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Eunice de Souza's poetry: creating a public *persona* as feminist performance

JOANA PASSOS
CEHUM

In this study I want to focus on a particular essay by Judith Butler – “An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory”¹ – where she interprets the notion of social acts by comparison with the strict definition of speech acts, thus highlighting the coded, arbitrary nature of the former. Butler starts by invoking a linguistic approach framed by pragmatics² to claim that just as it happens with language use, where you know there will be consequences to the things you say, when you behave in a certain (socially coded) way, your acts have social consequences according to social norms.

When reading this essay, I recalled a classical example from speech acts theory, which is the phrase “I do” in a marriage ceremony. The moment you utter these words aloud, you change your status from “single” to “married” before the group of people who witness this act, before the law, and according to the rites of a Christian religious institution. In her essay, Judith Butler takes up this same principle (that certain socially coded acts have major consequences for the definition of individual identity), to apply it to social acts

¹ in *The Performance Studies Reader*, Henry Bial (ed.), 2004, Routledge: London and New York, pp: 187-197.

² See the foundational study by the ideologue of speech acts theory: Searle, John R., 1996, *An essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press.

related to the construction, consolidation and promotion of a binary model of gender norms. The comparison is legitimate on the grounds of the great similitude between a language as a coded system, and the complex social “grammar” of rules of politeness, morality, shared cultural references and tradition, consolidated by habit, life styles and dominant mentalities. Butler departs from a reinterpretation of phenomenological theory of acts³ to claim that social acts related to the binary gender system – the referential system that divides the world into masculine and feminine, corresponding to men and women – are acts assimilated from social interaction (like language). In this way, in order to achieve a successful integration in society, children and teenagers are taught gender norms that affiliate them to masculine *or* feminine within a patriarchal social order. Note that a binary system is, in a way, “digital”. You are *either* masculine *or* feminine, and any negotiation between these gender opposites would cancel the application of the whole binary system. As young men and women usually fit into this binary gender system, they grant it effective consolidation and survival, and each of them will contribute with her/his own behaviour and identity to constitute and reinforce this same patriarchal social order. In other words, if I act feminine “correctly” (say, with my high heels, my lipstick, my self-restrained, elegant manners, displaying discrete respectability and clear assimilation of ladylike manners⁴) I am contributing, even if unaware of such consequences, to promote standard traditional ideas about a model of feminine identity. Thus, while acting according to a collectively sanctioned notion of the feminine, inculcated by socialisation, my social act is contributing to construct a “gender grammar” for a specific culture. In accordance with the notion of social acts, as I believe Judith Butler sees it, I would say each time I act the “proper feminine” performance, I am expressing my successful integration in a binary, heterosexual, gender system and, secondly, I am feeding, strengthening and consolidating the patriarchal culture that survives on the credibility of such gendered social role models and of the correlated social expectations they imply.

If you accept Judith Butler’s argument that gender, as a social norm, is a performance act, and not a necessary, inherent attribute of the subject,

³ The authors mentioned by Butler in relation to a phenomenological theory of acts are Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and George Herbert Mead.

⁴ I invoke such an example of a feminine role model because I think it has got general popular appeal for women, beyond other alternative gender models like the pop star or the sexy model which are more restricted to younger women in its general appeal.

then, first point – the act can be changed; and, second point – the grounds for marginalising deviant, alternative behaviour are exposed for what they are, forms of censorship and policing, encroached on models of morality.

Let us start with the latter. In her essay Judith Butler argues that feminists have to make society at large aware of the arbitrary nature of gender roles so that deviant behaviours stop being aggressively marginalized, or even punished as if they were pathological deviations. She urges people to confront the fear of accepting other gender constructions and that is in my view the great ethical claim in this powerful essay.

As for the possibility of creating a new gender “grammar”, that is, changing the performance of the gender social act (the above mentioned first point), Judith Butler offers a case study in her essay, presenting the transvestite as exemplary enactment of alternative possibilities. I am not saying Butler is claiming we should all become transvestites. I am saying that we can take the transvestite as an example of divergent forms of acting and living gender than the strict either/or binary model that patriarchal society offers you, moreover because this binary simplified system is comfortable to keep an oppressive, unequal hierarchy as organizing social principle. The multiplication of gender roles and identities would upset the hold of the masculine as model of humanity, having women as its opposite, its deviation, its “other”. On the other hand, in spite of its liberating potential, the multiplication, oscillation or re-invention of gender norms is no easy task. The script for gender acts is bound to tradition, and it has constantly been repeated for centuries, so, it is previous to the actor (as collective, culturally determined reference). Yet again, this ancient model is also dependent on current representations, on everyday performances, to keep its credibility.

