body armour-like in defence against the emasculating threats of modernity. Sandow was thus "created out of the cultural demands of his time"[36], serving as a reminder of what the male body could look like and do. Similarly, during the Great Depression of the 1930s in the United States, millions of American males felt emasculated by their incapacity to provide for their families. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) provided jobs and income to the unemployed, hiring workers to construct transport infrastructures as well as public buildings and recreational spaces. These projects were financed by the government for use by the wider community in a period of social rebuilding and transformation. In 1934 the WPA installed gym equipment on the beach immediately south of the pier in the city of Santa Monica in Western Los Angeles county, California. On this site, a place for exhibitionism and public entertainment, gymnastic and acrobatic displays were routinely held on the city-provided equipment, whilst a platform on the beach equipped with weight lifting apparatus provided a workout area for bodybuilders. This was the original Muscle Beach, a site widely regarded as the birthplace of the renewed fixation with physical fitness in twentieth-century America. As these selected examples impart, whenever cultural or socio-economic factors imposed a threat or 'crisis of masculinity' upon the male body, re-masculinisation was proposed as a means of deflection through building the body, either via physical exertion or the practice of bodybuilding. This history, exclusive to the male body, canonises a certain body type as the masculine ideal that ought to be aspired to. But, as has been established, such 'naturalised' reiterations of identity are constrained in relation to subversive, queered copies of identity. Cassils' presentation of a counterhegemonic masculine embodiment, therefore, constitutes an undoing of idealised masculinity that challenges the normative regime.

[35] Gaines and Butler (1977), 128
[36] Kasson (2001), 23

To illustrate how Cassils contextualises her/himself within the Californian bodybuilding subculture, I will briefly resume with recounting its history. The tumbling platform from the Santa Monica facility was removed in 1959 due to difficulties in the daily maintenance and supervision of the site and, subsequently, Muscle Beach, Venice inherited the modern fame and attention that was generated by the original Muscle Beach in Santa Monica.[37] In 1965, bodybuilder Joe Gold opened the first Gold's Gym on Pacific Avenue, Muscle Beach, Venice, having gained knowledge and expertise from training at the original Muscle Beach in Santa Monica. In 1977, Gold's Gym received international attention after featuring in *Pumping Iron*, a documentary film focusing on the 1975 IFBB (International Federation of Bodybuilders) Mr. Universe and Mr. Olympia competitions.[38] With its reputation of being *the* place to go for the latest training techniques, and its history of producing bodybuilding champions, Gold's Gym, Venice became known as 'The Mecca of Bodybuilding'[39], still retaining a prestigious reputation today.

Entering into this Californian subcultural history, Gold's Gym, Venice became the site of Cassils' bodily transmogrification. There, Cassils trained with Charles Glass, an original Muscle Beach affiliate and a renowned bodybuilding coach with a reputation for training elite, competition standard pro-bodybuilders and turning them into world champions. Supplementary to her/his training, Cassils' diet, devised by a nutritional specialist, dictated that on a daily basis s/he would consume the equivalent caloric intake required by a 190-pound male athlete. As rigorous and gruelling a process as the training regime, this diet entailed considerable discipline on Cassils' part, as, in order to consume that many calories on a daily basis, s/he had to eat every two to three hours.[40] Cassils set out to transform the sexed body holistically through exercise and diet, without the use of hormone treatment or surgical procedures. "This twist on 'getting cut' queers the trans body by showcasing the cut of musculature as opposed to

[37] Dan Knapp, 'New Acquisition Pumps USC Up' news article on the University of Southern California website, posted 28/11/05 <http://www.usc.edu/uscnews/stories/11855.html> accessed 08/01/14

[38] Dir. Robert Fiore & George Butler, *Pumping Iron* (USA: Cinema 5, 1977) 85 minutes, colour DVD

[39] See <http://www.goldsgym.com> accessed 08/01/14

[40] Cassils explained the training and diet regimes that s/he undertook for the *Cuts* project at the presentation delivered at Whitechapel Gallery, 14/04/13.

the cut of the surgeon's knife."[41] Cassils' non-medicalised strategy for sculpting the body, as well as her/his reference to 'traditional' sculpture in the work's title, are juxtaposed here with reference to the more typical form of trans sculpting affected by medical intervention. Arguably then, the intervention made by Cassils' *Cuts* project is also in trans discourse, as s/he makes the case for transition without recourse to medical practices.

Keeping in mind Cassils' holistic approach, as well as the aforementioned Aristotelian philosophy that casts body and mind as one, consider bodybuilding as a form of self-invention, a means to image forth an idea of oneself through the materiality of the body. As a process of forcing the body to conform with an idea conceived of in the mind, bodybuilding entails a vast amount of discipline both psychically and physically. In terms of athleticism, the body requires resistance in order to grow and generate form. Charles Gaines, the author of *Pumping Iron: The Art and Sport of Bodybuilding*, remarks: "The body is a reluctant medium." It resists. Just as the clay body resisted shaping in the performance of *Becoming an Image*. To develop any body part into what it is capable of becoming "requires hundreds of hours of demanding more than it wants to give."[42] Following on from these ideas of self-invention, at this juncture I propose a turn away from a focus on the physical sculpting of bodily materiality toward a psychoanalytical structure of bodily formation or becoming and its connections with a formation of the self, 'I' or ego.

In the essay, *On Narcissism* (1914), Freud describes narcissism as a withdrawal of the libido from people and objects in the external world and a redirection of that psychic energy onto the ego, or the self.[43] Considering bodily pain, Freud

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[41] <http://www.moving-image.info/artistheathercassils/> accessed 20/12/13. Cassils did, however, take mild steroids for eight weeks of the training. Cassils explains: "My decision to take (illegal) steroids was to enact an alternative tampering with the endocrine system, which, when combined with intense physical training and massive caloric intake, facilitated transformation into a muscle bound 'cut' physique without the use of testosterone." (Cassils interviewed in <http://artsy.net/post/editorial-bodybuilder-artist-heather-cassils-channels-lynda-benglis> accessed 20/12/13). Anxious to validate her/his temporary steroid use, Cassils frames her/his drug intake as a calculated risk, a necessary sacrifice that had to be made in order to facilitate as dramatic a transformation as possible in terms of muscle growth.

[42] Gaines and Butler (1977), 52

[43] Sigmund Freud, 'On Narcissism' (1914), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol 14, trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, Alan Tyson (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 67-102 (74-5)

asks whether the self-preoccupations of those suffering from "organic disease", illness or injury, might be understood as libidinally invested in their pain. He speculates as to whether such an investment in one's own bodily suffering can be read as a kind of narcissism, a withdrawal of libidinal interest from love objects and a lavishing of the libido on oneself.[44] Freud quotes a line of poetry by Wilhelm Busch to support his contention. Taking as his subject an individual who is suffering from toothache, Busch writes: "Concentrated is his soul, in his molar's narrow hole."[45] In Busch's couplet, physical pain is experienced through the psyche. The psyche concentrates on or invests in that physical pain, feeding it, redoubling its strength to the extent that, for the subject who suffers from this pain, anyone or anything in the external world which does not concern his suffering, drains from his consciousness. He becomes fixated on a part of his own body, withdrawing from any interest in external objects and instead lavishing interest upon himself.

Freud's essay continues: "The familiar prototype of an organ that is painfully tender, that is in some way changed and that is yet not diseased in the ordinary sense, is the genital organ in its states of excitation. In that condition it becomes congested with blood, swollen and humected, and is the seat of a multiplicity of sensations."[46] Freud's example here provides the means for his definition of erotogenicity: "Let us now, taking any part of the body, describe its activity of sending sexually exciting stimuli to the mind as its 'erotogenicity'." Freud then states that "certain other parts of the body – the 'erotogenic' zones – may act as substitutes for the genitals and behave analogously to them." According to Freud, what follows then is the potential to "regard erotogenicity as a general characteristic of all organs and [we] may then speak of an increase or decrease of it in a particular part of the body." In this passage Freud defines erotogenicity as the instance in which a part of the physical body becomes sexually stimulated and this excitation is registered psychically. He then proposes the genital organ as the prototype for this activity. When parts of the body other than the genitalia experience sexual excitation, Freud argues that these body parts behave like substitutes for the genitals. As such, any part of

[44] Ibid., 82
[45] From *Balduin Bählamm – der verhinderte Dichter*, chapter VIII, quoted by Freud in ibid.
[46] All citations in this paragraph: ibid., 84

the body may be experienced as erotogenic if that body part is invested in libidinally.

In Freud's theory of narcissism, the physical body is experienced through a psychic registering of pain and/or pleasure. Here body parts are delineated and made knowable on the condition of libidinal investiture; a lavishing of libido on a body part is what causes that body part to register in the conscious mind. I want to take these ideas and consider them in the context of bodybuilding.

In the world of bodybuilding, motivational phrases like "pain is growth"[47] are rife. Growth refers of course to the growth of muscles achieved through 'pumping iron' which translates as pushing or pulling against metal, or lifting weights.[48] To 'pump iron' is to work-out, with the express aim of building muscle mass. Offshoots of this terminology are 'the pump' and 'pumping up', nuanced concepts that require unpacking.

The pump is the addictive rush of bodybuilding. A complicated physical sensation, it comprises a heady mix of pain and pleasure. The pump describes a feeding and swelling of the muscles, as freshly oxygenated blood rushes to the site of the body that is being worked, engorging the muscle tissue. When the muscles are pumped they become distended with blood, tightening the surrounding skin. The muscles throb with a pressure that almost threatens explosion. Seven-time Mr. Olympia champion Arnold Schwarzenegger remarks upon the pump in the documentary film *Pumping Iron*: "The most satisfying feeling you can get in the gym is 'the pump'… Blood is rushing into your muscles and that's what we call 'the pump'. Your muscles get a really tight feeling like your skin is going to explode… and it feels fantastic."[49] We are reminded here of Freud's prototypical erotogenic organ, the genitals; congested with blood, swollen, humected, the sheen of sweat replacing the moistening of the genitals in a state of excitation, a sensation building to climax. Arguably what we have

[47] Gaines and Butler (1977), 22
[48] Murray (1984), 'Pump Iron' is defined on p. 201.
[49] Dir. Robert Fiore and George Butler, *Pumping Iron* (USA: Cinema 5, 1977) 85 minutes, colour DVD

here are body parts or the body as a whole behaving as substitute for the genitals.[50]

Bodybuilders pump up just before or between rounds of competition judging because the swelling caused by the blood flow enlarges the muscles. Pumping up is a strategy for a short-term, temporary maximisation of mass. Gaines describes the pumped muscles as taking on a "heavy feeling as though the work and pain, or even some of the iron itself, had been shoved in under the skin."[51] This painful aspect of the pump is the muscle tissue tearing. As Gaines elaborates: "Heavy, orchestrated exercise tears down the tissue of the muscles, and sleep and diet combine to replace and rebuild it, producing new and stronger flesh."[52] In view of Gaines' comment, the pump is not the exact moment of actual muscle growth. The visible enlargement of the pumped up muscles is, to some extent, illusory because the muscle tissue has not actually grown, it is instead swollen with blood. Rather, the pump is the precondition of muscle growth and this is precisely why the bodybuilder chases the pain or the pump, because he[53] knows that actual muscle growth will follow that sensation.

So the bodybuilder experiences the pump as pleasurable through engaging with the idea of increasing his muscle mass, whether that be in the short term, as a result of blood distention, or investing in the long term, working toward growing the muscle tissue. Bodybuilders may also have a pleasurable experience of the pump as a result of the release of endorphins. But for some, the pump is pleasurable in another sense. Some bodybuilders claim it is a sensation that feels better than orgasm. Expanding on his previous commentary on the pump, Schwarzenegger remarks: "It is as satisfying to me as coming is… I am getting the

[50] The rhetoric of bodybuilding is synonymous with hardness: bodybuilding literature advises how to "build rock hard muscle" <http://www.bodybuilding.com/fun/rock-hard-muscle-1-back-biceps.htm> accessed 23/06/14; professional bodybuilder Günter Schlierkamp titled his lifestyle DVD *Rock Hard*. This notion of bodybuilders 'getting hard' is rife with sexual innuendo, analogous to the penis in a state of excitation. In this sense, the pump evolves into a decidedly masculinist representation of libidinal pleasure.

[51] Gaines and Butler (1977), 42

[52] Ibid., 71

[53] This is, of course, equally applicable to female bodybuilders, but I deliberately and consciously use the male pronoun throughout this passage when referring to the generalised bodybuilder to highlight the phallic implications of the pump, a point which I take up again later in the course of this chapter.

feeling of coming in the gym… I am getting the feeling of coming backstage when I pump up, when I pose out in front of five thousand people…"[54] Exemplifying the Freudian assertion that any part of the body may be experienced as erotogenic if that body part is invested in libidinally, Schwarzenegger experiences the pump as a sort of kinesthetic *jouissance*, a complex sensation felt in this instance via the muscles themselves. Schwarzenegger's compulsion to chase the pump is driven by an autoerotic desire to experience an enjoyment that he equates with sexual satisfaction. Yet by fact of the strain under which he places his body in order to achieve this satisfaction, it will enduringly be tainted with pain, for, in the Lacanian sense of the word, *jouissance* describes that which lies beyond pleasure, which is not more pleasure, but rather pain.[55]

In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), Freud elaborates on the narcissistic relation established in *On Narcissism*. Here Freud suggests how one can account for the formation of that sense of self known as the ego: "Pain seems to play a part in the process, and the way in which we gain new knowledge of our organs during painful illnesses is perhaps a model of the way by which in general we arrive at the idea of our own body."[56] Reiterating the notion that bodily pain is the precondition of bodily self-discovery, Freud connects the formation of the ego with the idea one forms of one's own body. He thus frames the ego as being "first and foremost a bodily ego"[57]. The ego is formed from the psyche through a projection of the body and the ego is that projection. Freud writes: "The ego… is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface."[58]

Consider the mirrored walls in gym weight rooms. After a series of repetitions, the bodybuilder's own specular image is there to be gazed upon. Flexing his muscles, examining his lines, the effects of the pump are visible. Through such a self-reflexive lavishing of the libido, the ego takes the form of a surface

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[54] Dir. Robert Fiore and George Butler, *Pumping Iron* (USA: Cinema 5, 1977) 85 minutes, colour DVD; see also Gaines and Butler (1977), where a similar remark is made on p. 42.
[55] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis,* trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 184, 281
[56] Sigmund Freud, 'The Ego and the Id' (1923), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol 19, trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, Alan Tyson (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 3-66 (25-6)
[57] Ibid., 26
[58] Ibid.

projection. This surface can be understood as the body itself, "first and foremost a bodily ego", a bodily surface constructed for exhibition, and, in the scenario of the bodybuilder looking upon his physique in the gymnasium mirrored wall, this surface can also be understood as a literal mirror.

If, according to Freudian theory, an arrival at a certain idea of the body is achieved partially through pain and partially through a libidinal, narcissistic self-attention, given the parallels that can be drawn, a correlation between these ideas and bodybuilding is evident.

Freud's introduction of the bodily ego in *The Ego and the Id*, as well as his theory of narcissism, is rewritten by Lacan in *The Mirror Stage* (1949). For Lacan, the ego is formed through a process of psychic projection and identification before being marked, through language, in terms of sexual difference.

Lacan's account of the genesis of bodily boundaries takes the narcissistic relation as primary and this primary relation is indissociable from matter. Recalling Aristotle's *hyle* and *schema*, Lacan's mirror stage begins with bodily matter and how bodies materialise, how they assume their form or 'morphe'. The morphe is the shape by which the material discreteness of bodies is marked, how a body is differentiated from its surroundings and established as an entity within itself. The materiality of the body is acquired or constituted through the development of morphology.[59] To project a morphe onto a surface is to demarcate one's bodily boundaries, to distinguish the not-body from the body.

As in the case of the Freudian ego explained above, formed first and foremost as a bodily ego, throughout the duration of *Cuts*, Cassils trains her/his body into assuming a certain form, projecting a morphe onto or through the surface of her/his own body. It is as if this form is then reaffirmed in the performance *Becoming an Image* through the mirroring of Cassils' body in the clay slab. The body of clay mirrors Cassils' body in that it is, given the context of the commission, legible as a stand in for the genderqueer or trans body. Via Cassils' violent outburst, the clay becomes and unbecomes; it acts as proxy both for a

[59] Butler (1993), 38-9

body in a state of transition, but also for a body which is de-formed by the violence of gender norms, having taken a beating for its non-conformity. Cassils projects form onto the clay, forcing it to oscillate between bodily and not-bodily forms. In that process, the respective bodily boundaries of Cassils and the clay are established. The clay serves as not-body to Cassils' body; through differentiation, Cassils' bodily boundaries are demarcated by the clay matter.

For Lacan, the centre of the ego is located outside of itself in the externalised image, and it is that externalised image which confers bodily contours onto the ego. That is, the ego takes its form from external identifications with the specular image, or that which is other. Lacan's mirror is thus not necessarily a literal mirror, rather it provides the surface for the projected ego. Lacan notes: "It suffices to understand the mirror stage… as an identification, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image."[60] 'Becoming an image' then in a Lacanian sense, is to come into being through identification with an external other.

Cassils' identification with a certain morphology establishes her/his bodily ego which s/he projects through the surface of her/his body out into the world. But the identificatory process that informs morphogenesis is intricate. As Butler notes, conflicts over the "idealisation or degradation" of existing 'masculine' and 'feminine' morphologies are fought at the site of the morphological imaginary in complex ways.[61] For example, if, as social structures dictate, masculinity ought to be constrained to male bodies and femininity correspondingly constrained to female bodies, the existing feminine morphology is constituted by a distancing and a complete distinctness from masculinity. This distinctness is instituted by the laws of the heterosexual symbolic and its assertion of a gender binary that dictates how male and female bodies differ (in appearance). But what if one were to identify across this binary? Such identifications work beyond the logic of repudiation whereby one identification is submitted to at the expense of the other and thus open up the space for a spectrum of gender. The bodily morphology that Cassils identifies with is muscular, and muscularity, according to the heterosexual symbolic, signifies

[60] Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function' (1949), *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 3-9 (4)
[61] Butler (1993), 53

masculinity. Transforming the contours of the body through bodybuilding, Cassils affects a queering of established gender morphologies and their signifiers. S/he cites a masculine morphology (to appropriate Butler's terminology, Cassils arguably "idealises" a masculine morphology and "degrades" a feminine one) and radically resignifies it, calling into question the stability of existing 'feminine' and 'masculine' morphologies in the process.[62]

For Lacan, any morphology of the body, as a psychically invested projection, is a narcissistic idealisation or fiction; it is an imaginary formation. Furthermore, the dynamics of morphological identification, precisely because they take place as an imaginary process, are unstable. This appears to be a dubious assertion. Whilst morphology and morphological identifications as psychic processes are valid as pertaining to the imaginary realm of the Lacanian triad and are therefore unstable, that much is convincing, one might nevertheless argue for the reality of the flesh, the materiality that has been constituted by the morphological process. However, a bodybuilder's flesh, despite existing as a physical substance, is still susceptible to diminution.

An aspect of the *Cuts* project which addresses the instability of the body's contours is *Body Composition,* a three-channel video installation shown on three television monitors stacked, totem-like, in the gallery space. Part of the exhibition that accompanies the *Cuts* endurance work, *Body Composition* documents and unpacks in detail the rigor involved in Cassils' bodily transmogrification process. Raw footage of Cassils training at Gold's Gym plays out on the uppermost monitor; footage of her/him eating every meal that s/he consumed during the six month course of the project plays on the central monitor; and a time-lapse video made by splicing together photographs of non-perishable food containers, the contents of which Cassils had eaten during the project, is shown on the lower monitor. Cassils explains that, with the footage on the lowermost monitor, s/he strives to show both the capital that goes into maintaining a high calorie diet and the non-sustainability of the flesh that s/he

[62] The main thesis which runs throughout Halberstam's *Female Masculinity* is a questioning of what is socially regarded as 'masculinity'. For Halberstam, the potential to generate a change to the dictated 'norm' of male masculinity lies with alternative masculinities (Halberstam (1998), 3). Crafting a muscular corporeality, Cassils embodies Halberstam's call for an alternative masculinity.

had cultivated during the process, flesh that was both dependent upon continual ingestion and consumption to be maintained, and inseparable from ideas of surface construction.[63] *Body Composition* points to the endless work that goes into maintaining a 'cut' physique and the demand of a surface that requires continual construction. So if the body is unstable, what can be done to sustain it?

As Lacan would have it, the body itself as morphology, as a projected surface, is an imaginary formation and it remains that way until it "enters into the mediation of language… into the symbolic relation… into the order of a law…"[64] So, according to Lacanian theory, the morphological distinctness of the body can be sustained but only through language. Butler elaborates: "Bodies only become whole… by the sexually marked name. To have a name is to be positioned within the Symbolic"[65]. Without a name, the integrity of the body is unsustainable and it is that name, operating as a politically invested performative, that installs gender.[66] "The name is thus to be inculcated into that law and to be formed, bodily, in accordance with that law."[67]

Through the process of morphology, the ego, emerging first and foremost as a bodily ego, takes its form from external identifications. As I have argued, in *Becoming an Image*, it is the clay that gives form to Cassils' body (and vice versa) and in *Cuts*, Cassils' projected image delineates her/his bodily contours. But, according to Lacan's mirror stage, this delineation is a fiction, a formation that is suspended in the realm of the imaginary. In order to be fixed, the body must be named in the symbolic. But the morphe that Cassils projects through her/his body cannot be named; Cassils does not conform to the binary of the

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[63] <http://ellengallery.concordia.ca/en/audio-video.php> accessed 19/09/13

[64] Jacques Lacan, 'The Fluctuations of the Libido', Chapter XIV, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 176-186 (177)

[65] Butler (1993), 41

[66] In *How To Do Things With Words*, J. L. Austin proposes the distinction between performative and constative utterances. He argues that speech has both a constative element, which describes things in the world, as well as a performative element, which enacts the very activity that the speech signifies. The central example offered by Austin is the declaration made at a marriage ceremony, "I now pronounce you…", which puts into effect or produces the relation that it names. See J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà, 2nd edn (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975)

[67] Butler (1993), 41

symbolic, s/he refuses to be named in accordance with its mutually exclusive categories of 'male' and 'female'. The deformation of the clay body in *Becoming an Image* echoes or mirrors Cassils in her/his refusal to be named and thereby formed bodily by the symbolic law. Cassils can thus be said to contest sexual difference at the level of bodily morphogenesis and s/he remains, as a result, unfixed.

Ideas as to what constitutes the intelligible, legitimate, nameable body are regulated by prohibitions, which, in Butler's terms, "can be understood as the forcible and materialised effects of regulatory power."[68] As demonstrated using Cassils as a case in point, these prohibitions also produce the constitutive outside. If a bodily ego is unstable and unnameable, then it represents a reworking of the terms of those prohibitions that dictate what a gendered body is or looks like. Precisely because prohibitions do not always produce a body that fully conforms to the social ideal, "they may delineate body surfaces that do not signify conventional heterosexual polarities."[69] So, inadvertently or paradoxically, prohibitions serve to produce non-conventional bodies. "These variable body surfaces or bodily egos", Butler argues, "may thus become sites of transfer for properties that no longer belong to any anatomy."[70] Focusing on a specific component of Cassils' *Cuts* project, for the remainder of this chapter I explore this notion of a 'transferability of properties across different anatomies' and argue that Cassils employs this strategy as a further means to contest the binaries of sex and gender.

Cuts was commissioned by Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) for an exhibition called 'Los Angeles Goes Live: Exploring a Social History of Performance Art in Southern California' (LAGA). LAGA explores the histories and legacies of the region's performance art scene of the 1970s and early 1980s. Having researched this archive, Cassils cites Lynda Benglis' 1974 *Artforum* advertisement as an inspiration for one aspect of the *Cuts* project, a pin-up entitled, *Advertisement (Homage to Benglis)*.

[68] Ibid., 34
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid.

Primarily a sculptor, Benglis has explored materials widely in her practice. A key advocate of American post-minimalist art of the 1960s and 70s, she is renowned for working with poured polyurethane foam and molten metals; fluids that, when solidified, arrest the moment of flow, producing a permanent record of transformation. Amorphous and inchoate, these oozing agglomerations are formed from matter suspended in a process of transition or (un)becoming. In 1974, art historian and critic Robert Pincus-Witten wrote a feature on Benglis' sculptural practice for publication in the November issue of *Artforum*.[71] Receptive to his intention, Benglis announced that she would like to make an accompanying work within the context of the magazine itself. A deviation from the primary medium of her artistic production, the piece that Benglis produced is a printed image in which the artist's own body is deployed in and as the work; she constructed a performative self-portrait. That Cassils titles her/his piece *Homage to Benglis* necessitates an examination of the 1974 *Artforum* advertisement. Moreover, a discussion of Benglis' image is useful to my analysis of Cassils' pin-up because Benglis' portrait is a performance bent on challenging gender power relations.

Benglis' piece consists of a two-page spread with a black background. In the top left corner is a single line of copy, printed in a small, white typeface, which reads: "Lynda Benglis courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery copyright © 1974 Photo: Arthur Gordon." Opposite, on the far right hand side of the spread is an image of the artist. As the accreditation discloses, Benglis worked with fashion photographer, Arthur Gordon, to produce a portrait of herself. Save for a pair of cat's-eye sunglasses, Benglis is photographed naked. Bikini tan lines stand out starkly against her otherwise deeply tanned flesh and her skin glistens with an oily sheen. Evocative of a pornographic pin-up, Benglis riffs on that visual language to produce an image that is both playful and provocative. Knees slightly bent, she stands at an angle to the camera and, with her hand on her hip, she articulates a defiant gesture, one that deviates from the typical pornographic vernacular. In her right hand Benglis grasps a double-headed latex dildo. She holds it to her crotch, angling it in such a way that one head stands erect and the other is obscured by her pubic hair.

[71] Robert Pincus-Witten, 'Lynda Benglis: The Frozen Gesture', *Artforum* 13:3 (November 1974), 54-59

Figure 15 - Lynda Benglis, *Artforum* advertisement (1974). Photo: Arthur Gordon.

Benglis' dildo, positioned as it is at the lips of her vulva, is evocative of auto-eroticism, yet, I would argue, this dildo is more markedly legible as an extension of the artist's body than an object to be inserted into it. That said, Benglis' 'penis' is obviously fake. The anatomical implausibility of her enormous appendage renders it as object and by objectifying the penis in this manner Benglis transforms it into a symbol – the phallus; the phallus being an ideology that denotes masculine authority, not an essential anatomical part of the male body. If Benglis' dildo is to be read as phallus, then, as is the case in caricature wherein certain features are exaggerated for comic or grotesque effect, the sheer scale of it makes a mockery of the ideology of the phallus. Hand on hip, posing playfully with her absurdly immense member, the resulting image is cocky, aggressive even. Her ridiculing performance highlights the performativity of phallic authority. She draws attention to the posturing of masculinity and puts herself in its place of culturally constructed privilege. Benglis points out that the phallus or the position of masculine authority is self-adopted, constructed or performed. It is a 'corporeal style' that crafts a body which accrues cultural privilege.[72] Benglis is referencing and mocking this cultural privileging of the

[72] Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal* 40:4 (December 1988), 519-531 (521)

male organ but she is saying that the notion of cultural privilege is unstable. It is an assumed authority, rendered authoritative only because of continual citations and reiterations which occur within the very culture that it supports – patriarchy. As Amelia Jones phrases it: "it is Benglis' deflation of the pretensions of the male organ that empowers her, endowing her with… phallic power."[73]

To fully unpick these pretensions of the male organ and understand how Benglis deflates them we must return to psychoanalytic theory to consult Lacan's essay, 'The Signification of the Phallus'. Here Lacan argues: "…the phallus is not… an object (part-, internal, good, bad, etc.) …Still less is it the organ – penis or clitoris – that it symbolises. And it is no accident that Freud adopted as a reference the simulacrum it represented for the Ancients. For the phallus is a signifier…"[74] In this passage, Lacan begins by attempting to establish what the phallus is by stating what it is not. He then turns his attention to establishing the phallus as a site of control, as "the signifier that is destined to designate meaning effects as a whole"[75], that is, as the privileged signifier. Before considering the phallus as privileged signifier, we must first establish what it is that the phallus signifies.