Let us stay with the transvestite to think through the possibility of a more fluid and less intolerant conception of gender acts. The transvestite is a performance that subverts social roles by acting out of accordance with gender norms. In other words, the biological sex of the transvestite is theatrically ignored, and yet omnipresent in the performance, because even though the genitals of the performer are not exhibited they have to be constantly remembered by the audience: the matrix of a transvestite performance is the contradiction between the guessed biological sex and the careful replication of the opposite gender attributes in dress code, make up, gestures, voice, and seductive behaviours: the sexual provocation by the drag queen is the simple invitation to be the object of a male gaze, just like women are supposed to

be. For the audience, part of the pleasure in watching a transvestite performance lies in the liberating Carnival principle that is celebrated in this act. At that moment, in that stage, social gender rules are suspended and transgression is allowed without sanction (besides, the transvestite is usually seen as a clown, a grotesque figure, by a mainstream audience, so, there is another element of the Carnival here). But Judith Butler asks a disturbing question: what if the transvestite is not *on* a stage, but sitting next to you in the bus? Indeed, we could imagine that the individual sitting in the bus, next to you, is not wearing flamboyant feathers or a long shiny dress, but wears lipstick and eye make up in his masculine face, with short hair and even a well tended moustache. Something strikes you as slightly “out of place”. Then you look down and you notice the black high heel shoes. For some people, that would be an extremely disturbing encounter, moreover because there is no stage to safeguard reality from this playful subversion of gender codes. Some reactions might express indifference, but others could be aggressive. What is so disturbing about the transvestite in the bus? The problem is that this figure is not presenting itself as a clownish spectacle but rather stands as an example of a different gender act, an innovative script. The transvestite in the bus is posing as an element of reality, as a social act, only this gender act questions a binary view of gender, and this possibility may inspire horror. However, Butler sees the transvestite figure as the very epitome of transgressive possibilities. Moreover, and following Butler’s proposition, the transvestite is a figure that denounces the arbitrariness of gender roles, as social *constructs*. If gender roles are not biologically determined, then, they can be changed, just as they have been changing through history (only so far, you keep to two alternative binary gender scripts).

At the end of her essay, Butler states that the aim of her theory is to promote the necessity of a politics of performative gender acts, as a supplement to feminist theory. She believes that the perception of gender as performance would help feminists “to expose the reifications that tacitly serve as substantial gender cores or identities, and to elucidate both the act and the strategy of disavowal which at once constitute and conceal gender as we live it.” (Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 2004: 197⁵). Butler considers imperative to expose the dramatic cultural interplay in the complex construction of gender and she closes her essay with an open challenge to

⁵ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” in *The Performance Studies Reader*, 2004, Henry Bial (ed.), Routledge: London and New York, pp 187-197.

denounce sex binaries as a form of hegemonic control consented by women each time they perform their feminine act. Secondly, Butler argues for the strategic necessity of proscribing gender acts, a strategy Butler herself recognizes as utopia. However, you can experiment with alternative gender acts, and assert the right to live according to your individual sensibility.

Bearing in mind Butler's ideas, I will next discuss four poems by Eunice de Souza as example of a successful strategy. To expose gender as an assimilated social act. While exposing traditional gender performances as hegemonic scripts, Eunice de Souza also creates her own, alternative gender act, parting with traditional gender performances of the feminine. It is in that sense that I read her poetry as the construction of a feminist persona, from poem to poem, as she gradually creates a provocative character, sometimes posing as autobiographical, but always intent on problematizing gender and the social constructs behind gender roles.

I have selected four poems that illustrate some facets of this feminist persona and I would like to discuss my interpretation of these poems in relation to the claims I have stated above.

The anthology I am using for the research presented in this paper is a bilingual edition. The English⁶ version was selected by Eunice de Souza herself (1994) and it was translated to Portuguese by the poet Ana Luísa Amaral (2001).

1 – The break in the perpetuation of gender norms.

Forgive me, mother

Forgive me, mother
That I left you
A life-long widow
Old, alone.

It was kill or die
And you got me anyway:
The blood congeals at lover's touch
The guts dissolve in shit.
I was never young.
Now I'm old alone.

⁶ Eunice de Souza writes in English, which is one of the official languages of India.

In dreams
I hack you.

(Eunice de Souza, 2001: 38)

There is a clear anti-Catholic thematic line in Eunice de Souza's poetry, and the title of the poem does suggest the echo of the Catholic pray "Forgive me Father for I have sinned", which is the formal beginning for Confession. But in this poem, there is no real apology. The poem rather expresses a tremendous resentment at the mother, as a destructive figure you have to get away from. You can interpret it as the absolute necessity to reject gender roles passed on from generation to generation, or, as Judith Butler would say, as the utter rejection of the script for your life long act as a woman. The dimension of castration in the influence of the mother is condensed in the suggestion of frigidity ("The blood congeals at lover's touch"), and the destructive power of a mother figure is powerfully invoked in the image of physical decay ("The guts dissolve in shit").

This rejection of mother figures opens the way for a self-created gender identity, outside the linear genealogical continuity of the gender script passed on from mother to daughter. The cut in the love bond is clearly stated ("I left you old, alone") only this desertion of the mother is justified as an act of survival (it was kill or die). However, desertion was not enough, for you cannot simply unlearn socialisation by an act of will. That is why the gesture of disavowal and rejection has to go on in dreams, in the unconscious ("in dreams, I hack you").

2 – Convent Schools

The next poem also goes back to the negative effects of a conventional feminine education. Only this time, the context of socialisation is formal, outside the influence of family (the dimension that stood for the very first instance of gender socialisation, addressed in the previous poem). In fact, it is a recollection from convent school. Mind that, in India, as in many parts of the western world, up until the middle of the XIX century, the only institutions for the formal education of girls were convent schools.

Eunice

Eunice, Embroidery Sister said
 this petticoat you've cut
 these seams
 are worthy of an elephant
 my dear

Silly bra-less bitch

Eunice is writing bad words sister
 she's sewing up her head
 for the third time sister

the limbs keep flopping
 the sawdust keeps popping
 out of the gaps
 out of the gaps
 out of the gaps
 sister

(Eunice de Souza, 2001: 63)

The “incompetence” of Eunice (the choice of the name evokes the autobiographical pose I mentioned earlier) to be an “adequate girl” who succeeds in doing what is expected of her – performing the right gender act – is met with an accusation that suggests satire, as the girl is compared to an elephant: clumsy, big, grotesque, the opposite of feminine delicacy. The poem underlines the presence, from an early age, of policing mechanisms that prevent deviance from the appointed gender script, and these mechanisms are pervasive, being activated both by authority figures and colleagues. A second sensitive point is the pain behind the defiant pose. The girl resents the accusation. The fact she has no talent for “feminine occupations” (such as embroidery) is not dismissed as irrelevant by the child, even if the insult she lets out (“silly bra-less bitch”) might suggest the opposite. On the contrary, she feels anger, she feels inadequate, out of place, out of the gap, out of the script, and that hurts and belittles her sense of self-esteem. It is true Eunice holds a legitimate point against the sexless nun as an unfit character to raise sexually healthy women, but the intelligence that enables her to see

this inadequacy does not compensate for the fact that the lonely child has to endure the weight of going against conventions and censorship on her own.

In this childhood recollection, “Eunice” feels she is a failed, flawed doll. The unruly child, just like the unruly woman, has to endure a sense of guilt, and hence the repeated reference to being accused of failing in doing something like cutting petticoats, making elegant seams, making dolls whose head does not hold (self-image?), being clumsy. Again and again, the girl feels the pressure to conform. In the end, this constant struggle is exhausting and continuous, a feeling expressed by the obsessive repetition of the expression “out of the gap”, like letting something spill out from inside (writing poetry), only the exhausted body gets emptied of vigour, a gap in identity, with floppy limbs.

3 – Breaking stereotypes:

For S. who wonders if I get much
joy out of life

As a matter of fact I do.
I contemplate, with a certain
Grim satisfaction
Dynamic men who sell better butter.
Sometimes I down a Coke
Implacably at the Taj.
This morning I terrorised
(successfully)
the bank manager.
I look striking in red and black
And a necklace of skulls.
(Eunice de Souza, 2001:69)

Before discussing this poem I think it is relevant to recall that the anthology of poetry I am working with is a selection of poems, including pieces that had been published in previous anthologies. This amounts to say that this particular collection offers an overview of different aspects in Eunice de Souza’s poetry, and this fact frames my choice to include this poem in my study. As you noticed, in terms of tone this last poem is very different from the previous ones as it is happy and playful. The choice for such a poem aims

at illustrating this other dimension of Eunice de Souza's poetry. Together with irony, the presence of humour creates a fine balance in the general impact of her work, by contrast with her colder, resentful words. Thus, as you can see, there is light, playfulness and joy in her poetry, just as you can find moving moments of passion and solidarity. Yet, as I read through this anthology, I realised the most recurrent character is the precise observer, the deconstructive thinker, the surgical interpreter of life and memories. There seems to be a constant pedagogical intention, as if this was poetry written to make you think critically about things you usually take for granted: the emulation of behaviour between loving mother and daughter, the delicacy in women's hands, their natural willingness to perform certain kinds of works, and, referring specifically to this last poem, the social stereotype that takes for granted that unmarried women have to be bitter, sad and resentful.