As noted above, Lacan writes that the phallus symbolises both the penis and the clitoris, denying that the phallus is either; inasmuch as the phallus symbolises an organ, it is not that organ. Yet it is important to note that the penis and clitoris are always symbolised differently. The assumption of sexed positions within the symbolic order revolves around the threat of castration which is embodied by the female body and addressed to the male body. The clitoris is symbolised as not having, as penis envy with the potential to dispossess or castrate. The penis is symbolised as having with the fear of losing, that is, as castration anxiety.[76] According to Lacan's structure, through its symbolisation as penis envy, the female genital organ is defined by its not having a penis. The relation between

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[73] Amelia Jones, 'Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures, and Embodied Theories of Art', *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*, ed. Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer and Arlene Raven (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 16-41 (34)

[74] Jacques Lacan, 'The Signification of the Phallus' (1958), *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 271-280 (275)

[75] Ibid.

[76] Jacques Lacan, 'The Meaning of the Phallus', *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, trans. Jacqueline Rose (New York: Norton, 1985), 74-85 (75)

the phallus and the clitoris, therefore, is inseparable from a connection back to the penis, or rather the lack thereof. As such, a relation of identity holds between the penis and the phallus; the phallus, whether it symbolises the penis or the clitoris, is always concerned with the presence or absence of a penis. According to Lacan, within the heterosexual exchange "the phallic signifier clearly constitutes her"[77], that is to say woman *is* the phallus, and, as "the signifier of the other's desire"[78] (the other being the male counterpart who desires her), she is the phallus he has. As Butler remarks: "To 'be' the phallus, as women are said to be, is to be both dispossessed and dispossessing. Women 'are' the phallus in the sense that they absently reflect its power; this is the signifying function of the lack."[79] Hence how the clitoris can never be said to 'have' the phallus. Instead it is always man who assumes the position of 'having' within the heterosexual symbolic.

So Lacan lays claim to the phallus as privileged signifier and, though he explicitly denies that the phallus *is* the penis, a relation between the phallus and the penis holds regardless. As a result, the penis, and indeed the one who has it, can be said to assume a position of privilege. But the 'penis' that Benglis has is fake. It is a substitute. So now the question becomes: What substitutes for a missing penis and, if it can be substituted, what does this mean for the pretensions of the male organ? To answer this, we must turn to the Freudian concept of the fetish.

According to Freud, the fetish is a substitute for the penis, a particular penis, one that had been important in early childhood but was later lost, or rather, a penis which should "normally" have been given up but is preserved from extinction by the fetish. As Freud surmises, "no doubt a fetish is recognised by its adherents as an abnormality"[80], however, it is rarely experienced as symptomatic of an ailment from which one suffers, indeed, fetishists derive erotic pleasure from the object of their fixation. For Freud: "The fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed

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[77] Lacan, 'The Signification of the Phallus' (1958), 280
[78] Ibid., 279
[79] Butler (1993), 51, fn. 30
[80] Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism' (1927), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol 21, trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, Alan Tyson (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 152-157 (152)

in and does not want to give up."[81] The reason why the male child refuses to give up this idea is because, if he acknowledges the absence of the penis which he thought his mother had, then his own possession of a penis becomes endangered, he fears castration.

The term 'repression' explains the pathological process of blocking from the mind the memory of a traumatic event. In this instance, that which is repressed is the moment when the boy saw his mother's genitals, and saw that she did not have a penis. In Freudian terminology, if 'repression' describes the affect, 'disavowal' describes the idea,[82] the idea being that woman has a penis. It is important to note that this idea has not been completely deleted from the mind, only blocked. The idea, or, to revert to Freud's terms, the disavowal persists, for, once the child has seen that his mother does not have a penis, he continues to retain the belief that she does, yet, not unaltered by the event of having seen her genitalia, his mind-set on the matter changes. He reaches a compromise: "Yes, in his mind the woman *has* got a penis, in spite of everything; but this penis is no longer the same as it was before. Something else has taken its place, has been appointed its substitute, and now inherits the interest which was formerly directed to its predecessor."[83] The fetish object therefore, substitutes for that which is thought to be missing. It acts as a stand in to relieve the anxiety produced by woman's lack.

As a fetish object, Benglis' dildo serves as a substitute for the missing penis. It is precisely because an object can stand in for the penis in the scenario of the fetishist that the pretensions of privilege allegedly attached to the male organ can come unstuck. Furthermore, given the relationship that holds between the penis and the phallus, if, as argued above, through objectifying the penis, Benglis transforms it into the transcendent ideological phallus, then her performance shows that if the penis can be substituted, it is equally feasible

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[81] Ibid., 152-153

[82] The definitions given to 'repression' and 'disavowal' in this paragraph are taken from Freud's essay, 'Fetishism'. However, Freud makes alternative distinctions between these terms in chapter VIII of *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940), stating that 'repression' pertains to defence against internal instinctual demands and 'disavowal' pertains to defence against the claims of external reality (202). See Freud, 'The Psychical Apparatus and the External World' (1940), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol 23, trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, Alan Tyson (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 195-204

[83] Freud, 'Fetishism' (1927), 154

that the phallus can be substituted. Whilst Lacan seeks to establish the phallus as a site of control which signifies in relation to a specific structure that attributes power accordingly, through phallic substitution Benglis demonstrates exactly the opposite: the transferability of the phallus and thus the transferability of its power.

To further explain this concept of transferability, we must re-engage with Lacan's system at a more critical level. For Lacan, the phallus is the most privileged of signifiers because it is the signifier against which everything takes its meaning, "the signifier that is destined to designate meaning effects as a whole."[84] But why is this so? And according to whom? To claim that the phallus is a privileged signifier is to performatively produce this effect. Indeed, Lacan's announcement of this claim is its performance.[85] Under what authority can Lacan make this claim? And under what authority can it be upheld? Continuing in this vein, if the phallus as privileged signifier can be questioned, so too can the system that upholds it. As we have already established, a structure of phallic placement is determined within the symbolic by a relation of mutual exclusion, a heteronormative structure of sexual difference in which men have the phallus and women are the phallus. The privilege of the phallus is secured through the reification of these structural relations, a reification which occurs within that system by those who support it through continual citation and reiteration. This results in the perpetuation of a system that is devised and maintained from within and, as a self-reflexive system, it is subject to contestation. Since this is a system within which a process of continual citation and reiteration occurs, in which the phallus is continually signified, there exists within it the possibility for potential variations or resignifications. It is this critique of the symbolic order that lays the foundation for Butler's chapter on what she terms the 'lesbian phallus' in *Bodies that Matter*.

For Butler, the lesbian phallus intervenes in the Lacanian scheme through a "critical mimesis"[86] which questions the installation of the phallus as the privileged signifier of the symbolic order. Proposing a strategy for

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[84] Lacan, 'The Signification of the Phallus' (1958), 275
[85] Butler (1993), 50
[86] Naomi Schor, 'This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 2:1 (1989), 38-58 (48), cited by Butler (1993), 42

resignification, Butler calls for a displacement of the phallus, that it attach to a variety of organs, signifying in relation to "other body parts or other body-like things"[87]. To suggest that the phallus might symbolise body parts other than the penis does not constitute a deviation from the Lacanian scheme, after all, the phallus does symbolise both the penis and the clitoris, as discussed. What does constitute a deviation, however, is the suggestion that a body part other than the penis 'has' the phallus.[88] Lacan's symbolic order rests on a denial of transferability, an ascription of roles, either 'being' or 'having', and a subsequent relative attribution of phallic property. A transferability of the phallus would destabilise the distinction between 'being' and 'having', "upset[ting] the logic of non-contradiction that serves the either-or of normative heterosexual exchange."[89] Likewise, to argue that the phallus symbolises other body parts would call into question the mutually exclusive trajectories of castration anxiety and penis envy and thereby destabilise the ordering of sexual difference. I want to argue that Cassils uses this strategy of phallic transferability to question the symbolic order's binary structure of sexual difference. Politically, this is where Cassils' and Benglis' projects diverge.

Cassils describes her/his work as drawing on feminism and feminist art practice[90] and cites Benglis' *Artforum* advertisement as an inspiration for a particular aspect of the *Cuts* project, an image produced collaboratively with photographer, Robin Black, titled *Advertisement (Homage to Benglis)*. Firstly, in a nod to Benglis, Cassils worked with a fashion photographer to produce her/his image. Secondly, parallels exist between the two images in that they each encapsulate a certain seductiveness both in terms of content (as in the eroticisation of the body) and high-quality production. In aesthetic reference, Cassils' photograph is shot with a flash against a white background and, despite the brightness of the image, faint bikini tan lines are just about visible on her/his oiled skin. Cassils' homage to Benglis is thus evident aesthetically, but a political homage is less apparent. There is a certain continuity between the works in that Cassils' piece can be seen as a re-envisioning of Benglis' commentary on the performativity of gender and the transferability of the

[87] Butler (1993), 51
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid., 55
[90] 'About' section of Cassils' website <www.heathercassils.com> accessed 19/09/13

phallus, but for different political ends; Benglis enacts a send up of male privilege, whereas Cassils questions the binary structure of sexual difference. The shift between these artists can be identified as a matter of queerness.

Figure 16 - Cassils, *Advertisement: Homage to Benglis* (2011). Photo: Cassils with Robin Black.

Queering prompts us to see a material or object in a different way, against or to the side of what is expected or 'normative'.[91] The material or object that we are prompted to see differently in Cassils' image is the body itself. Cassils comments that, in her/his pin-up image, her/his "ripped masculine physique" substitutes for Benglis' double-ended phallus.[92] Here Cassils makes the case for her/his body as phallus, as in, s/he occupies the position of 'being' the phallus.

[91] I owe credit to David Getsy for his descriptions of queerness, which I have appropriated in this sentence. See 'Queer Formalisms: Jennifer Doyle and David Getsy in Conversation', *Art Journal* 72:4 (Winter 2013), 58

[92] "Substituting my ripped masculine physique for a double ended phallus…" Cassils made this remark in the print edition of the zine *LadyFace // ManBody*, 2011, n.p.

There is nothing radical in this alone, yet, simultaneously, in performing trans, Cassils cites masculinity through a muscular bodily morphology and through this morphology s/he also assumes the position of 'having' the phallus. Displacing and redeploying power from a traditional male context, the symbolic position of 'having' has been dislodged from the penis and transferred to other body parts, or the body as a whole. In this sense Cassils assumes dual roles of 'being' and 'having', thereby disrupting the mutual exclusivity of the heterosexual symbolic. Additionally, Cassils' use of the term 'substitute' to describe her/his body in place of Benglis' dildo signals back to the Freudian fetish. As has already been established, as a substitute for the missing penis, Benglis' dildo functions as fetish object. If Cassils' body substitutes for Benglis' dildo, then her/his body can also be said to function as fetish object. What we have here then is the body as both phallus and fetish. In Cassils' image, what comes to signify under the sign of the phallus is an alternative fetishised body. Cassils can thus be said to affect a resignification or reterritorialisation of the phallus through bodily queering.

At this juncture, I would like to briefly revisit that earlier strand of the present chapter focused on erotogenicity, as there lies within it a latent argument that I shall now make explicit, having outlined the theoretical framework of the fetish. Recall Freud's theory of experiencing any part of the body as erotogenic, the body behaving as a substitute for the genitals in *On Narcissism*. I would assert that, with this theory, Freud articulates a rhetorical affirmation of the transferability of the phallus. If this transferability is considered in conjunction with the notion of substitution in *Fetishism*, body parts or the bodily whole can fetishistically substitute for the male genitals and, by proxy, the phallus. Fetishists derive erotic pleasure from the object of their fixation. Mapping fetishism onto bodybuilding, such a derivation of erotic pleasure is reinforced by Schwarzenegger's polymorphously perverse remark in which he experiences multiple body parts, or indeed whichever muscle(s) he is training, as erogenous via the throb of the pump. The bodybuilder can thus be said to simultaneously occupy both Lacanian positions of 'having' and 'being'; 'having' the phallus through the construction of a hypermasculine, hypermuscular morphe and 'being' the phallus through experiencing the body as a fetishistic substitute for the genitals via the erotogenic experience of the pump. If through a

simultaneous 'having' and 'being' the orders of sexual difference are crossed, then there exists a sort of queerness to the practice of bodybuilding that suggests a latent degree of trans identification.

Turning to the reception of Cassils' image, Freud's writing on fetishism remains useful to my reading of *Advertisement (Homage to Benglis)* for its theorisations on both the act of viewing and perceptions of the sexed body. In 'Some Thoughts on Theories of Fetishism in the Context of Contemporary Culture', Laura Mulvey considers how semiotics and psychoanalysis can be used to bridge the gap between an image and what it purports to represent by deciphering the language of displacement that separates a given signifier from its apparent signified. Cassils' 'given signifier' is the physical body, and, when read according to the logic of established gender morphologies (which identify muscularity with masculinity, which is, in turn, rendered synonymous with the male body), its 'apparent signified' is that this given body is male. However, the relationship between signifier and signified here is not that straightforward. To quote Mulvey: "the image refers, but not necessarily to its iconic referent"[93] (iconic here meaning conventional or formulaic). Mulvey's essay proposes a consideration of fetishism, fetishism being a structure that arises out of such complexities in representing reality. Before I draw this chapter to a close, I want to deploy the concept of fetishism once again to discuss the tension between what is given to be seen and what is perceived in Cassils' pin-up image and to give voice to the muted dialogue of that which is displaced in between. To do so, we must return to Freud's text.

In the conception of Freud's fetish-object-as-substitute, the horror of castration experienced by the male child, both in terms of the perceived castration of his mother and the threat of castration posed toward him, establishes a "memorial to itself". Meanwhile, an aversion to the "real" female genitals occurs as a remainder of the repression that has taken place. This aversion is invested in the fetish object. The fetish is thus venerated by Freud as a "token of triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it."[94] A memorial to or a

[93] Laura Mulvey, 'Some Thoughts on Theories of Fetishism in the Context of Contemporary Culture', *October* 65 (Summer 1993), 3-20 (3)
[94] Freud, 'Fetishism' (1927), 154

memory of the horror of castration is triumphed over by an aversion to the reality of the female genitalia.

This positing of the fetish as triumphant is taken from Freud's 1927 essay *Fetishism*, yet, when he returns to the concept of disavowal in *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* in 1940, his thesis shifts. In the latter essay, Freud's concept of disavowal reads as follows: as a psychic process of displacement performed by the ego, disavowal is a means to fend off a demand from the external world which the subject finds distressing. The subject undertakes to blank out the perceptions which bring to knowledge this demand from reality. Yet, such an attempt at detaching oneself from reality remains incomplete and the disavowal is thus always supplemented by an inescapable acknowledgement of that reality. In other words, disavowal acknowledges its own origin in some form of trauma from which it attempts to distance itself. Its subsequent displacements both acknowledge and deny the existence of this trauma. Consequently, as Freud explains, "two contrary and independent attitudes always arise and result in the situation of there being a splitting of the ego."[95] In the case of fetishism, the two contrary and independent attitudes that co-exist are the wish that the female body had a penis and the reality that it does not. Freud therefore gives emphasis to the development of a dual reaction, a "splitting of the ego". As Mulvey explains, fetishism is "dependent on the ability to disavow what is known and replace it with belief and the suspension of disbelief. The fetish, however, is always haunted by the fragility of the mechanisms that sustain it."[96] For Mulvey, the mechanisms that sustain the fetish also threaten its existence. Freud's latter model of disavowal shows how it is a system that is in danger of collapse.

The notion of a split response, a disavowal that both acknowledges and denies trauma, is key to deciphering the language of displacement that separates a given signifier from its apparent signified and to the reception of Cassils' image. First let us consider the conception and production of the work.

Cassils' collaborative partner, Robin Black, photographs high fashion as well as shooting for homoerotic publications such as *Butt Magazine* and *Homotography*.

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[95] This unpacking of the term disavowal is paraphrased from Freud, 'The Psychical Apparatus and the External World' (1940), 202

[96] Mulvey (1993), 7

The aesthetics of both of these realms are clearly visible in Cassils' pin-up image.[97] The online presence of Black's photographs in homoerotic contexts, coupled with her gender-neutral name, often leads people to misread Black's identity and assume that her photographs are the product of a gay male gaze. Such an assumption affords Black a form of 'passing' with which Cassils feels some affinity as a trans-identified individual.[98] It also makes Black the ideal collaborative partner for Cassils' project. Black's portfolio, her subjects, her aesthetic, who she sells her work to and where she publishes it, how her photographs are disseminated and received, all work to set up the Cassils pin-up as another of Black's photographs of a gay male subject, serving to aid in the effect of Cassils' passing. Cassils' choice of collaborator thus contributes to the project's commentary on sexed (mis)perception. To disseminate the pin-up, the collaborative partners made use of Black's connections with both online and offline gay fashion and art publications. Leaking the image without disclosing anything about its subject, Cassils and Black hyperlinked it to the zine, *LadyFace // ManBody* and a blog of the same name.[99] An extension of the pin-up project and an elaboration of its play on gender perception and representation, *LadyFace // ManBody* is a catalogue of images of Cassils' body, photographed by Black. In the majority of these images, as in the pin-up, Cassils' mouth is red and overly lipsticked. As the title of the zine suggests, one would deduce that Cassils means to signify a 'ladyface' with this excessive cosmetic over-inscription. Meanwhile Cassils' taut, rippling musculature signifies a 'manbody'.

In the concept of the fetish, Mulvey remarks, the fetishistic substitute "also functions as a mask, covering over… the traumatic sight of nothing, and thus constructing phantasmatic space, a surface and what the surface might conceal."[100] Radically transforming the contoured mass of her/his body through

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[97] Cassils consulted the ONE Archive to research the aesthetic history of eroticised representations of male bodies, looking specifically at pre-AIDS epidemic fitness magazines. Toward the back pages of these publications the images become more pornographic. Inspired by the sense of a self-empowered sexual body in these photographs, Cassils sought to convey this in her/his homage pin-up, presenting "a self-determined body – the way I wanted to see myself." <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/heather/a-traditional-sculpture_b_983384.html> accessed 10/12/13

[98] Cassils stated this point about Black's 'passing' during the presentation at Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery <http://ellengallery.concordia.ca/en/audio-video.php> accessed 19/09/13

[99] To clarify, some viewers of *Advertisement (Homage to Benglis)* may not have followed up on this link, only seeing the pin-up image and in isolation of the wider project. For these viewers, Cassils' body may have passed as male without question.

[100] Mulvey (1993), 11

bodybuilding, Cassils affects the construction of a surface, projecting a muscular morphology that 'conceals' her/his biologically female 'birth body'. Arguably, in the *Homage to Benglis* pin-up, the body-as-fetish-object masks the traumatic sight of a castrated subject. For some viewers this may hold true. For others, this may only partially be so; the effect of this masking requiring reinforcement to convince, as offered in Cassils' donning of a white jock strap, stuffed at the crotch. Upon initial inspection, viewers likely perceive a 'male' body.[101] Cassils' overly lipsticked mouth can equally be construed as a construction that masks. The first half of the zine's title, 'ladyface', alludes to a performance of femaleness and feminine masquerade. Whilst lipstick may signify female performance, to my eye, Cassils is more masculine when photographed wearing the red lipstick than when her/his lips are left nude. Indeed, in the context where these images were shown, in gay male fashion publications, a male model wearing lipstick would not be incongruous. I read the red lips more as a means to sexualise the image than to signal femaleness. Remembering that the *Homage to Benglis* pin-up was leaked without any information about Cassils and her/his project, my reading of the red lipstick seemingly falls in line with that ruse.[102] The immediate effect of the pin-up is such that the photographed subject passes for male. However, as Mulvey suggests, a constructed surface always conceals a secreted depth. In titling the linked zine *LadyFace // ManBody*, Cassils clearly aims to allude to that which is concealed by the 'manbody' mask, as well as the cosmetic 'ladyface' mask. Beyond Cassils' muscularity and her/his red lips, diligent viewers of *Homage to Benglis* may perhaps register the faint bikini tan lines on Cassils' chest and begin to question the assimilation of binary gender's 'given signifiers' in a singular image/body/subject, potentially recognising them as queerly referent of something other than homoeroticism. The genderqueerness which is subtly insinuated in the pin-up is couched somewhat more overtly by the zine.

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[101] Or they may not. Although Cassils is clear in expressing her/his intentions of 1) creating an indeterminate representation and 2) orchestrating a scenario in which sexed (mis)perception is riffed upon, some viewers may immediately register the queerness of the image and the trans identification of its subject. Such is the unpredictability of performance and the inability of the artist to control the reception of a work.

[102] Notably though, equating red lipstick with sexualisation is an effect of socially engrained gender conventions, which code cosmetically constructed "sexuality of surface" (Mulvey (1993), 13) as feminine. So whilst I am arguing that, for me, the red lipstick does not immediately signal femaleness, rather a seductive sexualisation, my reading of the lipstick nevertheless retains a paradoxical latent nod towards constructed femininity.

Following on to the linked zine, in some images within *LadyFace // ManBody*, Cassils is photographed nude. Posing without the phallic appendage, Cassils presents her/his queer trans body and allows the pretence of passing as male to fall away. Remembering that the Freudian fetish includes a trace of indexicality in its function as 'memorial', that it retains something that points to the origin of the fetish, something that commemorates the horror of castration, by presenting her/his queer trans body full-frontal (a body that 'performs trans' or has been self-determinedly trans/formed without the use of hormone treatment or surgical procedures), Cassils retains and reveals that which is experienced by the male child in Freud's essay as the 'traumatic lack'. Separating the given signifiers from their apparent signified, the constructed surfaces/masks which have sustained the fetish slip, revealing the 'traumatic lack' and forcing its acknowledgement. Cassils may be able to pass as male, but in the same instance s/he leaves it open for the viewer to register her/his genderqueerness (whether that be by way of questioning the subtly evocative mixed signifiers within the pin-up and recognising a disjuncture between given signifier and apparent signified, or by clicking through to the hyperlinked zine and exploring Cassils' image in more detail – to be clear: I am not arguing that the 'lack' has to be *literally* revealed in order to achieve this effect).

Cassils' images address society's preoccupation with surface and its need to name and visually assign or read sex and gender according to binary structures. Cassils' intermingling and hyperbolisation of clichéd gender performances (excessive lipstick and a hypermuscular morphe) destabilise viewers' expectations of stable binary signals and their transparent and categorical legibility. S/he presents a challenge to those hegemonic cultural narratives through which sexual difference is typically represented, a challenge to the gendered visual regimes that dictate how (and whose) bodies are recognised as legitimate. S/he presents a queering of conventional heteroerotics. And yet, her/his platforms for staging these critiques are ones used by gay men who also queer, implicitly at least, heteronormative structures. Whilst Cassils' use of gay male websites to disseminate *Homage to Benglis* aids in her/his passing as male (thereby facilitating, or rather, amplifying the project's commentary on sexed (mis)perception), I want to argue that there is a further, political reason for situating the work in these particular queer spaces. Beyond her/his queering of

conventional heteroerotics, Cassils also queers conventional homoerotics by opening up a trans discourse within a queer context.

To explain this, I want to relate Cassils' account of how *Homage to Benglis* was circulated and responded to.[103] As stated earlier, initially, Cassils and Black disseminated the pin-up on the webpages of *Butt Magazine* and *Homotography*. From those planned locations, the image was appropriated by gay male forums and pitched against other eroticised bodies in 'hot or not' features. Within these 'hot or not' scales, Cassils' body was initially perceived as male and, judged as such, her/his body rated highly. Subsequently however, perhaps upon realisation of Cassils' breasts or having seen the full frontal images within the *LadyFace // ManBody* zine, votes decreased because the body on offer no longer fitted the criteria of judgment. Testimony to her/his aim to present alternative gendered modes of being and sexed forms of embodiment, Cassils' pin-up and *LadyFace // ManBody* zine proffer a catalogue of indeterminate "different visual options for people"[104]. The response in online gay male forums via 'hot or not' scales reflects this indeterminacy. People were not sure of what they were seeing or rating. Cassils' sliding up and down the scale as a result of fluctuations in viewers' votes is telling of this fact. In aiming to produce alternative visual options that would rupture expectations, the work was evidently successful.[105] And yet there is another politics at work in this project.

Recall the commission context of *Becoming an Image*. According to Cassils, the ONE Archive "privileges certain representations" of certain bodies, specifically gay white male bodies.[106] Aware of this representational imbalance, the curators that commissioned Cassils' performance suggested that s/he make a piece that would respond to the archive's missing elements. Thus, rather than drawing

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[103] <http://ellengallery.concordia.ca/en/audio-video.php> accessed 19/09/13

[104] <http://ellengallery.concordia.ca/en/audio-video.php> accessed 19/09/13

[105] To speak of the work's online dissemination in broader terms: on the one hand, Cassils had produced a range of enabling trans-positive images which act as "allegories of gender self-determination and transformation" (David J. Getsy, 'The Image of Becoming: Heather Cassils's Allegories of Trans Formation', *Cassils* (MU, 2015), 10-22 (16)) and yet reactions to the project were not always this celebratory. Cassils' images were also met with vitriolic transphobic responses that violently objected to her/his transgression of gender norms. Cassils reports such responses in 'Bashing Binaries – Along with 2,000 Pounds of Clay', *The Huffington Post*, posted 07/09/13, available online here: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/heather/bashing-binaries-along-with-2000-pounds-of-clay_b_3861322.html> accessed 19/09/13

[106] <http://ellengallery.concordia.ca/en/audio-video.php> accessed 19/09/13

from the contents of the ONE Archive, Cassils chose to highlight its absences. As David J. Getsy notes:

> There is a long history of the appropriation or suppression of the presence of transfolk in and by lesbian, gay, and queer histories, and [with *Becoming an Image*] Cassils sought to speak to the ways in which nonascribed genders and gender variance were either misconstrued or inadequately represented by archives and histories based on sexuality. Consequently, [Cassils] decided to produce a performance that problematised documentation and visibility itself.[107]

Though *Homage to Benglis* preceded *Becoming an Image*, as stated at the outset of this chapter, Cassils' entire oeuvre constructs a visual critique and discourse around the ideologies, histories and politics of (trans)gender experience and representation. That Cassils is sensitive to the contents and relative omissions of queer histories, suggests that her/his dissemination of her/his pin-up image in gay male spaces is an intervention which opens up a space of representation within a space of prior marginalisation. Meanwhile, in the instances of Cassils' passing as a gay man in these online forums, this stratagem of passing is equally active and interventional when read as a veiled critique, as a way of negating the exclusionary force of queer (archival) histories, as a negation of a negation.

Whilst Cassils confronts the cultural erasure of trans bodies, for Getsy, s/he also confronts the paradoxical treatment of trans bodies as "object[s] of voyeuristic fascination".[108] Arguing for Cassils' body as fetish object, as I have in this chapter, may seem to contradict this reading of Cassils' work. Getsy adds, "Perhaps the central issue for artists working from transgender perspectives has been this question of how to demand recognition without activating those visual regimes that fetishise the trans body or that visualise it only in relation to its past."[109] The fetishising attitudes that Getsy speaks of "dehumanise" the trans body and "trivialise" the work that self-determined processes of trans/formation entail. Though *Becoming an Image* resonates with this idea by problematising the visual capture of the trans body's image, Cassils' images for *Cuts* function differently. Rather than strategically avoid fetishising visual regimes, these images do precisely the opposite; they employ those regimes for affirmative

[107] Getsy (2015), 18
[108] Ibid., 12
[109] Ibid., 13

gains. It is the artist her/himself that fetishises the trans body. By orchestrating her/his own fetishisation, Cassils denies her/his viewers the possibility of authoring that process. S/he employs a fetishistic aesthetic to exploit its potency as a strategy of empowerment.