In complete opposition to such stereotypes, the poet asserts the principle of joy in her life as a single woman. As a grown up individual, the woman writing these pieces has conquered her right to be herself, regardless of the appointed script, while the poems associated to memories recall difficult stages in this process of self-discovery. As an adult, deviance from gender norms is openly acknowledged as unproblematic pleasure, probably close to the way transvestites may feel when performing their impersonation act.

The captivating irony in the poem arises from the fact the poet "feminises" masculinity around her, exposing gender scripts for the convention they are. If delicate work is for women why are men having such jobs as selling butter? If men are strong, why are they easily made to be humble if you have the money that implies social power? Another dimension of her joke is the insult on constraining social conventions. They are so mean and out of touch with reality that even sitting at a coffee shop, having a coke (meaning, women having leisure on their own, outside of the domestic sphere, unaccompanied by a husband) can be turned into a social transgression. The breaking of obsolete traditions in such a small, innocent, everyday gesture turns the rules proscribing this scenery look ridiculous. Finally, the invocation of the powerful feminine goddess Kali (traditionally represented as a dark figure, wearing red, and with a necklace of skulls) as the deity who offers the perfect role model for the poet's femininity, is so completely the opposite of the docile, domestic woman totally devoted to husband and family (like goddess Parvati) that the invocation is almost Carnavalesque. Kali is said to be the deity of sects of killers. She rejoices in blood offerings and she is a warrior

figure that supports at war those who invoke her. Reinterpreted by Eunice de Souza, Kali becomes a perfect epitome for empowerment and self-assurance: a joyful and inspiring goddess, managing finances on her own, adept of gothic fashion and enjoying modern leisure instead of cruel offerings.

4 – Marriages are made

Marriages are made

My cousin Elena
 Is to be married.
 The formalities have been completed:
 Her family examined
 For T.B. and madness
 Her father declared solvent
 Her eyes examined for squints
 Her teeth for cavities
 Her stools for the possible
 Non-Brahmin worm.
 She's not quite tall enough
 And not quite full enough
 (children will take care of that)
 Her complexion it was decided
 Would compensate, being just about
 The right shade
 Of rightness
 To do justice to
 Francisco X. Noronha Prabhu
 Good son of mother Church.

(Eunice de Souza, 2001: 14)

In traditional India (even among Catholic families), the search for the right partner to marry one's daughter or son is dependent on information concerning the involved families. It is not an individual enterprise, and parents usually arrange the marriage of their children. In Eunice de Souza's poem it is not the fact that marriages are arranged that is clearly at stake. It is rather the unequal position of the bride, right from the beginning of the

negotiations that concern her. In a society where dowry exists, women seem so undesirable that parents even pay to send them away. In this sense, the family of the groom feels entitled to press for a bargain, making irrational demands. Besides, the woman is objectified in this business arrangement, and that is why the poet represents the assessment of the bride as if she were cattle to be bought, having teeth and health conditions examined. Obviously the bride has no private prospects. She is a body without inner life, whose physical functions and healthy conditions are the sole focus of interest. By comparison, nothing is demanded from the groom concerning health conditions of genetic heritage. She, the bride, is the one who has *to be as expected*, to do justice to the groom, regardless of his own personal features, totally absent from the described marriage negotiations. It is this difference of procedures regarding groom and bride that is the theme of the poem since it is extremely revealing of wider social prejudice marking women negatively. Besides, on account of the elements of humour and irony present in this poem, the credibility of such prejudice is eroded by the highlighted lack of rationality, or even property, of the claims made on the bride.

I will conclude by saying that there is a dark side to Eunice de Souza's poetry – a darkness that may shock you because of its numbing analytical coolness. After all, her writing brings you pieces of a resentful child, of a woman that rejects the maternal in her womanhood, of brides examined as horses to be bought. But you also find in Eunice de Souza a tremendous intelligence, allied to irony and a sharp sense of humour, facets that bring light to her poetry. Ever provocative and polemic, the woman poet in these verses is a lucid observer, who rejoices in the assertion of her resistance, her deviation, and she offers them, as a sort of revelation, to her readers. She does compose a different gender script through her poetry, rebelling against the common places of a feminine performance according to the patriarchal script. Simultaneously, she makes you aware that the road to stand for a different way of being a woman, to act a different performance, is really tough, and that awareness is very important. Indeed, there is a tremendous honesty in this poetry, making explicit the price of choosing to *be* “against the grain”, against all the collective pressure to compromise. As for transvestites sitting on buses and hearing words of abuse, praise them for courage.

References:

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