Conclusion

This chapter has used Cassils' work as a case study with which to demonstrate the instability of those heteronormative power structures that dictate how the sexed and gendered body should look and behave. Via three psychoanalytically informed lines of argumentation, I have staked claims for Cassils' deployment of critical strategies which drive to this end. S/he contests the binaries of sex and gender at the level of bodily materiality and form; through transference and resignification of the phallus; and via the concept of the fetish. This is not to say that these strategic interventions are distinct from one another; they are interwoven parts of the same argument, which I have layered over the course of this chapter in order to build and strengthen my case.

Amassing a hypermuscular morphology, Cassils identifies across the binary model instituted by the laws and prohibitions of the heterosexual symbolic. According to the logic of this system, muscularity signifies masculinity. By citing a muscular morphology, Cassils affects a queer resignification of established gender morphologies and their signifiers. Transgressing the boundary lines of the morphological imaginary, s/he exposes the instability of those seemingly immutable, distinct and mutually exclusive categories of 'feminine' and 'masculine' morphology.

The structure by which the phallus signifies the penis as its privileged occasion exists only through reiteration and by virtue of that, is unstable and open to subversion. If the phallus operates as a signifier whose privilege is contested, then the structure within which it is mobilised is also open to contestation. By "deprivileging the phallus and removing it from the normative heterosexual form of exchange, and recirculating and reprivileging it"[110], the signifying chain in

[110] Butler (1993), 55

which the phallus conventionally operates is broken. To question the system that the phallus operates in, is to level its structure of deciding or naming sexual difference. I have argued that Cassils' work encapsulates and embodies this Butlerian intervention. Her/his (performance of) trans-masculinity queers the signifying chain, the heteronormative relation of non-transferable mutual exclusion, wherein men have the phallus and women are the phallus. Her/his citation of masculinity through a muscular morphology displaces phallic power from a traditionally male context and redeploys it. Dislodged from the penis, the symbolic position of 'having' the phallus is transferred to other body parts, or the body as a whole. By crossing the borders of 'being' and 'having', Cassils exposes the instability of the heterosexual symbolic's mutually exclusive delineation of sexual difference.

In this chapter I have argued that the phallus is transferable, that, through the practice of bodybuilding, it operates as a roving erotogenicity. In Cassils' pin-up images, an alternative fetish – her/his hypermuscular body and its garb – comes to signify under the sign of the phallus. S/he offers a different form of symbolisation which resignifies the masculinist and heterosexist privilege of the phallus. Anatomy, and sexual difference itself, thus becomes a site for/of proliferative resignifications.

This is, in summary, how Cassils contests the binaries of sex and gender via a trans/formative bodily morphology and, by deploying the body as both phallus and fetish, how s/he disrupts the heterosexual symbolic and resignifies its terms through bodily queering. Each of the strategies detailed above entails the citation and queer resignification of an existing model, a process which in turn exposes that model's instability.

Cassils displaces the symbolic order's schema of sexual difference by promoting alternative modes of being and forms of embodiment. This act of displacement exposes the hegemonic schema as one which constitutes itself through the violent reiteration and naturalisation of an exclusionary set of heteronormative dyadic identifications, morphologies, and performances. In other words, it exposes the system as one which violently abjects non-normative or queer forms of subjectivity. I have argued that Cassils' morphological transgression is

designed to be critical of this repressive logic, but in the same vein it also posits a generative, counterhegemonic alternative. Like the self-image put forth by strongman Eugen Sandow at the turn of the twentieth-century, Cassils' body of images are created out of the cultural demands of her/his time. In the context of the current social climate, in which gender roles are crumbling and definitions of masculinity and femininity are under pressure, Cassils' catalogue of "different visual options"[111] open up the space of representation for gender variations and different inscriptions of the sexed body. S/he creates images of self-determination and self-empowerment, images that turn "stigma into strength"[112].

[111] <http://ellengallery.concordia.ca/en/audio-video.php> accessed 19/09/13
[112] Halberstam (1998), xii

Chapter Four: The Posthuman Body

boychild is a young, black, transgender live artist. Her[1] performances consist of her lip-synching to a recorded backing track comprised of pop song remixes with heavily distorted vocal samples. She performs in darkened settings, semi-nude, her body usually smothered in white paint. I find her physicality powerful, imposing. Her head is shaved, her eyes obscured by whited-out contact lenses. As she performs, boychild's vocabulary of fluid movements are interspersed with jerky shudders and contortions and her facial expressions flit between pained grimaces and ecstatic grins.

An interfacing of technology and the body persists in boychild's performance practice: in her re-embodiment of disembodied voices that have been recorded, modified and mediated through a series of audio technologies, as well as in her use of various lighting technologies. With a strategic use of light, parts of her body seem separate from the whole. Through stark partial and/or strobe lighting effects, her body appears either fragmented or as if it were a projection or hologram. Such science-fiction inspired aesthetics image her as a non-human being, either alien or cyborgian.

She holds an electronic light in her mouth that flickers behind her teeth as she lip-synchs. When the strobe lighting intermittently stops, her light-engorged mouth becomes the only part of her body that is clearly visible, the rest of her flesh fading into relative obscurity. The staging effect of this light in her mouth amplifies the fact that the voice reverberating throughout the performance space does not emanate from within boychild's body. She channels a disembodied voice, re-embodying it. This effect of channelling is added to performatively by the breaks in between song lyrics when boychild's mouth gapes open and she stares, transfixed. In these moments her movements slow and periodically the release of tension causes her body to give way slightly, as if she is collapsing under the strain of the rhythm that courses through her, before becoming reanimated again to synch the next line.

[1] boychild considers her onstage persona to be female. Since I am writing about her body in performance, I use female pronouns to refer to her throughout this chapter.

I find the work emotionally charged and viscerally affective. A melancholic tone permeates the performance when boychild's chest heaves and she shudders violently, as if she is sobbing, or when she throws her head back repeatedly in time with the beat of the track, her eyes shut tightly, seemingly caught in the throes of agony. These gestures are performed with an intensity verging on hysteria and, yet, they are interspersed with postures of composure and power, as boychild draws up tall, puffing out her chest. Contradictory modes of being coexist within the work as boychild flickers from a traumatised disposition to one of empowerment. Her oscillation between these two disparate forms of black queer embodiment is technologically mediated both musically, through syncopated rhythms and chopped vocal samples, and visually via the series of still images generated by strobe lighting.

boychild initially began performing her lip-synch club act on the San Francisco drag scene in 2012. She then took her act into nightclubs and music venues whilst touring with rapper Mykki Blanco in 2013[2] before performing, as she does now, predominantly in 'high art' settings across Europe and the US.[3] The consumption of boychild's act has evolved from the drag scene, to the club, to the art institution. Via this process of increasing institutionalisation, her work becomes politicised, or rather, a sense of its potential as a vehicle for political statements is intimated. This is not to say that, to be programmed in an arts space, artworks must have a political angle and that political potentiality is the criteria against which the value of all art is judged. Work can of course be curated based on other criteria – historical lineage for example, or aesthetics; indeed, aesthetic richness is a key component of boychild's work. What I mean to say is that, by recontextualising the work in an arts space, the programmers of these venues implicitly indicate that there are themes, questions and points of contention in boychild's work that point towards a politics. The objective of this chapter and the next is to attest to that political value.

[2] Performance artist, poet and rapper, Michael Quattlebaum Jr., is a gay cisgender man who assumes a transgender drag persona when performing as Mykki Blanco (Blanco's stage name is a re-appropriation of hip-hop star Lil Kim's alter-ego, Kimmy Blanco). This idea of multiple selves and genders resonates with boychild, as will be explained.

[3] To note just a few examples, boychild has performed at MoMA PS1, Long Island City, New York; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Kulturhuset, Stockholm; the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles; the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), Warsaw; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

boychild's performance practice is layered, contradictory and dynamically multiple; it bears a density of eclectic references and mobilises numerous interpretive questions. As Jennifer Doyle might term it, boychild's art is 'difficult'. Perhaps some of the difficulty of the work, in terms of its (in)accessibility or (in)comprehensiveness, stems from an active resistance on its part to be clearly deciphered. With these chapters, I do not claim to reach a resolution and produce a singular, definitive elucidation of boychild's practice. Rather than closing off the work in such a way, I want to open it up, to work with and through its contradictions and explore the possible avenues it offers for alternative and/or future embodiments. Difficulty in boychild's work lies not just in the (in)accessibility of its content but also in how the work is experienced. In *Hold It Against Me*, Doyle explores the relationship between difficulty and emotion in contemporary art. Writing about art that "feels emotionally sincere" and "produces a dense field of affect", she engages with artists that "turn to emotion because this is where ideology does its most devastating work". Doyle elaborates: "The artists that interest me turn to emotion, feelings and affect as a means not of narcissistic escape but of social engagement."[4] I believe that the reason why boychild's work challenges its audiences to think and feel so deeply is because it engages with very real social and political issues, albeit in a very abstract way. These chapters identify boychild's performance work as a socially and politically engaged practice.

For me personally, boychild's performances were not only experientially compelling but also emotionally moving. After each performance, I was left with the feeling that I needed to spend time analysing and critically engaging with the part historical, part interpretive questions that the work had prompted. These questions revolved around humanness, gender, queerness, race, power and privilege and were framed by and transmitted through technology and the voice. But what could this constellation of body politics and aesthetics be pointing to? Why did boychild place such emphasis on technology and sci-fi aesthetics? Through the interfacing of technology and the body, cyborg imagery permeated the work, triggering the questions: how might posthuman/cyborg

[4] All citations in this paragraph are quoted from Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2013), xi.

politics allow for a different presentation of the human body? Might they present an alternative possibility that is more inclusive than existing dominant categories? And if so, what could this mean for the queer/trans/black body now and in the future?

Figure 17 – boychild, *#untitled lipsynch 1* (2013). Arika, Episode Five: 'Hidden in Plain Sight', Stereo, Glasgow. Photo: Alex Woodward.

I also wanted to think about why boychild had chosen to ‘speak’ through or be spoken through the voices of others rather than using her own voice. What is the effect of re-embodying a disembodied voice? What significance do boychild’s chosen vocal samples hold? How does remixing and distorting these samples transform their original meaning? And how do such audio manipulation techniques impact affectively?

My experience of boychild's practice was institutionally framed. Over the course of one weekend in May 2013 I experienced three of her performances as part of 'Hidden in Plain Sight', one in a series of Glasgow-based festivals hosted by Arika. These festivals provided a platform that enabled interaction with radical practices in both artistic and non-artistic disciplines through conversations, workshops and performances. In terms of subject focus, each of Arika's 2013-2014 festivals revolved around the intersection of queerness and blackness. What fascinates me about boychild is her emphatic use of technology, sci-fi aesthetics and cyborg imagery. Given boychild's embodiment, an exploration of these elements in relation to her must also reckon with her 'identity' as a black 'female' performer, an identity location which is both iterated and challenged through the work. As such, a consideration of race politics informs my analysis of this case study artist. In the context of Arika's 'Hidden in Plain Sight' programme, at no other point during the festival were the above elements interwoven with the overarching intersectional theme of blackness and queerness. boychild had presented a unique and provocative combination of politics and aesthetics and it was this that roused my intrigue and prompted my critical enquiry into her work.

Outside of Arika, in the broader context of published critical thought, the constellation of politics and aesthetics that boychild draws together in her practice retains its originality. My research has not revealed any literature on drag lip-synch performances that deploy posthuman politics or use cyborg aesthetics. Literature on queer posthumanism exists, as does literature on blackness, queerness and the posthuman, in writing collectively labelled 'queer afrofuturism'[5] but nowhere in this literature are the politics that relate to boychild brought in relation to one another and framed through performance and/or the (technologised) voice.

[5] Afrofuturism is "Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture" by re-appropriating "images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future". Mark Dery, 'Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose', *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1994), 179-222 (180). Foregrounding black agency and creativity, afrofuturism encompasses historical fiction, fantasy, myth, and magical realism and draws from non-Western cosmologies to interrogate current conditions of blackness, to examine past conditions, and to envision different futures.

In view of her technological augmentation, boychild's body in performance reads as more than-, other than-, partially (non)-, a queerly skewed version of- or post-human. For Patricia MacCormack, "The posthuman is a direct challenge, not to the former human, but what it means corporeally and discursively to be, or more correctly to count as, human…"[6] MacCormack takes a queer critical approach to the posthuman, writing:

> Like queer, the posthuman does not seek to exchange or go beyond toward a set goal. Both interrogate the arbitrary nature of systems of power masquerading as truth. Through a negotiation of alterity within self and an address to oppressed entities, queer theory and the posthuman mobilise and radicalise the here and now through desire, pleasure and pure potentiality.[7]

As MacCormack suggests here, parallels between queer and the posthuman are evident in their shared pursuits of problematising binaries and subverting normative default categories: the posthuman is simultaneously partial, hybridised, fluid, multiple, and resists unification. In theorising the interstitial, that which or those who exist(s) in and across the spaces between categories, both queer and the posthuman invoke the possibility of new alternative potentials. Due to the instability and unpredictability of these interstitial spaces and their inhabitants, these new alternatives cannot be predetermined and so they remain unfixed, replete with productive and transformative potentiality. As is evidenced in MacCormack's essay, the posthuman can be read through queer. More than that, I would suggest that the posthuman can be read essentially as queer, in the sense that the posthuman subject, as a transformative, metamorphic hybridisation, ever in a state of flux or (un)becoming, is a queered figuration of the human.

Queer and the posthuman are thus mapped over one another in existing literature in terms of bodily transformation and politics[8] but research on the posthuman in relation to black queer art is lacking. As Reynaldo Anderson observes, "previous Afrofuturist scholarship lacks analyses on black queer

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[6] Patricia MacCormack, 'Queer Posthumanism: Cyborgs, Animals, Monsters, Perverts', *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Michael O'Rourke (Surrey, England; Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2009), 111-126 (112)

[7] Ibid.

[8] See also *Queering the Non/Human*, ed. Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird (Surrey, England; Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2008)

performance. Although there is some analysis of the speculative fiction of Samuel R. Delany, there is a dearth of scholarship in relation to black queer performance…"[9] This deficit is addressed in this chapter and the next, as the analyses presented bring new insight to an under-researched field.

Arika programmed boychild's work amidst other performances, discussions and provocations by and between artists, filmmakers and queer theorists, as well as members of the ballroom community. A two-part discussion of 'Vogue'ology' introduced Arika's attendees to the black and latino/a LGBTQ ballroom scene, plotting a historical narrative which touched upon the community's artistic outputs, social structure, practices of gender performativity, and their influences on fashion and house music.[10] Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990), a documentary film set in the 1980s which chronicles the New York ballroom scene, was heavily referenced in these discussions.[11] Arika's placement of boychild within this context had repercussions for the reception of her work. Since my experience of boychild's work was framed by Arika in the context of the drag and ballroom scenes, I think it important to consider how her practice crosses over into these realms.

Lip-synching is a performance practice that has been embraced by drag acts. One needs only to think of the hit US reality television series, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, to see how strongly this connection has been forged and presented to contemporary audiences on an international scale.[12] In each episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race* the search for 'America's next drag superstar' culminates in a lip-synch battle and these performances are a key factor in deciding which contestants stay in ("shante") or leave the competition ("sashay away"). In

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[9] Reynaldo Anderson, 'Fabulous: Sylvester James, Black Queer Afrofuturism and the Black Fantastic', *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5:2 (2013), accessed 17/04/15, DOI: 10.12801/1947-5403.2013.05.02.15

[10] 'Vogue'ology, part 1' took place on 25/05/13, at Tramway, Glasgow and involved: The Legendary Co-Founder of the House of Garçon, Michael Roberson Garçon, Frank Roberts, Eboni Marshall Turman, Ann Cvetkovich, and Terre Thaemlitz. An audio track and video of the discussion can be found here: <http://arika.org.uk/archive/items/episode-5-hidden-plain-sight/we-have-something-say-about-pt1> accessed 26/08/16

'Vogue'ology, part 2' took place the following day and involved: Michael Roberson Garçon, The Legendary Pony Zion Garçon, Frank Roberts, Terre Thaemlitz, Vjuan Allure, and Emma Hedditch. Audio and video here: <http://arika.org.uk/archive/items/episode-5-hidden-plain-sight/we-have-something-say-about-pt2> accessed 26/08/16

[11] Dir. Jennie Livingstone, *Paris is Burning* (USA: Miramax, 1990), 78 minutes, colour DVD

[12] Dir. Nick Murray, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, 8 Seasons, 103 episodes (LOGOtv, February 2, 2009-present)

terms of form then, boychild's lip-synch performances bear a connection to one of the practices of drag performance. This is not to say that all drag lip-synch acts exist in one homogenous form. Nor, for that matter, does drag.[13] For example, a sample of broadly-defined styles of contemporary drag queen performance might include: fish (those who (attempt to) pass as women); club (those who have emerged or drawn inspiration from the 1980s/90s New York club kid scene); pageant (those who partake in or are influenced by drag competitions akin to beauty pageants); camp (those who are comedic, hyperbolic, ribald and parodic)[14]; impersonation (those who assume celebrity personae); 'bio'/faux drag (drag performed by biological women)[15]; androgyny/genderfuck (those who blend and blur the normative codes of gender by amalgamating 'feminine' and 'masculine' signifiers).[16] The drag queen's discursive counterpart, the drag king is similarly diverse. Describing kinging as a genre which "tends to eschew the notion of a consistent, legible alter ego", Katie Horowitz argues that this fluidity allows performers the freedom to

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[13] Elsewhere in existing literature, drag's historical roots have been subjected to thorough critical examination. See, for example, Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theatre* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000). The first major history of drag, Senelick's study traces the origins and variations of theatrical cross-dressing through the ages and across cultures.

[14] Just as drag eludes a singular definition, so too does camp. Nonetheless, as Andy Medhurst notes "most of us know it when we see, hear, feel or do it." He elaborates: "Camp, above all, is the domain of queens. It is a configuration of taste codes and a declaration of effeminate intent. It flows like gin and poison through subcultural conversations. It revels in exaggeration, theatricality, parody and bitching. It both vigorously undermines and rigorously reinscribes traditional gender roles. Its quicksilver sharpness runs rings around ponderous summarising." Andy Medhurst, 'Camp', *Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Andy Medhurst and Sally R. Munt (London: Cassell, 1997), 274-293 (276). Whilst Medhurst describes camp as a style/discourse that pervades the domain of queens "above all", Sue-Ellen Case identifies camp as an ironic and queer rejection of or "liberation from the rule of naturalism, or realism" (60) which can just as readily be deployed by lesbians as by gay men. See 'Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic', *Discourse* 11:1 (Fall-Winter 1988-89), 55-73.

[15] Holestar is an established UK example: <http://www.holestar.com> accessed 29/08/16

[16] Terminology varies depending on geographical location and personal preference, but this is a rough guide to a cross-section of a much broader spectrum.

Whilst critics have argued that *RuPaul's Drag Race* fails to fully account for drag's diverse and protean arrangements (which seems to me to be an impossible task in any case, given drag's seemingly infinite number of permutations), across its eight season run, the contestants on the programme cannot be grouped into one category. They represent across the spectrum of drag. *Drag Race* being one of the prime platforms for representations of contemporary American drag culture, celebrating the diversification of drag in the UK, the following blog posts profile a sample of (mostly emergent) British queens: Dean Eastmond, 'The British Queens Giving American Drag a Run for its Money', *Hiskind Magazine*, posted 08/06/16. <http://hiskind.com/2016/06/british-queens-putting-american-drag-shame/> accessed 29/08/16. Dean Eastmond, 'The British Queens Taking UK Drag to International Recognition//Part II', *Hiskind Magazine*, posted 16/06/16. <http://hiskind.com/2016/06/british-queens-giving-american-drag-run-money-pt-ii/> accessed 29/08/16.

experiment and interact with masculinity in nuanced and multivalent ways.[17] To present multiple masculinities, drag kings employ a range of performative modes. Given that boychild considers her onstage persona to be female, the performance culture of kinging is of lesser relevance to the present discussion than the culture of queening. As such, drag lip-synching is discussed in proceeding pages as it relates to drag queen performance.

Based upon the idea of making a voice appear to issue from elsewhere than its source, lip-synching shares formal commonalities with another type of performance practice – ventriloquism. In Chapter Five, I scrutinise existing literature on ventriloquism in order to theorise boychild's performative 'voice'. In the meantime, I want to briefly state the commonalities between ventriloquism and lip-synching before I present a comparative analysis between boychild's act and the performance of drag queens.

Lip-synching and ventriloquism both entail the channelling of a disembodied voice, as well as a sublimation into two or more personalities, and, as multi-sensorially experienced practices, they each rely on the relation between vision and hearing and a synchronisation of image and voice. If we consider the characteristic set-up of late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century ventriloquist performance, the familiar image of ventriloquist and dummy[18], it is possible to think of lip-synching as a technologised form of ventriloquism with the lip-synch artist, as physical, embodied mouthpiece, replacing the ventriloquist's dummy and a disembodied recording substituting for the ventriloquial voice. But, of course, the lip-synch performer premeditates her/his[19] own ventriloquial voice. Whilst a master-slave dialectic is manifest in ventriloquism with the assignation of an active role to the ventriloquist and a passive role to their puppet, this dialectic happens across the body of the lip-synch artist. S/he is simultaneously both ventriloquist and ventriloquised, assuming both active and passive roles.

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[17] Katie Horowitz, *The Trouble with 'Queerness': Drag and the Making of Two Cultures* (PhD Thesis, University of California, 2012), 23. Available online here: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8jn2c44k> accessed 27/08/16.

[18] Such stagings of ventriloquist performance arose as a genre roughly between late romanticism's fascination with the uncanny 'double' and the modernist preoccupation with automatons and puppets. C. B. Davis, 'Reading the Ventriloquist's Lips: The Performance Genre behind the Metaphor', *TDR* 42:4 (Winter, 1998), 133-156 (137)

[19] I use a mixed pronoun here to allude to lip-synching as a performance practice adopted and typified by drag artists.

Having selected a song and rehearsed it laboriously, the lip-syncher is familiar with the rhythms of the vocal: every pause, every intake of air, the duration of every note. S/he works to perfect their craft, to be controlled and on cue, creating a pretence for their audience that the voice synched to is issuing out from within their own body. Those audience members who recognise the skill involved in the performer's act of mimicry, enjoy the spectacle of the pretence and embrace it willingly, fully aware that the voice heard is a recorded one and not the 'authentic' voice of the performer. In this sense the lip-syncher is the medium through which the voice of another passes. The voice mimed to is inauthentic to the performer, in that it does not issue from within their body.

In camp drag performance, for example, this inauthenticity is drawn attention to, exaggerated and celebrated. Indeed, camp performance makes no attempt to conceal the fact that objects and people are pretending to be something other than what they are. Therein lies the critical aspect of the work. Through a re-appropriative queering of mainstream popular culture, a culture that oftentimes denies access to and does not necessarily purport to speak for marginalised others, camp performance is imbued with a sense of empowerment through cultural ownership. "As Andy Medhurst argues, camp has long been a shared pleasure within gay communities, a way of coping within a culture which marginalises you, and a means of recognising the likeminded within societies which, to one extent or another, outlaw homosexual practices."[20] By exaggerating to the point of collapse, camp functions politically as a tenacious refusal to be stigmatised against and nullified.

Though boychild's performances do not read as camp, her form of queering functions as akin to camp strategy. As in camp performance, a usurpation of pop culture is evident in boychild's work. She samples digitally manipulated pop tunes and re-contexualises them, thereby queering their original meaning. A deconstructive queering of pop culture is achieved in boychild's work through her chosen remixes, which feature pitch-shifted androgynised vocal samples as well as cut and looped syntax, but these songs are also queered through

[20] Kay Dickinson, ''Believe'? Vocoders, Digitalised Female Identity and Camp', *Popular Music* 20:3 (October 2001), 333-347 (345), accessed 18/04/15, DOI: 10.1017/S0261143001001532

boychild's performance of them. For example, in *#untitled lipsynch 1* boychild synched to a minimal, post-dubstep[21] remix of Rihanna's *Rude Boy*, which in its original context is a hetero come-on, a frivolous pop song that sassily voices a seemingly liberated heteronormative female sexuality: "Come on rude, rude boy, can you get it up… is you big enough?" However, boychild's re-performance of the song was, for the most part, deeply traumatic. Her chest heaved as if she were sobbing. Extending her arms, she reached out her hands then drew back, cowering. These gestures, coupled with her agonised expressions, amplified the self-objectification disclosed in the lyrics ("take it, take it"), conveying a pejorative sense of self-worthlessness, a desperate pleading, a need for validation ("love me, love me"). In its pop music form, the tone of Rihanna's *Rude Boy* is upbeat, whereas boychild feeds upon the viscerality of the emotions that already exist in the song's lyrics and she breeds those dark undercurrents in her performances, producing an affective experience of intense emotional charge. boychild's cowering and shuddering actions during *#untitled lipsynch 1* were interspersed with her drawing up to full height, arms outstretched, striking poses that exhibited her physical prowess and were connotative of power and strength. As I read it, boychild's enactment of these contradictory postures conveyed the self-objectification and self-worthlessness disclosed in the song's lyrics, but she was also enacting a bigger-than transcendence, a refusal to be objectified and dominated. Her chosen remix queered the original meaning and sentiment of the song and her re-performance intermittently offered a feminist revision of its lyrics.

[21] Post-dubstep (also known as Future Garage) is a movement of electronic music that incorporates the sparse, syncopated rhythm and strong bass lines of dubstep whilst also taking influence from UK garage's skittering hi-hats and chopped-up, pitch-shifted vocal samples. The remix that boychild synchs to in *#untitled lipsynch 1* is by an artist called nknwn.

Figure 18 – boychild, *#untitled lipsynch 1* (2013). Arika, Episode Five: 'Hidden in Plain Sight', Stereo, Glasgow. Photo: Alex Woodward.

In drag queen performance, typically the voice synched to is female and, further, usually a diva voice. Many queens have made names for themselves as diva impersonators, lip-synching to the voices of gay icons such as Cher, Madonna, Liza Minnelli and Janet Jackson. Though the subject matter of songs by these straight cisgender women is typically to do with heteronormative subjectivities and relationships, I do not wish to suggest that these divas are taken on in camp acts because they themselves are necessarily marginalising. Indeed, many of them (and, in fact, all of the artists listed above) are allies of and advocates for LGBTQ rights. Rather than the divas themselves, then, it is popular culture at large which is the critical target. Conveying triumphant sentiments of liberation and survival, oftentimes diva voices image forth a sense of empowerment. These affects and performative modes all conjure up certain allusions to the vocabularies of gay pride. Thus, drag lip-synch performers use diva voices in order to re-appropriate them for themselves; to articulate their

own queer identities and experiences and to negotiate and claim queer spaces for themselves within or through the mainstream. Though, in the contemporary landscape, genderqueer identities are increasingly becoming a part of the fabric of pop culture – bringing drag to the mainstream, *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a prime example – and though the wider social landscape is undergoing radical changes in terms of trans visibility and awareness, pop culture *en masse* is still largely hetero- and gender-normative. Synonymising the mainstream with "the non-queer world" in a 2016 interview, boychild indicates her acknowledgement of these circumstances.[22] To reject the mainstream or 'the non-queer world' outright is to fix oneself in an immobile position. Instead, "there has to be a way to move through" these marginalising realms.[23]

boychild channels the modern-day diva voices of Britney, Beyoncé, and Rihanna, but her performances are not a re-enactment of the original songs, nor are they drag in the sense that she performs these songs in a cross-gender mode as a diva impersonator. In terms of style, rather than using another's voice verbatim and her performance being a celebration of the inauthentic which revolves around comedic hyperbole, from the very outset of her performance career in San Francisco drag clubs, boychild has always presented a re-conceptualised version of lip-synching that differs from other existing styles, such as camp or impersonator drag performance. She takes an already subcultural form and subverts it further still. She does this in two ways. Firstly, as noted above, the affective pitch of her work is far removed from that of, say, camp performance. Whereas camp drag is (in general terms) playful and parodic[24], boychild's work is emotionally visceral in a way that is often traumatic and, at times, deeply harrowing. Secondly, she re-conceptualises lip-synch performance through staging herself as cyborgian. A cyborg (short for cybernetic organism) is a being comprised of both organic and mechanical or electronic parts, whose abilities have been enhanced by such a fusion of flesh and technology.[25] Technology and

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[22] Hili Pearson, 'Truth in Gender: Wu Tsang and boychild on the Question of Queerness', *Live Art Almanac Volume 4*, ed. Harriet Curtis, Lois Keidan and Aaron Wright (London: Live Art Development Agency and Oberon Books, 2016), 268-272 (270)

[23] These are Wu Tsang's words quoted from ibid., 271

[24] Describing it as "political and critical", Moe Meyer defines camp as "queer parody" in 'Introduction: Reclaiming the discourse of Camp', *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, ed. Moe Meyer (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 1-22. Dickinson notes: "Camp may seem to make light, but that does not mean it is to be taken lightly." Dickinson (2001), 345

[25] The term was coined in 1960 by psychiatrist and psychopharmacologist Nathan S. Kline and scientist Manfred E. Clynes as they worked on a NASA project exploring the possibility of

the body already unite in lip-synch acts in the sense that the lip-syncher mimes to a recorded backing track, but boychild's performances extend beyond this to an aesthetics of the body.[26] Whited-out contact lenses and the light glowing from within her mouth give her an otherworldly appearance; she uses partial and strobe lighting to make her body seem fragmented and/or holographic; and, aided in effect by strobe lighting, her staccato movements appear robotic.

Figure 19 – boychild, *DLIHCYOB* (2012). Single channel colour video with sound, directed by Mitch Moore, 4.33 minutes. Presented by MOCAtv.

designing an autonomous homeostatic control system that could be integrated into the human body to sustain its functioning in outer space. Acknowledging the sci-fi roots of this idea, Kline and Clynes declare: "For the exogenously extended organisational complex functioning as an integrated homeostatic system unconsciously, we propose the term 'cyborg'." Nathan S. Kline and Manfred E. Clynes, 'Cyborgs and Space', *Astronautics* (September 1960), 26-27 (27) reprinted in Chris Gray, *The Cyborg Handbook* (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 29-34.

[26] To cite examples from her broader artistic oeuvre, boychild re-imagines her embodiment in a cyborgian mode in film works that pre- and post-date her Arika performances. See figure 19 for a still from Mitch Moore's film entitled *DLIHCYOB* (2012), recorded for MOCAtv, a video channel developed as a digital extension of the exhibition programming at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Posted 17/12/12. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ll5lfTIyGgw> accessed 26/08/16. See figure 20 for a still from *A Day in the Life of Bliss* (2013-ongoing), a sci-fi feature film directed by Wu Tsang, starring boychild as the protagonist, BLIS.

Figure 20 – Film still of boychild in *A Day in the Life of Bliss* by Wu Tsang (2014). Image courtesy of the artist and Isabella Bortolozzi.

The first of the three boychild performances that I experienced took place as part of Arika's club night. Sharing the bill alongside boychild were DJ Sprinkles, famed deep house DJ and former resident DJ at New York trans club, Sally's II[27]; Vjuan Allure, who, having remixed bass-heavy house music, is credited as one of the creators of the 'new sound' in ballroom music[28]; and the vogue artist Pony Zion Garçon, a member of the House of Garçon and a legend in the ballroom scene in the category Butch Queen Vogue Femme. The club night was framed as a fully immersive ballroom culture experience and yet I felt that boychild was somewhat incongruent to her co-artists. In terms of community and voice, as we see in *Paris is Burning*, there is narration in the dance halls of the ballroom scene. A master of ceremonies introduces and provides commentary on each ballroom category. Yet boychild does not perform as part of a collective, nor as the representative member of a house. She is a lone figure, her posthuman, electronically mediated 'voice' contrasting with the narrative, community-forging voice of the dancehall.[29]

[27] DJ Sprinkles is the DJ persona of sound, text and graphic artist, Terre Thaemlitz.

[28] <http://arika.org.uk/events/episode-5-hidden-plain-sight/programme/hidden-plain-sight-club> accessed 10/10/14

[29] For a detailed scholarly examination of ballroom culture, see Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013). Bailey's study is balanced between personal accounts of his own immersion within the culture (his experience walking in balls and working with AIDS

I therefore see boychild's work as an intervention in the continuum of the drag and ballroom scenes. Through the use of technology and sci-fi aesthetics, boychild's works present a new constellation of the politics of gender, queerness and blackness by situating them in conjunction with posthuman and cyborg politics.

I will begin my unpicking of this complex web of politics with a quote from the artist herself: "If I were to identify as any gender it would be trans. Trans as a continually oscillating point on the spectrum, a journey that never stops or ends or lands in one place."[30] This declaration, made by boychild, was printed in the March 2014 issue of the feminist journal, *Girls Like Us*. According to its editorial, *Girls Like Us* features an "international expanding community of *women from all genders* within arts, culture and activism" and seeks to map "new routes towards a feminist, post-gender future."[31] Here the terminology 'post-gender' refers to gender in the sense of a fixity having been imposed upon it by a systematic binarisation. The prefix 'post-' denotes an aspiration to move beyond this binary and promote more inclusive communities of (men and) "women from all genders". Let us dwell on that for a moment. Consider a sample of other terms used as variants of or alongside 'trans': genderqueer, gender non-conforming, non-binary, third-gender, bigender, androgyne, agender, gender-fluid; in all this terminology there is an emphasis on alterity and diversity. That so many variations exist (and this is by no means an exhaustive list) is testimony to the fact that for so many individuals, their gender cannot be neatly boxed-in and labelled.[32] Relatedly, the post-gender concept calls for a blurring of distinctions, a spectrum of gender as opposed to a binarisation.[33] Hence, a

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outreach programs) and his ethnographic research into the practices, language, and kinship structures of ballroom culture. His text also includes a useful comprehensive glossary of ballroom community terms and phrases.

[30] boychild interviewed by Dreea Pavel, *Girls Like Us*, Issue 5 (March 2014), 10-17 (14). These words represent boychild's definition of what trans means to her, based on her own personal experiences. Other trans individuals may not share in the sense of oscillation that boychild describes. As such, this quotation is not a broadly applicable determination of trans.

[31] <http://www.glumagazine.com> accessed 13/11/14, emphasis my own.

[32] In fact, I have risked over-simplifying the matter here, as each of the terms listed above have their own set of meanings outside of their relation to transness and indeed these meanings often differ from one individual who identifies with each term to the next.

[33] Given that "Queer literally celebrates its deviant status, a deviation from the imperative oppressive dominant", as MacCormack notes, queer is "not a new nomenclaturing of how to be." (MacCormack (2009), 115) That is to say, queer, in its broadest sense as a deviation

feminist post-gender future, like the one that *Girls Like Us* strives toward, aims for the recognition, visibility and co-existence of all genders, as well as equality amongst them. Appearing on the front cover of the March 2014 issue of *Girls Like Us*, the case study artist of the present chapter is an appropriate poster child for this vision of the future of gender.

Whilst she thinks of her gender as fluid, boychild considers her onstage persona to be female. It is important to note the significance of boychild's ambiguous gender identification, as it adds a layer of complexity to my reading of the 'female' body that she is coding in her performances. I think of boychild as embodying trans in the sense that she gives concrete bodily form to the experience of being trans; her transness is a part of her everyday life. Meanwhile she inhabits 'femaleness' (or at least, in naming herself female, it seems she intends to) in that her 'femaleness' is a persona that she assumes onstage. Rather than a character, boychild's 'female' persona may well be another facet of herself, an amorphous aspect of her subjectivity that is not divorced from the "continually oscillating" trans identified remainder. These identifications are perhaps interwoven aspects of one and the same individual, the aforementioned "point[s] on the spectrum" that never converge and never settle in one place. Whether or not this is the case, what her assumption of a persona has the potential to facilitate is the possibility of presenting multiply and representing more than she is; the body in performance can be a space of representation for multiple gender identifications and presentations.[34]

Consider the historical, cultural, social, and political situation of those marked 'female'. In a heteronormative phallogocentric world, the female body is absorbed by the male with accordance to the phallic function. She is the phallus that he both desires and requires in order to feel whole. Confirming his existence, she is the constitutive 'other' of man. In naming herself 'female', perhaps boychild means to invoke these politics of otherness, difference, subordination, exclusion, and oppression. Her onstage persona would then allow

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from the norm, is not concerned with naming and designating new, further categories for ways of being, extending the lists of boxes in order to systematically label a broader number of people. Rather, queer gender identifications are made across and in the spaces between such categories.

[34] The ramifications of this multiplicity in relation to the racially marked body are explored in Chapter Five.

her to be a member of or align herself with another excluded category – woman – and she could thus speak for, or to the concerns of, more marginalised others. Though, from my own experience of the work, I would argue that it is not immediately obvious that boychild is to be read as female. She may have named herself as female but, for me, her gender remained ambiguous throughout each of the three performances that I experienced. In fact, given the interfacing of the body and technology, and the notability of sci-fi inspired aesthetics within the work, the ambiguity of her status as human was of greater prominence to me. Though of course, humanness, or one's viability as human, is not unrelated to sex and gender, as we saw in the earlier chapter on Cassils. Recall Judith Butler's comment: "'Sex' is not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which one becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility."[35] Hegemonic power dictates systems that govern gender appearances, behaviours and practices, delimiting what counts as viable in terms of sex and gender. Those who do not conform are subordinated by hegemonic ideas and practices, subject to "the violence performed by gender norms."[36] Such discriminatory or dehumanising violence, whether physical or otherwise, is enacted out of a will to enforce and maintain dominance, to continually constrain what counts as viable. As discussed in Chapter Three, in *Becoming an Image*, Cassils physically enacts the violence imposed by the constraints of a heteronormative hegemonic schema, one that delimits what or who counts as a viably sexed body, a viably gendered subject, or even a viable human being.

Also commenting on the dehumanising violence imposed by the exclusivity of gender norms, Susan Stryker writes:

> The first thing we say of a new child is 'it's a girl' or 'it's a boy.' Through the operation of language, we move a body across the line that separates mere biological organism from human community, transforming the status of a nonhuman 'it' into a person through the conferral of a gender status. It has been very difficult to think of the human without thinking of it through the binary gender schema. I think a lot of the violence and discrimination trans people face derives from a fundamental inability on the part of others to see us as

[35] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York; London: Routledge, 1993), xii

[36] Butler, 'Preface (1999)' to *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York; London: Routledge, 1990), xxv

> fully human because we are considered improperly gendered, and thus lower on the animacy hierarchy, therefore closer to death and inanimacy, therefore more expendable and less valuable than humans. A transgender will to life thus serves as a point from which to critique the human as a universal status attributed to all members of the species, and to reveal it instead as a narrower set of criteria wielded by some to dehumanise others.[37]

Notions of human viability are also related to race. To explain this, I propose a look back to historical conceptions of the human subject, as outlined in humanist discourse. The classical ideal of 'Man' as 'the measure of all things' was first formulated by the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, Protagoras, and later renewed in the Italian Renaissance as a universal model, as represented in Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*. Leonardo's rendering of ideal bodily perfection became emblematic of the values of humanism, its faith in the inimitable powers of human reason and its lofty belief in the capacity of humans to pursue their own physical and cerebral perfectibility. As Rosi Braidotti notes, "this self-aggrandising vision assumes that Europe is not just a geo-political location, but rather a universal attribute of the human mind"[38]. Here, an historical account of humanism becomes a model for civilisation and that model is based on the idea of Europe as both site of origin for humanist qualities and as representative of universal consciousness.[39] A paradigm is thus forged which includes an underlying dialectics of self and other which, in turn, raises issues of power and exclusion. Those who are othered by this Eurocentric, patriarchally-biased paradigm are reduced to less-than-human status. That is to say, the black and/or female (and, I would add, the trans) individual is excluded from traditional humanist discourses, rendered as constitutive other to the idealised white male heteronormative human subject.[40]

Additionally, a dehumanising denial of subjectivity has been imposed upon black individuals by the transatlantic world. Slavery relegated the black body to the machine-like status of labour unit, fungible commodity object. As such, black

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[37] Stryker stated this in an interview with Petra Dierkes-Thrun 'Transgender Studies Today: An Interview with Susan Stryker', *Boundary 2 International Journal of Literature and Culture*, posted 20/08/14, available online here: <http://boundary2.org/2014/08/20/transgender-studies-today-an-interview-with-susan-stryker/> accessed 17/09/14

[38] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 14

[39] Ibid., 13

[40] For a critique that more extensively foregrounds exclusion from the Enlightenment category 'human' on account of racial difference, see Denise Ferriera da Silva, 'No-bodies: law, raciality and violence', *Meritum* 9:1 (Jan/Jun 2014), 119-162

bodies were valuable only in a monetary sense for the financial gain of the slave owner. Residual effects of these historical events have left their mark on the contemporary American black body, as Mark Dery points out in his essay, *Black to the Future*. Dery notes a parallel between sci-fi tales of alien abduction and the black slave's experience of being forcibly taken from her/his homeland.[41] He remarks that, "[contemporary] African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees". Like their ancestors, they have been consigned to a subaltern position, a position that has endured throughout American history.[42] Dery's essay includes an interview with cultural critic, Greg Tate, in which Tate makes a similar remark: "…the condition of being alien and alienated, speaks… to the way in which being black in America is a science-fiction experience."[43] Here Tate's description of black lived experience resonates with Dery's observation.[44] This connection between sci-fi and blackness will be expanded upon in the next chapter when I turn toward a form of critical race theory known as afrofuturism, which affects a simultaneous imagining of the future and a re-examination of the past through a lens of African diaspora. For now, though, I want to give pause to take stock of the discussion thus far.

In gendered terms, by inhabiting a persona which she names 'female' whilst embodying trans, as a non-conformist to hegemonic ideas of sex and gender, boychild is positioned as subordinated other in more ways than one and the viability of her sex, gender and humanness is called into question. Moreover, the humanist political economy excludes her from traditional discourses of the human on account of both her race and gender. If one does not count as human or is cast as subhuman, where does one go from there? Is there a site of resistance or a critical framework that can be tapped into that might allow one to be seen, heard, valued? Henceforth, my reading of boychild's performance practice is set in the context of the posthuman.

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[41] The title of Dery's essay is appropriated from a song of the same title by rap artist, Def Jef, which includes the lines: "Stolen from the motherland, placed in another land".

[42] Dery (1994), 180

[43] Greg Tate in ibid., 208

[44] To clarify: Greg Tate is generally credited as having been the first to articulate this formulation. Both he and Mark Sinker are usually credited for inspiring the term 'afrofuturism' (see Sinker's 1992 essay, 'Loving The Alien In Advance of the Landing', *The Wire,* Issue 96, available online here: <http://www.thewire.co.uk/articles/218/> accessed 19/06/15), which was coined by Dery in *Black to the Future*.

Critical discourses surrounding the posthuman are not homogeneous. It is a concept that has divided critical opinion and, as such, it cannot be streamlined into one linear narrative and defined singularly. The posthuman is ambiguously embroiled in anxieties over the possible threat posed by technological excess and apocalyptic notions of human supersession. Meanwhile other critics revel in the potential opportunities that the posthuman holds for human enhancement. In the broad context of this thesis, I am investigating how transgressive forms of embodiment attempt to affect body politics progressively. As such, literature penned by critics who see progressive potentiality in the posthuman have provided the stimulus for my contribution to the field of posthuman studies. Within this chapter I examine the work of two such theorists of the posthuman, namely Rosi Braidotti and Donna J. Haraway.

Braidotti, whilst aware of the ambiguities noted above, upholds a positive view of the posthuman, believing in it as an "emancipatory", "liberating"[45] force. Describing herself as a "technophile"[46], she sides with the transgressive potential of technologies and identifies her own preoccupation with finding new and alternative political modes for existence within the contemporary technologically mediated world. Haraway presents a similar view in her influential essay, *A Cyborg Manifesto*.[47] Haraway's cyborg, as a product of (science-)fiction, as well as a creature of social reality, is a literal embodiment of the hybrid figure of the cybernetic organism but it also provides a metaphorical model for the destabilisation of existing binary thought and the forging of new political affinities.[48]

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[45] Braidotti (2013), 35

[46] Ibid., 58

[47] 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' was originally published in *Socialist Review* 15:2 (1985), 65-107 and subsequently republished in Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), 149-181. My references relate to the 1991 edition.

[48] I do not mean to paint Haraway in one broad stroke as entirely techno-utopian. Though she repeatedly refers to the cyborg as "utopian", her manifesto presents a dual vision that conceives of the cyborg as presenting both dominations and possibilities: "From one perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about… a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defence… From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of… permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints." (295) Though I am aware that Haraway maintains an ambivalent position, she does recognise the cyborg as a "fruitful" resource, which offers potentially positive outcomes (292). In this chapter, I formulate my argument by working from these, more progressively focused, of her ideas.

Braidotti's concept of the posthuman is a generative strategy that allows the othered individual the subjectivity that has been denied to them. Meanwhile, Haraway's image of the cyborg presents a hybridised and boundary blurring embodiment. Braidotti and Haraway are both materially focused, each of them speaking favourably of a continuum between technology and bodies. Such a development of new, experimental, alternative subjectivities is very much in tune with my overarching investigation of how bodily transgressions or transgressive embodiments in performance attempt to impact progressively on body politics. Furthermore, in that same spirit of posing a radical challenge to heteronormative body politics, a key recurrent tenet within this thesis, Braidotti and Haraway both take up an explicitly feminist position and employ a strategy of rejecting hegemonic 'truths': the assumed givens of the traditional humanist subject and his ideologies. I believe that boychild's practice harbours the potential for similarly transformative ideologies. The remainder of this chapter is thus given over to making the case for this progressive potentiality. I am, of course, aware that tonally the work incorporates less positive elements. Accordingly, Chapter Five nuances the affirmative perspective offered here, by examining specific formal elements within the work and addressing the race politics that it engages in detail. Before I begin my analysis of boychild's work in the context of the posthuman, I will outline Braidotti's position.

Examining that "unit of common reference for our species"[49], the human, Braidotti writes: "the term [human] enjoys widespread consensus and it maintains the reassuring familiarity of common sense. We assert our attachment to the species as if it were a matter of fact, a given. So much so that we construct a fundamental notion of Rights around the Human. But is it so?"[50] At the opening of her text, *The Posthuman*, from which the preceding lines are quoted, Braidotti calls out the human as an ontological given, positing it rather as historically and culturally contingent, a conventionalised construction, a normativising regulatory framework. Refusing to submit to an entrenched, universalised idea of the human, she calls for a more critical engagement with it.

[49] Braidotti (2013), 2
[50] Ibid., 1

In humanist thought the human subject is assured of its own autonomy, its capacities of reason and rationality, its capability of free will. Posited as distinct from sexualised (woman), racialised (native), naturalised (animals, the environment or earth) others, as well as the technological artefact, the traditional humanist subject anthropocentrically envisages itself at the apex of all living existence, making it instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination. Braidotti's conception of the posthuman opposes and critically questions these modes of thought.

Her method is to draw upon the anti-humanism of her poststructuralist teachers. Identifying that the term 'anti-humanism' may be misinterpreted, Braidotti writes: "philosophical anti-humanism must not be confused with cynical and nihilistic misanthropy"[51]. That is, anti-humanism is not 'anti-' in the sense that it is antithetical to the human or humanity (for example, humanist ideals, such as freedom, will inevitably be upheld even when arguing for anti-humanism), rather, the term is used to describe opposition to and a deconstruction of the traditional humanist subject.

Humanism is an intellectual tradition, a normative frame, and an institutionalised practice. These are the difficulties that the deconstructive approach tries to overcome. The poststructuralist, anti-humanist position is a project of displacing the unified humanist subject (to suggest that one has the control to eradicate it completely would be to repeat humanistic arrogance), instead placing emphasis on diversity and difference. Anti-humanism also rejects the dialectical scheme of thought where difference or otherness plays a constitutive role and it aims at "dislodging the belief in the 'natural' foundations of socially coded and enforced 'differences'…"[52] Feminists critique the patriarchal posturing of humanism, whilst anti-colonial thinkers question the primacy of whiteness. Braidotti describes the work of the poststructuralists as follows:

> These radical critiques of humanistic arrogance from feminist and post-colonial theory… propose new alternative ways to look at the

[51] Ibid., 6
[52] Ibid., 27

> 'human' from a more inclusive and diverse angle. They also offer… insights into the image of thought that is implicitly conveyed by the humanistic vision of Man as the measure of all things… Thus, they further the analysis of power by developing the tools and terminology by which we can come to terms with masculinism, racism, white superiority, the dogma of scientific reason and other socially supported systems of dominant values.[53]

Attempts to dislodge phallic primacy and white supremacy, to escape the oppressions imposed by established power structures, are important objectives. Whilst Braidotti supports these endeavours, she also stresses the importance of doing so with particular attentiveness to a firm location – the present. She argues that contemporary social theory must extend beyond an anti-humanist position in response to what she terms the 'posthuman predicament', the present epoch, in which boundaries between the human and non-human[54] are becoming blurred by the effects of continually developing scientific and technological advances.

Today "the concept of the human has exploded under the double pressure of contemporary scientific advances and global economic concerns."[55] Societies are dominated and globally linked by ubiquitous computer mediation and digital or online communication networks. The accelerating use of unmanned aerial vehicles or drones, controlled remotely via satellite, are changing the practice of contemporary warfare. Food is genetically modified. The vision to enhance human life and bodies is at the heart of developments in robotics, prosthetics and biotechnologies. These are all ways in which technology is becoming ever-increasingly entangled, incorporated and/or melded with the flesh to unprecedented degrees of intrusiveness.[56] As posthuman subjectivities, or "alternative ways of conceptualising the human subject"[57] are emerging,

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[53] Ibid., 28-29

[54] Here, 'non-human' refers to that which is posited as outside of the human with accordance to traditional humanist discourse. The posthuman subject collapses the purity of this definition.

[55] Braidotti (2013), 1

[56] MacCormack observes the queerness of this ever-evolving collapse of demarcated entities with regards to technology and flesh, writing: "The creations of connections – life as relation not dividuation – is posthuman living. Desire is, put most simply, the need to create connections with other things, not to have or know [as in humanism with its hierarchical systems of domination and its emphasis on knowledge as a uniquely human pursuit] but collapse the self with other(s). In this sense posthumanism is a form of queer desire, or queer 'life'." MacCormack (2009), 113

[57] Braidotti (2013), 37

Braidotti identifies the need to devise 'new alternative' schemes of thought, knowledge, self-representation and subject formation to match these transformations. She thus posits posthuman theory as a "different discursive framework, looking more affirmatively towards [these] new alternatives."[58]

Braidotti's idea of the posthuman is not something 'post-' in the sense of breaking entirely with all that preceded it. Nor is it to be equated with the inhuman(e). Rather, her posthuman is a historically specific conception of human subjectivity, a means with which to explore ways of engaging with the human and humanity in the context of the present condition. Braidotti's posthuman represents a conceptual shift in paradigm resultant of the rise of technological developments, bringing with it a shift in ways of conceiving of bodies and the world in which they function. Her theory is thus about human potentiality, about rewriting the humanist ideal and reinventing the human.[59] She writes: "The posthuman condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming."[60] Reluctant to let go of a collective notion of humanity, in using first person plural pronouns here, Braidotti groups herself and her readers together as members of humankind, to indicate that 'we' are all embroiled in this change, 'we' are all affected by the posthuman predicament.

Braidotti's text opens: "Not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that. Some of us are not even considered fully human now…"[61] She revisits this sentiment in a later chapter, when reflecting on her own embodied relationship to being human, writing:

> That in me which no longer identifies with the dominant categories of subjectivity, but which is not yet completely out of the cage of identity, that is to say that which goes on differing, is at home with… the [posthuman] post-anthropocentric subject. These rebellious components for me are related to the feminist consciousness of what it means to be embodied female… In the political economy of

[58] Ibid.

[59] Predating Braidotti, Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingstone formulate a similar argument: "The posthuman does not necessitate the obsolescence of the human; it does not represent an evolution or devolution of the human. Rather it participates in the re-distributions of difference and identity." Introduction to *Posthuman Bodies*, ed. Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingstone (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 10

[60] Braidotti (2013), 12

[61] Ibid., 1

> phallogocentrism and of anthropomorphic humanism… my sex fell on the side of 'Otherness'… becoming-posthuman speaks to my feminist self, partly because my sex, historically speaking, never quite made it into full humanity, so my allegiance to that category is at best negotiable and never to be taken for granted.[62]

Braidotti's is a politics grounded in the lived experience of difference or otherness, and subsequent marginalisation and exclusion. On a similar note, in a way that recalls Tate's earlier quoted comment concerning blackness and alienation, sound theorist, Kodwo Eshun writes about difference and alienation with regards to being 'human'.

> It's in music that you get this sense that most African-Americans owe *nothing* to the status of the human. African-Americans still had to protest, still had to *riot*, to be judged Enlightenment humans in the 1960s… there's this sense of the human as being a really pointless and treacherous category, a category which has *never meant anything* to African-Americans.[63]

Braidotti, Tate, and Eshun all relate a feeling of exclusion from and consequent non-allegiance to the dominant category 'human'. Instead, seeking an affinity with others in an alternative community, and reiterating Braidotti's mind-set of feeling "at home" with the posthuman, Eshun's text, *More Brilliant than the Sun,* argues that the subhumanisation of the black individual has given her greater access to the category of the post-human.[64] Interestingly, throughout his text, Eshun renders the black subject as female. (Hence why I have followed suit and used a feminine pronoun to relate Eshun's thesis.) It strikes me that, with this gendering, Eshun means to equate blackness and femaleness as constitutive of subhuman otherness and highlight the subordination of these excluded others. I believe that the trans individual can be added to this grouping of excluded others.

The posthuman, as it is framed by Braidotti, Tate, and Eshun, emerges out of a political history and is a useful framework within which to think about boychild because of the relevance of those politics to her both as a specific subject/body and in terms of the themes drawn upon in her performances. That said, the

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[62] Ibid., 80
[63] Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 193, original emphasis.
[64] Ibid.

shortcoming in these studies is that they are limited to certain kinds of bodies. Whereas Braidotti offers up the posthuman as a positive alternative for women and people of colour, and Eshun brings blackness (and implicitly femaleness) together with the posthuman and sound/the voice, nowhere in the work of these theorists is the queer, trans body brought into the discussion. Attending to this gap, my study is distinct from its predecessors.

The posthuman is where exclusion becomes potentiality. It offers the promise of something alternative to and more inclusive than existing notions of the human. Why should othered individuals want to be integrated within a category that has historically excluded, oppressed and exploited them? The posthuman proposes a reinvention of the human, the forging of a new way of being and a new community to which one can feel a sense of belonging. It is my contention that the engagement with the posthuman in boychild's performances does not end with aesthetics, rather it extends to the plotting of a posthuman politics. Having been positioned as 'other' by the humanist narrative, excluded from traditional discourses of the human, and historically subjugated, I would argue that boychild accesses the posthuman in order to utilise its resistant power.

Before I detail my interpretation of boychild's posthuman embodiment as resistant, I want to introduce Haraway's cyborg politics. The posthuman figuration that boychild images forth in her performances closely resembles the vivid descriptions of the cyborg that Haraway offers in her manifesto. Furthermore, Haraway's framing of her cyborg as a being that straddles myth and reality is, I think, echoed in boychild's performances in her creation of an imaginary world, which is legible as having been constructed according to a political agenda. For these reasons Haraway's cyborg manifesto is an apt framework through which to read boychild, but again, the deficit of Haraway's theory lies in its lack of address to the trans body; though she refers to the concept of 'post-gender', she never explicitly references the trans body. I believe that there are points of intersection between trans bodies and posthuman figurations such as Haraway's cyborg and that an assessment of these intersections could be useful when thinking about alternative forms of embodiment and the possibility of a post-gender future. In the proceeding

section I review Haraway's cyborg politics and re-read them through boychild's performance practice.

Braidotti's concept of the posthuman predicament reads much like a reiteration of Haraway's observations in her cyborg manifesto. Haraway writes of "rearrangements in worldwide social relations tied to science and technology" and how "we are living through a movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous information system"[65]. Likewise, Braidotti's call for a blurring of the distinctions that constitute the traditional humanist subject, her post-anthropocentric ideas of becoming-animal, becoming-machine, and thus becoming-posthuman, read almost as a re-formulation of the three boundary breakdowns that form the basis of Haraway's cyborg politics.

Signalling breakdowns of the boundaries between human and animal; between animal-human (organism) and machine; and between the physical and non-physical, Haraway contends that, through these ruptures, humans are becoming cyborgs: "By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorised and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism. In short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics."[66] As is made evident in Haraway's repeated references to her "cyborg myth", the protagonist of her manifesto is an imaginary being but she claims that it also serves as a metaphor for "our social and bodily reality"[67]. When Haraway speaks of social and bodily realities, she is referring to the lived social relations between bodies and their phenomenological experiences and yet these relations and experiences, at the same time as being real, are also culturally constructed; discursively produced and socially inscribed according to a political agenda. As constructions, they are fictions. Haraway therefore deduces that any distinction between fiction and reality is illusory and this is why she renders her cyborg as an embodiment of both of these things simultaneously.

Commenting on how biology and evolutionary theory have collapsed the species boundaries between humans and animals, Haraway argues that "the cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is

[65] Haraway (1991), 161
[66] Ibid.,150
[67] Ibid.

transgressed."[68] On the subject of her second boundary breakdown she notes that precybernetic machines, in their engineering and operation, were always haunted by the ghostly presence of humans. As such, their autonomy was illusory. She claims rather that more recent machines confuse the boundaries between natural and artificial, mind and body, organism and machine. Haraway's cyborg myth subverts and undermines the notion of organic wholeness and unity. Instead it is "resolutely committed to partiality"[69], embodying a more fractured and hybrid form in line with postmodern strategy. On her third blurred boundary between the physical and the non-physical, she claims that modern machinery, having reduced in scale to micro proportions, has become seemingly ubiquitous and invisible, so much so that it permeates all areas of human experience. For Haraway, modern machinery makes a mocking replication of God's omnipresence and power. Her blasphemous and ironic cyborg myth is no different. She argues that her cyborg is equally ubiquitous both politically and materially, that it embodies many things at once, that it is multiple and altering: "People are nowhere near so fluid, being both material and opaque. Cyborgs are ether, quintessence."[70] She concludes: "my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work."[71]

Transgressions across the boundary lines of hegemonic binaries can be identified repeatedly in boychild's work. Throughout each of her performances at Arika, I read boychild's body as ambiguously gendered. She may have named her stage persona as 'female' but, for me, her gender remained indeterminable. An interfacing of technology and the body was persistent in boychild's performances both in her use of audio technologies as well as various lighting technologies. Such a melding of technology and flesh was particularly prominent to me at the outset of *#untitled lipsynch 2*. I read the opening section of this performance as an enactment of a technologically enhanced body coming to life, like the scene from the 1931 horror movie, *Frankenstein*, when the monster's fingers twitch and its creator exclaims "it's alive!". Machine noise was juxtaposed with choral harmonies that brought an ethereality to the scene, amplifying the effect that

[68] Ibid., 152
[69] Ibid., 151
[70] Ibid., 153
[71] Ibid., 154

this was a moment of creation. In the middle section of the performance boychild crawled on all fours, miming bestial snarls in synch with an instrumental soundtrack which featured whirring noises that resembled animalistic whines and growls. As was also evident in *#untitled lipsynch 3,* as she mimed in synch with a de-tuned note that sounded out like an electronic wail, boychild's lip-synching is not constrained to vocal samples alone. She 'speaks' as much through sound and music as she does through voice.[72] Whilst these are all examples of boychild's technological embodiment, what I also want to draw attention to here is animalistic embodiment. boychild presented her body as an amalgamation in which the lines of demarcation between the supposedly polarised categories of male/female, organic/machine and human/animal were blurred and all-encompassed. To explain the political effect of these boundary breakdowns I want to re-cite an earlier noted point.

Earlier in the chapter, the dialectics of otherness were established as the vehicle of humanist Man's power. It was also established that the idealised humanist subject position excludes modes of embodiment such as non-male and non-white, as well as the non-anthropomorphic, such as animals, earth and technology. Braidotti writes: "All these 'others' are… cast out of normality, on the side of anomaly, deviance, monstrosity and bestiality. This process is inherently anthropocentric, gendered and racialised in that it upholds aesthetic and moral ideals based on white, masculine, heterosexual European civilisation."[73] Also speaking of otherness, Haraway argues: "Certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals – in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self."[74] Braidotti and Haraway suggest therefore that those who are excluded can be mobilised via posthuman subjectivity. For them, this is where the answer lies to the question of how power can be radicalised and redistributed amongst those who occupy 'othered' spaces and the spaces between and across binarised categories.

[72] A detailed analysis of boychild's 'voice' will be a focal point of the next chapter.
[73] Braidotti (2013), 68
[74] Haraway (1991), 177

In Braidotti's concept of a post-anthropocentric posthumanism, and Haraway's boundary blurring cyborg myth, the metaphorical function of their respective posthuman subjects is that they traverse the boundaries set in place by hegemonic Western ideologies. Braidotti speaks favourably of a continuum of technology and the body, as does Haraway, who celebrates illegitimate fusions which break down the distinctions that structure the Western self. She asserts that through cyborg politics, dominated others can overwrite existing dualisms and work to restore gradations of difference. Braidotti and Haraway each posit non-dualistic figurations as a means with which to destabilise dominant power matrices and open them up to new possibilities. By opposing both the hierarchical and the polarised structures that have led to inequalities, they raise a challenge to anthropomorphic humanism. This affects existing power structures by knocking the (white European, heterosexual, able-bodied male) human off his pedestal. With the extension of visibility toward other modes of embodiment comes the possibility of expanding notions of what counts as valuable life.

boychild presents her body in performance as a reconfiguration or reimagining of the human in connection with non-human others such as animals and technology. By blurring the boundaries between supposedly polarised categories, any notion of a stable, unified subject is questioned. Indeed, through multiple simultaneous identifications and presentations, a recognition of the complexity of subjectivity is at work in boychild's practice, as well as an emphasis on instability and plurality of meaning. Hers is a body that tells many stories simultaneously, a representation of numerous individuals marked as 'other'. The posthuman subjectivity that she performs reflects the political ubiquity of Haraway's cyborg, in that she embodies many things at once, she is multiple, fluid and altering. She embodies an alternative to constrictive conventions and it is this alternative embodiment that posits a critique of the traditional 'human' and destabilises his positioning at the zenith of everything. But it is not just in performance that boychild's embodiment suggests this counter-hegemonic positioning. Haraway's cyborg theory can serve us further here.

Read through Haraway, the opening section of *#untitled lipsynch 2* could be interpreted as a retelling of the origin story authored by a cyborg, a subversion

of Western culture's central myth of origin. Throughout her manifesto, Haraway repeatedly refers to her cyborg myth as her "blasphemy". This irreverence is apparent in her contention that the cyborg would not "recognise the Garden of Eden", since it has "no origin story in the Western sense", it was not formed in God's image from clay, nor was it "generated in the history of sexuality"[75]. It materialises through replication rather than reproduction. It is engineered rather than born. She continues: unlike Frankenstein's monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate. Nor does the cyborg dream of a community modelled on the nuclear family. With these statements, Haraway articulates not just a rejection of Western religion, but also a rejection of its fundamentals: patriarchal power, compulsory heterosexuality, the institution of marriage and the nuclear family. As oppositional to each of these elements, Haraway's cyborg is feminist, counter-hegemonic, and, I would argue, queer. When Haraway writes that the cyborg was conceived "with a power that was not generated in the history of sexuality"[76], the 'history of sexuality' she is referring to is clearly a history in which conception occurs organically, the history of heterosexuality. If Haraway's cyborg was conceived with a power that was not generated in that lineage, then her cyborg reads as having been queerly generated. This notion of a queer reproduction of bodies extends into the latter part of Haraway's manifesto when she proposes a strategy of 'cyborg writing' as a means to disrupt existing power schemas.

For Haraway, cyborg writing offers the possibility of intervening in representational practices as a means of survival: "Cyborg writing is about the power to survive… on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other."[77] Here and throughout her essay Haraway refers to the patriarchally governed, phallogocentric structures set in place by psychoanalysis which depend upon the myth of original unity, out of which difference is produced, through language, by the sexually marked name. To be named is to be formed bodily by and positioned within the symbolic law, be it as self/subject or marked as other. Haraway notes that "writing has been crucial to… 'postmodernist' theories attacking the phallogocentrism of the West, with its

[75] Ibid., 151, 150
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., 175

worship of the monotheistic, phallic, authoritative, and singular work, the unique and perfect name."[78] Her concept of cyborg writing is thus about the struggle for language, a struggle against phallogocentrism and naming. It is about the need to gain "access to the power to signify; but this time that power must be neither phallic nor innocent."[79] Cyborg authors are tasked with the subversion of command and control through a process of rewriting the body marked as other.

Haraway introduces the subject of cyborg writing by stating her indebtedness to feminist theorists who "write the body" and contribute to its "political language"[80]. I want to consider these notions in conjunction with the trans body. I believe that there are points of intersection between Haraway's theory, with its transformative and political agendas, and transness. I think that a consideration of the trans body in tandem with the posthuman/cyborgian body makes for a productive coupling, generating alternative visions for future embodiments. I also think that transness bears strong relations to notions of writing or rewriting the body and that these (re)significations have a reverberative effect on and in the political language of bodies.

Let us begin by thinking about how bodies are 'written'. Bodies are textual surfaces. Semiotically rendered, they are inscribed with signifiers that impact on how one's gender, sexuality, race and class are interpreted.[81] Such categorisations are predominantly read off of the body. I say interpreted here because, of course, all body texts are open to misreadings. Indeed, many bodies express a deliberate effort to present ambiguously, making a conscious play on how the body might be read – like Cassils, for example, whose work prompts us to question our connective assumptions regarding the visual information gleaned from scanning a body and the presumption that one can deduce that person's gender from these signifiers.

Consider the trans body as having been rewritten semiotically and/or materially – potentially through the medical technologies of surgery (prosthetic

[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid., 174
[81] Trappings of the body as well as body modifications extend this inscription.

augmentations) and/or hormone therapy, or, as was the case with Cassils, via a rigorous training regime. (Here the material and the textual may well be deeply implicated depending on whether or not the trans body has been recoded materially as well as semiotically.) To rewrite a body is to make an intervention into how that body reads socially. Which is not to say that one has complete control as to how one's gender is read, rather, that rewritten bodies that do not read clearly with correspondence to a heteronormative gender binary, that are non-adherent to conventional codes of gender legibility, present a new mode of being or embodiment that poses a challenge to existing norms. Thus, a rewritten genderqueer or trans body is imbued with an empowering potential to rewrite society both in terms of the types of bodies that comprise that society and in terms of posing a disruption to existing body- or gender-based language.

For Haraway, "Survival is the stakes in this play of readings."[82] The power to signify comes from the fact that these bodies are, in some sense, self-constructed; the trans person actively and agentially chooses to semiotically and/or materially transform their body (via bodybuilding as with Cassils, or having undergone surgical procedures and/or hormone treatment). Such self-constructed embodiments constitute not just new ways of being, but a mode of survival on, between and across boundaries. They may not fit within the rigid schema of heteronormativity, they may not be identifiable within the parameters of its law of sexual difference, but they exist nonetheless, surviving amidst such antagonistic conditions. In much the same manner as Haraway's cyborg therefore, genderqueer trans bodies can be said to take "*pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries" as well as "*responsibility* in their construction"[83], for, in doing so they expose the precariousness of the established gender binary. This echoes Stryker's earlier quoted sentiment that a transgender will to life serves as a point from which to critique the human and reveal its ideals as a narrow set of criteria wielded by some to dehumanise others.[84]

Haraway's cyborg theory, having imbricated imagination and material reality, is an apt framework for describing both boychild's inhabitation of an otherworldly

[82] Haraway (1991), 177
[83] Ibid., 150, original emphasis
[84] <http://boundary2.org/2014/08/20/transgender-studies-today-an-interview-with-susan-stryker/> accessed 17/09/14

onstage persona as well as her material embodiment or lived ontology. boychild is a living representation of Haraway's cyborg achieved on the one hand through performative framing and on the other hand through material-semiotic intervention (I mean this in terms of physical transition and its attendant effects in how her body 'reads'). Having rewritten her own queer trans body, boychild, as cyborg author, has "seiz[ed] the tools to mark the world that marked [her] as other". Her status as mark maker is furthered in her art practice as she (re)writes her body over and over through the self-representations that she images forth in her performances; she has access to the power to signify as both artist and art object.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that a subaltern positioned outside of the dominant and domineering ideology of the human might subvert that ideology by deploying posthuman politics. Masquerading as 'truth', discursively produced categories of normativity have become embedded in social reality as regulatory frameworks which idealise certain subjectivities and marginalise or exclude non-conforming others. In this chapter I have argued that, for those othered by the idealised humanist subject position, the impetus is not toward seeking assimilation into these universalised categories, nor is it about trying to eradicate them completely. Instead, the drive is towards interrogation and radicalisation by means of subversive intervention. The political project argued for is one which displaces the notion of a unified subject and dislodges the social codes of 'naturalness' and 'normality', promoting partiality, ambiguity, and variance in their place. Such a project does not propose a broader taxonomy for ways of being, an extension of the nomenclature in order to systematically label a wider range of people. Rather, it proposes a negotiation of alterity and diversity that lays emphasis on the hybridised and the interstitial, on identifications that are made across and in the spaces between categories. This is what posthuman figurations, such as the cyborg, can facilitate. Rather than being 'post-' in the sense of having departed completely from all that preceded them, these figurations are queer remixes which problematise binaries, blur distinctions, and explore the unpredictable, generative potentiality of alterity.

I stated at the outset of this chapter that boychild's art is difficult. Layered, contradictory and dynamically multiple, it does not impart a clear, emphatic politics. I also suggested that boychild performs a flickering between emotions, that her intermittent enactments of resistance, her postures of strength and empowerment, are offset by moments of abject despondency. Thus far, I have tried to work through the complexities of boychild's practice to explore the possible avenues it offers for alternative and/or future embodiments. Moreover, my focus has been directed toward identifying and affirming the work's more generative and positive political potentialities. Though the performance itself, in all its dark and enigmatic ambiance, does not stage an unequivocal critique, I assert nonetheless that boychild's posthuman embodiment can be read as critical and that it suggests a progressive political impulse insofar as it disrupts the regime of normativity by presenting a counterhegemonic alternative.

Breaching the boundaries set in place by hegemonic Western ideologies, boychild presents her body in performance as an amalgamation in which the lines of demarcation between the supposedly polarised categories of organic/machine, human/animal and male/female are blurred and all-encompassed. Her radical corporeality destabilises those dominant power matrices that figure human life in rigid binary form, opening them up to new possibilities and alternative modes of being.

Posthuman figurations are theorised in view of the unfolding developments affecting the body politic at large. As the boundaries between human and non-human become ever-increasingly blurred by the effects of scientific and technological developments, these "condition[s urge] us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming."[85] Moreover, and perhaps more pressingly given the recent explosion of interest, another socially impactful change that demands critical and creative reflection in terms of bodily 'becoming' is erupting. In the context of twenty-first century body politics, the need to devise new schemes of thought regarding gendered subjectivity and representation has taken on a greater urgency as a result of the shifts and ruptures affecting gender categories and identifications. By reading boychild as an enfleshment of Haraway's cyborg, a non-dualistic figuration that,

[85] Braidotti (2013), 12

in Haraway's words, inhabits "a post-gender world"[86], this chapter has worked toward offering some projective speculation on the future of subjectivity and corporeality. At the crossroads of sci-fi fantasy and reality, boychild offers a vision of the future of gender: her embodiment is both posthuman and post-gender. This is not to say that she has surpassed gender altogether, rather that she represents a mode of embodiment that has moved beyond clear binary delineations toward something deliberately ambiguous, contradictory, and partial.

[86] Haraway (1991), 150

Chapter Five:
Embodiment / Disembodiment / Re-embodiment:
The Politics and Poetics of Being / Having No-Body

Chapter Four argued for boychild's deployment of a strategy that attests to the viability and value of othered individuals through a posthuman or cyborgian reimagining of embodiment. In the present chapter I continue to theorise the posthuman in boychild's work, her use of sci-fi aesthetics, the technological augmentation of her body, and, most markedly, her technologised 'voice', but here I delve deeper. By homing in on specific formal aspects of the work, as well as engaging more extensively with those politics of the body which pertain to race, this chapter complicates and enriches my existing argument.

In describing boychild's work in the previous chapter, I suggested that she had flickered back and forth between a traumatised disposition and one of empowerment throughout each of her performances. Having established the posthuman as an affirmative politics prompted by a resistance to the anthropocentric hubris of the human and its devastating outcomes in the previous chapter, it may appear that I have overlooked the less positively couched aspects of boychild's intervention, those expressions of melancholia and rage which no doubt seem at odds with such an entirely affirmative reading. This chapter presents a nuanced examination of the contradictions and ambivalences in boychild's performances. It also reflects on the work's fluctuating emotionality and makes suggestions as to what this tumultuousness might signify.

Furthermore, as we shall see, blackness and references to the atrocities and discriminations that befell (and continue to befall) black people are legible within boychild's performances. I believe that these references to racial power dynamics form a part of the work's political significance. Whereas in Chapter Four I focused primarily on questions of sex and gender in relation to humanness, racial body politics and black experience are foregrounded and explored in detail in the second half of this chapter. My focus is also narrowed

by an examination of the issues of dehumanisation and alienation, both of which circle back to the posthuman.

In boychild's work, as a performance of the posthuman, I see a rejection of the idealised humanist subject and the embodiment of an alternative. In my experience of the work, for example, in the confident defiance of her gestures when she performed to a remix of Destiny's Child's *Say My Name* at the close of *#untitled lipsynch 3*, I also felt a retaliatory politics and a refusal to be oppressed. In appropriating and lip-synching those very words repeatedly, I read this section of her third Arika performance as a demand for recognition. Her stage presence and muscular physicality, given emphasis through a self-deifying presentation,[1] was also a factor in commanding visibility and conveying a sense of empowerment. However, it is important not to lose sight of the tone of melancholia that permeates boychild's performances; the sobbing, wailing and throes of agony, as well as her expression of frustration and rage.

Figure 21 – boychild, *BODY/SELF* (2013). Platoon Kunsthalle, Berlin, Germany. Photo: Paul Ward.

Whilst I endorse the idea that the posthuman can be used as a positive strategy and I do argue that, in the case of boychild, her work can be read as having deployed this strategy, I also think it is important to acknowledge her non-

[1] Such a presentation may strike a discordant note against my suggestion that boychild's use of the posthuman is a move beyond hubris. My assertions here are led by contradictions that exist within the work. These points are unravelled in detail at a later stage in the present chapter.

eradication of the specificities of the black, trans/female body, as well as the histories of degradation and oppression that such bodies have experienced. I think that this is what boychild is doing with some of her vocal samples. By appropriating, editing, and recontextualising song lyrics, placing them within a frame of reference that creates a dialogue between body, gender, and race politics, phrases such as, *"love me"*, *"tell me I belong"*, *"trouble so hard"*, *"I'm heartbroken"*, and *"I realise I mean nothing to you"*[2] become loaded with socio-historic meaning. In the context of boychild's performances, I read these lyrics as poignant references to the histories of exclusion that othered individuals have been subject to.

Let us think about the manner in which these words were 'voiced'. As she synched to *Moments in Heartbreak* during *#untitled lipsynch 2*, boychild's movements were jerky and loose like a marionette, as if her centre of gravity were shifting and her limbs were following suit, weighty in one instant and weightless the next. In this moment, in terms of performative action, boychild could be read as the ventriloquist's dummy, a passive object animated by an external force, the voice she synched to enlivening her body and dictating its form. Was she then spoken by others, the puppeteered slave to a dominant master discourse? Consider also the emotional charge of the work. Was she conveying her own pain or pain on behalf of others?

Owing to boychild's skilful performance, my affective reading as she lip-synched to *Moments in Heartbreak* was that the voice she mouthed expressed her own feelings of heartbreak. Of course I did not believe that she was producing the voice I was hearing but, ensnared by the synchronicity between boychild's mouth and the voices I heard, I collapsed the distinction between performing subject and the subject performed. I attributed the voice heard to the body before me and projected a certain authenticity onto it. I read boychild as voiced by others, as if *she* was begging to be loved, to belong, as if she was speaking of *her* troubles and *her* heartbreak at the realisation that she means nothing. When she performed *Say My Name* she rendered herself as powerful and I felt

[2] These lyrics are extracted from the following songs: Rihanna's *Rude Boy* (the line "love me, love me" was given prominence through repetition in the remix that boychild synched to by an artist called nknwn); Burial's *Archangel*; *Trouble So Hard* by Vera Hall; and *Moments in Heartbreak* mixed by LOL boys.

heartened by that conveyance of strength. And yet, of course, I was also aware that boychild was orchestrating everything, that she had active agency, that conversely, she was 'speaking' through others, appropriating their words and using them to convey emotions.

She was both passive mouthpiece and active agent. boychild's positioning of herself in these paradoxical roles of ventriloquised and ventriloquist, coupled with her performative actions of defeat and defiance, suggest to me that her references to histories of exclusion functioned multiply within the work. She was lamenting these histories, as well as expressing anger and frustration toward them. She was also presenting a resistant self-assured alternative. Indeed, for me, her highlighting of exclusion and its painful repercussions was an act of challenging in itself. It could also be argued that, in channelling multiple voices, boychild was not just speaking for herself, but speaking on behalf of many marginalised others, representing and giving voice to them. Indeed, boychild's work encompassed an entire dialogue about co-existence, (in)equality and the value (or lack thereof) attached to gender, blackness and human beings. Furthermore, the work also revolved around voice and voicelessness both in terms of ability to speak out and potential to be heard.

All this conjecture as to whom the voice belongs in boychild's performances points to the ambiguity or the unlocatability of the ventriloquial voice. But why does boychild choose to embrace this ambivalence in her practice? Why use this voice rather than her own? At this juncture a detailed examination of literature on ventriloquism will provide a useful starting point.

When one hears a voice, one logically seeks to ascribe it to a body (the body from which it came) by means of sight and associative cognitive function. But if a voice cannot be ascribed to a body and thus rationalised by verification of sight, it remains mysteriously unlocatable. When I say 'verification of sight', I do not mean to suggest that seeing is completely infallible; the eye can be deceived just as easily as the ear. But when a sound can be matched with a corresponding sight, as when a voice synchs with a mouth, an effect is created such that the seer/hearer can potentially be satisfied that the eye confirms what the ear hears. Both ventriloquism and lip-synching revolve around a play on the voice's

ambivalent relationship with sight and sound. The ambiguous nature of the unlocatable voice is thus a constant feature of both practices.

Mladen Dolar defines the voice of unidentifiable origin as the 'acousmatic' voice. He describes it as "a voice in search of an origin, in search of a body"[3]. Composer and theorist of sound in film, Michel Chion names this process of attaching the acousmatic voice to a body as 'disacousmatisation'. With the ventriloquist's dummy and via the lip-syncher's mouth, a visible 'source' for the unlocatable acousmatic voice is supplied, thus affecting a supposed disacousmatisation of the acousmatic voice. Yet, as Dolar argues, "even when [the acousmatic voice] finds its body, it turns out that this doesn't quite work, the voice doesn't stick to the body, it is an excrescence which doesn't match the body."[4] This is exactly the case in ventriloquial and lip-synch acts. Audiences to these performances know the visible source before them to be a surrogate rather than the actual or authentic source of the voice heard. As such, the voice does not 'stick' to its ascribed body. This effect is amplified by instances when the movements of the puppet's or lip-syncher's mouth are off-cue. As a separate entity, an object in and of itself, the ventriloquial voice highlights the impossibility of disacousmatisation. Appearing in the void from which it is supposed to have originated but which it does not fit, the ventriloquial voice is "an effect without a proper cause".[5] By that rationale, if the voice does not stick to its body, it remains unlocatable.

Dolar goes one step further and deduces that in no situation can such a thing as disacousmatisation exist because we cannot ever see the source of any voice; we cannot visually penetrate into the depths of the body's interior and even if we could, we still could not *see* voice. He explains:

> Every emission of the voice is by its very essence ventriloquism. Ventriloquism pertains to voice as such, to its inherently acousmatic character: the voice comes from inside the body, the belly, the stomach – from something incompatible with and irreducible to the

[3] Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: MIT Press, 2006), 60
[4] Ibid., 60-61
[5] Ibid., 70

> activity of the mouth. The fact that we see the aperture does not demystify the voice; on the contrary, it enhances the enigma.[6]

For Dolar the voice is, in this sense, always unlocatable. The voice never quite belongs to the body. It is separate from it; a bodily remnant object. Dolar's sentiment echoes that of Slavoj Žižek:

> An unbridgeable gap separates forever a human body from 'its' voice. The voice displays a spectral autonomy, it never quite belongs to the body we see, so that even when we see a living person talking, there is always a minimum of ventriloquism at work: it is as if the speaker's own voice hollows him out and in a sense speaks 'by itself', through him.[7]

Dolar's acousmatic voice and Žižek's notion of the voice as object, are points taken up by Steven Connor and expanded upon in his conception of what he terms the 'vocalic body'. For Connor, as it is for Dolar[8], the voice is immaterial – it is energy, not substance.[9] And yet it is "a raw, quasi-bodily matter", "full of the sense of the body's presence (its warmth, elasticity, and sensitivity)".[10] Having issued out from within, it crosses the border from bodily interior to exterior, out into the surrounding space and only becomes sound(ed) through the presence of some other body (human or otherwise). "The voice is always… on the border between the body and what is not body."[11] It is both a bodily process and a bodily production or residue. One could add to Connor's argument here that in this latter form, the voice, as separate from the body but still bodily remnant, becomes object and that, by means of this object status, it is imbued with a sense of autonomy. Connor's ruminations here offer ideas which are similar to Dolar's and Žižek's until he writes the following:

> How can the voice be both a bodily process and the precipitate of that process? … I think the answer lies in a conception which I have not

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[6] Ibid.
[7] Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (London: Routledge, 2001), 58
[8] Dolar critiques Roland Barthes for corporealising the voice, for writing of the materiality of the body as woven into the voice (see Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', *Image - Music - Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 179-189). Dolar's qualm with Barthes' idea is that "the voice cannot be pinned to a body, or be seen as an emanation of the body, without a paradox." (Dolar (2006), 70, fn. 10) It is precisely this paradox that is played upon in ventriloquial and lip-synch performances.
[9] Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 41
[10] Ibid., 31, 41
[11] Ibid., 113

> seen described fully anywhere in psychoanalytic or phenomenological writing, but which is powerfully implied and attested to throughout the history of ventriloquism: the conception of what might be called the *vocalic body*… Voices are produced by bodies but can also themselves produce bodies. The vocalic body is the idea – which can take the form of dream, fantasy, ideal, theological doctrine, or hallucination – of a surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice. The history of ventriloquism is to be understood partly in terms of the repertoire of imagings or incarnations it provides for these autonomous voice-bodies.[12]

Whereas Dolar's and Žižek's theorisations concern the ascription of a voice to a body which is already in existence (a process which, they claim, will always fail), Connor's formulation shifts the focus to the voice's ability to produce a body. According to his principle of the vocalic body, the 'autonomous operations of the voice' confer shape upon a speaking object/subject. That is, the voice, as disembodied autonomous object, animates and thus produces a speaking body. "Our assumption that the object is speaking allows its voice to assume that body… as an actor assumes a role, or as… divinity assumes incarnate form; not just to enter and suffuse it, but to produce it."[13]

Elsewhere in his text Connor states that a recorded voice is "a voice amputated from its body".[14] He still regards the recorded voice as imbued with vitality but finds "the voice's continuing power to animate, in the absence of a body which it should both be animating and be animated by" to be "distasteful and unnerving".[15] The effect is one of disturbance deriving from the disruption of seen space; the eye is disrupted because it sees a mouth moving, but the voice it synchs with is unlocatable in that the body from which that voice had originated is absent. Whether live or recorded, Connor is able to theorise the voice as disembodied, autonomous object. At the same time though, the voice is the manifestation of presence; whilst a voice may be disembodied, it is nevertheless present: "it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other"[16]. Connor continues: "The power of a voice without a visible source is the power of a less-than-presence which is also a more-than-presence."[17] The

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[12] Ibid., 35, original emphasis
[13] Ibid., 36
[14] Ibid., 11
[15] Ibid., 12
[16] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 17
[17] Connor (2000), 25

unlocatable voice is 'less-than-present' because there is not a body to support it and thus explain away its presence. Yet its apparent transcendence from the corporeal suggests a 'more-than-presence', a free-floating omnipotence which cannot be rationally explained. Impervious to the substantiation of vision, the unlocatable voice is instilled with a sense of power by dint of its inexplicability. Such enigmatic utterances are evocative of that which is other than or more than human; the supernatural, the spiritual, the prophetic, and the divine.

If the acousmatic voice cannot be disacousmatised, that is, if it cannot be pinned to a body (which, according to Dolar and Žižek, no voice ever can), then it remains a free-floating object, an autonomous voice-body. In its apparent autonomy, perhaps we can consider boychild's 'voice' as having produced her, as in the principle of the vocalic body. In its unlocatable omnipresence, perhaps her 'voice' can be read as supernatural, spiritual, prophetic, divine. If, through the practice of ventriloquism or lip-synching the disembodied voice is pregnant with reincarnative or re-embodiable possibility, in the case of boychild's performances, who is the subject reincarnated through the ventriloquised voice? And what is that subject giving voice to? If, as Connor argues, the history of ventriloquism is to be understood partly in terms of the repertoire of incarnations it provides for the vocalic body, then perhaps a brief look back at this history can help us to substantiate these claims and answer these questions.

Before twentieth-century stage acts popularised ventriloquism as an illusory interaction between performer and puppet, the practice was related to mystic experiences of ecstatic speech, the ventriloquial voice acting as mediator between the secular and spiritual worlds. Ventriloquism, in its earliest form, had its origins in classical Greece.

> The word ventriloquist itself is a Latin translation of the Greek word *engastrimythos*, from *en* in, *gaster* the stomach, and *mythos* word or speech. This term referred to a particular manner of speech which gave rise to the illusion of a voice proceeding from elsewhere than the person of the utterer. Such speech was employed both as divinatory practice and as a form of entertainment.[18]

[18] Ibid., 49-50

Engastrimythic divination entailed a supposed channelling of spirit voices through the stomach. Of these so-called 'gastromancers' or 'belly-talkers', E. R. Dodds writes: "they had a second voice inside them which carried on a dialogue with them, predicted the future…"[19] Consumed by an ecstatic trance, the engastrimythic subject thus became a prophet via their act of mediumship.

Voice channelling; a sense of spirituality and ritual; ecstatic trance; an emphasis on futurity; the power of the unlocatable voice; and the open to interpretation, enigmatic nature of words spoken are all key aspects of engastrimythic divination which speak to the dynamics at work in boychild's performances. A detailed examination of these themes as they appear in boychild's performances is therefore productive to my analysis of her 'voice' and the politics and poetics of (dis)embodiment that pertain to it.

An evocation of spirituality was clearly discernible in boychild's practice: in her assumption of cruciate poses, in the choral melody woven into the soundtrack, in her repeated utterances of 'God' and 'Lord' via her sample of Vera Hall's *Trouble So Hard*. Furthermore, ritual, possession and ecstatic trance were equally discernible aspects of the work. Voice channelling and/or spirit possession are powerful ritualistic traditions in some non-Abrahamic polytheistic religions and re-presentations of these mystic practices recurred throughout boychild's performances. For example, worship of the spirits of family ancestors; the ceremonial use of singing, drumming and dancing to connect with divinity and the spirit world; and a belief in possession by immortal spirits are all core beliefs foundational to the practice of Voodoo. Folklorist, Alan Lomax writes of his own personal account of having witnessed the Voodoo (also spelled Vaudou) 'dance of possession': "A vaudou ceremony is devoted largely to… singing, dancing, and drumming… while the gods are called one by one to visit the dancing ground. A god shows his presence by 'mounting the head' of [possessing] one of the worshippers, who then… takes on the legendary characteristics of the deity."[20] The staging of *#untitled lipsynch 1* presented the most conspicuous manifestation of boychild performing as deity. Standing on a pedestal, she wore a long white skirt that draped over the plinth and spilled onto the stage. With

[19] E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 71
[20] Alan Lomax, *The Rainbow Sign: A Southern Documentary* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1959), 11

her skirt enswathing the podium, her figure was elongated. Naked from the waist up, her muscular body smeared with white paint, her physicality was imposing, powerful. The stage was blanketed by an opaque darkness which was incised by two bright shafts of strobing white light positioned in front of and on either side of boychild, projecting up at her. When she stood tall, the beams crossed at her chest, illuminating her with a stark chiaroscuro that dramatically modelled the contours of her upper body. She had staged herself in such a way that she took on the likeness of a sculpturally rendered religious icon (albeit re-aestheticised in a posthuman, cyborgian mode) and yet, simultaneously, her physicality appeared less permanent than that, the strobing light lending an ephemeral flicker to her monumental form. Furthermore, she was animate; she twitched out a contortive dance in synch with the drum beat of the backing track. An electronic light that glowed from within her mouth as she lip-synched, exaggerated the fact that the voice heard was not issuing out from within her body; it seemed to enter her from elsewhere and course through her. This effect of voice channelling was added to performatively by the breaks in between song lyrics when boychild's mouth gaped open and she stared, transfixed. As befitting the iconography of the possessed body, the whites of boychild's eyes were made prominent, her irises obscured by whited-out contact lenses.

I am not arguing for exact replication of the Voodoo dance of possession, rather that boychild's performances *reference* it. I indicate these similarities so as to argue for boychild's highly stylised lip-synch performances as re-presentations of the ritual practices of spirit possession/voice channelling (re-aestheticised via the sci-fi inspired visual language of the posthuman), and to reinforce my argument for the sense of spirituality that permeates the work (a spirituality which is layered with both Western and non-Western religious references).[21] I keep spirituality at the forefront because it conjures forth the idea of that which is other than or more than human, that which is powerful by fact of its unknowability, and I want to argue that this is, in part, how boychild's disembodied – re-embodied ventriloquial voice is affectively powerful.

[21] Significantly, boychild cites a ritual practice from a religion which is black at its root and has a black political history. Voodoo has its roots in the tribal religions of West Africa and was brought to and developed in Haiti by slaves in the seventeenth century.

Figure 22 – boychild, *#untitled lipsynch 1* (2013). Arika, Episode Five: 'Hidden in Plain Sight', Stereo, Glasgow. Photo: Alex Woodward.

During her performances, boychild does not produce a voice in a literal, laryngeal sense, rather she ‘speaks’ through or is spoken by the recorded voices of others. These disembodied, perpetually unlocatable, seemingly autonomous voice-objects find an incarnate host in or take host of boychild’s posthuman body. In performance, her body balances precariously on the blurry boundaries of virtual and material reality. Strobe lighting makes her appear to flicker in the darkness as if she were a simulated projection or a computer-generated hologram. Through the visual vocabulary of sci-fi fantasy, her body is imaged as avatar. Besides referring to a virtual embodiment, a graphical alter-ego or screen persona, as in computing, the term ‘avatar’ can also be defined as the incarnate form of a deity on earth, as in Hindu mythology. Given her apparent in-performance holographic embodiment and the sense of spirituality/incarnate

deification in her performances, boychild can be said to embody these multiple avatar forms.[22]

In performing a re-conceptualised version of lip-synching, a posthuman, cyborgian re-presentation of voice channelling/spirit possession/deity incarnation, boychild's agency (the fact that she is as much the ventriloquist as the ventriloquised) is placed at one remove. As an audience we are fully aware of boychild's role as ventriloquist, and yet we willingly embrace the artifice of lip-synching. That is, we embrace the ambivalent unlocatability of the ventriloquial voice. In this sense then, boychild's 'voice' can be considered an 'autonomous voice-body', as per Connor's conception of the vocalic body, and she can be interpreted as incarnate surrogate or host, as a fantastical bodily projection formed out of the autonomous operations of that voice. Rather than use her own voice, she performs as channeller of an 'autonomous' voice-body so as to exploit its more-than-present power.

As C. B. Davis claims, "In ventriloquist performance and spirit channelling, the ontological status (and authority) granted to the 'other' voice is due to its signifiable difference from the ventriloquist or medium's 'own' voice."[23] In conventional ventriloquist-dummy performances, the difference between the ventriloquist's 'real' voice and the voice devised for their puppet signifies the latter's autonomy as a speaking subject; it is the signifiable difference between these voices that breathes life into and animates a formerly inert object. Likewise, the difference between the 'authentic' voice of the medium and their voice in the moment of their 'possession' signifies that the words spoken in that moment are no longer the medium's own, that their voice has been commandeered by an external force. Given that we do not ever hear boychild's 'own' voice during her performances, a rendering of the voice heard as ontological 'other' is not achieved through difference in this manner, though a 'signifiable difference' of sorts is deducible given that the vocal samples which

[22] boychild also has a notable artistic presence online. She uses Instagram as a channel through which to disseminate her photographic/GIF work. Most of these works are self-portraits, comprising a portfolio of multiple cyborgian selves or onscreen personae. This is a further example of boychild's virtual (dis)embodiment as avatar. See <http://instagram.com/boychild> last accessed 07/09/16. At the time of writing, boychild had 49,600 Instagram followers.

[23] Davis (1998), 137

comprise the 'other' voice in boychild's performances have clearly been transformed through remixing and music production techniques; pitch-shifted, passed through a distortive relay, and heavily loaded with echo and reverb effects.[24] That said, I would argue that it is through the notion of the vocalic body that the ontological status of the voice is most clearly conferred in boychild's performances.

If the voice as object appears like an 'autonomous' entity, then it appears to have a life of its own. Such a reading is arguably reinforced by the mouth's intermittent appearances as a partial object that 'speaks'. When the strobe lights trip off and all that can be seen of boychild is her light-engorged mouth floating in the darkness, this spectral apparition becomes part object, an organ seemingly separate from its bodily support. It appears as an organism in and of itself and thus "the subversive potential of an object starting to speak is unleashed"[25]. The mouth which free-floats independently from its bodily support and is animated by a voice that insists, despite the absence of a body, gains power through its disturbance of reality, through its sheer uncanniness. As Žižek phrases it: "Therein resides the traumatic impact of this shift: the distance between the Other and the Thing is momentarily suspended, and it is the Thing itself that starts to speak…"[26] boychild thus exploits the affective power of both the disembodied, unlocatable voice as 'autonomous' part object, as well as that of the partial object that begins to speak, so as to lend greater weight to her 'voice'. This, coupled with the evocation of spirituality in her work, causes the voice heard in her performances to register as if it had issued from an unknown place of origin beyond human rationality.

[24] Subjected to multiple forms of digital manipulation, the resulting voice, the 'other' voice, is stripped of Barthes' 'grain of the voice'. It is roboticised, mechanised, recoded in terms of the posthuman. This reinforces its status as an object separate from the body.

[25] Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004), 154

[26] Ibid., 152

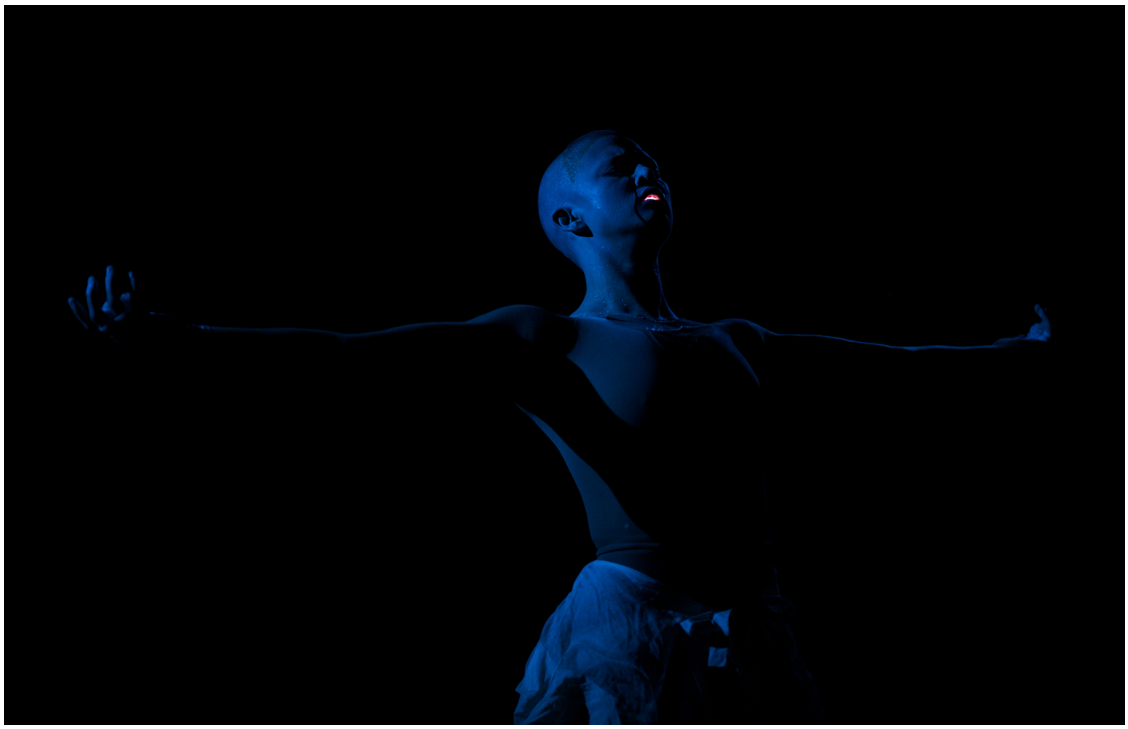

Figure 23 – boychild, *#untitled lipsynch 3* (2013). Arika, Episode Five: 'Hidden in Plain Sight', Tramway, Glasgow. Photo: Alex Woodward.

Continuing to theorise on the part object that speaks, Žižek writes: "It is not that this object is subjectless but that this object is the correlate of the 'pure' subject prior to subjectivisation."[27] Subjectivisation, as I understand it from Žižek's framing, is what makes a subject 'human'. In defining subjectivisation proper he writes: "what makes me a 'human subject' is the very fact that I cannot be reduced to my symbolic identity, that I display a wealth of idiosyncratic features."[28] He cites the example of an author's biography printed on a book cover which is followed by a line stating that the author enjoys a leisure pursuit of some description in their spare time. This supplement, he claims, "subjectivises the author, who would otherwise appear as a monstrous machine."[29] Thus the term 'subjectivisation' refers to the "whole person", whereas the 'pure' subject refers to the partial object alone and when that object speaks, what is heard is the voice of the monstrous, machinistic subject that does not yet involve subjectivisation.

boychild's posthuman figuration and her use of sci-fi aesthetics bear a strong relation to Žižek's ideas of that which is 'prior to subjectivisation'. Her

[27] Ibid., 155
[28] Ibid., 159
[29] Ibid.

cyborgian performative self does indeed read as a machinistic 'pure subject', prior to or not fully 'human'. In terms of her 'voice'/mouth as part object, keeping in mind Connor's formulation that "the voice separated from its source is an object of perception which has gathered to itself the powers of a subject"[30], what we are left with is something that, in its apparent autonomy, is not fully integrated into the whole. Furthermore, boychild's appearance as a projection or avatar, confers upon her a sort of ontological ambiguity. As an alternately blue, red or green plasm partially subsumed by darkness (affected through strategic stage lighting), boychild presents as what Žižek would term "a protoentity, not yet ontologically constituted in full"[31]. If her body reads as a protoentity, prior to or not fully 'human', in re-imag(in)ing embodiment thus, does boychild become no-body rather than some-body? What are the broader political ramifications of this? If one's body is not recognised as a body by those who have the power to delineate or designate what counts as a body, does it still exist?[32] Does boychild, as a queer, black, trans person performing as ephemeral hologram/fragmented part-object, thus reaffirm the dissolutive effect of her own marginalisation? Or, in 'becoming no-body', does she offer a different political approach? What could it mean politically to be and/or to have no body? Could this be a position of power?

My questioning and use of terminology here is informed by Denise Ferreira da Silva's ruminations during Arika episode six (the episode after the one at which boychild performed) when she asked whether it was preferable to be "some-body under the state or no-body against [it]"[33]. To be against the state is to occupy a place of resistance and refuse to submit to dominant ideology. If one is deemed to *be* nobody by somebody under the state, then to be 'no-body against the state' suggests that one is overlooked or regarded as non-threatening to the established order. Or if one *has* no body (according to somebody under the

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[30] Connor (2000), 39
[31] Žižek (2004), 143
[32] This question re-invokes ideas discussed in the Cassils chapter concerning her/his refusal to be named and to assume the bodily morphology 'appropriate' to her/his sex. If one resists by means of re-imag(in)ing one's embodiment, then one remains unfixed, opening up possibilities for alternative embodiments.
[33] Ferreira da Silva attended episode six as an audience member and posed this question. Arika then invited her to think further on this question in a conversation titled 'Standing in the Flesh' with Hortense J. Spillars on 19/04/15 at Tramway, Glasgow, as part of the programme for episode seven. An audio track and video of the conversation can be found here: <http://arika.org.uk/archive/items/episode-7-we-cant-live-without-our-lives/standing-flesh> accessed 08/09/16

state), then one also passes under the radar. This is not to say that the body is obsolete, rather that the body here is not registering as a body because it does not conform to the hegemonic schema. Nor is it to say that one's resistance is insignificant. Indeed, whilst being/having no-body could be construed as a position of impotence, it could equally be regarded as empowering, for, if one is situated outside of a constraining system, then one holds a potentially generative position from which to challenge that system's ideologies and politics. Furthermore, if the reason for one's exclusion from that system is because one 'has no body', then one such challenge might be to develop new, experimental, alternative ways of being.

Before engaging with these ideas further, I want to reflect back. At the outset of this chapter I stated aims: to examine the contradictions and ambivalences in boychild's performances and to understand her flickering back and forth between a traumatised disposition and one of empowerment. I return to these points now to draw out key aspects of my analyses and relate my argument thus far before I develop the discussion further by engaging with the racial elements within the work.

As I read it, boychild's performance of melancholic lamentation relates to the dehumanising and alienating exclusions, past and present, of queer, black, trans and female bodies. Take, for example, the song lyrics that she lip-synched to, samples that implored *"love me"*, *"tell me I belong"*, *"trouble so hard"*, *"I'm heartbroken"*, and *"I realise I mean nothing to you"*. When edited and reframed within the context of boychild's work, a context that creates a complex dialogue between body, gender, and race politics, these lyrics take on a socio-historic poignancy. They reference the exclusion and degradation that othered individuals have experienced[34] and boychild's expressions of pain, frustration and rage articulate a range of emotional responses to those experiences. Meanwhile, throughout her performance of *Say My Name*, for example, and intermittently during her performance of *Rude Boy*, boychild conveyed a retaliatory politics. She assumed postures that exhibited her physical prowess

[34] I am aware that perhaps my interpretation of the lyrical significance in the work is not enough evidence to convince on this point. In the proceeding section I give multiple examples from within boychild's work of her sensitivity to the historical oppression of othered bodies. The examples I note relate specifically to black experience.

and were connotative of power and strength. Her self-deifying stage presence commanded visibility. She enacted a refusal to be dominated. I would argue therefore that the emotional charge of boychild's practice is closely bound with its social references.

As explained in the previous chapter, the posthuman can be used as an affirmative and generative strategy, a framework with a resistant politics, a reinvention of rather than an escape from the human. boychild's posthuman figuration presents a radical subjectivity which challenges trajectories and paradigms that reiterate the heteronormative white, male human as dominant and oppressive. The ontological ambiguity of her body in performance speaks to the denial of subjectivity imposed upon non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual bodies – all those excluded from the humanist political economy. The intricacies of her ambivalent and unlocatable ventriloquial 'voice' relate to the sense of voicelessness that these othered individuals experience or how their voices have gone unheard. boychild's performed disembodiment, as well as her use of a seemingly autonomous voice-object in place of her own voice, can be seen as an expression of these fates. But equally, her use of these devices can be read as a subversive play on these debilitating impositions of being/having no-body and lacking an audible voice. Arguably, she uses those conditions of voicelessness and a denial of hegemonic subjectivity which are imposed upon her black, queer, trans/female body and subverts them via the posthuman in such a way as to resist against her marginalisation. The implications of her ontological ambiguity and voicelessness can thus be read both positively and negatively in ways that reflect her enactment of flickering emotions.

Whilst boychild's posthuman figuration addresses the specific realities of her own black, queer, trans experience, I would uphold that it also refers to the continuing sense of alienation experienced by the broader black, queer, trans communities, the experience of not being recognised as fully human. boychild's performances are especially sensitive to the historical context of an alienating dehumanisation of black bodies, as is evident in her numerous references to slavery and other race-related oppressions. In her Arika performances, some references were more latent than others. For example, at the outset of *#untitled lipsynch 2*, boychild's machine-body was 'humanised' by its ability to

feel emotion, as was explained vicariously through the lyric, "I know I may be young but I've got feelings too, and I need to do what I feel like doing, so let me go and just listen." I recognised these words as the lines spoken by Britney Spears at the beginning of her song, *I'm a Slave 4 U*. In Britney's song, slavery is meant both in the sense of her being a slave to the rhythm (*à la* Grace Jones)[35] and in the sense of a sexual relationship, an S&M type submission to the dominance of another. Yet slavery, in whatever form, is indivisible from its racial history. Though no more of Britney's *I'm a Slave 4 U* than the lines quoted above was used in *#untitled lipsynch 2*, boychild's allusion to the song was incredibly loaded, given that she herself is of African-American descent. It was clear to me that, with Britney's song, boychild was referencing slavery in the terms of black history and the history of slavery in America.

#untitled lipsynch 2 ended with boychild miming to lyrics sampled from a 1937 recording of *Trouble So Hard* by Alabama blues and folk singer, Vera Hall. Hall herself was the descendent of an enslaved lineage, her paternal grandfather having been sold into Alabama to work "all his life on a big plantation… in this white man's fields"[36]. The original of *Trouble So Hard* is a-cappella and, as such, is stylistically reminiscent of slave songs which were usually sung this way

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[35] I consciously draw Grace Jones into the discussion here in anticipation of the proceeding section on afrofuturism. Jones is an artist who aestheticises her own black body as posthuman in both her onstage performances and offstage in her music videos and album artwork. On the cover of *Slave to the Rhythm* (1985), a single photograph of Jones is montaged in such a way as to heighten her flattop fade haircut and extend her mandible. Her fierce expression suggests that a scream or snarl is escaping from her gaping mouth. This, coupled with her piercing gaze, makes for a striking image in which Jones' humanness is tainted and she is rendered part-machine, part-animal: cyborgian.

Jones is equally notable for her intentionally androgynous self-presentations; she sported a high-top fade years before it became a popular hairstyle for black men in the 1980s, and her signature stage look sees her pairing fetishised feminine garb – makeup and stiletto heels – with masculine tailored suits. Both Jones' striking appearance and her bold demeanour have seen her written about in afrofuturist literature as an iconic example of afrofuturism, female black power and sexuality.

Writing about Jones' 1980 performance, *A One Man Show*, for which she wore a raffia skirt (in homage to the 1920s Parisian exotica of Josephine Baker's banana and tusk skirts) over a gorilla suit, Miriam Kershaw argues that Jones' oscillation between "exploiting the 'feminine' myth of 'primitive' sensuality and the 'masculine' construction of threatening savagery" in her performances, serves to "de-essentialise the black female subject". Kershaw interprets Jones' performed references to racial and sexual stereotypes associated with the African diaspora as "ironic commentar[ies]" on Euro-American prejudices and "iconograph[ies] of power and subordination". For Kershaw, Jones' exploitation of the tensions and preconceptions related to race and gender in her performances, destabilises the historical power relations between male/female and black/white. See Miriam Kershaw, 'Postcolonialism and Androgyny: The Performance Art of Grace Jones', *Art Journal* 56:4 (Winter 1997), 19-25

[36] These are Hall's words extracted from Lomax (1959), 56

(sometimes accompanied by hand clapping and foot stomping).[37] Again, with this song, layered references to slavery were made.[38]

As she lip-synched to *Trouble So Hard*, boychild lay on her back beneath a spotlight. A heavily treated, almost robotic sounding voice sounded out: *"Oh Lordy, trouble so hard… Don't nobody know my trouble but God…"* boychild writhed on the floor and winced as she mouthed these words, conveying the pain intrinsic to the lyrics with grave intensity. Throughout the performance she had been nude except for a thong, covered in white paint and entwined in string, pulled taut and knotted around her legs, torso and head. As she lip-synched the above lines of verse, which looped over and over, she cut at the twine and disentangled herself. Daubs of white paint appeared on the floor, having rubbed off of boychild's contorting body. Patches of her 'true' skin colour were left exposed. The vocal faded out and the room darkened, marking the end of the performance. When the spotlight swelled up again, boychild had exited the space, leaving behind only indexical traces of her presence in the white paint smeared on the floor.

[37] Drums had been used in Africa for communication. When the connection between drumming and communication (with the potential for resistance) was made, drums were forbidden by slave owners. "…enslaved Africans, who had been denied the drum, made music with stomps, claps, and vocal sounds." Carl Paris, 'Reading 'Spirit' and the Dancing Body in the Choreography of Ronald K. Brown and Reggie Wilson', *Black Performance Theory*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2014), 99-114 (107)

[38] Though audience members would need to be familiar with the sample as well as Hall's background in order to make these connections.

Figure 24 – boychild, *#untitled lipsynch 2* (2013). Arika, Episode Five: 'Hidden in Plain Sight', Tramway, Glasgow. Photo: Alex Woodward.

There are a number of points to pick up on here, all of which relate to race politics and black experience. In this sequence my attention was drawn to: skin colour, or more specifically a masking and unmasking of skin colour; emotional intensity – both gesturally and in terms of facial expression boychild's performance was marked with anger, frustration, pain and sorrow; a sense of struggle followed by self-emancipation – in freeing herself from physical restraint, this sequence could be read rather straightforwardly as a metaphor for breaking free from shackles. Was this then a positive ending to the performance? Laden with references to race-related oppression, was the piece imparting a commentary on the iconography of racialised power and subordination, as well as a statement of resistance, a refusal to be dominated?

Similar tropes appeared in boychild's re-performance of Rihanna's *Rude Boy* during *#untitled lipsynch 1*. Having been smothered in a thick layer of white paint for the duration of the piece, boychild had masked her skin tone, rendering her body racially illegible. Mid-way through the second song used in the performance, the slow beat of the track splintered and, echoing the spasmodic lighting, the rhythm of the high-hat sped to a rapid trill, as boychild rubbed black paint over her chest, neck and face. She blackened her whitened skin frantically, still synching the lyrics *"take it, take it, love me, love me"*. Her

chest heaved as if she were sobbing. Extending her arms, she reached out her hands, then drew back, cowering. These gestures were performed almost hysterically and yet, in the next instant, boychild had drawn up tall, puffing out her chest – she seemed defeated one moment and paradoxically defiant the next.

Writing of this specific moment in boychild's performance, Jack Halberstam argues that boychild turns "blackness into something messy and vibrant rather than something factual and fetishised. Blackness moves around on her instead of representing a fixed form of identity."[39] According to Halberstam, boychild's actions represent an unfixing of racial identity, a rendering of blackness as dynamic and nuanced, rather than something that fixes and stereotypes the body. Halberstam's suggestion that boychild is questioning the permanence or stability of blackness is rich with ideas for further exploration and yet his analysis goes no further than this. The starting point provided here is useful for my own reading of the race politics within boychild's performances. Halberstam's interpretation also falls short in that it fails to acknowledge the underlying tension which bristles beneath the surface of boychild's actions. I flag this action of smearing black paint over a technologised, cyborg body as tensional because imagery which amalgamates blackness and technology points to a context of historical and political conflict. But, before addressing this, I want to focus on notions of fixing and unfixing blackness.

One way to envisage blackness as "something factual", as a "fixed form of identity", is to determine the black subject from without, to formulate a judgement of the body based on its visible differences and to categorise it racially. This idea of fixing the black subject in and with accordance to their own body, or more specifically their skin, is addressed at length in Frantz Fanon's text, *Black Skin, White Masks*. From his own experience, Fanon writes: "I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance… I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am *fixed*."[40] For Fanon, his blackness is foremost in how

[39] Jack Halberstam, 'Angry Women: boychild in the Wilderness', *Stand Close, It's Shorter Than You Think: A show on feminist rage*, ed. Katherine Brewer Ball and David Frantz (ONE Archives at the USC Libraries, 2015), exh cat, 24-29 (27)

[40] Fanon (1967), 116, original emphasis

others make determinations about his character and this fate is as inescapable as his skin. He continues: "My blackness was there, dark and unarguable. And it tormented me, pursued me, disturbed me, angered me. Negroes are savages, brutes, illiterates."[41] Preconceptions associated with blackness precede him: others' preoccupations with blackness as an essentialised category; base stereotypes of savagery, intellectual ineptitude, hyper-sexualisation, bestiality and depravity. Each of these factors amount to the sum of Fanon's 'overdetermination'. These fixed (mis)perceptions of blackness fix him in turn. Via the (Eurocentric) ethnocentric gaze – that is to say, via the gaze of the white onlooker who judges other cultures by the values and standards of their own – Fanon is ascribed a position (or, to use his term, he is 'fixed') in the racial hierarchy.

Fanon argues that this fixing produces an inferiority complex in the black subject which develops as a result of "the internalisation – or, better, the epidermalisation – of this inferiority"[42] which is imposed upon him or her from outside. Later in his text Fanon pushes this point further, writing: "…the Negro suffers in his body quite differently from the white man… A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of nonexistence."[43] In the process of overdetermining, the looker subjectively disidentifies with the object of their gaze. That is to say, the black individual is denied recognition *as a subject* by the Eurocentric onlooker. As Fanon explains, this symbolic transaction effectively denies him a subjectivity and instils in him a feeling of nonexistence, of alienation. On this point Fanon's text bears strong relation to my argumentation about the exclusion of people of colour from the humanist political economy on the grounds of their 'otherness', and subsequent feelings of existential crisis brought about by the denial of subjectivity imposed upon them.

Robyn Wiegman asks: "does 'the fact of blackness', as Frantz Fanon terms Western racial obsessions, lie in the body and its epidermis or in the cultural training that quite literally teaches the eye not only how but what to see?"[44] To

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[41] Ibid., 117
[42] Ibid., 11
[43] Ibid., 138-139
[44] Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorising Race and Gender* (Durham, North Carolina; London: Duke University Press, 1995), 22

ask whether the Western world's fixation with ordering individuals into racial categories lies within the body, is to question the validity of citing visible corporeal signs as a means to determine race. Bodily differences and the significations attached to them (skin tone and hair texture for example) are highly contentious racial markers simply because they are susceptible to misreadings. Wiegman remarks, "As evidence for the visible 'fact' of blackness, this recourse to the body as offering its own observable legitimation importantly reveals the production that underlies… the seemingly neutral moment of visual decoding." She adds: "the visible is never an uncomplicated production".[45] boychild's body is whitened in performance and thus rendered racially illegible. This masking of her skin could indeed be read as critical of the supposed 'logic' of a visible economy of race upon which distinctions can be based. That said, boychild's gesture here potentially alludes to something more complex than that. To take bodily differences as facts of natural racial differentiation that exist prior to cultural construction would be to submit to a fallacy. Wiegman articulates this very point by referring to the act of looking as one of 'production'. Evidently then 'the fact of blackness' is not constrained to the body itself, as is indicated in the second part of Wiegman's question, which enquires as to whether the 'racial obsessions' of the Western world are not more readily resultant of cultural inscriptions.

To question whether the 'fact of blackness' resides in the body, is to question the innateness of blackness, to question the idea that race is a biological truth, or to use Halberstam's phrasing, to question blackness as "something factual", a "fixed form of identity". If the 'fact of blackness' does not come from within, it follows then that it comes from without. To broach this line of questioning is to indicate that blackness is something that is formed and shaped by social, cultural and political pressures. These very notions emerge through Fanon's narrative in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

What I find most impactful about Fanon's text is his insistence that he is determined from outside, that he is fixed by socially, culturally, politically imposed racial prejudices. He is fixed by the falsehood which dictates that, not just blackness, but all races are essentialised categories, objective truths, pure

[45] Ibid., 24, fn. 12

and concrete universal types. He is fixed by stereotypes which define blacks in narrow derogatory terms. Yet blackness itself is not fact or fixed, as boychild symbolically gesticulates when she smears black paint over her body during *#untitled lipsynch 1*. The practice of citing visible corporeal signs as a means to determine race is not just unreliable as a result of the 'productive' complications of looking, but it is also unreliable because of variations in physical appearance across racial groups; 'races' are not the simple, clear cut categories that the above methods of classification would lead us to believe. Furthermore, one cannot assume a stereotypical, fixed idea of what it means to be black, since, as Fanon puts it, "Negro experience is not a whole, for there is not merely *one* Negro, there are *Negroes*."[46] As Fanon explains, blackness has real-world implications, it has a reality in lived experience but it is nevertheless a sociopolitically constructed concept, a technology, a preconception that is mapped onto his body by others.

Critical theorists of race argue that, as a concept, race emerged out of a need to account for and schematise difference.[47] It was devised and developed as a means to organise the social order. Wiegman notes that the "emphasis on race as a constituted 'fact' of the body – as a truth that not only can but must be pursued beyond the realm of visible similarities and differences"[48] was what characterised modern scientific investigations which purported to prove that blacks are inherently lesser-than whites. Bolstered by the rising authority of science as the basis of certain knowledge, race gathered legitimation as a system of hierarchically organisable biological categories. This context began with comparative anatomy (delineations of difference based on cranial capacity for instance) and then shifted from typology to genetics in the service of repeated attempts to define race as a biological entity.[49] "Making race revolve around biology constructed it as an innate, permanent, and inescapable status"[50] and it produced a hierarchical system that could be wielded as a tool of

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[46] Fanon (1967), 136, original emphasis

[47] To name but a few: Michael Banton and Jonathan Harwood, *The Race Concept* (New York: Praeger, 1975); Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s,* 2nd edn (New York; London: Routledge, 1994); Dorothy Roberts, *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-create Race in the Twenty-first Century* (New York; London: The New Press, 2011).

[48] Wiegman (1995), 23

[49] Banton and Harwood's text provides a comprehensive survey of contributors to the development of a theory of racial typology.

[50] Roberts (2011), 23

oppression, a justification for a multitude of atrocities against black bodies such as the transatlantic slave trade, colonial expansion, segregation, and scientific experimentation.[51] Treating race as a biological concept served an ideological function: 'scientific' theories propped up the fantasy of European racial superiority, as in Eurocentric humanist discourse, and validated black subjugation. These methods degraded the black body, defining it as less-than-human and designating it as conquerable. Scientific technologies were thus complicit in maintaining a white supremacist regime and justifying racism. As sociologist Paul Gilroy terms it: "For me, 'race' refers primarily to an impersonal, discursive arrangement, the brutal result of the raciological ordering of the world, not its cause."[52] Or, more simply put: it was racism that begat 'race', not the other way around.

I have traced a lineage of criticism which exposes the flaws of arguments in which blackness is fixed via claims of biological facticity because I believe that boychild's action of smearing black paint over her whitened body engages with this context. By making blackness messy and mobile, boychild's actions symbolise a transgression of fixed ideas of blackness; blackness is presented as an abstraction rather than an essence. Consider the emotion invested in the performance of that moment. Sobbing as she frantically blackened her skin, boychild expressed a torment that resonates with the feelings Fanon writes of – the pain of being overdetermined by others' fixed preconceptions of blackness. And yet her gesture of moving blackness around and over herself can be read as powerful rather than powerless. In the context of critical race theory, the symbolism of this action does not read as submissive. Rather, it reads as defiant, a refusal to be fixed with accordance to essentialised categories and stereotypes.

To locate a direct affirmative politics within boychild's work is problematic, given that her demeanour flickers between defeat and defiance throughout, given that her performance of power is intermittent and transitory. Indeed, the

[51] The reason why I have briefly detailed these exploitations is to evidence the historical context of a conflict between black bodies and medical/scientific technology. An awareness of this context is important to the proceeding phase of my analysis which focuses on boychild's posthuman, technologised black body.

[52] Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 39

tone of boychild's oeuvre, the overall feel of her work, is not always as active as such readings might suggest. To read her references to the historical context of a dehumanisation of black bodies – her references to slavery and other race-related oppressions – as a direct commentary on the iconography of racialised power and subordination, or to read her symbolic unfixing of blackness as an emphatic critique of the sociopolitical construction of blackness which endures as the cause of racist practices, is to claim an assertiveness for the work which it does not sustain unwaveringly; this assertiveness is only there intermittently. As I have been arguing, boychild's performance practice is contradictory and difficult. It resists a clear-cut reading. Though there are images of power in the work, these moments are cut-through, in glitchy juxtaposition, with downbeat elements. Despite my conviction that boychild's performances channel critical race politics – the symbolism of her gestures resonating with critiques of blackness as a fixed category – I cannot claim that the work fights for these politics explicitly. boychild's performances are more enigmatic than that. They present a layering of fragmented images, ideas, and points of contention which reference race issues and point towards a politics, but they do not impart a clear and emphatic political message with regards to these issues. I would argue instead that her practice is politically engaged and dialogic in form and that any suggestion of a politics is latent.

At this juncture I want to return to my earlier assertion that boychild's action of smearing black paint over her technologised, cyborg body is underpinned with a complex tension. The notion of race *as a* technology is closely bound with the historical relationship between race *and* technology. As detailed above, through scientific and medical technologies, attempts have repeatedly been made to validate racial classification and institutionalise racist practices; historically, technologies have been employed to sanction a deepening of racial inequality. With this in mind then, it seems that images of a posthuman or cyborgian black body would only re-invoke past oppressions. Proponents of afrofuturism argue to the contrary that the posthuman offers salvation for the black individual.

As Hershini Bhana Young poses it, the posthuman "emerges from the break that actively disidentifies with a compulsory humanist notion of real blackness"[53]. To dispute humanism's objectifying and degrading notion of 'real' blackness is to challenge a hegemonically imposed and entrenched construction. Such a critique takes steps toward attempting to affect ideological transformations and propose alternatives. That blackness is impermanent and unstable suggests that race as a concept can be transformed by/through ongoing political struggles. It is via the politics of the posthuman that afrofuturists assert their resistance. Whereas past oppressions involved a use of technology on/against the black body, afrofuturists claim that representations of the black body *as* posthuman can generatively rewrite that historically turbulent relationship between blacks and technology.

According to Alley Pezanoski-Browne: "adopting an alien, cyborg, or robot alter ego is one way to reclaim this previously negative relationship with science and technology… Afrofuturism is a way to project blackness into the future – not merely as existing, but as a critical and significant part of it."[54] Also making the case for reclamation, and expanding on Pezanoski-Browne's claim by offering a specific example, Tricia Rose comments on how afrofuturist appropriations of the robot represent a response to historical conditions in which enslaved black bodies were essentially roboticised in the sense of having been transmogrified into machine-like labour for the capitalistic gain of their owners. She writes: "It's like wearing body armor that identifies you as an alien: if it's always on anyway, in some symbolic sense, perhaps you could master the wearing of this guise in order to use it *against* your interpolation."[55] Perhaps the more positive aspects of boychild's practice, her flickers of empowerment, could be driven by these afrofuturist aspirations of reclamation and projection. Though, for afrofuturism to be an entirely appropriate model through which to read boychild's practice, it would also need to encompass other less utopian elements in resonance with the work's pessimistic tone. To determine whether/how the

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[53] Hershini Bhana Young, 'Twenty-First-Century Post-Humans: The Rise of the See-J' in DeFrantz and Gonzalez (2014), 45-61 (45)

[54] Alley Pezanoski-Browne, 'How Women in Pop are Carrying the Mantle of Afrofuturism', *Bitch Magazine,* Issue 62 (Spring 2014), available online here: <https://bitchmedia.org/article/black-to-the-future-afrofuturism-feminism-music-janelle-monae-kelis-ebony-bones-theesatisfaction> accessed 19/06/15.

[55] Tricia Rose in Mark Dery, 'Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose', *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1994), 179-222 (214), original emphasis

afrofuturist concept applies comprehensively to boychild's multivalent work, we must probe deeper into the world of afrofuturism to examine its tenets in greater detail.

The term 'afrofuturism' was coined by Mark Dery in his 1994 text *Black to the Future*, although, rooted in ancient African culture, the concept itself is not so new. An offshoot of posthuman theory centred on race politics, afrofuturism denotes both an aesthetic and a form of critical race theory, simultaneously imagining the future and re-examining the past through a lens of African diaspora. Afrofuturist works are interwoven with elements of mysticism, mythology, non-Western belief systems and, most prominently, the aesthetics and narrative conventions of science-fiction. Afrofuturist works place black figures within post-apocalyptic landscapes, cyberspace environments, indeed any alien or alienating space, creating situations which speak to Greg Tate's formulation that blacks live and "profoundly experience" the cultural dislocation, alienation and estrangement that sci-fi writers conjure forth for the protagonists of their literature.[56] In this way afrofuturist art is able to narrativise the lived experience of blackness. Meanwhile, in its capacity as a critical form of race theory, afrofuturism is also sensitive to the notion of race as a political creation, as is made apparent through renderings of black protagonists as outcasts, as alien/robotic/posthuman others.

Working at the intersection of imagination and technology, afrofuturist politics are concerned with a deconstruction and affirmative re-invention of blackness. When considered in conjunction with Tate's formulation on the narrativisation of black lived experience, this summary of the afrofuturist ethos points to a paradox: how can a theory which foregrounds the black body, be simultaneously trying to escape racial definitions of subjectivity? If race is an "anxiety fantasy"[57], a socially trained formulation rather than a fixed identity, how can that be reconciled with the lived reality of a black people, a community which is driven by a need to reaffirm their past and envision a future in which they can stake out a 'critical and significant' place for themselves?

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[56] Tate in an interview for the essay-film: Dir. John Akomfrah, *The Last Angel of History* (London: Black Audio Film Collective, 1995) 45 minutes, colour DVD

[57] Samuel R. Delany in Dery (1994), 190

It is not as simple as denying the existence of race altogether. Whilst race as a biological entity does not exist in reality, race as a technology certainly does and it has significant life-world implications in terms of how society categorises and consequently treats people.[58] Afrofuturists are starkly aware of this reality. Hence, their contemplations and articulations of blackness are suitably complex: artists and scholars meditate not just on representations of blackness specific to the lived experiences of black people, but also on ways in which blackness has been constructed and, more than that, they seek to redefine contemporary as well as past and future notions of blackness.[59] The paradoxical questions posed above are thus an integral, constitutive aspect of afrofuturism. They comprise the complex undercurrent which flows throughout afrofuturist art and scholarship.

Beyond their use of posthuman subjectivities as a means to re-invent the black body, the question of how afrofuturists deconstruct and re-imagine blackness is inextricably bound with temporality. As Mark Fisher explains, a crucial relation between temporal disjunction and black politics exists: "temporal disjunction… has been constitutive of the Afrodiasporic experience since Africans were first abducted by slavers and projected from their own lifeworld into the abstract space-time of Capital. Far from being archaic relics of the past, slaves were thus already in the future."[60] As Fisher remarks here, the African diasporic experience was as much a temporal disruption as it was a geographical one. Forward projection was inherent to transatlantic slavery in the sense that slave plantations were models of capitalist production, precedents of the modern American capitalist system; slaves were commodified and forced to do the work

[58] Adrian Piper articulates something similar when she writes: "What joins me to other blacks… and other blacks to one another, is not a set of shared physical characteristics, for there is none that all blacks share. Rather, it is the shared experience of being visually or cognitively *identified* as black by a white racist society, and the punitive and damaging effects of that identification." Adrian Piper, 'Passing for White, Passing for Black' in *Out of Order, Out of Sight. Volume I: Selected Writings in Meta-Art 1968-1992* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: MIT Press, 1996) 275-307 (305), original emphasis.

[59] That race is culturally, socially and politically constructed and yet still has consequences on one's life, circles back into one of the key propositions of Haraway's cyborg manifesto. Echoes of Haraway's proposition that "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion" (Haraway (1991), 149) reverberate through Tate's idea that works of black sci-fi – afrofuturist re-imaginings of blacks as aliens – serve as a metaphor for black social and bodily realities. The intertwining of myth and reality that Haraway's cyborg embodies is thus equally identifiable in afrofuturist figurations.

[60] Mark Fisher, 'The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology', *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5:2 (2013), 42-55 (46)

that wage-labourers later submitted to. This, he argues, is how "black slaves encountered 'postmodernity' three hundred years ago"[61] and, by extension, this is precisely why "time being out of joint is the defining feature of the Black Atlantic experience."[62]

In writing about the futurity of the slave experience, Fisher draws from Mark Sinker's 1992 essay, *Loving the Alien*. Exploring black sci-fi as a theme in music, Sinker argues: "The central fact in Black Science Fiction – self-consciously so named or not – is an acknowledgement that Apocalypse already happened: that (in [Public Enemy's] phrase) 'Armageddon been in effect'."[63] What Fisher and Sinker are getting at here (to continue couching these ideas of black experience in the terms of sci-fi vernacular) is that, if the slave trade itself constituted Armageddon, then contemporary African-Americans are living in a post-apocalyptic world. If, in conjunction with that idea, we recall Tate's argument that contemporary Afrodiasporic subjects live the estrangement that sci-fi writers imagine, then we begin to get a sense of how the devastation caused by slavery continues to affect black subjects; how African-Americans today, as the "descendants of alien abductees"[64], are navigating a still hostile and alienating environment. As Chuck D phrases it in the Public Enemy song *Can't Truss It*, invasions of the "motherland" left its people and their descendants "faded". This was and still is "the cost of the holocaust… the one still goin' on".[65]

Fisher writes of how these experiences of estrangement extend to feelings of existential grief: a "deep, unbearable ache… arises from the horrible realisation that, for contemporary black America, to wish for the erasure of slavery is to call for the erasure of itself. What… if the precondition for your being is the abduction, murder and rape of your ancestors?"[66] The grim reality of slavery and its aftermath presents black America with the realisation that if the transatlantic slave trade and its traumas had not happened, African-Americans

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[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 50
[63] Mark Sinker, 'Loving The Alien In Advance of the Landing', *The Wire,* Issue 96 (February 1992), available online here: <http://www.thewire.co.uk/articles/218/> accessed 19/06/15
[64] Dery (1994), 180
[65] Public Enemy, *Apocalypse 91… The Enemy Strikes Back*. Def Jam Recordings, 1991 (CD)
[66] Fisher (2013), 51

would not exist. Those traumas of the past are thus a painful part of the present for each of America's black subjects.

Cognisant of the political ramifications of African temporal disjuncture, afrofuturists appropriate this device, making substantive black historical presence and the affirmative forward projection of blackness a priority of their political project. This is not to say that afrofuturism is a wholly utopian concept.[67] Built upon a non-linear concept of time, how could it be if, given its potential to circle back on itself, the repetition of past horrors is a distinct possibility? Afrofuturism "avoids… utopianism by inventing rituals and techniques of temporal direct action"[68]. Kodwo Eshun terms these strategies 'chronopolitics': "temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress, these futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to prehistory."[69] What he means by writing of prehistory here, as in the period of human existence before written records of history began, is that black subjects were so condemned because, with accordance to enlightenment discourse, they were never classed as human and thus never had a history to record. Cast out of enlightenment formulations of existence and forcibly deprived of their social and cultural past, black subjects

[67] Take, for example, the exhibition 'Freestyle', held at the Studio Museum, Harlem in 2001. The show was curated by Thelma Golden who, in her introduction to the exhibition catalogue, termed the included works as 'post-black'. According to Golden, Freestyle's artists were "adamant about not being labelled 'black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness." (Thelma Golden, Introduction to *Freestyle*, ed. Christine Y. Kim and Franklin Sirmans (Harlem: Studio Museum, 2001), exh cat, 14). Engaged as this work was in a complex dynamic which rejected one notion of blackness whilst embracing another and seeking to define it otherwise, I would call this 'post-black' art afrofuturist.

To raise a specific example from the exhibition: a sound installation by Nadine Robinson plays segments from political orations which are "emotionally provocative for both their idealism and failure to deliver". Significantly, the work includes fragments from Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I have a dream…' speech, in which King relates his "dream today" about future racial equality. Using various audio technologies, Robinson blends soundbites from political orations with canned laughter to comment on "the position of the disenfranchised American population, laughing at the supposed equality in the constitutional foundations of the United States", to comment on how 'the dream' is often laughable. "That the American dream has fallen somewhat short of its promise is an observation that few would dispute" writes Sarah Robins in Freestyle's exhibition catalogue (all quotations in this paragraph: Sarah Robins in Kim and Sirmans (2001), 71). Robinson's installation is a clear example of an afrofuturist artwork which remains critically aware that dystopian futures are as possible as utopian ones.

[68] Tobias C. van Veen, 'Review of Ytasha L. Womack, Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture', *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5:2 (2013), 152-157 (155)

[69] Kodwo Eshun, 'Further Considerations on Afrofuturism', *The New Centennial Review* 3:2 (Summer 2003), 287-302 (297)

have fought for the substantiveness of their historical presence. Eshun's chronopolitical futurisms defy the progressive linearity that characterises early twentieth-century Western ideas of futurism as put forth by Italian and Russian avant-gardes, arguing instead for the continued import of the past.[70] Rather than casting off the past as immutable and therefore ineffectual, Eshun's chronopolitical strategy suggests a retention of the past and its traumas in order to rework them productively. To broaden out from Eshun so as to encompass afrofuturist thinkers *en masse*: afrofuturism seeks to deconstruct images of the past and "reorient history"[71] so as to offer alternative visions of the future. Fisher summarises this succinctly: "Afrofuturism unravels any linear model of the future, disrupting the idea that the future will be a simple supersession of the past. Time in Afrofuturism is plastic, stretchable and prophetic – it is, in other words, a *technologised* time, in which past and future are subject to ceaseless de- and recomposition."[72]

Earlier I argued for boychild's re-conceptualised version of lip-synching as a posthuman, cyborgian re-presentation of voice channelling, Voodoo-esque spirit possession, and deity incarnation (as per the definition of avatar in Hindu mythology). As such, boychild can be said to weave sci-fi aesthetics together with elements of mysticism, mythology, and non-Western belief systems in afrofuturist synthesis. Additionally, in relating the ancient history of ventriloquism in its earlier, spirit-channelling form, I examined ideas of ecstatic trance and detailed the notion that the engastrimythic subject or voice-channelling possessed body becomes a prophet via the act of mediumship. I re-invoke these points now to stake a claim for them as afrofuturist characteristics within boychild's practice, as I return to the subject of her 'voice'.

An example of chronopolitical strategy in afrofuturist art is the process of sampling in music. Sampling, be it of a voice, sound, or piece of music, creates anachronic moments. A sample is an indexical trace that signals a previous time

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[70] For a discussion of the similarities and differences between afrofuturism and European futurism see 'The Genesis of Afrofuturism' a subsection of Reynaldo Anderson's, 'Critical Afrofuturism' in *The Blacker the Ink: Constructions of Black Identity in Comics and Sequential Art*, ed. Frances Gatewood and John Jennings (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 171-192 (178-181).

[71] Ibid., 297

[72] Fisher (2013), 47, original emphasis

and context – the original song from which the sample is taken. Through sampling, multiple eras can be referenced, reworked, and collapsed into one (of course, still durational) moment. Via the music and vocal samples that comprise her technologised 'voice', just such an anachronistic discontinuum of time is affected in boychild's performance practice.

Using recorded voices, boychild juxtaposes vocal samples from contemporary pop songs by Rihanna, Beyoncé, and Britney with historical voices. The voice of Alabama blues and folk singer, Vera Hall, sampled from her 1937 recording of *Trouble So Hard* was synched to during *#untitled lipsynch 2* and Nina Simone's voice, a voice strongly connected with the US Civil Rights Movement, echoed around the performance space as *Sinnerman* (recorded in 1966) played out before boychild's *#untitled lipsynch 1*. Both Hall's and Simone's songs were borne out of musical genres which are black at their root; *Trouble So Hard* and *Sinnerman* are imbued with a blues tonality and both songs are traditional spirituals. In addition to sampling songs of these genres, boychild draws influence from the performance characteristics of these musics. Reworking vestiges from the histories of these musics, she collapses multiple timeframes into her performances. That boychild's incorporation of *Trouble So Hard* and *Sinnerman* into her own work samples more than simply the voices of Hall and Simone is significant, given both the socio-political histories and affective nature of the musics that these songs emerge out of.

In the deep South, congregations of enslaved Africans expressed their faith with spirituals, a religious folk music which drew from biblical texts, hymns and sermons. Sung or indeed shouted at prayer meetings, such was the fervour with which these songs were enacted, slave spirituals were very much a performed style of worship which included hand-clapping, foot-stomping and "a certain ecstasy of motion"[73]. That such actions accompanied the performance of spirituals is testimony to a retention of African cultural heritage – a body that shudders and sways, consumed by an ecstatic trance, displays the performative traditions of spirit possession, as practiced in the tribal religions of West Africa. The rapture that consumed and was enacted by all bodies involved in the

[73] Words extracted from the autobiography of slave preacher, James L. Smith (Norwich, Connecticut, 1881) reprinted in *Five Black Lives* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 139-240 (163)

performance of slave spirituals does not translate directly to boychild's stylised performance of spirit possession. Her convulsing body stands alone onstage and though her 'voice' is comprised of the layered voices of others, her performance of spirituality is not borne out of a communal experience. Nevertheless, a clear reference to the African tribal practice of spirit channelling is present in boychild's work. Her syncretism of both African and African-American cultural and religious heritage from multiple eras constitutes an afrofuturist recovery and re-imagining of past traditions.

The practice of communicating on multiple levels is another African tradition referenced by boychild. Albert J. Raboteau notes: "much of the verbal art of West Africans and many of the folk tales of their American descendants were characterised by indirect, veiled social comment and criticism"[74]. Described as 'making a way out of no-way'[75], cases have been made for the utilisation of this technique in blues songs and spirituals. Blues functioned socially in that it was a means of speaking out when one could not, of protesting against misery and exploitation. Though it emerged as a discourse of black struggle, the blues maintained an affirmation of black identity and voice. Functioning primarily as expressions of religious faith, spirituals were also capable of communicating on more than one level of meaning. Citing ambiguities in the religious imagery of their lyrics, scholars have argued that oftentimes slave spirituals additionally functioned as socio-political protests.[76] Specifically, references to freedom have been interpreted not only in the devotional sense of seeking freedom from the spiritual bondage of sin, but also in the secular circumstance of seeking freedom from the physical and psychic bondage of slavery. Lawrence W. Levine argues persuasively to this end, noting that many spirituals evolved out of references to selectively chosen bible stories, ones that resonated with the confined conditions of slavery and yet spoke optimistically of freedom from those

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[74] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution' in the Antebellum South* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. Updated edition issued 2004), 249

[75] Zora Neale Hurston in 'High John de Conquer', *The American Mercury*, Issue 57 (1943), 450-458, reprinted in *Mother Wit from the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, reprint edition 1990), 541-548 (543). Not coincidentally, 'Make a Way Out of No Way' was the title of Arika's sixth episode, where the conversations developed during episode five (which included boychild's performances) continued.

[76] Lawrence W. Levine, 'Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness', *Anonymous Americans: Explorations in Nineteenth-Century Social History*, ed. Tamara K. Hareven (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 99-130

constraints: "…there was always a latent and symbolic element of protest in the slave's religious songs", he argues, "which frequently became overt and explicit."[77] In posing his argument about protest and veiled commentary in spirituals, Levine notes that, in Africa, verbal creative spaces (songs, storytelling, proverbs and word games) have traditionally provided occasion for individuals to express their innermost feelings in a circumlocutionary manner, when direct verbalisation is otherwise not permissible. Songs could thus be utilised as outlets for emotional release.

Whilst popular conception categorises the musics of spirituals and blues as "vast collective works of mourning and melancholia"[78], the reality is that they were often pervaded by a sense of future promise, communicating joy just as readily as sorrow and indeed flickering back and forth between these juxtaposing sensibilities.[79] That boychild performs a similar sort of flickering between emotions further evidences my claim that her works borrow from these musics.

Let us reflect upon the emotive quality of both *Trouble So Hard* and *Sinnerman*. As traditional spirituals imbued with a blues tonality, both songs exemplify the affective characteristics of these genres; listening to them is an emotive experience. That boychild samples these songs suggests that she acknowledges their emotive power. Perhaps her use of them then is as much an attempt to harness and re-ignite that power in a new context as it is about referencing representations of historical black struggle. For example, Simone's version of *Sinnerman* is a take on a spiritual about expelling sin, recorded in 1966, at the height of her involvement in the Civil Rights movement. During that time Simone was increasingly unforgiving of the sins of white America. *Sinnerman* can thus be read as an allegory for the sins of her country, "where you gon' run to?" looming as a genuine albeit scornful question posed to those who refused to absolve themselves of the sins of racism. Simone's *Sinnerman* contains what Levine might term a 'symbolic element of protest' which becomes 'overt and explicit' once one takes into consideration the personal context of the person singing it,

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[77] Ibid., 121
[78] Fisher (2013), 52
[79] For example, *Trouble So Hard* passages from lamentation to celebration when *"don't nobody know my trouble but God"* is followed with the couplet *"went down the hill, other day / soul got happy and stayed all day"*.

as well as the socio-political context of the time in which the song was recorded. Once sensitive to these contexts, the listener becomes aware of Simone's political dynamism, which can be felt blistering through the song's driving rhythms. Her repeated exclamations of "power!" saturate her version of *Sinnerman* with the political energy of black pride activism. Aware of Simone's stature, perhaps boychild had *Sinnerman* play out before her first performance at Arika because she means to position her own work in allegiance with Simone's oppositional performance practice. When *Sinnerman* was played before boychild appeared onstage, Simone's voice was not altered. Left in its original state, her voice retained its specificity. This unaltered sample, this retention of past elements, could be read as an employment of the afrofuturist strategy of making substantive black historical presence a part of one's political project. That boychild samples an artist who became devoutly committed to black equality/empowerment[80] and that she incorporates performative aspects of spirituals and blues into her work might suggest that she seeks to position her output within a lineage of resistant black performance, that she seeks to contribute to the struggle for black liberation. Ever conscious of boychild's oscillating emotionality, I find the activist spirit of this interpretation to be discordantly optimistic. It is equally conceivable that boychild could be employing both the afrofuturist strategy of chronopolitics (deconstructing vestiges of the past so as to explain the present and offer visions for the future), as well as the traditional African strategy of circumlocutionary verbalisation, to relate a pessimistic prophecy. Using old songs to speak for present conditions, perhaps her references to past struggles are cynical suggestions that these struggles are still yet to be won, that such struggle is ongoing. By using *Sinnerman*, a thinly veiled protest song about the racist sins of white America, perhaps boychild is making a veiled, indirect point about continued racial inequality, commenting on how contemporary African-Americans are navigating a still hostile environment in the present. Given that afrofuturistic temporal disjuncture always entails forward projection, the future vision suggested here, then, is a dystopian one.

[80] Simone's militancy as a civil rights activist became increasingly evident through her use of music as a vehicle for social commentary and change. *Mississippi Goddam* (1964), the first of her 'protest songs', is a prominent example. A diatribe against the realities faced by African-Americans in the 1960s, the lyrics of *Mississippi Goddam* express Simone's own explicit response to the church bombing that killed four young black girls in Birmingham, Alabama and the murder of pastor and fellow activist, Medgar Evers.

When *Trouble So Hard* played out during *#untitled lipsynch 2*, Hall's voice was also unaltered, yet it was duplicated and this second version, layered over the original, was distorted. Digitally manipulated, it had been posthumanised. Here the anachronism of sampling is exemplified in this duplicitous voice: a voice sampled from a 1937 recording is layered with a futuristic projection of itself. The same voice, made two, speaks from/of the past and seemingly from and therefore perhaps of the future simultaneously. If, in afrofuturist strategy, fragments of the past are reworked in such a way as to offer prophetic visions of the future, perhaps boychild's remixed and re-embodied version of Hall's voice can be read as prophetic. With these older vocal samples then, it appears that boychild is voicing a melancholic fear that the future holds further 'troubles', a perpetuation of past racial inequalities.

Conclusion

At the outset of these chapters on boychild I set aims to work with and through the ambivalent difficulty of her practice in order to attest to its political value and identify it as socially and politically engaged. I have argued that her performances engage with socio-political issues but that they do so in abstract ways and without offering a resolved perspective. Over the course of the present chapter I have argued that boychild's work is dialogic in form, that it communicates on more than one level, that it presents indirect, veiled social comment and criticism and that it can be read as having incorporated a latent and symbolic element of protest.

Somewhat paradoxically, boychild employs fantastical means through which to engage with social issues and body politics pertaining to the racialised and (queerly) gendered body. The imagery she creates communicates multiply. On the one hand, with vivid intensity she performs the melancholia that a denial of subjectivity imposed by the hegemonic system might bring about, imaging forth a sense of existential ambiguity by presenting herself as a projection or hologram. Meanwhile, her ambivalent and unlocatable ventriloquial 'voice' symbolises the sense of voicelessness that might be experienced by these othered individuals. On the other hand, by employing the visual languages of sci-

fi, mythology, and the uncanny to confer an ontological ambiguity upon her body, and suffusing that imagery with haunting and anachronistically disorienting aural affects, boychild exploits the affective powers of less-than-presences which are simultaneously more-than-present. The subversiveness of the ambiguously unlocatable disembodied voice as 'autonomous' part object, as well as that of the partial object that begins to speak, lends greater weight to her 'voice'. In its apparent autonomy boychild's 'voice' appears otherworldly. Powerful by dint of its inexplicability, this enigmatic voice is evocative of that which is other than, more than, prior to or not fully human: the supernatural, the spiritual, the prophetic, and the divine. It preaches simultaneously about the sorrows of a past and present of exclusion and othering (*I'm a Slave 4 U, Moments in Heartbreak, Trouble So Hard*) as well as speaking prophetically of possible utopian and dystopian futures: a post-gender, posthuman future in which these once excluded others are acknowledged (*Say My Name*) and can belong (*"tell me I belong" - Archangel*) or coexist as equals (boychild has the word 'coexist' tattooed across her scalp, her body indelibly marked with that mantra); or indeed a future which perpetuates past inequalities and holds further 'troubles'. As in science-fiction (the genre of speculative fiction whose tropes she employs), boychild's work is concerned with the imagined exploration of possible worlds. Her performances construct a posthuman-afrofuturist mythology that speculates on (the evolution of) gendered and racial subjectivity. She shines a light on current and past struggles to hurl us into other possible futures, chimerical elsewheres that, in their unknowability, oscillate ambivalently between utopia and dystopia.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this thesis I set out to examine how recent changes in body politics have impacted on the themes and ideas explored in contemporary body-based performance. I also sought to determine the aesthetic and formal strategies that contemporary performance artists use to attempt to challenge sedimented norms, hegemonies, and power structures related to gender and the body. To summarise my findings and conclude my study, I want to respond to these research enquiries by plotting a pathway through my thesis which highlights the themes or areas of debate that have been addressed. In these concluding remarks I identify the through-threads that weave their way across and between each of the case study chapters and point out possibilities for expansions which extend beyond this thesis.

Through a negotiation of preconceptions, stereotypes, and binary ways of thinking and viewing the body, the artistic practices detailed in this thesis demonstrate different potentialities for exposing and resisting dominant oppressive constructs and systems relating to the body, working against categories assumed to be fixed. These practices also suggest the viability of subject positions outside of the dominant ideology that supports these categories. That is, beyond their exposure of the instability of existing bodily categories and their negotiation of social prescriptions, these artists utilise the performing body as a ground for nurturing alternative possible forms of embodiment.

This thesis affirms longstanding claims that performance art can play an active and productive role in transforming the ways in which the wider social world (beyond the social context of the performance space) might be viewed and understood. It also contributes to an emerging field of contemporary research which takes a queer, transfeminist methodological approach to disrupting conventional ways of seeing and thinking sex, gender, and other constructions of the body. Chapter One outlined my project aims and detailed my methodology. With reference to extant scholarship which argues that body-based performance art has the capacity to reveal the artificiality of gender and other bodily constructs, I identified a space for my research in the contemporary context of

twenty-first century queer feminist gender and body politics. Submitting case study examples to theoretically inflected analysis, I then examined three specific deployments of the transgressive body in performance and argued that these bodies were implemented strategically to challenge assumptions of 'normative' subjectivity and their representations.

Chapter Two addressed a performance example by Mouse in which the rules of social propriety, in terms of cleanliness and taboo, were destabilised. Civilisation of the body has entailed a policing process wherein the range of acceptable and appropriate behaviour has become increasingly narrowed and defined. This process has included a gradual exclusion and privatisation of certain sites of the body, specifically those which are most closely related to the body's functioning. By making public parts of the body which are ordinarily kept private, Mouse breaks these socially enforced bodily taboos. Transgressing the boundaries between public and private, between the inside and outside of the body, she presents a challenge to or a ridiculing of systematic order by showing body parts and (metaphorical) bodily matter 'out of place'. The second half of the chapter considered how this disruption of social propriety affects, in turn, a disruption of dominant conceptions of femaleness. Employing a dialectical approach so as to make a virtue of the work's ambivalent political character, I argued that one interpretation of Mouse's practice is that she strategically uses a marginalised body coded as grotesque, abject, and parodic to negotiate the stereotype of woman as erotic object for/of the 'male gaze'. However, whilst her grotesquerie might well subvert this stereotype, in its enactment, it also reinscribes another dominant representation: that of the female body as abject. In the same instance as she (potentially) challenges some dominant modes of thought surrounding women, she reinforces others. As with other practices that have strategically deployed abjection, Mouse runs the risk of demarcating and reiterating the norm even as she surpasses it. One objective of my thesis was to interrogate this point of contention.

Chapter Two then recuperated this ambivalence to some extent by closing with a queer theoretical-reading. By grotesquely imitating the female gender, Mouse can be said to dramatise the culturally stereotyped significations through which that gender position is established, thereby revealing the imitative structure of

gender in general as a discursively constituted performative construction. As such, Mouse's 'drag'-like personas potentially serve a twofold political function: they represent an exaggerated parodying of the culturally constructed stereotypes of 'woman', a disputation of entrenched notions of identity and the subject, meanwhile, her revolting body is also legible as a body in queer revolt against a heteronormative binarised gender system. A motivation to move beyond the abject, beyond the theoretical framework and knowledge base out of which this project originated, led me to explore and interrogate other such queer strategic approaches to and practices of disruption.

Interwoven with ideas of social propriety, the discussion of gender stereotypes and bodily preconceptions opened up in Chapter Two was developed in Chapter Three. Whilst policing processes imposed upon the body dictate a range of acceptable and appropriate behaviour in terms of civility and social comportment, they also impose limits of 'acceptability' on the body's physical appearance. These limitations cite, reiterate and thus seek to maintain a binary model of sex and gender. As is signalled in the title of Cassils' performance, *Becoming an Image*, within her/his oeuvre, the term 'becoming' (and its inverse, 'unbecoming') can be said to pertain to the sexes, as the artist's work asks: what is (un)attractive or (in)appropriate to what sex and in relation to what and/or whom? According to the heterosexual symbolic, muscularity signifies masculinity, and masculinity is synonymous with the male body. In direct contestation of these preconceived designations, Cassils set out to explore how a physical sculpting of the body via bodybuilding can affect a queer challenge to established gender morphologies. Self-identifying as non-binary trans, Cassils presents a counterhegemonic embodiment (or perhaps more aptly, a counterhegemonic enfleshing) of masculinity, one that (in line with Halberstam's call for an alternative masculinity) undoes idealised male masculinity via a technique of queer resignification allied to a strategy of *bodily* queering. This strategy of bodily queering calls into question the stability of existing 'feminine' and 'masculine' morphologies. Cassils' disruption of the binary system reframes oppositions as a spectrum of multiple differences, opening up both the lived space and the space of representation for gender variations.

Discussed in the final stages of the chapter, Cassils' zine, *LadyFace // ManBody*, presents a catalogue of deliberately indeterminate, normatively incompatible, "visual options"[1] which address society's preoccupation with surface and its need to read and name a body according to dyadic structures of sex and gender. Cassils' intermingling and hyperbolisation of clichéd gender performances (excessive lipstick and a hypermuscular morphe for example) destabilise viewers' expectations of stable binary signals and their transparent and categorical legibility. Presenting a challenge to those hegemonic cultural narratives through which sexual difference is typically represented, Cassils targets those power regimes that dictate how (and whose) bodies are recognised as legitimate.

In the context of the twenty-first century, broader means of self-determination are emerging as bodily categories and identities shift and become less distinct. Exposing the "biopolitical fictions"[2] of 'masculine-male' and 'feminine-female' morphologies, Cassils' queer embodiment and expansion of the space of representation for gender variations speaks to this emergent discourse and to the cultural demands of her/his time. Whilst projective speculation on subjective and corporeal evolution was thus a part of the discussion on Cassils, this subject matter took centre stage in Chapters Four and Five on boychild. Employing a science-fiction inspired aesthetic, she presents audiences with a vision of the future of human embodiment.

Analysing boychild's use of a transformed sci-fi aesthetics in tandem with the theoretical principles of both Braidotti's anti-humanist concept of the posthuman and Haraway's cyborg politics, Chapter Four argued for her cyborgian body in performance as one which poses a radical challenge to heteronormative body politics. Providing a metaphorical model for the destabilisation of existing dualistic thought, the queer black form of embodiment that boychild presents transgresses the lines of demarcation between the supposedly polarised

[1] These are Cassils' words quoted from a recording of a presentation given at Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Montreal, Canada on 11/03/13 <http://ellengallery.concordia.ca/en/audio-video.php> accessed 19/09/13

[2] This is Beatriz (now Paul B.) Preciado's terminology, appropriated from her/his manifesto presentation delivered at 'Charming for the Revolution', The Tanks at Tate Modern, 01/02/13 <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/charming-revolution-congress-gender-talents#open275729> accessed 21/04/16

categories of organic/machine, male/female, human/animal. A recognition of the complexity of subjectivity is at work in boychild's practice, as well as an emphasis on instability and plurality of meaning. As simultaneously partial, hybridised, fluid, and multiple, the posthuman figuration that she performs resists unification. She embodies an alternative to constrictive conventions and it is this alternative embodiment that posits a critique of the traditional (straight, white, able-bodied male) human subject and destabilises his anthropocentric positioning at the zenith of everything.

The exclusionary violence of classificatory systems, the notion of (non-)viability raised and explored in relation to Cassils, in terms of heteronormative constraints on who or what counts as a viably sexed body or gendered subject, was expanded to encompass other additional identity differentials beyond sex and gender in the closing chapters on boychild. boychild's practice poses critically provocative questions about gender, queerness, and blackness, and about one's viability as human in view of one's status with regard to these identity differentials. Allusions to racial power dynamics and the historical context of an alienating dehumanisation of black bodies permeate boychild's performances. With reference to key critical theories of race, Chapter Five traced a lineage of critique regarding the idea of fixing the black subject in and with accordance to their own skin, and argued that boychild's in-performance action of smearing black paint over her whitened body engages with this context. By making blackness messy and mobile, I argued that boychild's actions symbolise a transgression of fixed ideas of blackness. Despite my conviction that the symbolism of this particular action resonates with critiques of blackness as a fixed category, given the ambivalent and contradictory nature of her practice, I would not claim that her work fights for these politics explicitly. The issues and debates that she references point towards a politics, but her work does not impart a clear and emphatic message with regards to these issues. Thus, Chapter Five concluded that boychild's practice is politically engaged and dialogic in form and that any suggestion of a politics is latent. Of all the practices analysed in this study, boychild's work seemed to extend furthest beyond the systems that this thesis argues against.

Chapter Five also broached philosophical questions related to othered bodies about the existential crisis of feeling metaphorically disembodied, the feeling of being/having no-body and of having no voice. As forms emblematic of a multiplicity of voice and identity and concerned with a postmodern division or fragmentation of the subject, ventriloquism and lip-synching link with the instability and plurality of meaning within the posthuman. Examining these modes of performance through philosophical and psychoanalytic frames, I unpicked the complex politics of presence and power that pertain to the disembodied, re-embodied voice and used these ideas to theorise the political implications of boychild's enigmatic ventriloquial voice. Arguing for her re-conceptualised version of lip-synching as a cyborgian re-presentation of voice channelling, Voodoo-esque spirit possession, and deity incarnation, I staked claims for afrofuturist characteristics within boychild's practice. Beyond her re-performance of the African tribal practice of spirit channelling, the practice of communicating on multiple levels is another African tradition referenced in her work. Her syncretism of African cultural and religious heritage from multiple eras constitutes an afrofuturist recovery and re-imagining of past traditions. Moreover, via the music and vocal samples that comprise her technologised 'voice', an anachronistic discontinuum of time representative of the afrofuturist strategy of chronopolitics (deconstructing vestiges of the past so as to explain the present and offer visions for the future) is affected in boychild's performance practice. I concluded my in-depth analysis of boychild's 'voice' by suggesting that she imparts prophetic visions about the future of gendered and racial subjectivity, visions that, in their very unknowability, oscillate ambivalently between utopian and dystopian outcomes.

This thesis has argued that the embodied performance practice analysed exposes and questions the limitations of dimorphism, binaries, and fixed assumptions. Building on the performance work of previous generations which acknowledged and illustrated the complex, multifaceted and split subjectivity that everyone has as opposed to a unified stable and coherent subjectivity, these practices extend and further complicate these points. And, engaging with the contemporary context of shifting and proliferating gender identifications and categories, they convey a recognition of the plurality of gendered inhabitations of the world. Whilst Mouse's practice has the potentiality to encourage

flexibility in attitudes towards existing bodily categories, beyond this, Cassils' (non-binary) and boychild's (more-than-human or posthuman) practices also have the capacity to open minds to different ways of becoming and being by identifying, imagining, and imaging forth new possibilities.

This thesis contributes primarily to the fields of body art and performance studies by offering intensive analyses of three particular artistic practices. Extending visibility and legibility to these practices but without reducing them to the accounts presented here, I have tried to open up a dialogue, to offer ways in to thinking about these performances and what I argue for as their transformative potentialities. Throughout this thesis I have staked claims for these works as socially and politically engaged practices. Though they do not necessarily offer clear counter-positions, I identify each of the pieces examined as work that stimulates critical cognisance of existing hegemonic and heteronormative tenets and it is in this respect that I believe they can potentially affect transformative change.

The Live Art Development Agency (LADA), the preeminent live art organisation in the UK, writes of live practices as being positioned "on the frontline of enquiries into what our culture is and where it is located… Live Art asks us what it means to be here, now."[3] As an oppositional or subcultural art form that operates simultaneously within and against the current cultural ecology, live art is an aesthetics of the 'here and now' with a capacity for critical political enquiry. Using the body as site and material, *embodied* performance practices can be used as a means to disrupt boundaries, defy traditions, resist definitions, and render the invisible visible. Indeed, as Deirdre Heddon claims, "Politics attaches – sticks – to bodies; bodies reveal politics."[4] As I have tried to show in this thesis, live body-based performances are thus a particularly potent means through which to prompt new ways of seeing and thinking sex, gender and other constructions of the body in the contemporary context of subjective, corporeal social evolution, precisely because of their potential to engage critically with contemporary values, identities and expectations, as well as their drive to open

[3] <http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/about/what-is-live-art/> accessed 18/01/17
[4] Deirdre Heddon, 'The Politics of Live Art', *Histories and Practices of Live Art*, ed. Deirdre Heddon and Jennie Klein (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 176-205 (185)

up productive tensions, unsettle the seemingly given, and offer potential strategies for intervention in hegemonic thinking.

Arguing that 'performance' is "an umbrella term for scholarly as well as artistic research", Performance Studies international (PSi) stresses the "interdisciplinary" nature of this research, which is, as they claim, "strongly rooted in the interaction between theory and practice"[5]. As discussed in the 'event-text' subsection of Chapter One, a broader subculture of performance (consisting of both artists and non-artists) is organising around and in critical response to the contemporary Western social context. Each of the artists represented in this thesis, and indeed the interdisciplinary, theoretically-inflected research conducted on their practices within these pages, contributes to this emerging discourse.

Using academic scholarship to theorise embodied practices, I have enriched the understanding of contemporary performance art by contributing to conceptual readings of body-based live art practices which have wider socio-cultural implications. Furthermore, I have enriched the understanding of critical theory by invoking and contributing to discourses that challenge and undermine hegemonic thinking.

Plotting a Pathway for Future Research

Coterminously to my research, body politics have been undergoing some radical changes. In particular, debates around trans bodies and trans issues have been gaining momentum. In June 2014, the front cover of American weekly news magazine, *Time*, declared a "transgender tipping point". The issue featured an article by Katy Steinmetz titled, 'America's Transition' in which she asserted that society is experiencing a "transgender revolution" in terms of trans visibility, recognition and awareness, and that this "social movement is poised to challenge deeply held cultural beliefs."[6] Whilst I do not dispute the observation that trans awareness is growing, this change is not always entirely progressive (as Steinmetz's article tends to paint it) nor is it without complication. Indeed,

[5] <http://www.psi-web.org/about/> accessed 18/01/17
[6] Katy Steinmetz, 'America's Transition', *Time* (June 2014), 38-46 (40, 38)

increased awareness has in some respects prompted further prejudice in the form of anti-trans backlash.

Anti-trans sentiment was expressed recently from within the academy when Germaine Greer stated her opinion that trans women are "not women" during a BBC Newsnight interview screened in October 2015. Greer did not opine that trans people should be prohibited from undergoing transitional operative procedures, but what she did remark is that such procedures do not make a post-operative MTF trans person a 'woman'.[7] Strikingly similar to some of the arguments posited by Janice Raymond in her 1979 text, *The Transsexual Empire*, Greer's comments added fuel to the fiery debate about trans in-/ex-clusion that has raged within feminist scholarship over the decades.[8] During the interview, Greer stated: "I think that a great many women don't think that post-operative – or even non-post-operative – transsexual MTF people look like, sound like or behave like women, but they daren't say so."[9] Whilst Greer falls foul of Sandy Stone's concern of "uncritically reproduc[ing] discourses of gender that ultimately are unhelpful for understanding the complex specificity of *transsexual embodiment and experience*"[10], her uncritical reiterations are, moreover, less than helpful for understanding gendered embodiment and experience *in general*. Subscribing to biology-based sex-essentialism and gender stereotypes that

[7] The abbreviation 'MTF' is shorthand for 'male-to-female'.

[8] To cite a more contemporary context: in 2014, feminist activist and academic, Sheila Jeffreys, published *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2014), a book which resolved to explore "the harms created by the ideology and practice of transgenderism" (Jeffreys (2014), 1). Thematically dedicated to 'Trans/Feminisms', the most recent issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* "emerged from discussions within the journal's editorial board about how to respond – if at all" to Jeffrey's text and other anti-trans discourses like it. Intervening in the conversation about the "vexed relationship" between transgender and feminist movements, the May 2016 issue of TSQ reframed the terms of the conflict, situating it within a more complicated world history of trans/feminist engagement. It also sought to expand the discussion beyond the "overly simplistic" dichotomy between an exclusionary transphobic feminism and an inclusive trans-affirming feminism by profiling the breadth of work currently being carried out at the intersections of transgender and feminist scholarship. See *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* special issue on 'Trans/Feminisms' 3:1-2 (May 2016) DOI: 10.1215/23289252-3334127. Accessed 12/09/16. (Quotations in this paragraph are taken from the introduction to 'Trans/Feminisms' by Susan Stryker and Talia M. Bettcher, 5-14).

[9] Germaine Greer interviewed by Kirsty Wark, 'Newsnight', television broadcast, BBC Two, 23/10/15.

[10] Sandy Stone, 'The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto' (1987) in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York; London: Routledge, 2006), 221-235 (221). Added emphasis. As Stryker and Whittle's introduction to Stone's article states, its title refers directly to Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire*, "in which Raymond personally attacked Stone for daring to present herself as a woman and to work as a sound engineer at Olivia Records, a women-only feminist music collective." (221)

dictate what is 'natural' and 'normative' in terms of appearances, behaviours, and practices, Greer's utterances illustrate an attitude of immutability that shows no intent or desire to think beyond unified stable categories.

According to Donna Haraway: "We're in a post-gender world in some ways, and in others we're in a ferociously gender in-place world."[11] Though she stated this in a 2006 interview, Haraway's words read to me as a no-less pertinent encapsulation of the contemporary situation. Whilst in some respects, increased visibility and awareness of gender variance and its terminology is inciting progressive transformation in terms of how the body politic at large comprehends sex and gender, in other respects, the challenges to existing bodily categories and identities that genderqueer and trans bodies impart are being met with hostility by those who are wilfully reluctant to renounce long upheld constructs and expectations.

The increased cultural and socio-political prominence of trans and genderqueer bodies, and the vigorous discourse that continues to develop across a range of platforms around transgressive subjectivities, demonstrate that this is a pertinent and indeed pivotal moment within which to reflect critically on existing ideas of gender and their continued interrogation and representation in performance. Whilst this thesis has addressed some trans artists and some of the debates in the above mentioned examples, there is scope for the critical conversation to continue as further developments evolve.

At this juncture I want to re-cite a text introduced in Chapter One: J. Jack Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism*. Describing the concept after which his book is titled, Halberstam wrote: "Gaga feminism *grapples with what cannot yet be pronounced* and what still takes the form of gibberish, *as we wait for new social forms* to give our gaga babbling meaning."[12] Gaga feminism is so termed because it derives from the formulation that 'gaga' is a child word that stands in for whatever it is that the child is not yet able to enunciate or vocalise.

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[11] Donna Haraway interviewed by Nicholas Gane, 'When We Have Never Been Human, What Is to Be Done?', *Theory, Culture & Society* 23:7-8 (December 2006), 135-158 (137). DOI: 10.1177/0263276406069228. Accessed 01/09/16.

[12] J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012b), xxv. Added emphasis.

Halberstam's notion of grappling with that which is, as yet, under-articulated because it is still in a process of emergence strikes a chord with the parameters of this thesis and how it might open out onto further research.

Significantly, the 'transgender tipping point' is a cultural moment which is still unfolding; we do not yet know where it might take us. It is this, the very *unknowability* of the current context's future trajectory that provides an exciting and generative ground upon which future research might build. As new body-based grammars develop and new practices of bodily becoming emerge, I hope that we can look forward to further boundary breaches and to further explorations and representations of radical subjectivity in future works of embodied performance art. It is my hope too that I will be able to continue to attend to these practices as they unfold.

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